

## [Private libraries in practice](#) [1]

Written by [Sam Bowman](#) [2] | Thursday 29 March 2012



Yesterday's "pastygate" was a fun moment in England's usually-dreary political scene. Everybody was knowingly parodying themselves in "outrage" at the government removing the VAT exemption from Cornish pasties and sausage rolls? The Telegraph even set up [a rolling live-blog](#) [3]. It was a rare display of fun self-awareness by the Westminster set.

It reminded me of another silly story that took place around this time last year, with admittedly less self-awareness: the kerfuffle over "library privatizations". Some local councils, making spending cuts to adjust to cuts in their central government funding, decided that libraries were high up on the list of things to forgo. (This may have been politically driven, because it was mostly Labour councils shutting libraries down.) The media narrative ended up portraying this as a central government cut to libraries directly, so the whole story came to embody the supposed pain of austerity.

[Eamonn Butler wrote a blogpost](#) [4] arguing that closing libraries was not just necessary but also desirable, which provoked an angry storm on Twitter among followers of John Prescott. Funnily enough, it became our most popular blogpost ever, with around 30,000 direct hits to it alone, and counting. Now, on the terrific Atlantic Cities blog, I read about a case of [privately-run public libraries working quite well in practice](#) [5]:

*Even the councilman who opposed the move, Bob Kellar, says he hasn't heard any complaints since the new system opened in July. "I have visited the library a couple of times and walked around. I was very impressed with what I've seen," he says. "I really haven't felt that there has been any push-back."*

*Indeed, it sounds like there's not much to complain about. Hours have increased. The library is now open on Sundays. There are 77 new computers, a new book collection dedicated to homeschooling parents and more children's programs. Santa Clarita is even installing a fancy laptop dispenser, where patrons can swipe their card to check out a laptop to use anywhere in the system. Visits are up; a new facility is in the works.*

This is different to privatized libraries, because the city is still paying. But it's an interesting step, and one that library-lovers should pay attention to. The savings from outsourcing the running of these libraries have been significant (in the region of 20-25%) and it looks like, if anything, quality has improved.

It's not ideal: the public shouldn't be paying for libraries, which should be funded by charities or subscriptions. But it's a start.

**Source URL:** <http://www.adamsmith.org/blog/media-culture/private-libraries-in-practice>

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