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Do library partnerships work and how can they help build a strong future for the library?

Abstract

The Hive, Worcester is an integrated public and university library, the first of its kind in Europe, and is also host to the County Archive and Archaeology service and Customer Hub. Currently celebrating its seventh year of operation, many of the benefits of running a joint service between Worcestershire County Council and the University of Worcester remain evident: cost sharing, skill sharing, a vibrant and affordable event programme. However, since opening in 2012, there have been many profound and continuing changes in the operating environment and context of both partners. This chapter will look briefly at the joint library model, The Hive in particular and the benefits and challenges of the core partnership and how we go about delivering in partnership. It goes on to explore some of our reflections on and approaches to leadership in a partnership context.

Introduction

Library partnerships exist in many forms: formal and informal, short-term or longer lasting, internal or external to the organisation that a library sits within, sharing premises or not. Combined use, co-located libraries have existed for more than a century, most often in small rural communities where it is economically efficient to combine a school library with the sole public library. The exact number worldwide is unknown, but there are at least 67 in the USA, 200 in Canada and 100 in Australia (Cassevans 2017). A good overview of the history, models and benefits of joint libraries can be found in McNicol's comprehensive book (McNicol 2008).

In this chapter, we are reflecting on a less common model of joint-use library, that of a collaboration between a university and public library resulting in a fully integrated service. Alongside the core partnership, we have also developed a range of other working relationships in order to extend the service offer within a challenging current operating environment.

The Hive

The Hive is the result of a formal partnership between the University of Worcester (UW) and Worcestershire County Council (WCC) in the United Kingdom. Opening in 2012 after nearly 10 years of planning, the original aim was to provide a joint academic and public library for the whole community which would offer shared services and space including seamless access to the organisations' combined physical collections via a merged catalogue and shared access to some digital resources. By the time of opening, the building also included the Worcestershire Archives and Archaeology service, with their 26,000 records of historic buildings and monuments and 12 miles (19km) of county archives, a Council Customer Service Hub, and a café. Today, The Hive remains unique within Europe, welcoming over 700,000 visitors a year to enjoy the facilities, services and vibrant events programme, and is the proud winner of many awards including the Guardian

University Award for Contribution to the Community (2013), The Times Higher Education Awards for Outstanding Library Team (2013) and The SCONUL Library Design Award (2016).

There is a strong focus on customer service, and an integrated front of house library team deliver high quality support to all users. Customer satisfaction from all our customers is consistently high with our most recent internal Customer Voice survey in 2018 reaching 85% "Very Good" and 99% Good/Very Good" for the public and a National Student Survey score which has climbed to over 90% in 2017-8 and 2018-19 putting the University of Worcester in the top quartile nationally. Co-located partners also adhere to a set of shared standards which set the tone for the whole building and all service interactions. Our wide reaching, popular events programme is contributed to by both library partners consisting of events as diverse as Professoriate lectures and Baby Bounce and Rhyme. Other resident partners such as the Council's Customer Service Hub and Worcestershire Archive and Archaeology Service also contribute workshops and support sessions to the public programme, as do external partners such as the Canal and River Trust. This undoubtedly makes it one of the most varied, but affordable programmes in a public library setting in the UK (see website www.thehiveworcester.org/whats-on for up to date listings).

Governance and leadership

The partnership is underpinned by a contractual governance structure and formal Stakeholder Agreement which outlines each partner's responsibilities, role and contribution. [Contractual and Governance Model] The partners share the costs and governance of this PFI (Private Finance Initiative) project. Costs are split 70:30 overall, broadly in line with the floor space distribution, with Worcestershire County Council taking the larger share to include the Archive and Archaeology service. The Library element is fully integrated on a 50:50 basis which includes the majority of service delivery costs.

In the Stakeholder Agreement, the working arrangements to deliver the library services are also outlined, covering services, stock, building use, staffing and management structure. A clear vision for The Hive("The Hive Vision and Mission" n.d.) was also developed during the planning phase and has proved to be immensely important for maintaining consistency, particularly as leadership changes have occurred within the partner organisations. It remains the yardstick for our working practices today, against which we test and measure service proposals and potential changes.

Current challenges

The success of The Hive has not come without its challenges. Both the local government and Higher Education sectors in the UK have experienced a tumultuous and on-going period of change, starting even before The Hive opened. These changes, which include political, social, technological and financial aspects have had considerable impact upon the library services and consequent challenges for management and leadership.

Worcestershire County Council context

Local Authorities across the country have experienced significant reductions in budget over the whole of the past decade, and Worcestershire County Council has saved over £100 million since 2011, with £3.9 million of that applied to the Library service to date. Further

reductions are planned for 2019-21. Operating in a constrained environment both in relation to library budgets, but also across the whole organisation (working with partners in a newly commissioned environment, who are operating significantly limited services) has proved challenging. After being commissioned, service provision is often reduced or changed, and relationships and partnerships previously fruitful and mutually beneficial can suffer from a change of personnel or downsizing and we all feel the effects of constant change in our environment. Within the library service, a series of savings measures have significantly changed the shape of the service. Across the County there are fewer staff at the frontline, adjusted opening hours, more libraries co-located with more partners and fewer service point managers who now manage multiple libraries. The Hive, to some degree has yet to be directly affected by these changes, but some effects do ripple through the service. In particular a significant reduction in capacity at Library Leadership Team level has resulted in less capacity to coordinate some aspects of the service. For example, book and online resource provision, IT infrastructure oversight, literacy projects and significant Countywide partnerships used to be centrally managed but are now increasingly allocated to service point managers or to the remaining interim Leadership Team. As Worcestershire Library Service embarks on a new round of savings, a Libraries Transformation Programme is being proposed. Ahead of that, following the recommendations of an LGA Peer Review, (Local Government Association 2019) a Library Strategy is being developed, to align service priorities with both the national library agenda (Department for Culture Media and Sport 2016) and local plans (Worcestershire County Council 2017), aiming to outline service priorities and to set out a vision for the wider service in the future.

The University of Worcester context

Universities in the UK are operating in an environment of constant government policy change and increased regulation. Scrutiny of their performance through external measures such as the Teaching Excellence Framework (Office for Students n.d.) and numerous league tables is aimed at giving students greater and more informed choice, leading to increased marketisation of the sector and fierce competition to recruit the declining numbers of 18-year olds. At Worcester, where we train many teachers and nurses, the removal of bursaries and government promotion of schemes to deliver teacher training in schools rather than at universities has presented additional challenges. The fees that universities can charge students has been capped whilst an ongoing review of funding (Department for Education 2019) has built in uncertainty. At the same time, rising student expectations and developments in technology require constant investment in estates and systems, placing institutions under financial pressure. Writing in April 2019, we are still awaiting the outcome of Brexit negotiations, with the implications for Higher Education of the United Kingdom leaving the EU unclear.

Our focus as an institution in response to these challenges is on continuing to recruit students who we believe can flourish at the University and doing all we can to help them to succeed, whilst also exercising financial prudence. Sharing costs of the library building and staff is viewed by the University as a cost-effective way to provide a high-quality facility. Within the Library, we respond to institutional priorities by seeking to provide the best services and environment possible to support our students and staff. As an integrated joint-use facility we also play a key part in the University's ongoing commitment

to the principle of inclusion, expressed in part by wide-reaching community element included in the strategic plan(University of Worcester 2019).

Partnership working success in a changing context

The Hive clearly could not exist without the partnership, and provides a high-quality facility for all, where costs, skills and connections are shared. Consequently it is a venue where we can collaborate effectively and efficiently to provide services that continue to meet and sometimes exceed our respective organisation aims, despite the challenges and constraints that we operate within. Two key areas of success within the partnership are those of shared skills in a joint staffing and customer model and partner contribution to a varied and vibrant public and schools programme.

Staff freely share knowledge and skills at The Hive. This happens both internally within the library but also across services and indeed the County. Academic liaison librarians share their expertise in online resources with frontline staff at The Hive and across the County to enhance customer access to these resources. Library Team Leaders provide training and support to the Housing team, encouraging best practice around customer to customer interaction and ensuring their customers adhere to the behaviour standards of the building. As part of both County Council and University teams, managers have access to a wide range of expertise and training to support learning as diverse as the importance of play in early years to supporting those with mental health issues. The spirit of cooperation is essential - being open to supporting and learning from each other a key component to the success of the project. Where we have been successful, all partners have entered into that spirit; given generously, but similarly gained.

The Hive's public and school programme has also benefitted from the core partnership, but also from additional partnerships with outside agencies.

A popular stay and play session for under 5s and their parents/carers, Wacky Wednesday, was founded with our local Children's Centre. They planned activities, provided resources and staffed the sessions providing expert advice and signposting for parents. After being commissioned to an external provider, Action for Children, they could no longer provide the same level of support. We worked with the Centre for Children and Families at the University of Worcester to provide specialist training around the importance of play for the library team, and have recruited a number of volunteer students of early years, thus providing support for the sessions, but also valuable work experience for the students.

Library access support sessions for schools, have been supplemented and enlivened with curriculum specific schools engagement activity delivered by the University of Worcester, including a Parliament Day led by the School of Education, and schools' festivals such as Beeline storytelling and Micro Science Fest during British Science Week. Similarly, The Hive are hosting a series of school sessions for the Severn Rivers Trust "Unlocking the Severn" project.

At a time when many library authorities are being forced to shrink what they can offer, The Hive, thanks the strength of our partnerships, has been able to expand the content and reach of what we do.

Joint Library Success Factors

The literature recognises that there are many models and partnership types, and that therefore, it is not easy to identify reasons for success or failure. However, there are a number of factors that reoccur in successful projects (Matthews and Calvert 2007):

- i. A formal planning process. The detailed and protracted planning during the development of The Hive led not only to a successful launch of the project, but also shaped the people involved and revealed some of the attitudes and qualities necessary to work and lead in this unique library. It developed a deep sense of commitment to the concept in many of those involved, and revealed the need to be willing to understand the perspective, the requirements and the priorities of our respective partners. A territorial mindset or unwillingness to collaborate would be disastrous in our context. An ongoing commitment to reviewing progress and forward planning is also vital.
- ii. A written agreement “adeptly used by management” (Bergoc 2012). The Stakeholder Agreement is a touchstone that we always return to when one partner is proposing a change at The Hive. The shifting financial landscape (in particular in the Local Authority, but increasingly in the University environment) has put pressure on the project to deliver savings or significant changes. However, the service standards, staffing establishment and joint budgets cannot be changed without dual sign off. Alteration to services, staffing and resources have therefore to some degree been protected thus far. However, in the face of the increasing pressures on both organisations there is a growing need to be more agile, adapting to the needs of our respective organisations’ financial and service drivers. Nuanced negotiation has become essential.

Recently, expansion of the University Campus and a perceived lack of need for IT support at The Hive led to the University of Worcester proposing the removal of on-site IT support. Referral back to the stakeholder agreement, the Vision and Mission and an agile approach to the proposal led to a change of position. We worked with the University IT team to bring their service front of house, sharing a service point with our 2nd tier enquiry service and implementing shared service standards to ensure consistency. A roving 2nd line team were additionally hosted at The Hive. As a result we were able to maintain and in fact improve services to our customers.

- iii. Vision. The clear vision articulated from the start of The Hive project has been vital in its success and has contributed to the sense of commitment already discussed. As new leaders or project members have joined us subsequently, this ethos needs to be shared and nurtured, and enthusiasm for our vision is something we look for when recruiting staff.

In order to implement the vision and values at a granular level, the integrated front of house library team works to a set of shared standards and guidance. These are also

adopted by all teams within the building including the Library, Customer Hub & Housing, Archive and Archaeology Service, Security and Facilities Management. Customer service standards (known as How to WOW) and behaviour standards are agreed and adhered to by all partners. The vision threads through them, encouraging connection, inclusivity, well-being and visibility. Staff induction is an important moment to present the vision, the standards and the expectations to all teams and a shared document has been developed for this purpose.

- iv. Integration and collaboration. The ethos of integration runs deep at The Hive, with staff working from within their respective organisations but in a fully integrated environment with a clear set of joint aims, sharing skills and contacts.

By encouraging engagement with partners, the Hive is a lively and ever changing environment. Staff are encouraged to foster relationships to diversify and strengthen the service offer leading to partnerships as diverse as Oxfam (Great Hive Book Rescue), and Worcester Museum and Art Gallery (Young at Art).

- v. Communications. Formal structures of communication exist in the governance outline and officially dictate how the partners make decisions. Outside of this, strong and regular relationships between individuals and the organisations is essential. Taking the time to hear and learn about the others' needs lays an important foundation for the success of the partnership.

Sometimes, finding solutions that suit both partners and is true to the vision is difficult, particularly when involving those with less regular exposure to and understanding of The Hive. An example of this was seen when the partners prepared to go out to tender for a Library Management System (LMS). A project team was put together with representation from both County Council and University including Procurement and Finance staff, ICT, and Project Management. A perception grew amongst University library representatives that the fundamental importance to students and academics of digital resources did not appear to be appreciated by all within the project team, and that this was being reflected in the proposals for how the tender requirements should be articulated, structured and weighted. Strong leadership was needed from within the University library team, supported by County Council library service counterparts to address this situation. The approach taken was to ensure that there was robust and effective negotiation, alongside repeated communication of the joint needs of both library services and the vision of The Hive to help build understanding. However, whilst being clear and standing firm on what the University was not prepared to give way on, the team also needed the flexibility to acknowledge the specific needs of the County library service, which included their mobile library and prison library services. The complex joint requirements almost certainly reduced the number of solutions available including a system that the University was very interested in, but this was accepted as a necessary cost of working in partnership. The process ended successfully in procuring a system that works for both partners, whilst maintaining positive working relationships.

However, "what" we do is never as important as the "how". The skills we have learnt through the core partnership: those of flexibility, creativity and true openness, put us in good stead when it comes to working with other partners. We are always thinking about what we can do together – working collaboratively and creatively towards our common goals. Essential to this is the ability to see things from others' perspectives, to be able to negotiate mutually beneficial outcomes, and most importantly to be able to let go of what might be right for your organisation, but does not meet the needs of the partner. However, it is not always easy to 'think partnership' and takes time to develop. Leaders have to be willing to listen when they get it wrong and be prepared to adapt their approach for the best outcomes.

[**Working in partnership : implications for leadership**](#)

As well as benefits, working in partnership imposes a particular set of challenges which require effective and joined up leadership to manage and navigate. We suggest that it is valuable for any university library to understand these and recognise the competencies linked to success in partnerships. This is because around the world "collaborations assist organisations" (universities) "to deal with the complexities of the changing and increasingly competitive business world" (Veles, Carter, and Boon 2019). Inevitably therefore, library leaders are or will be increasingly required to work in partnership with others, even if not based in a joint library.

A recent overview of leadership in libraries (Stewart 2017) refers to research into leadership competencies in academic and public libraries, covering staff at different levels of their career but not mentioning any joint use library settings. In fact, the authors of this chapter have traced virtually no published information on leadership in the specific context of joint libraries. We have therefore reflected on our leadership in The Hive in the context of three strands of enquiry: Firstly, drawing on the concept of the 'Third Space' in Higher Education; secondly looking at the experience of other sectors, notably that of public health and social care; and finally the concept of empowering leadership as a notable model of the leadership traits required in a partnership context.

1. The Third Space

The University 'Third Space' has been described as "the process and the outcome of blurring the boundaries between professional identities and cultures of academic and professional staff" (Veles, Carter, and Boon 2019), and is a space that libraries have been operating in for some time. Whitchurch (Whitchurch 2010) specifically refers to this space in the context of increasing university collaborations with external agencies, in widening participation or enterprise activities for instance. We would argue that the Hive partnership fits this model of the Third Space well, and indeed, is a further extension of it – blurring boundaries between the university and public worlds. Observations on the characteristics of Third Space staff can therefore be expected to be of relevance to our team and their leaders.

Both Whitchurch and Veles focus on the complexity of Third Space working and the importance of relationship and network building, and present models of how this develops over time and moves through a number of stages. Whitchurch suggests that in this process

differences need to be negotiated, understanding facilitated, and a new sense of identity created along with new rules and resources. She also claims that “managers may tolerate a significant degree of ambiguity, uncertainty and risk” and need an ability to work round formal structures, promote the interests of all and be prepared to add value to both spheres.

Veles sums up these requirements as follows: “The critical feature of all third space professionals is that they view collaborative elements of their work ...of paramount importance to their professional work and to the success of the organisation”. This is a statement which leaders within The Hive recognise and endorse.

2. Collaboration in other sectors: Boundary Spanners

As already stated there has been little written about leadership in joint libraries, but some useful insights can be gained from the public sector where there is an increasing dependence on organisations working together (in the UK, USA and northern Europe at least) as a result of government policy and rhetoric since the start of the 21st century (Armistead and Pettigrew 2008),(Williams 2012). It should be noted that the literature here is also relatively sparse (Dickinson and Carey 2016, p24) but Williams (Williams 2012) believes that it is appropriate to compare sectors because the motivations to collaborate are often similar. However, he points out the need to take care when making comparisons because of different contexts and structures.

With this proviso, Williams’ work on ‘Boundary Spanners’ is a useful model for considering leadership and management implications in joint libraries, describing those people who act across professional, organisational or sectoral boundaries. Williams believes that these types of collaboration are highly complex and that boundary spanning leadership compared to that in more traditional organisation, needs to be more facilitative and catalytic (Williams 2002).

Williams identifies 4 area of competencies needed by boundary spanners:

- Reticulist – i.e. appreciating the network of problems and contexts, and being able to cultivate relationships through negotiating, persuasion and by acting as a bridge or filter.
- Interpreter – having an open mind to other perspectives, understanding the needs of the other organisations, and operating in a medium of trust
- Coordinator – managing the process of collaboration through planning and monitoring
- Entrepreneur – recognising that traditional approaches may not work and being prepared to try new ideas and employ lateral thinking.

Williams suggests that the most valuable expertise and knowledge that a boundary spanner leader can have is to develop a detailed understanding of the context and values of each partner, so that they are able to make strategic links and connections that others may miss. Positive qualities include respect for others, confidence, diplomacy, and a teamwork ethos.

3. The Continuum of Leadership: adopting empowering leadership traits

The characteristics observed in our successful partnership, those of collaboration, flexibility and the ability to "let go", are mirrored by how we manage our teams. The model of empowerment described in Tannenbaum and Schmidt's Continuum of Leadership, resonates strongly with how we manage at The Hive. Empowering Leadership encourages staff to "express opinions and ideas, promoting collaborative decision making and supporting information sharing and teamwork" (Lorinkova et al. 2013). Participative and collaborative norms are adopted at all levels of the organisation. They support multiple teams working from within different organisations to contribute ideas and to make service or project decisions together. Managers are working like McGregor's Y-theory managers (McGregor 1987) where solving problems and contributing is widely distributed amongst the teams. The strength of the customer service model, the culture of continuous service improvement, and the "hard work" of partnership is evident throughout the Hive and shows in our CSE (Customer Service Excellence) accreditation and sustained high customer satisfaction.

These 3 strands of evidence reveal many similarities in thinking around the leadership requirements for successful partnership working in different sectors and resonate with our situation in The Hive. A common theme in all three is that leadership in a collaborative context is complex and "Partnership working is hard" (Armistead and Pettigrew 2008). Attwood (Attwood et al. 2014) states that "where there is complexity and uncertainty, individual leaders acting alone at the top of organisations can never be up to the challenge". As a result of this complexity, there may be less reliance on hierarchy, and a more distributed form of leadership (Dickinson and Carey 2016). It is not surprising therefore that in the literature reviewed for this chapter, as well as our own experience, there is a strong emphasis placed on relationship building and networking, and the recognition that building successful collaboration while positive and productive, takes time and effort. We are still engaged in this process, but in so doing, we believe we have created a truly integrated library, where an approach of equity towards our broad range of customers drives service development and innovation.

Going forward

Almost seven years since opening The Hive, while the Vision and Mission remain an important bedrock for how we operate, and the decisions we make jointly, we have identified a need for a new strategy to reflect the changing aims of both organisations. The Hive cannot hope to encompass all the goals of both organisations, but we have worked together to identify key strands which the Hive is well placed to deliver jointly: Schools and Education, Health and Well Being, Art, Culture & Heritage and Business and Investment. To ensure we have capacity in the right places to deliver against our plan and to meet what continue to be high expectations from both organisations, we intend to examine our staffing structure over the coming year. In order to deliver against those priorities, the value of our current and future partnerships and relationships is not lost on us. While the partnership between the libraries of Worcestershire County Council and the University of Worcester is at our heart, our work across the organisations and with external partners has become increasingly important.

We have, from the start, identified a need to investigate more thoroughly the impact of the work we are undertaking but this has proven to be challenging and remains a gap. A report commissioned by the University (Economic Insight 2015) calculated the GVA (Gross Value Added) to the local economy at £1.8 million and also acknowledged that there was cultural and social impact, some of which was identified without being quantified. We aspire to engage with research partners and to use models of social, educational and economic impact to measure our success more effectively in the future. This will help to advocate for the service and explore the real effect of our unique integrated model but also, it will support a deep reflection on the services we provide to our customers helping to shape what we do in the future. On a smaller scale, we have developed innovative approaches to evaluating the impact of discrete projects such as our Study Happy programme, combining qualitative and quantitative data to assess success against project aims. We are extending this by developing a set of core questions for the evaluation of all events and activities which take into account the Hive's key strands, rather than a simplistic measure of satisfaction. These are being rolled out more widely in the other County Council libraries. For instance, the annual 'Customer Voice' survey in 2018 asked customers if they felt Worcestershire libraries had positively impacted on their health and wellbeing. 61% of respondents felt that they had benefitted from meeting and interacting with people, and 41% felt more connected with their local community.

Research which has already been undertaken and is planned for the future, relates to an appraisal of our management approach by the University of Worcester Business School. Theories of Customer to Customer Interaction were applied to The Hive context to support an evaluation of our approach to supporting staff with behaviour management. This has informed changes to the training programme. A further piece of research is planned, examining our leadership practices in the partnership context to better understand the approaches we have found most effective and the adaptations we have made.

Conclusion

The skills we have learnt through our founding core partnership within the Library Service, those of flexibility, collaboration, resilience and creativity enhance us as leaders. This ripples through the teams below and around us where we work collaboratively and across boundaries to achieve the best for our customers. We are always ready for partnership working – whether that be internally with our long standing County Council/University colleagues or with new partners from the community with whom we might work for some other mutual aim. The key (as with all good relationships) is finding out what you have in common, but also to recognise and respect your differences: the skills, knowledge and unique strengths each partner brings to the relationship. Continuing to be prepared to put in the hard work: to flex, blur boundaries and to find new approaches and ways to lead effectively in our complex, inspiring (if sometimes challenging) partnership context.

Further and more rigorous evaluation of our impact will be needed to fully assess how successful the model has been to date and what role such a partnership might play for other libraries. What is certain, is that operating in a partnership context has profoundly influenced what we can deliver, how we deliver it and the flavour of our leadership. The spirit of flexibility, collaboration and boundary spanning facilitates efficiency in operations,

drives a culture of continuous service improvement and high team performance and enables a wide-reaching impressive programme of public events. The Hive, born of a partnership, continues to be much more than the sum of its parts.

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