

## **Chalfont St Giles Community Library**

### **Running a small public library with volunteers: our experience**

*The library has had a number of enquiries from communities across the UK whose libraries are under threat of closure.*

*Tony Hoare, Chairman of Chalfont St Giles Community Library, describes the experience of our small library.*

#### **Background**

In November 2006 Buckinghamshire County Council closed eight small public libraries including the County library in Chalfont St Giles. The County provided the village with an alternative mobile library service. Our village was strongly against the library's closure. At the time the County would only allow the library to continue if it was run at 'no cost to the County'.

We [the Friends of the Library] consulted our local community, including the Parish Council, and with their support we decided to take up the challenge. We opened as a self-managed Community Library in January 2007. Two other Bucks communities Little Chalfont and West Wycombe also followed the same path.

In 2010 the County revised its policy agreeing to work in partnership with the village and provide some support to the Community Library. The mobile library was redeployed. Since 2010 County-Community Library partnerships have been established in a further fourteen communities across Bucks. The County provides tailored support to each Community Library.

Also in 2010 Chalfont St Giles Parish Council purchased the freehold of the library building from the County.

Our library has featured on the BBC One Show on a couple of occasions, firstly, in May 2010 [www.youtube.com/watch?v=y3dV49VLzNk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y3dV49VLzNk) and secondly in a comparative piece with Friern Barnet library [www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_VIS\\_z2RL0Q](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_VIS_z2RL0Q) in May 2012.

#### **How does it work?**

Residents use the Community Library in the same way and on the same lending terms as any County library. We use the County library system and along with the rest of the County we are now linked into a wider library network, so our users have online reservation access to over 6 million books in over 200 libraries across the South East. Stock can be borrowed and returned across the County network including the Community Library. The library is included in the County's inter-library delivery network.

We are a 100% volunteer organisation - all unpaid. At an organisational level running the library is similar to running a small business; you need individuals with some skills, for example general management, financial, marketing and fundraising skills are all useful. The organisation also needs access to the necessary expertise to handle the relevant legal issues including data protection and safeguarding.

Operationally we have around 50 volunteers mostly retired people but not exclusively so. Our volunteers come from all walks of life. Ex-librarians are of course a real bonus! We operate with two volunteers on duty in the library at any one time and typically each volunteer serves in the library for half a day once a fortnight. The County provided initial library system training and we continue to hold update training sessions as required.

We have been very fortunate with our volunteers and have not found it difficult to recruit them. I think this is because people like small village libraries and it's a sociable and pleasant experience to work in one. Our volunteers have proved reliable and we have had minimal volunteer turnover.

We aim to have a first class book stock. Our stock is a combination of local donations, locally purchased and County supplied stock. Residents are generous with their book donations, but we only add the best and most and up to date donations to our stock. We buy a good number of new books for both adults and children. We can purchase via the County's stock purchase system. We cover the full stock range, fiction, non-fiction and children's. We also have some children's DVDs. We are careful in our selection process to ensure we have a balanced stock selection. We update the library stock system locally.

When we started we linked up with the volunteer run visitor information service in the village and this service is now provided from the library.

We have two computers with internet access for public use - the only public internet access in the village.

Core funding now comes from a County annual grant, some 200 local residents who are 'Friends of the Library' and the library till (late fees, DVD hire charges etc.). Further fundraising activities are carried out as required. Over the years we have raised money from author talks, quiz nights, a small lottery and garden open days. From 2007-9 we received an annual grant from the Parish Council. Grants have also been received from the District Council and local businesses. The Community Library is a registered charity. This brings some financial benefits, for example a saving on business rates and the ability to claim gift aid on residents' cash donations. It also opens up the possibility of applying for grants.

In addition to a grant the County provides the IT and library systems and related support, some County book stock and volunteer training both by a County library trainer and via online training material.

### **What has been achieved?**

We have increased the library's opening hours from the 20 hours per week of the old County Library to 34.5 hours per week. The library is now open lunch times and Saturday afternoons. The library operates with two volunteers whereas the County library was served by a single librarian.

We have increased the book stock by 60% and we think improved the stock quality through tailoring it to local needs.

The library's lending has increased every year from 2007-12. Our book lending is similar to the level of the former County library.

The library building has been improved with new windows, a new porch and some interior refurbishment. In a joint project with the Parish Council we are working on a plan to build an extension to the library.

We are making more use of the library building - we aim to use the library to maximum effect in the service of the village. We run story times for pre-school children every week. We have a close relationship with the infant and junior schools in the village. We run events for children during the school holidays and the national 'Summer Reading Challenge' each year. We use the library for surgeries e.g. our MP, Councillors, Community Police and also for other events like coffee mornings.

Incorporating the resident and visitor information service into the library has ensured more efficient use of volunteers and buildings.

Retaining the library helps ensure that the village remains a good place to live and adds to the footfall in the centre of the village which in turn helps the local shops.

The process of running the library locally has been enjoyable and I think has enhanced our village community. Support from all parts of the village has been terrific.

From the County's perspective, through supporting the Community Library, they are able to deliver the statutory library service into a smaller community in a most cost effective way. The Community Library costs less than a third of the cost of the old County library. We think it is important to remain part of the public library network and service.

### **Conclusions**

Whilst a well-funded traditional paid staff library is likely to be the best option for any community, our experience indicates that there are opportunities to give small libraries a new lease of life whilst saving money.

The model that we have followed in Chalfont St Giles is not universally applicable. Our library is small with light to moderate use. Buckinghamshire is a relatively prosperous County with a sufficient pool of people with the time and skills to operate the local library. Trying to follow the same model in a busy town library in a deprived area would I think be less likely to succeed.

Nevertheless the overriding requirement for a successful volunteer small library is in my view a strong local community with a desire to keep the local library open. It can be done!

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