



CASE STUDY – JESMOND LIBRARY



Organisation's Name: Friends of Jesmond Library

Organisational type: Community Managed Library and Community Hub

Ownership: The building is leased by the Friends of Jesmond Library from Newcastle City Council. Friends of Jesmond Library is a company limited by guarantee (number 08430250) and a Registered Charity (in England and Wales, 1151935).

Location: Jesmond Library, St George's Terrace, Jesmond, Newcastle upon Tyne NE2 2DL

Setting the scene:

Jesmond is a relatively affluent suburb of Newcastle upon Tyne, with primarily Victorian housing, situated only about 2 miles from the City Centre. The local population includes a significant number of students and staff from the city's two universities, professionals from local government and the health service, elderly residents of a number of specialist homes and grouped residences, retired people and families. The library is situated on the edge of Jesmond's main local shopping centre (Acorn Road), close to a Metro Station (West Jesmond) and to Jesmond Pool and Gym (another community enterprise).

Project evolution: As part of a round of major budget cuts in late 2012 the City Council announced the proposed closure of Jesmond and a number of other public libraries. About 100 people attended a packed public meeting on 4 December, with 93 attendees opposing the closure of Jesmond Library and 3 supporting it. The meeting agreed to establish a

Working Group of residents both to oppose the closure, but also, should the Council press on with its plans, to consider establishing a community-run vehicle to re-open it. After consideration of a number of options, including asking the community enterprise running the swimming pool to take over the library as well, the working group decided to establish an independent charitable company, the Friends of Jesmond Library. The Council subsequently decided that the library would close on June 30 (shortly after the building celebrated 50 years since its official opening) but also to negotiate a lease of the building to the Friends, with a view to enabling them to reopen it as a community-run operation. After consulting with residents, drawing up a business plan, fundraising, recruiting and training volunteers, and holding several trial openings in August, the Friends re-opened the library on 21 September 2013.

Project description

Jesmond Library is open for three days a week as a normal public library, with just over 10,000 books, newspapers and a seating area, a popular children's area, coffee machine, People's Network public access computers, a photocopier and two well-used community meeting rooms. Room bookings and events organised in the community rooms and main library space take place both during normal library hours, and usually in the evenings and on the other four days a week as well. No paid staff are employed; we currently have about 85 volunteers.

Jesmond Library is housed in a much loved Grade Two Listed Building, designed as a public library in the 1960's, with a distinctive round main library room, almost completely surrounded by floor to ceiling windows. Most of the bookshelves and other furniture can readily be moved, making the room an excellent venue for public meetings, concerts and plays.

The library operates independently from the local authority, from which it receives no ongoing revenue funding, and so is not part of the statutory library network. Nevertheless, the Friends have had significant advice and help from a number of council officers and councillors and choose to pay for the council to maintain various building maintenance services.

When the library re-opened, the council donated most of the book stock and furniture to us. The Friends now spend about £4,000 a year on purchasing new (and some second hand) books, as recommended by a book buying group of library users. Donated books are only accepted if they are in priority categories, such as modern novels or good quality children's books. The older books are regularly "weeded", to remove books which are not being borrowed or look damaged. Having been disconnected from the council's Library Management System, the Friends now use Eclipse.

The Friends cover normal running costs from a variety of sources, with the largest contributions coming from regular voluntary monthly or annual donations from supporters, room hire, and events organised by volunteers. Extra fundraising, such as grants and special appeals, is used to fund capital improvements to the building.

The Friends hold the building on a 20 year lease from the council. The council is responsible for keeping the roof in good repair, but otherwise the friends are responsible for all building maintenance, repairs and running costs.

During the coronavirus crisis the continuing regular donations from library supporters have proved even more important than usual, as nearly all other income has stopped, with the exception of one of the government's very welcome grants to small businesses. Together

with financial reserves this will keep the library solvent throughout a phased reopening period, until (hopefully) normal service is resumed.

Impact and outcomes:

Although Jesmond is very well supplied with churches and church halls, cafes, pubs and restaurants, it does not have a single, secular, community centre, making the library an excellent “neutral” venue for many community activities and meetings. Access to the university libraries and the City Library (in the city centre) is not difficult for specialist purposes, and for readily mobile residents, but Jesmond Library is greatly valued by older residents, parents with young children, and many other local residents. The People’s Network computers (still run by the city council) are heavily used by local residents with limited access to IT facilities, including people needing to print items from their own lap-tops or tablets.

In the 12 months 1 April 2019 – 31 March 2020 there were over 960 events or room bookings. Events taking place in the library include councillors’ ward surgeries, consultation meetings organised by the council and others, language classes and conversation groups, current affairs discussions, drama, music, adult education organised by the WEA, monthly morning/lunch events for older people, storytime for young children and their carers, children’s crafts, and weekly Thursday evening talks, covering a huge range of topics. Several newly forming groups have held their first meetings in the library, including the Jesmond Dementia Action Alliance and Keep Jesmond Clean.

Key lessons:

- It would not be possible to fund the public library operation without regular income from donations from local residents, and events and room hire. The library activities and other events are mutually beneficial, combining to create a busy and friendly atmosphere which is much appreciated by volunteers and library users. An independent, community-managed library can react quickly to customer views and the suggestions made by volunteers, and benefits from the involvement of volunteers with a wide range of skills and interests.
- All community libraries are different, and some things which have worked in Jesmond may well not work elsewhere. In terms of generating support from our local community (both financial and offers of volunteers) it was important that everyone realised that Jesmond Library would definitely close if local support did not materialise. Indeed it did close for a few months, so it was clear when it reopened that there was a new way of working.
- Drawing on a full range of skills from the local community has also been vital: besides volunteers keen and knowledgeable on books and libraries, we have needed legal help, building maintenance volunteers, newsletter and poster experts, IT advice and much more. As well as local residents, some local businesses have been very helpful, seeing a local library as an important component of a flourishing locality. And other local community organisations have also been helpful, whether by helping to “spread the word”, using the library as a venue, or encouraging their members to volunteer.
- Networking is extremely important. In the early days of the Friends of Jesmond Library the Working Group sought advice from other pre-existing community libraries, from relevant council staff and councillors, and from the operators of the nearby community swimming pool.

Contact information:

Chris Clarke, Company Secretary and Treasurer, chrisclarkenewbrough@gmail.com

All general enquiries to enquiries@jesmondlibrary.org

Useful resources:

Annual Reports; Volunteer Handbook; original Draft Business Plan; advice to volunteers involved in the “Book Collect, Return and Delivery” service which has been running during the coronavirus lockdown

Website and Social Media links:

www.jesmondlibrary.org

www.facebook.com/JesmondLibrary