

Libraries Better Together – The Public Library Ethos

Derby currently benefits from a network of 15 libraries. Each individual library is relatively small, with its own unique character, reflecting the community it serves. Being responsive to local needs is an important element of a successful library, but equally if not more important for their success is that they belong to a wider network, with each service point in that network sharing common practises and a common pool of book stock on which to draw.

Customers who mainly use their local neighbourhood library can be confident that their membership card will allow them the same experience should they choose to use the Riverside Library or any of the other neighbourhood libraries in the city. They can drop their returned books off wherever is convenient for them, all the same services they are used to will be available for them whichever library they visit, and above all their reading choice is not limited to what they can see on the shelves. This commonality enables small libraries to punch above their weight, and Derby Libraries are seeking to work with community groups to maintain these key strengths alongside the benefits of having community-run, independently managed neighbourhood libraries.

One of the greatest strengths of public libraries is that they are open to everyone, providing a neutral and welcoming space which anyone can come in to, pick up a book or magazine and start reading, without charge, proof of ID or other barriers to entry. For those who wish to make greater use of the service, a single joining process gives access to a network of service points with the same loan periods, charges, IT provision, procedures and rules. This consistent customer experience, made possible by shared systems, is the real strength of the service.

No library is an island – an individual library may hold tens of thousands of books, but an isolated collection can become dated and irrelevant in a very short space of time and no longer of interest to customers. A solitary library wishing to offer a balanced and wide-ranging choice of reading material will quickly fall behind in being able to supply its readers, who want the latest fiction titles, a wider range of their preferred genre such as science fiction, romance or crime, or up-to-date travel guides and other non-fiction.

The central plank of the '*Libraries Better Together*' ethos is undoubtedly the reciprocal arrangements relating to book stock. Working together, Derby's Council-run and Community managed Libraries can, between them, offer readers almost half a million books to choose from; if a specific title is not on the shelf, for a small charge it can be delivered to a library of choice within a few days. In addition, collections are also circulated between libraries, allowing for periodic refreshment of stock at each service point.

These arrangements reach beyond the city; Derby has a long-standing and mutually beneficial arrangement with Derbyshire, meaning customers in both city and county have a collection of over 1.5 million titles available to them via the Online Public Access Catalogue (OPAC). Together with the regional and national inter-library loan system, all this adds up to make each library in the network something much, much bigger than can be contained by four walls.

Not only can these shared arrangements transform CMLs into portals of information and reading pleasure, they also bring resilience to adversity and tremendous cost savings, not only in procuring and administering the underpinning IT systems, but also purchase of book stock, allowing us to keep as many people happy as possible on a surprisingly small budget.