

## **Chalfont St Giles Community Library**

### **Running a small public library with volunteers**

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

*As an introduction - here is a clip about the library from the BBC One Show 24 May 2010:*

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y3dV49VLzNk>

*Since this clip was broadcast and as explained below the Council has revised its policy and the Council does now provide some support to the library.*

*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 affected communities with an alternative mobile library service. Our village was strongly against the library's closure. After a fairly meaningless consultation process we (the 'Friends of the Library') were told by the County that we could run a library from the existing building and use the county library computer system but this would have to be done at 'no cost to the Council'. We would have to pay for everything including renting and running the building, leasing IT equipment and hiring county stock.

We 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 Buckinghamshire communities, Little Chalfont and West Wycombe also followed the same path.

In 2010 the County revised its policy. The little used mobile library was redeployed and the County now provides some support for the Community Library. Support includes an annual grant, free provision of IT, a small amount of book stock and volunteer training. The library is now included in the County's inter-library delivery network. The new arrangement covers over half of the library's annual running costs which means that local effort can focus on running and developing the library rather than constantly having to fundraise to exist.

In 2010 the Chalfont St Giles Parish Council purchased the freehold of the library building from the County. We now pay a nominal rent to the Parish.

### **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.

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 provides some initial library system training. We also hold update training sessions.

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. It's quite a sociable and pleasant experience to work in one. Our volunteers have proved reliable and we have had minimal volunteer turnover.

Most of our books are donated by local residents. We buy a good number of new books for both adults and children. Some more specialist books come from the County e.g. large print. 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.

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 also provide two computers with internet access for public use - the only public internet access in the village.

Core funding now comes from a County grant, some 250 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 last four 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 in particular a saving on business rates and the ability to claim gift aid on resident's cash donations. It also opens up the possibility of applying for grants.

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

We have increased the library's opening hours from the 20 hours per week of the old County Library to 30.5 hours per week. The library is now open lunch times and Saturday afternoons.

We have increased the book stock by 50% and we think improved the stock quality through tailoring it to local needs.

The library's lending has increased in each of the last four years and our book lending is now just ahead of the level of the old county library.

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

The library building has been improved with new windows, a new porch and some interior refurbishment.

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 nursery and primary 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, Adult Social Carers and also for other events like coffee mornings.

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.

### **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 unlikely 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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