COMMUNITY-LED WORK IN PRACTICE:
EXPERIENCES FROM CANADIAN LIBRARIES

A CLA Community-Led Library Service Network series of papers

February 2015

Creating a Community-Led
Staff Structure

By John Pateman

What is Structure?
There are two types of Structure in public libraries – the Staff Structure (how staff are organised and managed) and the Service Structure (what services are offered, how, where and when). The Staff Structure will determine how many tiers of staff there are, the number of positions at each tier, and what each position does (defined by job title and job description). An efficient and effective Staff Structure enables the public library to get the greatest value out of its most significant and valuable resource – its staff.

Why does it matter?
The Staff Structure should employ the principle that form follows function. In other words, the Staff Structure should reflect the Purpose, Vision, Values and Strategic Directions of the public library. If the Staff Structure does not reflect the Strategic Objectives of the public library then it will not be able to deliver those objectives. It will not be fit for purpose. Many public libraries go through a regular process of reviewing and updating their Strategic Plan every three to five years. But few public libraries review and update their Staff Structure to reflect the new Strategic Plan objectives. Over time this means that the gap between the Strategic Plan and the Staff Structure gets wider and wider. At some point this gap will be so wide that the organisation can no longer deliver its objectives. This will then require large scale structural change to bring the Staff Structure back into line with the Strategy. It is a much easier task to continually adjust and fine tune the Staff Structure on an ongoing basis so that this misalignment does not occur.

Who should be involved?
Changes to Staff Structure have the most immediate, direct and biggest impact on staff, and so they must be actively involved and engaged in the change process. This must include everyone who works for the public library, from the CEO / Chief Librarian to the Cleaner, and everyone in between. The public library Board must also be involved because an effective Staff Structure is vital to the good governance of the organisation. Partners and suppliers should be engaged as well. They can play a useful role as ‘critical friends.’ They do not work directly for the public library and can give independent and objective perspectives on what works and what can be improved. The community must also have a say, whether they be active library users, passive users or non users. Their taxes pay the salaries of staff who exist to meet their needs and so they should have a significant input into the structural change process.

How do you go about it?
A good starting point is to review the current Structure to assess whether it is fit for purpose and able to deliver the Strategy. This will reveal whether large scale or more minor structural change is required. Position titles and job descriptions can be reviewed but these only tell part of the story, because they often do not reflect what is really happening. So it is
essential that staff are interviewed and asked to describe their daily activities. In a unionised environment this process is best managed via the established negotiation and bargaining structures. Input from key stakeholders (board, partners, suppliers, community) should also be gathered and cross-checked against the staff perspective. This triangulation will identify areas of consensus and divergence. A further round of conversations can explore these further until a consistent and coherent statement is drafted for each position. This should describe clearly what the position is designed to do and the position title should reflect this description.

What should a good structure look like?
A good structure should be as flat and non-hierarchical as possible with no more than four tiers between the ‘top’ and ‘bottom’ of the organisation. The language which describes the Staff Structure should mirror that of the Strategic Objectives. For example, if there is a strategic objective around Lifelong Learning, this should be reflected in the position title and job descriptions of positions at every tier in the Staff Structure. The structure should be organised around these strategic themes and not around professional expertise – the language of Reference, Adult Lending and Children’s Services is no longer fit for purpose. It should be replaced with strategic language such as Lifelong Learning, Economic Development and Social Inclusion. This recognises that staff from across the organisation will be delivering these objectives. This approach will replace vertical departmental silos with horizontal cross cutting matrix teams. A new Flat Army will be created.

How do we know if it’s working?
The new structure must be continuously reviewed and formally assessed three months, six months and one year after implementation. If it’s not working as intended it should be fixed sooner rather than later. Problems can be identified by talking to position holders, board members, partners, suppliers and community. The key question to ask is, ‘How is this new position delivering the strategic objectives?’ Evidence must be provided to demonstrate this. By triangulating responses to this question from the various stakeholders it will be possible to identify any potential problems or the need for further changes. The job description will effectively be reviewed at every supervisory meeting when progress against objectives is discussed. Aligning the staff structure with the strategic objectives, and involving the community in this process, is critical to the development of a community-led public library.

The author
John Pateman has worked in public libraries for 36 years in a number of different roles ranging from Library Assistant to Chief Librarian. John was Chief Librarian of three library systems in the UK: Hackney, a diverse inner London borough; Merton, a multicultural London suburb; and Lincolnshire, a large rural county. John is currently Chief Librarian and CEO at Thunder Bay Public Library. John was part of the research team which produced Open to All? The Public Library and Social Exclusion (2000), which informed the Working Together Project (2004-2008) in Canada. John is the author of Developing a Needs Based Library Service (2003), Public Libraries and Social Justice (2010, with John Vincent) and Developing Community-Led Public Libraries (2013, with Ken Williment). John is a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals and he received the National Culture Award from the Cuban government for his work in support of Cuban libraries.