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The *hollowing out* of children's public library services in England from 2010-2016

Abstract

This research develops a normative understanding of Rhodes' (1994) theory of *hollowing out* of public services and the extent to which this process has happened to children's library services between 2010 and 2016 in England. The objectives were to gain knowledge of the phenomenon, seek to assess emerging trends, and create a working definition of hollowing out as it applies in the public library domain. To achieve these objectives, Freedom of Information requests were made to Local authorities across England to gather data on library input since 2010.

It was found that there has been a significant downward trend in staff, spending, and opening hours across children's public library services in England between 2010 and 2016. The research found that there has indeed been hollowing out of children's library services. On average, specialist staff have been cut by 40%, children's book budgets by 23%, and opening hours by 11%. The literature suggests that this is coupled with a rise in closures, community run and outsourced libraries, and volunteering. The data produced for this research describes a process which is consistent with the definition of hollowing out proposed by Rhodes (1994). This definition encompasses the economic and political factors that shape the phenomenon of hollowing out.

This research is the first in the world to consider the concept of hollowing out in relation to public libraries. The definition and methods used will be beneficial for future research in the domain, and the findings from the study can help to inform debates about the condition of public library services in England in the modern era.

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Introduction

Rhodes' (1994) seminal work on the transformation of the British state from the 1970s in response to membership in the EU, Thatcherism, and neoliberal trends towards private sector management within the public sector identified four key aspects of *hollowing out the state*: privatisation; loss of central government functions to outsourced delivery systems; loss of central government control to the EU; and limitation of public service functions through managerial accountability such as performance measurement and output controls. Rhodes (1994, p.144) argued that private sector standards of “economy, efficiency and effectiveness” clashed with public sector values. This paper considers the concept of hollowing out as it applies to the provision of public library services in England.

Recent concerns about the state of library provision within England, and a perceived worry about the future of public libraries, has generated considerable debate and commentary within the media and society at large. In the wake of the 2008-2009 recession and responsive austerity measures of subsequent UK governments, public libraries in England have experienced severe cuts. This has been the result of UK government policy to transfer power from central government to local authorities and communities, whilst simultaneously reducing the budgets of local authorities responsible for public library provision by 27% (Goulding, 2013).

Budget reductions and a move towards community or externally provided services has resulted in the following changes for public libraries:

- a restructuring of library staff;
- reduced staffing levels;
- reduced opening hours;
- dwindling book budgets;
- and a rise in volunteers (Anstice, 2015; BBC, 2016; Goulding, 2013).

As highlighted in the *My Library by Right* campaign, public libraries have experienced, or are increasingly at risk from, a process of 'hollowing out' – that is, “being eroded or eaten away” (Rhodes, 1994). This evocative metaphor of 'hollowed out' libraries paints a bleak picture; buildings as shells, emptied of resources,

materials, services and staff. This metaphor for the transformation of public library provision within the UK is new, and few studies have attempted to define hollowing out, or research the nature and extent of the process of this phenomenon.

Evidence shows that whilst some library buildings have closed, far more have undergone a process of hollowing out (Anstice, 2015). A Select Committee report on library closures found that “reductions in opening hours and the loss of professional staff may damage the service more than the close of particular buildings” (Culture, Media and Sport Committee, 2012). The trend of both closures and hollowing out is set to continue in the next few years (BBC, 2016).

Children’s library services are a core aspect of public libraries and critical to supporting literacy and promoting reading. This is recognised by the government, which aims to have all children be “active members of a public library” (Department for Education, 2015, p.5). The benefits that libraries can bring to the lives of children is well documented: “public library use is strongly correlated with positive outcomes for reading attitudes, motivation, and behaviour and school attainment, and non-library use with negative outcomes (Clark and Hawkins, 2011, p.17).

There has been an emergence of populist commentary on protecting public library services, with the emphasis of this advocacy on library closures. Authors, charities, and local communities have put the problem of library cuts into the national consciousness. However, there is a lack of literature detailing what the process of hollowing out entails, and what the impact of this process has been on the quality of services, and to the end user. Similarly, there is a lack of literature exploring the breadth of children’s library services in England. Elkin and Lonsdale (1997, p.236) argued twenty years ago that more research was needed into children’s library studies, and that the sector would benefit from a partnership between “[Library and Information Science] schools and practitioners [...] to assess research needs within the sector”.

To date, England has experienced a much worse situation than devolved UK nations. Libraries in England have lost 22% of staff in the last six years, compared to 3% job losses in Scotland in the same period (BBC, 2016). The situation in England serves as an example to Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales about the direction

public library services in these devolved nations may take following trends in England.

Aims and Objectives

The purpose of this paper is to examine the process of hollowing out on children's public library services in England between 2010-2016. The objectives of this research were:

- To gain knowledge of the extent of the hollowing out process on children's library services
- To assess if there are any emerging trends relating to this process
- To create a working definition of hollowing out within the context of public libraries

Quantitative data from a random selection of local authorities was used as the basis of this research. English local authorities responsible for library services were asked to respond to Freedom of Information (Fol) requests asking for data pertaining to children's library services between 2010-2016.

The scope of this project focuses geographically on England, and thematically on the post-recession years of a coalition and Conservative led government in the UK. The effects of the last two consecutive governments' austerity agendas have greatly altered public services in England, whereas Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have been relatively protected by the economic decisions of their respective devolved governments (Travers, 2015).

Literature review

The sweep of budget cuts, efficiencies, staff losses and library closures that have been imposed on public library services in England, including children's services, are unprecedented. Goulding (2013, p.478), warned of the effects of austerity and government policy on libraries, which, "faced with severe budgetary constraints, cuts to opening hours, staffing, bookfunds and increases in fines, fees and charges have become common across the English public library sector".

Children's library services in England have a long and celebrated history as a service at the heart of public libraries. Children's librarians have been central to providing a specialist high-quality service. Public libraries have historically been concerned with "encouraging a reading habit within children from an extremely young age" and this important role helps shape future adults as readers (McMenemy, 2009, p.52). The literature suggests a nationalised and centralised political approach to ensuring the continuation of a high-quality library service for children is lacking. The consequence of this is that children in England are subject to a 'postcode lottery' of library services; some will have an excellent service at their doorstep, others will not.

In 2014-15 there was an estimated 3.9 million children living in poverty in the UK, a figure which had risen by 200,000 from the previous year (Monaghan, 2016). Compared to their global counterparts, young adults in England are underperforming in literacy and numeracy (Kuczera, Field and Windisch, 2016). A 2013 Save the Children report revealed that children from poorer backgrounds were at risk of being left behind in reading and literacy skills from as young as seven years old and further predicted that by the year 2020, nearly half a million children would not have reached their expected reading level by the age of seven (CILIP Update, 2013). These are just a few anecdotal reports that represent a wider need in the UK for a continued strategy to tackle inequality and promote early literacy from infancy.

There is evidence to suggest a strong correlation between using a public library and better school attainment (Clark and Hawkins, 2011). Libraries have a key role to play, alongside education and other public services, in supporting and promoting reading and literacy. Libraries also contribute to the holistic development of children, "intellectually, socially and culturally" (Elkin and Kinnell, 2000, p.115). Studies also show that public libraries address childhood social inequality. Children who receive free school meals, a typical indicator of household poverty, are 20% more likely to have visited a library than a bookshop (Clark, 2016). For many children, the public library is the only place outside of school that they have access to books.

There have been several key studies of children's libraries and librarians in the UK, although they are too old to be considered contemporary research. Edmonds and Miller (1990), Elkin and Lonsdale (1997), and Elkin and Kinnell (2000) are

responsible for the three major studies into UK, and English, public library services for children.

Edmonds and Miller (1990) used mixed qualitative and quantitative methods to research the breadth of children's library services in England between 1982-83 and 1986-87, including a statistical survey of library authorities and case studies of 6 individual authorities. Their key finding was that services across the country greatly varied. Some library authorities had no specialist children's librarian post, although 96 of the 108 authorities had a principal youth librarian, often at a senior management role. There were several limitations to the study due to the difficulty in gathering data about children's librarians, who often had multiple responsibilities across different areas. The authors also reported that quantitative measurement of library services, such as book issues, did not paint the whole picture. They suggested a longitudinal and qualitative study would be a worthy addition to the field of children's library studies.

Elkin and Lonsdale (1997) took a broader conceptual look at the socio-political factors affecting library services to children. Their text outlines the piecemeal provision of library services to children during the 1990s due to local government restructuring and budget cuts. Like Edmonds and Miller, the authors expressed a view that children across the country were not receiving a consistent standard of service. This suggests that for decades before the scope of this research, there has been evidence of a patchwork situation for children in accessing quality library services in England. Elkin and Lonsdale also echo Edmonds and Miller's call for further research into children's library studies and argue that little research has been done to assess the value of libraries on child development.

Elkin and Kinnell (2000) did address this research gap by reporting on the *Place for Children* project which conducted qualitative research investigating the impact of public libraries on children's reading from 1996-1998. The key finding from this study was that libraries did impact on literacy through reading skills acquisition, fostering a love of reading, and developing a sense of self and social awareness. This latter point can be better understood in the context of more recent research conducted into the correlation between public library use and social capital, discussed in the following paragraphs.

In the twenty-first century, discussion of public library provision is dominated by the phenomenon of the digital age, and the advent of digital resources and virtual libraries. However, in literature pertaining to children's libraries, the importance of physical space cannot be emphasised enough. Libraries as places can provide a safe and non-judgemental space for children and families, which supports learning and literacy from infancy, and helps fight social exclusion (Rankin and Brock, 2009; Elkin and Kinnell, 2000).

Recent literature has explored the role that libraries as physical places can have in fostering social capital for children (Coulton and Spilsbury, 2013; Bon, Cranfield and Latimer, 2012). Libraries provide children with a safe and informal environment to engage with their neighbourhood and community, build social and intergenerational networks, and learn how to responsibly contribute to the library community through borrowing and returning books. Field (2017) posits that the key concept of social capital is the value of social networks. According to Allan (2012) these networks can be defined by three different relationships: 1) bonding – between similar types; 2) linking – between different strata of power; 3) bridging – between different types. Allan (2012, p.4) defines the last relationship as “when people from different groups come together”, which is particularly pertinent to libraries.

In a wider study of social capital and public libraries, Johnson (2012) went beyond studying the relationship between libraries and social capital to argue that libraries have the potential to actively *create* social capital through building a network of trust between patrons and staff and providing a positive communal space for all.

Halpern's (2005) monograph on social capital demonstrates the relationship between the nature of social networks and the positive outcomes of economic growth, health, education and employment. However, he argues that the nature of social networks is rooted in ideas of belonging, and that this reliance on membership and participation can be exclusionary. Social capital benefits the individual and the wider network, but these networks are not equally accessible to everyone (Halpern, 2005). As Johnson (2012) demonstrated, public libraries are uniquely placed to create social capital as a membership service that is freely accessible to every person.

There are many publications discussing policy and best practice for providing a library service to children, although much of this literature is produced in North

America. In the UK, CILIP and its specialist membership organisation the YLG, produce guidelines and policy documents relating to this service. CILIP's predecessor, the Library Association produced research and policy in relationship to children's library services. International organisations, including IFLA, also contribute to policy and mission statements for children's library services. Literature which defines library services for children are largely out of date, however there is agreement as to what these services should entail. An ideal children's library service should:

- Be distinct from adult library services, with a dedicated space for children
- Be universal, inclusive, free and accessible
- Have trained staff who specialise in children's library services
- Have an excellent variety of engaging materials for different age groups
- Work in partnership with external and local organisations to provide a comprehensive service to children (IFLA, 2003; Blanshard, 1998).

Public libraries are instrumental in key schemes to encourage children to read. The Bookstart project, which encourages reading from infancy, and the Summer Reading Challenge, have been hugely successful projects which have reached millions of children. 97% of UK library authorities take part annually in the Summer Reading Challenge, which inspires children to read six books from the library over the summer holidays to win a medal. Because of this project, children return to school after the summer with a consistent or improved reading level (Sarrag et al., 2011). The Bookstart project has had similar successes and babies who receive Bookstart packs perform better throughout education than that of their peers (Cooling, 2011). For over twenty years, projects such as these have been run in partnership with local organisations, retailers, health organisations and charities. Cooling (2011, p.10) argues that librarians are integral to these operations, "librarians are not just passive partners; they bring expertise and ideas to Bookstart".

Hollowing Out and UK Government Policy

The concept of 'hollowing out' public services has been applied to libraries in the last few years by library advocates. It stems from Rhodes' (1994) seminal work on the transformation of the British state from the 1970s in response to membership in the EU, Thatcherism, and neoliberal trends towards private sector management within

the public sector. Rhodes identified four key aspects of hollowing out the state: privatisation; loss of central government functions to outsourced delivery systems; loss of central government control to the EU; and limitation of public service functions through managerial accountability such as performance measurement and output controls. Rhodes (1994, p.144) argued that private sector standards of “economy, efficiency and effectiveness” clashed with public sector values. This process then led to a fragmentation of public services and a loss of Central government control (Alcock, Daly and Griggs, 2008). Rhodes metaphor of hollowing out represents an institution which stands firm but in skeletal form, stripped of its many functioning organs.

Contemporary literature highlights the contradictory nature of the process of hollowing out, whereby state control in the 1980s was both ‘rolled back and rolled forwards’ (Mohan, 1999; Bochel and Daly, 2014; Raco, 2013). Essentially, power was transferred and outsourced from Central government to policy networks and private organisations, whilst at the same time, Central government tightened powers over Trade Unions and brought in regulatory powers for welfare provision.

The relevance of hollowing out to the situation facing Public Libraries today can best be understood by highlighting the parallels between Rhodes concept and the neoliberal austerity agenda, as well as situating the coalition and Conservative governments’ policies as a progression of Thatcherism.

UK Government Policy

As mentioned in CILIP’s *My Library by Right* campaign, public libraries in England are affected as much by economic forces as they are political forces. The late 2000s financial crisis led to austerity, but the cuts facing public libraries over the last six years must be viewed in a wider context to be fully understood.

The incumbent UK Conservative government was elected in 2015, following the 2010 election of the coalition government, led by a Conservative majority. Prime Minister David Cameron’s 2010-2015 government’s social and public policy can be characterised by two concepts: ‘Big Society’ and ‘Localism’.

Cameron’s ‘Big Society’ promised to build and empower community spirit by promoting volunteering and social enterprise, in a bid to take more control over

public services (Travers, 2015; Atkinson, Roberts and Savage, 2013). The government argued that by transferring responsibility for public services to local communities, these communities would develop fairer practices to overcome inequalities:

“We want to give citizens, communities and local government the power and information they need to come together [...] Only when people and communities are given more power and take more responsibility can we achieve fairness and opportunity for all.” (Cabinet Office, 2010).

There is much in this sentiment to resonate with public libraries; the desire to inform and engage communities with local services is paramount to public libraries.

Similarly, localism transferred more powers from Central government to local communities. Projects such as Free Schools encouraged parents to take charge of education for their families and communities by setting up their own community run schools. The Localism Act 2011 encouraged communities to bid for control of local authority assets, such as public libraries. However, Atkinson, Roberts and Savage (2013) argue that community control projects give a false sense of agency. Localism ignores the systemic privileges and barriers many communities face which would mean whilst some communities might flourish, others would flounder.

Similarly, Travers (2015) posits that decentralisation, whilst ostensibly empowering local communities, simultaneously harms them. Following the 2010 general election, local authorities had funding cut by 27% and council tax was capped, which effectively crippled many authorities. This was the most severe range of cuts to local authorities since 1945 (Travers, 2015). In this same period, privatisation of health provision, abolition of welfare measures such as the education maintenance allowance, and the introduction of the bedroom tax were implemented, all of which had an adverse effect on the most vulnerable in society (Beech, 2015). The government extended one hand offering more powers, whilst taking away economic and welfare support with the other.

The parallels between Rhodes metaphor of hollowing out the state and the coalition government's policies of withdrawing support for public and state services, whilst empowering privatisation and commercialisation of these same public services is

clear. In both scenarios, the state and public sector is viewed in a negative light – wasteful, overbearing, and ineffectual – whilst the private sector and private sector management style is viewed as cost effective, non-controlling, and efficient.

Hollowing Out Public Libraries in England

For England, the picture for the public sector over the last seven years has been bleak. The picture for libraries, which only constitute an estimated 1-2% of local authority spending, has been especially bleak (Goulding, 2013). The CILIP *My Library by Right* campaign highlighted the lack of “financial and political support for public libraries in England” (2016). Coonan (2015) argues that, “some councils, seeing that their libraries made no money and were in some cases underused, saw them as soft targets for closure” (p.452). Similarly, Anstice (2015) argued that councils considered libraries as a ‘soft’ service, and that there was a lack of awareness amongst councillors that libraries are statutory (p.4).

This is representative of many misinformed views of libraries. The statutory nature of libraries is often not taken seriously by authorities, and a number have made strategic plans that do not comply with their duty (DCMS, 2012, p.3). Goulding (2013) expands upon this view to argue that there is an element of wilful ignorance amongst local councillors towards libraries as “decisions about public libraries are opportunistic and being made on the hoof and in a panic to save money” (p.489).

Child and Goulding (2012) suggest that public libraries can have an important role specifically in times of financial crisis, which is also not understood by central or local government. Their study into library usage in the Midlands after the recession used quantitative data and time series analysis to assess usage trends after the 2008-2009 recession. In this period, contrary to expectations, library usage increased, particularly in relation to job searching, advice, and IT use.

Library cuts, and the impact on service delivery, has not been researched at large. The last major study on the impact of library cuts was published in 1998 by Proctor, Lee and Reilly. They looked at the impact of reduced opening hours and library closures between 1986-1997, using quantitative measures such as book issues to explore correlations between usage and reduced services. This was followed by qualitative research into user behaviour. They were unable to yield much of value

from the quantitative data as there were too many variables. Children were highlighted as a group distinctly disadvantaged by reduced hours as it impacted on when they could visit after school to work on homework.

Staffing Libraries

A BBC (2016) investigation found that over a six-year period, since 2010, nearly 8000 library jobs disappeared, which represents about a quarter of the total library staff population. In this same period, only 343 libraries closed (BBC, 2016). This suggests that the number of job losses is not due to library closures, which means that most libraries have had a drainage of professional, experienced and trained staff. The BBC report reveals that same period following 2010, 15,500 volunteers were recruited. This suggests that in many libraries, volunteers are not a support for library staff, but a *replacement* of library staff.

The DCMS (2012, p.41) recommend that local authorities, “must ensure that they retain enough experienced and/or professionally qualified staff to develop the services on offer to the public and to reflect changing needs, and to support the growing number of volunteers”. There is a solid argument for using volunteers in times of economic hardship to maintain public library services. For many library managers, it is tough choice between saving staff or saving libraries (Caseldon, Pickard and McLeod, 2015; Kennedy, 2013).

Of the staff that remain, many have experienced a generalisation of their work role, with professional staff subsuming responsibility for different areas, often across multiple library sites, although this follows a trend of the last few decades (Elkin and Lonsdale, 1997). The implications of restructuring library staffing to this degree has not been studied, but there are concerns that there may be adverse consequences. Trained and professional library staff are responsible for building and maintaining relationships with the local community, creating partnerships with community organisations, collection development, marketing library services, organising outreach programmes, and specialising in certain user areas.

The long-term sustainability of libraries reliant upon volunteers is also of concern. However, there is a growing number of community managed libraries, 382 in total, which are either asset owned, or run in partnership with local authorities. Many of

these have prospered and been successful in supporting the local community. The use of volunteers and community run libraries can further engage local communities in the library service and help to reduce running costs for local authorities (DCMS, 2016a).

Outsourcing Public Library Services

As well as the rise of volunteer run libraries, many local authorities have considered outsourcing library services, and even privatising library services to cut costs. Anstice (2015) argues that outsourcing of library services is rare. Whilst it is true that privatisation of library services remains low, many library services have been outsourced to non-profit organisations and trusts such as Greenwich Leisure Limited, which runs many libraries in London, as well as sports and leisure centres. This method of outsourcing remains popular for local authorities. By transferring powers to trusts and social enterprises they can often benefit from lower rates and taxes (Goulding, 2013). Many local communities feel that there has been a lack of transparency or consultation about library cuts and the transferring of powers to other organisations (Goulding, 2013). Transparency is an important issue when it comes to public services. FOIA gives the public rights to access information held by public authorities. It is unclear how this legislation applies to social enterprises, normally exempt from FOI requests for commercial reasons, who are now responsible for public libraries.

The literature shows the complexities of the factors that feed into the phenomenon of hollowing out. The metaphor of hollowing out has historic, economic and political contexts but, as previous studies show, it is relevant to the current situation facing public libraries, which are being affected by circumstances unique from other periods of change. Based on a review of the literature, hollowing out can be defined as follows: *a process of efficiencies and restructuring in which library buildings stay open but the actual services, and the value of those services, is eroded through government and local government policy, cuts, and 'deprofessionalisation'*. This new working definition is analysed in the remainder of the paper.

Methodology

The objective of this paper is to seek to understand the phenomenon of hollowing out of public library services and to analyse the extent of hollowing out specifically on children's library services. The impact of this process on library users is not a central concern of this study, although the approach of this study, and its findings, are a sound basis for developing research into this area.

This research objective required an inductive, rather than a deductive, approach to research based on propositions developed in response to identified phenomenon, rather than hypothesis. Maxwell (2012) argues that qualitative research does not always have a logical and linear structure. It is a reflexive process threaded throughout the gathering and analysing of data.

This study was impacted by a process of reflexivity. Initial research questions were identified through the awareness of the research problem. At the start of this process, research questions focused on the impact of hollowing out on the quality of library services and experience of users. It was these research questions that formed the original foundation of the methodology for this project.

However, these research questions have transformed in response to the process and completion of this research. It became clear that it was important to focus on *why* and *how* hollowing out happened and *what* exactly it was, rather than focus firstly on the outcome of this little-understood process. Some of these new questions are addressed by this project, but others are valuable questions that would benefit from further research. Based on the literature review and the process of this research the following research questions were developed, which this research ultimately seeks to address:

- 1) What is the process of hollowing out of children's public library services?
- 2) To what extent has this process occurred between 2010 and 2016?

Research Design

Inputs, outputs and outcomes are all aspects of a library service worth exploring to understand in what ways hollowing out has happened.

Method of Data Collection

When seeking to address the research questions, it was decided that an approach that could measure the process of hollowing out in a quantifiable way was best. A descriptive survey method was chosen, which would seek to understand the nature of local authority library service provision over a six-year period. FOI was selected as the best method as it can be used to extract pre-existing data from the Local authorities responsible for library services. The very metaphor of hollowing out suggests an invisible internal process. Any internal data relating to this process can be requested from local authorities under FOI legislation.

FOIA has not been well exploited by researchers in the ten years since it came into action (Savage and Hyde, 2014). Many countries now have FOI policies which are designed to encourage access to government and public body information that would previously have been closed to the public. According to Walby and Larson (2011), the driver behind these policies is to promote accountability and transparency of government and increase participation and understanding of government. Worthy (2013) expands upon this to include improvements in government decision making and rising trust in government as objectives of the UK's FOIA.

Strengths and Weakness of FOI

There are also several limiting factors which may affect the value of FOI as a methodology for researchers. Lee (2005) notes that using FOI for research purposes can place the researcher in a "passive role" (p.6). The researcher is reliant upon pre-existing data in whatever format it is held. Similarly, Walby and Larson (2011) highlight that data produced from FOI is often mediated and measured in unknown ways by whichever authority is responsible for its original production, rather than pure primary data produced by the researcher in an original study.

One concern not discussed in the literature is the restrictions of FOIA to public bodies. In England, the Act does not cover contracted out services of public bodies, although there is FOI guidance for arms-length external organisation (ALEO's) in Scotland under the Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002. In England, some public authorities have contracted out library provision to private companies or charitable social enterprises. FOIA does not apply to these companies. Currently,

information relating to the performance and delivery of contracted out services worth £5 million or more should be published by Local authorities (Ricketts, 2016). The consequence of a lack of FOIA policy extended to cover contracted out services is that the transparency and accountability of those local authorities, which take advantage of contracting out their statutory provision of public library services, is unclear. This poses a potential barrier to the success of gathering data about public libraries from Local authorities approached via FOI.

Nevertheless, many researchers who have used FOI, or studied the impact of FOI on academic research, have found it to be a beneficial and valuable method of gathering and producing data (Lee, 2005; Savage and Hyde, 2014; Walby and Larson, 2011). It is a fruitful method of gathering otherwise withheld data. To expand upon this benefit, it can also then provide insights into how this data or information is managed by public bodies. It makes it possible for researchers to request pre-existing data that would have otherwise been untenable to produce due to time and cost constraints. Walby and Larson (2011) and Savage and Hyde (2014) particularly emphasise the effectiveness of FOI when used in conjunction with other qualitative tools as a mixed methods approach to research.

For the purposes of this research, the benefits of using FOI as an approach to data gathering are threefold:

- 1) As an exploration of local authority provision of children's public library services, it makes sense to firstly obtain the pre-existing data that local authorities hold on this matter
- 2) It provides a secondary opportunity to explore the management of information pertaining to children's library services by local authorities and the accountability of local authorities in this regard
- 3) FOI provide solid evidence to contextualise the qualitative and quantitative data gathered via the survey of children's library workers also undertaken as part of this project

Design of FOI

As identified in the literature review, there is an acceptance that a hollowing out of public library services has occurred in the period between 2010 and 2016. To date, there has been no research into what this process entails or how it has specifically manifested regarding children's library services. The metaphor of hollowing out has real grounding in economics and politics. This research explores the proposition that the phenomenon of hollowing out has tangible implications such as input from Local authorities into library services targeted at children. The literature review identified three quantitative inputs as necessary to provide a children's library service:

- 1) Spending on children's library resources e.g. book budget
- 2) Children's library staff
- 3) An accessible library space for children

For the first two inputs, quantitative data was requested about the year-on-year book budget and staff numbers for children's library services between 2010 and 2016. Data on the adult book budget was also requested for comparison. For the last input, it was assumed that all libraries would have at least some space for children, and so quantitative data on opening hours was requested to provide further information on the availability of space and library services to children. The exact information sought can be seen in the request form (appendix 1).

Population and Sampling of FOI

The Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 makes the provision of a public library service the responsibility of Local Authorities. There are 151 authorities responsible for library services in England. This covers four authority types: county councils; unitary authorities; London boroughs and the City of London; and metropolitan districts.

The premise of using FOI was to capture a complete picture of local authority provision of children's library services across England between 2010 and 2016. To achieve this objective, a sample was selected from each authority type within the overall population of Local Authorities. A probability sampling method was employed by taking a stratified random sample from each authority type. Bryman (2012, p.171)

argues that “probability sampling allows the researcher to employ tests of statistical significance that permit inferences to be made about the sample from which the sample was selected”. The stratified random sampling approach sought to ensure that there was proportional representation of each type of authority. This contributes to a more complete understanding of what the data might infer about library provision for children across England as a whole.

To have a confidence level of 95%, with an accepted margin of error of 6%, it was calculated that out of a population of 151, an overall sample of 100 was needed. The following formula was used to work out a stratified sample size from each authority type: $n = \frac{100}{151} * p$. The distribution of samples resulting from this formula are shown in table 1. All 151 Local authorities were input into an Excel spreadsheet, within their authority type groups, and the formula =RAND() was used to randomise the local authorities. The first local authorities listed within each authority type group were selected, up to the required sample size.

Table 1- distribution of samples

Local authority type	Population (<i>p</i>)	Sample size (<i>n</i>)
County councils	27	18
Unitary authorities	56	37
London boroughs	32	21
Metropolitan districts	36	24
All authorities	151	100

Although there is statutory guidance for conducting FOI, the exact process varies depending upon the public body that information is being requested from. All public bodies that fall under FOIA have 20 working days to respond to FOI. These requests must be received in a traceable format such as a letter or email. Some Local

authorities have pre-set online request forms with limited character space, which can restrict the number of words used to express what information is being requested. Other Local authorities publish the contact details of a specific Freedom of Information officer who can then be emailed directly.

An email template was created to be sent to each of the 100 Local authorities selected. These emails were sent out in the beginning of July 2016. However, in some cases, the email content was altered to fit the specifications or character limits of an online request form. In these cases, every attempt was made not to change exact wording of the information requested. This was not always possible. The researcher did find that in at least two cases the online form appeared to corrupt some of the characters used within the request (particularly numbers and grammar such as apostrophes) which resulted in some ambiguity on the part of the Freedom of Information officer as to the specific information requested. In both cases a further relationship was developed between the FOI officer and the researcher to clarify what data was being sought. There may have been other cases of this happening unbeknownst to the researchers, where the Freedom of Information officer did not seek to clarify ambiguous text.

Of the 100 requests sent out to Local Authorities, the researchers received 94 responses – a response rate of 94%: many of these responses were incomplete. This was a disappointing response rate considering that FOIA makes it mandatory for public bodies to respond to FOI requests within 20 days. However, in comparison to other survey methods, it is a high response rate, which suggests that FOI is a fruitful data collection tool.

Data Analysis

Of the 94 Local authorities that responded to FOI, 73 provided usable data. Other responses were excluded on the grounds of having ambiguous or missing data that would distort trend analysis. Additional data was produced from correspondence between the researcher and FOI officer or responding librarian. The additional data does not represent the whole sample as only some respondents shared additional data. However, it is believed that this data was shared to provide background to the data released by FOI officers, and it is therefore useful in contextualising the quantitative data generated by FOI.

Children's Book Budget

Of the 73 usable data sets, 45 had complete data to analyse for the first FOI question on children's book budgets. The sought-after sample of the 100 Local authorities approached was as follows: 18% county councils; 37% unitary authorities' 21% London boroughs; and 24% metropolitan districts.

Repeated measures testing on the children's book budget for each financial year for the 45 local authorities across six years showed a downward trend in spending on children's resources (Figure 1):

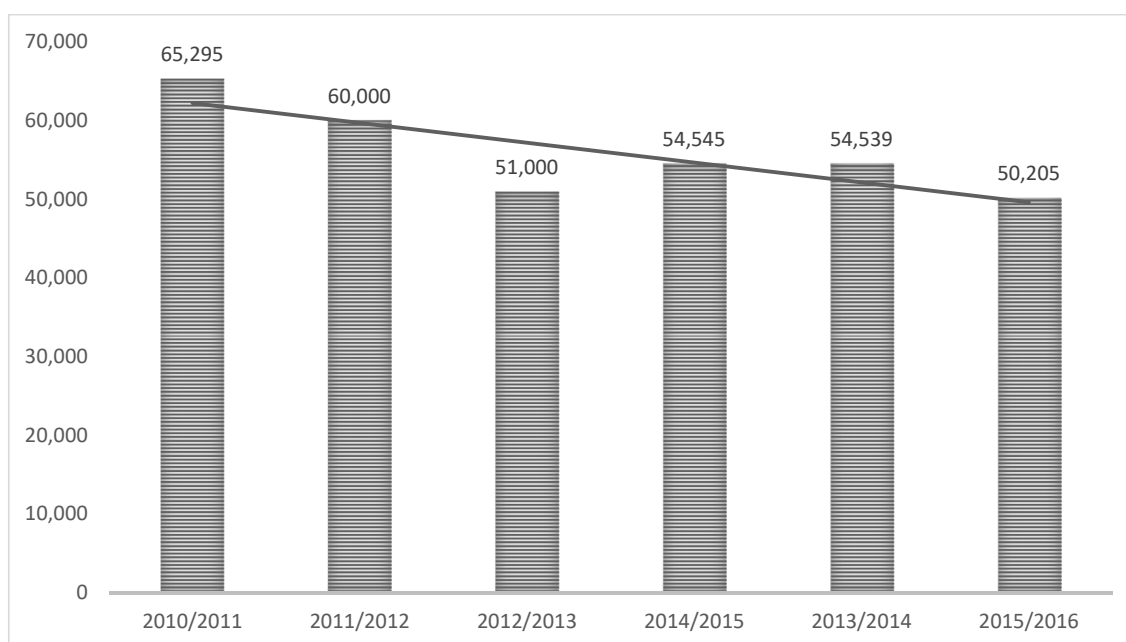


Figure 1 - Children's resources budget per year (median) 2010/11 to 2015/16 (n=45)

The data for each year shown indicates a general trend whereby the median spending on children's books and resources has fallen between 2010/2011 and 2015/2016 by 23% from £65,295 to £50,205. As table 2 further shows, the steepest decline in spending was between the year 2011/2012 and 2012/2013, and the lowest spending year was 2015/2016.

There are several outliers that affect the above data. For this reason, comparing the median budget of each financial year is a more reliable method of measuring the changing pattern in spending than the mean budget (Table 2).

Table 2- mean and median children's resources budget per year

		Child resources budget 2010/2011	Child resources budget 2011/2012	Child resources budget 2012/2013	Child resources budget 2014/2015	Child resources budget 2013/2014	Child resources budget 2015/2016
N	Valid	45	45	45	45	45	45
	Missing	28	28	28	28	28	28
Mean		82,494	76,543	75,109	74,819	78,685	75,412
Median		65,295	60,000	51,000	54,545	54,539	50,205

Some authorities have children’s book budgets of several hundreds of thousands of pounds; others have budgets of a couple of tens of thousands of pounds. It is useful therefore to further analyse this data set. Of the 45 data sets included, 16 experienced an incline in their budget over the period measured. This was the case in 2 of the 6 county council, 6 of the 15 unitary authorities, 4 of the 11 London boroughs, and 4 of the 13 metropolitan districts where data was supplied. The remaining 67% of the sample experienced a decrease in spending. 31% of the sample had over 35% spending cuts, and 16% had over 50% cuts over six years. Two Local authorities were observed to have experienced over 70% decline in spending on children’s books from 2010 to 2016.

Children’s Library Staff

Only 46 authorities responded with complete data on children’s librarians. Other authorities either did not record exact job roles within the library service, or did not have any specialist children’s library staff.

Figure 2 shows that FTE children’s library employees sharply declined in the first four years following 2010:

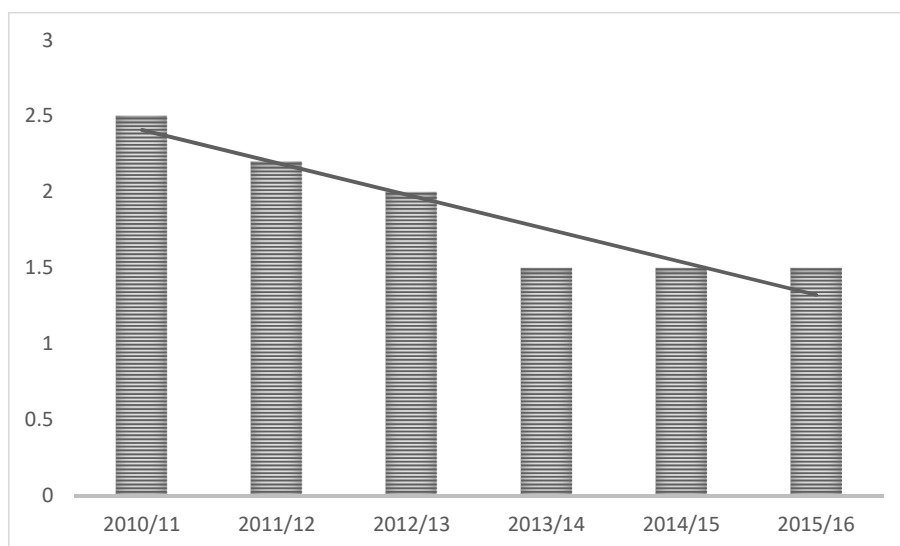


Figure 2- Median FTE dedicated children's library staff per year

The median children's staff FTE for each authority fell by 40% from 2.5 to 1.5 from 2010 to 2016. One county council went from an FTE of 5 dedicated staff in 2010/11 to 0 in 2011/12 onwards, and these numbers have never recovered. Another county council went from an FTE of 8 dedicated staff in 2010/11 to 1 in 2011/12 and onwards. Only 3 authorities experienced a growth in FTE children's staff during the period researched. 17% of authorities had steady FTE employment during the same period and 78% had a decline of children's staff between 2010 and 2016. Most significantly, 22% of authorities eliminated all specialist children's library staff roles from their service over the six years studied.

From the perspective of local authority types, Table 3 presents the data for the reductions across each type in FTE staff, with significant reductions in dedicated children's staff across recorded the board:

Table 3 - Reduction in dedicated FTE children's staff by local authority type

	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	% reduction in period
county councils (n=7)	7.8	7	5.7	4.5	3.5	2	<u>75%</u>
unitary authorities (n=20)	2	2	1.8	1.5	1.5	1.3	<u>35%</u>
london boroughs (n=7)	3.5	3.5	3.5	2.8	2.8	1	<u>71%</u>

metropolitan districts (n=12)	2.5	2.5	2.2	2.1	2.1	1.7	<u>32%</u>
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Library Opening Hours

Figure 4 demonstrates the downward trend of weekly opening hours across 57 authorities. This shows around 100 less opening hours per week for local authority libraries. However, many of these lost hours can be accounted for by library closures. By introducing the variable of authorities which have or have not implemented closures or removal of library services to community hands, a data subset is created which can be furthered analysed. Figure 3 presents the data for all 57 library authorities that provided valid responses related to opening hours:

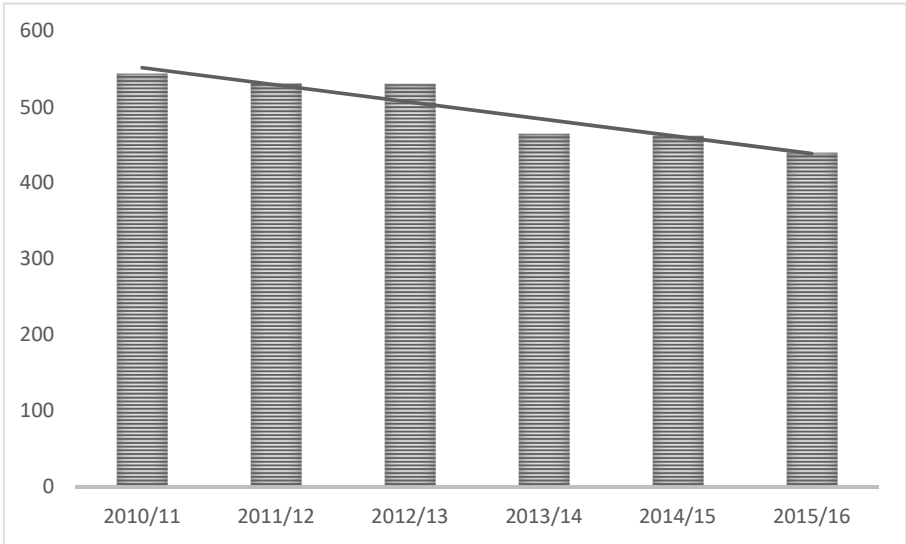


Figure 3- Median opening hours per week for all authorities (N=57)

Figure 4 presents opening hour data for the 24 authorities that had experienced library closures over the period:

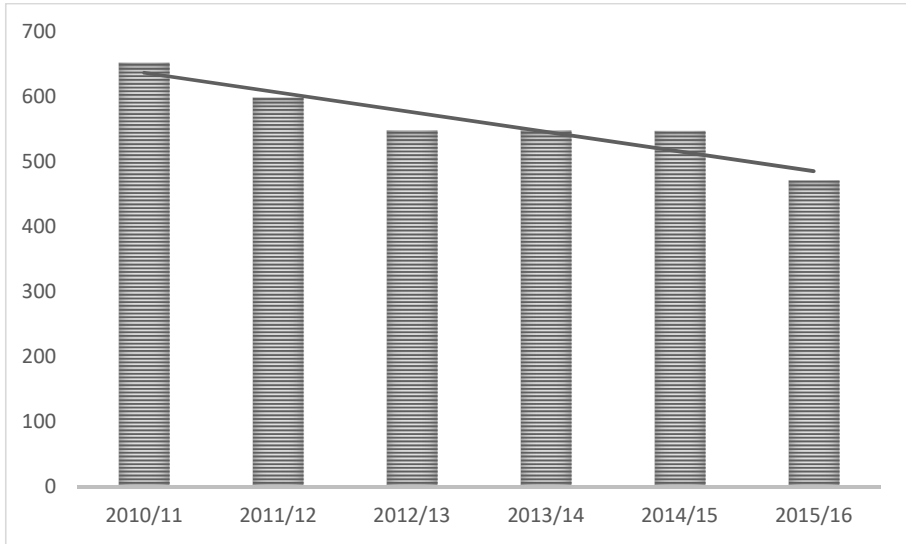


Figure 4- Median opening hours in authorities that have experienced library closures (n=24)

Figure 5 also demonstrates a decline of weekly opening hour year-by-year for the 33 authorities that had not experienced any library closures.

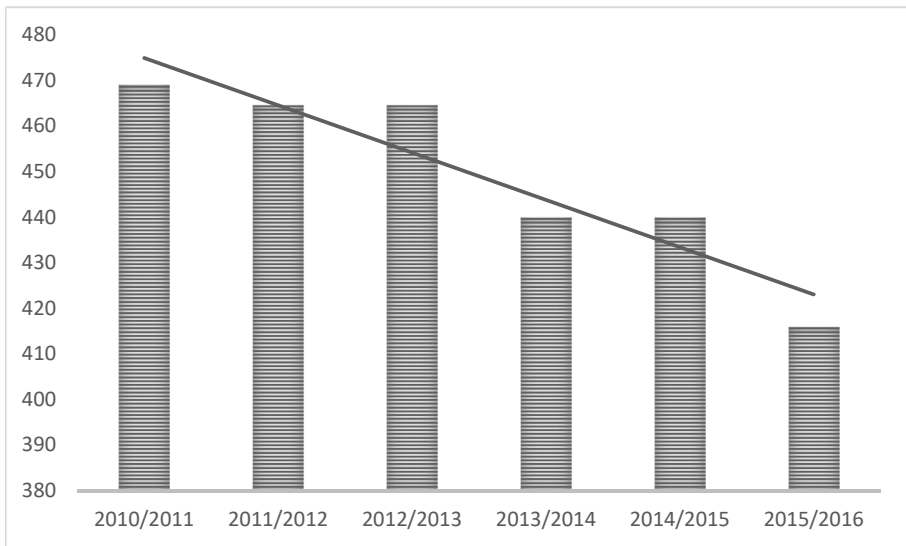


Figure 5- Median opening hours per week for no closure authorities (n=33)

The median measurement of weekly opening hours reveals that authorities with no closures still experienced around 53 lost hours per week from 2010/11 to 2015/16, which is a decrease of 11%. Furthermore, opening hours have experienced a significant drop in the last year measured. Figure 6 presents the opening hours of all closure libraries and non-closure libraries side by side:

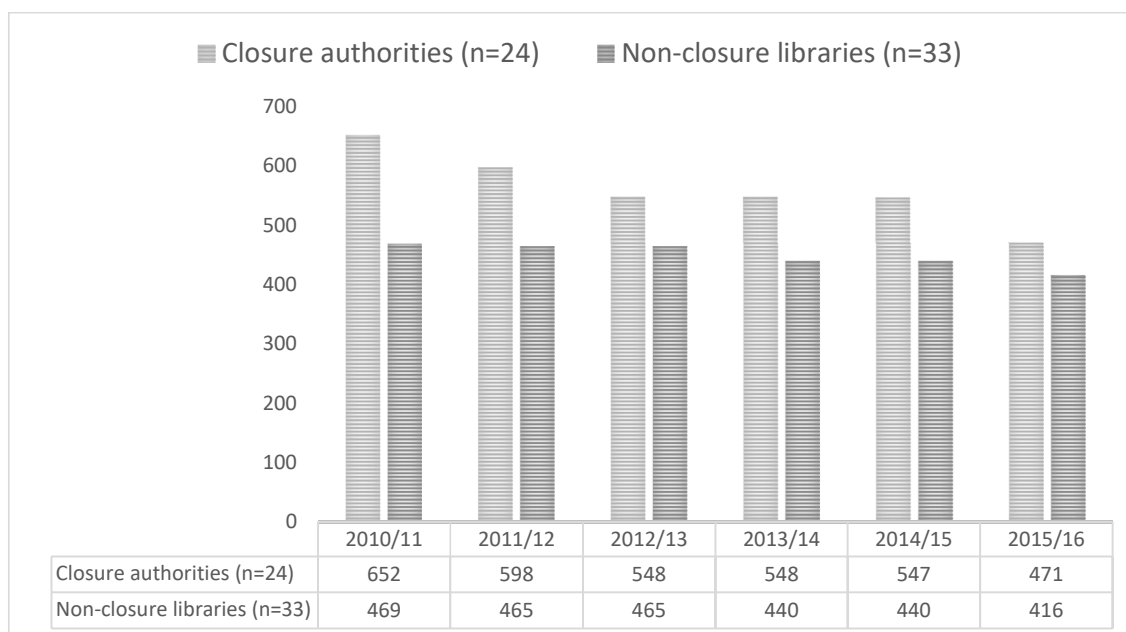


Figure 6 - Median weekly opening hours comparing libraries experiencing closures, and no closures

When local authority type is analysed, we can see reductions in opening hours across all types:

Table 4 – Median data for reductions in weekly opening hours by local authority type

	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	% reduction in period
county councils (n=9)	1727	1472	1547	1547	1547	1524	<u>12%</u>
unitary authorities (n=21)	334	315	302	302	294	274	<u>18%</u>
london boroughs (n=9)	538	489	465	431	431	439	<u>18%</u>
metropolitan districts (n=18)	680	652	652	579	578	511	<u>25%</u>

All authority types, then, have experienced significant weekly opening hour reductions in six-year period under study.

Additional Data

The key themes to emerge from additional textual data generated by FOI correspondence are: 1) inaccessibility of data; 2) restructuring of libraries within Local Authorities; and 3) generalisation of staff.

For 1) many authorities simply do not record lots of data, as one FOI officer reported, “the council does not hold separate data regarding spend on children’s and adult’s books”. This reflects a wider incidence of children’s library services not being regarded as a specialist or separate aspect of the overall library service. Other FOI officers noted that the inaccessibility of data was a direct result of outsourcing. One reported that, “[the] council commissioned [a community interest company] to manage library services (...) therefore this information is no longer held by the council” which outs access to the data out-with the scope of FOI legislation. Similarly, another commented that, “unfortunately, [the council] has contracted [a social enterprise] to provide library services so we are unable to provide all the details you have requested”. In both these cases, library services remain up and running, but the data pertaining to their running is no longer openly available to the public. While clearly evidencing a key element of Rhodes definition of hollowing out (privatisation and outsourcing), there are also worrying aspects here from the point of view of outsourcing of services to arms-length organisations that are not subject to FOI legislation, and thus not transparent to the public. This poses significant challenges to the public, and to researchers, attempting to build a picture of the public library service in the UK, and the impact of cuts.

The next theme, 2) demonstrates a broader change within local government that affects many local services, whereby individual services are restructured, integrated and centralised into one. One FOI officer reported the effect that this has on data management regarding these services, “a number of elements of the library budget have now been centralised and are therefore no longer presented within the envelope of the library services budget”. This restructure is happening in different ways. One authority reported on the integration of libraries and museums and stated that “libraries and museums budgets merged from 2011, we are unable to separate the two budgets” another neighbourhood services, “[the] library service is now on component of a wider [neighbourhood service] that incorporates community centres and other functions” and similarly another customer services, “since 2013 libraries and customer services have been fully integrated and expenditure cannot be completely separated for libraries only”. Most of these reported changes to local authority provision of services has happened within the scope of this research.

For 3), the generalisation of ‘deprofessionalisation’ of staff could in some cases be regarded as part of the wider restructuring of libraries. Certainly, one authority indicated that this was the case: “as an integrated library and museum service, we do not have dedicated children’s librarians/library assistants. We do have learning officers with a service-wide remit”. However, many authorities emphasised that although there were distinct library services, staff had a general responsibility across the service whereby “all of our staff deliver and provide library services to children and young people” and “work with children is part of the work of every member of staff in each branch”. These quotes appear particularly concerned with frontline staff, but other FOI officers indicated that the generalisation of staff goes deeper. One reported that, “after a major review [in 2015] staff now have multi-functional roles” and another commented that, “there is now a team (...) with responsibility for a broader engagement programme [who] work with a wide range of ages”. This generalisation of staff is also occurring in tandem with staff cuts across library services in England.

Discussion

The data obtained for this paper supports the literature to show that children’s public library services have been hollowed out in the following ways:

1. reduced book budgets; ‘
2. deprofessionalisation’ or loss of staff;
3. reduced opening hours;
4. and outsourcing or restructuring.

The first research objective was to gain knowledge of the extent of hollowing out of children’s public library services. The FOI showed that children’s book budgets have fallen by 23% in the period researched. 67% of Local authorities were found to have decreased children’s book budgets. CIPFA stats from 2014/15 to 2015/16 show that the overall book budget for libraries fell by 8.4% in that year (Kean, 2016). According to the FOI data, children’s book budgets fell by 7.9% in this same year, which is a similar percentile. This provides some verification of the FOI data.

Recent research (BBC, 2016) found that between 2010 and 2016 there was 25% staff cuts across the UK. Children’s staff were reduced by 40%, which is 15% more

than staff cuts throughout the whole library service. This would suggest that children's library staff have been cut at a greater rate than the rest of the service. According to FOI, in areas where there were no service closures, hours fell by 11% between 2010 and 2016.

The second objective of this project was to assess emerging trends of hollowing out. The falling patterns in spending, staff levels and opening hours suggest that this trend will continue. The steepest declines can be seen in the years immediately after 2010, and again after 2015. This is compatible with the two general election years, but it is not clear if this pattern is related to the election itself, or if it is an outcome of the election of the coalition and consecutive Conservative governments. The data also showed that outsourcing and restructuring is an enduring trend. This is compatible with the literature on neoliberalism and Cameron's concepts of localism and the Big Society. The clearest theme to emerge from this research is that whilst libraries are a statutory service, there is no standardised delivery across England of children's public library services. This is not new, as Edmonds and Miller (1990) and Elkin and Lonsdale (1997) found, but when combined with restructures to services and severe cuts, it is likely that this situation will continue to worsen for many young people.

The third objective was to create a working definition of hollowing out as it pertained to libraries, which was proposed as:

a process of efficiencies and restructuring in which library buildings stay open but the actual services, and the value of those services, is eroded through government and local government policy, cuts, and 'deprofessionalisation'.

This working definition was proposed after analysis in the literature review, and the data analysis undertaken in this paper confirms its validity.

Conclusions and recommendations

The concept of hollowing out as defined by Rhodes has been proven to be present within public library services in England. This research has demonstrated that there has been a downward trend in staff, spending and opening hours across children's public library services in England between 2010 and 2016. The literature suggests

that this is coupled with a rise in closures, community run and outsourced libraries, and volunteering. The data produced for this research describes a process which is consistent with the definition of hollowing out identified at the start of this research. This definition encompasses the economic and political factors that shape the phenomenon of hollowing out. Although it has been applied here to a specialist public library service, it may be a valid definition to test against the wider public library service, or other public services undergoing a similar process since 2010.

However, this research has shown that library services across England are variable, and some local authorities continue to provide a similar or better investment and standard of service as they did in 2010. This leads to the argument that children face an unfair 'postcode lottery' of library services depending on which Local authority they live in.

This research is limited in several ways. The scope of the research was constrained by a lack of usable data from FOI. As more library services are outsourced, it is expected that the issue of transparency of library services will continue. The research is also limited by the depth of its approach. Local authority inputs of library services were researched, as well as staff attitudes and perspectives of the process of hollowing out. This identified that libraries benefit children's literacy skills and help to develop social capital and overcome inequality. From the research, a hypothesis can be put forth that the quality of library services for children has suffered over the past six years, and therefore the benefits of libraries for children will be lesser. However, this cannot be tested within the scope of this paper.

More research into the value of libraries for children, and the impact of hollowing out on how valuable the service continues to be needs to be done. As an outcome of this research, the following recommendations are made:

- Future longitudinal research into the impact of hollowing out on children should be conducted to explore the correlation between quantity of library inputs and quality of service
- Children's library services should be protected as a statutory aspect of library services at a national level and a nationally recognised framework should be

developed with guidelines for providing children's and young people's library services

- Guidelines on comprehensive data management regarding public libraries services should be created for Local Authorities, and this responsibility should lie with authorities and not organisation such as CIPFA, who collect data
- Any statutory service that is contracted out should be covered by FOIA

The authors hope that these recommendations, and the results presented, will benefit future research and help to inform the discussion on the current state of children's public library services and any policy or strategies relating to the provision of these services. As the literature and research shows, libraries have huge value for children and society in terms of education, health, citizenry, and working life and the opportunities for this service to benefit the lives of children in the future should be protected.

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