

The LIBRARY *Campaigner*

Supporting friends and users of libraries



All change for local councils!

How the new regime works – and how to make it work for libraries

PLUS:

- **Two new national reviews! What's behind them?**
- **Volunteering – the debate gets going!**



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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.



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EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MEETINGS

The Officers and the Executive Committee meet regularly every two months, 1–4pm usually 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. We have recently met in Lewes, Birmingham and Rotherham. If a local group would like to invite us to meet in their area, we would be delighted to come.

2009 MEETINGS

January 24; March 14; May 9; July 11; September 12; December 12

MEMBERSHIP FORM

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Did they really mean that?

Just like London buses we have two reviews or inquiries into public libraries coming along at once (see p. 4). One by the Department for Culture, Media & Sport and one by the All-Party Parliamentary Committee on Libraries (etc).

Just to complicate things they were announced on the same day, without seemingly there having been any collusion. And then the DCMS one appears to have had its terms of reference and indeed the identity of the reviewers changed after outcry in the press.

It is that public outcry which has concerned me. One email the Campaign received refers to proposals to open libraries to 'food, drink, football, chatting and MOBILE PHONES' (emailer's emphasis). And most of the broadsheets as well as some of the red tops have found time to slate the 'modernisation' agenda.

My problem is that I don't think that the minister, or those who have inspired the 'official' review, have any intention of getting rid of books in libraries, or diminishing their role or ability to be a place of learning.

What they have done by concentrating on the Internet, 'liveliness' and shared services is make it seem that they actually don't care about the books and other core resources. It is difficult to find much mention of those in the Minister's speech (see p. 5).

I don't believe that the officials don't care about these things. But the core existing library users – who need to be retained – do and will react (indeed, have done so) if they think the emphasis is being shifted.

The furore in recent years about the amount spent on books has a core truth. Many library systems could achieve more bang (or books) for their bucks, and those that have done so arguably have not made enough of it.

The result of the collapse of the Net Book Agreement – whereby libraries could only get 10% discount – and the proliferation of published books at cheaper prices means that money does, in many cases, go further even if in 'real terms' less is being spent. Nonetheless, more could be done to enable access to wider material.

Secretary's Slot

Andrew Coburn
Campaign Secretary



Equally, those apparently calling for noise and activity in libraries are not, in my experience, denying the value of a place where quiet study can be pursued. What many library services are trying to do is combine both by providing areas where people can talk, drink coffee and socialise as well as places where you can get your head down in a book.

Once again the surface has obscured the substance (although, once again, in some places it is probably true that there is a clash of cultures).

However the changes in society, as much as in libraries, that have been made over the last couple of decades, mean that public library services do need to find new ways of bringing in customers.

Surveys of non-users reveal that many don't know about all the things they can do in a library and/ or think that libraries are the same as they were in their youth. And no amount of bright buildings and swathes of new and clean stock will get them back in without other effort.

There are also communities of non-users who would never have dreamt of using the library. They are precisely those who could benefit from the fact that it is a free, non-judgemental service – or should be.

I am sure there are libraries or individual members of staff who would deter such potential users. But those

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communities are why the service must go out into the community, work with other services and indeed share their premises – or invite them into libraries – to reach potential readers and users.

Where does all of this leave the reviews I started with? No idea. The terms of reference and methodology to be adopted are still unclear. The Campaign has offered to meet and/ or submit written evidence to both groups, with no response at the time of writing.

I am likely to be out of the country for much of the important period when work is being done and the results published, assuming they are. I trust that the Campaign's position, even if it turns out to be completely different to mine, will be made known.

TAKE 5 MINUTES FOR THE LIBRARY CAMPAIGN!

It would help us enormously if every TLC member could take a few minutes to check their Standing Order. See details on page 2 opposite.

Is your S/O made out to our up-to-date bank account number and address? Is it for the correct amount?

Incorrect details like this can cause big headaches for our (all-volunteer) helpers, and/or lose us precious funds.

A few minutes spent checking will be much appreciated!

The joy of jargon?

Dear Laura,

I think you are doing a great job editing The Campaigner, but may I make a tentative suggestion or two?

I think I am of average intelligence and maybe a little above, but I do not find the articles easy reading. This is because there are too many references to various bodies, officials, government departments and so on with all the acronyms, which are difficult to learn to tie up with the organisations they refer to.

There are just too many of them! Can they be simplified a little, along with a list of the acronyms and their meanings?

One of the best articles from the point of view of simplicity and readability was Fred Barnfield's 'A drop in the ocean'. Inspiring, too!

Anyway, keep up the good work. It is so important now, with all the financial pressures on local councils.

*All good wishes,
Sidney Sadgrove, Sussex*

Dear Sidney,

Many thanks for taking the trouble to write – and for the kind remarks. The issues you raise are important ones. What do other readers think? Please tell us.

I really do try to make a point of spelling out – once, anyway – what all these wretched initials stand for, every time they appear in a fresh article, with a few words to explain what the body named actually is. However, it doesn't surprise me in the least that this fails to do the trick.

For one thing, as you say, 'there are just too many of them'. Indeed there are. It's a constant complaint that public libraries suffer from a disastrously fragmented chain of command.

One government department (Department for Culture, Media & Sport – DCMS) is allegedly in charge of libraries. To see its current thinking – and action – on libraries, turn to page 5.

Floating around are a number of advisory or lobbying bodies

that have something to do with libraries. Unison is an obvious example. The most prominent 'independent' body is MLA (Museums, Libraries & Archives Council). You are not alone if you are unclear exactly what it is for. Lyn Brown MP is one severe critic of MLA – who is now masterminding another review of public libraries (see page 11)!

Meanwhile, neither DCMS nor MLA fund public libraries. The purse strings lie with local authorities. Each service has to convince its own local authority that it's worth investing in its libraries. Local authorities come under another government department altogether – charmingly titled 'Communities & Local Government' (DCLG).

Even worse, for local authorities the whole system has now changed. There are a whole load of new jargon phrases and acronyms to cope with – see pages 8-9. But take a few deep breaths first. It's a jungle.

If things are going reasonably well in a library service, users can get their points across with the language of goodwill and common sense. I'd prefer that every time.

But alas, if a library service is not working well with users, or if it is not getting what it needs from its local council paymasters – then someone has to make it work better. And the chances are they'll need to understand how it's supposed to work. Then the jargon, the names and the acronyms come in.

I make no apology for trying to explain this stuff. Some Campaign members really need it. If you can relate to libraries and their staff without resorting to 'the system' – congratulations!

And, by the way, I would love to get more reports like Fred Barnfield's. We don't often get offered pieces about local services and issues. Please send them in!

Meanwhile, I am collecting a list of jargon and acronyms to insert in the next issue.

If you can't wait, you'll find the Campaign's Handbook a mine of information – absolutely vital if you do have a campaign on your hands – for just a fiver!

Laura Swaffield
Editor

Familiar issues?

I have been a member of a small library users group for some years. The persistence of its members and our librarian (now called a manager) and her deputy kept it going. Now that they have both moved on it seems that the group has been allowed to die...

Havering has not shut any of its branches and they are slowly being refurbished, but libraries, for economic reasons, now have to house/cover extra services.

Collier Row, my own branch library, is small but houses a public advice desk. This takes up a comparatively large amount of space, to the detriment of bookshelves. We are told that we have the same number of books that we had prior to refurbishment. If this is so it is because

there are now far more paperback romances, fewer large reference-type books. In the past the local library would have been the place to get a book on a specific subject, rather than have to go and buy one's own copy.

Of course computers for public use belong in our public libraries. But I do question librarians handing out bags for recycling materials, and selling bags for garden waste. Use of libraries is changing. Not, in my opinion, always for the better. I believe local councils would snatch them away from us if they could.

*Yours faithfully,
Henrietta Howe, Essex*

Dear Ms Howe,

Another letter – illustrating some valuable points. If you read the Secretary

of State's speech (page 5), to get an idea of the government's latest thinking, you'll see he's keen on 'shared premises'. It can work very well. But not always.

This is where library users come in. They often know – much better than library managers and even frontline staff – a library's locality, its building and even its stock.

They can spot when a splendid-sounding policy needs adjusting – or junking. They can see ways to save money, improve services, reach into the community and more.

If only library services saw users as a resource! A source of free, high-quality information, advice, feedback and ideas! Too many library staff see criticism or comment as an attack. They are the losers.

Laura Swaffield
Editor

REVIEW BLUES?

You wait for ages, then two or three come along. So it is with reviews of the public library service. As we go to press, major reviews are in hand by the government, Parliament and the librarians' trade union.

The first review will be by DCMS (Department for Culture, Media & Sport). This is the government department ultimately responsible for public library policy. However – crucially – it has no funds to allocate. Local authorities spend what they choose – or rather, what their residents persuade them to spend!

The second will be by the (take a deep breath) All-Party Parliamentary Group on Libraries, Literacy & Information Management. Despite its awful name, this is a very useful body. It is not the official DCMS select committee (which, of course, did its own well-received review in 2005). It is a fairly informal interest group, whose meetings make some great connections behind the scenes.

The third will be by Unison, which needs no introduction. Unison is ahead of the game. Its own expert

review of public libraries has been in train all year. And it is more relevant than ever. Local authority staff (including librarians) have been pointing out all year that a 2.5% pay increase is in fact a cut – just as the cost of living rockets. This case is all the stronger since the recent expensive disaster wreaked by the financial sector.

Unison also, obviously has strong views on the importance of public services – and much experience to offer in the practicalities of delivering them. Launch date is provisionally in December. Look out for it!

The Library Campaign will, of course, make sure users' voices are heard by all these reviews. Let us know what you think, and want. Prepare your own evidence too. Meanwhile, we give you a guide to the thinking behind these reviews. Are you thinking what they're thinking???

The DCMS Review What will it look at?

These are the official terms of reference for what DCMS is calling its 'library service modernisation review'. NOTE that it says it aims to focus on users! It's up to users to make sure that really happens...

AIM: To review and define the government's vision for a modern, world-class public library service that prioritises the needs of users and puts libraries at the heart of local communities; and to set out the policy, partnership and investment framework needed to achieve this vision.

OBJECTIVES: To deliver:

- A strong statement of DCMS's long-term vision for public library services that prioritise the needs of users and sits at the heart of local communities.
- An analysis of the policy and investment framework needed to achieve this vision in five key areas, including highlighting best practice and innovative partnerships.
- An assessment of the delivery partnership required between central and local government to enable the realisation of this vision.
- A set of recommendations for central government, its agencies and other partners, to support the delivery of this vision for a modernised local library service.

The objectives of the individual work-streams are:

1. Digital services and information literacy: To define the role of public libraries in supporting information literacy, and to explore and make recommendations on the skills, technology, content, service structures and partnerships necessary for the

library service to develop its digital offer and meet the needs of its current and future communities.

2. A skilled and responsive workforce: To review and make recommendations on the skills mix required to deliver a 21st century library service; the ways in which the public library workforce can be locally empowered; and on the local and national leadership needed to develop this workforce.
3. Capturing impact: To consider and make recommendations on the local and national data necessary to capture the impact of libraries on their local communities, which will be effective in securing the support and

engagement of partners. To consider and make recommendations on the need for a new national definition of a minimum service standard.

4. A community-led service: To explore and make recommendations on innovative models of service delivery that make libraries increasingly responsive to the needs of their communities and that involve users in their design.
5. Funding innovation: To review and make recommendations on innovative partnership and funding models that can release additional capital and revenue funding streams to enable service modernisation.

What Andy said ...

Andy Burnham is Secretary of State for Culture, Media & Sport. He survived the recent government re-shuffle and kept his post. He will ultimately decide what is done with the DCMS review. He gave an insight into his thinking in a recent speech to the Public Library Authorities conference. It caused quite a bit of controversy in the press. So – what did he really say? Below is Andy's speech, with editing kept to an absolute minimum.

One of my core beliefs is in the power of art, culture and sport to transform communities and transform people's lives. Culture brings together individuals and communities, providing inspiration and a sense of place for everyone. And public libraries are right at the hub of those connections – right at the heart of our cultural life.

Andrew Carnegie 100 years ago funded the establishment of 380 public libraries in Britain alone. This is what he had to say about their value: 'There is not such a cradle of democracy upon the earth as the Free Public Library, this republic of letters, where neither rank, office, nor wealth receives the slightest consideration.'

I am with him 100% on that. He blazed a trail, and his model has underpinned library provision for the last 100 years.

Now, however, I feel the time is right to look again at what should define our libraries – take the core values and standards at the heart of Carnegie’s vision but translate them into a service for the future.

We’ve brought Victorian schools and hospitals into the 21st century. Libraries are a similar cornerstone to our community, so it’s time to look at how we might do the same.

This is why I am delighted to be launching a modernisation review that will make sure our public libraries continue to fulfil that ideal for current and future generations. The review should lead to changes. Positive changes which will reflect the best of what many libraries already do, and the ambitions I know many hold.

Commitment

I want to begin, however, by reaffirming my commitment to the provision of a comprehensive library service.

This, for me, is absolutely non-negotiable. The statutory duty under the Public Libraries & Museums Act 1964 gives my department (DCMS) a unique and special relationship to public libraries that we do not have for other cultural sectors. I take it very seriously.

That goes back ten years for me, to when I was a special adviser in DCMS working for Chris Smith.

Internet

We set up the People’s Network as, I like to think, a step ahead of the curve in addressing the digital divide.

It put internet access into every single public library in the UK, and turned around the decline in the numbers of people visiting libraries.

There have been a number of assumptions made about the internet and the effect it will have on society. My view is that some people are too fatalistic; It’s ungovernable – anything goes; it’ll be the end of books and newspapers; it’ll be the death of libraries.

Actually, none of that is proving to be the case. In the past five years, when the internet and broadband have taken off, library visits have gone up by 17m to 288m, with half the population using the library.



Andy Burnham

Reading

This year, I’d like to pay tribute to everyone involved with the astonishing success of the National Year of Reading [*The Campaigner*, Spring 2008, p.11]. Libraries have been leading the charge.

The central team at the National Literacy Trust has worked tirelessly and delivered beyond all expectations, but the way the library workforce have embraced the project and made it their own has been inspiring.

The library membership campaign has been one of its greatest, most tangible successes. Over a million new members have signed up since April.

This is a phenomenal achievement and shows the public’s appetite for libraries when they are promoted with energy and creativity. My basic challenge for the next six months is to take that level of energy and creativity and apply it to the modernisation of England’s library service.

Resources

Let’s just remind ourselves of the resources at our disposal. Local authorities collectively spend over a billion a year on libraries – that’s more than the total spent on culture and sport (ie, the grants from Arts Council England, Sport England and the museums and galleries spend by local authorities). So we have a grand public purpose, a substantial resource and the will of a hugely creative, talented profession.

My own vision of the future is to duplicate the renaissance in public

interest and professional confidence that we’ve seen in museums and galleries over the past few years.

I remember hearing an art critic moaning a few years ago about the prospect of being bumped by pushchairs while contemplating great art. Now galleries are full of parents and children and pushchairs, and I think that’s a change for the better.

But there’s still a view in some quarters that libraries should be like the galleries of old – solemn places, patrolled by formidable staff. Silence, it would appear, is a library’s most valuable asset.

But learning is not all about quiet contemplation. I want to see libraries full of life, rather than silent and sombre. Attractive buildings, exuding a sense of joy – offering something unique and valuable right at the heart of the community.

That hasn’t, if we’re honest, always been an accurate description of some libraries.

The Public Library Standards (*The Campaigner*, Spring 2008, p.8) were useful to kick-start the early stages of transformation. But now we’re underway.

And as the relationship between central and local government evolves, the real transformation is increasingly down to those on the frontline understanding what kind of service is right for each community. It’s absolutely right to have responsibility for delivery at the point of delivery, bringing all services up to the level of the best.

And central government needs to change with you. We’re not in the business of micro-managing services. That doesn’t mean abandoning a fundamental standard of service on offer, but making sure it is provided in the best way possible.

We need to help tackle some of the big questions, about what future generations of users will require, and how libraries can work now to modernise.

Digital age

The first big question: what more can libraries do to involve and engage local people in the digital age?

I think the internet is more of an opportunity than a threat. People talk about social isolation. Young people, particularly, spending hours alone in front of a computer.

But there is a real thirst out there from people looking for opportunities to come together. Libraries should be the place where real social networking happens –

Facebook-3D; OurSpace instead of MySpace.

Look at the way book clubs have taken off – getting on for 10,000 clubs with 100,000 members (according to estimates by The Reading Agency). Libraries are the natural place to meet.

Take the *Who Do You Think You Are?* phenomenon on TV. Huge numbers of people are now looking to trace their family history. Libraries are already feeding this passion, and building people's research and IT skills along the way.

What the internet offers is the chance to unleash the potential for people to get together in a library space instead of cyberspace. Go on MySpace and find ten or 20 others locally interested in Spanish literature or the tango. Find an expert who is interested in teaching a class. Go to your local library and negotiate rooms and times and facilities. Libraries are the perfect place to provide a convenient, safe public space to bring people together.

There's a real hunger from the community for places where they can organise educational activities for themselves.

This is a real opportunity, alongside more traditional forms of education, to fire people's imaginations and enthusiasm – bringing individuals together with voluntary and other groups and experts, like the National Trust, and the University of the Third Age. A true celebration of local history, local identity and, crucially, local learning.

I believe libraries, museums and galleries are the natural home for this kind of informal learning. We want to see how we can use this outstanding network of local cultural resources to support this, and cement a place at the heart of the community.

Staff

The second big question: what new skills and approaches do staff need?

The days of the librarian being seen only as the gatekeepers of knowledge are long gone. The traditional professional skills are still important, but what other skills do you need to keep the transformation going?

Part of the answer is visible in that response to the National Year of Reading campaign. Creativity, entrepreneurial skills and great customer service are what's needed to bring people into libraries and keep them coming back. It's a consistent truth that services are the most effective where local support and partnership working is strong.

We shouldn't forget that over a third of the population don't have computers at home. The main chance for millions of people to get online is at their local library. These are people – older people, the less well off and experienced – who are still looking for a level of support in an unfamiliar world, even as the internet becomes an increasingly important part of our full participation in society.

It's a fact of modern life, as well, that public services have got to deliver when people are free to use them – which means opening later in the evenings and at weekends. There's no getting round that. The best services are already leading the way, but more needs to be done to bring this responsiveness to every community.

Money

The third big question: where does the money come from to modernise quickly?

Here's a good example. The Platt Bridge Community Library [in Andy Burnham's own constituency] is part of a project to regenerate public services. It includes a new primary school, a Sure Start children's centre with wrap-around nursery care, a family support centre, a community health centre and a housing office.

The school contributes to the library's stock of books, the library acts as reception for the school. Overheads are cheaper. Visitor numbers are up on the old library a mile away (closed as part of the project), and a wider range of people are using the library. It's a modern, attractive, appealing building, it's really busy and the community is clearly proud of it.

In Manchester the library service has been turned around in a matter of years, and is now at the heart of the local authority's vision. At the centre has been an innovative partnership with the local further education college. This has brought investment, new library buildings and a fresh, engaging service to the local community.

Closures

Incidentally, this illustrates a point about library closures. It is a common understanding that local authorities close a library at their peril. But where a service has grown up piecemeal there's always a danger it's serving the needs of the community as it was 30 years ago, not how it is today.

If a library is underused it may mean it's in the wrong place, with the wrong hours. The money can be more use reinvested elsewhere. We shouldn't be

afraid to take a fresh look at the library estate, if it means a better service overall.

Be proactive!

Unfortunately, I'm not here with a pot of gold or a blank cheque. However, I [want] the review to explore how easy it is for libraries to access major sources of government capital (like Building Schools for the Future), and if and how my department can help.

Shared buildings, I think, are a really good model for a new generation of libraries. But I'd also like to see a more proactive approach from libraries – looking for partnerships for funding, not waiting to be approached but banging on the Chief Executive's door.

To support you in making the case, the review will also look at the impact of libraries on people's lives. How to capture the sort of evidence that wins the argument for funding with potential new partners.

Conclusion

Over the past decade we've seen the fabric of schools and hospitals transformed by public spending. I'd like to see a similar transformation in the public library service over the next decade – co-locating with other services at the heart of the community.

Public libraries blazed the trail of making the best things in life freely available for all. We've got free entry to national museums and galleries. Free swimming from next April. Free healthcare since 1948. But we've had free access to 'the medicine chest of the soul' since the Public Libraries Act 1852.

Our public library service is a fantastic national asset. The government is absolutely committed to ensuring we have a high-quality, free service, loved by the local community.

There is a threat – but it is not from podcasts and ebooks, or the iplayer and the internet. Demand for library services isn't diminished by the internet, it should be multiplied by it.

The core principles of the library service, as set out in the ten-year Framework for the Future [*The Campaigner*, Spring 2003, p.7] remain good.

So the threat is not in what is already being done – but in not looking far enough ahead to what people will want from their local service, and adapting to meet their needs and second-guess their expectations.

Libraries are an essential part of the fabric of communities. As such they should be full of life, full of joy – full of people.

LOCAL COUNCILS – planning for public libraries

From April 2008, local councils have had to plan all their services in a completely new way. That includes libraries. Users need to get to grips with a whole new vocabulary and a whole new way of making the case for better services. Why? Because that's what libraries themselves now have to do. Here it is in a nutshell.

KILLER BUZZWORDS

Outcomes

Local councils' performance is no longer assessed in terms of what they spend, or even what they provide. Inspectors will look at 'outcomes': what is the effect on people's lives? For instance, how many people use certain services? are they happy where they live? how healthy are they? how many teenage pregnancies are there? how many people take active exercise? And so on.

Community engagement

Local councils now get more autonomy from central government – in exchange for truly 'engaging' with residents. This must go 'beyond consultation'. It is easier said than done. And there is no official guidance on what proper engagement consists of. Each council is doing its own thing. It's up to service users to make sure they do it well!

Best resource (ideas, engagement toolkits, examples, case histories): www.mla.gov.uk/programmes/framework/framework_programmes/Community_Engagement_resources

THE TRICK IS...

... to see which 35 NIs have been chosen to go in your local council's LAA plan. Then think how the library service can help achieve them. And build up evidence, to make sure libraries get the resources they need.

For example, NI 110 (young people's participation in positive activities) appears in many LAAs. The relevance of libraries is obvious. As well as the MLA's Outcomes papers, some government reports are directly supportive (Every Child Matters and Aiming High: the 10-year strategy for youth). Libraries also have Fulfilling Their Potential, a long-running youth project run by The Reading Agency, which offers a mass of proven ideas, case histories and a 'national offer' advocacy kit to make a case to local councillors and planners.



Halton does not have NI 9 as a priority. But its libraries must still work to it. Meanwhile, events like this Bollywood Day will make them able to prove they contribute to the NIs for serving children, social cohesion, engagement in the arts, and many more.

BASICS

The Local Government & Public Involvement with Health Act 2007

This introduced a new relationship between local councils and central government. Councils get more autonomy – on condition they 'engage' fully with their residents. LAAs are now the basic planning tool for all councils. Until this year, councils had to deal with seven government inspectorates and meet 1,200 detailed service targets. All this has been replaced by just one inspection process, looking at just 198 National Indicators (NIs).

National Indicators (NIs)

Every council must work to a 'set' of 198 National Indicators (NIs). These specify 198 'outcomes' that together are meant to cover all local council activities – from road accidents to whether people are afraid of crime. All 198 will be measured by government inspectors.

But local councils also choose about 35 NIs for special attention – after consulting local people about their priorities.

The New Performance Framework for Local Authorities & Local Authority Partnerships: single set of National Indicators: www.communities.gov.uk/publications/localgovernment/nationalindicator

NI 9

This is the only NI about libraries. It measures increase in % of adult residents (age 16+) who use them. Nothing and nobody else. 'Use' can be library visits, online or telephone contact, attendance at library events, outreach contact etc. It will be measured via a 'rolling survey' of local people (carried out by Sport England). Only 10 councils have chosen NI 9 for special attention.

WORKING TOOLS

Using the NIs

The most realistic way for libraries to get council support is to show that they can help the council get a good score for whatever priority NIs have been chosen to go into the LAA. Even if NI 9 has not been chosen, libraries are so versatile that they can contribute to many other NIs. For instance, NIs about art, health, education, activities for youth, old people's welfare – and many more!

MLA (Museums, Libraries & Archives Council) has issued two papers analysing the NIs, with ideas on how libraries can help achieve them – and prove it. They make a pretty unwieldy read, but will give you a flavour.

Outcomes Framework for Museums, Libraries & Archives and Outcomes Framework: theme narratives with case studies: download via www.mla.gov.uk/policy/improvement

Improvement tool

There's a massive new Culture & Sport Improvement Toolkit. This enables services objectively to assess current standards, plan improvements, evaluate results. Users should find themselves being consulted as part of this process. Of special interest are the sections on community engagement; partnership working and customer service. Also covered: leadership/governance; policy/strategy; resource management; people management; performance/achievement/learning.

www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pageId=7921068

The Library Benchmark

This replaces the old Public Library Service Standards. But it's very different. It's not compulsory. And it does not include any precise figures to aim at. It is a 'sector-led voluntary improvement tool' that libraries are supposed to use to measure performance for their own internal purposes and to compare with other library services. It lists 23 desirable outcomes to aim for, but libraries insert their own target figures. It covers: satisfaction; participation; access; resources; efficiency. It serves as a handy checklist of the basics of a modern service. But it doesn't really have teeth.

The Library Benchmark: download via www.mla.gov.uk/policy/improvement

LSP

There is no official guidance on how to consult local people. Each council has a Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) to guide its basic planning. Typically, it might include the council itself, the primary care trust, police, local employers' forums, higher/further education institutions, the Jobcentre, and at least one body that represents local people/groups/volunteers.

SCSs

The LSP – in turn consulting widely – puts together a Sustainable Community Strategy (SCS). This sets out a long-term view of what residents want the borough to be like, and their priorities for action. It becomes the council's over-arching plan, which will influence all its other plans.

LAA

The SCS is turned into a clear plan for delivery – the Local Area Agreement. This is then agreed with government. It covers three years. Its core is the 35 NIs chosen to suit the priorities stated in the SCS. Councils all also get an extra 16

(non-negotiable) targets for achievement in education, from early years to Key Stage 4 pupils. Every council has now agreed its LAA for 2008-11.

CAA

From April 2009, a single Comprehensive Area Assessment will replace inspections by multiple

government agencies. Not much is yet known about how this will work. The CAA is expected to cover: (1) likelihood of LAA outcomes being delivered /effectiveness of management; (2) efficient use of resources; (3) direction of travel (i.e. are services getting better or worse); (4) performance against all 198 NIs.



Derbyshire is one of 10 councils to prioritise NI 9 – measuring use of libraries by over-16s. Enthusiastic users of Bolsover's refurbished library are seen here with councillor Bob Janes.

VITAL INFORMATION

Check which NIs have been chosen by your own council: www.localpriorities.communities.gov.uk/

Find a huge mass of further information on the websites of MLA (www.mla.gov.uk); DCLG (Department of Communities & Local Government (www.communities.gov.uk)) and IDEa, the local government development agency (www.idea.gov.uk).

BE HEARD!

This issue sets out a lot of views on public libraries. Now is the time for us library users to be heard! A local government re-jig (pp.8-9) is supposed to put 'community engagement' centre-stage. Two national-level reviews (p. 5, p.11) are looking at the issues in some depth. The Library Campaign will certainly make itself heard. How about you?

As we go to press, Lyn Brown's committee was still refining its terms of reference. You can contact Lyn via her website (www.lynbrown.org.uk); tel (020 7219 6999); email (Lyn@LynBrown.org.uk) or post (House of Commons, London, SW1A 0AA). You can contact the government's review board at library.review@culture.gsi.gov.uk (DCMS says it assumes that organisations involved in the review have access to email – which, in fact, everyone has – via the library).

SHOW & TELL

Alan Dove reports on a talk (at the Library & information Show 2008) by Roy Clare of advisory body MLA (Museums, Libraries & Archives Council). He's now on the board that will carry out the government review. So – what's his thinking?

The talk was refreshingly free of jargon. Roy started by suggesting this is a great moment. The economy is in a mess and we cannot expect a lot of new funding, but libraries can make a difference to people. He saw a future in which government bodies (including MLA, the Arts Council and Sport England) are better joined up, and public libraries are better integrated with their communities and education services.

He had travelled right round England and Scotland visiting libraries, and found a lot of good work – the best are really good. But others are not so good – among other examples, he mentioned some of the systems for information technology (IT). Control is needed (most people agree public libraries should restrict access to pornography). But a few libraries used the same control systems as the council's own computers, so library users were denied access to websites simply because the council did not want its own staff wasting work time on them. MLA cannot tell library authorities what to do, but it will encourage good practice.

Roy believes libraries must keep in step with the changing population, which includes many semi-literate or illiterate people and people from other countries. Change will upset some. For example a research library (he did not say which) in London is being closed and replaced by a community library. There are lots of protests from its 'mainly white middle-class users', but local residents include many immigrants and deprived people who will be better served by the community 'library for all'. (He did not enter into the problem for research

libraries, which inevitably serve a community much wider than their location, nor whether his logic meant this library, and others, should be sited only in a white middle-class neighbourhood.)

Roy also mentioned our ageing population, but did not suggest how this will affect libraries in practice, nor whether it would cause conflict with other changes he wanted to see.

He anticipated more integration between education and public libraries, but this would mean new thought. For example, in higher and further education the academic IT network is generally used, but this cannot yet be provided in public libraries, which are slower, with more limited content. And public libraries pay VAT but colleges do not. He did not, however, say what MLA is doing about these problems.

To bring about change Roy felt we must get over a narrow view of funding – more public-private partnerships will bring in private sector funding.

Among the questions was one about the potential for an online catalogue allowing anyone to find which UK public libraries hold books they seek, along the lines of the Copac catalogue for major research libraries. Some 'experts' suggested technical problems in making the various cataloguing systems work together, others thought commercial rivalry between software suppliers would mean real co-operation would be a long time coming, yet others thought the only problem is lack of political will. Roy said such a catalogue is entirely feasible, and MLA is trying to get it established. Meanwhile, library users who wanted it could help themselves by demanding it.

ALFRED MINTER

We are sad to report the death of Alfred Minter of the Sandwich Library Guild – a valued and very welcome attendee at Campaign executive committee meetings.

WHAT'S CONWAY?

The planned reviews of public library issues aren't the first this year. So many complaints from users – about falling standards, loss of professional staff – reached the librarians' organisation CILIP (Chartered Institute of Library & Information Professionals) that it published its own review on ten services.

It was written by ex-chief librarian Patrick Conway. The ten services – Cumbria, Dorset, Dudley, Gloucs, Hampshire, Hillingdon, Kent, Lambeth, Medway and Northumberland mostly (not all) get a qualified 'so far, so good' verdict.

But big problems are shown to be building up. Money has already caused many of the problems complained of.

Services also increasingly seek just to satisfy 'expressed need' from current users [Ed: if that!] rather than reach out to others as a public service should. And 'following agreed procedures and customer skills' are more often required of staff than specialist library skills. The abolition of national standards for libraries is creating a 'vacuum' – with no organisation seemingly prepared to step in and give leadership.

Finally, powerlessness – libraries are a small department that does little to get its voice heard.

Libraries could do so much more, Mr Conway argues. They are (or should be) right at the centre of local councils' duties – information, participation, education, leisure, culture... But if they don't speak up, they won't get the chance. [Ed: Maybe if they asked their own users to help, they would do better]

The Parliamentary Group Review

As we went to press, there were no formalised terms of reference for the review by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Libraries, Literacy & Information Management. It was keen to consult, even on such basics. But here's an indication of its focus, from a speech by Lyn Brown MP. And, yes, The Library Campaign was quickly in touch.

I believe it is vital that the public library service is reinvigorated and that its self-confidence and sense of purpose is addressed and renewed. That is why All Party Group is undertaking a review – into the leadership and governance of libraries.

I want to make a call to action. I want [people involved with libraries] to work with us on this venture – suggest topics and frame questions, submit evidence, nominate witnesses, be radical or reactionary but please – above all else – engage!

How should libraries be owned, funded and managed? How are leadership qualities enhanced? How do we improve recruitment and retention? How do we develop local political engagement? There are so many potential lines of enquiry. We will boil the programme down to the wicked issues, so that we are focused.

It is vital that we do not squander this opportunity. This is why I am so anxious to take care and even some advice on how we frame the precise terms of reference. We must make sure we are able to see the wood for the trees

What Lyn said ...

Lyn Brown MP is well-known to London library users. She has been a strong and articulate supporter of libraries, first as a local councillor, then as chair of the London Libraries Development Agency (which works for all London's boroughs) and now as MP for West Ham and chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Libraries, Literacy & Information Management. She calls a spade a spade. Here's the speech Lyn made at the same conference where Andy Burnham spoke (p. 00).

My comments are my personal views and do not necessarily reflect current government thinking. In my view, there are spectacular examples of excellent library practice spread all over the country. In general terms this should be a time for optimism, because there are unlimited opportunities for experimentation and innovation.

And yet I have felt increasing disquiet over the past five years or so. Today – to my dismay and personal discomfort – I feel I have to say enough is enough!

There seems to be an endemic uncertainty among librarians about the role of public libraries, and just how they can influence change rather than be passive recipients of change.

The good news is that we are giving detailed examination to some fundamental concerns about library purpose and function. This is necessary and important.

But let's get this in proportion. Because the bad news is that this introspection often takes place in a sterile vacuum, or a library bubble, and has been going on for too long without a robust leadership response to drive solutions – to move us on.

I believe that it is vital that the public library service is reinvigorated and that its self-confidence and sense of purpose

is addressed and renewed. That is why the Parliament's All Party Library, Literacy & Information Group is undertaking a review into the leadership and governance of libraries.

Libraries are part of our history – especially that of the Labour movement. The working classes were passionate about their libraries, as an asset and a place that could help them to improve and change their lives.

In 19th century Britain, having something close to universal access to public libraries was an emotional cause. When the garden suburbs were built, libraries were at the heart. They were hubs of knowledge, learning, classes, meetings – places to ferment revolutions, social changes, campaigns, protests.

Passionate

Can we be as passionate today as our predecessors were? Can we reawaken the need for this civic space amongst our communities?

It seems to me that the original core purpose of libraries – information, education and culture – still holds firm.

But the world around us continues to change at an ever-increasing pace. As I and others have said – libraries must embrace that social change and constantly adjust the manner,



Lyn Brown MP

methodology and public face of how they continue to deliver this core purpose. This is a challenge for librarians.

As I have also said before – we must change or die! We have to evolve to meet, survive and contribute to this new world.

Cause for concern

The CILIP report [see p.10] reviewed ten local authorities giving cause for concern in three areas – library closures, staff reductions and the proposed transfer of assets to community groups. Patrick Conway, its author, concluded: 'This proposed transfer could lead to reduced accountability and potentially a two tier service.' He added that the community ownership model and others should be investigated, tested and evaluated.

I do think that we need to talk about asset owning – properly. Is it appropriate for the public library service? For all public libraries? Only the smaller ones? What are the pre-conditions that a good library authority should ensure are in place to guarantee that the transferred library will continue to be a thriving, dynamic, changing, evolving entity?

Is it just a word for cost-cutting? A con on the public, who think they are given control of something they love – only to see it reduced to a heap of ashes as they struggle to run it, without skill, support and resources? How can we ensure that such assets are not doomed to fail? What interventions and fail-safes would we need?

It's a debate – and we need to engage. It is part of the political fabric of today. It needs to be properly thought through, weighed, considered and deliberated. We need to connect with the debate and by doing so, drive the case for libraries in government at national and local level.

Receptive government

At the moment you have a receptive government. At a library conference last year there were not one but two government ministers speaking. Ed Miliband [now Secretary of State for Energy & Climate Change] and Ed Balls [education secretary] are both down to do a library event in the Commons this year.

Phil Woolas, a past minister for local government, insisted on including a libraries example in a government white paper. He said: 'The government recognises the significant contribution that libraries can make to sustainable communities and therefore it is a priority that libraries are included in our work to combat social exclusion and promote neighbourhood renewal.'

My own Secretary of State [for Innovation, Universities & Skills], John Denham, is a creative and intelligent man. He is dead interested in how libraries contribute to informal learning in communities and how his department's agenda can engage with libraries, using space for organisations such as University of the 3rd Age.

The most recent minister for libraries [Margaret Hodge] is a former local council leader who is genuinely committed to libraries and brought energy and warmth to her role. We now welcome Barbara Follett, who has a real

working knowledge of cultural interests and the arts. I look forward to working with her.

They all get the importance and relevance of libraries to the cross-government agenda.

Priorities

But we all work and live in the competitive world of priorities and resource allocation. We must understand how this works at national and local level, and learn to operate effectively within this environment – and demonstrate substantial, relevant outcomes.

CILIP's report provides an interesting narrative on the recent history of the public library in England.

It highlights (with hindsight) the important role played by government initiatives such as Best Value, Public Library Standards and Library Position Statements in bringing the corporate spotlight on to local library services.

This was a challenging, even painful, experience for some. But it did bring a new level of strategic thinking to the services that we (or the tax pound) provide. The measures were crude, I accept, but they did provide an external assessment which carried substantial political and personal consequences.

In the real world of political campaigning, our lack of clear impact assessment measures (to enable us to assess the outcomes of our services, demonstrate the value of these outcomes and measure continued improvement) is a potentially fatal flaw.

We have to provide needs-based services in our community libraries. We need to have a baseline and set targets. We need outcome measures that are agreed locally.

Only ten authorities have specifically opted for the new National Indicator on library usage [see p.7]. But, as ever, the issue is really about the library's contribution to the other indicators that have been selected within the local context.

The Library Benchmark, recently launched to 'fill the void' left by the Public Library Standards [*The Campaigner*, Spring 2008, pp.8-9] is an improvement tool that is entirely voluntary and has low political visibility. Personally I think it is irrelevant.

CILIP's report remarks on the various locations of libraries within local authority structures, and the place of the

head of library service within the hierarchy. I personally believe that services with a clear purpose and proactive staff can deliver successful outcomes irrespective of departmental structures. We should not waste precious energy getting hung up on processes.

I would certainly challenge the defeatist assertion that 'opportunities for advocacy on behalf of the service are limited, given the position of heads of service in management structures'.

Let me dare to give librarians a political tip: you must assert yourselves as part of your day job.

The report comes to the view that a demand-led service, focused on expressed demand, is the priority in terms of professional standards. It states that the unexpressed needs of communities and individuals are less of a priority, and the capacity to meet those needs is reducing.

I just can't agree. As a Labour politician I see that as taking the easy way out, and consolidating provision around the existing information- and leisure-rich.

I want to hear how libraries are impacting on worklessness. I need to see that libraries are actively combating anti-social behaviour and social exclusion. I have to see facts and figures about increasing access and enhancing skills to convince me that libraries are at the heart of priority agendas.

Under-recognised

So where does this all leave us? We have a strong and trusted 'brand', which has strong political support and recognition. It delivers, in part, relevant, necessary and excellent services.

But is under-recognised for what it does. We are worried that we cannot recruit bright young things with drive and energy to refresh our organisations (or retain many of the bright not-so-young things!). We continue to have the same circular discussions about the meaning of life and the shrinking library universe.

Why do we think we are in this position? Why do we feel we are on the decline? Why are we defensive and defending our ever decreasing empire and borders?

Not surprisingly, we have no shortage of information or opinions. We have plenty of operational programmes. But where is our strategic and political direction? Where is our leadership? To whom do we look to represent us, promote

us and, when necessary, defend us? Who explains us? Who helps us to grow and develop as individuals and organisations?

Issues

Public libraries need a single-minded sense of purpose, linked to an understanding of the bigger picture. I can find no reassurance that the current advisory machinery will ever manage to do this.

Our public library service is highly valued at local level. But it has undeniable issues around political and professional capacity, strategic leadership, advocacy and innovation.

My own experience convinces me that these issues can be addressed only by a focused National Library Development Agency. It would not restrain local initiative or dilute local flavour, it would work in partnership with library deliverers to create and seek partnerships, provide support, add value, ensure advocacy, work regionally and nationally to develop our brand and begin to resolve some of our perennial questions about library purpose and function.

Regional activity should be focused on the facilitation of delivery programmes. National activity should outward-looking, be characterised by sharp elbows in corridors of power and influence, with an ability to question and challenge and be all about advocacy and leadership.

Above all, it should be bloody-minded in its espousal of the library cause.

Reaction and action!

I am not seeking sympathy. I love my job. But fitting library events and issues into my working life is really tough! Work/life balance has long since ceased to be a personal aspiration. The reason why I am an active and involved member of the library community is that I care passionately about them.

My passion is not prompted merely by the content, ethos and values of the public library concept – although I do feel a strong affinity. It is really focused on what libraries can do to change lives, and tackle inequality in its many guises.

I am hoping to galvanise a reaction and some action. I have perhaps been a little blunt. But friends give free advice.

And ensuring the future of a dynamic, thriving, well-led library service is too important for me to spend time prevaricating.

New Who's Who!

Barbara Follett is the new Libraries Minister. She brings an intriguing range of experience to her post at DCMS (Department for Culture, Media & Sport). She is officially Minister for Culture, Creative Industries & Tourism. That includes libraries.

She replaces Margaret Hodge, whose husband has been ill for some time. Margaret will rejoin the government when she can.

Lyn Brown MP says that Barbara Follett 'has a real working knowledge of cultural interests and the arts'. Her most obvious link is her author husband. Ken Follett has written more than 20 best-selling thrillers and histories. Her interests listed by the Commons include work as 'communications consultant' to Ken, and shares in a recording studio.

Barbara served as Parliamentary Private Secretary to Tessa Jowell in 2005-07, when the latter was Secretary of State at the DCMS. She has been on several Parliamentary bodies, including the Film Industries Group and Labour's backbench Treasury Committee.

Her real passions are health and equality (racial and sexual). She has had many posts running, or lecturing in, relevant organisations – many in Africa, where her alcoholic father had ensured a peripatetic childhood.

Her past is a colourful one by normal political standards. She is known, for instance, as the colouring expert who 'Folletted' many New Labour MPs to improve their image, in the heady days of the late 90s.

After two failed attempts, she became MP for Stevenage in 1997. She co-founded the Labour Women's Network in 1987, then Emily's List (which supports women becoming MPs) in 1995.

Meanwhile Lyn Brown, library users' favourite MP, remains at Parliamentary Private Secretary (PPS) level. However, the Secretary of State she is PPS to is John Denham in the Department for Innovation, Universities & Skills (DIUS). That has to be a useful foot-hold for public libraries – see below.

Learning in Libraries

Success! Libraries have moved right up the agenda of a government department that ought to know all about them (but didn't). Lobbying has scored a bull's-eye.

Culture Secretary Andy Burnham is to work jointly with John Denham, Secretary of State at DIUS [Department for Innovation, Universities & Skills), 'to ensure better access to libraries, museums and colleges as part of a wider government drive to introduce more adults to the pleasures of learning'.

The value of libraries (and other cultural venues) in 'informal education' has long been pushed – notably by MLA (Museums, Libraries & Archives Council) with its massive Inspiring Learning for All programme.* This was full of ideas for helping libraries (etc) play a role in informal learning, and how to train staff to encourage learners. Libraries can, for many people, be far less threatening than, say, the local college or even a school. They can hold 'taster' events and family sessions, tempting people in and then helping them build on their interests.

But a DIUS consultation paper in January (*Informal Adult Learning: shaping the way ahead*) showed very limited awareness of libraries' existing work – let alone their potential.

* www.inspiringlearningforall.gov.uk/default.aspx?flash=true

One or two isolated projects got a mention, such as the success of Hampshire's libraries in attracting Learndirect customers, and the well-established UK Online centres (half of them are in libraries).

But, for instance, the Vital Link was ignored. This is a huge nationwide partnership, linking public libraries with local colleges teaching adults to read. The main idea has been to get people reading just for pleasure. This, in turn, led to the best-selling Quick Reads books involving top-line authors, publishers - and the entire World Book Day publicity machine. See *The Campaigner*, Spring 2007, p. 11.

The DIUS report raised many issues – but was most excited about using technology and the internet to attract people. However, the major call in the responses was for better access to private and public spaces, and for more public funding (especially for adults who have had least access to education in the past).

You can see in Andy Burnham's speech (p.5) how the theme of learning in libraries is now flavour of the month. Maybe there is no nationwide conspiracy to 'dumb down' public libraries after all. 'Strong local partnerships' will be the key, DIUS now says. And access to libraries is top of the list.

Time2Give in Kent

I was fascinated to read two articles in the last edition of *The Campaigner* on volunteering. Alan Templeton's piece (Volunteers – whose view is it anyway? p.6) contributed to a challenging debate that is taking place in the real world of public libraries over the role of volunteering in our sector.

The second item (p.14) covered the 2008 Libraries Change Lives Award. It made reference to Kent County Council's 'Time2Give' scheme, which was one of three projects short-listed for the award.

I join Mr Templeton in questioning: 'Who is setting the agenda about what they (volunteers) should and should not do?' and 'Is the present consensus the right one?'

In Kent we were already starting this debate back in 2002 when the opportunity presented itself to be part of the Lending Time pilot project funded by DCMS (Department for Culture, Media & Sport). See *The Campaigner* no. 65, autumn 2002, p.9). In Kent we later made this part of our mainstream service, as our own Time2Give programme.

It is no coincidence that simultaneously we were transforming the way that we engage with local people. In fact from the outset the volunteer scheme was seen as an integral part of our 'public involvement' programme.

We take the view that anyone who gives up their time freely to help us improve the library service is a volunteer.

This may be in traditional ways, like delivering books to home-bound customers. But it may also be by providing us with valuable feedback and advice, or by acting as local advocates for our service – both roles that members of our user groups ably fill.

Other examples of volunteer roles are as 'Web Wizards' who provide help and advice to people using our public access computers; and as gardeners who help us develop and enhance our growing collection of 'reading gardens'. Our youngest volunteer is 13 and our most mature is 84 (one of several octogenarians).

It is also important to recognise the benefits to volunteers from volunteering. The stories of some of our volunteers provide an added dimension to this debate.

Take the case of Dan, who now makes his significant contribution to public library services through full-time paid employment with us. Following a period of unemployment, Dan lacked the confidence to secure such a post without the 'gateway' we provided through volunteering opportunities. Dan has now developed his skills and secured City &

Volunteering continues to be a hot topic. Increasingly, small branch libraries are being turned over wholesale to volunteers as the only way to save them. It is a tricky path to tread, as Alan Templeton pointed out in our last issue. But, for library head Cathy Anley, volunteering is at the heart of community engagement and service improvement.

Guilds and NVQ qualifications. He says: 'None of this would have been possible without the opportunities, help and support I received.'

Or Carol, our 2007 Volunteer of the Year. She tells us about the friends she has made, and the improvements to her health, after she started volunteering with us following her recovery from a stroke.

Carol says: 'I get a tremendous buzz helping with the Baby Rhyme Time... the actions help me move and develop my weaker arm... I really enjoy my library volunteering, and plan to continue for many years.'

We have consistently maintained our principle that we place volunteers only in roles that add value to the service, and have never directly substituted a volunteer for a member of staff.

However, in being responsive to the expressed needs of local people, and the wishes of our volunteers, it would be foolish to say that there are never grey areas that we have to navigate.

So, for example, if local people come to us anxious to develop services at/encourage use of their local very small branch, and they want to run children's activities, or a homework support club or reading group, and they have the skills and capacity to deliver such a programme – should we say no because in other, larger, libraries, or in more disadvantaged communities, such activity is supported by paid staff? As someone who has worked a lifetime in public service, I cannot take this view.



Anyone who gives up their time freely to help us improve the library service is a volunteer.

It is right that the local authority should provide adequate funding for the 'comprehensive and efficient service' mandated in the Public Libraries & Museums Act 1964.

But library managers are all fully aware that even with such funding secured, we constantly have to prioritise how we allocate these resources.

For example, staff who run a reading group for people with learning difficulties in one of our town centre libraries do not have the capacity to provide similar support to another reading group based at a small village library nearby.

This second group is made up of intelligent and articulate local people, well able to organise such activity themselves. In effect, they are acting as volunteers. Are they to be denied this activity because in another library, with a needier group of customers, staff run the group?

And our priorities change over time, even while they follow the same broad themes: providing access to information, and supporting reading for learning and pleasure.

So I would argue that to be truly responsive to local people, we have to be open to their views and welcoming of their contribution to helping our services improve.

Even the most robust employer/employee agreement, of the kind Mr Templeton describes, needs to be flexible enough to recognise that every individual potential volunteering opportunity is unique.

What we need is broad agreement to provide reasonable protection for staff, and a pragmatic approach to implementation which takes account of the will of local people. Then all three parties to this compact will have their needs addressed.

In Kent we are proud to have taken this agenda forward with our 1,000-plus volunteers. We are profoundly grateful for the over 50,000 hours of volunteering that they have contributed to our service improvement in the less than three years since we launched Time2Give.

Cath Anley is Head of Libraries, Archives & Museums, Kent County Council.

Time to think

Mary Nolze, a library volunteer in Kent, responds to Alan Templeton's questions with a whole lot more questions. Using volunteers, she makes clear, is not a simple matter.

Alan Templeton is apparently keen to start a debate on volunteering in public libraries. I agree with him that there is much to discuss. I think the wider question of volunteering in the public sector as a whole needs to be considered, not just the library situation.

I would like to start with quoting Alan's opening gambit: 'Other countries have shown that it is possible to run a public library service based wholly or partially on unpaid volunteers.'

Frankly, unless we know a bit more about how good these services are, so what? Rather intriguingly, Alan does not actually fully commit to saying if he thinks such a thing is actually desirable, though one can make a not-so-shrewd guess. So I will step in. Why is it a good thing? Who exactly is it good for? And why volunteer to work in a library – or any other publicly funded body – when you

would not dream of volunteering to work in Sainsbury's or in the NatWest Bank?

This is no trick question. In today's world, rather than in the distant past where some people seem to prefer to stay, it is a perfectly fair and serious concern.

In the past there was a far sharper division between private and public sector, but this is blurring more and more with each year that passes.

I said to myself a long time ago that if the public sector continues as it does down the privatisation road, there will be nothing for it but for the private sector to engage more with welfare activities – just to redress the balance a little. Indeed, this happens now: it is impossible to pass the supermarket checkout without being bombarded with vouchers supporting this or that school cause, and companies are constantly flaunting their ethical credentials.

Some years ago I attended a seminar by Dexter Whitfield, author of *The Welfare State*. He predicted that in time, local authorities would cease to exist as we know them now. They would merely be giant commissioning bodies, meeting annually to award contracts for running not just parts of the service, but everything. There would be no directly employed staff.

My point is that our council tax and income tax will not go down! We will, however, be increasing the wealth of private companies. There will be no guarantee that, with their naturally profit-driven motivation, they will continue to serve the vulnerable in an effective way. Volunteers will be very attractive, as they will enable staff costs to be cut.

Is it really wise to volunteer in such a climate? What exactly is the role of the state and of state institutions in the 21st century? Until we have a consensus on this, would it perhaps be wise to avoid volunteering in the public sector, apart from in roles which are already well-established and which we know will not cost jobs. Would it not be better to express one's instinct to serve by



Every individual potential volunteering opportunity is unique.

VOLUNTEERS

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supporting a full-on charity, rather than the strange hybrid beast that the public sector is turning into?

I am at the moment a Home Library Volunteer for Kent County Council. But if my many contacts tell me that volunteers are starting to replace paid jobs in any part of the library service in Kent, I will withdraw.

Alan mentions 'robust agreements' which could be negotiated to solve the jobs question. H'mm... I have been involved in local councils for a long time, and I am not sure there is such a thing! Agreements can be blown apart in a single meeting, usually when management decides they don't agree any more!

I am clearly not totally against the traditional type of volunteering in libraries. But I do believe the subject is extremely fraught. Let us assume for the moment that we can return to the somewhat flaky status quo. To justify itself, volunteering needs to be good for one (or more) of the following (in order): the customers, the volunteers, or the staff.

I will not allow a woolly concept such as 'society' or 'the community' to creep in at this point. It will stop us looking carefully at the issues. Though I can hardly agree with Mrs. Thatcher in my position, I think I know what she was driving at in her infamous comment about society.

So, is volunteering good for customers? I would say it certainly can be, provided volunteers are carefully selected and set to the right tasks. It is probably true that there will never be sufficient funds for everything a library authority might wish to provide. Top of the list of deserving customers, in my opinion, are the housebound, the elderly, and those isolated from the mainstream in any way. Activities which include them fully in the service must be a good thing.

However, I do have concerns about the inclusion issue. Staff who remember some of the village centre libraries run by volunteers in the past remember nightmare scenarios where bossy matriarchs kept the library as a 'nice' place for their own buddies, and were far from welcoming to anyone they did not like. Books were kept aside for friends, and strangers did not get a look in.

Such things must be avoided, clearly. Libraries cannot be cosy clubs just for one group. There must also be an open-minded

attitude toward stock selection. I understand that in some of the many libraries in the United States which make heavy use of volunteers, the local politicians find it an easy matter to censor the stock. The two facts are not unconnected, in my opinion.

Is volunteering good for volunteers? Not a silly question. A psychologist, or in fact anyone who has ever thought deeply about anything, knows that human motivation is a very strange thing. We can do the right thing for the wrong reason, the wrong thing for the right reason... and there are any number of variations on this theme.

Without being unduly cynical, we must admit that it is nearly always more than sheer altruism that leads a person to volunteer for anything. This isn't, of course, a bad thing, but it ought to lead to a certain amount of caution. For the customers' sake, it is the altruistic motive we really want. The feeling of satisfaction felt by the volunteer, or whatever other emotion is engendered, must be secondary.

I suggest, perhaps, that the most purely motivated would-be volunteer would simply show up at the local Volunteer Bureau and ask where the need is greatest. I believe it is true that the greatest need at the moment is for hospital transport, a job which is probably tedious, unsung and time-consuming. Far less fun than helping in the library with junior activities or diving into the archives!

Is volunteering good for library staff? It can be, relieving them of tasks they know need doing but realistically can never do, and bringing them into contact with the many cheerful and agreeable volunteers who are out there. But it will be different for every authority, making a standard agreement or policy impossible.

In a large rural county like Kent, visiting all housebound customers is impossible for library staff. In City of London libraries, which I have joined recently, staff are able to deliver books over the Square Mile themselves.

Also, I know of cases where library staff have felt that unsuitable volunteers have been foisted on them, and that the customer was not really benefiting.

I must strongly disagree with Alan over his definition of 'core activities' as activities which 'would benefit users the most', and his assertion that the staff would also define it in that way. Thinking

back over the hundreds of library customers I have known, what would have benefited them most depended entirely on the individual.

Some benefited most of all from a chat, some just wanted the loo, some needed social services, and yes, quite a few wanted to talk to someone knowledgeable about books. Many wanted a fount of wisdom on local history; it was very much the luck of the draw if they got the latter. At Tonbridge Library, where I worked for many years, what would have benefited all of us, staff and customers, was something very basic and which we never got: a roof that didn't leak!

So, rather than be mired down by what is or isn't a core activity, I would rather stick to saying this – people who have spent many years training for and learning a job, building up experience and contacts, accepting a relatively low wage in return for job satisfaction, are people to be valued and not patronised and told they are entrenched stick-in-the-muds simply because, with very good reason, they fear for their jobs. On this point I will never back down.

So far in Kent, volunteers have not replaced staff directly. But very many jobs have gone in the past few years and, in my new view as a customer, the service is now less good. I have also heard the view expressed in an open meeting by a Kent County councillor that if the service cannot manage with the staff it has, it should recruit volunteers.

In this climate, volunteering is bound to be a sensitive and emotive issue. Considering the useful support given by Unison to the Library Campaign, I think it would be wise to treat this subject carefully and not alienate staff.

Mary Nolze left library work 2007. She worked for 18 years in Kent libraries and was leader of the library staff side in Unison from 2005 to 2007. She is now an emergency volunteer for the Kent Home Library Service. Her first library job was in Swiss Cottage Library in 1968, where she was ticked off on her first day for taking too long to shelve the art section. Her very last library task took place at 6pm on August 17 2007, when she replaced a copy of the Daily Telegraph in the newspaper store for a customer and went home for the last time. She is glad she always stayed on the front line.