Original Article

Using buildings for community benefits: A best practice case study with North City Library

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ABSTRACT This paper looks into how the North City Library in Harpurhey, Manchester actively uses all sorts of community engagement activities to maximise the uses of the building. The authors argue that all facilities managers should do what the library manager does in order to make the best use of buildings. We mainly use the case study methodology, combined with a literature review, face-to-face interviews and finally, a workshop. The North City Library plays a key role in the regeneration activities in North Manchester, and it also serves as a community hub and a source of pride for the local community. The adjacent Sixth Form College should learn from its neighbour and bring the whole building to its full use. The authors are still exploring other opportunities for a series of similar case studies. However, until the other case studies are completed, they cannot be compared with this North City Library case study. The library manager's role of bringing the building to its full potential should be applied within every facilities manager's role, to make the best use of the space/buildings. This paper calls for all facilities managers to look outside the box – the building they are managing. They need to think about the surrounding local communities and find ways to fully use the buildings to the maximum potential and deliver some of the benefits to the local population.

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BACKGROUND

Manchester is one of the United Kingdom's fastest growing economies, and is the United Kingdom's largest regional centre. It is a vibrant, multicultural city with a regional population of 422 000. Despite the positive changes in Manchester, some parts of the city are among the most deprived areas in the United Kingdom. North Manchester is one of these deprived areas. It is multiply deprived, with low educational attainment, socially isolated communities, and poor health and life conditions. According to Tapp (2004), Harpurhey has been named as the most deprived area in England, with an unemployment rate of 8.4 per cent, with only 8.6 per cent of adults having a university degree, barely a third of households owning their own homes and 60 per cent of Harpurhey adults not owning a car.

In the attempt to regenerate North Manchester, Manchester City Council (MCC) produced several Strategic Regeneration Frameworks (SRFs). In the SRF of December 2002, it was decided that the city council wanted to 'secure the long-term future of North Manchester as a series of vibrant residential communities'. Central to this aim is the 'development of a high-quality wide-ranging network of community facilities which attract existing residents to remain in the area and new residents to move in, helping to reverse the depopulations trends of recent decades'.

Part of the SRF included a proposal for MANCAT (Manchester College of Art and Technology) to redevelop the former Harpurhey Bath sites as a Sixth Form College with a range of facilities accessible to all sectors of the community. It is proposed that the library facilities necessary for the college could similarly be the basis of a much larger facility for the whole community across the catchment area of Harpurhey District Centre, operated jointly by MANCAT and the city council.

This proposal coincided with MANCAT's rationalisation of their accommodation strategy of 2001–2005. MANCAT disposed its original city centre campus and relocated to several deprived areas of MANCAT to address the local skills shortage. Currently, it operates at 14 different locations across Central, North and East Manchester. It is the largest institution for further education in Manchester, and the seventh largest further-education provider in the United Kingdom. With a mission to 'enhance the knowledge and skills of the whole community', MANCAT has strived to play a crucial role in the regeneration activities by imbedding deep into local communities, and by providing more than 500 courses at all levels, from basic skills to higher education. Its effort has been recognised in the recent Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education) report, giving MANCAT an 'outstanding' grade-1 report in 2007.

THE BUILDING

Library facilities in Harpurhey and Lightbowne were provided at two locations on Rochdale Road and Moston Lane. Both locations are small facilities offering a limited range of stock serving small catchment areas. There have been longstanding aspirations to replace these two facilities with a new library at Harpurhey District Centre. When the SRF proposal to MANCAT was approved, the library staff finally secured the resources

to realise this aspiration. The inclusion of a public library facility in the Sixth Form College scheme was expected to 'significantly enhance the range of facilities available in the District Centre and encourage interaction between sectors and age groups in the community' (planning document).

The building project was completed through a financial deal between the city council and MANCAT. Designed by Manchester-based architects Walker Simpson, the building is 'L'-shaped, with the Sixth Form College and public library occupying the two wings. The library is on the first floor of the building, with spacious and flexible space for children; a teenager area; a relaxation area; PCs, CDs, DVDs and Playstation games for teenagers and children; a photocopier; and café services, provided by MANCAT staff. Free access to City Council services is available via a web-based interface and FREE phone. The second floor is designed for learning, and thus it is quieter, with two community meeting rooms, a homework centre, adult and MANCAT computers, adapted computers for disabled and visually impaired people, and journals and learning resources. There is also a DVD and music library, baby changing facilities and toilets on all the floors.

The building itself has already won two prestigious architectural awards and is designed to meet local requirements and needs. One of the awards was the silver award in the national Roses Design Awards 2006 for the Best Public Building and another one was from RIBA/LSC Further Education Awards 2006. These awards confirm that the iconic and highly visible Harpurhey building is an excellent example of sustainable design. RIBA/LSC (Royal Institute of British Architects/Learning & Skills Council). Well-designed buildings can encourage students to participate in learning, and can motivate them to learn effectively in a changing twenty-first-century environment. This new building seems to be fulfilling its task of inspiring learners and widening participation. According to MANCAT statistics, the number of learners aged 16–18 has increased from 1395 in 1999/2000 to 2950 in 2004/2005.

Despite the fact that the building has won awards for its architectural design, it has many problems in terms of functionality, mainly due to the fact that during the design and construction stage, the experienced library staff were not involved in the process. For example, the escalator at the entrance is only for going up to the first floor (to the library). Users have to use the lift and staircase on the side to come down. Many visitors have found this confusing. The building also lacks a clear sign on the exterior to indicate that it is a public library. Despite the fact that it has been in operation since January 2006, some local residents still think this building is only for the college (this has partly been compensated by a sign that has been put up recently and leaflets distributed to homes and shopping centres, which are just across the road). The building is also environmentally friendly, and uses rain water and natural ventilation. However, in dry weather there is not enough rain water, and on hot summer days the strong glare from the glass wall makes the inside so hot that it is almost inhabitable. The computer and information technology (IT) services have been very popular in the library. However, these cannot be expanded further because they are restricted by under-ground IT cables, as flexibility has not been sufficiently incorporated in the design.

IMPROVED SERVICE AND PERFORMANCE

Since moving into this new building, the library manager has been constantly coming up with innovative ideas to put the building to its maximum potential and attract as many people to the library as possible. Within 18 months of operation, it had already hosted 55 community activities/events at the library. For instance, it held an opening party of the community garden in the spring of 2007, hosted a live music event as part of the 'In the City' music convention, an 'open mic' talent night giving a forum to local performers, a community engagement event for Manchester Working and Northwards Housing, and a wild birds of prey event in the community garden. They also created a local history group, a yoga group, a healthy well-being group for older people, events for local people as part of the Manchester Food and Drink festival, reading groups including Sure Start story times, activities for the school holidays, a business Information Zone for job seekers and basic skills courses. Just a few months ago, they also used Flickr (<http://www.flickr.com/>) to hold a photograph competition on what people think of the library.

On the Sixth Form College side, they have been learning from the vibrant community activities at the library side. The college provides an early bird breakfast (free tea and toast) for students arriving between 800 and 2030 hours in order to attract young people. The college and the library have also held a few joint events. In the spring, the 'Shimmer and Shine project' together with MANCAT invited young girls between 15 and 18 to a 6-week programme of health, beauty and positive mentoring. They have also held summer sports activities programme for youth in the community garden, quite in contrast to traditional library activities.

As a result of all these community engagement activities, the North City Library has more than double the number of users than the previous two libraries combined. Twenty-eight thousand people visited the library during its first 8 weeks of opening. Figures show that 77 per cent of residents used the library in Harpurhey in 2006/2007, compared with 61 per cent in 2003/04 (16 per cent increase), and 1 per cent of residents used the facilities almost every day, with 46 per cent using it at least once a month.

The success of the building can be measured and described in many different ways, but the best evaluators are its users. Customer satisfaction for the library, as a key indicator for Value for Money of services decided by the council, has improved significantly among the local residents since the new library opened. Only 64 per cent of residents were satisfied with Harpurhey library services in 2003/2004 compared with 87 per cent in 2006/2007. Seventy-four per cent of residents say that library services have improved, which is the best rate among local authorities. It has provided four times more computers than the two previous libraries added together, in order to suit the needs of local residents, and these have proven to be the most popular part of the library.

Most importantly, the local residents have grown to recognise that the library and college building is for public use and is a key part of community facilities. It is obvious that the community has taken pride in the building. Regardless of the fact that it is sitting in the middle of a

high crime rate ward, there have not been any vandalism activities against the building since its operation. For a new building of its size and location, this is quite an achievement.

THE PARTNERSHIP

This is the first time the public library service and Sixth Form College have been co-located in the same building in Manchester, and both parties have gone a long way in learning from each other. The college side manages the building in terms of all the operating and maintenance issues, and also the catering facilities on the ground floor. The library pays for its share of the service to MANCAT. From the college's facilities managers' perspective, their job is to keep the building secure and functioning. From the library's perspective, they want a maximum amount of local residents to come into the building and use the facilities. This has ultimately created some conflict, especially in terms of security. It took a lot of convincing for MANCAT to gradually accept the different activities that would be held in the building and the community garden, and for them to take part in the activities. They have opened up the café so local pensioners can come in and have a good, decent meal.

Even though there are positive changes in the way the facilities managers manage the college side of the building, they still have lot to learn from the library manager. The two sides of the building provide some interesting contrast: while the library side constantly has users and remains vibrant 7 days a week, the college side sits quietly with most classrooms empty, especially during holiday months. As it is a Sixth Form College, it is not linked to the public enquiries that are made at the library for basic skills and other training activities. It has also failed to encourage local people to visit the college side and provide inspiration for further education opportunities. In terms of number of events, it held far less compared to the library side. Therefore, while the library has made the most of the new building and has come up with as many activities as possible, the college is still mostly operating as a normal college, with its doors only open to its students.

In all, the library and college are enjoying their partnership in the same building. In fact, MANCAT has learned that they could take more advantage of this type of partnership. They have recently opened up their college library at Openshaw campus for public uses, again in partnership with Manchester Library Information Services, in an attempt to attract traffic and potential students to this previously under-used library.

BENEFITS REALISATION

Benefits management and realisation has recently risen as the 'new' practice that seeks to move forward from the traditional investment appraisal approach and focus on the active planning of how benefits will be realised and measured (Glynne, 2006). Bradley (2006) defines the process of benefits realisation in five steps, as detailed below:

- conceive benefit as real;
- get more detail on the benefit so that it is fully understood;

Figure 1: Benefits management process (Ward *et al*, 1996).

- map the benefit's dependencies, taking changes required and earlier benefits into consideration so that it becomes more realistic;
- actualise the changes leading to the benefit;
- transform benefit into money (not in all cases, for example public sector).

The Health and Care Infrastructure Research and Innovation Centre (HaCIRIC) at the School of the Built Environment at the University of Salford has been carrying out research into the Benefit Realisation Framework, especially within LIFT (Local Improvement Finance Trust) health-care settings. HaCIRIC has carried out an overview of Benefit Realisation literature and has chosen to use Ward *et al*'s 'Cranfield process model of benefits management' developed in 1995 (Figure 1), as this model 'illustrates in a simplistic format the interrelations between the main elements for the effective management of benefits' (Sapountzis *et al*, 2007).

As the Benefit Realisation Management approach was not adopted from the beginning of this case study, this paper will briefly go through step four of the benefit realisation process – evaluating and reviewing the results.

According to the Prime Minister (<http://www.betterpublicbuildings.gov.uk/>), a good public building should

- improve the delivery of public services;
- give a sense of identity and community;
- be a source of local pride;
- help to build a sustainable future.

As a public building, the North City library has certainly provided the local community with a much better library service compared to the old libraries. It plays a key role in the local community and regeneration

activities by acting as a community hub within a very deprived community. It provides local residents with training opportunities that would help them in terms of up-skilling and employment, which in turn fits into the government's 'sustainable community' agenda. Using the building as a flagship inspiration, it becomes a source of pride, and reflects a sense of ownership through the various community activities with the local residents. Therefore, it is truly a building 'for the public', and fits all the four criteria for a good public building. Therefore, it has certainly realised the benefits of being a public building.

LESSONS LEARNED

The benefits through the North City Library would not have been realised if it were not for the efforts of the community engagement team (led by the library manager) working onsite. From the authors' point of view, the library manager is the true facilities manager. Rather than thinking inside the box and worrying about security all the time, the library manager thinks about how to make the best use of the building and how to deliver maximum benefits to the local community. In addition, these activities go far beyond the conventional library activities, as she is making the maximum use of the distinctive new building. She and her team are always generating new ideas and activities that would attract more people to the library. As for her, the purpose of the building is clear – to serve and to be well used by the local community. Whereas co-located in the same building, the facilities manager of ManCAT is more of a conventional facilities manager. Her main concerns are about looking after the physical attributes of the building, making sure it is safe and sound, rather than considering the possibility of utilising the spaces on the college side 24–7 as the library side. The fact is that the library side is already running short of space for meetings and some large-scale activities. If the MANCAT side is willing to open up its spaces to the public more, not only can they generate some income through renting the facilities, but they can also make better use of their vacant spaces, especially during holiday times. In this way, the relationship between the library and the college can also move from co-location towards collaboration, and can realise the planned benefit of 'encouraging interaction between sectors and age groups in the community'.

Indeed, the library manager should be the exemplar for all traditional facilities managers. It is true that all facilities managers are there to look after the building, the facilities and the people who are using them. Nevertheless, there could be other uses for the space rather than restricting it to nine-to-five office hours. Each building sits within a community and can have a certain impact upon the local residents and community life; however, in most cases, a building just alienates itself as just another corporate building that has very little to do with the local population. Facilities managers or building managers could look into hiring local labour and using local supply chain (especially for cleaning and catering staff), exploring the possibility of hiring out space for evening and weekend uses, linking up with local schools for visits to create inspiration for young children, creating volunteer groups among employees to get involved in community activities, and so on. Only

through these alternative functions can buildings be used to their full potential and bring benefits to the local communities. They could all learn from the best practices set up by the North City Library and try to make maximum use of buildings and spaces.

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