



David McNulty, Chief Executive
Surrey County Council
County Hall
Penrhyn Road
Kingston upon Thames
Surrey KT1 2DN

10 April 2012
Delivered by email

Dear Sir,

Community Partnered Libraries

I write this open letter as the Chair of the Surrey Libraries Action Movement (SLAM). It is written further to the judgment of the High Court in R (Williams and Dorrington) v Surrey County Council.

Much of the court case was concerned with the Council's position that training of volunteers could solve any and all adverse impacts on the accessibility of community libraries caused by removing paid staff. Officers had put before the Cabinet, in Mr Justice Wilkie's words, 'bland assertions' that training would be required and monitored. The Judge held that such assertions fell 'substantially short' of what was required by law. This was a case in which the Judge considered that there was clear unlawfulness on the part of the Council.

We are disappointed with the Council's response that it is 'pleased' with the finding that it has failed to give due regard to issues of equality. The Court of Appeal has recently said that inattention to equality issues is not only unlawful but bad government. We fail to understand how the Council can possibly be pleased. The legal claim was not, as the Council has suggested, a 'technical' challenge; it was a challenge about whether the Council had properly considered the impact of removing paid staff on the accessibility of libraries to vulnerable groups. It had not. The Claimants will be seeking an Order quashing the decision to proceed with CPLs.

We urge the Council to consider Mr Justice Wilkie's judgment carefully. There are serious questions about the effect of removing paid staff which have not been considered, but must now be considered thoroughly and put to the Cabinet. The Cabinet needs to be able to consider, rigorously and properly informed by its officers, the extent to which training of hundreds of volunteers can cure the accessibility problems of removing paid staff, and what training might be necessary.

We understand the central features of the current training plan to be as follows:

- There will be a 'start-up' period of training in the first two or three weeks at each CPL.
- The Council will train each steering group's 'key volunteers'. These key volunteers will then 'cascade' the training to other volunteers.

- Key volunteers will have 30 minutes of training on 'equalities' legal requirements.
- Key volunteers will have 20 minutes of training on data protection, copyright, 1964 Museums and Libraries Act, computer misuse, video loans law, Sale of Goods Act, library byelaws and complains procedure.
- Key volunteers will have 10 minutes of training on Customer Service.
- Key volunteers will have 60 minutes of practical demonstration of library processes.

It is said by the Council (surprisingly) that, by the end of this short two hour training, the key volunteers will "understand how to operate the self-service point, be able to register a new customer and how to request books, DVDs and talking books" and "will know how to identify good quality books and understand the principles of stock display and location" and "will be aware of the legal requirements of customer service."

The Cabinet needs to be able to consider whether this is sufficient. In particular, the Cabinet needs to know (1) what the adverse impacts of removing paid staff on accessibility are likely to be and (2) whether and how those impacts can be mitigated by training.

The first point is tremendously important. The Cabinet cannot assess the extent to which training of volunteers can replace the skills and experience of paid staff unless it has a full understanding of how paid staff are able to benefit vulnerable library users. The only way that this can be fully understood is by consulting vulnerable library users. The Council has not consulted, for example, elderly persons, disabled persons, and children, on the ways in which paid staff assist them in accessing the library service (and thus promoting library use). The Council must consult properly or it will be impossible to properly understand the effects of removing paid staff. The Council has, SLAM acknowledges, consulted the Disability Empowerment Boards (DEBs). However, the Cabinet has not had the opportunity to consider the concerns that were raised by the DEBs. More importantly, there is nothing to suggest that the participants in the DEBs (other than those participants that raised concerns) were users of the Surrey library service. Library users need to be consulted.

On completion of such a consultation, it will be possible to understand the importance of paid staff and the potential impacts of removing them, as well as what training might be necessary if they are removed. Some of the impacts are, in SLAM's view, already clear, although they could be better understood with appropriate consultation.

They include:

- (1) Full-time paid staff are able to develop knowledge of the library users and their needs. For example, if a blind a person uses a particularly library, the full-time staff will become familiar with how that person is best (and prefers to be) assisted. That will inevitably be a better service than if the library user is assisted by a different member of the large pool of volunteers on each visit to the library. That person is likely to be encour-

aged to use the library if they know they will be met by staff familiar with their needs. Full-time staff are also likely to have more experience in providing such assistance. Generally, there are a myriad of ways in which full-time staff being able to develop relationships with and knowledge of users enhances the service. We are aware, for example, of an elderly lady in one particular library who has a particular interest in cats. The library staff know this and are able to look out for the latest books on cats and will often keep a book that they know she will like aside for her. She says that the staff make her feel like there is help for her. This will be a familiar story to many users of the affected libraries. It is a real advantage to having paid staff in libraries, and of considerable importance in promoting library use.

- (2) Assistance from staff is not just about library processes (such as reserving a book). Vulnerable users also rely on staff for help in obtaining information, or making use of reference books, or suggestions for fictional books. Some volunteers may, by chance, have fantastic knowledge and expertise and be able to assist. But it is unreasonable to expect the majority of volunteers to be able to provide the same service as those who spend their working life in libraries. Staff in the community libraries may not be professional librarians, but as was recognised by the Council in September 2011, “Staff working in libraries are trained and experienced in providing excellent customer service, including encouraging library users of all ages to try new reading.” That is correct and it ought not be underestimated. We have been told, for example, by one elderly user that she frequently asks for assistance with reference books and the staff “always know the answers.” We suspect that the judgement of Sally Parker (Library Sector’s Manager) was correct when she “made it clear” to one DEB that “she was not suggesting that volunteers would provide the same level of service as paid library staff.”
- (3) Some disabled users will have very specific needs. Examples would include a user with an autistic spectrum disorder, or with specific physical impairments. The ‘bare assertions’ to the requirement of training do not at all demonstrate how such specific needs will be able to be met by a rota of volunteers.
- (4) An increasing number of services are provided by telephone to Enquiries Direct, or to ‘link’ libraries, or online. This includes book reservations, failed requests, PIN reminders, registering with a library, catalogue searches, reserving books, accessing borrower history, book recommendations (when not provided by a volunteer), queries such as why a user has a fine, amending a borrower’s details, lost membership cards or change of borrower status, account queries or waiving fines, issuing an item for an extended time period, and issuing an unrecognised item. The impact of such a change on the service on the disabled and elderly, who are more likely to find such changes in the service to act as barriers, ought to be explored and recognised.

- (5) Libraries can play a hugely important role in combating social isolation and providing opportunity for social contact, particularly, it appears to SLAM, amongst the elderly. A library staffed by a large pool of volunteers may provide opportunity for social contact, but the absence of familiar staff will reduce the extent to which relationships can be generated with a familiar face at the library. In SLAM's experience of talking to elderly library users, some of whom made witness statements in support of the legal action, the relationship with permanent staff was greatly valued and appreciated.

Of course, all of the above must be seen in the context that running a library is asking an awful lot of volunteers. Key volunteers will not only have to generate a considerable amount of knowledge in the workings of a library, but also have to co-ordinate a large number of supporting volunteers. It requires a huge amount of time and energy. It will be incredibly difficult to maintain in the long term.

To say the very least, it is difficult to see that the training outlined above comes even close to properly addressing these issues. The training is incredibly brief, particularly given the breadth and importance of the issues being trained and that the training has to be cascaded by volunteers to hundreds of other volunteers. The necessary outcome for community libraries is about the understanding and development of a culture in which all users of the library feel that they have good customer service and have the same equality of access to library provision. This, surely, requires consistent reinforcement, review and appraisal over a prolonged period of time by trained and competent supervisory staff. This is, we understand, what the Council provides for its paid, customer facing staff.

In SLAM's view, such considerations ought to lead the Cabinet to the conclusion that paid staff ought to be retained, and the effect of losing such staff is not justified by the miniscule budgetary savings made by removing them. If it does not lead the Cabinet to such a conclusion, it ought to at least lead the Cabinet to conclude that significant further funding for and training of volunteers will be necessary.

None of the above is to say, of course, that SLAM does not believe in the value of volunteers to the library service. Undoubtedly, some volunteers will be highly knowledgeable. SLAM is also of the view that a community library service supported by local volunteers is a better community library service. But the importance of paid staff ought not to be underestimated and should be explored properly before they are taken away.

We hope that this letter is given careful consideration.

Yours faithfully,

Mike Alsop
Chair of SLAM

