Case Study

Libraries are deeply rooted, iconic institutions, to which people are strongly attached. Many people defend the values libraries stand for, open access to books and information, even if they no longer use library services. As a result closing libraries, even when they are run down and little used, often faces local opposition. Plans to close libraries as austerity measures have provoked national protests and legal action. Yet over the last decade a string of reports have warned that the number of people visiting libraries continues to fall and the number of books they borrow even more sharply. Fewer and fewer people are visiting libraries and those that do often use the library to search for information and use computers. Ubiquitous access to theweb through mobile devices, computers and tablets is changing how people access information and read. E-book readers like the Kindle and iPad allow access to millions of books.

Some library services have responded to these challenges. In Hampshire libraries have been remodelled as Discovery Centres. The London Borough of Newham hasturned libraries into the core for integrated, one-stop shops for public services.
Libraries have also adapted to the e-book revolution, with services such as Sutton Bookshare, a council-led marketplace where residents can lend and borrow books. Other services have turned to community support to stave off closure: Lewisham's community library is staffed by local residents.

However these cases remain the exception rather than the rule. Innovation in libraries tends to be piecemeal. Libraries are hard to close and yet also hard to change. One of the few library authorities to adopt a deliberate and strategic programme of creative decommissioning was Tower Hamlets. Since 2002, TowerHamlets has systematically closed 15 old libraries and opened up four new 'Idea Stores' – a reinvention of what a modern library could be that combines a library service, adult learning, after school activities for children, local information, a café,health services and other cultural activities in one location.

The programme started with a clear challenge: Tower Hamlets was rated one of the worst London boroughs in terms of its library provision. The mainly Victorian buildings were often inaccessible: libraries that had been built close to centres of population a century ago, now found themselves wedged into the side of a busy dual carriage way. The ageing buildings were expensive to run and renovate. Little had been invested in the book stock for years. A public consultation found there was huge demand for a fundamentally different approach.

The public valued libraries – convenient and open access to books remained a high priority for the community – but current provision was failing to meet their needs. Books were hosted in the wrong kind of buildings, which were open at the wrong times, in the wrong locations, staffed by people with a culture that too often prioritisedorganising the books rather than serving customers. People wanted services that reflected their daily lives.

The Idea Store concept emerged through public engagement. It was clear the new libraries would need to be located close to the main markets, public housing estates and transport hubs. The team commissioned external input from the architects BissetAdams to design the physical space to capture the spirit of the new service. It was through the

building design that the culture of Idea Stores was shaped, engagingstaff and the public in visioning a new type of library and community asset.

With multiple levels and mobile divides, the space can be manipulated to serve different needs. The overall feel of an Idea Store is quite similar to an Apple Store. Each Store has an attractive and affordable café. The Stores blend into the high street and deliberately evoke a retail feel to make them feel modern, accessible and aspirational. The design and models for the stores, and then the first to be created onRoman Road market, provided a highly visible rallying point to mobilise interest from the public, business, politicians and staff.

As the first Idea Stores neared completion the team also embarked on an extensive recruitment and training programme, borrowing from techniques used at high street chains like Pret à Manger, to prepare staff to work in a more customer-focussed way. The training made tangible the kinds of behaviour the service needed to encourage – staff out on the floor, working with customers – rather than in a back room cataloguing books. The entire programme was led by a dedicated team which just focussed on developing the new formats.

The attractive designs for the new libraries reinforced the shortcomings of the old. The closure programme was planned so there was never more than six weeks between the closure of an old library and the opening of a new one in its place. Theold library buildings were eventually sold off to be redeveloped: one became an extension to the Whitechapel Gallery.

Switching buildings was, if anything, easier than changing cultures of work and service. Some more traditional librarians disliked the new format and left. The leadership team had to work hard to develop a new working culture – the ‘Idea Storeway’ – and train staff extensively to work more flexibility and focus on meeting customer needs. It is harder to decommission an ingrained culture of work than it is to decommission the building in which people operate.

Tower Hamlets now has one of the most highly rated library services in the country, with use of library and adult education facilities across the borough having doubled inthe past five years. The sale of some of the old library sites helped to fund the reinvestment in Ideas Stores, although upfront investment was critical to pump-primethe redevelopment work. The Idea Store buildings also allow much lower running costs. Tower Hamlets is one of the few local authorities that are not planning to cut spending on libraries in the near term.

- What were the key factors that made this a successful example of change?

- Are there any lessons to be learned from this case study for your organisation or partnership?

Taken from Nesta (2012). The Art of Exit: In search of creative decommissioning.