

The library as welfare generator

Like the rest of the world, Denmark is experiencing a marked centralization that concentrates the population around the largest cities. This results in a divided Denmark, where the rural areas are being depopulated, work places close down, young people move to the cities and the tax base is diminishing.



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The project *Småt brændbart* ('small combustible') links five of these fringe municipalities in Jutland, Ringkøbing-Skjern, Morsø, Aabenraa, Vesthimmerland and Brønderslev – in a project where the libraries are being developed as a kind of welfare institution.

Via the project, the five libraries have facilitated joint creative processes that bring together citizens and municipal players to work on new welfare solutions. The project gets financial support from the Danish Agency for Culture and Palaces and runs over two years.

New library welfare solutions

It is obvious that the present public welfare models are crying out for new solutions. The unique aspect of the project is that *Småt brændbart* places the five libraries as welfare generators.

In the fringe areas, with a rapidly growing group of older people and fewer taxpayers, welfare solutions have to be reconsidered. This calls for social innovation, co-creation, collaboration.

Naturally, there are nuances in the different approaches, but the point remains the same: Together we can achieve more, and it is a question of thinking of solutions across the municipality.

The project is particularly important as an example of how libraries can tackle the role of welfare operators.

Focus on segments

Based on the Danish library initiative Tænketanken Fremtidens Bibliotekers' (The think tank Future Libraries) segment study from 2014, the project has so far been focusing on the target group seniors and parents over 30.

With the help from personas and observations, the project has formulated the senior target group's particular fringe characteristics: He is male and in the risk zone as regards loneliness and health problems. Another challenge in the fringe areas is marginalized families. Many parents are poorly educated, economically challenged and the group is characterized by high unemployment.

All five libraries have conducted merging processes with for example care consultants, family consultants, associations and fire balls. The result is five projects that make new collaborations possible.

Facilitating welfare without extra costs

The results of the project show that the

public library is a unique arena for joint creative processes and that by uniting various players, new welfare solutions can be worked out without extra costs. Simply by using the collective resources across borders.

In this way, *Småt brændbart* defines a new role for public libraries in fringe areas: Based on culture, learning and identity, the libraries have strategically and purposefully placed themselves at the forefront as welfare facilitators and problem solvers in relation to municipal challenges, initiatives and strategies, e.g. in the areas of mental health and social challenges.

“ The aim of the project is that the library must contribute to merging the existing efforts and policies within the area, which requires the library to be out-reaching and facilitating.

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