

The LIBRARY *Campaigner*

Supporting friends and users of libraries



A new minister for libraries – how does the future look?

What are public libraries for? – see page 5

Local solution, or hostage to fortune? – see page 7

Books – a chance to spend more on them? – see page 12



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THE LIBRARY CAMPAIGN – AIMS AND OBJECTIVES:

To advance the lifelong education of the public by the promotion, support, assistance and improvement of libraries through the activities of friends and users groups.

Executive Committee Meetings 2005 dates November 19

The Officers and the Executive Committee meet regularly every two months, 1–4pm on a Saturday, usually in central London. Campaign members are always very welcome to attend. If you want to come to a meeting contact the Secretary to receive an agenda.

We would like to hold more of these meetings in the regions, both to encourage members to come and to help those committee members who have a long journey to London. Last year a meeting in Lewes was managed.

If a local group would like to invite us to meet in their area, we would be delighted to come.

Thanks to ...

- **Unison**, for its continued and valued support.
- **CILIP (Chartered Institute of Library & Information Professionals)** for permission to adapt certain material for this issue from its journal, **Update**.



The Library Campaign
22 Upper Woburn Place
London WC1H 0TB

Tel: 0870 770 7946
Fax: 0870 770 7947
email: librarycam@aol.com
www.Librarycampaign.co.uk

Registered charity number 1102634

ELECTED OFFICERS AND MEMBERS OF THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

National Secretary: Andrew Coburn

13 Shrublands Close, Chelmsford, Essex CM2 6LR
Tel: 01245 244957 – Day; 01245 356210 – Eve
email: acoburn@blueyonder.co.uk

Chairperson: Brian Hall

32 Beachcroft Road, Wall Heath, Kingswinford, West Midlands DY6 0HX
Tel: 01384 833884. Fax: 01384 274025. Mobile: 07778 007791
email: brianhall@msn.com

Treasurer: Martin Wright

24 Fairlands Road, Sale, Manchester M33 4AY.
Tel: 0161 718 3637. email: wrightm191@hotmail.com

Members of the Executive Committee

Judith Deschamps

35 Medusa Road, London SE6 4JW

Kathleen Frenchman, 7 Barnsbury Square, London N1 1JL
Tel: 020 7607 2665. email: kf@librarylondon.org.uk

Eric Hirons-Smith

2 Arrowsmith House, Wharnccliffe Hill, Rotherham, South Yorks S65 1HQ
Tel: 07835 259675

Ron Salmons

14 Sherwood Road, Hampton Hill, Middlesex TW12 1DF

Chris Smith

45 Surrey Road, Seaford, Sussex BN25 2NR

Ron Surrudge (Chair of AGM)

3 Dower Avenue, Wallington, Surrey SM6 0RG

Tel & Fax: 020 8647 2003. email: rgsurrudge@btopenworld.com

Membership Secretary: Tricia Kings

28 Morrab Road, Penzance TR18 4EZ.
email: tk113@hotmail.com

Editor: Laura Swaffield

36B Crewdson Road, London SW9 0LJ

Tel: 020 7255 0586. email: laura.swaffield@cilip.org.uk

Friends Groups Liaison and Co-ordinator: Vacant
– if interested, please contact the Secretary

News from the Campaign



The *Campaign starter pack* (handbook) for campaigners has been re-written by Geoff Smith, and is now being edited and designed for publication.

Meanwhile, the regular meetings with staff at the MLA (Museums, Libraries & Archives Council) are raising TLC's profile and providing us with very useful contacts and information.

At the most recent meeting, on July 28, Andrew Coburn, Judith Deschamps, Kathleen Frenchman and Brian Hall, (The Library Campaign) met Andrew Stevens, Val King and Sue Meeson from MLA.

The group got a preview of the PKF report (see p. 12). They also discussed the MLA's planned response to the select committee report (see p. 14), due to be published the next day. Discussion included the importance of the **right kind of staff** and attracting the right skills.

This was the perfect cue for Sue Meeson to show how MLA is trying to solve this very problem. A strategy to 'market' public libraries will begin by highlighting the **need to recruit more librarians** – and to stress that the job needs lively, people-centred workers, not the usual stereotype of what a librarian is.

Discussion followed on how the Library Campaign could help. TLC was asked to comment on a '**pocket book of public libraries**' and **graphics style sheets** then being designed – and did, to a very tight timescale. They are just now being issued. Both could be used by the

Campaign nationally and also by local groups, perhaps distributed through the Campaign.

The Campaign reps told the MLA that we very shortly intend to start work in earnest to gain Chief Librarians' help in compiling a **new directory of local groups** (see NEW WEBSITE above). CILIP (*the librarians' association*) will also be asked to help.

Andrew Stevens gave a preview of a '**community engagement**' project intended to produce, by summer 2006, guidance and toolkits to enable library authorities to involve the community in making choices and get the training to do so. The project worker will be put in touch with the Campaign.

Val King reported the latest on MLA's comprehensive '**workforce development strategy**'. There is work in the South West on 'generic skill sets and training needs analysis for the new agenda'. NIACE (the national adult education body) has developed '**E-Guides for Libraries**' – **training materials specifically for library staff** – and is now looking for 'e-champions' to make best use of the work so far.

Finally, work on the barriers that discourage young **black and ethnic minority** people from seeking jobs in libraries is being studied. A report is due soon.

Work to sketch the demographic profile of **volunteers** is still under way. TLC has been sent a copy of the questionnaire being used with local authorities.

THE LIBRARY CAMPAIGNER WINTER 2005, No.71

EDITOR: Laura Swaffield

DESIGN & PRODUCTION:
Owain Hammonds

CONTRIBUTORS:

Mrs H. Andrews, Professor Ken Bakewell, Mark Benjamin, June Benn/Barraclough, Andrew Coburn, Kathleen Frenchman, Brian Hall, Peter Richardson, Laura Swaffield

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What do you think of The Campaigner – its content, its frequency, its style? What do you like, or dislike? What would you like to see more of, or less of? All comments and ideas gratefully received at the TLC address (opposite) or direct to Laura Swaffield: laura.swaffield@cilip.org.uk; 020 7255 0586.

AGM 2005: NEW OFFICERS

At the AGM on Saturday 12 May 2005, at Friends Meeting House, London, the small group present elected the **officers and Executive Committee** – Chair: Brian Hall; Secretary: Andrew Coburn; Treasurer: Martin Wright. Executive Committee: Judith Deschamps, Chris Smith, Eric Hiron Smith, Ron Salmons, Ron Surridge, Kathleen Frenchman.

It has been a difficult year since then, with Brian and Andrew (in particular) beset by an assortment of illness, family affairs and/or 'the day job'. Jill Wight, our former administrator, is still much missed. But we need to complete our review of TLC's future before we decide exactly how to re-invest the small sum that used to pay Jill.

The Treasurer writes: Please can members update their SUBSCRIPTIONS to the current rate with payment into the Campaign's HSBC bank account, by using the membership form on the back page.

The Campaign has a new website – so use it!

Andrew Coburn writes:

As promised, the Campaign has a new website. It is not as full as it should be yet and **we would like your contributions or suggestions**. You can find it at www.librarycampaign.com.

One of the things we have started to do is **list all the local Campaign Groups**, Friends and User groups that we can.

If yours is not there, please **email the contact address on the site** with the details. If your group has a site of its own, we will be happy to put in a link. If not, we intend to offer local groups the opportunity to put up their own information - contact details, information about activities they organise, and so on. So let us know if you want to take advantage of this.

Web Wizard needed

The site is relatively simple to update but – as most readers will know – we are a small organisation, run by volunteers. **Someone who is prepared to run the website would be very welcome**. You will need email and access to the web, but the actual editing instructions are pretty simple.

We should thank John Kershaw for putting the site together. If you have a voluntary organisation that wants its own site, his rates are very reasonable. He can be contacted on www.kershaw.org.

Treasurer's Report

The Library Campaign: Statement of financial activities (including income and expenditure account) for the year ended 31/3/2005

	2005	2004
	£	£
Incoming resources		
Unison grant	8,000	8,340
Members' subscriptions	4,412	4,761
Pledges	192	261
Donations	—	65
Conference income	—	630
Sales	17	7
Insurance claim	—	856
Interest	252	15
	12,873	14,935

Resources expended

Costs of activities in furtherance of the charity's objects:		
Campaign Director: salary, pension and NI	—	12,369
Postage	331	570
Telecomms	165	445
Stationery & computer supplies	116	341
Travel: outside meetings	124	111
Subsistence: outside meetings	—	141
Annual General Meeting/Conference	—	846
Steering Group travel	—	99
The Campaigner ¹	—	—
Equipment	—	141
Materials Officer expenses	114	96
Miscellaneous	153	61
	1,003	15,220
Net incoming resources for the year	11,870	(285)

Net movement in funds

Net incoming/(outgoing) resources for the year	11,870	(285)
Balances brought forward at 1 April 2004	2,237	2,522
Balances carried forward at 31 March 2005	14,107	2,237

Balance sheet as at 31 March 2005

	2005	2004
	£	£
Assets		
Balances at bank: COIF Charities Deposit Fund	12,742	—
HSBC	961	10,018
Alliance & Leicester	404	738
	14,107	10,756
Less liabilities and provisions		
Grant received in advance	—	8,000
Creditors	—	519
	—	8,519
Net assets	14,107	2,237

Notes

¹ The printing costs of The Campaigner have been paid by Unison.

² There are 50 life members who have the right to indefinite membership. No attempt has been made to calculate the value of this.

Martin Wright, Honorary Treasurer, April 2005

What are public libraries for?

Brian Hall, TLC's Chairman, sets out some basics

It has been suggested that one of the ways of determining the level of civilisation of a country is to study the extent to which it supports its public library service. The UK has a proud tradition of supporting its public libraries going back over 150 years, and a reputation that is envied worldwide.

Some of the basic principles underlying provision are still valid today – a concern not just for individuals but with service to the community as a whole; free access to books and information; co-operation, co-ordination and mutual support to provide access to all our heritage; the provision of services on the basis of equity and equality – not consumer-driven.

But times are changing. New management styles which concentrate on economy, efficiency, audit, assurance and assessment sit uneasily with the goals of not-for-profit organisations. A library cannot be run as a short-term profit-orientated business; it is a place of opportunity waiting for the chance encounter of mind and idea.

Is it the job of public libraries to be the bibliographical equivalent of Sky TV or The Sun? Or as Richard Hoggart so eloquently put it: 'Is it the job of the public library to become the McDonalds or Burger King of the printed word?' Equity, excellence and effectiveness are also essential features of a good public library service.

Public libraries have a vital role to play in the community. All surveys show they are still the most popular public service, even among those who do not use them personally. They see their value for others, especially children and young people. These people are our future. There is a need to see quality public libraries as an investment for the future, whereas governments at both national and local level always seem to be thinking only of short-term 'fixes' – to see how little they can get away with spending.

Public libraries have vital roles to play in many key areas of social life:

Centres for literature – reinforcing the civilising influence of reading. Reading, literacy and literature are still

Chairman's Message

*Brian M. Hall
Campaign Chairman*



important. Developments in newer media, and their recognition as vital information resources, do not mean that older values should be abandoned. In many ways, public libraries can be seen as one of the last bastions of the printed word. If libraries do not defend and support books, who will? Nonetheless, all media have values, and these need to be recognised and appropriate provision made, though achieving the right balance between traditional and newer media is quite a challenge.

Centres for learning – libraries are important places for study. They provide access to materials not available elsewhere and support independent learning. They also provide a safe place for people to go, and one unfettered by commercial considerations. They are also the most ubiquitous of public buildings, usually with longer and more convenient opening hours than 'office hours'.

It is sad to see local authorities using early closures as a way of saving money. The tendency to close on Saturday afternoons is to be deplored. This was always the busiest time of the week when I was a young librarian. Public libraries represent a huge investment in buildings, resources and equipment. It simply does not make economic sense to close them at times when the public are best able to use them, particularly as the savings are 'peanuts' as a percentage of the local authority's overall budget. The return to Sunday opening in many authorities is to be welcomed.

Community centres – again, public libraries are the most widespread of community buildings and provide meeting rooms. In many areas, the library is the only public building available for educational and cultural activities.

Cultural centres – by providing a wide range of materials, especially books, journals, audio-visual and electronic resources. They also provide

information on the work of local arts societies and promote reading, literature and writing, providing play sets, music scores and picture loans. They also provide facilities for active groups and in some cases co-ordinate these through local arts councils.

Role in a democratic society – by providing information on publicly funded organisations, consumer rights, complaints procedures, political processes and by supporting freedom of expression. A truly democratic society demands an informed electorate in terms of access to a wide range of informed opinion.

It is also fair to say that public libraries are also important not just for what they provide but also for the values they represent. These are not just empty phrases. Many people believe passionately in the concept of democracy and in people's right to equal and free access to information.

Social role – this is important for the young, the elderly, the self-employed, the unemployed, the lonely, the carers... public libraries have an important role in overcoming social exclusion by providing information without charge, thus empowering people. It was disappointing to see that at a recent international librarians' seminar in Stockholm on library services to multicultural communities, not a single British librarian was present.

Supporting the family – by Sunday opening, family literacy and computer projects, information on life skills e.g. parenting. Community libraries, based in schools, have had something of a chequered history but they can work given sensitive management and can be seen as a way of keeping open both libraries and community schools.

In short, there is a new agenda. Public librarians must consider how they can use their professional skills to advance this agenda. Areas such as modernising local government, tackling social exclusion, the development of the learning society, the knowledge-driven economy, customer consultation and the improvement of standards, neighbourhood renewal, economic regeneration – all represent challenges for the public library, but all are challenges that are being addressed.

It's the same the whole world over...

Andrew Coburn gives a glimpse of the public library campaign scene in Norway and the USA.

I went to the World Library and Information Congress in Oslo during August. I have to admit to not being as focused on Campaign-related stuff as I should have been, but I was interested to hear that in Norway there have been a couple of places where closures of branches have been announced.

In Nordtvet, a closure was met by protest from Friends groups and unions. A proposal to run the branch with volunteers eventually failed after the friends group saw it as the thin end of a wedge.

In Baerum, closure of three branches

was proposed. In one of the communities there was a suggestion that volunteers would work alongside library staff to keep the branch open. This proposal was still on till the end of 2006, despite union opposition, when I last heard.

Both library closures and active friends groups are more prevalent in the USA, where local government funding is very different. In Bedford (Texas) the town library closed and local residents are reported by the American Library Association journal as trying to raise \$400,000 to reopen it. On the opposite

page it is reported that a judge had stopped the city of Philadelphia from reducing hours in 10 branches and laying off staff.

And in Salinas (California) where the whole library system was threatened with closure, it has been kept open – in some fashion at least – for the remainder of this calendar year.

In Niagara Falls the service was under threat of closure for lack of funds, while in Massachusetts, the 114-year-old Hampden public library closed at the end of June, after a local vote failed to raise the money necessary to keep it open another year.

Murder in the Friends group!

Much closer to home, Andrew Coburn reviews a book that has a whole new angle on the old 'Murder in the library' formula!

Mat Coward: *Open and Closed*, Five Star, November 2005 (1594142742); *Success... and how to avoid it*, TTA Press, 2004 (095269474).

Mat Coward has been a supporter of libraries and the Library Campaign for years – possibly since he worked in a public library in the 80s. He has now turned to writing – journalism and detective thrillers.

The latest in the latter series is dedicated to 'the library workers of the world – on liberty's front line now more than ever'. It starts with a murder of a member of a library Friends/ campaign group during the occupation of a library to protest against its closure.

If the idea of occupying a library sounds familiar, so might the acronym chosen by the group – LOFE, standing for Libraries Open For Everyone. They would have chosen LOAF, but apparently that had been pinched by another organisation. Which is ironic because before the Campaign was founded an organisation called LOAF (Libraries Open and Free) did occupy a library in Hertfordshire in a similar protest.

I think Mat Coward knows this, but his detectives have a lot of fun inventing other meanings for the acronym – it is one of the sly, humorous asides that you find throughout the book.

I like detective stories, and I had not come across Coward's work before. He is not going to be the Agatha Christie of the

21st century but this is a pleasant read – this book in particular, because the murder victim is an old-style Communist and the Campaign group contains a range of 'types' which may be familiar to many of us – the politician on the look-out for a cause, the perpetual joiner of things, the person who has been working on the cause for years and is put out by the Johnny and Joanna Come Latelys and the keen young union official (come to think of it, that might have been me, though the similarity should not be taken too far.)

You don't get too much on the campaigning or on the library apart from

that, but the plot has its twists and for me the victim and his family ring particularly true. Definitely worth getting your library to order (or even buy it yourself too.)

Success and how to avoid it is Mat's take on the pitfalls of becoming a writer, whether by freelance journalism or by getting a book published (his headline advice is 'Forget it!').

As I don't have any ambitions in this direction I am not sure how good the advice is, although the gist of it is that writing is a difficult profession from which to make money. But it is a light read, and any pearls of wisdom will not be difficult to reach.



Arsenic in the tea-cups? Not this time. This is Medway Libraries and the coffee-and-quiz party they held to thank the volunteers who help with the home library service.

Parish or perish?

Andrew Coburn debates some new developments in local libraries

Despite the apparently encouraging support for libraries evidenced by the People's Network, Framework for the Future and related developments in the last few years, there are still too many threats to the public library service.

The reports by Libri, which have got a lot of media attention in the last 18 months (see 'The Libri wars', *The Campaigner*, Winter 2004, p.14), may be seen as over-egging the pudding on the pessimistic side – but they have served to keep libraries in the public eye.

Across the country we are still seeing closures and reductions in opening hours, from Liverpool to Buckinghamshire – and probably elsewhere. Please tell us about them in your area.

The difference these days, as opposed to the time in the 80s when the Campaign was formed, is that now the changes are almost always accompanied by redirection of the money saved to other parts of these service, rather than being cuts in overall library spending.

As always, this may well mean putting in some mobile library stops in a community where the static branch is shut. Or opening a nearby library for longer, using the staff time from the closed service point.

The money that would have been spent on books and other stock is also often kept in the central pot, to boost what is available elsewhere.

But we should hardly be surprised if this is not satisfactory to the community around the old library. Even the glossiest new vehicle coming once a week may not make up for a familiar building available on more than one day.

So it is unsurprising that in some places alternatives are being sought to keep the buildings in use, or at least to provide a static service of some sort.

Two of the prime examples come from Cambridgeshire. Whatever Campaigners may think of the concepts we cannot afford to ignore them as signs of the times.

Cambridgeshire County Council closed ten branches in 2003. This was not their first attempt to make closures, but this time it seems there was the political will from all parties (although as

Cambridgeshire is solidly Conservative, this may have been a case of damage limitation by the minority groups).

A report I have been reading makes it clear that there was opposition the plan and to the alternative provision of mobiles etc.

What has been different is that in all ten communities, the local people have founded an alternative service of their own in static premises.

The way in which they run them appears different (one has still to start, as I understand it) but essentially they all use volunteers.

The County Council has not backed away, however. They have agreed to put books into each Library Access Point (as they are collectively termed, though individually they have names such as Bassingbourn Book Café, or Bottisham Community Library.)

The council also provides access to its catalogue, and training for the volunteers to use the essentials.

Without rehearsing the whole story, for the moment at least these communities (and one which had been pioneering a version of this following a closure in 1996), feel that they have maintained their library despite 'closure.'

I have not visited any of the Access Points and would be interested to hear from someone who has, or is even involved in running one.

The Council says that it still runs a mobile service in these communities, and does not feel it is replacing the library service by a volunteer-run version. It is 'an extra level of provision that the community has asked for, and has offered to deliver.'

Campaigners should be aware that the reason I came across the detailed report is that it was circulated on an email discussion list in response to a request for information from another authority about running services without staff.

Another response came from Somerset and, although that model is very different, we may see more of this.

One of the remarks in the report is that Parish Councils have been very involved in the process. Some parish councils have consulted the Campaign in the past to help protect their local

Secretary's Report

*Andrew Coburn
National Secretary*



libraries and there are many which have a fair amount of money that they cannot spend on the few statutory duties that they have.

So it came as no surprise to see on the same discussion list, a few days later, a report that a Council in a 'fast-growing village', also in Cambridgeshire, may be thinking of putting some of its money to extend the opening hours of a local branch.

This I had not come across before. My knowledge of the powers of Parish Councils is sketchy, so I assume that they have checked out the legalities.

As the reporter remarked, many parishes donate sums of money for one-off activities. This would be a longer term commitment by implication.

Apart from the uncertainty of continuity, it raises questions such as – what is being asked for in exchange? if the parish council seeks nothing at the beginning, will they withdraw the money later on if the Library Authority does something they don't like – perhaps something that has nothing to do with libraries, such as closing the road through the village for months (this happened near me recently – though without any such retaliation.)

My gut feeling is that the local authority entrusted with providing a library service should do so.

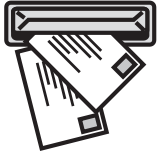
Partnership with other local authorities and agencies (such as the health service) is also growing, and I have no quarrel with this. But I am particularly concerned that volunteer services may run out of people power if something else comes along, or the people leave. Then where is the alternative service?

It would be far better to have a full service static library in the community, though we might now have arguments about what constitutes a full service.

What do readers think?

*Andrew Coburn
TLC Secretary*

Letters



We have had little chance to squeeze in Letters for some time. This page therefore contains some shamefully dated pieces. But, interestingly, the issues still apply. So the contents make as good a read as they ever did. The Editor genuinely welcomes contributions from Campaign members, so she hopes these pages will serve as an apology to the original writers – and encouragement to others to get in touch.

7-day wonder?

My local library has just issued a notice to the effect that the loan period on books, talking books and CDs will be reduced to 21 days – a reduction of 7 days from that currently offered.

Is this a trend? Are there any other libraries out there reducing the loan period?

The notice claims the new regimen will give library users speedier access to the stock most in demand. But I wonder if it is to increase turnover for the benefit of the statistics, which must be a good idea in this era of financial pressures on our library services!

Yours faithfully

Peter Richardson

Chairman, The Users & Friends of Manor House Library, Lewisham

Fine...

This is just a brief note to say how much I enjoyed the article by Anne Fine (*The Campaigner*, spring and winter 2003).

Years ago I acquired the Teacher/Librarian certificate of the SLA (School Library Association), and many of the points she raised I have experienced – even in a school library.

In fact, I don't think there was anything with which I disagreed.

I also think that library users should be consulted all along the line. What is the use of a library that has nothing that the user wants?

Yours faithfully

Mrs H. Andrews

Milford Haven, Dyfed

... not so fine

I tried very hard to read Anne Fine's article 'The library child' (*The Campaigner*, Winter 2003, no. 67)) but found it difficult because of the peculiar English. I presume that many children have read the works of Ms Fine and this could go some way towards explaining the poor standard of literacy so prevalent today.

What is meant by 'The library must make shift for computers'? Presumably 'The library must make room for computers'. (My own experience is that libraries are making a great deal of room for computers at the expense of books.)

Does computer maintenance really cost more than the earth?

Presumably the final paragraph should really be two sentences with a full stop after 'children' and a capital 'W' for 'we'.*

My two excellent English teachers at Dudley Grammar School would have been far from happy at the number of sentences beginning with 'But' or 'And'. One of these English teachers was the late Ian Serrailier, who was an outstanding (and very literate) children's writer and a life member of the Library Campaign.

Yours sincerely

Professor KGB Bakewell,

Emeritus Professor of Information

& Library Management,

Liverpool John Moores University

Editor's note: About your penultimate paragraph – No, the word 'in' is missing – and that is entirely my fault. The sentence should read: 'Only libraries can provide enough reading for the children we shall all of us be looking to in the future.' And the beginning 'Ands' and 'Buts' may well be down to my personal editing style, too.

Trolley song

Our Friends group has provided a wheeled walker, comprising seat and basket, following a similar request from a customer. This is a fairly deluxe version, costing I think around £200, but I have seen a simpler version, a bit like a Zimmer frame with a rest and basket.

The walker is proving popular, although getting the message across that it's for everyone – and not just one that another customer has left standing – is harder!

Mark Benjamin

Hexham, Northumberland

Consultation...

NB: This letter was sent to the writer's head of the library service, and copied to The Campaigner, among other publications.

We knew that as a result of the 'explosion of knowledge' on the internet, public libraries were going through a process of revaluation nationwide. This process has gone hand in hand with a reduction of stock and a 25% reduction in borrowings.

This is a complaint about the way this process is going on locally. It has been an unpleasant shock to realise that the advent of computers at the Blackheath Library, and apparently also at the Eltham branch, has resulted in the restructuring of the entire floor space, and the wholesale selling off of many valuable books from the Reference Library.

There is now a small, cramped space for readers of newspapers and magazines and, I presume, reference books, though there are not many left to consult. Some of the fiction shelves are now squashed behind the table for readers. I was not aware of any proper process of consultation over the purchase of – is it 14? – computers, though I did some time ago fill in a form about what I wanted from a public library. That was the last I heard of it.

The fiction stock was not long ago also reduced, without reference to readers.

The old catalogue, which was useful and quick, has been replaced by a new one as part of the internet. This is unwieldy and tedious, and assistants have not received any training in its use.

I could write at great length about all this, but I hope you will realise that many of us are not at all pleased with what has been done at 'our' library. I know my opinions may be minority ones but I fear the eventual destruction of the old idea of a library.

Apart from this, though, it is surely wrong that there has been no discernible process of consultation of local library users about this and other innovations or alterations.

June Benn (June Barraclough)

London SE3

... and other common concerns

I have been an avid public library borrower since 1936, and an individual member of your Campaign for some years. I am also a novelist under the name June Barraclough, and I am borrowed from the public libraries, doing quite well from my PLR (Public Lending Right authors' payments).

I read from cover to cover the latest copy of *The Library Campaigner* (Winter 2004). Although I am not and never have been a librarian, I find much that is disquieting in it. I am most concerned with the very young and the very old.

I feel the young are now quite well served. I have always believed that books can teach far more than even the best teacher, so long as a child begins at an early age to know where a library is and how to use it. 'Education' is all very well but the pleasure derived from reading is often ignored at school.

I heartily concur with Miranda McKearney's article on the sheer *pleasure* of reading.

What's the use of learning to read if you never read anything for enjoyment? 'Love of reading' *may* be 'more important for educational success than family wealth or class' but 'education' is not the prime consideration.

I am concerned with the Public Library Service Standards, the Tim Coates (Libri) Report and the House of Commons Select Committee enquiry into government policy on public libraries, primarily as a *reader*.

I still have my doubts about the People's Network but I wish you well with the re-launch of the Campaign, with which I'd like to associate myself. I am rather too old (74) to be actively involved but I do my best to complain locally about certain aspects of our local libraries – for example, the sale of reference collections, the cramped surroundings because of the addition of computers, the removal of the easy to use catalogue (the internet catalogues are not easy for older people to master) and the general 'anti-elitist' drift of the public library network.

We could so easily lose our libraries in the rush to 'modernise' in the world of computers. Many of my own readers are older women pensioners, who can certainly not afford to buy new

paperbacks and who rely on the public libraries to provide their reading matter.

I am also concerned with the dearth of the 'classics' – I speak of fiction, since I know more about this. Most books I want to read are in some mythical 'reserve stock' and have to be ordered. This, I suppose, refers to your 'stock quality standard'.*

Qualified staff are important as buyers. Books keep disappearing to be sold off, and then ten copies of a certain best seller arrive. I have nothing against Danielle Steel –and indeed do not write 'literary' novels myself! – but I don't believe we need ten or more copies of her latest paperback in one branch, especially when perfectly sound novels are sold off if they are regarded as not being 'popular' enough. Many out of print books do not stay on the shelves for long. We do not want libraries to be bookshops!

I distribute *The Library Campaigner* to the library assistants at my branch in the Borough of Greenwich, as they do not appear ever to have heard of it.

Fortunately for myself I am a life member of the London Library. But nothing beats the convenience of one's local library – unless it is usually shut on the one day you'd like to use it. I do not wish to have to use my membership of the London Library for all my leisure reading.

Obsession with targets and performance assessments worry me too. I do not think we have a Library User Group here in Greenwich. I'd like to know if Greenwich

is to be 'peer-reviewed' but I have little confidence in councillors, ever since we stopped having a Chief Librarian and one of our newest libraries (built 1962 and opened by our local MP) was razed to the ground in 1985. I campaigned – twice – to keep it but I was told I was a 'middle-class elitist'.

All I can say is that the indefinable sense of being 'at home' in the library has vanished. I am aware that the reaction will be: 'Oh well, old people always say things are getting worse', but I do not believe it is just a matter of age or only of memories of the excellent, quiet, well-stocked libraries of my childhood in the West Riding of Yorkshire.

There is much more I could say but I will desist! I just wanted to make a few points.

Yours sincerely

June Benn (June Barraclough)

* I am particularly worried about PLSS 16 and PLSS 19 – standards for quality of stock and qualified staff that are now 'in abeyance'.

Editor's note: You don't have to go via the internet if you don't want to, but a look at our newly-revamped Library Campaign website reveals the existence of three groups local to Ms Benn – Blackheath Village Library Users Group, East Greenwich Library Campaign and Friends of West Greenwich Library. We are happy to give contact details for these or any other groups via a note or a phone call to our central address (see page 2).



Friends of Lewes Libraries raised an impressive £71,000 for – among other things – soft seating, listening posts and a dedicated music computer in the new building opened in October. Is fund-raising a major or minor function for user groups? What do readers think?

The public library service in 2015

Think national, act local, and network, network, network! *This, Kathleen Frenchman reports, was the exhortation emerging from a recent Laser Foundation conference on the future of public libraries.*

The senior librarians and managers gathered in a gracious Westminster mansion had come to peer into the future – what would the public library service be like in ten years' time? But in the world of government policy wonks 2015 is just about the day after tomorrow. 'The trends are set,' John McTernan of the Prime Minister's Policy Directorate told us, 'but there is still time to tweak a bit.'

In these days, when the fate of so many libraries is in the hands of people whose expertise is in quite different disciplines, it was good to know that not only has Mr McTernan a degree in librarianship, he has actually worked in libraries.

Living standards, he said, were expected to have risen by two thirds by 2015; people would be better educated and have more money, and many more of them would be working for themselves or running small businesses.

Libraries should be expected to provide financial advice, access to business information, a range of advice and information to help people to market themselves and their skills and to support them in managing risk.

He was thought to be a tad optimistic about the coming preponderance of affluent graduates. Several voices favoured provision being concentrated on the have-nots, but some others thought it would be *wise* to cater for the well-heeled middle classes too, as they were likely to be effective advocates for the service.

Leading lights of the day were former Culture Secretary, Chris Smith, and Lord McIntosh, at that time Minister for Heritage and Media. Chris Trinick, chief executive, Lancashire County Council; was among other pundits present.

There was no disagreement among speakers that imminent advances in electronics would allow pooling of resources nationally, and internationally, to bring both economies and a much improved service, often delivered *outside* library buildings and *outside* library opening hours.

On governance Chris Smith, soon to be an ex-MP, identified two mega issues

concerning the future of libraries (and he was very sure that they had a positive future) – should they remain a local authority service? and should some parts of the service be paid for?

On the second question, he ruled out decisively having a two-tier service, with some services charged for and some not, saying that the free end would inevitably deteriorate and become worthless.

On the first issue, though, he showed signs of metamorphosing into the non-politician he was about to become: he said he didn't know.

The disadvantages of being in the local authority, he said, were that the statutory responsibilities of the library service were so unclear and that it often fell to the bottom of the pile for fund allocation. The advantage was that the service was probably better safeguarded within a council's remit.

He seemed to come to the conclusion that the answer was to make clear the service's statutory responsibilities and maintain it in the shelter of the local authority.

Chris Trinick of Lancashire came down firmly in favour of libraries being in local government. The library brand was strong, he said, and it was appropriate for a council service to offer space for use by the community and to contribute to municipal regeneration.

There was a neutrality about the council – it could honestly offer free access to information to both haves and have-nots.

He had been impressed with the delivery of the People's Network programme. It was on time, within budget and with the training complete – a model of local authority achievement, and one it could be proud of.

John McTernan suggested that there might be a national service directed by the British Library or – at the other extreme – a devolved or bottom up model, governed at neighbourhood level.

Andrew McIntosh's preferred option was that standards should be set nationally and that national or regional services should be delivered through

locally provided premises, perhaps even at parish level.

Lord McIntosh pointed out that the library service had very recently acquired a bigger role in the overall assessment of local authority performance. He also predicted that the Surestart under-5s programmes, wi-fi hotspots, and the brightening of buildings, already begun, would proliferate throughout the country.

He and other speakers were keen that library premises should be shared with other council or health services or art galleries/museums, bookshops or theatres.

Only Chris Smith saw fit to mention in this arena the low morale and lack of motivation afflicting library staff.

He called for more training and better career opportunities. An injection of confidence in their own worth was needed, and an awareness of the importance of the service they were providing.

Being able to exploit a diversity of resources to achieve the rapid delivery of information needed by the inquirer seemed to be everyone's foremost concern.

But the cultural and educational role of libraries was given equal importance by the majority of both platform and floor. The Minister commended browsing in the old sense of the word, and spoke of the need for expert help for the users who did not quite know what they wanted or how to find it.

The vision was for the new networked library service of the future to have a strong national input but at local level to be tailored to suit the community it served.

It had been a good day and, for this participant – I think the only one specifically representing library users – the prospect was not too pessimistic.

This conference was a response to a 'futures' document produced for the Laser Foundation by a group of high-flying young library managers tipped for the top. To find out more, go to: www.futuresgroup.org.uk

What's next?

New faces

There's – yet another – new 'libraries minister'. David Lammy, MP for Tottenham (London), arrived in May.



There's also a new 'libraries adviser'. Of the two changes, the second perhaps is the most striking. This post was long held by Peter Beauchamp, known to many library users who have contacted the DCMS (Department for Culture, Media & Sport).

Peter left this job, back in September 2004, to join a firm of library consultants in the private sector. It didn't work out, but that's another story.

Peter is to be replaced by John Dolan. Until the New Year John continues in his current post as Assistant Director (Community Learning & Libraries) in Birmingham – effectively, the chief librarian.

The adviser's post is itself to be moved. Instead of being lodged in the DCMS, it will become part of the MLA (Museums, Libraries & Archives Council) – funded by the government, but an independent body. This is another big move.

The minister's post, by contrast, often looks like series of flashes in the pan. David Lammy's predecessor (just since June 2003) was Lord McIntosh – he has been whisked away just as his pet project for libraries was due to come to fruition. This was improving public libraries' use of their money – specifically, by commissioning a report on possible

efficiencies in book purchasing (see page 12).

Similarly Lord McIntosh's predecessor, Tessa Blackstone, had suffered much the same fate. She ceased to be minister just as her own project – the *Framework for the Future* action plan – was to be published.

David Lammy has so far shown himself very willing to turn out to support libraries at all kinds of launch events. He has said supportive things (without being too complacent). He has often described his own childhood in Tottenham, where the library was a personal lifeline to peace and quiet and to books, which weren't available at home.

Lammy's job is not the same as Lord McIntosh's, which was huge and unwieldy, and included gambling and broadcasting. Lammy's full title describes his remit – Minister for Culture, Arts, Heritage, Museums, Galleries & Libraries. This lines up neatly with the remit of the MLA.

Opinions vary about the new arrangements. By the next issue of *The Campaigner*, we hope the implications will be clearer!

New money?

Something to look out for... There's £400m for 'community libraries' in the 2006 bidding round of The Big Lottery (that's the result of merging the lottery-funded New Opportunities Fund with the National Lottery Charity Fund).

As we go to press they haven't really worked out what this might mean – capital? revenue? buildings? outreach projects? equipment?

So keep your eyes peeled. It might be something you could bid for.

New buildings

Sure to be in the news are public library buildings. You'll remember that the House of Commons select committee on libraries pointed out forcefully that many libraries are struggling in shabby buildings after decades of under-funding.

Well, the MLA has commissioned a survey to find out just how bad the situation is. Expect doomy headlines in the national papers when it reports –

probably in the New Year. And prepare to take advantage of the publicity locally.

There is a wealth of information that might help you.

First there's a new (this year) website called **Designing Libraries**.¹ It has been set up via CILIP (the librarians' professional body) as part of *Framework for the Future*.

It includes a database of new or refurbished buildings (admittedly pretty patchy, so far), regular forums for discussion (get on in there and give the user's point of view), a regular (electronic) newsletter you can subscribe to and – above all – a load of links that will bring you lots of pictures, useful articles, details from manufacturers of all kinds of library furniture and equipment, library re-fit specialists etc.

The material covered ranges from simple signage to major building or refurbishment schemes. Probably one of its more useful aspects is that user groups will easily be able to find out what is available, and so make suggestions that are practical and can't be fobbed off.

Also interesting are the results of the **Public Library Building Awards 2005**.² This major competition is run every two years by CILIP's Public Library Group (PLG). It makes a point of giving awards to libraries big and small, and to refurbishments as well as grand new 'landmark' buildings, to interior décor, community involvement and access for disabled people. There's a lot of information on the PLG section of the CILIP website.

Finally, the Jubilee Library in Brighton has raised the profile of the whole subject by winning the 2005 **Prime Minister's Better Public Building Award for 2005**, run by Cabe (Commission for Architecture & the Built Environment).

The Cabe website³ will tell you more. And it also has a lot of good material on public buildings and public involvement – including publications specifically about libraries (scroll down the Publications list to *21st Century Libraries: Changing forms, changing futures* (April 2004) and *Better Public Libraries* (August 2003).

¹ www.designinglibraries.org.uk/

² www.cilip.org.uk/specialinterestgroups/bysubject/public/awards

³ www.cabe.org.uk

How efficient is your library?

The row about libraries and their bookstock rages on. The government's contribution was to commission the PKF report on 'efficiency in the stock supply chain'. It has nothing to teach good services, says Laura Swaffield – but make sure your service isn't one of the bad ones.

Business consultancy PKF has delivered (rather late) the report¹ on efficiency/stock supply that has long been earmarked in the *Framework for the Future* plan. It cost a cool £150,000 (+ VAT), but it is pretty flimsy.

Its main value could be that government is more prepared to support the obvious if it is expressed in an expensive report produced by business consultants. Its advice is vague at best.

Local councils, for instance, are advised to see if their management structure is good enough, with no indication of what to look for. And PKF mostly declines to estimate how much services might be able to save, although it makes a few wild guesses that have aroused some quiet derision in those who have some idea.

The truth is that many good services are already doing more than PKF suggests – and with a better sense of what is worth doing and what is not. Others are shamefully behind, and need a sharp kick to smarten themselves up. What kind of service is yours?

PKF's most useful single source of information is a questionnaire painstakingly filled in by 61 chief librarians. PKF's method of analysis was basically to count the suggestions to see which was cited most often. (The answer is EDI – electronic data interchange – i.e. ordering, invoicing etc electronically instead of using paper).

The report contains a lot of information, mostly undigested. Two interesting facts emerge. First, public libraries account for just three per cent of the English book market. This rather knocks on the head the theory that more efficient stock management would make savings so massive that all their other problems would melt away. Second, some councils get the same (admittedly crude) satisfaction levels as others that spend half as much per person. But this is a rather naïve way to slice through complex issues of users' and non-users' wants and needs.

PKF concludes that councils could save by 'adopting the same processes, and purchasing books together' one way or

another. Suppliers should select books, with services retaining 'minimal sums for additional local items'. This has caused horror among those who see all local flexibility being squeezed out. To be fair, several services are already outsourcing selection in this way and seeing their book issues go up. But they retain a decent proportion of their funds for local choices. It all depends what PKF means by 'minimal'. And, as usual, PKF has no idea.

It lists 'options' – including an entire unified national book-buying service – but it says almost nothing about the merits or de-merits of each. National buying would be best, it thinks, especially if all 'library management systems were fully linked to suppliers' databases', with a single cataloguing system and 'a national library service'.

The idea of a whole 'national service' was universally shot down in flames before the report was even issued. Many library services are already in 'consortia' together, enabling them to get better discounts by bulk-buying. Nearly all libraries already use a single cataloguing system. And all-singing, all-dancing management systems would of course be wonderful, but will be an expensive technical miracle to implement.

RFID (radio tagging of books) could save unspecified sums, says PKF. It needs to be 'further examined' (i.e. someone else will have to find out the real worth of this assertion).

Common processing standards, says PKF, could also save an unspecified amount of money – as everyone already knows who has heard book suppliers cursing the waste of having to put on different labels, covers, numbers etc to suit the quirks of different services. PKF probably doesn't know that it is notoriously difficult to get them to give up these quirks – but that's another job that will have to be done by someone else.

At least, this time, somebody has already done the job PKF dodges out of – a set of minimum common standards have already been worked out by NAG (National Acquisitions Group),² a group of specialist librarians. For free.

PKF lists 'quick wins' (things councils can do now) and 'longer term' work (finding out if there's merit in any its other vaguely-expressed ideas, and if so, what's needed to put them into action, and then getting them done). That's all for someone else to do.

So now the real work starts. First comes a joint statement by MLA (Museums, Libraries & Archives Council) and DCMS (Department for Culture, Media & Sport). Their declared aim is to find funds to reinvest in the service through 'a national approach to library procurement' and 'standardised and simplified processes'. The first task appears to be to find out what these words might mean.

PKF has listed 'options'. But it will be MLA/DCMS which will have to find out 'the views of all interested parties, including the library community, the cost implications and possible implementation time-scale of each'. Not to mention the funds needed to make major changes in existing systems.

MLA/DCMS reject out of hand one PKF 'option' – a national library service. Local councils are the best people to run libraries, they say, although this local accountability 'may have costs attached'.

MLA/DCMS will now work on the next steps with local councils, the Society of Chief Librarians, 'other government departments', the Local Government Association etc.

There will be a project plan, followed by 'best practice road shows or conferences' to publicise the report and involve local services, councils, and suppliers including library management system suppliers.

Basic work will also have to be done to find out if RFID (radio frequency identification) will do what PKF assumes it will do, and if councils can or will follow PKF's advice that they adopt the same book-processing standards.

By June 2006, with what surely seems miraculous speed, the preferred option will be chosen. But after that there will have to be a feasibility study and a business case, a funding model, an evaluation of potential models to see how

they reconcile efficiency with local responsiveness, and a project plan.

The whole new system is to be in place by April 2008. This is very ambitious, and will need whole-hearted support from the library community.

Library experts are broadly supportive of the PKF report. All, however, seem torn between the need to point out its limits, and the need to put their full weight behind any initiative that may force the less efficient library services to adopt the basic standards already used by the good ones.

CILIP (the librarians' association) finds the report 'realistic', especially in its reluctance to be specific about possible savings, and in highlighting the limited bargaining power that libraries have (with only three per cent of the book market).

But most of PKF's ideas have been proposed before, or need much more work. And it is 'simplistic' to judge efficiency just by placing spend alongside customer satisfaction statistics. Still, the

fast response by MLA/DCMS is 'encouraging'.

NAG says most of PKF's ideas are 'self-evident' and already in use. Others 'need much wider discussion'. NAG will gladly help.

For instance, PKF seems unaware that many ideas will cost a lot to implement, and that almost-total book selection by suppliers ignores libraries' duty to buy non-standard stock (e.g. non-English) and to manage and promote backstock. Finally, much will depend on library services' willingness to agree common systems. A few drop-outs would wreck the savings prospects for all.

Library supplier Bertrams also welcomes PKF's ideas. But most of them it is already using with its clients. They are already detailed in its report *More Books for Their Buck*. [This makes a better read than the PKF report, with concrete examples and proper figures.]

Andrew Coburn (The Library Campaign) is alarmed at the idea of

only 'minimal' funding for stock locally chosen. And a 'national agency', of whatever kind, would cost money for admin that should go into book-buying.

Technology is the best hope for savings, he says – but most services know this already, and could actually do with some help from MLA in getting system suppliers 'on board'.

Geoff Smith, experienced as a chief librarian, library supplier and consultant, doubts if PKF's ideas will shake certain services or councils out of their 'inertia and complacency' – since they have been aired so many times before.

PKF, he adds, fails to see that stock must be not just bought but maintained, reviewed, disposed of (or kept), promoted, displayed etc. Buying new stuff is the easy bit.

¹ www.mla.gov.uk/action/framework/framework_04b.asp

² www.nag.org.uk

³ www.bertramlibraryservices.com

Statistics on spending

What is the truth about the way public libraries handle their funds? A mass of statistics is published – but you can use them to argue many things, says Laura Swaffield.

The 'actuals' for 2003-04¹ show that public libraries have definitively reversed the years of decline in visits. There were 336.9m visits, compared to 323m in 2002-3 and 318m in 2001-02 – the lowest point for visits in years.

But for book issues, 2003-04 marks the lowest point ever – 340.9m, compared to 360.7m the year before. That's 5% down. Total books in stock was also down 10% on 2002-03, while holdings of audio-visual material (tapes, videos, DVDs etc) were up 10%. Internet use gets credit for much of the upturn in visits.

Total revenue spend was £950.9m – was up by 8.2% on 2002-03, with inflation only 2.5%.

What you make of all this is up to you. The figures can be used to argue the library 'establishment' point of view, that libraries need to adopt all the new media to attract people – and that it clearly works. The figures can also be used to argue the 'books only' case made by Tim Coates and the charity Libri (see *The Campaigner*, winter 2004).

The new minister, David Lammy, commented when the 'actuals' were published: 'Reading and literacy

remain at the heart of the service – and always will – but it is fantastic that that access to new media now plays just as big a part.'

But probably the best advice is to get stuck in to the (very) detailed tables of stats on all the library services – especially, of course, your own. The national figures iron out big differences in spending – and performance – between services that range from excellent to pretty dozy. What kind of service is yours? What could it learn from others? Hours of fun are guaranteed...

If you want to tussle with stats on stock, you need the latest 'materials' budgets² published by Lisu (the word does not stand for anything).

Northern Ireland stands out painfully here – against a modest recent overall increase in materials funds (1.6%), N. Ireland shows an average two-thirds slash is expected for 2005-06 (80% in one authority) and, within that, a 75% cut in books. It follows an average increase of 40% in 2004-05.

Swings – though not on N. Ireland's scale – or 'large discrepancies' between estimates and actual spending are common.

In 2004-05, overall spending went up 1.9% (although a 4.4% rise had been predicted). This builds on increases of 4.1% and 7.7% in the previous years.

Spending on audiovisual stock went up 9.3%, but books only by 0.1%. Similar proportions are shown in predictions for 2005-06. It is known that many authorities are getting discounts of more than 10% on books, but whether this mitigates the apparent downgrading of books, Lisu can't tell.

Total staff numbers went up 2.9% – but professional staff decreased by 0.6%.

But the national averages, as always, conceal big differences between individual authorities. Twelve reduced professional posts by over 10%; eight increased them by 15%.

Of 175 councils that gave overall spending figures for both 2003-04 and 2005-06, 97 expect an increase – and 47 of those think it will exceed 10%.

¹ Public Library Actuals 2003-4 on www.cipfastats.net

² Lisu Materials Fund and Budget Survey 2004-06 on www.lboro.ac.uk/departments/dils/lisu/index.html

Crisis? What crisis?

In the spring issue we featured the Commons select committee report on public libraries. So what was the government's response, when it finally came after the general election?

Both Unison and The Campaign – among many others – had given evidence to the committee. The resulting report (*The Campaigner*, spring 2005) was a statement of the situation that managed to find favour with most people – even those waging war with each other on library issues.

It emphasised books and reading (while asserting that free internet access is now an essential requirement). It called for serious spending on buildings. It made a tough wake-up call to the library profession to sort itself out. And it frankly stated that the service is 'in crisis'. It cannot go on drifting while the DCMS (Department for Culture, Media & Sport) continually fails to make its voice heard among the decision-makers and the budget-holders.

So how did the DCMS respond? The new Culture Minister, David Lammy, wrote a warm, appreciative foreword. He is rapidly making friends in the library world. But, alas, that does not make up for the generally feeble response of his department.

It dodges most of the committee's points. It rehashes the usual figures about how well-used and well-liked libraries are. Where the MLA (the government-funded Museums, Libraries & Archives Council) is already working on a problem (as best it can with its tiny budget), that is taken to mean 'problem solved'.

So there's no more to say, for instance, on efficiency savings, peer review, disabled access or improving the Public Library Standards.

The select committee had sensibly pointed out that libraries make very good community centres – but they need extra funds to take on this extra task. This point is side-stepped entirely, while DCMS rejoices in the neat way that all those unfunded extra functions fit with libraries' core purpose.

As for the crumbling buildings – which the select committee highlighted as an urgent problem that needs money to solve it – well, says the DCMS, some libraries are very nice. And the rest? Well, there's PFI (private finance), and maybe the lottery people will come up with something.

And how about funds to sustain the People's Network, or action to protect school libraries, or even action to stiffen the spine of the DCMS itself? Forget it. Not a word.

Finally, one or two plums are dropped in without explanation (e.g. 'Active engagement with the local community is the hallmark of a good library service and we will encourage that.') Luckily, TLC's meeting with the MLA has given us some clues to what that one means – see p. 3.

Meanwhile, the MLA¹ seized on the government's lacklustre response – and turned it into a 'challenge to local authorities and other funding bodies'. Essentially it said: 'We are doing a lot, but somebody's got to find some real money.'

The document* and its links make a good, short refresher on what MLA is actually doing to improve public libraries right now. Given its meagre funds, it's doing pretty well. Five challenges must be met in three years, says MLA: opening hours; diversifying the staff and the services, while involving the community; free internet access; better efficiency; better buildings. Few will reject this summary. But few will fail to notice that it means serious money – despite the government's avoidance tactics.

MLA Chair Mark Wood said: 'We

New Select Committee

There is now a new House of Commons Select Committee on Culture, Media & Sport, following the general election. It has elected its Chair: John Whittingdale OBE (*Conservative, Maldon & East Chelmsford*). The other members are: Janet Anderson (*Labour, Rossendale & Darwen*); Nigel Evans (*Con, Ribble Valley*); Paul Farrelly (*Lab, Newcastle-under-Lyme*); Mike Hall (*Lab, Weaver Vale*); Alan Keen (*Lab, Feltham & Heston*); Rosemary McKenna (*Lab, Cumbernauld & Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East*); Adam Price (*Plaid Cymru, Carmarthen East and Dinefwr*); Adrian Sanders (*Lib Dem, Torbay*); Helen Southworth (*Lab, Warrington South*) and Tim Yeo (*Con, South Suffolk*).

The Commons special interest group on libraries is to be chaired by the new MP for Newham, library enthusiast Lyn Brown.

know that when libraries are properly funded book borrowing and visitor numbers increase, yet most have suffered from a chronic lack of capital investment.'

Councillor Chris White, Chair of the Local Government Association Regeneration Board, agreed that libraries are 'an essential resource', but added: 'Councils must have the proper resources...

'Increased funds are vital in the long-term improvement of our libraries, to book purchasing and changes to library spaces – the latter, for example, need serious capital investment, as many spaces are in old buildings or listed properties.'

* www.mla.gov.uk/news/press_article.asp?articleid=834



Books are the keystone, said the select committee – but free use of the internet should also be a right in the 21st century. Here, 82-year-old Cathy Kirby takes advantage of a free taster session run by Kirklees Libraries during Adult Learner Week.

Consultation – the latest

The need to ‘consult’ – library users and/or staff – is increasingly being urged in official-speak. Here are three examples. Real consultation is not so easily found at grassroots level, but these reports may add strength to your voice.

Battle of the users

CPA – Comprehensive Performance Assessment – is the tune that every local authority has to dance to. Devised by the Audit Commission, its complex tables of ‘Performance Indicators’ are used to give councils a fairly crude score of one to five stars. And on that they are judged by central government.

A whole new CPA framework is now being phased in, to be used by all councils in England by 2008. Its main aim is to ‘raise the bar’. It is even called *CPA – the harder task*. This is bitterly resented by many councils. If you are good and stay just as good, you may well find yourself getting a worse grade than before. The reason, some were told during negotiations, was that ‘there are too many excellent councils’!

Still, there is some good news. The Audit Commission (AC) has conceded that councils can give more weight to locally defined needs, and less to central government diktats. The assessment will also include a major aim to stress the views of service users. It does not, however, specify how councils should find these out. But it says it will judge how well councils ‘listen’, and whether this actually leads to changes.

Meanwhile, the Local Government Association (LGA) is so furious at the unfairness of AC’s ‘moving of the goalposts’ it is devising its own alternative. This will emphasise ‘peer support, more about public satisfaction with what the public want, and more about local need’.

The LGA version will be launched next spring. It is an extraordinary situation – the AC and the LGA furiously battling to tell the government how to assess local authorities, and both emphasising that users’ views must come first!

www.auditcommission.gov.uk
and click on ‘local government’

It’s easy – just listen

Public service managers should listen to ideas put forward by staff and unions, says a new report from the

National Consumer Council (NCC). And it is just not true, says NCC, that staff needs are sure to run counter to the needs of users. ‘No one goes into public services to do a bad job. Public servants want to be proud.’

The NCC has done a mass of research on public services in general. And it gets the same basic message every time, it says: ‘The starting point is to listen to what people want.’

Much of the report – part of a major research project – urges services to work with, not ‘for’, users, in a genuine partnership. The keys to making fast improvement, says NCC, are already known. And listening is top of the list.

People are passionate about public services and want good ones available to all, says the report. But they can also feel ‘small’, ‘ignored’ or ‘cheated’.

Most important, managers and staff who talk about ‘customer focus’ should actually mean it. This includes providing clear information and rights for service users. Users, after all, have useful information to give – including ‘what it’s like to live round here’.

In turn, professionals today need ‘soft skills’ such as listening to ‘develop relationships built on respect’ with users. Technical competence is no longer enough to do the job properly.

It’s also vital to value staff and to have ‘short feedback loops’ so that frontline staff are free to adapt to users’ needs.

Unfortunately, this very clear message was badly undermined among library staff because the report included some dodgy statistics. By mixing its sources, NCC contrived to show that libraries have a very low public satisfaction rating – when all the evidence overwhelmingly shows they are highly popular.

Among those who contacted the NCC was Chris Batt, Chief Executive of MLA (Museums, Libraries & Archives Council). It is ‘dangerous and potentially flawed’ to mix statistical sources like this, he told NCC boss Ed Mayo. He hoped to work with NCC to clarify the real picture.

The NCC website soon had an *Errata* note, which explained that the researchers had simply requested ‘the latest information’ on all public services, using the Freedom of Information Act. If the result was so disastrous, it argues, this is a problem in itself and justifies NCC’s campaign for ‘a single customer measurement across all services’.

‘It is a shame,’ Ed Mayo added, ‘if what has got lost in the statistical error are the lessons from across services as to what makes for good customer satisfaction. There is little ground for complacency in any sector.’

‘I would be pleased to see closer collaboration with the library sector on this, and would welcome discussion on how we could do this in a way that reinforces the best of what we already have!’

A Playlist for Public Services,
www.ncc.org.uk/publicservices
www.ncc.org.uk/publicservices/playlist_erratum.pdf

Plan for youth

The government’s new *Together We Can* action plan includes a call for young people to shape library services, both locally and nationally.

The plan, which brings together 12 government departments led by the Home Office, was launched at a conference in June with David Miliband, Minister for Communities & Local Government, and Hazel Blears, the Home Office minister responsible for community safety and civil renewal.

The list of planned actions includes: ‘Provide young people with the chance to get involved in and shape public library services locally and nationally, with young people participating in library design and planning, staff recruitment and training through *Framework for the Future*, the government’s ten-year strategy on libraries.’

The overall aim of *Together We Can* is ‘to empower people to work with government in solving public problems and improving their lives’.

Civil Renewal Unit (Home Office):
www.homeoffice.gov.uk/comrace/active/civil

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