



# Q&A with Alex Kittow, Libraries Unlimited Chief Executive

Posted on 16 Oct 2019



A recent Q&A with Alex Kittow, Libraries Unlimited Chief Executive, discussing our future vision and plans for Devon Libraries, Torbay Libraries and Devon Mobile Libraries.

**Question: Library visits and stock issues declined in 2018/19, do you think it is possible to reverse the decline and increase visits and stock issues over the next year (or few years)?**

We're absolutely focused on bringing more people into our libraries and to encourage people to read for pleasure, so of course we will do our best to reverse the decline. However, we have to be realistic and accept that the way we live our lives is changing, high streets are used less, increasingly more shopping and borrowing of books is done online and we all lead busy lives which means convenience is a priority. We see significant traffic going through our websites and we're always looking at ways to improve our digital services so that we can meet people's needs. At the same time, we're continually expanding our services and events within libraries to encourage people through the doors to explore what we have to offer.

**Question: Events and activities massively increased last year – what do you think the main reason for this was and is this the direction in which libraries are heading?**

The main reason is because we have been working hard to bring new people into libraries through a diverse events programme. We're trying new things all the time, like Drag Queen Story Time and live streaming events from the Royal Shakespeare Company. We want communities to look to the library when they want something to do, whether it's parent and toddler groups, Lego and Code clubs, knit and natter, dementia cafes, author visits or fundraising events organised by one of our supportive Friends Groups. Is this the future? I think this will be a way that libraries and their buildings can be used to serve our communities more, by providing events and experiences that people might not be able to access elsewhere.

**Question: Tier 5 libraries had a 10 per cent increase in visits – what do you think the reason for this was and can this be translated to the other libraries? (also – which libraries are the tier 5 ones?)**

Topsham Library is one of our Tier 5 libraries, and last year we opened a brand new library in the Nelson Close Community Centre. Since opening the library has attracted lots of visitors and we've seen a real increase in usage. This is largely what it is behind the 10% increase, although Uffculme Library has also seen an increase due to Library Extra sessions run by volunteers which has helped to increase the hours that the library is open.

**Question: eLibrary issues and digital downloads are up but physical book issues are down – is this the way in which libraries are heading or is there a plan to get more people reading physical books?**

We are passionate about reading for pleasure and we know that reading and stories in any form can help to improve people's lives in many ways. We don't mind if people prefer physical books or digital books. Technology is changing the way we live and we, therefore, want to continue investing in our digital offer as we know that enhancements in digital services will continue to change the way we interact with books and information. That said, I have no doubt that there will always be a strong demand for physical books. Kids love them, adults love them and over the past year or so, reports have shown that the sale of books has begun to pick up again as more people move back to hardcopies. Either way, we will remain committed to providing people access to both.

**Question: You mentioned ideas like drone racing in libraries as a way to get people into them – are there any other ideas of this sort on the cards, or when may we see innovations like this become a reality?**

We have lots of ideas for how we can better utilise our libraries. We're up for trying new things to help reach our communities and to increase our income to ensure a sustainable future. We need to carefully weigh up our options and develop strong business cases for each. With drones, I believe there's huge opportunity for children

to come to libraries to develop new science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) skills, just like the way that Code Clubs teach children coding. I expect we will see some new ideas implemented sometime in 2020. If you or any of your readers have an idea that will help our libraries generate income and increase our community impact at the same time then please let me know on [info@librariesunlimited.org.uk](mailto:info@librariesunlimited.org.uk)

**Question: How badly is the reduction in funding affecting libraries?**

Austerity has been going on for a while, and libraries have faced significant funding cuts over the past 10 years. However, I think we are only just beginning to feel its effects. The reduction in funding has been devastating to our local authorities and in turn to library services, library staff and most importantly, the people of Devon.

**Question: How sustainable do you think it is for all of Devon's libraries to remain open?**

I think we have a good chance of keeping Devon's libraries open for the long term with the support of our commissioners and local Councillors at Devon County Council. However, we will continue to need the support from our volunteers and Friends Groups and will need to take an entrepreneurial approach to ensure we aren't too reliant on public sector funding. We will also need to be ahead of the game when it comes to new trends and developments so that libraries remain relevant.

**Question: How do you see Devon's library service looking this time next year, and in five years' time?**

Books were in the library before they were in the home, the same with computers and the internet, what next? We already have Code Clubs, 3D printers and laser cutters in some of our libraries, and over the next year or so we plan to introduce virtual reality amongst other exciting developments.

What you can be sure of is that there will be friendly, knowledgeable staff and lots of books! My hope is that libraries will be increasingly used as community hubs and the impact they have on our quality of life, our health and wellbeing and our community cohesion will be better understood. My experience of libraries in Devon is that they are not always quiet and the impact they have is less to do with the books on the shelves and more to do with the relationships they facilitate.

Over the past few weeks we've recently received some fantastic testimonials about how libraries have changed people's lives in Devon, and one that will stay with me is from a home library service user who said: "*What an absolute lifesaver it is having books to read whilst being housebound and confined to a wheelchair; the selection of books which you provide for me I cannot thank you enough. My eyesight is*

*gradually deteriorating and the large print enables me to thoroughly enjoy the books which you get for me from all over Devon. There is a saying that a book can provide a ticket for you to travel the world and I solve crimes, look after animals, read how people spend their lives and achieve certain things, gain different slants of historical events which I hadn't thought of and transports me to different parts of the world. Thank you so much for providing me with such a wonderful and varied selection of books which keep me, a 97 year old, well and happy in my declining years!"* My hope is that in one, five and ten years' time, libraries will still be offering people the same high-quality and life changing services that they are now, but to even more people.

For more details about Libraries Unlimited, visit [librariesunlimited.org.uk](http://librariesunlimited.org.uk) or search /LibrariesUnlimited on Facebook or @LibrariesUnLtd on Twitter.

### **About Libraries Unlimited:**

Libraries Unlimited is an independent charity and staff and community owned social enterprise, established in April 2016.

Libraries Unlimited runs Devon's public library service, Devon Libraries, commissioned to run 50 libraries across the county and four mobile libraries, as well as running Torbay Libraries on behalf of Torbay Council, including four public libraries. Each local library has something for everyone: books and information, music, films, computers with access to the Internet, free Wi-Fi and more.

[Find out more about Devon Libraries here](#)

[Find out more about Torbay Libraries here](#)

Libraries Unlimited also runs the FabLab Devon and Business and Intellectual Property (IP) Centre.

- Fab Lab Devon

Fab Lab Devon is based in Exeter and Barnstaple Library. It is a small-scale workshop offering digital fabrication facilities. It's an open access, not-for-profit, community resource where anybody can invent and make just about anything.

[Find out more about the Fab Lab here](#)

- Business & IP Centre

The Business and Intellectual Property Centre in Exeter and Barnstaple Library provides support to business owners, entrepreneurs and inventors, in partnership with the British Library. Users can access a comprehensive collection of online databases and publications and attend practical workshops, one-to-one advice sessions and inspiring talks.