



**Somerset County Branch  
submission to the  
Somerset Library Service  
Review**

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# **SUBMISSION TO THE SOMERSET LIBRARY SERVICE REVIEW**

The Somerset Library Service Review was initially proposed as a result of 2 years of an extremely tight book fund as well as other financial pressures on the service, e.g. the drop in income from audio-visual loans.

Unfortunately, the recruitment freeze and the prospect of the need for further savings has added to the complexity of the process and possibly made it harder to gain the best outcome for the service.

## **BACKGROUND**

Historically, Somerset has one of (if not the) most cost-efficient library services in the UK. This has been achieved through the very efficient use of available resources, the groundbreaking LibrariesWest consortium and by having one of the lowest paid workforces in the Authority.

Financial pressures have been accumulating over a period of some years. They began when audio-visual income began to decrease and escalated with the cuts to the book fund.

*It had never been wise to rely on the A/V income to help finance the service. What began as a marginal boost to service funding soon became a prop and when new media and changing uses of A/V came along, as they were bound to, this had a very negative result for the whole service.*

The 2 service restructures in the last 10 years or so, has already led to a serious cut in professional staffing. Costs in administration and support services have been reduced significantly.

Staff have been remarkably flexible and positive through challenging times.

## **BOOK FUND ISSUES**

A few years ago, when Somerset County Council was striving to achieve central government targets, the book fund was at an adequate level and had been given some extra funding. This was reflected in an increase in visitor and issue figures. For the last 2 financial years, the book fund has been slashed by £500,000 down to just over £200,000.

*This means that each library has only had one new book per week for the last 2 years.*

There has been a consequent obvious decline in visits and issues.

It has also put pressure on the LibrariesWest Consortium partnership due to Somerset's reliance on the other partners to fulfill borrowers' needs for new material.

*If you went into a shop and saw the same stock every time you visited, with none of the latest models or ranges, you would not keep visiting it and you certainly would lose faith in its ability to continue trading. This is what is happening in Somerset's libraries.*

Only those who can afford to request new titles are ever likely to see them until they have been in print for some time and the next bestseller has been and possibly gone. The FastTrack one week bestseller loan system is much missed by readers and had a very positive image with excellent performance results for the service.

UNISON asks if the increase in the use of online library services has been taken into account. This will also have led to a decrease in visits as many people now use the website or 24 hour renewals telephone service instead of coming into libraries to renew or request items. Staff have been instructed to promote and encourage the use of these services and the SW1 Customer Contact service.

## **LIBRARY STAFF**

As has been mentioned, Somerset Libraries have undergone 2 staffing restructures in the last 10 years as well as the more recent loss of most of the caretaking posts. Each restructure led to a loss of staff, the second halving the number of professional team librarians.

There is a significant, often overlooked, difference between library assistants and their professional colleagues. It is the professional librarians who inform and drive the service forward with their expert skills and training in library planning and management. They have gained professional qualifications and have chartered status. Library assistants do not need any more qualifications than 3 GCSE's although in practice many have more qualifications and most have various important skills and experiences that contribute to the service.

UNISON believes that any further loss of professional staff will lead to a crisis for the future planning and development of the service.

*'At a UNISON inquiry into the public library service in the UK - The People's Inquiry - in February 2010, a librarian from a county of a similar size to Somerset stood up and told the Inquiry that there were only about 6 Children's librarians to go out to schools and playgroups, etc. This was considered a wholly inadequate number by the Inquiry Panel and audience. I was too shocked and ashamed to stand up and tell them that Somerset only has one.'*

*Deirdre Livingstone  
UNISON workplace representative*

The long-term idea in the Shared Intelligence report for the Consortium to possibly share professional services, although it may be helpful, is only at the stage of one potential proposal among many for this organisation.

Frontline staff have seen their roles change significantly over the last few years. There is a great deal more unofficial as well as funded and trained tutoring than previously, particularly in IT skills. The loss of so many professional staff has meant frontline staff taking a greater role in marketing, promotions, displays and activities such as story times. Unfortunately, lack of staff has meant a frustrating inability to expand services to users. Initiatives such as 'Living Libraries' and out-of-hours clubs, that many other authorities have, are not possible in a lot of our libraries.

The use of volunteers to address this lack, if properly implemented, can add many benefits both for the service, its users and the volunteers themselves. Somerset libraries have an excellent volunteer policy. The Housebound Service in partnership with the WRVS has a long history and the service has enriched many lives. However, volunteers can only be used for these 'add-on' services, their use needs to be monitored and managed and they cannot replace permanent staff. Nor should it be expected of them.

It must be stressed that Somerset County Council has had excellent value for money from its library staff for many years.

It has been mentioned that Somerset libraries have an aging workforce. UNISON believes that this is because of the entrenched low-pay culture in the service and the serious lack of career opportunities as well as lack of job security for professional or qualified staff. Young people are unlikely to enter a service in continuous crisis for low wages.

*Indeed, Somerset's Library and Information Assistants (LIAs) are one of the lowest paid in the South West and probably the UK. North Somerset's LIAs earn considerably more.*

The need for frontline staff to take on more roles and responsibilities will need to be reflected not only in a better pay and career structure, but also in sufficient staff numbers and funding to be able to take on the training and planning necessary for these extra duties.

There appears to have been a low take-up of training opportunities recently which UNISON believes is due to staff feeling unable to take time away from their work duties.

This lack of staff resources will have a detrimental effect on Somerset libraries' ability to implement its 'Vision' and core offers. It will also become harder to maintain the image of libraries as safe, trusted neutral spaces without the staff that give them a welcoming atmosphere. If you talk to users, for many, it is the staff contact that is a vital part of the service for them.

## **STAFFING ISSUES SINCE THE RECRUITMENT FREEZE AND ANNOUNCEMENT OF THE REVIEW**

The recruitment freeze came at an unfortunate time in the progress of the

library service. It has had a serious impact on staff numbers - the full-time equivalent figures do not properly reflect this - which has meant additional factors have emerged on top of the issues for which the review was commissioned.

Staff morale is at an all-time low.

Frontline staff who previously felt some measure of security from the nature of their role are now uncertain of their futures. The nature of the posts has changed significantly, the pace of change and demands on time and skills increasing year on year. The probable introduction of RFID self-issue systems and possible impact on staffing is of great concern to them, as are the threats to the 'community' and mobile libraries. The job security of professional staff has already been addressed.

The Community Directorate has been assiduous in applying the recruitment freeze to non-exempted posts. The serious impact of this on the library service cannot be denied. The mass resignation at Wincanton library was an example of the stresses placed on staff. It has been customary to use staff from the 'hub' libraries to help with staff shortages at other libraries. However, these 'hub' libraries are now too short of staffing hours themselves to be able to do this on the scale now needed. The amount of management time taken to redirect staff resources logically is not an efficient use of a valuable resource at a critical time for service development. The increased costs in travelling time and expenses for staff going to many non-base locations also needs to be taken into account. This cannot be a viable long-term solution to this issue.

Staffing is now at crisis point and if any more staff leave, the Library service will be unable to cover their loss. This will have an impact on the public when libraries have to implement sudden or unannounced temporary closures.

Somerset libraries are also now unable to recruit younger or new staff to replace the aging workforce and ensure a future with equally well-trained and skilled staff for the long-term.

There must also be some assessment of the physical and other stresses that are being placed on staff. The expansion of roles and duties for all posts in the service has already been mentioned.

This summer saw a very busy time with record numbers taking part in the Space Hop Summer Reading Challenge. Another challenge for their staff. Unfortunately, it also saw the loss of the Peoples Network for several weeks. Frontline staff had to deal with many dissatisfied, anxious people during the already busiest time of the year. There is the physical impact on each member of staff having to deal with more items for long periods. They are also now being questioned on the future of their library by users. As nothing has been decided, it can lead to more strain on them as this brings their own concerns to mind. UNISON has been informed recently that managers have now produced information for staff to address this issue and knows that they have already done their best to support staff numbers. However, the gaps and strains in both staff and service are apparent. If this continues, UNISON foresees an

unavoidable increase in sickness levels and, in UNISON's experience, a probable rise in grievance issues.

## **SUMMARY**

UNISON welcomes the opportunity that the review has given to address the future of what is an efficient, cost-effective, well-used and loved library service. Its lead role in the LibrariesWest consortium puts it at the forefront of innovation in library authorities in the UK.

It is very unfortunate that this opportunity now has to take into account the immediate and future impacts of the recruitment freeze and probable extra cuts to the service in the future.

Somerset libraries have suffered from a long-term shortage of funding, extremely serious short-term cuts to the book fund, with a consequent impact on visitor and issue figures, and the loss of a significant number of both professional and non-professional staff. The service is now so lean and mean, that there is practicably little scope for further cuts without serious damage being an inevitable consequence. UNISON believes the short-term is not a viable option.

Despite this, it has managed to maintain a well-run, efficient, highly cost-effective service. It is well-used and regarded in high esteem by the people of Somerset. It provides a far wider range of services than just lending books. It has a real and significant impact on many lives. It is flexible enough to take on new roles and lead the way in partnership working across authorities and internal and external services. It is a forward-looking service ready and eager to take on new challenges in engaging with future needs. Libraries have proved that they can be a gateway to new technology and media for their communities and can adapt their ways of working and core values to incorporate new roles.

Heritage and Libraries management has produced a vision that is an excellent basis for further consultation with all stakeholders, staff included. Long-term, realistic goals for the service must be developed. The value of the service to the people of Somerset and to Somerset County Council itself must never be forgotten. Libraries are truly priceless resources with incredible flexibility and once a good service (with all that that implies) is lost or seriously damaged, it can never truly be replaced.

UNISON looks forward to further consultation on whatever proposals result from focus groups, reports and debates, input from staff and users and Members' decisions. We hope that a secure, forward-looking service will develop from all the efforts and hard work of those with the good of the service and the people of Somerset in mind.