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# Concerns over Forest Hill Library plans to rent desk space

NEWS JUN 29, 2017 BY NATASHA ONWUEMEZI



Forest Hill Library in Lewisham has started renting out desk space at the cost of £200 a month.

The library has 12 new desks to rent and said the “dedicated co-working space” will be for the exclusive use of creatives, freelancers, entrepreneurs, social enterprises and charities. The space comes equipped with lockable storage and wifi.

The library based in South East London has been run under a community model library by arts organisation V22 and community group Friends of Forest Hill Library since October 2016.

Tara Cranswick, founder and director of V22, said that the rentable desks are based in a new, previously unused, space and stressed that the library would still have the same number of old desks to use for free. All the money raised from the rent would be pumped back into running the library, she said.

However, the move to charge for desk space has sparked some

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and amongst some library campaigners.

Dawn Finch, library campaigner and former president of CILIP, told *The Bookseller* that she had "great concerns" over who will be profiting from the enterprise. "Whilst I fully understand that in times of austerity, a public library may well need to explore creative methods of income generation, I have great concerns over the type of companies that are circling community libraries in search of a profit. I feel that as some library groups are desperately in need of an urgent solution to funding problems, they will be forced to make decisions that are, in themselves, unethical.

"The provision of a library service is a legal and statutory requirement for every local authority. As they wash their hands of the problem by handing libraries over to small groups, they force community groups to desperately try to hang on alone. This will inevitably lead to some groups making decisions that are not inclusive, and do not serve all in the wider community."

Author Catherine Johnson said: "I couldn't believe this. It makes me incredibly sad and angry. What a crass attempt at squeezing cash for locals. The whole ethos of libraries as free to their communities is broken by this initiative. Libraries were set up to be the universities of the working class: a place to study, to do job applications. These opportunities are now denied to all but those to pay. A sign that volunteer run spaces do not work."

Meanwhile, library campaigner Alan Wylie said: "Renting out desk space to entrepreneurs or anyone in what was once a statutory

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'community library' is managed by an offshore arts organisation and has a board of trustees, many who are entrepreneurs themselves, who don't see a problem with the privatisation and commercialisation of public spaces/services."

However, the library has defended the move, stressing that the space was previously unused and that all revenue will be reinvested into the running of the library.

Cranswick said: "The desk space we're renting out was previously unused and all funds received will go back into the library. It's a large space that used to house the teen section and film clubs and events, but now the teen section has been moved into the main library and the clubs and events in the community space next door. All the desks in the main library are still there to use free of charge."

She added: "We've gotten a lot of flak, people don't necessarily understand our business model. There's a lot of strong feelings about what's going on with libraries. Hundreds are closing, and keeping them open is an important thing to do. They're important community centres as well as places that house important resources."

V22, which primarily runs artists' studios, also took over the running of Manor House Library in Lewisham, which re-opened last month.

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