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**Bringing digital enterprise to a rural library network: the experience from Devon**

**Library Service, UK**

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**Introduction**

My paper will cover the work Devon Libraries is currently developing to bring digital enterprise to libraries in a rural English county. I will talk about our new Fab Lab, which opened in the redeveloped Exeter Library, in May 2014 and our work on the national Enterprising Libraries programme.

The paper will show how our growing experience and confidence in supporting digital making and enterprise support within libraries is having a broader impact on the way we think about and shape our library services in the future, whilst also demonstrating to stakeholders our contribution to key policy agendas – locally and nationally – around economic growth and digital skills development.

Growing the economy is a key priority for the UK government and was the stimulus for the establishment of a network of Local Economic Partnership (LEPs) across the country. If we can demonstrate – in a meaningful and effective way - the contribution libraries can make, we have a real opportunity to re-position libraries as a recognised asset, which can lever economic growth within communities.

**Context**

Devon is the third largest rural county in England with 747,000 people dispersed over 6,500 km2. It is located in a beautiful part of South West England. Traditionally, it has tended to rely on agriculture and tourism for its local economy.

The county is quite diverse: the south of the county is generally prosperous, with the economy of Exeter, the only city, growing at a fast pace with a particular focus on technology, such as the new Exeter Science Park and international technology companies like the Blur Group choosing to relocate their global HQ from London and Dallas to Exeter. Exeter University also has a strong reputation for innovation and the broader county has a growing spirit of entrepreneurship. In the north, where transport links are relatively poor, deprivation tends to be higher and there is greater reliance on short-term work focused around the tourism industry. The area of north Devon covered by Torridge District Council has the lowest weekly wages of any part of the country. Across the county, there is significant growth and interest in social enterprise, creative industries and self-employment generally. The well known School for Social Entrepreneurs is based in the county.

In such a rural area, the availability of broadband is a real challenge and, although Devon is funded now to rollout broadband to all rural areas, inevitably many communities are lagging behind in terms of connectivity.

Against this backdrop of a changing and increasingly divrse economy in the county, the library service continues to transform. Devon currently has 50 libraries ranging from Exeter Library, our largest library at 5,000 m2, which has recently reopened following a £4 million redevelopment, to rural libraries which are as small as 50 metres2. We have had a programme of transformation and change over the past 5 years, introducing wi-fi, self-service, refurbishing our libraries and building new community hubs – known as ‘Devon Centres’ - which combine a wider range of services.

In parallel, we have faced enormous financial pressures – having to reduce the libraries’ annual revenue budget by £3 million (a 30% reduction) from 2010 – 2013 and now facing a further £1.5 million reduction from 2014 – 2017. We are having to think about the library service in radically new ways, identifying how to bring in new audiences, more diverse sources of income and new partnerships.

**Our response**

For the past 15 years, we have not had a particularly strong role within the library service in traditional areas of providing business information and advice. Our neighbours in Plymouth operate the PATLib model and they have tended to pick up enquiries relating to business information and intellectual property.

However, the stimulus of the national Enterprising Libraries initiative has given us the opportunity to work in new ways with our colleagues in the Council’s Economy and Enterprise team to understand how libraries can support enterprise and the growth agenda. Together, we have identified that libraries have a strong role to play around:

* Providing members of the public with access to business support and advice
* Support around Intellectual Property (IP)
* Development of Work Hubs – incubation spaces in libraries for start up businesses and associated services, such as cafes, networking spaces and meeting rooms
* Digital making – providing access to new technologies for local people, children and schools and businesses to access
* Digital inclusion – supporting and encouraging greater digital literacy and supporting people seeking work
* Supporting access to digital technology in rural areas

I’m now going to talk about two specific projects which have helped us explore several of these areas.

**Enterprising Libraries**

In October 2013, Devon was selected as one of 10 library services across England to participate in the Enterprising Libraries initiative. This is a national programme supported and funded by the British Library, Arts Council England and the UK Government’s Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG).

Devon’s project has specifically been focused on how our redeveloped Library in Exeter could provide more support for local businesses. Participation in the programme has given us access to:

* £45,000 in cash
* Training for library staff from the British Library’s Business & IP Centre (BIPC) and the Library of Birmingham
* Expertise and resources from the BIPC and from the Library of Birmingham

In addition, our Economy colleagues have helped us to make the effective links into existing business support networks in the county and begin to understand how we can position ourselves in the landscape of enterprise support.

It’s early days – as Exeter Library only opened in May 2014 - but so far we have:

* Hosted the launch of Innovate Devon
* Connected up with a live feed from the BL during Global Entrepreneurs week
* Developed the library team’s skills and knowledge to support the service
* Offered free desk space, fast wi-fi, a café and meeting rooms right in the heart of Exeter
* Offered free online business resources (eg Cobra) to all library members
* With support from the IPO and BIPC offered a range of materials including detailed industry guides and introductions to patents, trade marks and designs plus a wide range of new business related book stock
* Worked with a range of partners including the School for Startups to offer a range of support and events around enterprise and business

**Fab Lab Devon**

In addition to Enterprising Libraries, we have also been working on a parallel project to install a Fab Lab in Exeter Library. The Fab Lab – or Fabrication Laboratory to give its full title – is providing low cost prototyping facilities for a wide range of potential client groups, including start up and growth businesses, members of the public, children and young people, artists and craftspeople, people with disabilities and schools. Essentially, the service is available to anyone who may benefit from access to low cost prototyping equipment.

Equipment on offer includes:

* 3D printers
* CNC routers
* Laser cutters
* Digital sewing machines
* Vinyl cutters
* Sublimation printers

Most of this technology was not easily available for public use in Devon prior to the Library’s reopening. Individuals had to travel as far as Bristol (80 miles away) for access to some of this kit.

The Fab Lab is proving an important part of the new Library’s offering to the public. The space has attracted everyone from 8 to 88 and has demonstrated that there is a huge latent demand for access to digital technologies amongst the general public. It’s become a place to try things out; it’s helped satisfy the curiosity of those who have heard about 3D printers but never seen one in action and has created a real sense of pride – amongst the staff and wider community – that the Library was selected as the venue for the Fab Lab.

Relative to other Fab Labs, situated in out of town locations such as Science Parks or university campuses, the Exeter Fab Lab has a significant level of footfall, which only looks set to grow as the Fab Lab becomes fully operational in the autumn. The Library itself is open 7 days a week, 57 hours a week and is attracting between 2,000 – 3,000 visits each day. That is a significant customer base to grow a regular clientele for the Fab Lab.

Users of the Fab Lab so far have included:

* An artist using the laser cutter to explore new approaches to paper cutting
* A miniature boat builder using the CNC router?
* Children and young people using the Fab Lab for regular Raspberry Pi and Code Club activities
* Members of library staff, who have particular interests, such as Raspberry Pi, embroidery, etc

The capital costs of the Fab Lab equipment have been funded by the Council’s Economy team; the Library is providing the space free of charge (at least for the first 2 years) and additional external funding has been secured through NESTA and a local social enterprise called RIO. The Council is currently working with a further education college to explore the potential for a new social enterprise, which would include representation from the Library Service, to manage and support the Fab Lab going forward.

**Benefits**

We are still in the early stage of both the Enterprising Libraries initiative and the establishment of the Fab Lab. However, it’s clear that there is a real benefit both for the library service and for the community. The Fab Lab, in particular, has been a game changer in terms of how we are perceived in the city and has helped engage our staff in pursuing more innovative approaches to service delivery across the Library.

Over time, we expect customers of the Library to benefit from the two initiatives in the following ways:

* The Library can act as a catalyst for people who may be in the early stages of considering setting up a business (pre-start ups). Having motivational talks and case studies from entrepreneurs – hosted by the Library - can be the trigger to inspire the next steps in budding entrepreneurs
* There is the potential for huge benefits in helping Fab Lab users to access the enterprise support available in the neighbouring Business & Information Hub. We expect to be able to connect Fab Lab users with high quality Intellectual Property (IP) advice, for example so they can – if they need to – gain adequate protection of their idea.
* The Fab Lab can provide opportunities for collaboration and meeting other people with shared interests in a friendly, welcoming and accessible space. Monthly Raspberry Pi Jams, hosted in the Fab Lab, have already enabled a very wide range of people to connect physically who otherwise would not have known one another. The developing Fab Lab Volunteer Programme also gives interested people the opportunity to share their skills, develop their own knowledge and give something back to the Library and Fab Lab.
* Given the strong partnership links that our Economy colleagues have, there are clear routes to refer people onto more sophisticated business advice or prototyping equipment. People using the Fab Lab can be referred, if need be, to the Centre for Additive and Layering Manufacturing (CALM) at Exeter University due to a pre-existing partnership with the University and its Innovation Centre.

**Lessons learned and next steps**

There is a real sense of excitement about the future potential of libraries’ contribution to the ‘Growth’ agenda in Devon. We will be working in the coming months on a ‘pop up Fab Lab’ for example that could be taken out to rural libraries in the county.

Meanwhile, the whole experience has given us pause to consider our wider role as a library service at a time of significant financial pressure and rapidly changing customer needs. As the Head of Devon Libraries, the experience has enabled me to consider how we can be an ‘enterprising library service’:

* How do we spot opportunities as a library service and how can we ensure we are fleet of foot to respond quickly as opportunities appear?
* How do we present ourselves and our brand to the outside world, including the business world in a way that is modern and appealing and shows our potential as enablers of economic growth?
* What are the skills we need from our staff to help deliver this agenda?
* How can we generate income from being enterprising which can help sustain our core roles?

**Conclusion**

Our experience of developing Enterprising Libraries and the Fab Lab has enabled us to understand how new technologies, new funding streams and new partnerships can help us become an enterprising library service. Whilst much of this work is new to us, it has a strong resonance with the core and longstanding role of libraries as enablers of self-directed learning; providing access to everyone within communities – on an equal footing. We are confident that our customers are using these new facilities to develop their skills, explore their curiosity in digital technologies and collaborate with others. It reinforces our powerful role as connectors of people and enablers of knowledge creation.

**More information**

Fab Lab Devon <http://fablabdevon.org/> @fablabdevon

Enterprising Libraries <http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/funding/apply-funding/funding-programmes/enterprising-libraries/>

Exeter Library @ExeterLibrary

Devon Libraries [www.devon.gov.uk/libraries](http://www.devon.gov.uk/libraries)