



COMMUNITY MANAGED LIBRARIES NATIONAL PEER NETWORK

Podcast Transcription - Cricklewood Library



Community Managed Libraries National Peer Network Podcast

Cricklewood Library - Episode #1

Chris Neath

Hello, this is Chris Neath, Network Manager for the Community Managed Libraries National Peer Network. Today I'm talking to Sally Long, Chair of Trustees for the Friends of Cricklewood Library, a community library based in north-west London.

So Sally, just to start off, could you tell us a little bit about Cricklewood library's story?

Sally Long

Cricklewood Library is set opposite a park in southeast Brent, south of Brent. We're a volunteer run library and we've been trying to get open for ten years. We opened in October last year and we're completely volunteer run; the only paid members staff is our lovely cleaner.

We are running, we're open three and a half days a week and basically to get here we've had to battle with the council, with freeholders, All Souls college. We've worked with other libraries.

We've run pop-up libraries in the local stations. We've run courses. We've raised an awful lot of money and we've had to kit out a space which is 187 m² or 2000 sq ft.

It's split up into three usable separate spaces and includes a cafe. That's about it really. I mean, we're about 15 minutes from any local high street or anything like that and we've got one bus route running to us so we're the most remotely can be, being in London- zone 2.

So we are in Brent, which is the most diverse borough in the country apparently and we have a very mixed population. We've got quite a lot of social deprivation and social isolation and then also we've got some pretty well-off people living locally so it's a really vibrant area and a lot of people come by the library because they're crossing from one high street before Broadway to Willesden. So we get a very, very varied group of people.

Chris Neath

How important are volunteers to the library?

Sally Long

The library is run by volunteers. It's run by the community, so volunteers are the hearts of the library. Basically, everybody in here is a volunteer and even our lovely cleaner, who I like to mention Margaret, she also does other stuff and comes to groups and things. So the volunteers are actually what makes the library run.

We have different teams of volunteers. The trustees effectively are volunteers, people working doing book issuing and then we have people running the cafe and the volunteers are trained and they really bring their own flavor every time different people come in. They are very welcoming, and people comment about the difference with this library and other libraries because they get a big 'hello' and a very caring attitude. But the other thing is that we've been fortunate. Our library has very dedicated volunteers and they all work through a system called "Three Rings" and they seem to understand it, so that's good. They work well as a team. They're coordinated by Wendy Tyrrell who's also trustee and the librarian.

They are trained separately according to what role they're going to fulfill. But they come up with interesting things, they really help change some of the things that happen in the library to fit better with the community. They live all over the borough actually and surprisingly aren't all older people. We've got quite a few younger people coming in as well. So that's about it.

We're always looking for more volunteers because it is a slightly fluid situation, so you get your core group, probably about realistically, probably about 15, and then there's a kind of larger group, about 40 for different things and then there's a larger group. So, I think overall we've probably trained about 80 people- and that's how the library runs.

Chris Neath

And, from your perspective, what is the biggest challenge facing community managed libraries in the current climate?

Sally Long

I think it always comes down to the money. You do need money to run, even with a marvelous group of volunteers, you've got overheads to meet. At the moment obviously worrying about heating bills- electricity and so on- and it's not only getting the money to run the library, it's all of the background stuff that you need to be on top of things and so on.

What you don't know, when you start getting involved in a community managed library is that you are going to have to negotiate everything and negotiate pretty hard. So, for instance, over the Covid period, we weren't able to access those grants because we weren't open at the relevant time to have the paperwork to back it up. So, we had to make sure that we got ourselves zero rated for the business rates and that we had all the bills really pinned down, and that's an ongoing thing. I think financial planning and really projecting costs and so on is something that you need to do. So, get your specialists in to support that. Also, that's how you get grants, you have to show that you're on top of the finances, so it's a double whammy. You've got to get the people in both you to use the space, the volunteers who run the space and then the background operation, which is the financial planning.

It means you have to develop a lot of skills because those – actually, willingness to learn and financial planning.

Chris Neath

What would you say is the network's role in supporting community managed libraries in the future?

Sally Long

I think the network's got a great role to play; I think also 'spread the joy'. Libraries are already a thing that makes people happy, just the idea of libraries, but the amazing stories of the community managed libraries in England and Wales. It's just incredible what people have done, and I think that that's a huge story to tell one that reflects what's going on in the local communities.

I think the other thing is that everybody has these little kind of black holes where they don't have the knowledge to deal with a problem that comes up. Recently we've had a problem with considering a complaints procedure amongst volunteers, so these kind of little points of conflict which shouldn't really add up to much, but they can really rock the boat and it's a fragile vessel.

I think the skills that people have and the way that they handle the situations: examples, but actually toolkits as well, people talk about toolkits. It's good to have some forms that you can do,

checklists, be able to make sure that you got everything covered. You don't want to think that you're doing fine and then suddenly discover that you're falling off a cliff financially or all your volunteers have left, or you've run out of trustees. You do need a backup, and I think the network can really keep that. have it in your back pocket ready for the moment you need it. Also, for people starting off, all those pieces of advice and contacts: a friendship network, is how I'd like to see operation running.

It's already happened. We've already seen it happening where people have a problem, people from the network have got in touch, and everybody kind of sits down: 'How can we tackle this?', 'How can we support this person and keep this library?'

Chris Neath

And finally, if you could give one piece of advice to a community library at the start of this journey, what would it be?

Sally Long

One piece of advice is- that desert island disks moment- I think I'd just say, be there prepared for the long haul, it's not going to be a short thing. You're taking on something quite enormous. So, stay in power and reach out to the community. The community, they may not even realise how much they want the library at the point that you're getting involved. Reach out to community and be prepared to have to really stick it out. But at the end of it all, I suppose the main thing is very, very simple. Communities need libraries, so you're doing something really important and so 'Well done'. Join the group and let's keep people happy and keep the libraries open.

Chris Neath

Again, that was Sally Long from Cricklewood Library. A huge thank you to Sally for telling us more about the library. If you would like to find out more about what they do or would like to connect with Sally, you can get in touch with me via info@communitylibrariesnetwork.org. Also, if you'd be interested in coming to chat with me or have ideas for a future episode of the podcast, you can get in touch the same way.

Thanks for listening and see you next time.