

# *The* **LIBRARY** *Campaigner*

*Supporting friends and users of libraries*

**The minister won't  
listen ... so now  
we're going to light  
up Parliament!**

**Here's how you can help libraries on 4 February and 13 March**

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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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– if interested, please contact the Secretary

The following organisations send representatives to attend steering group meetings:  
Unison, Chartered Institute of Library & Information Professionals (CILIP), Association of  
University Teachers, University of the Third Age.

## 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**.

## 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.

### 2012 MEETINGS

2012: 24 March, 12 May (AGM), 14 July, 15 September, 17 November – all Saturdays

# MEMBERSHIP FORM

I wish to join The Library Campaign and enclose a Cheque/PO for £..... for one year's membership.

Name.....Tel: ..... Email .....

Address.....Post code.....

**GIFT AID:** I confirm that I am a UK tax payer and pay an amount of Income Tax and/or Capital Gains Tax at least equal to the tax to be reclaimed in the tax year. I would like my/ our subscription (plus any donation) to be treated as Gift Aid.

Signed..... Date.....

### MEMBERSHIP RATES

Individual £15.00 • Concessionary Rate £10.00 • Local Organisation £20.00 • Trade Union Branches £30.00

Local Authorities £200.00 • Company/National Trade Unions £100.00 • Others please write for details

Please make cheques payable to: **The Library Campaign**. It saves a lot of time and money if you pay by Bankers Order.

If you are able to do this please fill in the form and return it to us.

### BANKERS ORDER FORM

To The Manager.....(Name and address of your bank)

Please pay The Library Campaign

(HSBC, Salford University Branch, The Crescent, Salford M5 4PB. 40-40-39, a/c 61277405) the sum of £..... every

year starting on ..... (date) until further notice

Signed..... Account No .....

Name..... Address .....

..... Post code .....

(BLOCK CAPITALS PLEASE)

Please return to: **The Library Campaign, 22 Upper Woburn Place, London WC1H 0TB**. Registered Charity (England & Wales) No. 1102634

# SATURDAY FEBRUARY 4 is NATIONAL LIBRARIES DAY!!!

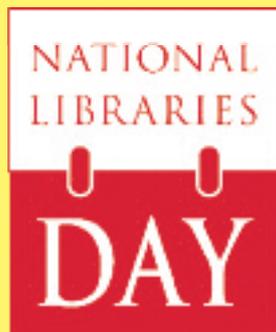
Many of you did great things for the first such day last year – and there's plenty of reasons for keeping up the pressure this year. Turn out to support your local library. Take a friend, or several.

There are some low-key ideas on the official website, plus plenty of publicity material you can download:

[www.nationallibrariesday.org.uk](http://www.nationallibrariesday.org.uk)

For something a bit more showy – but easy to do – here are some ideas from Friends groups in Lambeth:

- Rope in staff to demonstrate some of the little-known glories of the service, such as internet resources, local history, reading groups ...



4 FEBRUARY 2012

- Have a stand for the Friends group (of course).
- Ask other groups who use the library to come and show what they do.
- Have three scrolls (wallpaper lining is ideal) for people to write (1) what they like about this library (2) what they want (3) – for children – draw a library-related subject.
- Have an area where people can have their comments filmed – on someone's mobile or laptop.
- Display photos of the library past or present, previous events, whatever you've got.
- Never forget the power of a few placards and some balloons!
- Invite the local press.

# TUESDAY MARCH 13 is the day we LOBBY PARLIAMENT!!!

The Library Campaign is joining a mass lobby of MPs. The culture department refuses to act. Many local councils refuse to listen. We must keep up the pressure to save the library service. So we have to take the fight to Parliament itself.

TLC will lobby alongside Unison, the National Federation of Women's Institutes, Voices for the Library, Campaign for the Book and the Chartered Institute of Library & Information Professionals (CILIP).

**Do come! It will be an entertaining as well as a useful day.** From around 11.30am to 2pm, there will be a rally at Central Hall with celebrities, campaigners, films and music. The Hall will also have meeting places and

exhibitions – including a 'pop-up library' to demonstrate some of the many great things libraries can do – often unknown to MPs (and councillors). **INVITE YOUR MP!**

From around 2.30pm, we hope as many of you as possible will go to meet your MPs and ask them to help. Public libraries are a local matter in their constituency.

And now they are a national emergency. **PLEASE LOBBY YOUR OWN MP.** (Instructions overleaf). A delegation will go to lobby the Department for Culture, Media & Sport nearby.

Look out for further plans on TLC's website:  
[www.librarycampaign.com](http://www.librarycampaign.com)

Follow the lobby on twitter [#librarieslobby](https://twitter.com/librarieslobby)

## OUR AIMS

- We need MPs to help us hold the minister to account. The provision of library services is enshrined in legislation. The government must accept its duty to oversee local authorities' adherence to the law.
- Libraries are unique open spaces, offering a wide range of services to communities and individuals alike. They are a vital public resource during a recession.

- The statutory duty should be underpinned by a national vision for a modern library service, including agreed standards and a framework to support local delivery.
- Public libraries should be properly resourced by government, so that local authorities can deliver sustainably planned, well-staffed services, tailored to meet the needs of local communities.



# How to lobby your MP

## What's it all about?

The lobby is calling on the government to take action to stop the devastation of public libraries through cuts and closures. We want the Secretary of State to uphold his duty to superintend the library service by setting out a clear vision, standards and framework to support local authorities to deliver high quality, sustainable library services.

**We need as many library users, workers and campaigners as possible to attend the lobby – to explain to their MP how they are personally affected by cuts and closures in their area, and how vital it is that MPs support libraries as an essential public service.**

An MP should regard you as a constituent, whether you voted for them or not. MPs are required to represent their constituents' interests, even if they may not agree with them. Each MP can have up to 90,000 constituents, so they may not agree with each and every one. But they should listen to your concerns and be prepared to pass your views on to the government.

Use a meeting with your MP to:

- Tell them what is happening in your area
- Influence their views
- Persuade them that many other constituents share your concerns
- Ask them to pass your views on to the government
- Ask them to take appropriate action to show that they support you.

## Meeting your MP

In theory you can turn up any time the House of Commons is sitting and request a meeting. But there is no guarantee that they will be there, or will have time to meet you. And, due to heightened security, there is a strict limit on numbers within Parliament. Even if you are taking part in an organised lobby, you should make every effort to arrange to meet your MP in advance.

## Contacting your MP

The best way is to write to him or her at: House of Commons, Westminster, London, SW1A 0AA. Most MPs also use email and should treat emails in the same way as letters. Find your MP's email address at: <http://findyourmp.parliament.uk/>

Include your home address, as MPs have strict rules about dealing only with their own constituents.

It's also worth giving your mobile phone number (if any) or asking for theirs, so it is easier to contact them on the day.

## Where to meet your MP

There is a limit of 100 lobbyists at any one time in the Central Lobby. This is where people traditionally wait to meet their MPs. These are other possible meeting places:

- MPs can come to Central Hall, Westminster, where the rally is taking place, between 11.30am and 4pm. We will set aside an area for them. Central Hall is on Storey's Gate, London, SW1H 9NH, only a few minutes' walk from Parliament.
- We plan to book a large committee room in the House of Commons for the afternoon.
- Your MP may have an office in another building, where they might suggest meeting you.

## Getting in

If you need to go to Central Lobby, go through the St Stephens entrance to the House of Commons. Stewards will be there on the day to help you. When you arrive ask the attendants' desk to telephone your MP's office, and tell a police officer that you have a meeting with your MP and show them any associated correspondence. This should enable you to go straight to security checking rather than queuing with the general public waiting for tours of the building. Your MP or one of their staff will usually come and meet you in Central Lobby.

## The Green Card

If you have not arranged a meeting with your MP in advance you can still try to meet them on the day using the Green Card system.

You will need to queue at the St Stephen's entrance, go through security checks and proceed to Central Lobby. Once you are there, go to the desk and ask for a Green Card. This is a request for your MP to come and meet you.

On the card you must clearly set out why you want to meet, eg, 'to discuss cuts

**Lobbying is using your right to meet your MP as a constituent. You can do this in your constituency, or by visiting Parliament in person. This guide has been written by Unison for people taking part in the lobby for libraries on Tuesday 13 March.**

to the library service in X local authority and across local government more generally'.

This is very important. If you do not manage to meet your MP on the day, the card will still be sent to them. Your MP should then respond directly to you. The more they know in advance about why you were at the House of Commons, the better.

The desk staff will take your completed card and ask officials to look for your MP. Be prepared to wait – but lobbyists who have firm appointments may also be waiting, so be prepared to give up after around 30 minutes.

## The meeting

Be as brief, clear and courteous as possible! If the MP sends a member of staff, treat them the same way. Keep in mind the main points you want to make, and what you would like them to do. Try to ensure you:

- Thank them for taking the time to meet you
- Establish how much time they have
- Make your key points – but try to allow most of the time for questions and discussion
- Most importantly, ask them what they are prepared to do to support your views and put them to the government.

## Disabled access

If you have a disability, telephone the Serjeant-at-Arms office, who can advise you (phone 020 7219 3000 and ask to be put through). Some disabled parking is provided, but this needs to be arranged in advance.

It is usual for one of your MP's staff to accompany you once you are inside the building. You will need to arrange this in advance. Contact The Library Campaign if you have any access requirements.

# SITS VAC – WANTED: A Secretary for the Library Campaign

AT THE Library Campaign AGM on May 12, I shall step down as Secretary of the Campaign and leave the Executive Committee (trustees). This article is to explain why, and to address the issues the Campaign will need to tackle in electing a new Secretary.

On the TLC website is an article about what the new Secretary could expect to do. I hope that at least one person will look at these two pieces and say ‘That could be me.’

I am resigning as Secretary because I have done it over 20 years. That is probably too long. I indicated my wish to stand down when we became a charity in 2004. Although I delayed the moment once, I will not do so again. The Campaign needs new blood, and needs to recognise that work has to be taken on by more than a few people – which, regrettably, is the pattern of the past few years.

Since 2004 we have also not employed anyone (except for a few specific projects). Thus a lot of tasks have had devolve to lay members of the executive, and elsewhere. The Secretary got many of them.

One of the reasons I have been allowed to carry on for so long is probably that I am a practising public librarian in a good library service (Essex County Council), and have a range of contacts in the profession through my work and related activities.

The Campaign needs such links to keep it up to date, to make contacts with people who might be able to help, and to influence the ‘movers and shakers’. I have been able to facilitate and do some of that.

I don’t intend to drop out of TLC altogether – I may, for instance, volunteer to ‘mind’ the website – so I can continue to give some support in that way. There are other, more bureaucratic and routine, things that the new Secretary needs to do.

## Secretary’s Slot

Andrew Coburn  
Campaign Secretary



But we need more active members who are willing and able to get more involved in the library world outside their own locality – even if largely electronically.

Another thing I tend to do much of – stemming in part from the above, but also because the Secretary is one of our three principal officers – is media contact. This means both responding to it and initiating it, by writing and publicising responses to consultations and other developments. Once again this is something TLC should perhaps spread amongst its activists (not necessarily only those on the Executive).

Don’t get the wrong idea – there are a number of people who do contribute to our work, or can be tapped for advice and assistance. Our Treasurer and Membership Secretary both do great jobs. Laura Swaffield, as well as being the Chair, has edited this magazine for years with great success. And there are others.

The Guardian recently quoted Enver Hoxha’s new year message to the Albanian people in 1967: ‘This year will be harder than last year. On the other hand, it will be easier than next year.’ I cannot help thinking that this will be true for public libraries as for many other sectors of society, and I am sorry to step down in those circumstances.

However, TLC needs a new direction and a fresh hand on the tiller. I do hope that someone – or some people, because the work could be divided – will come forward.

*Andrew Coburn, Secretary – until May*

## THE LIBRARY CAMPAIGNER SPRING 2012, No.83

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## The Library Campaign Annual General Meeting 12 May 2012

The AGM of will take place at 14:00, **Saturday 12 May 2012**, in central London (venue to be confirmed). An agenda will be sent to all members by the beginning of May and posted on the website ([www.librarycampaign.org.uk](http://www.librarycampaign.org.uk)) with the accounts and annual report for the year ended 31 March 2012.

Items for discussion and Nominations for the Executive Committee should be made in writing to the Secretary by 7 May 2012. The positions to be filled are: Secretary, Chairperson, Treasurer, 6 ordinary members, of whom two shall be members representing local user groups.

### JOB DESCRIPTION FOR THE SECRETARY OF THE LIBRARY CAMPAIGN

*Strictly speaking these are jobs that the Secretary does or has been doing. Many could be done by others, including those not on the Executive.*

- Acting as the named contact for the Charity Commission;
- Doing Charity Commission returns;
- Arranging Executive Committee meetings;
- Hosting the Campaign dedicated phone and fax numbers;
- Looking after the Campaign email account ([librarycam@aol.com](mailto:librarycam@aol.com));
- Receiving mail forwarded from the Campaign accommodation address (22 Upper Woburn Place);
- Paying in monies received;
- Writing cheques for monies we need to pay out;
- Sending out material to new members and other people who request stuff;
- Storing (and despatching when asked) Campaign materials such a spare copies of the Campaigner, T-shirts, posters and postcards;
- Responding to local and national developements.

See the Campaign website for more details: [www.librarycampaign.co.uk](http://www.librarycampaign.co.uk)

# Our New Year Honours!

## Library heroes!



Staunch TLC members Pat and Peter Richardson are now officially among the local 'heroes' chosen by the South London Press – for their tireless efforts to save five libraries in Lewisham. This took them to endless council meetings, the culture department, Downing Street – they even waylaid the Secretary of State at the Commons! Alas, in vain. Pat is also a regular contributor to this magazine, and to the London users' website ([www.librarylondon.org](http://www.librarylondon.org)).



At a splendid awards ceremony, Pat said: 'Libraries are a great leveller and incalculable in their value, which is why we are fighting to keep them.' Peter added: 'It's a great honour to have been nominated, let alone win, especially considering the other nominees who have all done such incredible work in their communities.'

## Maggie Gee OBE

Author Maggie Gee – novelist and library campaigner – was rewarded in the New Year Honours List with an OBE, for services to literature. She has lived in Kensal Rise (in Brent, London) for 24 years, and has written and campaigned about the council's determination to close the Kensal Rise library and five others. She says: 'I came from a background that was not very literate so I want my work to be available for everyone.'

**Library Campaign members and friends are getting the recognition they deserve!**

## Wonders of the web

**Ian Anstice** has been named Information Professional of the Year by Information World Review (IWR). Ian, a public library branch manager, runs the Public Library News blog ([www.publiclibrariesnews.com](http://www.publiclibrariesnews.com)), documenting the threats to public libraries.

Presenting the award, IWR's editor, Peter Williams said: 'Ian's work is a stirring story of how much can be achieved, and how knowledge and information really is power. A well deserved winner. I would urge you to go take a look at his work.'

Ian said: 'I was surprised to see there was no publicly available site to show what was going in each authority. I started the blog in October 2010. This includes all news articles on public library cuts, a map of the cuts and a tally of cuts and proposals by authority.'

PS: there are also some impressive – and sometimes very funny – analysis pieces!



**Voices for the Library (VftL)\***, the advocacy group that co-organised TLC's conference, has been named by the Independent newspaper as one of its 'Independent voices of 2011: the most influential non-celebrity users of Twitter'. The award aims to honour people who use Twitter not for celebrity rubbish but 'to inform, provoke, entertain and engage'.

\* [www.voicesfortheibrary.org.uk/wordpress](http://www.voicesfortheibrary.org.uk/wordpress)

VftL says: 'When we first started up in August 2010 we never imagined that we would have such an impact. We are all volunteers who spare whatever time we can to keep the campaign going by highlighting both the cuts to libraries across the UK as well as the value of libraries and librarians.'

'We believe passionately in what we do, and the pockets of good news certainly help to give us the energy to keep speaking out in defence of libraries and highlighting the very important contribution they make to society.'

'But... if it wasn't for [campaigners] writing posts for our site, supporting us on Twitter and Facebook, emailing us with information and spreading the word about our campaign we would never have had the impact we have.'

Librarian **Lauren Smith**, VftL member, has been elected the next President of librarians' association CILIP (Chartered Institute of Library & Information Professionals).



# The Library Campaign Conference

## 22 October 2011

### An inspiring day

#### Starting point

It's been a very nasty few months for librarians, library staff and everyone who cares about public libraries, and about the principle that citizens should have comprehensive access to these wonderful institutions.

We've seen them sent straight to the top of the list of services that councils are choosing to cut, as the effects of the government's Comprehensive Spending Review bite and local government finance is squeezed until the pips squeak.

But, in some ways, the public debate this policy has provoked has been every bit as bruising. Because, along the way, we've had to swallow some harsh lessons that we probably weren't expecting – about the way some people think about libraries, and how irritatingly successful these naysayers are in getting their negative, inaccurate views into the mainstream.

Many of them haven't been in a library for 20 years and are proud of that. Many think everyone has access to the same financial and personal resources that they do. Some are paid political lobbyists.

Others can't for the life of them see why a few minutes with Google fails to top a librarian's years of training, experience and professional development.

Or they think libraries have brought it on themselves for not operating to their exact personal specification.

Knowing all this does not do much to lessen the sting. Nor does the fact that we've seen such a wonderful groundswell of support from people who do use and value libraries. Their voices seem to be getting drowned out – especially at a local level, especially when it comes to making the case for libraries to their elected representatives.

#### The Conference ...

For me, it was pretty much essential to take this opportunity to get together with like-minded folk who have been campaigning for libraries all round the country.

The conference attendees came from three groups, although I'm sure many people would happily describe themselves as members of more than one.

They were: (1) those who had founded, run or taken part in campaigns for a specific library or group of libraries; (2) people with a professional interest in books, literacy and libraries; (3) trade unionists (mostly from the library staff union, Unison).

It was very interesting and useful hearing experienced campaigners share their stories and the expertise they have picked up along the way.

I got the chance to meet a lot of people in person that I'd only previously known

**Lisa Hutchins gives an overall account of the day**



Lisa Hutchins is an information librarian and blogger. Follow Lisa's blog on [www.ljhutchins.com](http://www.ljhutchins.com)

online, and to have some great conversations with them.

I was also able to catch up with some old contacts, get some solid, practical ideas for campaigning, contribute to the discussion about national action and get an insight into some of the obstacles that mature library campaigns regularly meet (especially when they can't persuade elected representatives to work with them, or even listen to them).

I learned that the personal cost of campaigning in the face of setbacks can be very high, and that it is essential to make sure you have enough support.

I also left with what I had come for – practical tools and ideas to help me in areas that are not necessarily my strongest (such as organising events).

Thanks to The Library Campaign and Voices for the Library for organising an inspirational event. I look forward to meeting and working with members of both in the future.



Philip Pullman with campaigners including (L to R) Demelza Jones (Gloucestershire), Lauren Smith (Doncaster), John Irvén (Somerset), Pat Richardson (Lewisham) and Laura Collignon (Brent).



Alan Gibbons was with us in spirit and on video – he was in Africa on the day!

See the video at:  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=NZTyFHF\\_nTI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NZTyFHF_nTI)

## The Money Trap

**PETE STARTED** by illustrating the economic impact of making one library assistant redundant. £5,000 goes from tax receipts (if she was earning £20,000 a year).

Instead, the government is now paying about £11,000 in benefits just to keep her. Also, she spends less so this impacts on the private sector. For every 100 public sector posts lost, another 41 are lost in the private sector. It therefore makes little economic sense to get rid of council workers unless they immediately move into another job.

Local government gets money from (1) a formula grant from the DCLG (Department for Communities & Local Government), made up mostly of business rates (c. £20bn per year), plus revenue support grant (£3bn per year), plus money for schools; (2) council tax payers (£26bn); (3) fees and charges – this last is the fastest growing element of the lot.

2010-11 saw a £1.1bn cut to local government from central government, notably a £311m cut to services for children/young people (Connexions etc).

2011-12 saw a further £3bn cut. These are the fastest and deepest cuts made in most people's lifetimes – 'and this is only the beginning'.

By 2014-15 there will be a 28% cut in real terms to all public services (including the police). But for local government it is worse. The overall budget started at £20bn in 2010, and ends at £13bn. This means a 33% 'cash cut'.

For every £1 a council received from the government in 2010-11, it will get 67.6p in 2014-15. If you factor in inflation as well, it is an even bigger cut.

Council tax will be frozen. The Chancellor has found £650m to pay for this. This freeze will create regional disparities and will benefit the better-off most, as it is based on house prices. People in London in the most expensive bands will gain twice as much as those elsewhere in the country in the poorest bands. It also removes any opportunity for local people to say that they would be willing to pay more for libraries.

The formula grant has gone down this year – the first year in its history that it has done so. The Welsh Assembly has allowed councils to increase tax (they believe in localism there, unlike England, where councils do not have the choice).

### Ian Anstice reports Pete Challis of Unison's talk on the scary state of local government finance

Clearly some resources can be found by the government for other things – it recently found a further £250m for weekly waste collections.

There may be some real efficiencies to be made. For instance, introducing co-mingled recycling collection saved one council £25m in landfill charges. However, these cannot be made overnight – and the speed and scale of the cuts makes the task impossible.

The government says it wants to encourage local retention of business rates. This is great, but only if you're a borough like Westminster, which currently collects £1bn business rates revenue but only gets £100m back.

Also, there has been sleight of hand by government – forecast business rates that go above set limits will be kept by central government to subsidise other grants. So growth in business rates will not go to local councils but to central government.

£21bn was distributed in business rates in 2011 but £19bn was the sum stated – government claims accounting was wrong. This makes things even worse, as the artificially low 2011 figure is used as the base year. OBR (Office of Budget Responsibility) predictions say that business rates will rise to £30bn – but all this gain will go to government.

Then there's tax avoidance and evasion. There was a £35bn tax gap in 2009-10 (HM Revenue figures) because big companies did not pay the tax they should. The UK is now famously the only country in Europe that does not support a Robin Hood or Tobin tax (a 0.01% tax on financial transactions), which could raise £25bn per year.

Corporation tax is lower in the UK than in many places (UK 28%; Japan/USA 39%). Eire's rate is 12.5% 'to attract business' – but it is not really helping, as Eire is now locked into it. The government plans to cut corporation tax down to 23% in 2014 (this will mean £2.7bn less in revenue in 2014-15).

'If we ignore where the money is coming from, perhaps we are missing the trick,' said Pete.

### MESSAGE FROM CAMPAIGNERS: GET MONEY-WISE

**1** Get to know the figures. Find the following official council documents: (i) the medium-term financial plan produced annually, which shows plans for the next 3-5 years; (ii) the annual budget (this can be revised several times per year); (iii) the out-turn figures (this means the money that was actually spent during the year in question, and shows if they did what they said they were going to do).

**NB:** Budgets are set on March 1 for counties, March 11 for districts and boroughs. But the big financial decisions will have been made back in October/November. Out-turn figures tend to be released June/July the following year.

**2** Discover the council's level of reserves – some are being added to (!). If a council claims that money in the reserve is earmarked, it needs to be done for a stated purpose and needs to be reviewed annually.

**NB:** Capital funds are, essentially, those earmarked for buildings. Revenue funds are for running costs. A council cannot sell a building and move the money to the revenue budget.

**3** Watch for 'service charges', where the council charges libraries for central services such as IT/personnel etc. These may well be poor value. However, it can be really difficult to get exact figures.

**4** Note that asset transfers and moving libraries to be run by community trusts are becoming a lot less financially attractive due to changes in tax law.

# Why libraries matter ...

## When you open a book

Written specially for The Library Campaign by Alan Gibbons

When you open a book

You open a mind.

If there are many open books

Then minds open

Like flowers,

Tremulous, contrary,

Rebellious, enquiring,

Reckless, wise.

If there are many open books

People kick at doors

That are closed,

They tug at cases that are shut,

Ask questions about laws

That are unquestionable.

For that reason some people

Would rather a book

Stays closed

Like a door.

In Brent they came

With boards

To turn a door

Into a wall,

A wall

Into a final chapter

But people

Arrived with open minds

Instead of hammers and nails,

With angler's chairs

Instead of hammers and crowbars,

With questions

Like flowers,

Tremulous, contrary,

Rebellious, enquiring,

Reckless, wise.

While the libraries stay open,

The books stay open,

The minds stay open,

The final chapter

Is still to be written

And the first chapter

Is still to be thought.

Alan Gibbons

## The fight against stupidity

**Philip Pullman gives his full support – political and intellectual – to people fighting to keep libraries open.**

EVERY ACTIVITY we've heard about, every protest and every court case, is a blow well worth striking in the interests of decency and civic good.

But it's worth standing back a little and looking not just at the individual battles here and there – this one where we win a little ground, that one where we have to fall back – but at the larger battle of which these form part.

And at the war, the great war, against the background of which this large battle can be seen clearly, and where we can see other battles, other fights, other struggles and other losses and victories.

Because the fight to save the libraries isn't just a struggle in isolation. There's a context in which this makes wider sense, and a perspective in which we can see the meaning and the significance of such things as the judgement about Brent Libraries.

To get to that wider view, I want to remind you of some characteristics of our nation and our world today.

We have a political system which is less and less democratic, and more and more the plaything of large and powerful corporate and financial forces.

We live in a nation where more and more influence over government

is bought by large corporations and very rich individuals, funding lobbyists and think tanks and whispering market fundamentalism into willing ears, exporting jobs to cheaper parts of the world, undermining government revenues by avoiding taxes or exploiting tax havens – Lord Ashcroft! Sir Philip Green! – persuading journalists and commentators that in spite of all the evidence the private sector is always efficient and the public sector always wasteful, rewarding helpful ex-ministers with profitable directorships and installing their own people on government boards and committees, providing corporate hospitality, paying for ministers or – who knows? – perhaps the friends of ministers to fly to attractive places in first-class accommodation, helping their friends to profit from the break-up of the railway system or the National Health Service and no doubt in due course the BBC, helping members of the government to meet influential editors and media owners and even spend time at parties or dinners with the brutes.

Does it stop there? Of course it doesn't stop there.

What about the financial crises we've endured over the past few years, and the way the bankers managed to reward themselves with even bigger bonuses after nearly bringing the whole national economy crashing down around our ears?

And who's been terrifying governments with the threat that unless these gluttons were indulged in their every appetite, they would all go off and live in Switzerland?

Personally I would say 'Go, you bastards, and good riddance'. But Prime Minister after Prime Minister has been persuaded that we need rich people taking advantage of us in this country. It's good for us to be taken advantage of.

And when we look at the consequences of all this activity, we see a nation where everything seems to have been turned upside down.

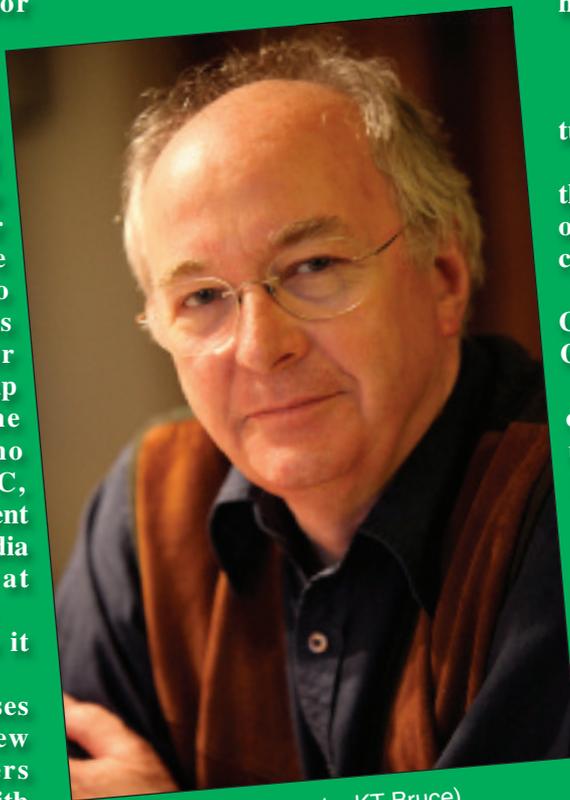
Do you remember the arguments in favour of privatisation? The state can't run things efficiently, we were told; we need to put enterprises into private hands.

I don't know about you, but it seems to me that privatisation makes things more expensive, more

complicated, uglier, more difficult to deal with, more difficult to find someone responsible, in every way worse.

And we have very little democratic protection against this. Were we ever asked whether we wanted a state of things like this? Do you think we ever will be?

So much for our national politics. Let's look at the wider world, and I don't mean the world of warfare,



Philip Pullman (Photo by KT Bruce)

famine and exploitation, I mean the wider world still, the natural world.

I mean the catastrophic destruction of natural habitats; the gigantic, slowly revolving continent of indestructible plastic in the Pacific Ocean; the unstoppable slaughter of the rain forests; the inexorable retreat of the ice from mountains and oceans with all that that implies in terms of hunting grounds, sea levels and floods.

I mean the way we continue to burn up the great gift of natural capital in the form of carbon-based fuels with no thought of tomorrow.

I mean every way in which we are trying to destroy the earth we live on, as if we had never been told how foolish it was.

National politics, the wider natural world, and now I want to come down to a much smaller scale: the scale of the family. Do you remember those recent UNICEF reports that pointed out how unhappy British children were, in

comparison with children in other countries? The unhappiest in all the countries they tested?

It doesn't happen by accident, and it didn't start yesterday. Philip Larkin said something of the sort forty years ago:

'They fuck you up, your mum and dad.

'They may not mean to, but they do.

'They pass on all the faults they had

'And add some extra, just for you.

And he goes on:

'But they were fucked up in their turn ...'

Something in the way we live in this country, in the way we deal with one another, has effects on our children that ought to shame us.

To quote the previous Children's Commissioner, Sir Al Aynsley-Green:

'We are turning out a generation of children who are unhappy, unhealthy, engaging in risky behaviour, who have poor relationships with their family and their peers, who have low expectations and don't feel safe.'

The national, the worldwide, the familial; and now for the level up from the family, the level that concerns all of us here today, that of local authorities, the people responsible for looking after our libraries.

I'm fascinated by how surprised they were when they met such fierce and immediate resistance. And how they have to resort to insults to defend their position.

Those of us who got involved in Oxfordshire's library campaign were 'well-heeled worthies' who want to run down the care of the vulnerable and the infirm and who look on with casual unconcern while children and old people die shivering in the streets.

Oh yes, and we were only supporting the libraries in the first place because we wanted to increase the sales of our books.

And now the leader of Brent Council, Councillor Ann John OBE, has welcomed the High Court judgement [supporting library closures] with the words that the decision 'means we can now push ahead with our exciting plans to improve Brent's library service'.

That, by the way, is a masterpiece. It ought to be quoted in every anthology of political bullshit from

here to eternity. All the time, you see, the council had been longing to improve the library service, and the only thing standing in the way was – the libraries.

Now what I'm asking is: Why do we do these things? Why do we behave like this? Why is it that wherever we look, at whatever level, we find things so wrongly done, so obviously bad, so evidently destructive?

Is it malice? Do we behave like this out of spite and hatred? I don't think it is. To be sure, malice and wickedness certainly play a part in human affairs, but it's a smaller one than we might think.

I think the fault lies elsewhere. What characterises all of these ways of behaving, at every level we look at, is that they're stupid.

When we stand back and look at the way politics is run in this country – and not only here: look at the half-witted way the Republican Party is behaving in the United States – when we look at it objectively, what must occur to us is – how stupid.

What a stupid way of running a country. What a stupid way to treat our children. What a stupid way to look after the only planet we've got, what a stupid way to look after a pearl of great price like a library service.

It's all joined up. The war we're fighting is not against this party or that one, this flag or another flag, our parents or our MP or anyone else in particular: it's against stupidity.

And stupidity is not to be underestimated. The poet Schiller, whose great words on the subject of Joy were set in Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, knew what a huge part stupidity plays in human affairs:

'Against stupidity,' he said, 'the gods themselves struggle in vain.'

And so it might look – to a reflective, philosophical mind able to stand back from the hurly burly of human affairs and contemplate them in the light of eternity.

But I am not here to be pessimistic. I want to see happy children and happy parents. I want to see a world getting cleaner and returning to a more balanced climate.

I want to see a national government that is honest and open

about the influences that try to sway it this way or that. I want to see local authorities taking more care of one of the great treasures in their portfolio.

That's what I want to see. I dare say you do as well. But we can't improve the whole world all at once. We should remember the context, remember the significance of what we're doing, and then fight hard where we happen to be, doing one thing at a time.

And what has particularly cheered me about [library campaigners] is the detailed and concentrated thought people have been putting in to this question of



what we are to do.

It would be easy to lament, to pour ashes over our head, to wail and cry, but you're not doing that. The verbs in the workshop titles make it clear: organising, constructing, working, looking, using ... they're active. There's a sense of purpose here. People are fighting stupidity.

I want to say a few words about my own concerns and feelings, and then I'll stop.

I'll focus to begin with on libraries and children, because their needs, I think, trump every other. We must make this country a happier place for children to grow up in.

We mustn't, we surely must not make it harder for children to go to a library than it is at the moment. And yet isn't that exactly the situation that'll result from Brent's heroic attempt to beat the bullshit record?

To do away with half your libraries with the excuse that the remaining ones will be bigger and better entirely ignores the fact that they're further away, they'll be visited less by children. Inevitably,

Families need a place that's reachable.

If you close the library that's within walking distance, that means that so many fewer children will go to a library at all. Isn't that what's going to happen when the library closes, whether in Brent, or in the rural areas of Gloucestershire or Somerset, or in the edge-of-town districts like Blackbird Leys in Oxford?

We must make our libraries accessible to children. Because one of the most common forms of tribute to the public library is where the speaker says: 'It opened up the world for me when I was a child', or something similar. I want that sort of experience to be available for every child.

And the sort of reading that really takes place here, the sort that really makes a reader out of us, is reading for pleasure, which government after government has paid lip-service to while working assiduously to prevent it.

And since what they do is more effective than what they say, we end up with reports like that of the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment two years ago, which demonstrate that children and young people in the United Kingdom fall far behind their contemporaries in Albania and Kazakhstan when it comes to reading for enjoyment.

They just don't do it. Our children can decode the language all right, they can bark at the print, as we used to say, but they get little joy from doing so.

But the sheer centrality and vital importance of reading for pleasure is well documented, not least in a paper the National Literacy Trust produced in 2006.

The benefits of reading for pleasure include improvement in writing, in text comprehension and grammar, in breadth of vocabulary. It develops a positive attitude to reading, which in turn leads to higher achievement. It develops self-confidence, and leads to greater pleasure in reading in later life. It increases general knowledge, a better understanding of other cultures, more community participation, and a greater insight into human nature.

Not reading for the sake of passing a test, but reading for pleasure is what does that.

And reading for pleasure has got to be controlled by the child, not by a curriculum, not by a teacher, however well-intentioned, not by anyone but children themselves.

I profoundly dislike, for example, the way reading is captured by slave-drivers and made to work at something it wasn't meant for.

People who think reading is instrumental, that its value is in how you can use it for some other purpose.

Reading to promote discussion about contemporary issues: no matter whether the book's any good, it's about bullying, therefore we should use it. Reading to teach grammar: underline the adjectives in this passage – find examples of the passive voice – work out what words are missing from this paragraph.

Can we wonder why children are put off reading, when that sort of rubbish is seen as its only aim? We do not write books for that purpose. I try to bear in mind the words that Samuel Johnson is supposed to have said: 'The true aim of writing is to help the reader better to enjoy life, or better to endure it.'

Those are my purposes when writing; I think they could hardly be bettered as purposes for reading too.

And the function of an adult in this mysterious business of helping a child become a reader is to advise, to point in interesting directions, to make available, to encourage, and to stand back.

That's what we need librarians for, and why volunteers, no matter how willing, will never replace properly trained professionals.

For example, the Reading Agency's Summer Reading Challenge, which this year involved over three-quarters of a million children in reading – not reading as a joyless task, something you have to

do for the test, but reading purely for pleasure.

Only the libraries could provide the materials and the staff to make this possible. And nothing could be more important, if we have the well-being of our children at heart.

The last thing I'll say begins with a recollection of my time as a library assistant – a pretty lowly form of life – in Charing Cross Road library, part of Westminster city libraries, in the early seventies.

I'm a romantic. I'm easily swayed by my imagination. And one of the things that used to thrill me was the sense of a great network reaching out from library to library, embodied in the inter-library loan system connecting my branch with the other Westminster branches, St John's Wood, Marylebone Road, Buckingham Palace Road, Drury Lane and so on, and from there out to the other London boroughs, and from there out across the whole country.

If someone wanted a book that we didn't have, we could get it. No-one expected every branch to hold every book in the world. It was the connectedness, the joined-upness, that meant that it didn't matter if your local branch was a great central one or a small suburban one, or a rural one, because you were part of the great system. Out of curiosity I used to collect the compliments slips that came with the books our readers requested, and I've still got them.

This is why Brent and the other local authorities who want to close lots of small libraries in favour of fewer much bigger ones are wrong.

It's a bad policy. It would be far more sensible to close the big libraries and open even more small ones.

If Kensal Rise Library is still open, if Blackbird Leys in Oxford still has a library within walking distance of the people who live there, if hundreds of other libraries all over

the country are kept open and properly staffed, then readers can reach pretty well any book they want to with the help of the inter-library loan system.

If you want the internet, well, we have it. But the internet is like looking at a landscape through a keyhole, and, what's more, a keyhole that's getting narrower all the time.

We shouldn't forget that the way Google works, for instance, is to look at all the searches you've made in the past, and work out what it thinks you want to see now based on what you've looked at before.

It shuts down a lot of possibilities before you even start. You'll never know what's there, because it keeps most of it out of sight.

If you really want complete freedom of choice, complete openness of information, where nobody is spying on you, no-one is selling your presence to advertisers, the only place to find it is a library, where they keep books.

And the book is second only to the wheel as the best piece of technology human beings have ever invented. A book symbolises the whole intellectual history of mankind; it's the greatest weapon ever devised in the war against stupidity.

Beware of anyone who tries to make books harder to get at. And that is exactly what these closures are going to do – oh, not intentionally, except in a few cases. Very few people are stupid intentionally.

But that will be the effect. Books will be harder to get at. Stupidity will gain a little ground.

I salute everyone who's protesting and demonstrating to save this library or that one, everyone who's devising a way of preserving one of the greatest and the best gifts any society has ever given its seekers after truth, its children, its old people, everyone who is looking for help better to enjoy life or better to endure it.

There's nothing more valuable in the war against stupidity than the public library. These are hard times, but you are each guarding a beacon, and I have every confidence that you won't let that beacon go out.

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## What is outsourcing?

**PRIVATISATION IS much further forward in the USA, with LSSI being the fifth largest provider in the country. In comparison, there is only one council (Hounslow) run by a private company in the UK. So far.**

Privatisation can mean fragmenting the service, offering two tiers. By definition it doesn't make sense, as libraries will never make money.

If you have to be privatised, though, it is better to be the first to be privatised to a new company, as it will be used as a flagship to get more contracts!

Cross-boundary working between boroughs is a good way to save money. 'The economies are enormous,' said Diana Edmonds (former head of libraries in Haringey, now with the GLL social enterprise, which runs leisure services for councils).

She added that there is real potential for integration very fast, eg, a library app able to integrate all libraries in London.

However, lack of co-operation between different commercial companies means that opportunities to combine services are lost. Privatisation and outsourcing change the nature of the library.

There is a need for a national network. There is currently a lack of national

libraries systems. For instance, everyone has different computer catalogues, library cards, self-service systems (RFID) and so on. Privatisation and volunteers make fragmentation worse, not better.

Evolving technology should make national standardisation easier. 'Accidental' fragmentation, however, could create many competing standards.

Competition? There isn't any in libraries – they don't match the private sector well. There is no need for long-term contracts for private companies unless they have themselves paid for a high initial investment into the system and need to make the money back.

If a council outsources libraries (to any kind of outside entity, whether community volunteers, a trust or a business) it escapes the political embarrassment from closing them. Libraries would lose their directly accountable nature for anything not in the private company's contract. The company is accountable to the council, which is accountable to the public.

LSSI claim that 'all they will do will deliver service more efficiently due to economies of scale' – but they have no contracts at all at the moment.

You can challenge private companies on efficiency criteria. They have no magic

**Ian Anstice reports on a workshop chaired by Tom Roper, which discussed an option increasingly being explored by local councils – outsourcing or privatising library services**

bullet of efficiency, certainly not the 15% margin they would need to cover their probable profit.

Outsourcing may make a service more populist, not more popular. A statutory library service has to be comprehensive (eg, include classics). However, a company's main duty is to its shareholders not to the public.

The Localism Act (now law) means that anyone can challenge the local council and ask to run a service. But once that door is opened, it may not be local people who are in fact chosen to run the service. Some see it as an open door to the private sector.

Chief conclusion from the workshop was that privatisation and outsourcing are against what the library needs. They fragment the system and bring in 'the anarchy of the marketplace'. Many are worried that the Big Society/Localism agenda is a mask for privatisation.

There were no lightning bolt proposals from the group, but it was very useful to talk to each other.



**IS THIS the difference between privatising and simply sharing services? Slough (a small service) has contracted Essex (a very large one) to run its libraries. A year on, it is opening three new self-service 'satellite' libraries, one in a refurbished community centre and the other two in children's centres.**

All are in areas which had no library, where hard to reach groups live and where there are the most non-users. They aim to be 'a gateway to library services'. Each has around 2,000 books, a self-service kiosk, library catalogue and free internet access. Residents can join, borrow, renew and return books, and use a telephone hotline to ask library staff for help.

**The on-site council staff (from Community Services or SureStart) are trained to give basic library support. Library staff visit weekly for children's music or rhyme sessions, and to deal with other matters.**

This has been achieved while reducing costs – by 15% so far. A further 5% is planned over the next two years. Opening hours since 2009 have doubled to 321 hours.

Andrew Stevens, Assistant Director for Culture & Skills, says: 'While libraries across the country are closing, I am delighted that in Slough we are reversing that trend.'

'We are able to do this by sharing premises and creating community hubs with different services available in one place.'

## Volunteer fears

Laura Swaffield reports Ian Anstice's workshop on a very hot topic – volunteers

LIBRARY USERS and workers found much in common at the conference. But on volunteer-run libraries, views varied among campaigners. Margaret Bailey (Brent campaigner) said: 'If that's what it takes [to keep a library open], that's what we'll have to do.' The Kensal Rise group has already set up a new charity to run/assist in running the library, to cover all possible eventualities.

Fellow campaigner Laura Collignon said: 'We both feel that libraries should be run by the local authority. We pay for librarians. But we really have our backs against the wall. The council has not used the building particularly well. There is much unused space, and we could use it better.'

These campaigners had been upset by a Voices for the Library blog post which criticised them for 'wanting' to take over libraries with volunteers.

And Elizabeth Ash (Croydon) argued: 'I'd rather see libraries shut and hold the council to account, as part of a longer game plan.'

But Alan Templeton (Camden) warned her: 'Councils can't be embarrassed.'

And when the audience was asked who wanted libraries to be community-run rather than council-run, not a single hand went up. Not one really wanted to run the library in preference to the council.

Ian Anstice, who works as a public librarian in Cheshire, praised his own volunteers: 'They do brilliant work. They do things I simply couldn't do, because there's 100 of them and one of me. I love them – if they are complementary.'

'But it's really horrible now, because volunteers are not seen as wonderful in the strange new world we are in. Librarians are in fear of them. Being a volunteer is seen as a party political statement.'

At various times during the day, campaigners made it clear that they see volunteers as a potential device for 'moral blackmail' and 'picking off' communities. The most deprived are the least able to run their own library. Forcing them to run libraries or lose them is unfair – they do not have the same resources as more prosperous areas.

Campaigners fear that volunteer-run branches will not last for long. Any or all the volunteers will face burn-out after initial enthusiasm. The library may survive a year or



Cartoon by Ian Anstice, using ToonDoo ([www.toondoo.com](http://www.toondoo.com))

two, or three, and then fail – leaving the community with no library at all. The council can then blame the volunteers for closing the library.

Volunteers need training, supervision, organisation, a vetting process, an interview process, and dedicated volunteer co-ordinators (who may well be volunteers themselves). In some areas, they are expected to cover the cost of maintaining or even refurbishing the buildings. Elsewhere, this issue is glossed over. There are many big legal and organisational issues to resolve – and almost no experience to draw on. This does not bode well for long-term survival.

And, everyone agreed, most well-meaning volunteers have no idea what the job entails. Even more frightening, nor do most councils. A consultant paid by Doncaster to advise on volunteers produced a huge list of complex duties. Meanwhile the mayor announced that anyone could do the job, it just meant stamping and shelving books.

Above all, delegates feared that councils could dump their whole responsibility on to residents – if they won't take on the library, or if the arrangement fails, it's their fault for not caring enough.

### SINCE THE CONFERENCE ...

... events have moved fast. Somerset and Gloucester WON their joint judicial review case against closures. As we go to press, both councils are re-doing their plans and research. Alas, the Brent campaign LOST its case against brutal closures, LOST the appeal – but is trying to appeal at a higher level. The council did not wait, but cleared out five of the six threatened branches. Surrey campaigners have now been forced to launch a judicial review case.

Now many more councils are trying to avoid public fury – 'saving' libraries by handing them over to volunteers. Communities are starting to say no to this. They include Oxfordshire, Trafford, Dorset and (with some success) Surrey. As noted in the last issue (p.16), the government is all for it. Yet its report\* cheerfully admits that 'community managed libraries' raise huge problems that it can't even list in any detail. It's unknown territory.

\* <http://tinyurl.com/67xc9al>.

## Next steps

*We can't report even a fraction of the fascinating details that people exchanged. And the big campaign stories need updating (catch up with them online – see below). So here are some of the major themes that emerged. These we will act on.*

### MESSAGE – STARTING SMALL IS FINE!

SO, WHAT did I get from the conference? A sense that starting small and low-key is just fine – it's how everyone started. The message I took away was an important theme of the whole conference. Almost all library campaigners have started from exactly the same place – a sense of unease about what was happening, a feeling that something badly needed to be done about it, followed by the realisation that they were the people who would have to do it – or no-one else would.

The people who have found themselves spearheading really big campaigns with a national profile started out in the same boat as the rest of us, with the same motivations. In fact, any of us could find ourselves having to do the same kinds of things.

**Lisa Hutchins, [www.ljhutchins.com](http://www.ljhutchins.com)**

### MESSAGE – GET ONLINE!

It's good to have a Library Campaign magazine, but it's no longer enough. In this age of crisis, news moves fast. And as campaigners redouble their efforts, ways to get involved proliferate fast. So –

1. If you have an email address, please make sure TLC has it ([librarycam@aol.com](mailto:librarycam@aol.com)). Then you can be in the know as soon as needed!
2. Look out for campaigner news on [www.librarycampaign.com](http://www.librarycampaign.com). Coming soon – a much-needed wiki, to make all the information you need much easier to find.
3. Check regularly on at least one of the news websites: [www.publiclibrariesnews.blogspot.com](http://www.publiclibrariesnews.blogspot.com)  
[www.voicesforthelibrary.org.uk/wordpress](http://www.voicesforthelibrary.org.uk/wordpress)  
[www.alangibbons.net](http://www.alangibbons.net)
4. If you are actively campaigning, Facebook and Twitter are now important tools. Learn how to use them: <http://wiki.sla.org/display/23things> (Week 6).
5. If all the above makes no sense, go to your library and get them to explain, and sort you out an email address!

### MESSAGE – WE NEED TO GO NATIONAL!

PETE CHALLIS of Unison said we are looking at the biggest cuts to local government funding in living memory, and suggested the figure tops 30% even if inflation is not factored in.

He suggested that the solution to this (and other public sector funding problems) is national political action.

This was perhaps unsurprising – but the same point was made again and again throughout the conference, and was one of its most important themes. Local campaigners now need to organise on a national level rather than just concentrating on their own neighbourhood battles.

The conference ended with one of the day's highlights – a totally uncompromising, furiously angry and gloriously rabble-rousing speech from author Philip Pullman [see page 9] reiterating the theme that the current threat to libraries is a national problem, only likely to be solved by action on a national scale.

**Lisa Hutchins, [www.ljhutchins.com](http://www.ljhutchins.com)**

### MESSAGE – WE NEED TO POOL RESOURCES BETTER

THIS WAS a really important event. It allowed campaigners to share their experiences and offer support and advice, but also to get a sense of how groups around the country feel about hot topics such as volunteer-run libraries, the likelihood of success in legal challenges and what to do about national campaign activities.

It helped to put campaigners in touch with information and resources they can benefit from. At Voices for the Library, it can be hard to manage people's expectations – we're all volunteers working in full-time jobs, and Voices isn't a funded organisation. We can't save libraries all on our own and we need a national network – which is why the day was organised in the first place! The event and subsequent publicity has helped.

A lot of action points came out of the day. A couple are particularly important and pressing:

- The need for a wiki where people can update everyone about local situations and discuss plans of action etc. Voices, The Library Campaign and some others are working on this;
- The need for a large-scale, national event such as a march or rally to put pressure on the DCMS to intervene in library cuts around the country. Plans are now well advanced.

The Library Campaign, Voices for the Library, CILIP and Alan Gibbons' Campaign for the Book will work together to make events like National Libraries Day even more successful.

**Lauren Smith, Voices for the Library**



# A vision for a 21st century library?

I AM a regular visitor to the Barnsley Central Library. In the library is a plaque that reads: ‘The moment we persuade a child, any child, to cross that threshold into a library, we’ve changed their lives forever, and for the better.’

Classic Obama prose – but he’s right. Because within each library lies a reservoir of potential.

Libraries are in the middle of a difficult and necessary process of change, but they can emerge transformed. In an age where citizen engagement is reshaping our democracy, where education is more vital than ever, where we increasingly live in a knowledge economy, where access to information is almost as important to being able to fully participate in life as access to electricity; libraries should be more relevant than ever.

## Public space

Is there any other place like a library? Is there any other public space where anyone, rich, poor, immigrant, unemployed, parent, schoolchild, retiree – anyone can come and sit, and think, and work, and read, and go online, without paying for the privilege or anyone asking you to leave? Libraries offer a place to learn, to socialise, to connect, to access the arts and enjoy literature and the news.

Libraries teach children that reading really is fun and let adults read alone or in company. Libraries are instruments that can be used to inspire, motivate, innovate and raise the aspiration of any person that chooses to use them.

Libraries are neutral, safe, supporting places, where the experience is controlled to a good extent by the users themselves and where individuals, couples and families, can pursue what is important to them.

They are perhaps the least intimidating of all public spaces, somewhere people tend to feel an easier sense of ownership. Maybe that is why libraries are so often seen as a community asset in the way other institutions are not.

## Cuts

Of course, libraries face enormous challenges, which cannot be ignored. Over the last few years the global economic downturn has impacted on cities and communities across Britain. The reality has been huge pressure for local government cuts: many councils have been backed into an impossible position

**Dan Jarvis MP is the latest in a long line of shadow culture/library ministers. He is keen to learn, is commissioning a report and is starting a tour of libraries. This is his position so far ...**

by David Cameron, Eric Pickles, Jeremy Hunt and Ed Vaizey – the minister allegedly ‘responsible’ for libraries. Does anybody seriously believe that libraries are safe in their hands?

And there are longer-term issues. When many can search the internet from the comfort of their own home, and when you can download an e-book onto a Kindle in seconds, the idea of going to a library and trawling the shelves for something to borrow seems to some an outdated practice.

Like any institution, particularly one funded by the public purse, if libraries are to maintain their purpose and place in the 21st century then they must progress and modernise. But this is not a mandate to rebuild every library from scratch, or for mindless closures.

Instead, it presents an opportunity to be visionary about the place of a library in a modern Britain. I believe that in the darkest of times, we need the brightest of ideas.

## Potential

Now more than ever is the moment to harness the opportunities that libraries offer and employ them as ladders of social mobility and personal development.

To realise that potential, libraries must evolve and develop. These are undoubtedly difficult times, and with them come difficult decisions, but there can be no excuse for government policies that are short-sighted and destructive.

As the shadow culture minister, I’ve commissioned a report entitled, ‘A Vision for a 21st Century Library’. I did this because I want the debate over libraries in Westminster to be properly informed by practice on the ground and around the regions. I want to know why people value their local library service, and how library services can be developed.

Plenty of local authorities have seized the challenge. I began my library tour at the ‘super library’ in Southwark, a place that has seen an increase in visitor numbers, has kept every single library open and developed a plan to ensure that over the next two years, money is saved.

I also visited the Ideas Store in Tower Hamlets, another example of innovative thinking from a local council which has ensured local people continue to enjoy these vital services in the most modern of settings.

## Inspiration and support

Obama also said that: ‘More than a building that houses books and data, the library has always been a window to a larger world.’ These libraries aspire to just that ideal. They are places that are a pleasure to visit, that offer not just information but inspiration and support.

The bigger ones have performance and rehearsal spaces, meeting rooms, coffee shops, galleries. Here the neutral, inviting space of the library anchors a wider focus for the whole community.

It’s not just about size: even the smaller

## SHOW DAN YOUR LIBRARY!

Dan is now touring libraries around the country. So far he has seen ‘flagship’ new projects in London such as Canada Water, Southwark and the Ideas Stores, Tower Hamlets. He will visit the Manchester area towards the end of February.

His assistant comments: ‘There are some great libraries there, but we are also interested in finding some of the less successful and well-run ones – and some of the smaller community libraries, both flourishing and struggling.

‘We have visited some great places, but most of them exceptional in their scale and ambition. It would be good to see the other side of things as well.’

**Please send suggestions direct to Stephen Carter at [cartersf@hotmail.com](mailto:cartersf@hotmail.com)**

**DAN JARVIS is shadow culture minister and new MP for Barnsley Central (since a by-election last year).**

**Ex-para Dan has a degree in International Politics & Strategic Studies. He went to Sandhurst, then with the Parachute Regiment to Kosovo, N Ireland, Iraq and Afghanistan. Posts included Company Commander, Special Forces Support Group, Aide de Camp to General Sir Mike Jackson and staff planner at the Permanent Joint HQ and Army HQ in England. Last year he was awarded the MBE for his service in the Army.**

**As an MP, Dan has become Chair of Labour's backbench committee on Business, Innovation & Skills and has been on the BIS Select Committee. He is now shadow minister covering: creative industries, arts, libraries, tourism, heritage and the built environment, Royal parks, the Royal household, National Lotteries, museums and galleries, theatre, opera and orchestras!**

**His hobbies are reading, running and mountaineering (including in the Himalayas, Pakistan and Nepal). He lives in Barnsley with his two children and his partner.**

**An interview in *The Guardian* (10 January) commented: 'He is coming at the subject from a position of almost complete ignorance. Still, he seems to have the appetite and energy to master the issues.' Oh well, at least he reads!**

**Follow on Twitter: @danjarvismp**



libraries often have exceptional staff, dedicated people who see it as their duty to help people navigate what can be a bewildering range of sources, to facilitate their own knowledge exploration.

Of course costs have to be cut, but often there is much that can be done before cutting services and branches. Co-location, for example, is in many ways a solution whose time has come.

To have a library, gallery, museum, restaurant, theatre, advice bureau or business startup centre, all within one building, can save money and multiply their impact and reach. Libraries can open up their doors to coffee shops, and sometimes to local artists, poets, musicians and actors, sweating their assets by renting out rehearsal and performance spaces.

And in many cases local library authorities can combine their back office operations to make significant efficiency savings.

### **Volunteers**

Libraries can also bring in volunteers to reduce costs, but this should be an engagement of the community rather than a shuffling off of responsibility. Volunteers are important and welcome additions, but I have yet to meet a group who would not rather be supporting a service adequately funded by the state.

The Tory vision of the 'big society' is an ideological cloak for diluting the basic

premise that these services are a fundamental duty of a decent society, and should be treated as such.

The right fit will vary from place to place, but one thing is clear: the government should be pulling out the stops to help local authorities find imaginative and innovative ways to cut budgets without cutting services – but they're not.

### **Shortsighted policies**

Currently, 600 libraries across the land face the risk of closure. When they shut their doors they will be lost forever. Long after the deficit has been paid off and the rhetoric has been forgotten, communities will still be feeling the effects of these shortsighted policies.

In the end, the decision over how we maximise the opportunities that libraries have to offer is also an ideological one. The demographic that is hardest hit by the closure of libraries is always the poorest.

The men, women and children who cannot afford the latest laptop and who struggle to pay the landline bill (if they are even connected), let alone get wi-fi broadband – these are the people you find using the library computers, books and social space. They are the ones in the library doing their homework, searching for jobs and striving to improve their life opportunities.

These opportunities should not be the privilege of a minority in better-off local

authorities, but a right for all, accessible by everyone, which the government has a duty to protect.

Their social impact is hard to quantify, one reason libraries have often been undervalued, but it is real and substantial.

And the government should be properly exploiting this huge but often under-used asset, by integrating the library more deeply into every aspect of government services. They are failing to do so.

Libraries evoke strong emotions. You can't ignore the need for cuts, or for libraries to justify their funding: it would be a dereliction of duty not to be clear-eyed and hard-headed about what libraries mean today.

### **Values**

But at the same time this is also about more than just pounds and pence. Libraries represent a certain set of values, part of a wider sense of what kind of a society we are and what kind of a country we want to be. Whatever else, those are the values I believe in. That is why we must not be overtaken by nostalgia and why we must be imaginative and ambitious.

Saying that, of course, is the easy part. Over the coming months, I will be visiting libraries around the country to put some flesh on that vision. I would welcome input from anyone who cares about libraries. But this is where I am starting from. Our libraries, and the communities they serve, deserve nothing less.

# What we told the MPs ...

**1** The Library Campaign is the only membership based national organisation with a mandate to represent users of libraries. The Campaign was founded in 1984 and became a charity in 2004. We welcome the opportunity to make a submission to the Select Committee Inquiry and will be pleased to give oral evidence.

**2** A summary of the detailed submission below is as follows:

- ‘Comprehensive’ means both the services offered by a library and access to library facilities. One without the other is not sufficient.
- ‘Efficient’ covers a number of issues, but the main lesson is that many authorities have not yet explored or implemented all the options open to them before announcing cuts.
- In announcing cuts/closures authorities have ignored the conclusions of the Charteris report on consultation. This omission has been made more glaring given the results of the recent judicial reviews concerning equality assessments etc.
- The Secretary of State needs to be more responsive and pro-active. The quality of research and advice Ministers get needs to be improved.

**3** This submission takes each of the Committee’s issues in turn. We want to preface our detailed comments by re-affirming our belief, which we know is shared by user groups throughout the country, whether they are facing closures locally or not, that the public library service should remain a statutory duty devolved to local authorities.

How that duty is interpreted locally is an issue related to the definition of ‘comprehensive and efficient’ but removing the obligation would allow an authority to run a very limited and inaccessible service with no possible comeback – or even not to have a public library service at all.

**Suddenly, last winter ... the culture department’s select committee decided to hold an official inquiry into public library closures. It had to be done to a tight deadline in January. This is what TLC secretary Andrew Coburn said (in consultation with TLC’s executive committee, of course)**

**What constitutes a comprehensive and efficient library service for the 21st century?**

**4** We believe that comprehensiveness means both the services offered by a library and access to library facilities. One without the other is not sufficient.

**5** In terms of services the availability of a good bookstock is clearly an essential. This means up to date titles but also a balanced range of backlist both in terms of fiction (including but not limited to the classics) and non-fiction (where there are many subjects where good literature does not date). Conversely we would expect to see tatty, out of date books (such as superceded medical titles or old travel guides) removed and replaced.

**6** However, books are not the only type of lending stock. There should be sufficient material in other formats such as spoken word cassettes or CDs, DVDs and recorded music. We are not opposed to e-books being offered, though we believe that this service must be free of charge.

**7** A second strand of service is Reference and Information. This used to be in book form but we know that online alternatives are now as affordable and require less replacement – even if the paper version is available, which increasingly is not the case. However, in large libraries we would also expect to see reference material on paper. Even the smallest is likely to need at least some titles – e.g. Whitaker’s Almanac and a good English dictionary.

**8** Reference and Information provision is not confined to the traditional types mentioned in the paragraph above. We would expect library authorities to be making their own material available

to their own users and those of other public services. Once again much of this material is available electronically, but we know that not everyone has access to (or the skills to make use of) the Internet. In addition, reading a detailed planning development scheme online is often something only for the brave professional – let alone a lay person.

**9** We see a huge role for education in and by the library service. Many are participating in UKOnline. But libraries also need to be open for children to do their homework, and should work with schools to ensure that there is suitable stock to help with this. Adult Literacy is another area where libraries have been doing, and must be able to carry on, invaluable work using such tools as the Six Book Challenge, Quick Reads and work with families.

**10** Much continuing education is done by adults in their own time and at their own speed. There needs to be suitable provision for them to obtain and use material that will, for instance, help them learn a foreign language, work out how to repair the car or find out what more formal avenues they can pursue to improve themselves.

**11** This should not be regarded as excluding other possibilities. We want to stress in particular that this is what an authority-wide service should offer – not necessarily an individual branch. This may mean that smaller branches cannot do everything, but they should be in a position to enable users to access any of the services listed.

**12** ‘Comprehensive’ means access across the authority, not just resources inside one building. This is underlined in the more detailed guidance in the Act covering various needs. In this sense it is as fundamental as the ‘efficient’ bit. Physical access is in no

way outdated in the 21st century – with the disappearance of other community spaces, from pubs to post offices, plus the increasing importance of online access even to the poorest (80% of benefits to be claimed online) it is more important than ever.

**13** In addition a comprehensive service is one that is fully interlinked, so that a user at any branch can expect the same answer to her question as would be given at the central library; be able to request a book (etc) from any library in the system; use the same online tools in all libraries etc. This makes closure of small service points even more undesirable.

**14** ‘Efficient’ can have a variety of implications. A good deal has been spoken and written about streamlining support and ‘back office’ functions. There is still a fair amount of work to be done in many services to achieve this. There are services such as Westminster, Hillingdon and others which have already made great efforts in this regard. We do not believe that running services outside the local authority (whether as outsourced services, mutuals, trusts or arms length companies) necessarily results in improvement.

**15** Shared services may be one way of making more efficiencies but only if the authority – and its users – has/have the same amount of guarantee that services will be delivered on time, to budget and where required. There is no point in a shared service which simply means shipping books from one huge central depot to the branch if there is no other saving.

**16** Self service had been used as a way of making better use of staff before (or at least as well as) becoming a money saving innovation. It has been used to enable staff to keep their libraries looking clean and welcoming and allow them time to talk to users about what they are trying to find, make recommendations about what to read next, and help them use online tools. We would much prefer it to be introduced for these purposes rather than to save staffing costs. In the same way as a closed branch is difficult to re-open, making staff redundant and/or deleting posts makes it much more difficult to

reintroduce them to work on other services.

**17** We are not opposed to co-location of library services, as long as they are not being shoehorned into back rooms and hailed as a full replacement for a stand-alone building. Conversely we do not oppose other public services sharing premises with the library, as long as this does not diminish the library’s presence and ability to offer the same services and functionality as before.

**18** Finally the use of partnerships, both locally and nationally, should be part of the library service routine. Locally this may be with SureStart or Children’s Centres, or local arms of national organisations such as Macmillan Cancer Care. Nationally such organisations as The Reading Agency and National Literacy Trust have strong connections with libraries and should be used where they can add value.

### The extent to which planned library closures are compatible with the requirements of the Libraries & Museums Act 1964 and the Charteris Report

**19** Our understanding of the Act and the report is that they deal with different issues. The Act is primarily about ‘comprehensive and efficient’. The Charteris report is about process – specifically that used in arriving at a decision, including such things as proper consultation and planning. In addition, the recent judicial reviews have again pointed up issues around consultation, and also about impact assessment and equality.

**20** Most authorities that are proposing to close libraries, or have carried out closures, have tried to get local groups to carry them on using some volunteer labour – or at least staff not paid by the statutory library authority. There are some we know which have offered some staffing, but principally as support to community volunteers etc.

**21** We do not believe that this can be regarded as being compatible with the Act. We do not believe that a

library run by volunteers, even if well trained, committed and available, can guarantee to maintain the same level of service.

**22** Moreover we are aware from user groups in some areas that, because volunteers cannot be given full clearance for data protection, CRB and other reasons, the libraries they run are not fully connected to the local authority systems and cannot fulfil a role as part of the statutory service – since they cannot offer the full range of services that the ‘parent’ does.

**23** Apart from this, in some areas the authority has claimed that there are enough libraries in close proximity to allow residents to use them with very little difficulty. This ignores concerns about accessibility such as the availability of public transport and suitable opening hours.

**24** Taking one bus to a library with two children, one in a pram, may be manageable, but two – with a longer journey time even if the connection is guaranteed – is a challenge for many parents. Yet that is what some closures appear to demand.

**25** For a child wanting to use the library to do homework – or just as a quiet study space if they don’t need the stock – travelling to a library in the wrong direction to their school, in the evening, is again not something most parents would be keen on.

**26** Elderly people may have just as many difficulties with travel.

**27** Some authorities are also ceasing mobile library services, which were once, and in some places still are, offered as some replacement for the closure of a static library. This seems also to reduce the comprehensive nature of the service for those in rural areas and even some urban environments where, for whatever reason, there is no library building.

**28** We remain to be convinced that many of the authorities which are closing libraries have tackled the efficiency issue first. Apart from the issues mentioned above, they should also be looking at the overheads and re-charge costs that the library service incurs. We know that these cannot be separated out for the library service

alone (i.e. without looking at the effect on housing or adult social care) but they certainly bear examination before the front line is attacked.

**29** So far as the Charteris report is concerned, we believe the principles it laid down were good ones and widely accepted. They were indeed endorsed by the Minister in his letters to Local Authorities. If there are to be any changes to law governing public libraries, the Charteris principles should perhaps be given some kind of legal status.

**30** We believe that much of the planning and many of the alleged consultations before closure decisions have been announced are flawed, to say the least. Too often the choices are ‘close or run with volunteers (there is no option C)’. No other options are listed and most individual users – indeed many user groups – struggle to find enough information to allow them to make informed alternative suggestions, even if they might be considered.

**31** Authorities need to be much more transparent in explaining what is on the table, and more prepared to enter realistic dialogue with users and their representatives about other solutions. The shape of the central government budget settlement for the next couple of years is reasonably clear and councils should be planning ahead anyhow – why not lay open the details for libraries as part of this, especially if they are actively being considered for closures or cuts?

**32** Such disclosure must include equality and other impact assessments, so that those responding to consultation can make appropriate comments and perhaps suggest alternative solutions.

### The impact library closures have on local communities

**33** As we hope we have indicated above, this can be considerable. Libraries are the only community space in some places – especially as post offices, pubs and other facilities close down.

**34** Beyond that, we understand that a number of local groups and users will be submitting evidence. We believe that their testimony will be more informed on this point than we, as a national umbrella organisation, could offer.

### The effectiveness of the Secretary of State’s powers of intervention under the Public Libraries & Museums Act 1964

**35** There is nothing wrong in theory with the Secretary of State’s powers to intervene, but new light has been thrown on this by the unprecedented passivity of the present incumbents.

**36** The Minister has met representatives of a number of local user groups and the relevant local authorities in the last year. A duty on the Minister to seek and listen to such representations is surely implied in the Act. However, we understand that none of the user representatives have had any feedback after discussion with the authority. It is true that the user groups would have been unlikely to accept their authorities’ reasoning. But a failure to communicate at all does not speak well to the desire of Ministers to resolve the difficulties. A number of local campaigns have tried hard to have a dialogue with their library authority. Most have used all the council’s democratic processes and have produced alternative suggestions or even whole budgets, and have been completely ignored.

This is not the Big Society model to which the government claims to be wedded. Altogether the various official bodies that deal with libraries have no provision for including library users and little interest in hearing what they think. This has led to unproductive fights all over the country.

**37** The key might well lie in the quality and source of the advice – if any – that Ministers get. It demonstrates the need for proper, independent professional input and some formal machinery for consulting users. The MLA, when it existed, was sometimes put in a difficult position of being expected to offer advice to

authorities on behalf of the DCMS but with no overt support and, it seemed, no backing in private either. We have not yet had an opportunity to talk to Arts Council (England) but, given the staffing resources it has at its disposal, it seems unlikely that they will be able to do much more than has happened previously.

**38** The Advisory Council on Libraries would have been another source of such advice. However as it is a victim of the ‘bonfire of the quangos’ the Minister cannot look to it for advice.

### Other Matters

**39** There are some other issues which informed or interested users of libraries have raised with us which we think the Committee might want to consider in formulating recommendations. These principally relate to the way that closures and cuts which have already been proposed or taken place, may be analysed.

**40** For instance, it may be worth looking at the possibility that they have happened where a local authority has had heavier than average cuts to its main grant. The (perhaps poorly managed) library services then had to make drastic, in-year cuts or closures. The evidence for this should be available in part from the CIPFA data.

**41** Part of this exercise would be an examination of how library budgets and expenditure are reported. CIPFA is a blunt instrument. However it is revised, some differences will be hidden in the way that authorities respond. Looking at annual reports or the library sections of annual accounts may be as useful.

**42** One of the things that may be highlighted by this work is whether there is a relationship between budgets, management of services and falls in issues and other figures about library service use.

Despite the existence of MLA/ACE, LGA, SCL, CILIP nobody (or no body) seems to be pulling together evidence on this in a systematic way – perhaps this is a job for DCMS or ACE if they are to take their advisory and guidance roles seriously.