

# The occupation of Friern Barnet Library and the future of public services in Britain

Peter Reydt  
7 March 2013

Britain's national press hailed the establishment of yet another community library in Barnet in north London last month. They praised it as a victory for the local community, and for the squatters who had occupied it against closure and noted the prominent role of members of the Occupy movement.

However, this was no victory against the Conservative-Liberal Democrat austerity policies. It demonstrates how clearly the politics of localism and vague professions of anarchism and self-organisation advocated by Occupy play into the hands of the ruling elite and facilitate rather than oppose the destruction of vital services.

Barnet's Conservative council closed Friern Barnet Library in April 2012. The council has a long record of cost-cutting services by privatisation. But since the election of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government and the slashing of local government funding, Barnet has made even deeper cuts through its "One Barnet" programme.

The council's plan was to sell the building and merge Friern Barnet and North Finchley libraries to create a new library at Artsdepot, Tally Ho Corner. Artsdepot is the borough's only professional arts venue and has been funded from commercial, charitable and government sources since Barnet council cut its core funding in 2011.

The library negotiations with Artsdepot representatives collapsed at the end of the year. By then members of Occupy London had moved into the library and reopened it as "Friern Barnet People's Library". Thousands of books were donated by private individuals, and events like yoga classes, live music and children parties were organized.

In December, a court ruled that the council had the right to evict the squatters, but acknowledged their right

to protest and gave them six weeks to leave. By the beginning of February, a compromise was found by the council and community groups. On 5 February, activists from Occupy London handed back the keys to the library to an official from Barnet Council, who then passed them to the trustees of the newly formed Friern Barnet Community Library Ltd. A two-week licensee agreement enabled them to take control of the building during negotiations for a deal over a two-year lease.

The library will be a volunteer-run service with limited public funding, which does not even cover a full-time librarian. It would be a fallacy to call such an undertaking a library. A book exchange would be closer to reality. For all intents and purposes, another fully funded public library has been eliminated in line with the coalition's policies. Indeed, the replacement of funded public service provision with community volunteers has been justified as "The Big Society".

By no means does a community library equate to a fully-funded library. There is more to a professionally-run service than handing out books. Libraries today deliver a variety of services including advice on using information technologies. In many of the libraries handed over to "the community", computers and other equipment was removed. Such services, as they exist, are generally underfunded at best.

Barnet council is predictably enthusiastic about community libraries, encouraging them as an alternative. Hampstead Garden Suburb Library was closed in 2011 and reopened in 2012 run by 70 volunteers. Council leader Richard Cornelius said they had saved enough money from cuts not to need to sell the Friern Barnet building, and he welcomed a new volunteer library on the Hampstead Garden Suburb model. Cornelius offered a grant of £25,000 and "other practical help".

This means that the council's budget for this library has been cut to £25,000 and there is no commitment to maintain this beyond two years.

Along with other vital services, there has been an onslaught on libraries throughout the country. The web site *Public Libraries News* estimates that 343 libraries are either currently under threat of closure, or have already closed since April 2012.

This is not the whole story. Savings are being made by reducing staffing levels and cutting the range of services and opening times. Friern Barnet had been operating with reduced opening times prior to its closure.

A December 2012 report from the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) noted that 60 percent of respondents had reduced or expected to reduce library staff numbers in fiscal year 2012-13. In FY 2011-12, 64 authorities reported 1,000 staff reductions. In 2012, 50 authorities reported 824 staff reductions.

The CILIP survey estimates that library opening times across the country will be reduced by 1,720 hours a week. Annie Mauger, CILIP's chief executive, said that according to further research as many as 700 of 3,500 professionally qualified librarians have lost their jobs in the current fiscal year.

The onslaught upon library services includes plans to close 10 of Newcastle's 18 libraries, and 14 of the 27 libraries in Sheffield. Liverpool Council is considering closing 10 of its 19 libraries. All of these councils are carrying out massive savings in their budgets by cutting supposed non-essential services to the bone. Sheffield is cutting £50 million from its 2013-14 budget.

Despite the public outcry at its failure to follow up the Olympic legacy, the council has already decided to shut down Don Valley Stadium, where famously Olympian Jessica Ennis trains. Newcastle is set to cut £90 million from its 2013-2016 budget, including proposals to cut 100 percent of its arts funding, destroying 1300 jobs in the process. In Liverpool, the council plans to cut £32 million this year. This follows the £141 million cut over the last two years. The city will make £290 million in cuts over the period 2011-2017. Libraries are among the first services to face destruction.

Part of the Tory "Big Society" approach is to cut spending by using unpaid volunteers and handing over

services to communities and private initiatives. All over the country, community libraries have sprung up as councils have cut funding. In March 2012, there were 61 community-managed libraries. This is expected to more than double in 2012-2013, reaching a total of 129. CILIP anticipates that by April 2013 at least 10 percent of libraries will be run in this way.

A variety of government publications are promoting the establishment of community libraries and the use of volunteers. A newly-published study by the Arts Council England and the Local Government Association, "Community libraries—Learning from experience: guiding principles for local authorities", encourage the illusion that these community libraries can keep up the level of service provided by properly funded and staffed libraries.

As in Barnet, capitalist politicians see several advantages in such enterprises. The buildings are maintained and managed and the semblance of a public service is kept up while protests are directed into harmless channels. Only the mass mobilization of the working class armed with a socialist programme and the fight for social equality can defend public services such as libraries.



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