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Edinburgh Research Explorer

Continuity and change

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Continuity and change: the voices of Scottish librarians

Abstract

This article reflects on the evolution of public libraries in Scotland and, in particular, the impact and consequences of austerity measures on Andrew Carnegie's foundational belief that public libraries are for the 'good of the people'. It does this first by situating Scottish libraries in their historical context and examining MacDougall's (2017) rich accounts of those working in the sector from the 1930s to late 1990s. This was demonstrably a period of profound social change, and one which offered the sector multiple opportunities. Library services were able to evolve and expand, both as a profession, and in their position as a core public service in local communities. The second part of the article turns to data collected as part of ongoing research funded by the Leverhulme Trust on the value of the modern public library. The accounts presented are from those currently working with, and for, public libraries. Continuity is observed in the fundamental principles that library staff aspire to uphold. The critical change is in their ability to deliver these principles in the face of ever-increasing austerity cuts, experienced as a continual 'chipping' away of services. This, combined with growing demands for welfare services from communities increasingly burdened by poverty, means the library service is more important than ever before – yet in a greater position of precariousness.

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Introduction

Andrew Carnegie's public library philanthropy reflected his strong commitment to extending equality of opportunity through learning. Carnegie's intention was that the library service should be free to all, providing access to education, information, and opportunity for self-improvement. There was also an expectation that the importance of public libraries would prevail in the future. Of the Central Library in Edinburgh, opened in 1980, he said:

> *…we must trust that this library is to grow in usefulness year after year and prove one of the most potent agencies for the good of the people for all time to come. (Carnegie, 1890).*

Carnegie's vision has continuity, and we see it dominating (often middle class) popular perspectives on public libraries (Pochin, 2019), and policy on the library's role in society (Scottish Library and Information Council, 2015, Welsh Government, 2017, Sieghart, 2014, Government of Ireland, 2018). The *Independent Library Report for England* (2014:6) states, for example, that the public library 'underpin[s] every community. It is not just a place for self-improvement, but the supplier of an infrastructure for life and learning'. Meanwhile, the Scottish library strategy, 'Ambition and Opportunity' (Scottish Library and Information Council, 2015:2) describes public libraries as providing access to ideas, knowledge and information to everyone and as acting as a 'valued and trusted resource at the heart of local communities', and the Welsh quality framework says libraries 'connect and unite' (Welsh Government, 2017:3). Common across all these narratives is the idea that public libraries have a special place in our social realm; unique in localities in supporting individual and collective learning in its multiple forms.

Claims of the public library as a social good is a familiar policy narrative. Yet at the same time, and for many years, there has been recognition that public libraries are at a significant cross-roads; not one that will simply reshape their identity and role, but their long-term viability. One of the primary discussion points has been the growth and accessibility of digital technologies, and the resultant impact on the needs, demands and expectations of library users (see Cavoto and Hurst, 2019 for an alternative discussion on the impact of digital technology on book lending). Libraries have adapted, both through an expanding digital offer (McNamara, 2017) and by efforts to re-establish libraries' social and geographical 'place' within neighbourhoods (Whitelaw et al., 2016). Yet the context of austerity has meant that, along with other state-funded services, the high expectations set in policy is increasingly more difficult to deliver. Budget cuts have resulted in many libraries operating on limited opening hours, depleted stocks, reduced staff and a growing reliance on volunteers (CIPFA Research and Analytics, 2019). Others are fighting, or have succumbed to, closure (Grant, 2016, Mackay, 2019, Merson, 2019).

The article seeks to continue a public conversation about the current state of public libraries in Scotland and, in particular, the impact and consequences that Westminster-led austerity measures are having on their future. It does this by first looking back to situate Scottish libraries in their historical context, and examining Ian MacDougall's (2017) rich accounts of Scottish library staff working from the 1930s to the late 1990s in his *Voices of Scottish Librarians*. This was demonstrably a period of social change, and one which offered the sector multiple opportunities. Library services were able to evolve and expand, both as a profession, and in their position as a core public service in local communities. The second part of the article turns to data collected as part of ongoing Leverhulme Trust funded research on the value of the modern public library. The accounts presented are from those currently working with, and for, public libraries. Continuity is observed in the fundamental principles that library staff aspire to deliver. The change is in their ability to deliver these principles when faced with budgetary cuts, experienced as a continual 'chipping' away of resources. This, combined with the

demands for welfare services from communities increasingly burdened by poverty, means the library is in an ever greater position of precariousness.

The emergence of a library service in Scotland

It is not the intention, nor is there the space, to provide a comprehensive overview of public library development in Scotland (for a full account see Aitken, 1971 also, Crawford, 2002). However, it is worth reflecting on the pivotal historical markers since these can help to contexualise our understanding of the modern public library service in Scotland. It was the 1850 Act of Parliament (and subsequent specific amendments for Scotland) that established in law the first rate-supported libraries in the UK. Yet as John Crawford (2002) describes the antecedents to the public library can be found long before the Act, with the origins of the Scottish community library dating back to the late 17th century. The administration of these early libraries took a range of forms, with the predominant being a combination of institutional libraries, endowed libraries and subscription libraries[1] (Kelly, 1966). It was not uncommon for collections to be bestowed by a benefactor or purchased by a church or religious institution, and their use managed by local clergy or parochial authorities. In the case of subscription libraries, governance was (in theory) democratic. Yet their management was often composed of leading figures in the community, and whose ideology was reflected in book selection and administration (Crawford, 2002:247).

Members of subscription libraries were largely drawn from the middle classes, with provision for working classes coming from Mechanics' Institutes. Typically established through the patronage of local industrialists, it was hoped that the provision of a library would provide more knowledgeable and skilled employees. By 1850 there were 55 such institutes in Scotland, providing the (largely male) working classes access to individual reading and self-education. Also supported was an active cultural and social environment consisting of lectures, entertainment and discussion, activities now considered to be core to the public library ethos. Like the other forms of libraries discussed above, the Institutes were deeply ideological and held the belief that education and reading in a communal and well-maintained environment would establish respect and good moral values. As Johnathan Rose puts it, the intent was in making the working classes 'sober, pious and productive' (Rose, 2010:238). While this moral intent is not explicitly recognisable in the modern library, Mechanics' Institutes had a critical role in shaping rate-supported libraries (Aitken, 1971:53).

The eventual dominance of state-supported libraries did not come without hindrance. Some expressed concerns that state-supported libraries would become working class lectures halls, and 'give rise to an unhealthy agitation' (HC Debate, 13 March 1850). Others, including the 1849 Select Committee report on libraries, took the view that the provision of facilities for self-improvement would actively promote social morality to the benefit of all (House of Commons, 1849). This latter perspective prevailed, and the result was the enactment of the Public Libraries Act 1850, with the scope of the Act being extended to Scotland in 1853[2]. Importantly, it was this that introduced the first rate-supported libraries, with free admission to all libraries and museums established.

Even at this point, the Act did not, as David McMenemy (2009:27) describes in his own account of public library development, have an 'easy ride' through Parliament. In Scotland, and elsewhere in the UK, public libraries were slow to be established, and in some areas (including Edinburgh and Glasgow)

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[1] Institutional libraries were the antecedents of specialist academic libraries. Endowed libraries – with collections donated by benefactors - were controlled by the local clergy, and almost all were attached to parish churches in towns and cities (Kelly, 1966).

[2] The 1850 Act extended to Scotland and Ireland by an Act of 1853, which was subsequently superseded by the Public Libraries (Scotland) Act 1854 which gave library authorities the right to raise the rate by 1d. and to spend money on books, maps and specimens as well as on library and museum buildings. Scottish library legislation was consolidated into the Public Libraries Consolidation (Scotland) Act 1887.

continued to receive opposition (Aitken, 1971:74). Sykes (1979) notes that even well after the Act, many public libraries remained poorly resourced, which in turn was reflected in the quality of buildings and stock. Paradoxically, it was this representation of the library as a 'poor' service that came to shape working class attitudes to the library: 'in appearance, location and smell many [free libraries] were associated with that very condition so abhorred by the bulk of the working class – charity' (Sykes, 1979:19). Twenty five years after the Act was extended to Scotland there were still only six rate-supported libraries – in Airdrie, Dundee, Paisley, Forfar, Galashiels and Thurso (Aitken, 1971:81).

It was from the 1880s that renewed impetus for a state managed library estate took hold, greatly advanced by the philanthropic support of Andrew Carnegie which financed the building of 33 libraries in Scotland[3]. A further key development was the establishment of the Scottish Library Association[4] in 1908, a move which brought together what had previously been a fractured library profession. Thomas Kelly, whose work expertly chronicles public library development in Great Britain, recorded the steady introduction of new library services in the period up the First World War (Kelly, 1973:appendix IV). What is remarkable is that in spite of the economic fragility of the interwar years, investment in public libraries continued, with services becoming an important diversion from the social and economic circumstances. Kelly quotes one unemployed reader of the time stating that the library had been 'the means of holding on to sanity during months of despair' (Kelly, 1973:257). The McColvin Report - *The Public Library System of Great Britain* - published during the second world war brought further progress (see Whiteman, 1986 for depth discussion of McColvin's impact). This report on the organisation of the public library service concluded that, despite being vital to civil society, public libraries were not adequately meeting demand or demonstrating the value of books and libraries to the public. While for some the McColvin Report was a scathing attack on practice it also, notes McMenemy (2009:31), came to inspire an entire generation of librarians, further professionalising librarianship and consolidating the scattered network of services.

In the Scottish statutory context, the next critical juncture came in the shape of the Public Libraries (Scotland) Act 1955. This removed the limitation on expenditure and borrowing for public libraries; gave powers to public libraries to co-operate with each other; and powers to organise and finance extension activities. Then, in 1973, the Local Government (Scotland) Act made it a statutory duty for the local authority 'to secure the provision of *adequate* library facilities for all persons resident in their area' [my emphasis]. Of course, the issue of what constitutes 'adequate' library facilities continues to be a source of debate and political contestation (MacDougall, 2017), especially in the context of austerity and financial spending cuts at the local authority level. It is also worth noting that the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government have no specific powers of intervention in library services. However, the Local Government (Scotland) Act 2003 charges local authorities with the power to promote and advance community well-being, and to secure 'best value' in its service delivery, under which public library legislation can, in theory, be reinforced.

Bringing us right up to date is *Ambition and Opportunity: A Strategy for Public Libraries in Scotland*, launched in 2015 and refreshed in 2019 (Scottish Library and Information Council, 2015). Here, the strategic vision set out for public libraries in Scotland is as 'trusted guides connecting all of our people to the world's possibilities and opportunities', with the wider mission to be 'part of a shared civic ambition to fulfil the potential of individuals and communities'. To date, the strategy has been

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[3] A list is available here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Carnegie_libraries_in_Europe
[4] The Scottish Library Association was originally affiliated with the Library Association in 1931. When the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) was established in 2002, the Scottish Library Association voted to change its name to Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals in Scotland (CILIPS).

supported by investment through The Public Library Improvement Fund (PLIF) which has invested over £1.7 million to support creative and innovative library projects throughout Scotland (Reid and Whitehead, 2015). However, the wider financial context is largely represented by cuts to the core local government funding for library services.

Voices of Scottish librarians

A summary of the statutory and policy changes in the public library service provides a historical overview, yet offers no insight into librarianship as the service is being built - a period of significant political, social and economic upheaval. The *Voices of Public Libraries* (MacDougall, 2017) offers, in part, that understanding. The book is the result of the Scottish Working People's History Trust; their wider objective being to record the recollections of working people about their lives, their housing, educational, recreational cultural and other experiences. Through the project a consistent attempt was made to record the experiences of working people in occupations that were disappearing or in process of changing. The result was 14 interviews with former library staff (ten men and four women) who had obtained professional qualifications, as well as those who were working in libraries in different capacities, over the period 1930 to the late 1990s.

There are, of course, limitations to these accounts. As Crawford (2017) points out, there is little background on how the interviewees were selected, nor can they be taken as representative of the sector. Nonetheless, the accounts do offer insight into the limitations and restrictions of the inter-war period and post-war austerity.

Viewed through a contemporary lens, one of the most striking reflections was in how the interviewees came to work in the library service. The majority spoke of themselves as keen readers throughout their childhood, and there was an implicit assumption that a fondness of books and reading was central to their becoming a librarian. Joe Fisher, for instance, said that as a child he 'just read, and read and read', while Dorothy Milne rehearsed her family motto growing up 'I read to learn'. Affectionate memories of using public libraries as a child were also shared, as were the deep impressions these visits had on their understanding of what a library should strive to be. These early encounters also held emotional importance, intertwined as they were with stories of family relationships and early expressions of independence.

Despite a love for books, the library service was not typically a pre-planned career. Rather it was described as a job that many had 'fallen' into. John Hunter thought that a library job would be a 'cushy little number' as he enjoyed reading books. Peter Grant, similarly, described himself as 'knockin' aboot doing damn-all' when a librarian approached him to ask whether he would like to work in the library. After a letter to the Burgh Librarian, Peter was quickly appointed. Another distinction from the contemporary precariousness of youth employment was the sheer availability of posts. Isabella McKinlay talked about the multiple job offers after leaving the Scottish Library College, and of her freedom to wait until her preferred post in a mobile library became available.

Notable in the narratives is also the emergence of the public library service as a profession, as supported by the McColvin Report. In the 1930s those joining the profession describe themselves as being encouraged to study to become an Associate of the Library Association (ALA) – as in the cases of Dorothy Milne and Andrew Fraser. The establishment of the Scottish School of Librarianship in 1946, later to become the Department of Librarianship in 1964, further consolidated this professional identity. Professionalism also appeared to be valued by service providers, with evidence of local authorities financially supporting staff to gain qualifications (although this was not universally experienced it does contrast significantly with more recent experiences). MacDougall's own

observations conclude that investment in professional training engendered a confident workforce, producing a cohort of librarians responsible for building the modern public library service:

> … they were the builders, the ones who used the foundations created by their professional predecessors to expand services, to introduce new facilities and new delivery models.(MacDougall 2017: 2)

This confidence was supported by a willingness to develop and resource library services. Several, like John Preston, Gavin Drummond and Peter Grant, described the opportunity to oversee refurbishment and new build projects, as well as enhanced mobile provision. That is not to say that librarians did not face challenges. Local politics are a constant throughout, with negotiations with local councillors and efforts to get them 'on side' being fairly common. So too were debates about which department the public library service should be situated within the Council. The availability of resources appears to change markedly during local government reorganisation in the 1970s, and for several interviewees it was this change that marked the end of their career.

The strongest aspect of continuity with contemporary libraries is in the enthusiasm oflibrary staff for public libraries and the service being provided. Shared are tales of the everyday sociability taking place in the public space of the library. Margaret Deas tells a brilliant story of the library helping a man whose dog had fleas find details about a vet that was open, while others spoke candidly of dealing with the challenging behaviour of patrons, and balancing these against the needs of other users. Working in largely working class Tranent, John Hunter described his efforts to ensure he provided for the community needs with supplies of *The Morning Star,* racing newspapers and the ubiquitous Mills & Boon romance. Gavin Drummond talked of the mobile library user who taught herself a range of skills, including meat curing and butter making. This he concluded is 'what it's about'.

What did these librarians think about the future of the library service? The timing of the interviews is significant here. They took place between 1996 and 2002, well before two social transformations that have since reshaped the public library service: the 2008 recession and subsequent fiscal austerity programme, and the rapid expansion of social media (for instance, Facebook was founded in 2004; YouTube 2005). For many, there was a sense of accomplishment – a feeling that they had improved the library estate and the profession. As Bill Paton states:

> … libraries have changed for the better: there is more money, a far better selection of stock and the type of materials has extended, local studies services have improved, more professional staff.

Others had left the service despondent. All believed in the library service as a unique community resource. Yet there was concern that inadequate funding was being allocated to maintain the service. As Peter Grant rather eloquently stated in his interview in 1998:

> After all this struggle. To get it up to that level and then it's just gone doon the stank and it'll take years, if ever, to build back up again because the will's no there. I think there's goin' tae be closures and […] curtailment of hours.

The impact of austerity on public libraries

Since the interview, Peter Grant's prediction has become a reality for some library services, confirmed in statistics published annually by the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA). These illustrate not only cuts to income and expenditure, but also shortened opening hours, depleted stocks, reduced staff and a growing reliance on volunteers (CIPFA Research and Analytics, 2019).

Table 1 details the top level change in the number of libraries open for more than 10 hours a week. This reveal a dramatic decrease in provision over the period 2008-2018, with an 18% reduction in Great Britain overall. Decline in England matches this average, while the equivalent figure in Scotland is only slightly lower (14%). Most notable is the reduction in public libraries in Wales where the drop exceeds a quarter (28%).

Table 1: Number of public libraries open more than 10 hours per week, 2008-2018

	March 2008	**March 2018**	**Change**
England	3,469	2,853	-18%
Scotland	604	521	-14%
Wales	338	244	-28%
GB Total	**4,411**	**3,618**	**-18%**

Source: CIPFA Public Library Statistics, 2009-2019

Analysis of the figures relating to Scotland can provide more insight. Notably almost half of the reductions relate to just four local authorities - Fife, Shetland, East Ayrshire and Moray. It is also worth highlighting the appearance of a relationship between local authorities moving services into a Charitable Trust and the reduction of provision. Six of the eight local authorities where library services have been transferred to a Charitable Trust have reduced provision at a level over the Scottish average (Table 2).

Table 2: Public libraries open for more than 10 hours per week 2008-2018, by local authority

| Local authority	March 2008	March 2013	March 2018	% change 2008-2018	Independent library
Shetland	12	11	3	-75	-
Orkney	4	4	2	-50	-
East Ayrshire	23	23	14	-39	Yes
Moray	18	17	12	-33	-
Renfrewshire	18	14	13	-28	Yes
Fife	51	51	37	-27	Yes
South Ayrshire	15	15	11	-27	-
Argyll and Bute	16	13	12	-25	-
North Lanarkshire	29	28	23	-21	Yes
Falkirk	10	9	8	-20	Yes
Scottish Borders	18	16	15	-17	Yes
East Lothian	14	14	12	-14	-
South Lanarkshire	28	26	24	-14	-
West Lothian	16	16	14	-13	-
Eilean Siar	8	8	7	-13	-
Aberdeen	19	17	17	-11	-
Clackmannanshire	9	8	8	-11	-
East Dunbartonshire	9	8	8	-11	-
Midlothian	11	11	10	-9	-
West Dunbartonshire	11	9	10	-9	-
Dumfries and Galloway	26	26	24	-8	-
Highland	48	46	46	-4	Yes
Aberdeenshire	35	34	34	-3	-
Glasgow	34	33	33	-3	-
Angus	9	9	9	0	
Dundee	15	15	15	0	
East Renfrewshire	9	9	9	0	-
Inverclyde	7	7	7	0	-
North Ayrshire	18	18	18	0	-
Stirling	18	18	18	0	-
Edinburgh	30	31	31	3	-
Perth and Kinross	16	17	17	6	Yes
Scotland total	**604**	**581**	**521**	**-14**	**-**

Source: CIPFA Public Library Statistics, 2009-2019

Note: Highland and Scottish Borders both operate commissioned community co-produced libraries in their area. Other local authorities have transferred library services in certain localities to community groups. The number of libraries in community ownership was not available for this article.

Other figures from the CIPFA Library Statistics are also worth stressing. Analysis in data collected between 2008-09 and 2017-18 reveals the total income (per 1,000 population) for Scottish public libraries dropping sharply from £1,614 to £642. Staffing over the same period has also experienced significant reduction. For instance, staff in post dropped from 0.57 to 0.39 per 1000 population, professional posts almost halved, from 605 to 328, while volunteers doubled from 848 to 1,701. Given

these trends, it is not surprising to see a corresponding downward trajectory in both stock and issues, particularly the latter (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Stock and issues per 1,000 population, 2008-09 to 2017-18
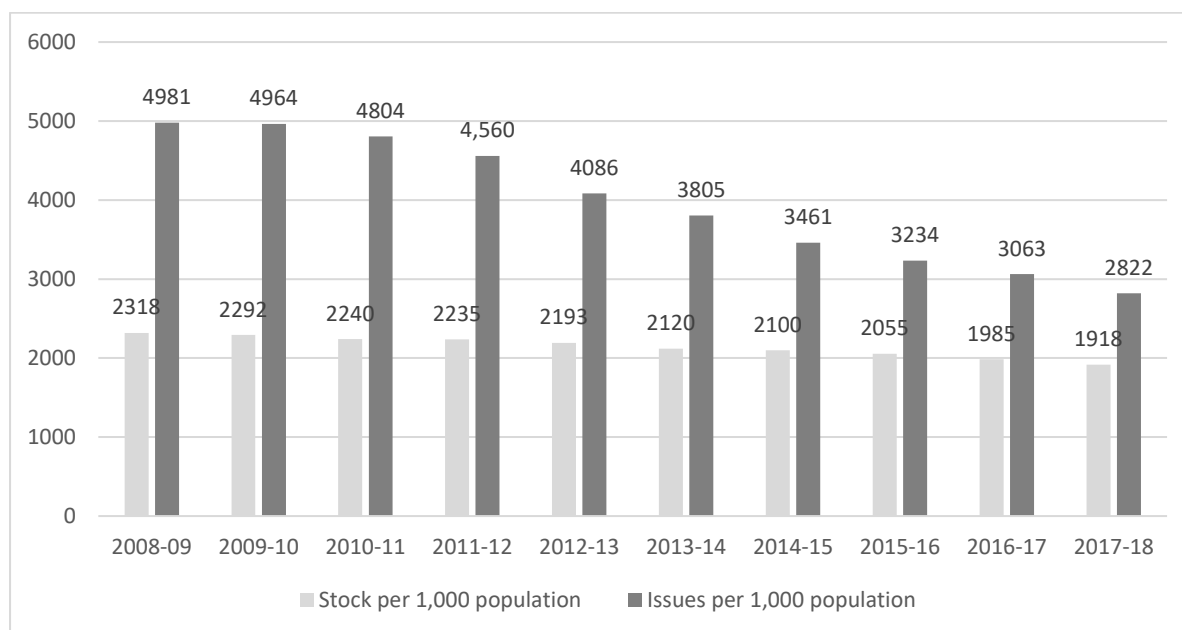
Source: CIPFA Public Library Statistics, 2009-2019

We can draw a number of headlines from these figures; that they demonstrate a statutory service being systematically dismantled and downsized, or that they reveal the unacknowledged and under-resourced library profession. However, the reality is, as ever, more nuanced. Look again at the cuts in library services open for more than 10 hours across Scotland by local authority (Table 2). Within the 14% overall reduction, there is an incredible range. Five local authorities reduced library provision by more than 25%. Yet six made no changes to this category of library, and two added more. It has been suggested that the devolved Scottish government has 'buffered' local governments from the full extent of the cuts to public services. This may be the case, yet it is local circumstances (historical, social, economic, political, demographic) which affect the priority Councils give to library services when faced with budget cuts and, crucially, the competing demands of statutory services.

What we can say is that managing library services in austerity has prompted a range of responses by local authorities in Scotland. This has involved considering, or closing services in some areas. This does not necessarily equate to a retrenchment of service provision. In several cases, closures have been combined with investment in remaining services, or undertaken with a view to developing new models of service delivery (such as community hubs or shared campuses) with the aim of creating a focal point for communities. Annette Hastings and colleagues (2015) have discussed the way that stories of how local government is 'coping with the cuts' can be portrayed through different narratives. Thus, while a story about new community hub may be celebrated by decision makers as a positive story of community building and an ability to adapt in adversity; for those working and living in communities it can be emblematic of a chipping away of services in the name of efficiency and economies of scale.

The voices of librarians in austere times

In this final section, data from interviews and focus groups with those currently working in the library service are presented. Collected as part of ongoing research for the Leverhulme Trust on the social value of public libraries, the interviewees share the complexities of delivering a library service in the

wider context of fiscal retrenchment. The interviews were undertaken between 2018-2019 as part of the pilot stage of the project, and involved 21 interviews and 3 focus groups with library staff working in seven different local authorities. While interviewees included staff working at different levels, and with differing professional statuses, for the purposes of this article these attributes have not been included; nor has the name or type of local authority in which they worked.

All the interviewees recognised the multiple pressures of prolonged austerity. This was typically discussed in relation to Welfare Reform which was described, especially in urban localities, as having a significant impact on demand for computers. Also under pressure was staff time due to frequent requests for support navigating benefits system on-line. Concern was expressed that the retrenchment of welfare services within communities, such as benefits advice services, coupled with the digitisation of public services (such as Universal Job Match or social housing applications), was a further contributor to pressure. While staff were always keen to support this work, it was challenging since they were not, as several pointed out, trained welfare advisors:

> *We are seeing massive increase in the demand for PCs, employability and filling in forms. That sort of thing. But it's difficult – we aren't welfare advisors* (library staff member)

While public libraries across Scotland are working to support vulnerable communities in explicit ways (for instance through food bank provision, and partnerships with welfare advice teams), not surprisingly the research revealed multiple examples of public libraries supporting vulnerable communities in less tangible ways. As in the interwar period, the salience of the public library is in its ability to be a social space at a time where physical manifestations of services – both public and private – are retracting. This could simply mean a space 'just to be', accompanied by a welcoming smile, hello, or nod of the head, or if required low level help and support, such as help finding a book, support accessing a computer, or a friendly chat:

> *… there's just a lot of people here are very lonely. […] Whether you can fix that, or whether you're in any position to do anything, at least you're listening.* (library staff member)

The interviews were replete with stories of everyday acts of kindness, whether that is making a cup of tea for a regular without electricity at home; booking train tickets for those with impaired sight; or helping someone get dressed for a funeral. While library staff were keen to emphasise the public good offered by their service, in some localities there was frustration over the inability to deliver the range of services that their local community required. While this was especially the case for single staffed libraries, inadequacy of resources and support was a common narrative. There was also an awareness that parts of the communities would greatly benefit from outreach, for example through regular visits to nurseries, schools or communities group who may experience barriers accessing library services. However, funding for this type of work was either short term or non-existent, or in some areas simply not valued:

> *What would help us is that if we had more staff to do outreach, and we just don't have the staff to do anything at the moment, so we're really struggling. We need to get out there, and that's not considered an important part of what we do.* (library staff member)

For many interviewees the critical impact of budgetary cuts was the impact that reduced resources had on staff. Several spoke about feeling pressured in their role, and of being over-stretched and under-resourced. Others – especially those who had worked in libraries for many years – described a palpable malaise about their inability to deliver the service they wanted to deliver, and to achieve the high expectations set out in national and local policy:

> *Staff are under severe pressure. We can't do all the things we want to do, or are being asked to do,* (library staff member)

In part, these responses were related to the gradual loss of professional staff, as reflected in official statistics. Others highlighted that it was not de-professionalisation that was the primary issue, but rather the repeated loss of long-term, well-experienced supervisors following cuts and closures. The consequence of these patterns was often on staff morale which one interviewee stated was at 'rock bottom':

> *… staff morale is at rock bottom, the lowest it's been, and that's causing a lot of you know, you're disillusioned.* (library staff member)

This not only resulted in some staff feeling unvalued, but in one case retracting their own labour to the bare minimum required:

> *I know personally I won't give what I don't have to now, which is sad, and I feel bad for that.* (library staff member)

Worth highlighting are the experiences of staff who have moved into community hubs, or shared campuses/buildings with other services. As noted earlier, in the public domain these changes have largely been narrated through a positive account of austerity helping to foster localism, creativity and partnership working. What was clear was that while this was the experience for some, perspectives varied considerably across localities. This variation was largely because of the immense differences in the type and form of shared provision. In some instances, community hubs were described as a landmark investment into a community; others involved a shared campus without the explicit values of a 'hub'. At the other end of the spectrum, changes had involved the closure of a Council office, and the re-housing of generic customer service staff into the library building.

Positive experiences generally came from those working in 'hubs' where there was a feeling that the development, in principle at least, aimed to be focal point for the community. There was also a strong view that shared service models, while not necessary being the first choice, were the outcome of pragmatic decision-making focused on 'future proofing' the library estate:

> *… keeping library services here for another twenty years is our challenge, in whatever form that takes.* (library staff member)

This positive viewpoint was countered by a deep concern that shared delivery models would continue to 'chip away' at the unique role of the library, and those working in it. The issue most emotive was not necessarily sharing physical space with other services, but of roles becoming generic within those spaces. An example of this might be a library sharing a campus with a leisure centre or a Council office, and staff delivering generic customer service activities. Several interviewees were worried that this model of working was actively destroying the service that MacDougall's librarians worked so hard to establish. The following quote revealed the anxiety of this library staff member concerned about working generically with Council staff:

> *… a library assistant's post is a very skilled […] it's bad enough that they don't have [professional] librarians, but it's like [..] they don't have any library - comprehension of what a library …* (library staff member)

Another, working in a shared campus with a leisure centre, noted that despite being their post being generic, the 'value' from the Charitable Trust, as they put it, was invested in the leisure component of

the post. Libraries within Trusts, they were quick to note, are the 'poor cousin' since they do not bring in their own revenue:

> … the bulk of the job description is weighted towards the sports side. It comes back to the value question. The value of what customers get from libraries is secondary [to the Trust]. (library staff member)

For others, it was not simply a case of defending the role and specialist skills of the librarian – although these were considered critical. It was also that other services – in this example Council office staff – were offering a profoundly different service:

> … the two services are fundamentally opposing, they're not the same thing. (library staff member)

For all time to come?

Free libraries in Scotland emerged in response to a belief that they were vital not only as means of accessing education and self-improvement, but also in creating a strong civil society. Although slow to take hold, the public library movement has been successful in establishing a nation-wide statutory service emboldened with clear profession values and principles. While the significance of books and reading may have changed over time, what is constant is the role public libraries have had in supporting those who are most vulnerable. This support often comes in forms which, unlike issues or visits, are quantifiably unmeasurable and their significance easily missed. Just as the public library offered support and diversion in the interwar years, so too is it during this period of prolonged austerity.

The statistics contribute to profiling change in the sector. Provision is declining in Scotland; yet we can also observe great variation across local authorities, with patterns shaped by local circumstances and identified needs. Nonetheless, the persistent decline is not a welcome trend. Neither is the significant decline in investment in library services and staff (CIPFA Research and Analytics, 2019), or the growing budgetary gap (Accounts Commission, 2019) which cuts to library services are frequently used to fill. The cuts have been experienced by libraries in two ways. First, through an increase in demand for welfare services (like support to access University Credit) and, second, by a gradual reduction in the resources required to deliver an adequate service. At the same time, the changing needs, demands and expectations of users are impacting on traditional library services, such as book lending. In this set of circumstances library workers are between a rock and hard place, experiencing increased demand for specific types of services, yet reduced investment to enable them to respond.

The interviews sought to explore how those working in libraries have experienced these dynamics. Again, there is continuity with the past. Staff who joined the contemporary service still clearly articulate the social role and value that libraries have, and their continued contribution to the 'common good'. Largely, there is agreement with the narrative being set out in policy documents wherein public libraries are the connector at the heart of the community. However, changes to service models – especially when poorly articulated and driven by financial motives – can have a deleterious effect. Staff morale is threatened, as is the quality of the work being provided.

Andrew Carnegie placed trust in the public library and its ability to be a potent agency for the good of the public. Public libraries can still be this agent. As Eric Klinenberg (2018) puts it they can help heal our divided, unequal society. The question is whether libraries will be afforded this role. For that we must ask deeper questions, not of the place and function of the public library, but of the functioning of our welfare state, and the mechanisms in place for supporting those most in need.

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