

# PEOPLE, POLITICS and HARD DECISIONS

An Investigation into the Management  
of  
Public Library Closures

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## **ABSTRACT**

This is an account of a study into the decision making process involved in closing public library service points. The research investigates the experiences of 20 authorities which closed libraries between 1991 and 1997. It examines reasons for closure decisions and identifies and discusses criteria for closure adopted by these authorities. It investigates relationships between management, elected members and users and considers the influence that each party may have in the eventual decision to close. It explores the communication process throughout the decision-making process, examining both consultation and information giving processes. The results of the study are intended to help inform the decision making of those authorities considering the closure of public library service points.

Authorities that had closed libraries were initially asked to complete a postal questionnaire asking for information on the context of the decision and its implementation. Managers were asked to reflect on what they had learnt from the process. The questionnaire was used to identify a sample of ten authorities in which in depth interviews with senior managers were held.

The study shows that 82% of proposals to close were made by managers, often against a background of political reluctance. Financial imperatives meant that local ward members tended to have little influence over the decisions. Managerial influence was dependent on the preparation of data to support the proposal, recognition of political constraints and previous good relations with elected members. There were no criteria for closure that were acceptable to the public and little evidence that they could be satisfactorily compensated by improvements elsewhere. All respondents considered low use and the accessibility of alternative service points to be the most important and acceptable criteria when selecting libraries to close.

The dangers of adopting these criteria are noted. In most cases closure was seen as a last resort, following years of reductions in both opening hours and materials spending. Genuine consultation with the public over decisions was found to be rare, partly because of the short budgetary time scales and partly because of the inability of authorities to find alternative strategies to closure. Closures, to minimise damage, need to be planned as part of a general strategy for service development. There was strong evidence that public

reaction could be influential in changing decisions, particularly with regard to authorities' future policy on closures. The key to gaining staff acceptance and understanding was found to be preparation to ensure no redundancies and acceptable re-deployment, combined with early and honest communication together with face to face contact with senior managers.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

This report summarises the findings of a three month study carried out between January and June 1998 by researchers from the University of Sheffield's Department of Information Studies. The project grew out of research also carried out for the British Library, (Proctor, Lee and Reilly 1998), which sought to *quantify* the extent and impact of public library closures and their impact on library users during the last ten years.

The present project followed requests from authorities for information on the experiences of services where closure decisions had been made. How had they gone about it? What criteria for closure had been used? How did they reconcile the tensions between management and local members, and between management and local staff? What are the pros and cons of consultation? What had people learnt from their experience? The report attempts to answer these questions.

The quotations at the beginning of this report present a range of senior librarians' reflections on library closure experiences which had taken place from the 1980s into the 1990s. This period spanned a plethora of central and local government policies and conflicting pressures. Some librarians we spoke to had managed more than one 'round' of closures.

In their study of access to public libraries, Proctor, Lee and Reilly (1998) show that at least 179 building-based libraries in 56 authorities have closed over the last ten years. All but two closures have been of local branch libraries. This amounts to 5.5% of all service points open in 1986. Although not all of these closures were finance driven, it is significant that the number of decisions made for financial reasons appears to be increasing.

During the last three years, all decisions to close libraries in London Boroughs have been finance driven. In the financial year 1996/97 three quarters of County Library closures were for financial reasons. When we surveyed authorities at the beginning of 1997 nearly a quarter told us they thought closures were likely or very likely. Although political second thoughts minimised the number of closures actually taking place, financial problems remain acute and the option of service point closures remains on the decision making agenda.

For this reason we believe this Report is timely and we hope that it will lead to more informed decision making by those authorities forced to travel this road.

## **2. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH**

The aim of the research is to investigate the process that leads to closure decisions. Its outcome will be to provide library managers and elected members with the data necessary to inform decisions about service options in the context of declining or standstill budgets.

The research will try to answer the following questions:

- a) What are the circumstances that make service point closure a preferred option?
- b) What criteria have authorities used to determine which libraries to close?
- c) How might conflict with staff, elected members and users be handled most effectively?
- d) What are the most effective ways of consulting the public?
- e) What influence can managers and the public have on decisions?
- f) In what circumstances might closure benefit the service?

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

The study was conducted in two phases:

(i) postal questionnaire (Appendix 1) to 35 library authorities known, from our previous research, to have closed libraries during the last five years. We received responses from 20 authorities (57%).

(ii) follow up in-depth interviews in selected authorities

We conducted interviews in 10 library authorities that had indicated their willingness to explore, in more depth, the issues surrounding closure. The sample comprised three counties, three metropolitan districts and four London boroughs (both inner and outer London). In most cases we interviewed the Head of Library Service (Borough Librarian, Director of County Libraries, Arts and Archives etc.). In some authorities, a 'second tier' officer (the senior manager who had been most closely involved with the 'closure process') was the respondent, and in one authority, we interviewed the former Chair of Leisure Services. The outline topic guide used in the personal interviews is given in Appendix 2.

An important aspect of securing the co-operation of authorities in this study was the guarantee of total anonymity. We have, accordingly, ensured that no respondents can be identified from illustrative quotations in this Report. We sent each of the ten authorities a draft of the Report for checking that anonymity had been preserved. A copy of the final draft of this Report was distributed to all public library authorities in England and Wales in October 1998.

#### **4. THE CONTEXT**

## 4.1 The Role of the Public Library Service

The public library service has been the subject of much internal debate, external review and scrutiny over the last ten years. Local authorities have been under pressure to maintain library services against a background of wider local government changes, the demands of central government policies, the need to define performance indicators, quality assurance, best value, and to meet standards agreed within the profession itself.

In its recommendations to the Secretary of State for National Heritage, the *Review of the Public Library Service in England and Wales*, (Aslib, 1995) set out four purposes for the public library service: The potential for conflict between the demands and needs of *current*, *potential* and *future* users is clear:

- (i) to take what steps are practical and necessary to ensure that the public library service can meet the *demands of future generations*.
- (ii) to create a public library service that will be *a community asset* in which local people can take pride, and which others will respect - an asset that helps local people to identify with their community.
- (iii) to develop, maintain and operate public library facilities and services that will *directly* benefit people who live, work or study in the area, or who visit it, and wish to make *regular and frequent use* of these services.
- (iv) to maintain public library facilities and services that occasional users of public libraries can take advantage of when the need arises, although these occasional users may be unfamiliar with the services that are available - that is, *services which have a contingency value*.

## 4.2 A new and developing role

The biggest changes in public libraries over the coming years will arise from the development of information technology. In its report, *New Library: The People's Network*, the Library and Information Commission (1997) suggests that '...the rapid spread of high-performance communications will mean that even the most remote rural library will offer access to the same facilities as a large urban library.'

Building on the well-documented support of service users and the wider public for the public library service, it confidently asserts '...the library is an enormously powerful agent for change: accountable and trusted by people, and integral to education, industry, government and the community.'

*New Library: The People's Network* envisages 'the new and growing range of resources and facilities which networking can deliver, combined with the existing assets of the public library system, will form the core of a powerhouse of knowledge...providing equal access to the global and the local. The principal strands of content and services of the networked public library are: education and lifelong learning; citizens' information and facilities for participation in society; business and the economy, training and employment; community history and community identity; the National Digital Library.'

It is ironic that, within this emerging scenario, the majority of authorities are currently struggling to maintain access to their existing public library services. It is even more ironic that local access, on which so many of the catalogued benefits depend, is under most threat.

## **5. THE RESULTS**

Our findings are discussed under six headings, reflecting the topic areas explored in the interviews:

- About the decision to close.
- Relationships between members and officers.
- Criteria for closure.
- Consultation with library users and the local community.
- The influence of the public on decision making.
- Dealing with staff reaction.

## **5.1 About the decision to close**

The closure of any library service point is an emotive issue. Much may be made of closures in the local press and ‘Save our Library’ campaigns by users are common. Many ‘Friends’ Groups began life as a response to a threatened closure (Whittaker 1998).

The closure of a library, unlike reductions in opening hours, affects all users and leads to the greatest loss of library use (Proctor, Lee and Reilly 1998).

For these reasons we were interested in the processes which led up to a closure decision. What persuades managers and/or elected members to make this most sensitive of choices? Where does the initiative come from? What circumstances make a closure option inevitable? Is closure ever justified?

### ***Decisions and Options. Who drives closures?***

In over 82% of responding authorities library management had made the initial proposal to close libraries, usually in response to a requirement to meet a very tight budget target.

Both questionnaire and responses indicated that it was never a decision taken lightly.

Indeed, in almost every case closure was seen as a last resort. Put simply, this might be summarised, as ‘*we have reached the end of the line, and we had tried all other strategies in previous years*’.

Library managers spoke of years and years of pressures on budgets; of contingency plans drawn up, of combing through staff schedules and making every effort not to have to put closures on the agenda. Options were, however, always limited:

*'...we are dealing fundamentally with a holy trinity: staff, stock, and static library sites... (added with a wry smile): that soon becomes an unholy trinity when you come to reduce them ... You can't just make staff redundant [even if we wanted to], and you can't just close sites. You don't make savings unless [you do] the whole package...'*

*'...you've only got three options really: we either close libraries, reduce or delete the bookfund, or reduce opening hours and within that, staffing levels.'*

There appeared to come a point when the option of closure could no longer be avoided:

*'In previous years closures were always lower down on the agenda. But we're talking about substantial 6-figure cuts here and you haven't got many options... yes it is a last resort but we'd used up many of our other options from previous years.'*

*'Yes, it is a last resort issue. We had been struggling with a service that had taken small cuts over a long period of time, and we were in an authority that had more libraries...per head of population than the county average...so we were continuously spreading our resources very thinly...well we were going to death by a 1,000 cuts.'*

We asked questionnaire respondents why they had rejected other options and found that, in many cases, other options had *not* been rejected. Closures formed part of a package which also included reductions in opening hours and the materials fund. Reasons for rejecting or moving beyond other options included:

*'the financial savings target to be achieved was too high.'*

*'[There was a] requirement to save £500,000 from the budget.'*

*'gradual reductions in opening hours, book fund, etc. had led to an overall decline in standards.'*

*'the service had seen huge reductions in opening hours...members accepted an officer recommendation that there was no scope for further cuts...'*

The closure of libraries within an overall service strategy appeared to be rare. Most decisions were reactive, and a response to immediate circumstances. There were, however, exceptions. Occasionally a new manager raised closures as an option because they were able to bring an outside perspective to bear:

*'I came from another authority which had X libraries but over a much wider geographical spread...I did feel I was falling over libraries in this authority ...some within easy walking distance of one another.... So we looked at a host of options from having one library up to having X'*

In another case the decision followed a new committee structure and a subsequent three year plan for budget reductions. Library management's input here resulted in four options all of which involved service point closures. Again, though, closure proposals were considered to be the only option following previous opening hours and staffing reductions which had resulted in management *'struggling from one crisis to the next'*.

Elected members generally seemed much more reluctant than officers to contemplate service point closure. There was evidence from a number of authorities that service point closure had been on the management agenda for some time before members were prepared to consider the option seriously:

*'We have been trying to close various small libraries for the past three years...18 small libraries have been identified for closure but members are very reluctant to close libraries.'*

For some authorities, closure was the logical consequence of years of indecision. Members (and sometimes officers) had been reluctant to put closures on the agenda or had failed to rationalise the distribution of service points after local government boundary changes in the late 1960s and more particularly local government reorganisation in 1974.

*'There was a perception that we had too many overlapping libraries too close together...but one is always reluctant to close libraries. With hindsight, [by closing the libraries we did], we were, over a period of time, **rationalising** the quite large number of*

*libraries we had...it was a question of putting that situation to rights, although it did not seem that way at the time.'*

Another commented of a 'redundant' library: *'Only political embarrassment had saved it from closure in the past.'*

The reluctance of members to embrace library closure willingly is unsurprising. The withdrawal of any service in a local community, no matter how poorly used, is unlikely to be popular with the electorate. The nature of local government in this country with councillors having, primarily, a geographic responsibility, also has an impact.

Local councillors had initiated a proposal to close libraries in only three authorities (two London Boroughs and one Metropolitan District). In one case members had come to the conclusion that the number of libraries in the authority was too high, compared with other similar authorities. In another, a small group of *'influential members'* had taken the initiative, over-riding or ignoring the views of local ward members. In a third case, members had responded positively to a community proposal to assume control of a shared-use building.

### ***The Influence of Decision making timescales***

The nature of the budget cycle in local authorities is determined by the Standard Spending Assessment (SSA) settlement, and the complex financial relationship between central and local government. This means, for example, that an authority will receive its settlement in December with the need to set a budget by 1<sup>st</sup> April for the following financial year. In practice, this might give library managers some three weeks to sort out their budget for the coming financial year before its library committee meets in January! Faced with the need to find six figure savings, authorities are, in reality, making predictions and detailing options well before the SSA settlement reaches them from Whitehall: *'We had been given warning and indications... and so we had prepared for the worst - but in less than four weeks we cannot prepare all those different options so we have to be ready...'*

All but three of our respondents found themselves in this position - not knowing the extent of any damage and having to prepare 'blind'. Guesswork about the extent of any shortfall was not always accurate and any appeals against the settlement only exacerbated the problem. Two authorities reported that closures were put on the agenda only following mid-year budget revisions when additional savings had to be found:

*'What they[the members] required of me halfway through the year was a further saving and at that point our position was that we'd taken enough off opening hours, and we'd taken enough off materials. The only option available was to close libraries.'*

For some authorities the schedule was less compressed, but the need to find the savings no less pressurised. *'...although we didn't have to find money on 1<sup>st</sup> April we had to find it by 31<sup>st</sup> March following...and we were encouraged to get savings in place sooner rather than later...when I had to draw up a list of ideas I was told this must not include closing libraries but in fact the target amount didn't leave me any alternative...'*

Coming through the range of responses is the lack of any coherent strategy for long term service planning in the majority of authorities. Given the nature of the local authority budget cycle this is, to some extent, understandable. The yearly uncertainty over SSA levels and the requirement to balance budgets on an annual basis are a disincentive to medium and long term planning. Politically there are also electoral timescales to take into account. One authority pointed out that the only reason a closure took place was that it was 'mid-term' and the members felt secure enough to take an unpopular decision.

### ***Justifying the decision to close libraries***

Our previous research (Proctor, Lee and Reilly 1998) showed that library closures take place for different reasons, not all of them dictated by the need to make savings. Nearly a third of the library closures surveyed were made for what might be termed 'service reasons', e.g. low use or inadequate buildings. Many authorities believed that a mobile library provided better value for a small community than a poorly located and poorly resourced static branch. 15% of closures over the last ten years have been of libraries serving less than 250 people and achieving less than 10,000 issues a year. Nearly 70% of service points have been replaced by one or more mobile stops.

It is not within the remit of this study to suggest the extent to which ‘low use’ is a valid criterion for closure. However, our previous research concluded that the role of the *local* library is quite distinctive and neither a mobile library nor an alternative library in another community is a satisfactory substitute for the majority of users. This view was supported by some of our respondents:

*‘...I have to say I don’t think mobiles are a good replacement; they provide a good service but they cannot replace the solid location of a library. If you’re only there for 3 hours a week it’s often difficult for people to get there within those restrictions.’*

*‘...in the case of rural libraries we would say we are putting in a mobile service instead but they did not want that; they wanted **THEIR** [static] library. ...we made attempts to explain, to say service elsewhere [i.e. on alternative sites] would be no worse but people found it hard to take on board because they are interested only in their own particular library.’*

An exception may be in the case of the smallest static libraries. One Metropolitan District reported how it had gained acceptance for a closure of one very small library in shared premises by demonstrating a mobile replacement. Another also commented that the availability of a mobile library had reconciled users to the closure of their local library.

When asked about consultation with users, a number of respondents told us they thought it was pointless ‘*asking a community whether it wants to lose its library or not.*’ The not unwarranted assumption was that every community values its library. However, in one exceptional case, a Metropolitan District, the community itself suggested closure of a small library. They had approached elected members with a proposal to assume control of a joint-use building. Members had agreed and library management had accepted the decision on the grounds of low use and cost. The library was replaced by a mobile stop.

The consensus seems to be that there is very little, in the eyes of the community affected, that will justify closure of their library. Management, on the other hand can more easily see the broader picture:

*'there comes a time when you've to make some decisions about either library opening hours or closures in order to make sure that the resources aren't eroded so much that the service is meaningless anyway...'*

### ***Compensation for closure***

It was not uncommon for authorities to use some of the money saved by closure to put back into the service elsewhere. However, it was rare that the community affected benefited, other than through the provision of a mobile library replacement. In only two authorities were *improvements* planned to compensate for the closure:

*'...in this authority this was part of planned improvements thus:...provision of a better building (was re-decorated, re-wired, more accessible than old site, bigger collection for users)'*

*'...longer opening hours - new structure means libraries open to 8pm instead of 7pm (some previously only open till 6pm); increase in bookfund; immediate response visible to users: flooded libraries with new fiction after closure of libraries; installed PCs and free use of Internet in remaining libraries...'*

Elsewhere more general benefits to the service were planned: *'all four options produced savings but released different amounts for reinvesting in the service.'*

## **5.2 Relationships between Members and Officers**

The key questions here related to possible tensions between management and political agendas and also the influence of local ward councillors on corporate decision making: (Not In My Back Yard (NIMBY) attitudes.)

Our questionnaire asked how far, and in what ways, management could influence closure decisions (in either direction). Not surprisingly, there was a range of responses suggesting different relationships existed in different authorities. In most cases management felt it had some influence but, in the end, political sensitivities would always remain paramount:

*'The decision to reduce opening hours, in order to save libraries...went beyond management thinking.'*

*'...professional recommendations are important.... However, local politics and NIMBYism play a huge role...and officers' recommendations are frequently turned down.'*

*'Can have an influence but political reality at constituency level has greatest influence.'*

*'...prime factor to elected members will always be political sensitivity.'*

Two authorities reported that they were not in a position to influence decisions, and others suggested that the key to a higher level of influence was a combination of 'rational argument', 'hard evidence' and being well prepared for a cross examination. One respondent pointed out that tactics should depend on context. Clearly these might differ depending on management's attitude. Managers might *scare* members away from closures by encouraging fears of lost votes and bad public relations but they could only *encourage* members to go for a closure option through both cogent arguments, and an equal sensitivity to the political context: *'...the proposal coincided with the mid-term period of the Council's administration making difficult decisions more palatable.'*

Managers pointed out the importance of knowing members well: *'Clearly managers need to know what will work best with their members...'* The same point was also implied by another respondent who advocated getting the Chair's agreement to any proposal first.

The benefits of having a good relationship with the Committee Chair were demonstrated in one authority where the Director of Libraries reported:

*She fought entirely with officers and with her group to ensure that resources were found from elsewhere...she was very visible...the lobbying, the re-drafting of committee papers, we sat here and she was fully briefed by officers... all the chairs of the different committees are sitting and doing the same, they come back and say no [we lost at the policy and resources committee] ...but she [chair of library committee] fought on our behalf.*

In contrast, the head of another authority found himself having to negotiate what was in effect a 'face-saving' exercise. directly, (albeit informally), with the Leader of the Council. *'No I didn't involve my Chairman [of libraries] at all. This is not ideal but I knew he*

*would not support me*'. This chief officer admitted he had 'saved the library', knowing he had the backing of public, staff and a number of members who *'would not show their true colours'* and as a first tier officer he had *'direct access'* to the leader of the council. He regretted that as library departments in most other authorities are being merged and amalgamated into much larger departments (e.g. education, leisure or community services) most Heads of Library Service would not have such direct access).

There was strong evidence from the interviews that previously existing relationships were critical in gaining agreement. The underlying point here appears to be that, where the relationship was good, the 'crisis' brought out the best in all the parties concerned. They 'pulled' together and came out of the whole episode, which lasted many months in some cases, feeling stronger and with a commonality of purpose. However, where there were underlying tensions between members and officers, the threat of closures highlighted and exacerbated latent bad feeling and the resultant bad publicity did nothing to improve an already poor relationship.

*'At the time of the cuts, relations where pretty bad between members and officers; officers were very shocked as to why this was happening to their library service...it was a very difficult period'*

The closure of any service, for financial reasons, is a difficult process and often time is the key factor. It was noticeable that during the interviews, many managers spoke of the 'pain' and 'loss' and 'sadness' involved in the process of discussing, and finally agreeing a series of closures: *'this was a very painful long drawn out process...we had a two year timescale...in which to report to members, keep refining reports, bringing them back to committee and at the same time consult with the public.'*

It was interesting that the perception of an external threat or 'common enemy' was often the key to good relationships. During the last Conservative government, the most dramatic effect (perceived as the result of central government interference with 'middle England') was described as immensely positive: *'the very good relationship with our employees and politicians...that consensus had been going on for maybe 100 years but had*

*lain dormant...we had never been under threat but [this] pressure from central government fanned the flames.'*

Even in an authority where there had been much bitterness and resentment surrounding the whole cuts and closure issues, the member/officer relationship came out of this episode unaffected: *'Well it was actually quite positive because we were all equally unhappy about what was happening - it was a question of managing the process...but the relationships I have to say were very good overall...'*

### ***The Role of Local Members***

Although it is not uncommon for officers and members to agree in principle to closures, the attitude of local ward councillors can be an issue for both managers and Chairs. The closure of local services in marginal seats obviously might have a critical impact on an individual's electoral chances, and local people also have a right to expect their councillors to fight for services in their wards. The bland and formal comment by a former chair of leisure services describing *'a full and frank discussion about the options available'*(!), we suspect sanitises hours of heated discussions and disagreement which he alluded to when he was interviewed.

Although not applicable in all authorities, officers confirmed the difficulty of reconciling local ward members: *There are always tensions, as no-one wants to see something closed in their ward.* In some authorities, officers made a conscious effort to present options, and left the difficult issue of reconciling local members to the hard decisions firmly in the hands of the politicians. Many questionnaire respondents reported that there had been few problems with local members:

*'they had little say in the decision'*

*'This was a decision made by a small number of influential members.'*

*'local ward councillors had little say in the process. I also think there was a degree of New Labour pressure to be realistic...'*

*'The majority group applied a strict discipline...and did not allow NIMBYism to get a head of steam...It also helped that the Council did make a commitment that appropriate buildings would be made available to local people as a community resource...'*

*'[how did we reconcile local members to decision?..] with difficulty but at the end of the day, they went along with the majority- they had to. It's like any form of government - you have to make decisions based on democracy, on the vote...'*

The tensions at local level did, however, have one positive outcome. One manager interviewed, smiled hesitantly: *'...in many ways it really woke up [local] members to the library issue in a way that they had never seen...they took it all very much to heart when they heard from their own voters...so we ended up with members who were much more in touch with library issues.'*

In one authority lack of public response had been instrumental in making the decision stick and reconciling local members. This however was an exceptional situation. The same questionnaire reported *'NIMBYism means officers' recommendations are often turned down.'*

In only one authority did local members remain unreconciled: *'I don't think we ever reached a situation where local members accepted closure.'* This later resulted in a revised policy leading to *'a general prioritisation in favour of the service rather than bitter local comparisons between wards.'*

### **5.3 Criteria for closure.**

Conversations with library managers had suggested to us that the choice of library for closure was often a key issue. Elected members might, perhaps, be looking for choices in safe wards or where resistance from the electors might be limited. Managers were known to favour a mixture of criteria, perhaps focusing on the minimum impact on users.

Managers had also told us that, for the public, there were no acceptable criteria at all.

Our findings on the managerial criteria used to identify libraries for closure reveal two trends which may be characterised as (a) ‘scientific’ (we must aim to use as many criteria and measurement devices as possible) to (b) ‘the cynical and reluctant’ (‘we recognise we must use objective criteria but we doubt if any such reliable method can be found.’) Despite their reservations, officers described this aspect of implementing the closure decision as having often led to an enormous workload, as they sought to provide data on which ‘equitable’ decisions could be made and implemented.

We found that relatively few authorities had taken a ‘scientific’ approach to choosing candidates for closure. This was, perhaps due to the short timescale within which most authorities had to make decisions. It is significant that the most coherent and detailed approach was in an authority which approached closures over a two year timescale.

Questionnaire responses showed that the primary criterion for closure is most likely to be ‘low use’, which was cited in all the closure decisions reported. This, however, begs the question as to how ‘low use’ might be defined. In our previous research, different authorities described libraries issuing both 8,000 and 55,000 issues a year as ‘low use’! One respondent agreed:

*‘I don’t know what low use is ... because libraries are not just about issues (statistics] they’re more than that...There is also a selfreinforcing issue - if people have been at the brunt of cuts...the more you cut books and other materials and opening hours, the less people will use them.’*

An equal consideration, also cited in all cases, was the accessibility and availability of other services, either mobile stops and alternative libraries. Proctor, Lee and Reilly (1998) however, show how deceptive this criterion can be. In one authority two libraries were closed, both 1.5 miles from the nearest alternative, and both on direct bus routes. In one case over 80% of users affected found their way to an alternative library. In the other case less than 35% did. In the former case the key factor was that the alternative library was adjacent to a large out of town shopping centre.

Relative costs were a consideration in 41% of authorities and the state of the building in 24% of cases. Assessment against a specific standard of provision was cited in two cases, with unspecified 'quality' criteria in another two. Socio-economic criteria were used by only two authorities.

Costs and savings also appeared to be an issue for members. One respondent reported that the 'carrot of capital receipts' had been a deciding factor for members. Another told us: *'In one of the libraries we closed, it was costing us £9 per book issue - well that was a good indicator for our Members to understand!...'*

In one authority a strategic plan for the library service had evolved which viewed all its libraries as an authority-wide network, and recognised that all material could be held anywhere. Libraries were 'tiered' in one of three groups for stock development. A decision about whether a site should close was based on current and developing use of a site. The use made of each site was compared with the use made of other similar sites within the authority itself.

When drawing up a shortlist of potential sites for closure, most managers used a mixture of criteria, sometimes coupled with comparisons with other authorities, described by one respondent as *'we only compare data within the same family of authorities'*. Authorities then used a range of data to establish what they felt to be equitable criteria which would be easily understood by members and the public.

*'We started with the LA (Library Association) Standards about what a good library service should be (which were at the time still in draft form). We looked at geographic spread i.e. we were not necessarily going to keep the biggest or the busiest library going.'*

*'We used visitor figures and proximity to other facilities, it was mainly use and location....'*  
Here the head of service admitted (as did others) *'we know the service...and the 'candidate' libraries for closure presented themselves.'*

*'We looked at internal management data: issues, hours open, issues per member of staff, availability of another library. ...our main intention was to show business activity and put that information in the public domain...'*

In this authority a conscious decision was made **not** to weight the data in any way: *'no, we wanted a very stark picture...we wanted to show that in some areas this would be the last remaining council facilities in the area that was now under threat.'*

The difficulties of finding criteria acceptable to members was epitomised by one Metropolitan authority:

*'We tried three models. First we looked at costs per reader and costs per issue and ranked libraries from the cheapest to the most expensive. Then we looked at volume of use and the number of people actually likely to be affected. We also looked at social criteria. We had recently plotted catchment areas and used the census data to give us car ownership, minorities, single parents, elderly, under fives and so on. We scored communities according to social need. In the end members didn't like any of them. When we did close we went for low use libraries which was also the simplest.'*

Even where managers were satisfied they had used legitimate criteria, they remained concerned about the effect of applying them: *'usage was the primary criterion, proximity of an alternative, etc....but at the end of the day it was not acceptable and there were people who relied on those libraries.. **and we were seen to be withdrawing from a community**'.*

Some senior librarians had to face a process which was carried out by the Council's staff outside the Library Service, and expressed cynicism (not to say irritation) about the process. In this case: *'the Leader of the Council got his own staff drawing circles of one mile radius around each library and mapping the nearest alternative. His people are even supposed to have walked from one library to another but we believe the timings are for very fit people indeed...they must have been on roller skates - not old ladies with shopping!'*

### ***Can any criteria be found which are equitable?***

Some senior library managers do not think so: *'I don't think scientific criteria work...you could pick any set of criteria and depending on which ones you choose and how you weight*

*them you could actually close or justify the closure of any service on the planet. Our prime criterion was **least damage...**to the overall service... and they were all relatively near to other libraries’.*

This manager was forced, of course, to make recommendations so: *‘we asked: are there libraries which are reasonably near ...to bus and transport connections...were these alternative libraries in or near local district shopping centres which would give users reasons to go there...we looked at opening hours (all of them had been restricted already), level of use...’*

Even where officers felt quite confident about the measurement tools and benchmarking they had applied to draw up shortlists for closure, they admitted the shortcomings of the process. These reservations relate to how the authority views the role of the public library service. Most of the criteria invariably involve usage and visits. One head of service noted that these were the only indicators she had been allowed to apply, but stressed the wider social and learning support role of the library, factors which are more difficult to quantify.

Officers were also concerned that whilst they had to use economic indicators, these did not give the full picture of the value of the library to its community: *‘...a library may not be well used but if it is a long way from another one it may be a very real community asset and it would be unfair for it to be closed.’*

Defining criteria to the satisfaction of managers and members is one issue. Satisfying the communities affected is another. This was, perhaps, one reason why so few attempts had been made:

*‘No one can justify the closure of a library to the people who use it. It’s an impossible task...but with all the various demands on the budget the key issue is - is it cost efficient to maintain the service? ...but what makes libraries cost beneficial isn’t a science, it isn’t something you can look at a set of criteria and score against it find the lowest score’*

*‘You can’t justify the closure of a library - you can only explain the reasons for closure’*

Two authorities in our survey offered a broader perspective on the criteria they used which we summarise below as we feel they create the groundwork for further work which might be carried out in this area to guide other authorities:

**Example 1: *Decision conferencing***

This process involves determining priorities and ranking them in a table with the aim of achieving various budget reductions. This is a recognised way of achieving a whole set of reductions and trying:

*‘to see what you gain’ by making an increase in expenditure or what you lose by making a budget reduction and weighing service areas against each other, ‘We did this as a group across the Culture and Leisure Dept. and produced a table of various reductions which included a number of library closures .....they were weighted against the Council’s main objectives of community regeneration and economic regeneration .....we were looking to see how our services would either enhance those objectives or, if there were reductions, how they would lose the benefit of community regeneration.’*

This strategy follows the social audit approach which measures the value of a service against its contribution to corporate social objectives (Linley and Usherwood 1998).

**Example 2: The development of detailed criteria**

Of particular interest to other authorities which may need to plan for closures in the future, is the detailed work carried out to develop criteria in one authority. This authority was in the somewhat unusual position of having a two year timescale in which to develop its plans for closures. They began in December 1994 with an SSA set for 1995/96, were given a forecast by the council for 1996/7, and used 1995/6 to ‘work through the closure debate.’

They finally reached decisions in the period June- September 1995, with libraries closing at the end of the financial year in March 1996, but the full savings to the authority only appeared in 1996/97. Senior Management admits that this timescale is not shared by most authorities facing massive cuts, but feels that *‘this painful process of cutting libraries could not have been done in a short time’*.

They began by using CIPFA statistics to give '*crude number of libraries per head of population*', then looked at comparisons with other authorities and confirmed the fact (which they had been aware of for some time) that the authority had a large number of libraries per head of population. Some 20 sites (out of a total of 53) came under scrutiny.

The authority also identified that it had a very large number of 'tiny' libraries. Their location followed no very rational pattern. Whilst over the last 15 years there had been some rationale as to where a library would be sited, many of these libraries had been there for over 100 years.

The senior management team went on to use and adapt national data in a very broad manner and refine these to local needs. This process led to comparisons of numbers of libraries, benchmarking the 20 libraries under threat in terms of use, cost, socio-economic factors, distance to other libraries, etc.

The authority spent some **six months** refining these criteria and using them to inform members. A working group met over this period to define, re-define and apply these criteria, referring back to precedents in professional literature on standards for library provision. All this work naturally took up a large amount of staff time but management did not feel that there was any published literature which offered specific guidance for authorities which needed to identify libraries for closure.

This process led to the original list of 20 libraries being reduced first to twelve, and then to nine 'libraries under review'. This process was taking place at the same time as a series of consultation meetings was being held for the communities affected. Finally, a 'rating system' was developed which scored libraries against each other. This looked at:

(i) **library criteria**: statistics: trends, issue figures, whether a library was growing or declining, the number of issues per hour, net costs, number of visitors, total costs each library was incurring, distance to nearest library, and so on.

(ii) **council data**: current and future planning applications; population trends, availability of public transport, etc.

(iii)

Using these data, libraries were divided into rural and urban groups, identifying those libraries which had the highest scores. Examples of these criteria and the scoring system are given in Appendix 3. We believe that this detailed work might usefully form the basis of further guidance for other public library authorities seeking to draw up 'closure' criteria.

#### **5.4 Consultation with library users and the local community**

At a seminar organised in May 1998 by the Social Research Association (SRA), speakers discussed the growing trend on the part of public sector bodies to involve the citizen in decision-making. There is a spectrum of possibilities for connecting citizens to the decision-making process, but a great deal of misunderstanding on what such mechanisms for consultation can achieve.

Recognised methods for connecting citizens to decision-making include: national polls and published statistics (e.g. Social Trends); operational statistics (e.g. in the health sector); election of public representatives (e.g. local councillors); decision making by public representatives (e.g. local authorities); referenda; deliberative polls; surveys; traditional consultations with public and pressure groups; focus groups; public meetings; appointed representatives; citizens' forums or panels; citizens' jury.

In a recent report, *Citizens' Juries: theory into practice*, the Institute of Public Policy Research (1997) argues for a new atmosphere of trust to be encouraged. In place of secrecy, passivity and mutual contempt, there needs to be openness, interaction and mutual respect'. There are two ways of looking at how many people are involved in a process which aims to tune decision making more effectively to the needs and lives of citizens. One is the coverage of the process: the number of people contributing information voluntarily or involuntarily. The other is participation: the number of people actively contributing to the process.

In our interviews we explored this vexed issue of 'consultation'. Common sense suggests that, if a decision is 'the least worst option' and there is absolutely no room for manoeuvre, consultation is inappropriate. It will simply raise unreasonable expectations that the

decision can be reversed. However, if some form of dialogue has not taken place, when the news about a specific closure proposal breaks, a meeting with library managers and/or councillors may be demanded. The resulting confrontation can be painful, with officers and managers inevitably on the defensive. In our research we were interested in whether any authorities had deliberately consulted and what the consequences might be.

The first point that came across was the need for total honesty and clarity about what any meeting or dialogue with users and the community is for:

*'It wasn't really consultation, we were really informing them [the public] of why we were doing it...you've got to let people know what you're doing but is it consultation or information about a decision that's already been taken? In a consultation you clearly have to take their views into account. Some people at our meetings were led to believe they were consultations and the opposition [party] picked up on this and it was thrown back at us'.*

In our questionnaire, respondents were asked whether they had consulted and what form this consultation had taken. We were surprised at what respondents considered to be 'consultation'. Methods noted included user surveys, consultation with ward members (indirect consultation?), and asking users to let management know of any problems.

One authority noted that Committee Reports were open to the public, another that users could attend the Committee Meeting at which the proposal was made. When we noted these responses we could not help being reminded of Douglas Adams' Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy, in which the imminent destruction of the Earth is posted at the Galactic Council's Regional Offices on Alpha Centauri!

A number of authorities 'consulted' *'after the proposal to close was approved by elected members.'* Some were honest enough to admit that *'Consultation was very much about letting people have their say: realistically it was not going to change our views.'*

Another commented: *'I think the term consultation is inaccurate because you're actually informing people of the process. Consulting people implies you're going to change the*

*decision. Unless you have other options then public outcries are unlikely to be able to influence a decision.'*

This last point is important. Both management and members can take an authority-wide view and come to the conclusion that a particular closure is, indeed, the 'least worst option'. However, it is unreasonable to expect any individual community to agree to sacrifice their own service for the good of others. This means that *allowing* a community to influence a decision ('We agree. We won't close your library.') puts the onus on both management and members to have alternative strategies to call upon.

Whether or not an authority has agreed to consult, some form of dialogue was seen to be inevitable: *'once closures had been picked up in the local press after committee meetings.'* One interviewee said: *'...the way people treated the meeting was: if we weren't going to consult them they were going to tell us anyway...even people who didn't use the service told us we couldn't close their library because it was one of the things that held them together as a community. They wanted the right of the possibility to use it if they chose to.'*

A number of authorities held meetings or conducted surveys in order to gain a clear idea of problems and issues resulting from the closures. One authority commented on the relative ineffectiveness of a meeting at which ex users were asked 'how can we make things better?' *'...obviously, there was hardly a person in the room who wanted the library to close so they weren't overly motivated to help dig us out of the hole we were placing ourselves in, they were just digging it deeper for us.'*

Six authorities stated categorically that no consultation had taken place, including one which commented on *'the pointlessness of asking a community whether it wants to lose its library or not.'* One interviewee commented: *'Consultation? Well we didn't and that was not the way the authority behaved. At that time members took the view they were elected by majority and they were there to make decisions which would be in the best interests of the people of this authority'*

Three authorities had deliberately set out to consult before the decision was taken, although not all were convinced of its value: The head of one London authority commented:

*'we must reflect the needs of our community...consultation is [important], etc., but in my experience it's very difficult as a concept to get to grips with - 'community' is often just a few powerful individuals who run a few organisations - are they truly representative? Is that consultation? The sad truth is that in many inner city areas they[the users/ community] are just too apathetic to react - so no we did not have a huge amount of consultation'.*

The point was also made that consultation does not necessarily give an accurate reflection of what service *users* feel, but is certainly effective at letting you know what the *community* feels. There is often a wide gap between regular user figures and defenders of a library. One library had 1500 registered borrowers yet collected 5,000 signatures to keep it open.

One interviewee commented: *'One of the things which came through in the consultation is how many people wanted to defend the library 'just because it was there' They may not use it themselves but they wanted to save it for the community or for other people's children...there were very emotive feelings made known to us about the value of libraries ...take away the library and it's the first stage in decline in civilisation ...so certainly issue (figures) don't show the total value of the library in the community.'*

The role of the library as a community asset and focal point was said to be a main part of many 'save our library' campaigns. The difficulties were compared by one officer to those of the church authorities which attempt to close (and rebuild) old redundant churches in areas which have become run down, and to channel resources to new areas of population, e.g. new estates. Such moves are often met with fierce local opposition as the community perceives a local known 'community space' is being uprooted. Its symbolic removal causes the community to feel as if its roots are being damaged.

In only one authority (which had a full year to explain and communicate to users which options were being considered by the library committee) was there time for detailed consultation, which was described as *'intensive and extremely time-consuming.'*

*‘General public meetings were held first of all at locations around the authority where everyone whose library was at risk could feasibly get to. Over the consultation period Members’ opinions shifted in favour of greater reductions in opening hours and closing just five or six libraries. The review of libraries narrowed to a list of twelve...public meetings were then held at each of these. All public meetings were fronted by officers and members.’*

Detailed descriptive leaflets were made available in all libraries and users were asked for comments on the options under discussion. Over 5000 replies were received. Then:

*‘With the libraries on the short list there were additional meetings with parish councils, friends groups (which formed as a result of the threat) etc. In addition, at a series of Committee Meetings which progressed the issue, interested groups were allowed to address members before the meeting.’*

## **5.5 The Influence of the public on decision making.**

Our questionnaire asked respondents ‘How far and in what ways can the public influence closure decisions?’ In our interviews we asked respondents about occasions when decisions to close had been reversed.

Questionnaire responses varied. In some cases public opinion and the strength of protests had reversed decisions to close:

*‘[The public had] a major influence - 3 libraries were scheduled for closure, but only 2 happened, mainly due to strong public campaign in one area.’*

*‘We had numerous petitions with thousands of signatures. The politicians found the money to keep branches open.’*

*‘A number of successful ‘save our library’ campaigns have taken place in recent years and public pressure on members is very effective.’*

The same message came across in our interviews:

*'public reaction was unbelievable - yet what came through very strongly was the high priority the public put on library services - in fact public opinion swung the political issue... the whole of the county was up in arms - human chain around shire hall - this issue went beyond libraries as voters were saying protect our services'*

Perhaps because of the financial imperative, a minority of authorities were impervious to public reaction. In one outer London borough, local campaigners were successful in getting a slot on a community programmes unit TV programme, and the protest became a national issue with involvement of the local MP. However, the library still closed. In almost all other cases, the reaction of users and the community had a significant effect, particularly on attitudes to future decisions:

*'Politically, the impact of the closures is that the members do not want to close any more libraries. [Members] were very shocked and disturbed about the level of response from the public. We went out to every meeting with at least one of the chairs and as many local councillors as we could persuade. They were distinctly uncomfortable as there was such a hostile atmosphere. So the outcome in this sense may be of some benefit to the service simply because it has dissuaded the members about closures.'*

*'The views of the public do have an impact on the elected members in that although they may not have changed their minds on this occasion, they may be more reluctant to close a library in the future.'*

Although public opinion had, in most cases, been strongly voiced and influential, in a minority of authorities lack of response had been a feature. There were concerns that in areas of deprivation, local communities often did not get together to 'save' a threatened library. The long term implications of this worried many officers who stressed that library authorities should not be providing only for those who 'shout the loudest'.

*'We believe that library use in our authority is generally more marginal than it might be in an outer London leafy borough where literature, reading and information are more central to people's lives. It's telling that when we closed the libraries we did ...well if the library habit is marginal to your life, and you are just basically trying to exist... you have to make a bigger effort to get to it, you just give up because it is not absolutely central to your life.'*

*'the sad truth is that many inner-city areas seem too apathetic to generate this kind of [protest].'*

One county authority reported that *'one urban library died with hardly a whimper - its users were few, within easy reach of another library and not sufficiently [well] organised or knowledgeable to make an impact.'*

There were a number of comments about the effectiveness of individual protests although there appeared to be no correlation between the strength of feeling and whether the specific library was 'saved' or not. In one extreme case, a senior manager remarked:

*'... when I went into [the community] apart from thinking 'Good God, they're going to kidnap me and hold me hostage' it was obvious they were...going to do something and in fact, they'd slept in the night before, essentially occupied it the night before.'* What followed was a three week occupation of the library ended only by court order. The library still closed.

Nor does there appear to be a correlation between the amount of use a library gets and strength of protest. In one authority the hardest fight was for a *'tiny 12 hour portacabin which did 12,000 issues [a year].'*

An interesting point was made by one respondent asked to reflect on occasions when decisions had been overturned. He could not think of any occasion when this had happened but pointed out that, even without a campaign from the community, closures themselves had raised awareness and affected future decisions:

*'...well there was no outcry [when those libraries closed] but since that time the public is aware that closures **are possible**, and some [libraries] have been reprieved as a result of pressure from the community. In the past two years politicians have got together privately and have identified library closures as top of the list of **most sensitive cuts of all council services.**'*

From the evidence it is clear that the decision to close a library is likely to generate considerable passion amongst users and the community in general: *'Anybody who wants to close libraries without a fuss underestimates the response they'll get from people who use that service and sometimes people who don't even use it.'* This reaction is likely to surface whether or not the authority has consulted, and whether or not a forum is provided for information giving.

For this reason, before making any decision to close, an authority needs to be very clear how firm its resolve is. The manager has a responsibility here. As one manager put it: *[Tell them] never underestimate the capacity for anger. ...let the members know precisely what they're getting into and determine whether they are prepared to hold it.'*

Even when an authority is determined not to overturn a closure decision, public reaction may have a significant and unexpected influence on future policy. The following comment was not unique: *'Public pressure on members is very effective. [It has] led to the refusal of members to contemplate any further closures.'*

## **5.6 Dealing with staff reaction**

The library managers in our study presented a remarkably positive picture of how staff had dealt with the threat and process of closures. There were, however, difficulties arising from the need for the initial proposals to be kept confidential, that is, discussed only within the senior library management team.

We asked respondents in our questionnaire what they had learnt about consulting with staff. Despite the need for early confidentiality the consensus was that staff should be informed at the earliest possible opportunity. Management should be *'open about the risks of closure'* and ensure that staff were clear about the proposals. *'Total openness and honesty'* were stressed by a number of respondents.

One Machiavellian respondent suggested that *when* staff were told might depend on management's own attitude to the closures. If staff are told before the proposal goes to

committee *'campaigns and groundswells of staff/trade union opinion can build up and be most effective during the period before the committee decision'*.

Organisational climate was seen to make a difference. One authority felt it could inform its management team at the earliest stage *'because it 'acts very responsibly in this way', (i.e. doesn't leak proposals.)*. In another authority the news had to be broken whilst the staff were actually on strike over another budget issue:

*'...as soon as they got back we actually ran through it with them. It meant a new campaign for them because most of them feel very strongly for their communities...*

Despite this unpropitious start, later on in the process, positive staff reaction was noted:

*'...the staff all attended the public meetings, they were key players when it came to sorting out our options after closure and most of them were eventually as helpful as we had a right to expect them to be.'*

The level of understanding about staff opposition to the process shown by this manager was mirrored in other authorities. Several questionnaire respondents stressed the need for management to understand that opposition from front-line staff reflected a real concern for library users and should not be condemned.

Managers highlighted an inevitable *'conflict of interest'*, between the personal and professional concerns of library staff, for example:

*'...well their [staff] concerns were at two levels: have I still got a job if this library closes? ...that's reasonable but also many care passionately about people who use their libraries and so they are concerned for them.'*

This concern was not restricted to the likelihood of closing a library; even a change in opening hours could put site staff in a difficult position:

*'they might understand it and rationalise it - but they are getting all this stuff from users that can be difficult to deal with...they know it's about a policy somewhere which they may or may not agree with.'*

Two strategies were suggested by respondents to minimise problems. First authorities must spend time preparing for the eventuality of closures. Respondents advised keeping vacancies, filling posts on a temporary basis and taking every practical step to avoid redundancies. Secondly, when the closure proposals were made public, reassurance about job retention, possible moves, etc. had to be immediate.

*'...The staff were upset but generally supportive of senior management - ....they knew their jobs were safe'.*

Sometimes, telling the staff where they might move to was easier said than done: *'I had to work out four different staffing structures for four different service scenarios'.*

Respondents stressed that direct access to senior management was very important. Senior managers should visit the affected libraries and make themselves personally accessible to the staff affected. Problems should not be left to Personnel to sort out:

*'I think we handled this [staff relations] aspect very well...we knew staff would be very shocked.. so senior managers went out and spoke to all staff personally. Other managers knew staff personally and so they went and delivered the message and explained what was going on...'*

Some authorities experienced particular pressure points. One had involved middle managers in decision making all the way through the process and they bore the brunt of the pressure:

*'...it was most painful for local managers ...they had [devolved] responsibility for budgets. They found it harder than front line staff (who could say 'it's not me mate..!') Local managers were involved in all aspects [of the closures] work on criteria, consultation and so on. It was very uncomfortable as they were...involved in decision making on which libraries would close, and they also knew all the staff and the borrowers - and they knew the Members on the ground...'*

Despite these pressures, however, the majority of managers felt there had been no long term damage to staff-management relations: *'...if you can be proud of a process like that we were proud of it...we don't have ill feeling among staff.'*

The length of time it took decisions to be confirmed was also an issue for some authorities. This caused tension amongst managers for a considerable period of time until: *'because we talked for so long, there was an acceptance of the closures... it had already happened in their minds from unspeakable and unthinkable to almost when it was done: why didn't we just get on with it?'*

Managers also reflected, often with deep sighs of resignation, the frustration of having had to cope with repeated cuts in their budgets. The 'threat' to close libraries had thus become almost routine each year, in some authorities almost becoming(sadly) an integral part of the annual 'planning' cycle. Staff learned to live with this but the cycle of 'crying wolf' meant that: *'they thought it would not happen and management would just not go through with it'* This could breed an atmosphere of cynicism and mistrust.

Despite these problems however, most respondents told us that staff appeared to understand the need for change.

*'front line staff were understanding and this helped keep cohesion...and the staff all knew that the senior managers were as devastated as they were...'*

*'I don't think in either case that staff felt it was a wrong decision regrettable though it would be.... I don't think the staff were particularly resistant - they understood the logic of the arguments and how we'd arrived at the decisions.'*

The availability of someone else to blame helped at least one authority:

*'How did they view the senior management team? Well, no it wasn't them at county hall and us as a library service....it was much more us in Greenfieldshire and them at Westminster...and that's why we got the very good relationship with our employees and politicians - they all sang from the same hymn sheet.'*

Reflecting on the long-term impact on management-staff relations, one manager summarised thus:

*'I think we came through it quite well...at the end of 15 months we were able to look back and think, we did have staff understanding of what we were trying to do....even for those [staff] who were most uncomfortable with the decision and who found it most painful....'*

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

Because all authorities are different it would be foolhardy for us to try and provide a ‘tool kit’ for those authorities contemplating the closure of service points. That is not the aim of this study. However, we believe that the evidence we have collected enables us to draw some conclusions about the issues involved in any closure decision and its subsequent implementation. We provide the following reflections in the hope that it will be of value to any authority forced to consider the closure of library service points.

### 6.1 Why close a library?

We know from previous research (Proctor, Lee and Reilly 1998) that the majority of closures are caused by budget problems. Budget problems are inescapable for many authorities and are often severe enough to make direct service reductions inevitable. Nine out of ten authorities have made direct reductions in access to the service during the last ten years and over half have closed one or more service points.

Managers, in their responses, demonstrated a very great reluctance to close libraries, and in almost every case treated closure as a last resort. Many authorities drew our attention to the many years of service reductions that had finally led them to a closure decision.

There clearly comes a point at which closure appears to be the ‘least worst option’ for the long-term future of the service. Proctor, Lee and Reilly (1998) showed that many recently closed ‘low-use’ part-time libraries had once been busy full time service points and there was evidence from our own respondents that multiple reductions in opening hours causes substantial damage to the service in terms of loss of use. This can eventually lead to service point closure as the library reaches the point at which use is so low it is no longer considered viable.

*‘...the majority of the libraries we closed had suffered the most severe reductions in opening hours, with the majority in the 16-17 hours range. Most had, at one time, been open over 40 hours. Use had fallen significantly...’*

Managers in authorities are caught in a trap. Opening hours reductions are preferable to closures only up to a point. If budget settlements continue to be inadequate, year after year, there comes a time when closure becomes preferable to yet more reductions in opening hours. Managers closing libraries are, rightly, looking at the long term future of the service. ‘Jam’ can be spread only so thinly. If budgets are reduced on a permanent basis, quality in terms of choice and range of materials and services can only be preserved if officers and members accept a reduction in the number of places from which those services is delivered.

## **6.2 Is ‘low use’ a legitimate criterion for closure?**

As our research shows, in every case of closure we studied, low use was the primary criterion for closure, together with the accessibility of alternative services.

Superficially, ‘low use’ is a convincing reason for closure. Low use generally means a high cost per issue (fixed staff and building costs). It also means that the smallest number of users is affected by closure. However, some of our respondents expressed their concern over the use of this criterion. Volume of use is only one measure of a library’s value. Linley and Usherwood (1998) suggest that the ‘social audit’ approach provides a more valid indicator of value, i.e. to what extent does the local library contribute to the achievement of the authority’s social and economic policies? This was recognised by one of our respondents:

*‘I don’t know what low use is - that’s why the social impact research is so important - because libraries are not just about issues...’*

Proctor, Lee and Reilly (1998) also show that a *local* building based library has a distinctive value to a community which cannot be replaced either by a replacement mobile library or an alternative branch in another neighbourhood:

‘The research suggests that the local library adds something to the quality of life which is related to much more than reading or information seeking. The local library gives users a sense of worth, since staff recognise and know them to talk to. It makes them feel they *belong* to something important, something which we might say gives them a sense of community.

And, it provides a place to meet like-minded people, people to talk to, and people to share information with: *'close affinity of people in a small community who were anxious to help...'*

*'...We gained a strong impression of the local library as a multi-directional 'information junction'... with users as active participants. The 'library user' had, in many cases, become as involved as the staff in the transfer of information, help and advice. All this was lost in the cramped hurley-burley of the mobile stop, or the use of 'someone else's library.'* (Proctor, Lee and Reilly 1998 p.88-89)

This value is enhanced for children in the community:

*'... the local library visit is a 'learning opportunity' for young children in its widest sense. Where else but the LOCAL library can you, at the age of six or even younger, be totally independent, responsible for something that isn't yours, make choices without parental intervention, and have a relationship with safe adults who are neither family nor teachers?'* (Proctor, Lee and Reilly 1998 p.90)

One respondent suggested how a local library might be made more viable:

*'If we want to keep alive as a library service we must be not just libraries but community facilities: we have certainly convinced members of that because of the council help points in all libraries - all our staff are trained in that information provision...[the library] links to all 5 district council offices so the library has moved well beyond its traditional library function. We are now seen as a gateway for the community to all council services ....'*

Notwithstanding these points, if closure has to take place, the accessibility of other services should, rightly, be a prime consideration. As we have shown, however, distance is, in itself, too simplistic a measure of accessibility. Topography, and the location of the alternative library in an area to which users are already drawn by other facilities are also important (Proctor, Lee and Reilly 1998).

We have so far focused on the closure of libraries primarily for financial reasons. We are not, however, saying that there are no circumstances in which a library should be closed. A minority of our respondents had closed very small libraries for 'service' reasons - because their judgement was that a mobile replacement offered a satisfactory replacement

service. In the cases we examined it appears that this judgement was justified. We were told that users had accepted the new facility without complaint.

The case for the closure of some service points, at least on cost grounds, appears to be incontrovertible. Proctor, Lee and Reilly (1998) reported building-based libraries closing with as few as seven current users. However, they also showed that the definition of 'low use' varies widely from authority to authority. Further work needs to be carried out to define 'low use' more helpfully.

### **6.3 Library Closure: The Consequences**

Managers suggested to us that they closed libraries not simply because there was no other option, but because it was in the long term interests of the service. We have suggested what these practical benefits might be, above. However closure also provided some unexpected consequences.

Some librarians suggested that whilst closures had been an unwelcome intrusion (eating into staff time, resources, public confidence, and the quality of services), nevertheless raising the issue of closures and bringing the public library service to the forefront of the political agenda had acted as a catalyst. It had forced councils (politicians and senior management) to re-examine where the library service was positioned within the wider corporate context - a shift they welcomed.

*'we now have a very different library service...it raised the profile of libraries enormously - in a way that nothing else has ever done before - [the threat and eventual closure of libraries] made people come out and say how marvellous libraries are.'*

There were, however, arguments on the other side. In some cases elected members were so traumatised by the public outcry that managers felt their future room for manoeuvre had been severely constrained:

*'...you can't play the card more than once - if you want to make that very difficult decision about closing a library later on you can't do it [again]...so it reduces the flexibility we have to manage the service. ...the issue is now seen [in the community] as ...if we rise up from*

*the community we will save our library - and also the local politicians will just not want to close a library at all...'*

This reaction, of course, presupposes that managers are eager to close libraries and this was by no means always the case. What came across from some of our respondents was an ambivalent attitude to closures:

*'we do have split loyalty - I didn't come into library work to close down libraries. It's not what we're about. On the other hand if you make a professional decision that this library ought to close it is a painful decision and you'd prefer to have more money and to increase the use.... When local people write in...and say 'how dare you think about this [closure], secretly, you're rather pleased - but we were not in position to whip that up - but if it does get whipped up by the community then - and if members then find the money...and make cuts elsewhere and the library is saved - no one is more pleased than the officers...'*

Relationships with users can also be damaged:

*'Any change [in future] has the potential to be totally misrepresented - people get anxious about things that may not be as bad as they think...so a lot of this was about managing change...the relocation (which in our case was what the closure was)... created a HUGE amount of work with fallout here at HQ - we were the focus for letters, phone calls, etc...'*

The service itself may be damaged:

*'...there was long term damage to the credibility of the service - and I just don't think that all that (the closures) was a price worth paying.'*

*'We had to cut back so much we had undermined the very foundations of the service...'*

*'...professionally the decision on the reductions in hours was more painful and more damaging than we thought it would be...we have compressed the service...not reduced the numbers coming through the door and put real pressure on staff.'*

One manager's attitude to the closure of six libraries can be summed up as profound regret:

*'In straightforward management terms and budget terms it was a useful contribution to reducing the budget but I have to say the six libraries we closed saved us, at the end of the day, £110,00 - £120,000, but £30,000 went back into the extended mobile service so that the final saving was something like £80,000...managerially that's the economics of a madhouse - to lose 6 libraries for that'.*

When asked what he had learnt from the experience his response was: *'Don't do it'*.

The key point, summarising the experiences of our respondents, appears to be that **the policy justifying the proposed closure is crucial**. Problems are most likely to arise when closures are proposed as a 'last resort' in reaction to a budget crisis. When closures do not form part of an overall service strategy, and when the decision is sprung on an unsuspecting community, then the consequences can be the most damaging. Communities are then most likely to feel victimised, and elected members 'traumatised' by their subsequent reaction.

The main difference to emerge in our study was between these 'reactive' authorities and those (a minority) which closed as a result of a radical review of the entire library service. For these few, the options for library closure(s) formed part of a wider picture. The consequent underlying rationale influences not only the process itself and the effects of closures on all those involved, but also the way in which they are viewed with hindsight:

*'...you need to think this all through right from the very beginning. We did a major review...it was not just a case of we must find £250K, so let's find library X. You have to make decisions right at the beginning about who will consult, keep stakeholders involved, you must be methodical and think in big terms, and go at it whole-heartedly. We knew what type of service we wanted to end up providing and we created money to improve the service. If you know what you're doing that gives you a moral basis and you feel more energised about it...'*

A key issue in securing more effective management of service reductions is that of timescales. We do not believe it is a coincidence that the most considered approach to reductions and the most sensitive treatment of consultation was in an authority where

decisions were made over a two year timescale. Authorities need to find ways of overcoming the annual budgetary imperative, particularly when the closure of service points begins to find a place on the agenda.

#### **6.4 Are users ever satisfactorily compensated for the closure of their library?**

Several authorities had re-invested some of the money saved from the closures in the service. However, a minority had made improvements which were of direct benefit to the users affected. In only one case was it reported that users had agreed (through a survey) to the 'trade-off' offered. These had included improvements in stock and opening hours at remaining libraries. This was exceptional. The following comments were more representative of the general opinion:

*'[with a sigh] well, we couldn't offer them [users, community] anything they wanted - they wanted to keep their library...'*

*'...we looked hard at the alternatives available and at the different groups who would be hit [by closures] we tried to highlight...e.g. services to playgroups, schools, housebound, special mobile services for homes and sheltered housing; all the most vulnerable and least mobile would be served by a range of other services that are not based on a static library service...that's what we were able to say (...but people... were not impressed...they wanted their library **building**.'*

#### **6.5 Developing an Understanding between Managers and Elected Members**

The evidence shows that relationships between management and members are critical to the success of a closure strategy. Clearly trust is important, and that can only be achieved over a period of time. Authorities where previous relationships were good found them strengthened by the experience.

That relationship requires two things. Of elected members it requires a willingness to look at the service with 'managerial' eyes. It requires them to look at service reductions in

terms of the long term and relative impact on the user, rather than on the short term impact on the ballot box. For the library manager it requires political sensitivity and skills:

*'Librarians cannot divorce themselves from the political agenda; ...they must gain skills in navigating this field and must be aware of the national and local political agenda .They must learn to be advocates for the library service and can no longer believe that library services can exist on their own.'*

There were certain practical strategies managers could carry out to encourage member co-operation. One library manager had undertaken to reply to all complaint letters addressed to members!

## **6.6 To consult or not to consult?**

One can argue that an authority which believes in decentralisation of decision making, the empowerment of communities and the adoption of an 'enabling' role must commit itself to consultation as a principle. However most respondents had not consulted as a principle, but, either as a reaction to community pressure or in a way which was to some extent 'cosmetic'. On occasions there was an element of dishonesty: *'We were not really going to change our minds'*.

Experiences of consultation were largely negative. The anger of those there and suspicion on both sides played a part: *'Trots' and activists coming in and trying to use it as another stick with which they were going to batter local government with.'* Elected members, in particular, sometimes appear to have been genuinely shocked or dismayed at the passion unleashed by threatened communities, and this occasionally resulted in unexpected changes of mind. There was sometimes a fear on management's part that these 'U' turns would encourage communities to protest even more loudly next time, making future decisions even more difficult to sustain.

These fears, however, were there, even when genuine 'consultation' had not taken place. People had still made their feelings felt.

The final problem raised concerned the difficulty of getting communities to understand arguments which were about service quality and long term benefit for the service as a whole. A community's views are likely to be parochial and managerial arguments are unlikely to be convincing. The point was made again and again that no community would agree that its own library should close.

The issue here for the authority is that consultation should not be seen as 'win-lose' *negotiation* but as the collection of evidence on which a decision may, at least in part, be based.

This strategy was adopted, with some success, in one authority where a long list of libraries at risk was reduced progressively using both management data and the results of consultation. The key issue here was, not surprisingly, the length of time it took.

The short timescales for decision making almost certainly prevent thorough consultation taking place. The authority above came to closure decisions over a two year timescale. Consultation involved '*public meetings*' for all libraries at risk followed by further meetings in shortlisted libraries. These were in turn followed by meetings at libraries on a final list for closure with additional meetings of parish councils and Friends (action) groups. The whole process had been '*extremely time-consuming.*'

This consultation had been planned from the beginning and the authority was clear about what the options were. The consultation would be no shorter in a 'reactive' authority where every change resulting from a public meeting would mean 'back to the drawing board'.

From the evidence it seems clear that consultation to be both valid and valuable needs both time and preparation. Authorities *must* decide what their sticking points are, in advance, and *must* be clear about alternative strategies. Consultation must be entered into honestly, and both authority and community must be clear, at the beginning, what the parameters are within which the authority is prepared to listen and make changes. Time must be made available to return to communities, as decisions are firmed up.

Even where timescales did not allow for consultation or where authorities had decided it was inappropriate, the evidence suggested that initiating a dialogue with users could be helpful. Experience suggested that officers, Committee Chairs and local ward members should all be present.

## **6.7 What influence should communities have on decision making?**

The answer to this question is: ‘How much influence do you want them to have?’

Respondents stressed how important it was that the parameters within which people could influence decisions were clear *before* any dialogue was opened. One of our respondents also stressed the importance of knowing how resolute members were before entering into any dialogue with users. *‘let the members know precisely what they’re getting into and determine whether they are prepared to hold it.’*

Are public meetings really representative of those people affected? Some respondents thought not. The presence of unrepresentative ‘activists’ and meetings ‘swamped’ by non-users were both mentioned.

Two respondents mentioned the difficulty of deprived ‘inner city’ areas finding a voice. The assumption here is that the services which will be most keenly fought for are those in middle class communities where users are more vocal. Who will fight for a ‘comprehensive and efficient library service’ for those for whom the library habit is marginal and who are most at risk of being marginalized and excluded from an information rich society?

Those who shout the loudest are not necessarily those in greatest need. This, however, does not need to be a problem for a service which has explicit social policies and knows its communities. An authority needs to listen to the arguments rather than to the decibels.

## 6.8 Dealing with staff reaction

Two of our respondents' authorities were reported as 'highly unionised' yet industrial action had been avoided in both cases. In general, relatively few problems were experienced in this area. The evidence suggests that the key to securing co-operation and minimising negative and damaging reaction is:

- Tell staff about the risks at the earliest opportunity.
- Keep them informed at every stage. Openness and honesty pay off.
- Ensure job security beforehand by keeping vacancies open, making temporary appointments, etc.
- Have these in place at the beginning of the process so that immediate reassurance can be given
- Make senior management *visible*. Make personal visits to affected libraries.
- Accept that opposition reflects both a concern for the users and a reaction to 'loss'.

## 6.9 Summary

We believe that this study has thrown light on a number of important issues surrounding decisions to close libraries. These have been discussed at length above. However, the following seem to us to be the key issues that should be considered by authorities considering the closure of service points:

### **FORWARD PLANNING**

- It is important to plan any closures as part of a general strategy for service development.
- Authorities need to find ways of limiting the damaging nature of the annual budget cycle so as to improve forward planning, meaningful consultation and the quality of decision making.

## **CRITERIA FOR CLOSURE**

- There is a need for more discussion/inter-authority co-operation on the development of criteria for closure.
- There is a need for authorities to review definitions, e.g. low use, accessibility in discussion with comparable ‘families’ of authority.
- Authorities should consider the use of qualitative criteria, e.g. Social Audit approach, when assessing the value of a service point.

## **CONSULTATION AND PUBLIC REACTION**

- Consultation should be used as a tool for collecting evidence on which to base decisions rather than as a forum for negotiation after decisions have been made.
- It is important to be clear, in advance, about:
  - a) the authority’s likely response to adverse reaction by users.
  - b) the availability of alternative options to closure.
  - c) its resolution to carry out decisions.
- Issues of social exclusion must be considered. Authorities must avoid falling into the trap of listening only to the loudest voices.

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# APPENDIX 1

## Access to public libraries

### The Public, Politics and Hard Decisions

British Library funded Research Project G339

**Please complete this questionnaire in relation to the closure of static library service points *where finance was a key issue*.** If you have closed libraries on more than one occasion please answer in relation to the latest occasion on which you closed a library. **Please return completed questionnaire by Wed. 28 January 1998 to Sylvia Simmons (CEPLIS). 1 Garrick Avenue, London NW11 9AR. Fax: 0181 922 6155 or email <sylvia@inforesponse.demon.co.uk>.**

**If you have any queries please telephone her on 0181 458 9062**

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#### PART A: MAKING THE DECISION:

1. Was the initial proposal to close made by

a) library management

b) elected members

2. What factors led to this proposal?

**3. If other options were considered, why were they rejected?**

**4. Please describe what criteria you used to decide which libraries were to close.**

e.g. accessibility of other libraries, socio/economic factors.

---

**PART B                      CONSULTATION**

**5. At what stage, if any, did you consult the public?**

**6. Did you seek professional advice on survey design, public consultation exercises etc.?**

YES  NO  *Please give details: .....*

.....

**7. If you consulted the public: Did you organise:**

Meeting(s) with library user groups

Meeting(s) with community groups

Other public meetings

Focus Groups

A survey of

library users

community groups

users/non-users

Other forms of consultation

*Please give details: .....*

.....

## **PART C LESSONS LEARNT**

**8. Reflecting on your experience of consulting people, what have you learnt about**

**a) how far and in what ways the public can influence closure decisions?**

**b) how far and in what ways library management can influence closure decisions?**

**9. Reflecting on your experience of managing staff through the closure process, what have you learnt about:**

**a) consulting and/or informing staff?**

**b) dealing with staff's reaction to the decision?**

**10. What were the key issues which convinced local elected members that a library in their community should close?**

---

**YOUR CONTACT DETAILS:**

**Name:**.....

**Title/position**.....

**Local authority**.....

**Phone:**.....**Fax:**.....

**E-mail:**.....

Thank you for your help.

**If you would be willing to talk to one of our research team please tick here:**

## Appendix 2

### **People, politics and hard decisions: qualitative study**

#### *Outline interview schedule (face-to-face interviews)*

##### **About the decision to close**

- at what point in the budget-making process did the issue of closing libraries arise/
- was this the first time it had been raised? If YES, what was different this time?
- if NO, how long had closures of libraries been on the political/management's agenda as a budget strategy?
- to what extent was closure seen as the last resort
- why were other strategies rejected
- what was the rationale behind the closure option

##### **Relationships between Members and officers**

- Can you describe the process that brought members and officers into agreement?
- how did you reconcile local members to the decision?
- were there any ensuing tensions?
- how were relationships between Members and officers affected

##### **Occasions when Members/officers changed their minds**

- were there occasions in the past when closure decisions have either been reversed or abandoned
- what were the most important factors in securing the change of mind
- how did the circumstances differ from when you DID go ahead with closure

##### **Implementing the decision**

- how did you go about choosing the library(ies) to close
- what criteria did you use

- did you consider other criteria (e.g. CIPFA statistics), socio-economic data, etc.

### **Reflections on the process**

- in general terms, what do you believe are the criteria which justify the closure of a library
- how do you define 'low use'
- how far do you believe this reflects the value of a library to its community
- in retrospect, do you feel closure(s) were the right decision
- was there any political fallout from the decision

### **Consultation with library users and local people**

- how did library users get to know of the threat to their library
- what attempts did you make to explain the decision to local people (if none, why not)
- did you consider formal consultation, (with professional help to run it)
- what were you able to offer users as ‘compensation’ for the closure
- how did you respond to local opposition

### **Impact of the closure(s)**

- what attempts have you made to assess the impact of closure on local people
- what evidence of impact has there been

### **Staff reaction**

- what was the level of understanding about the decision among staff responsible for the libraries which were to close
- how did they learn about the proposal
- what opportunity did they have to discuss the implications of the decision
- what impact did the decision have on management-staff relations
- with hindsight, would you have done anything differently (to secure greater understanding or commitment from staff)

### **Lessons learned**

- what are the most important lessons you have learnt from your ‘closure’ experience: both the process itself and the community’s reaction to it
- how would you do things differently in the future if you to close another library

## **APPENDIX 3 (1)**



## Appendix 3 (2)

### BANDS

Book Issue Totals:	(1)	up to 32,000
	(2)	32,001-52,000
	(3)	52,001-104,000
	(4)	more than 104,000
Book Issue Trends:	(1)	worse than -20%
	(2)	-20% to -11%
	(3)	-10% to 0%
	(4)	more than 0% (i.e. any increase)
Book issues per Hour Open:	(1)	up to 40 per hour
	(2)	41-60 per hour
	(3)	61-90 per hour
	(4)	over 90 per hour
Net Cost per Book Issue:	(1)	more than 50p per issue
	(2)	41p to 49p per issue
	(3)	34p to 40p per issue
	(4)	less than 34p per issue
Total Visitors per Week:	(1)	up to 1000
	(2)	1001-2000
	(3)	2001-3000
	(4)	more than 3000
Visitors per Hour Open:	(1)	fewer than 18 per hour
	(2)	18-27 per hour
	(3)	28-40 per hour

(4) more than 40 per hour

Population

(1) up to 3500

(of the local catchment area,

(2) 3501-4500

based on existing knowledge

(3) 4501-5500

of communities served by

(4) over 5500

individual libraries)

Population Trends: last 5 years

(1) less than 0% (i.e. any decrease)

(percentage change to the

(2) 0% to 5% increase

catchment area population)

(3) 6% to 10% increase

(4) greater than 10% increase

### **Appendix 3 (3)**

## **Appendix 3 (4)**



