

Refuturing Community- Managed Libraries

Recognising their value and contribution while enabling sustainable policies and opportunities for their future

September 2024 | Policy Brief



About the Centre for the South

This project was funded by the Centre for the South (CftS), a policy institute based at the University of Southampton.

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Find out more

Friends of Cobbett Road Library:

<http://www.cobbettroad.info/research>

Community Managed Library Network:

<https://communitylibrariesnetwork.org/>

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About the collaboration

This report results from a collaboration between Dr Brian J. Hracs (University of Southampton) and Prof. Roberta Comunian (Friends of Cobbett Road Library) in Southampton.

Brian J. Hracs is an Associate Professor in Human Geography at the University of Southampton. His research focusses on culture within cities including the role public spaces, cultural facilities and creative activities play in fostering civic conversations, community cohesion, quality of life and economic development.

The Friends of Cobbett Road Library (FCRL), Southampton, have supported and campaigned for their local library since 2007, when it was council-run. Following Southampton City Council's decision in 2017 to defund the library and turn it into a community-managed library (CML), FCRL have continued to support the library. Closed between January 2021 and January 2024 – due to the previous provider's withdrawal – the library has recently been given to another external organisation to manage. In 2023, the uncertainty about the library re-opening and its future initiated discussions amongst the group about opportunities as well as challenges faced by CMLs.

Some local creative partners also contributed to understanding new creative uses and opportunities for engagement in libraries. For example, Light-UP Youth Theatre and Improbable Club delivered creative workshops and activities for children and young people and supported a creative writing competition about the 'Library of the Future'. Artist Joanna Rose Tidey created a new mural and inspiration for the community.

Thank you

We want to thank all the research participants in Southampton and across the UK for their contributions via interviews and surveys. A particular thank you to the younger contributors, children and young people, who engaged creatively to explore the future of libraries. All the Friends of Cobbett Road Library supported delivering a rich programme of activities with Light-UP Youth Theatre and Improbable Club. Finally, during this collaborative journey the knowledge, help and support of the Community Managed Library Network has been invaluable to reflect on the wider implications of the research undertaken.

Cover Photo: Author Yarrow Townsend discussing her book 'The Map of Leaves' with children at Cobbett Road Library (courtesy Friends of Cobbett Road Library).

Authors and Copyright

This policy brief was authored by Dr Brian J. Hracs, University of Southampton and Prof. Roberta Comunian, Friends of Cobbett Road Library, with the support of Georgina Cockett and Emma Coleman (University of Southampton students).

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Executive summary

This policy brief results from a collaboration between the University of Southampton (The School of Geography and Environmental Science) and Friends of Cobbett Road Library. This work intended to address local challenges around the threats and opportunities faced by a community managed library - Cobbett Road Library - in Southampton. However, while engaging with local communities and stakeholders, we discovered that CMLs have emerged – slowly and almost invisibly but with scale – in the national landscape of library provision in England without being fully acknowledged, regulated or supported by local or national policy. So, while engaging with library users and imagining the future of a local library, the research team also explored broader questions about CMLs. In particular – through qualitative interviews and creative engagement activities – the project unveiled how the contributions of CMLs to the socio-cultural landscape of rural and urban areas need to be fully acknowledged.

THE PROBLEM/CHALLENGE

The Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 created a statutory duty for local authorities ‘to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service for all persons desiring to make use thereof’. Despite this statutory duty, public library provision in the UK has been undergoing continuous cuts since financial austerity started in 2010/2011. The Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) reported in 2018 that total staff has declined by 45% across public libraries in England since 2006-07.

The Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy’s (CIPFA) annual survey of the UK’s libraries, excluding Northern Ireland, reveals that in 2021/2022 there were 3,064 library branches open. This is 1,074 fewer than in 2011/2012, or a 25% decrease, in a decade. Since 2010, 773 have closed. Alongside the demise of local authority-run libraries, the opening of CMLs has become a trend that is growing yearly. In 2012 the Arts Council of England identified 170 CMLs. By 2019, the number had risen to 485, and at present (2024), there are 585 members of the Community Managed Library Network.

Despite one quarter of library services being placed in the hands of community groups in one decade, very little has been done to understand this massive shift, including how CMLs operate. This lack of knowledge, support, and regulation also undermines the ability of CMLs to survive and thrive now and in the future.

THE WORK WE HAVE DONE

The project has included a range of activities and research methods. Overall, at the local level, in partnership with FCRL and creative partners, we have delivered creative workshops and activities – including a creative writing competition for children and young people. We reflected with the community about their needs, the role that the library can play and how it can evolve in the future. We also engaged locally and nationally to interview 13 other CMLs, three representatives of organisations/networks/campaigns which support CMLs and two representatives from local authorities supporting the work of CMLs alongside statutory libraries. Our activities culminated in a final event at Cobbett Road Library, which brought together 6 South Hampshire CMLs to network and exchange ideas about future collaborations.

KEY FINDINGS:

- CMLs have emerged nationally as a sector from the problematic demise of public library provision across the UK. Against austerity and polycrisis (COVID-19, cost of living, energy), CMLs have navigated multiple challenges while offering renewed opportunities in communities.
- Beyond library service provision, CMLs have often become community hubs. They have been stretching and expanding their offer to respond to community needs, with some achieving this despite precarious financial positions and uncertain volunteer bases.
- Despite their resilience and successes, CMLs’ value is currently underestimated, and their socio-economic and cultural contribution to communities is often invisible and unaccounted for by policymakers and funders.
- CMLs face continuous challenges to their long-term sustainability, including, in some cases, crumbling infrastructure, volunteer shortages, uncertain leases and contracts and funding. Moreover, where strong place-based leadership is found – within both CMLs and local authorities, it can shape their success, but this is often an exception rather than the norm.

RECOMMENDATIONS

At both local and national policy levels, the report recommends that CMLs are:

- Transparently and collaboratively mapped and defined.
- Better funded and supported to deliver their socio-cultural agendas.
- Valued and celebrated for their engagement with local communities and contribution to public policy agendas.

The study supports the need for a better understanding of the challenges faced by CMLs and celebrates their achievements throughout a turbulent decade. It finds, however, that for CMLs to be viable and sustainable in the long term, interventions (mapping, definitions, frameworks and funding) are needed.

Findings

Through qualitative interviews we identified challenges and opportunities that can significantly impact the future of CMLs. Here are some key findings and implications:

Emerging from the ashes: Traumatic transitions, multiple forms and renewed opportunities

All interviews highlighted how being a CML was never seen as a choice or preference rather a response to the loss and disappearance of local libraries. This transition was often seen as traumatic or a lesser evil than losing the library entirely. Negotiating and taking on a library was described as a demanding task; however, the resulting CMLs have brought a new lease of life for many libraries that have suffered cuts in funding, staff, stock and hours over the years.

Community-managed libraries as hubs: Volunteers stretching to respond to community needs

Based on the contexts and demands of their unique communities, CMLs have been reshaped to undertake an extended range of community roles, especially addressing childhood and elderly needs (in response to the demise of local infrastructures). Therefore, CMLs have also been tasked with delivering a much larger social agenda – often larger than the one taken on by council-run libraries. Crucially, this is all done by recruiting and managing a network of volunteers, which can put incredible strain on a few members of the community. Indeed, ageing volunteers, quick turnaround, tasks that are less appealing to volunteers, and a lack of training make delivering this range of services sometimes difficult.

The sustainability challenge: Contracts, fundraising, leadership and communities

CMLs are all experiencing challenges with long-term planning and sustainability. This comes from the continuous need to renegotiate terms as tenants and precarious financial conditions which rely on persistent fundraising, leadership continuity and the economic stability of local communities. Balancing these challenges within a very complex economic situation that has recently included a pandemic, energy, and cost of living crisis has put a strain on many of the CMLs. The leadership – including volunteers and trustees – can often create only short-term plans (due to the changing economic pressure faced by councils). Moreover, we see a disparity between libraries in communities with higher and lower levels of economic and cultural capital.

The value of community managed libraries: Measuring success and gaining recognition

The overall contribution that CMLs make to the provision of library services in the UK, as well as to other health, social, cultural and well-being agendas, is widely underestimated and often invisible. Partially, the CMLs do not have the skills, frameworks and time to evidence this contribution – which the CML Network has been championing. Partially, their contribution needs to be underplayed by policy and the wider library sector to defend the public provision and to make sure the success stories of CMLs do not lead to further funding cuts and library closures. Overall, while the range of positive case studies, community work and achievement does require acknowledgement, this needs to be accompanied by a recognition by policy, nationally and locally, that a new socio-cultural sector has emerged from the closure of public libraries. And like other socio-cultural organisations (community centres, art centres, health centres, etc), they need to be properly regulated and funded to enable their long-term sustainability.

Recommendations

Informed by the research and interviews conducted, we were able to develop recommendations for a range of key stakeholders and gatekeepers to address the future sustainability of CMLs.

For support networks and campaigners:

Creating a common framework to measure value – shared across CMLs – will enable them to talk to policymakers and the community about their work with evidence and confidence.

It is important to take individual evidence and **build a campaign that raises awareness locally, regionally, and nationally about the number of CMLs and their contribution.**

For local authorities:

Adopt a partnership frame of mind (rather than an outsourcing frame of mind) towards CMLs supporting each of them in an equal and transparent way to allow collaboration and sharing across CMLs.

Support CMLs with shared training opportunities (equal to staff training in council-run libraries) and **shared campaigns** to recruit and engage volunteers across the local authority.

Expand funding opportunities and grants to make CMLs more energy efficient, when possible, by allowing them to generate their local energy. Funding should also be directed towards the maintenance of buildings to allow CMLs' fundraising to go towards activities connected to the library service provision.

For national policy:

There is a need for more research and mapping of the sector nationally to understand its precarity, needs, and prospects for long-term sustainability more fully. In particular, it will be important to map council-run libraries and CMLs in connection with local communities and socio-economic challenges.

National policy should provide much more clarity on CML models and regulate institutional and funding models (in connection to other libraries, museums, and other charity organisations). Policies should also create new funding streams to support their social and cultural activities.