

Out of the rubble - the establishment of a new type of library in post earthquake central Christchurch

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Abstract

Christchurch City Libraries' Central Library Peterborough opened on 19 December 2011, 10 months after the 22nd February earthquake. It is now one of 2 temporary central libraries, which are intended to remain in place until the new Christchurch Central Library opens in 2015/16.

This paper describes the Central Peterborough journey, starting with the traumatic losses associated with the closure of the old Central Library, the dislocations of the following 10 months, and then charts the development of a new type of library.

The paper outlines key milestones in this journey, and shares some of the challenges and successes experienced along the way. While it is to be hoped that few librarians will ever have to cope with the disruptions of the last 3 years in Christchurch, there are some useful learnings in the areas of team dynamics, service design and development, change management, community connections, and just what can be achieved in extraordinary times. Who would have thought that pre-school programmes can quite happily exist alongside genealogical research, that a fiction specialist could morph into a family history expert, that a circulation assistant could embrace a world languages collection, or that an archivist could happily take on membership and shelving? These are just a few of the opportunities that have been embraced at Central Library Peterborough, and attendees will gain an appreciation of what is possible when the status quo no longer exists.

Background

On the 21st of February 2011 the Central Library of the Christchurch City Libraries network was a relatively traditionally structured operation, made up of 5 service delivery oriented teams, each focussed on a specialist collection, function and/or customer group. The five teams were Customer Welcome (issues and related functions), Centre for the Child, Popular (fiction, magazines and music), Information and Learning (non-fiction and computer provision) and ANZC (local heritage and family history). These teams were supported by a Circulation and Distribution team which was responsible for returns, shelving and stock movement functions. In those days before RFID, all circulation activities happened on the ground floor, and teams other than Customer Welcome were largely disassociated from this activity.

Central Library had a distinctively different function compared with the 18 community libraries scattered across the city, and in spite of some movement of staff to and from Central Library, there was an element of “them and us”. Within Central there was some limited interchange between teams, but by and large we kept to our silos. As with any large workplace, many individuals did not know members of the other teams very well, and there was also the perception of a hierarchical divide in that some teams consisted solely of (qualified) Information Librarians, and other teams were mainly Library Assistants. And although a shake up of some sort was in the wind due to the planned introduction of RFID later in 2011 and the associated introduction of a new service delivery model, none of us could have predicted the traumatic changes wrought by the magnitude 6.3 earthquake of February 22nd.

The immediate impact of the earthquake on the library and the city has been well documented elsewhere (Brandenburg and Arona et al., 2012; Fraser, 2012; Prout, 2012; Robertson, 2011), so I will concentrate my focus on what happened to Central Library staff. In the days and weeks immediately afterwards, individuals took on a range of different roles in a range of very different locations. Some simply turned up for work at libraries as they reopened, and were immediately flat out meeting the needs of customers who were desperate to re-engage with a very important part of their lives. Others were assigned to one or more libraries, where they pitched in and helped out in whatever way they could. Some were engaged on various library and Council projects, as access to workspaces, computers and matching of skillsets allowed. One example is that during this period we managed to process and digitise a collection of glass plate negatives that had been donated to the library, due to the availability of specialised staff who were unable to perform their usual functions. Other tasks were more earthquake related, such as contacting all those customers who were unable to return their loans due to housing being damaged and/or inaccessible.

Some of us had even more varied experiences. One colleague became part of the red zone cordon access team, working out of a couple of tents outside the Christchurch Art Gallery through autumn and early winter, processing access passes for everybody from Rachel Hunter to Gerry Brownlee. I worked with the Welfare Team in the Civil Defence's Emergency Operations Centre post-quake, and this role morphed into a more general welfare support function with the Council's Community Support unit. Meanwhile my library

involvement continued, including leading the library's Earthquake Archive project and maintaining contact with team members located in various libraries. It was not untypical for me to be working in 3 or more locations in the course of a single day, as throughout this period most Council functions were operating out of one sort of temporary accommodation or another.

Throughout this period library management worked hard to protect employment, as other Council colleagues in badly damaged facilities such as the QEII pool and fitness complex were facing a redundancy process.

As the weeks turned into months, plans started coming together for replacement central city library facilities. The first of these was located at the South City shopping mall, and consisted of a very small and highly attractive collection in a small retail space, adjacent to the supermarket entrance. This service was staffed by Central Library colleagues, who were released from their temporary assignments to provide customer service in this unusual (for Christchurch City Libraries) and fast paced environment.

Establishment of Central Library Peterborough

By October/November 2011 planning was well underway for a much larger and more comprehensive temporary facility, to be known as Central Library Peterborough (Annan and Thompson, 2013). It would provide access to some of those key Central Library resources which had been unavailable since the quake, including the family history collection, historical newspapers and other resources on microfilm, the 600 title magazine collection, world language collections, and sizeable audio visual, fiction, non-fiction and children's collections. Once again, a team comprising colleagues who had previously worked at Central Library was assembled, and came together a couple of weeks before opening day to assist with shelf stocking. Squeezed between half full stacks, we managed to run a half day training session to prepare team members for our new service delivery model, incorporating roving and proactive customer service, a few days before we opened.

This team consisted of staff from all 6 previously described Central Library teams, many of whom had not worked closely with each other. In the 10 months since February they had experienced varying degrees of personal trauma and upheaval, as well as a very wide variety of work experiences, along with concern about their own job security. Team members were also feeling a sense of loss in relation to their Central Library workplace, roles, and teams. Most had not yet worked in a RFID environment, but everybody was, to a greater or lesser extent, familiar with basic circulation functions, membership and the like.

Storming

As can probably be imagined, for the first few months we were pretty much in survival mode. As well as establishing all of our day to day operating procedures, we had to get to know the community such as it was, fine tune the collection, establish each other's strengths and weaknesses, and allocate collection and task responsibilities. This was very much the "storming" phase, which was accompanied by demolition of various neighbourhood buildings, including the Christchurch Convention Centre (venue of 2009 LIANZA Conference) directly across the road. As only the second library at CCL to implement RFID,

the technology was still bedding in at this stage, and our learning curve was quite steep. At about this time, the Council ran its annual staff engagement survey, and not surprisingly, the Central teams did not score highly.

As team members got to know each other, and the day to day functions started to run more smoothly, we began to seize the opportunities of being a hybrid temporary library, combining elements of both Central and community libraries. This was a chance to try some things out, and come up with creative ways to meet our customers' needs. Children's Babytimes and Storytimes sessions started up, followed shortly after by a weekly computer help drop in session. Both of these were driven by enthusiastic team members, who lobbied for and then led their implementation. Our family history fraternity did not take long to discover Central Library Peterborough's resources, and team members had plenty of opportunities to practice their newly learnt skills, be they loading a roll of microfilm, or providing an introduction to shipping lists or Ancestry.com. Team members were developing a greater appreciation for each other's skills, and both formal and informal training and development flourished. Examples of the latter included less confident colleagues participating in computer drop in sessions alongside more confident team mates, and heritage related reference enquiries being shared amongst team members as a way of building their knowledge of heritage and family history resources.

Forming

In the middle of 2012 a change proposal resulted in permanent appointments to the Team Leader and Associate Team Leader roles, and in August we held an externally facilitated team building and planning day. The latter enabled us to reflect on our journey to date, and used the appreciative inquiry methodology to focus on our strengths and the team's potential to create our own future. As well as coming up with some objectives for the year ahead, this was a significant step in the "forming" stage of our team's development. During September of last year we welcomed 4 new part time library assistants to Central Library Peterborough, which was something of a milestone as the team by that point was forming a distinctive culture, had an identity and a direction. Their arrival cemented the formation of "Team PB" (this was the time of the London Olympics!), and over the last thirteen months our four "newbies" have made a significant contribution to the close knit and highly functioning team that is Central Library Peterborough today.

Some of the key objectives identified at our team planning day included:

- An invitation to members of the Library Leadership Team to spend some time working at our library, which was accepted by Carolyn and a number of her colleagues
- A prominent profile across the Christchurch City Libraries network, which has been achieved in part by frequent articles and photos in the weekly staff newsletter
- Hosting CCL colleagues and taking all opportunities to visit and work in other libraries
- Connecting with our communities, which has included running Introduction to iPad sessions at local aged care facilities, and hosting after hours visits by family history groups from across central Canterbury

- Upskilling ourselves so that all team members are equally confident with any enquiry – be it readers' advisory, homework help, or family history, with seamless handovers to more experienced colleagues as and when required
- Social events, which as well as the usual celebratory morning teas, have included a family oriented pizza evening, and a self catered sit down Christmas dinner in the library for team members and their families

Achievements

Other highlights of our first 22 months of operation are:

- the development of a strong partnership with the Christchurch Art Gallery, who have been using the library as one venue for their Outer Spaces exhibition programme, which to date has seen 5 exhibitions on a variety of themes in display cases scattered through the library space
- a successful partnership with a Year 9 teacher at Riccarton High School which led to librarians introducing resources at the school, and subsequently groups of students coming in to use Central Library Peterborough's resources as part of an enquiry learning project looking at Christchurch past, present and future
- an Introduction to Family History course over 4 weeks where customers were supported by team members whose backgrounds include the fiction and circulation teams of the old Central Library

The 2013 Christchurch City Council staff engagement survey result for the Peterborough team saw a 46 percentage point increase over the 2012 score, and placed the team on a par with the rest of the Libraries and Information Unit. This was a fair reflection of where the team had got to by this point, and not surprisingly was in line with the very high levels of positive customer feedback we regularly receive.

Leadership

A number of factors have contributed to these successes, and to the growth of a strong team delivering a wide range of excellent library services, in somewhat challenging circumstances. Team members have been highly supportive of one another, and a strong bond has formed through the shared experiences of the earthquakes and the resulting disruption to many aspects of our lives. Most team members are going through house repairs or relocation, and this in itself has required a mutually supportive team culture. The efforts of our employer to not just preserve our jobs but also support us in a variety of other ways has been greatly appreciated.

Provision of pastoral care continues to take a high priority as we move into the 3rd year post disaster, when coping skills can be stretched to the limit (Christchurch City Council, 2013). Team leadership has role modelled this, and worked to support team members in both their work and non-work lives. We have demonstrated flexibility and endeavoured to meet team members' needs as long as they were compatible with service delivery demands. The team's success has also been aided by complementary leadership and personal styles of the Team Leader and Associate Team Leader – this has proven to be a very powerful mix.

Leading a team in these extraordinary times has required a hands on approach, an appreciation of the whole person, and an encouraging style. Trust has been important, and this has been repaid in spades, as colleagues have risen to the challenges inherent in the current environment. Initiative and flexibility have been encouraged, and team members have readily taken on responsibilities as their confidence has grown. A genuinely positive approach has been vital, and I have worked to share my belief that the opportunities associated with establishing a hybrid temporary Central library don't come along many times in one's working life. And last but by no means least, it has been really important to have lots of fun in the workplace.

Team members share a commitment to providing a high level of professional and customer focussed services, and have seen the personal and professional benefits of venturing into the unknown and expanding their skill sets. Many have moved well beyond their comfort zones, but are now reaping the rewards that this brings.

Post Script

Life in post-quake Christchurch is never predictable, from where will the road cones be on my way to work tomorrow, to where will I be working next week! In June of this year, the Library received notice that the site of Peterborough's sister library, Central Library Tuam, was required for the start of construction of the Justice and Emergency Services Precinct, and that the building had to be vacated by the end of November. Once again this led to a furious search for new premises, and also provided an opportunity to review the location of resources across the 2 libraries. The good news is that Central Library Manchester will be opening in the new year, and will include a reunited local and family history (ANZC) collection. Consequently this has resulted in a readjustment of team membership, as specialist staff accompany their collections around the city. Therefore our opportunities for team building and multi-skilling continue, and for once the truism of "plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose" (the more things change the more they stay the same) does not apply.

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