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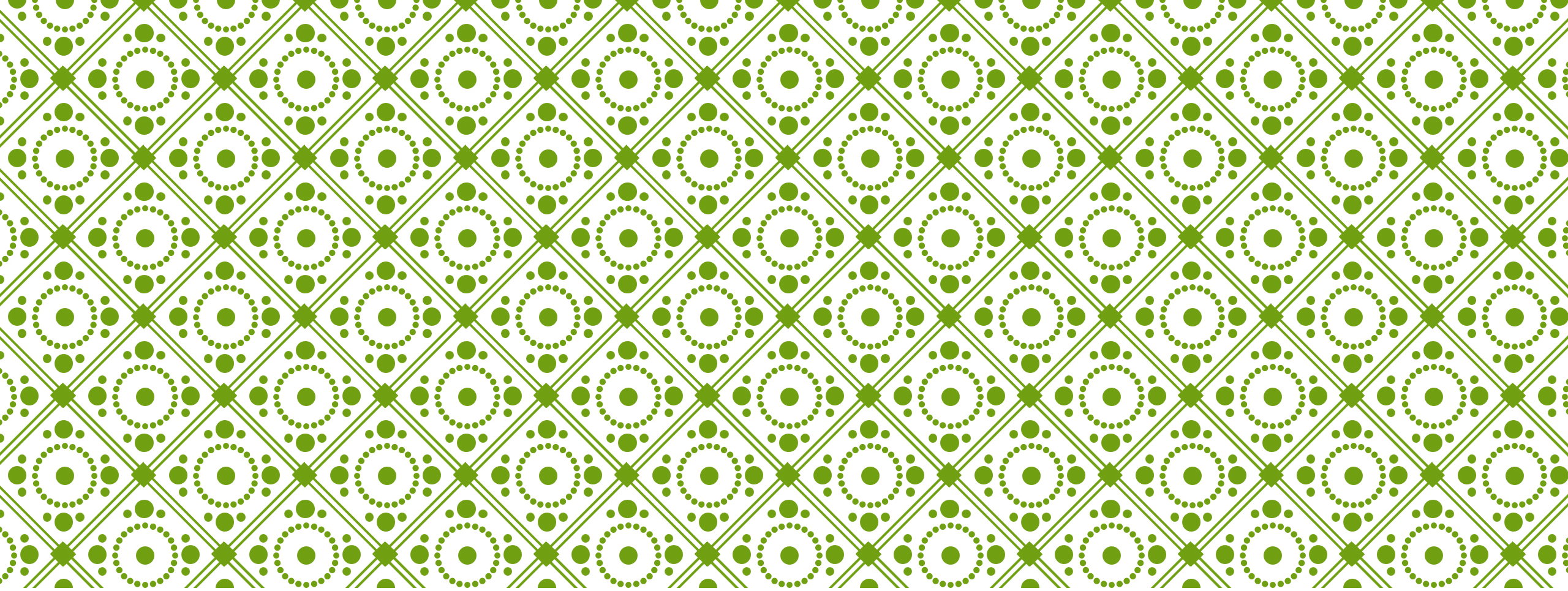
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THE CHALLENGES OF DELIVERING A PUBLIC LIBRARY SERVICE USING VOLUNTEERS: A QUALITATIVE INVESTIGATION EXAMINING KEY STAKEHOLDER EXPERIENCES

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THE UK PUBLIC LIBRARY LANDSCAPE



<https://www.pexels.com/photo/brown-and-white-bear-plush-toy-42230/>

Emergence of a hybrid public library landscape

In past 6 years complex picture has emerged (Wainwright et al 2016)

343 libraries closed

A quarter of all paid library jobs gone

Recruitment of 15,500 volunteers

Sticking plaster approach to heal cuts

VOLUNTEER BENEFITS

'Volunteers have always contributed to libraries' (Sieghart Independent Library Report for England 2014, p.21)

Additionality/value-added

Enhancing capacity and expertise

Community engagement

Social inclusion

Reciprocal relationship

Volunteers develop new skills, widen social networks and become empowered



<http://www.staffordshirenewsroom.co.uk/hundreds-volunteers-back-libraries/>

VOLUNTEER CHALLENGES



<https://www.flickr.com/photos/number7cloud/16525933126>

The elephant in the room

Political

Random and reactive

Job replacement

Barriers to volunteering

Usual suspects

Social exclusion

Coercion reduces benefits

Lack of capacity

Costly



MY RESEARCH

Phase 1 Delphi study

Phase 2 Case study investigation

2 North East Metropolitan Boroughs

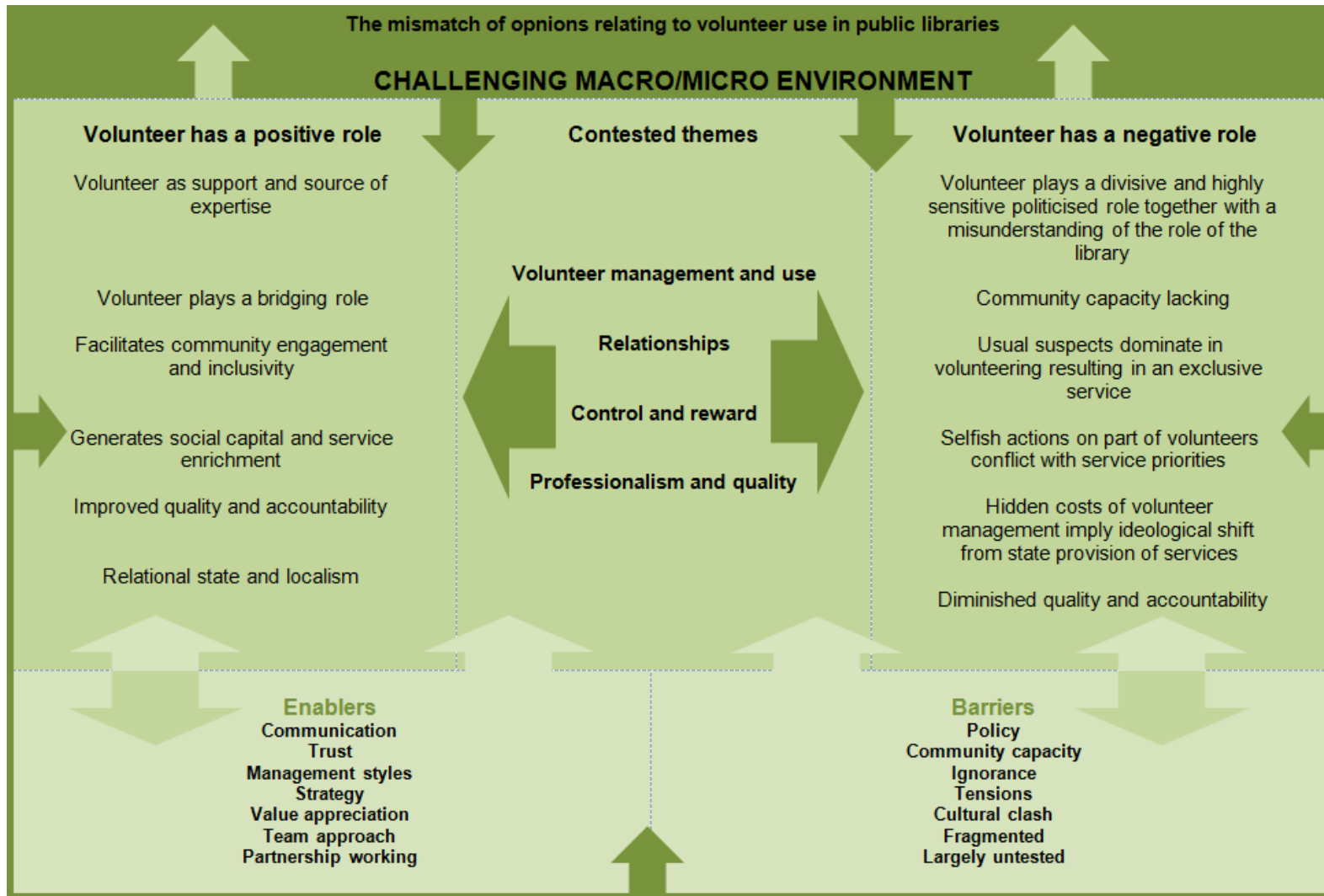
4 stakeholder groups questioned

Interviews, focus groups, surveys

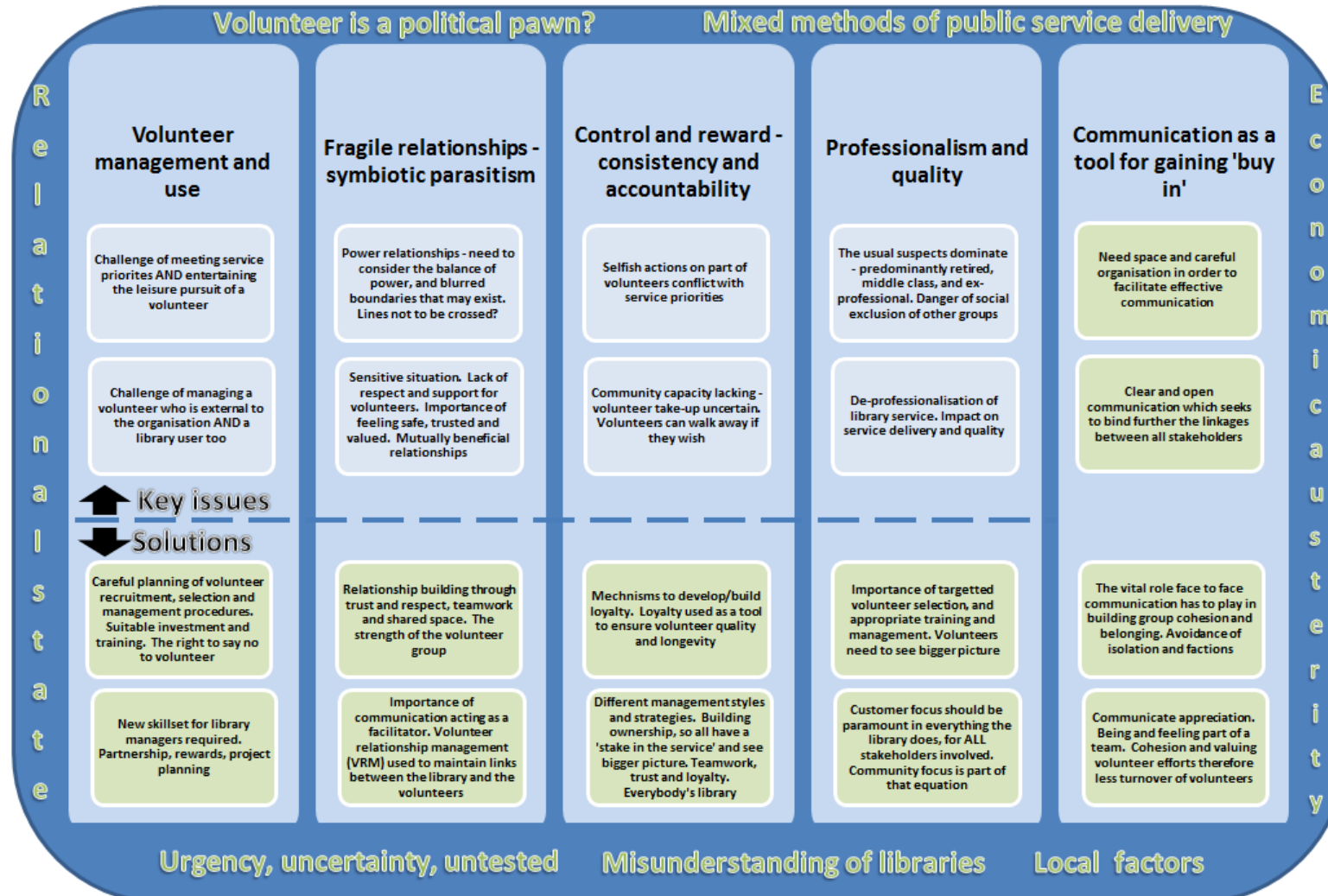
Themes, triangulation

Rich picture

PHASE 2 FINDINGS



CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS



CHALLENGING ENVIRONMENT

‘The ultimate challenge is one of resources; its financial, it’s the budget situation we are in, because of the situation that the council is in. The budget has been massively hit, we’ve so far managed without closing any libraries though we have reduced hours, we’ve also taken hits in the book fund over recent years, but we are now at a situation where there is nowhere else to go really’ (Library manager interview LA1)

‘In the North-East we know that our local authorities have had the brunt of the cutbacks from the Tory government, and you just think how far can they cut them?’ (Volunteer focus group LA1)

‘That’s the way people think; if it’s not making money it’s not worth its salt’ (Volunteer focus group LA1)

VOLUNTEER MANAGEMENT AND USE

'It's become tinged lately, there's not animosity towards them (volunteers), but there's definitely a few rumblings amongst staff. The staff are getting more and more work to do front-line, and less and less of the..... nice side' (Library manager interview LA2)

'Volunteers are I think.....tricky to handle. It's more difficult than staff, because after all, as a manager or a supervisor, you can tell somebody to do something who is staff, or NOT to do something, and they either listen to you and do what you say, or they can be in trouble. It's not quite the same with volunteers' (Library manager interview LA1)

'We can walk away for a start if we don't like it, but they can't. We can pick or choose, they can't. If we decide not to come in on a Wednesday or come in on the Thursday instead, we can' (Volunteer focus group LA1)

'A small volunteer group can take more support, of paid staff's time, than the rest of the paid staff put together. So does their value outweigh the benefits that they bring?'(Library manager interview LA2)

RELATIONSHIPS

‘I think there could be quite a lot of resistance to new people (volunteers), and staff are resistant to new people. They’re alright with the people you’ve got, but it is quite a delicate balance’ (Library manager interview LA2)

‘The council kind of acts as though it’s willingly giving up its time. It doesn’t want us... well I’m not saying it doesn’t want us to have it (the library), but it wants us to have it, but within its own sound box really. They’ve put up a lot of walls’’ (Volunteer focus group LA2)

‘They’ve (volunteers) had arguments amongst themselves. I’m now very aware there are probably 3 distinct groups of people, and they come in at separate times, and they’re not communicating with each other even though they are working on the same project. The older group don’t like the newer group of people who have come in’ (Library manager interview LA1)

CONTROL AND REWARD

'It's the level of control you can have as well; volunteer staff are volunteering their time, they can come and go as they like. You've got no real authority over volunteers, I mean you can put guidelines in place, but you can't bring to bear some of the pressures you can on paid staff ' (Library manager interview LA1)

'You're here for your own enjoyment, and you're here voluntarily.....so it is a little bit more relaxed amongst us because of that, so we do operate differently to paid staff' (Volunteer focus group LA2)

'I do think the population couldn't support that (volunteering). I don't think you would get the body of people to run a library on a consistent basis.....I just don't think we've got enough, for want of a better word, professional people, as a pool to come in to do that' (Library manager interview LA1)

'You can't make them (volunteers) stay, you have to ask nicely. You do have to always be aware that they are not employees, they are members of the public who are helping you, and they can be a law unto themselves' (Library manager interview LA1)

PROFESSIONALISM AND QUALITY

‘We do have one gentleman, who’s possibly got Alzheimer’s or senility. His volunteering really really helps him, but there’s a point at which it’s quite difficult to find him something to do..... But we know it is really important for him to keep coming along, and to be as involved as possible, so I find that quite a challenge’ (Library manager interview LA1)

‘You might get some very enthusiastic people, but I think it is more than having enthusiastic people, you need someone who understands what a library is’ (Library manager interview LA1)

SOLUTIONS TO THE CHALLENGES

Communication as a lynchpin

Purpose, belonging, ownership, loyalty and trust

The role of space

Customer focus

Mutually beneficial relationships

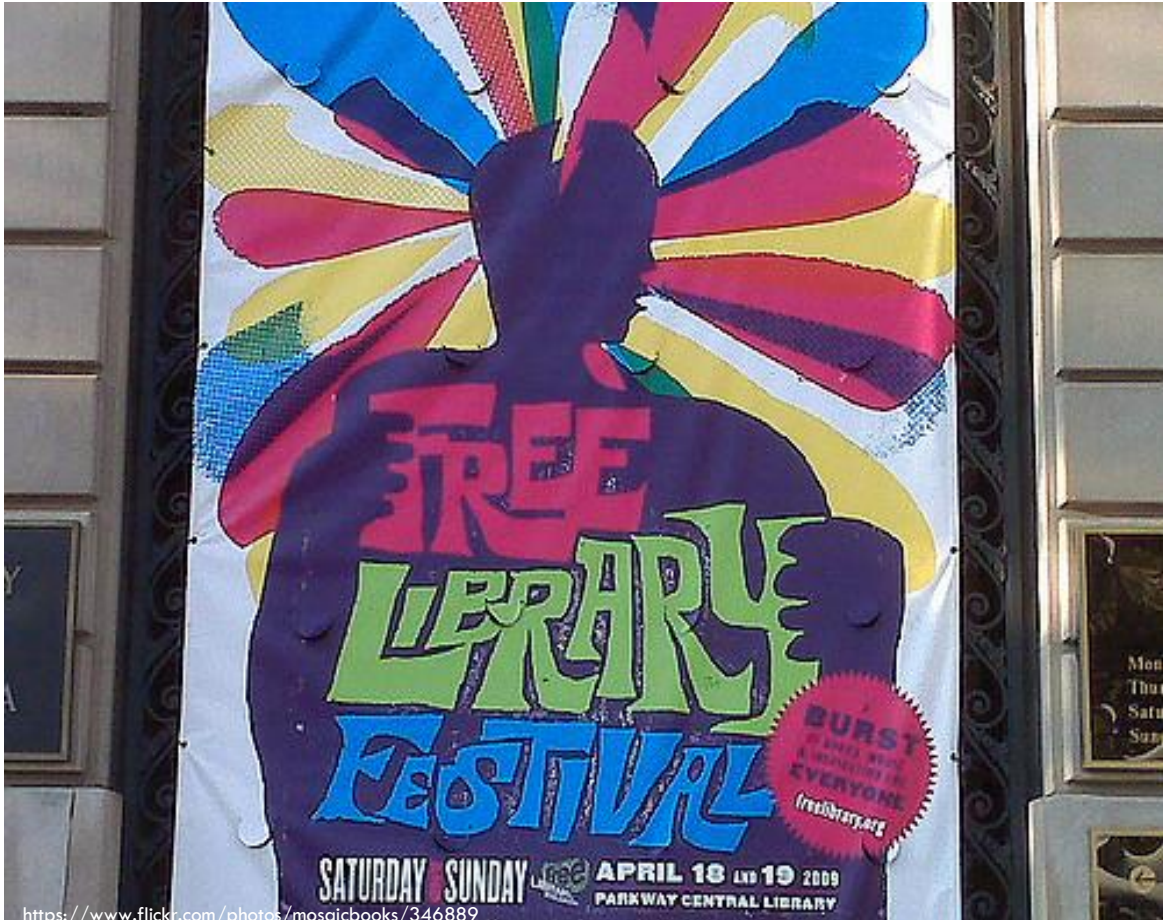
Formalisation of volunteer management procedures

New skills for managers

Volunteer relationship management



TO CONCLUDE



'A library in the middle of a community is a cross between an emergency exit, a life raft and a festival. They are cathedrals of the mind; hospitals of the soul; theme parks of the imagination. On a cold, rainy island, they are the only sheltered public spaces where you are not a consumer, but a citizen instead.....'

As the cuts kick in, protestors and lawyers are fighting for individual libraries like villagers pushing stranded whales back into the sea. A library is such a potent symbol of a town's values: Each one closed down might as well be 6,000 stickers plastered over every available surface, reading.

'WE CHOSE TO BECOME MORE STUPID AND DULL!'

Libraries that stayed open during the Blitz will be closed by budgets. A trillion small doors closing' (Moran, 2013: p.211)