

The LIBRARY *Campaigner*

Supporting friends and users of libraries



THE BATTLE GOES ON!

Much remains to be done to save public libraries – now, and for the future.

Read about the next stage...



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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- **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**.

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FRIENDS GROUPS LIAISON AND CO-ORDINATOR: Vacant

– 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.

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.

2011 MEETINGS

14 May (AGM), 16 July, 17 September, 19 November

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

So what have we been up to – and what more can we do?

THE months since the last issue of the Campaigner have been tumultuous for libraries – especially public libraries. The Campaign has not been as visible as we would like and this is both an attempt to explain why but also to say what we have done.

Let's start with the good things. We had the front page of *Mature Times* – a newspaper that is given away free in lots of libraries as well as Age Concern and similar premises. This highlighted the concerns that were building. As well as bringing some new members, it has also resulted in a follow up front page in an edition of the paper in the New Year.

We also managed to make our mark in the run up to National Save Our Libraries day – 5 February. Thanks largely to the Campaign Chair, Kathleen Frenchman, we had adverts in two national papers (*Daily Mail* and *Guardian*) which helped publicise the day and brought us some notice for a surprisingly affordable price. This was supplemented by an ad in the House magazine (which is literally the house magazine of Parliament, but also goes to movers and shakers as well as lobbyists etc associated with Parliament).

All of the above has maintained a presence for us. At the time of writing the Women's Institute (WI) AGM – the national conference famous a few years ago for booing Tony Blair – has the future of public libraries as one of its resolutions for debate.

The WI has suggested to their local groups that The Campaign is one of the organisations that may be able to brief them in their pre-conference deliberations, and we have tried to assist.

On the other hand we have had a major problem with our website. It (or rather the server on which it was hosted) had been struggling last year and at New Year it finally died. We have been investigating a way to revive it, either

Secretary's Slot

Andrew Coburn
Campaign Secretary



through a completely new arrangement or by resuscitating it through the existing host company. I hope that by the time you read this we will have something live again, though the old site has been frozen in time and is still usable.

Apart from that the Campaign will have to decide what its main focus is to be. A number of great campaigns (with a small c) and activities against the proposed cuts, closures etc are under way (see page 8).

A larger number of friends and local campaign groups have sprung up than we can keep track of. We are now catching up (see box).

NEW GROUPS

Do you know of any newly-formed library friends/user groups? We are launching a major hunt for the contact details of every group in the UK. We will list them free of charge on our new website.

And we have big plans to involve all groups in exchanging information and ideas, and fully involving them in the Campaign's next moves.

PLEASE LET US KNOW!

There is a distinct role for the Campaign, as the only national body that represents users and friends groups. It may be as an honest broker between different views on styles of campaigning, and even on the purpose of public libraries. It may well be as an information source and organisation through which people can exchange ideas.

And it should still be a place to collate the views of users/friends and campaign groups across the country to convey them to politicians and decision makers.

THE LIBRARY CAMPAIGNER SPRING 2011, No.81

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Owain Hammonds

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The Library Campaign Annual General Meeting 2011

The AGM of the Library Campaign will be held on **Saturday 14 May 2011**. The venue will be Birkbeck College, London and a full agenda will be sent out nearer the time. Nominations for officerships (Chair, Secretary, Treasurer) and the other Executive committee positions, plus items for discussion should be sent to the Secretary by 30 April.

To do all of this we will need some assistance from Campaign members.

To misquote John F Kennedy:

'Think not only what the Campaign can do you for you but think what you can do for the Campaign'. And then tell us.

State of play 2011

THE Library Campaign (TLC) – an alliance of library users and staff – was set up in 1984, when public libraries were under severe threat from the Thatcher administration. It is the only national organisation that represents library users and user groups.

Few would have guessed that in 2011 we'd be facing an even worse threat. As we go to press, the number of branches/mobiles marked for closure is climbing towards 600.

As always, the fate of well-loved small libraries emerges as the major issue. With the public, anyway. Cuts to bookfunds, opening hours, staff etc are very damaging – but they can be reversed in time. But once a small library is gone, it won't ever come back. And local, accessible libraries are vital.

Some library managers (and councillors) are baffled by this support for every branch, no matter how small or grotty. They sincerely feel they can offer an improved service on the 'fewer but better' model.

Others are impatient with anyone who stands in their way, dreaming of shiny new super-libes, and/or looking for easy cuts that don't entail disentangling the council's systems or their own impenetrable budgets.

As always, too, the quality of the consultation by local councils has been the subject of furious criticism. Often this is justified. That's despite a lot of rhetoric about 'localism' and 'empowering' local people to get involved.

Finally – as always – many councils have been amazed to find out (the hard way) that attacks on public libraries make them very, very unpopular. They seem to have to learn this lesson from scratch, again and again.

So – experienced campaigners might think nothing has changed at all. But it has. The scale of closures now looming is too insane for anyone to ignore. So support is building up as never before.

Laura Swaffield looks at the good news, the bad news – and the future

The campaign game has also changed. The internet is a tool undreamt of in 1984 – or even five years ago. Email has made it so much easier for group members to



Anthony Scully

contact each other (and nearby groups), swap notes, discuss ideas and plan activities at short notice. Campaigners (including librarians) are running invaluable websites that collate the flood of information coming in from all over the UK (see page 8).

User groups are setting up their own websites and/or using Facebook and Twitter to organise – fast. The most famous recent example was Stony Stratford Library in Milton Keynes, which in a few hours mustered hundreds of people to invade the library and take out all the stock. The story was featured as far away as the *New York Times*.

The ultimate example, of course, is 'Save Our Libraries' day on 5 February

(see page 7). The idea was suggested by a Lewisham local campaigner, Anthony Scully, and then flagged up by author Alan Gibbons on his blog shortly before Christmas. That's all he did. It took off like a forest fire. The public – and the press – responded with huge enthusiasm.

Something else has changed. The bottom line in 2011 is that local councils are being forced to make heavy cuts. It will no longer do to shout: 'Libraries are a good thing! People love them!' That's true. And it is still well worth demonstrating this truth.

But it's equally true of many other precious resources being slashed. Libraries can't be saved at their expense.

This time, as well as using their campaigning muscle, library supporters must come up with their own suggestions for making savings, if they don't like their council's. And fight to get them heard.

A related new development is the emphasis on volunteering. This year, it's every local council's easy answer to people who don't want libraries closed: 'OK then, run it yourself.' Some campaigners have succeeded in blocking (or at least delaying) closures – only to find this is the only alternative on offer.

Many complex issues arise, which TLC has explored and will continue to explore. You may feel it's a viable option for your own community (but read page 11 first!). You may feel there might be some merit in supplementing the work of paid staff to keep libraries open (at least in the short term). You may feel the whole idea is daft and insulting.

The core TLC policy has always been simply to support library users in getting whatever it is they want for their own service. What exactly they want is for them to decide.

Despite much lip service, this simple principle is still too difficult for many councillors (and even library chiefs) to absorb. More enlightened library managers, of course, are only too grateful to have 'consumers' say the things they daren't say themselves. But some of them practically take out a

A National Library Day:

Let's have a day every year to celebrate public libraries. This is Alan Gibbons' latest suggestion. TLC says yes!

DANGER – ACT NOW!

April 25 is the deadline on consultation on a very bad idea from the DCLG (Department for Communities & Local Government – the body that holds the purse-strings for local councils, and therefore libraries).

It has published a huge list of statutory duties that councils currently have to carry out. It wants to know which are ‘a burden’ and should be abolished.

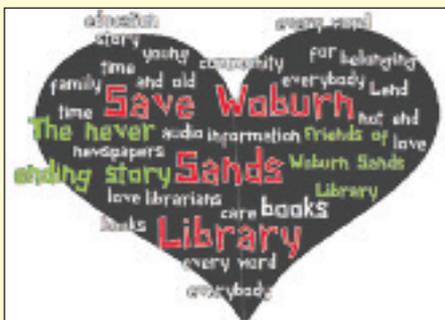
Surprise! Library duties are on the list! There is no plan to abolish the statutory duty to provide a library service at all. But under threat are three sub-sections of the relevant Act (the Public Libraries & Museums Act 1964).

026 requires councils to provide information so the Secretary of State can do his job of supervising library services – he’s reluctant to use it, but we must not lose it. 027 enshrines the vital words ‘comprehensive and efficient’ – the indispensable key for evaluating services. 028 protects staff, assets etc transferred out of direct council control – something we’ll be seeing a lot of, we suspect.

Help us protect these vital clauses!

To fill in the official consultation form, go to www.communities.gov.uk/localgovernment/decentralisation/tacklingburdens/reviewstatutoryduties

Or post a letter to your MP, minister Ed Vaizey at DCMS (2-4 Cockspur Street, London, SW1Y 5DH) and Eric Pickles at DCLG (Eland House, Bressenden Place, London, SW1E 5DU).



Wirral and the Local Government Association!)

It has even been endorsed by the DCMS. Its basic criteria are quoted in two letters sent by DCMS to all local councils, urging them to think before they slash. That’s a weapon we can use.

Unfortunately, DCMS has so far declined to do more than write letters. That should be changing, too. As we go to press, a hail of lawyers’ letters, from several campaign groups, is hitting DCMS demanding action – in terms that make it clear that legal action will follow

has recently re-branded itself as a corps of experts who are keen to advise local authorities on how to improve their library services.



Unfortunately, when it is called in to do so, it works on a confidential basis, does not consult local user groups – and then tells them whether or not (in MLA’s opinion) the service is suitable for them. Result – frustration and fury. MLA’s Chief Executive, Roy Clare, has even

crucifix and a bunch of garlic at the sight of service users with opinions. A very big culture change is needed.

The ‘community ownership’ rhetoric can, we hope, be turned to library users’ advantage. We must work on this. Councils must learn that users now insist on being involved and consulted – and listened to – in service planning. Starting right now.

Unfortunately, a similar change is needed at national level – where TLC can be a strong national voice for library users.

The DCMS (Department for Culture, Media & Sport) is legally obliged to ‘supervise’ library services – and intervene if they cease to be ‘comprehensive and efficient’.

That’s a good definition. And we are lucky to have had its meaning scrupulously analysed and updated for the 21st century. The ‘Wirral report’ (see Campaigner, winter 2009) did just that. It has been widely acclaimed (except by



if there is no satisfaction. Watch this space!

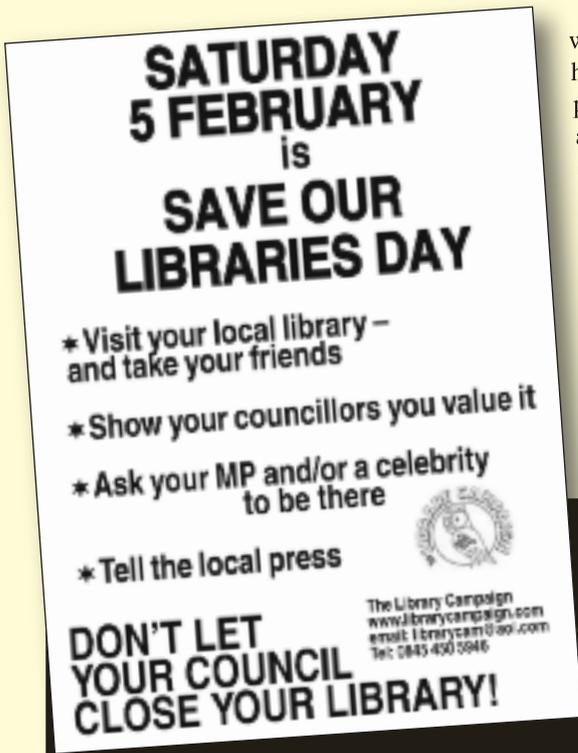
There are other problems. The MLA (Museums, Libraries & Archives Council) has been particularly frustrating. This ‘strategic’ national body

publicly come out in praise of some cutters, and has branded library campaigners as old-fashioned and unwilling to see any kind of change. How wrong can he be?

MLA itself is soon to be folded into the Arts Council (on a much-reduced budget). The question still remains, and must be answered – just who do they think they are they working for?

It could be argued that users have, up to now, been the only effective support for libraries. It’s only they who, over the years, have made a huge fuss and ensured massive publicity any time libraries were in danger.

Yet again, this year, many have done a brilliant job. Some have scored encouraging victories – or at least deferral while people get a chance to discuss more sensible options.



Authors, as always, have been wonderful supporters locally – and have got lots of media coverage. The press is aware as never before. Local and national newspapers, local and national TV, intellectual journals and consumer magazines, have highlighted the current crisis again and again.

Interestingly, too, libraries have emerged as a focus for discussion about public service cuts in general, and the Big Society (whatever that means) in particular. Apart from much media cover, libraries are a

common theme for some new 21st-century-style campaigns.

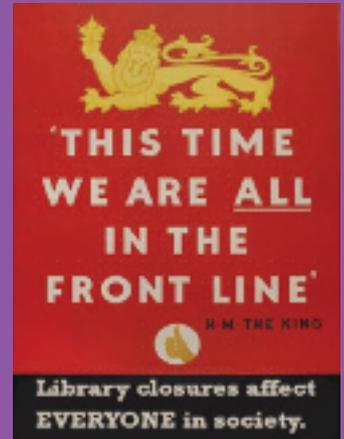
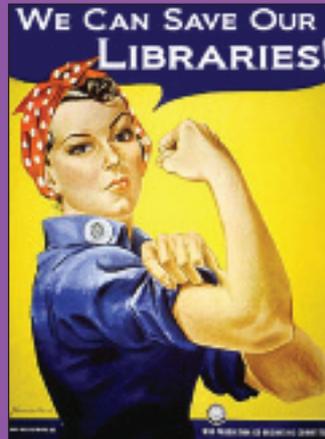
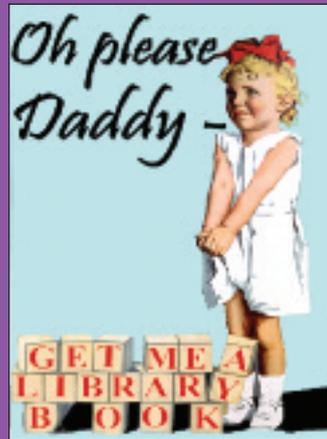
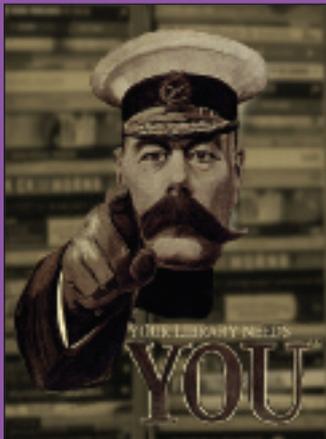
For instance, UK Uncut is a group that works to publicise cosy (legal) tax avoidance deals that divert billions from the public purse.

It uses its highly enjoyable website (www.ukuncut.org.uk) to help people get together to stage stunts at guilty shops or banks. Very popular are ‘read-ins’, to highlight the fact that libraries are among the services being starved. It works well – because everyone instantly grasps the value of public libraries.

Next from TLC ...

TLC is currently developing its website as a medium for users to share tips and ideas: sensible savings, free resources libraries can use, sources of information, examples of good practice (plus, of course, campaigning tips).

FREE POSTERS VIA THE INTERNET JUST PRINT THEM OFF

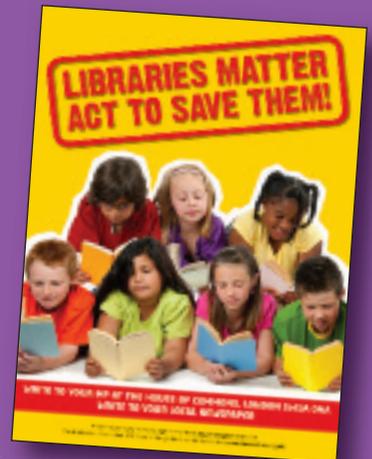


Phil Bradley has made 36 funny-but-serious library posters out of old wartime posters – some familiar, others less so, but all checked to be out of copyright.

www.flickr.com/photos/philbradley/sets/72157625923493122

The Booksellers Association has made freely available a double-sided poster/leaflet, with advice on the back about how to campaign for libraries.

www.booksellers.org.uk



Save our Libraries 2011

What a day!

PUSHING off the crumpled bed sheets, groping for the radio switch, Radio 4 with libraries as one of the headlines! That wakes you up!

Turning the dial and hitting on LBC, there is James Max trying devil's advocate AGAINST the libraries' case, but being shot down in flames by his callers. No less than deserved. If you have to explain the value of libraries to professional, educated people, despair does creep in.

I manage to think of the TV... something to do with 50... oh, it is 8.50am and there are libraries, a pro and a con. Interestingly, both interviewees are coming across as pro! The pro interviewee gets his case across well, and says he is off to the read-in at Norbury Library.

The act is together again on BBC News 24 by 9.50am, and there we find [national campaigner] Alan Gibbons and another children's author, who nearly drops the ball but is rescued by Alan's experience and know-how.

With the adrenalin well and truly flowing, we are racing off to [threatened] Sydenham library by 11am. The place is packed. Even the Library Service Manager and the Cabinet member for Communities are present, as well as extra staff.

Lots of faces we know, a children's group in the corner singing their nursery rhymes happily, some people actually trying to implement the read-in and so much excitement in the air.

Is this the Big Society? We have all given up our time, we know why we are there and why it is important. Any minister out there to comment on this fulfilment of policy?

Lady Warnock is here to support the library and read from *Death Sentence*. It is difficult to hear because of the great buzz in the background, but we are so pleased she is there! Our local poet, Chrissie Gittens, takes the stage and reads appropriately from her collection, to make the children laugh, and adds a special composition on the loss of libraries. (Much later, we listened to her short story, *Just One of the Girls*, at 12.30am on Radio 4.)

Anthony, the organiser, calls for a big round of applause and thanks for the library staff. No quarrels there! We are then entertained by two members of the teenage reading group, followed by storytelling, with a ukelele (*Grow, Grow, Grow, Monster Tomato*, accompanied by tomato shakers!).

As we leave, getting through the melee and meeting more familiar faces, we see [musicians] Sly and Reggie setting up outside, having come from [another threatened library at] Crofton Park. They look really respectable as urban pirates. Maybe we all do! What a shame the Mayor is missing all this – in his own back yard, too.

Having been impeded by traffic we just make it to Crofton Park before closure. The library is overwhelmed with visitors and we are heartily welcomed by all staff. We missed Lindsey Davis – what a trooper, straight off to Blackheath Village [also threatened].

Barely time for a quick bite, picking up friends and off to Grove Park. We are met by Sly and Reggie. It is time for another photo shoot. Two councillors are out in support.

Saturday 5th February 2011, says Patricia Richardson, was 'a stunningly brilliant show of what really matters to us'. This is her (and husband Peter's) experience on the day in Lewisham, London.

The library is a true experience, delightful inside, on open ground and full of mums, babies and children. Here we actually 'do' the read-in and it is SO comfortable.

More faces we know and books to borrow. Grove Park has a good collection! We all come away with a book. Sly and Reggie head off for Blackheath and later we start off for New Cross.

Blackheath Village Library is, like the rest, overwhelmed with visitors and new joiners. Blake Morrison makes the introductions and concentrates on how valuable libraries are to those with health problems and dementia.

Lucy Mangan reads from *The Reluctant Bride*, followed by Father Nicholas of All Saints Church. Lindsey Davis has arrived and reads from a Falco book about the murder of a librarian, what else? Peter Greaves, a local resident, reads a poem by Auden and the writer Jane Shilling, mud-spattered from horse-riding, speaks of the importance of libraries in her life.

We arrive at New Cross [fifth threatened library] at the same time as our urban pirates, and get some good pix on the road. This small library is awash with people, more faces we know.

Yet again, the Library Service Manager is on station, extra staff are out and one or two councillors present. Yet again there seems to be a good collection of books. Those present were running interesting presentations.

Natch, one thing leads to another and the read-in became an all-night sit-in. Well done them!!! Someone draws the short straw and it has to be the Library Service Manager, who stays overnight along with security officers and the sitters-in. Sympathetic friends, neighbours and library savers bring in food supplies. Nobody dies.

Meanwhile, back home in bed (I am tired, and getting older than I realised), who is on the TV? Before my eyes there is James, the New Cross organiser, grinning from his photo on the screen, backed by his feisty words in defence of libraries.

BBC News 24 covers the lot, across the country, celebrities everywhere supporting the age-old tradition of libraries. It is on the radio too, but I am struggling to keep my eyes open and listen to the end of Chrissie's skilful story on Radio 4.

We thought the idea was to keep libraries as a public service (1964 Public Libraries & Museums Act) but manage the money better! Where is the Audit Commission when you need it? Who should supervise public spending? Down to us again?

I drift off to thoughts of sit-ins at every library under threat. What could they do? Libraries belong to us, after all. Peter can be heard tapping away on the computer, getting visual material out and climbing into bed around 2.00am. What a day!

Save our Libraries 2011

Save our Libraries 2011

Library links ...

THE LIBRARY CAMPAIGN

> www.librarycampaign.com

The national umbrella organisation for Friends of libraries groups. Useful advice on campaigning, including a complete handbook of advice on forming a group, campaigning, how libraries work and how to get more information. £5 by post (free to new members) or available online. Plus news, contacts, handy page of links to other websites and groups nationwide. Developing as a base for Friends/users to exchange ideas.

PUBLIC LIBRARIES NEWS

> www.publiclibrariesnews.blogspot.com

Highly topical site that lists all the news about library services in danger, in easily searchable form. Lots of other material too.

UK LIBRARY WATCH

> www.uklibrarywatch.pbworks.com

As above – another highly topical site that lists all the news about library services in danger. Lots of other material too.

VOICES FOR THE LIBRARY

> www.voicesforthelibrary.org.uk/wordpress/

A site set up by librarians to advocate the value of and good things done by libraries (and librarians). Not affiliated with any of the bodies below.

NB: the three websites above work closely together, and have links to many current local campaigns.

Facebook and **Twitter** are becoming indispensable tools – especially for active campaigners.

To get some insight try the **Facebook** links on some of the campaigning websites. Or enter the legend **#savelibraries** to get the latest news, very succinctly, on **Twitter**.

To find out much more about these new ‘social media’, a librarians’ website has some useful free training. Not all is available to outsiders, but much of it is:
<http://wiki.sla.org/display/23Things>

CAMPAIGN FOR THE BOOK

> www.alangibbons.net/

Author Alan Gibbons is also passionate about school libraries. He has very useful stuff, and is constantly opening up new fronts for campaigning.

TIM COATES

> www.goodlibraryguide.com/blog

Sometimes controversial blog by ex-bookseller and publisher but also library supporter, Tim Coates. He has strong views on wasteful spending by councils, and has been called in by several Friends groups to analyse their local service and suggest savings that won't damage frontline services.

CILIP

> www.cilip.org.uk

The Chartered Institute of Library & Information Professionals – the professional body for librarians in the UK. Useful ideas/information for arguing libraries' case, now opened up for public access under ‘advocacy’.

The public library battle is moving very fast. To keep up – even to find out what's going on locally – internet access is becoming more and more essential. Go to your library and see! Here are the main resources

DCMS

> www.culture.gov.uk

The Department for Culture, Media & Sport is responsible for policy on libraries in England. Information – and convenient ways to contact the libraries minister, Ed Vaizey.

THE READING AGENCY

> www.readingagency.org.uk

Inspiring charity, run on a shoestring, that has developed scores of ideas for public libraries to develop their audiences, and produces training and material for any service to use. Loads of ideas, and resources to prevent people having to re-invent the wheel.

LIBRARIES FOR LIFE FOR LONDONERS

> www.librarylondon.org

The umbrella organisation for London Friends groups. Topical reports, links to London groups etc.

MLA

> www.mla.gov.uk

The Museums, Libraries & Archives Council, the quango (non-departmental public body) providing advice to libraries of all types in England. Masses of ideas/information on libraries, though not very easy to find.

UNISON

> www.unison.co.uk

This is the trade union which organises most library staff. It has recently produced some excellent reports on public libraries. A full campaign pack is due soon.

LGIU

> www.lgiu.org.uk

The Local Government Information Unit ‘provides support to councils and champions democracy’. It is funded by local authorities and trade unions. Local authorities pay the bills for libraries, so that is where the buck stops.

HEART OF THE SCHOOL

> www.heartoftheschool.edublogs.org

A new (October 2010) site to advocate for school libraries.

CYMAL

> www.cymru.gov.uk/topics/cultureandsport/museumsarchiveslibraries/cymal/?=1&lang=en

The Welsh counterpart of MLA.

UK UNCUT

> www.ukuncut.org.uk

Something a bit different. The grassroots movement – now taking off in the USA – that encourages people nationwide to stage events inside local banks and shops that are known to (legally) avoid large sums in tax. One of its most popular ideas is to stage a read-in, to show that no cuts to public libraries would be needed if just one such company paid just part of the tax it (morally) owes. Much amusing footage – and inspiration?

Finally, you can print out a selection of witty, copyright-free posters from: www.flickr.com/photos/philbradley/sets/72157625923493122/

Save our Libraries 2011

Save our Libraries 2011

Why libraries matter – reading

MY area is libraries, reading and people power. Yet libraries and reading are often missed out of the picture when talking about the importance of the arts.

That's weird, because reading is our biggest participative art form. Just think about what happens when you read – you're instantly plunged into a deep and intimate connection with the writer; your imagination fuses with theirs to create new worlds and understanding.



And libraries are the way society ensures we can all access the personal power that comes when you're a reader.

Reading isn't just a nice thing, it's essential to being part of society. It's an art form that needs to reach everyone. But it doesn't. One in six adults struggles with low literacy skills.

Libraries are key to tackling this. Libraries are surely the ultimate community enabler, a potent symbol of collective power and civic pride. It would be hard to think of a more important part of our cultural fabric to a 21st century agenda that's about community power and action, an agenda which, of course, predates the Big Society.

Libraries are an essential social and cultural good, says Miranda McKearney, Director of The Reading Agency charity

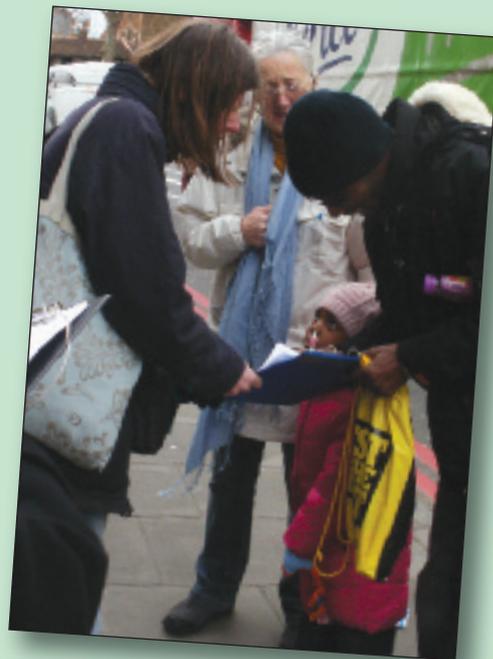
Libraries are changing. The way they support reading has become far more social and dynamic – everything from reading groups to whole city read-ins. This creates an exciting new creative platform for volunteering.

Libraries lead one of the UK's most important cultural opportunities for children – the Summer Reading Challenge, which involves 760,000 4-12 year olds, and makes a big impact on their enjoyment of reading and literacy attainment.

This is starting to be supported by a brilliant volunteering programme, with young people helping children get through the Challenge.

Their input offers an important mixed economy model. It's community involvement that adds capacity to, but doesn't – and shouldn't – replace a professionally run library service.

As a charity specialising in helping libraries to spread reading, we're involved in lots of work to transform services by sharing power with users. In April we start work (with Big Lottery funding) in 20 disadvantaged communities, from Sunderland to Hounslow. This programme, called My Voice, immerses young people in creative reading, drawing them in through artists like Akala of the Hip Hop Shakespeare Company.



At the same time, it involves them in making decisions about library services, taking on accredited volunteering roles and spending budgets. They become activists and service shapers. Our experience is that they want and need support from library staff – as do most volunteers. So even though we're huge champions of community power I am dubious about the likely long-term success of libraries in disadvantaged areas being run wholly by volunteers.

Last year volunteering through libraries rose by 8%. If we play it right, we're at a stage of development where we could see a whole new wave of public involvement through joined-up arts/library/reading work.

But there's also the terrifying possibility that we're about to blow it, that we leave a library network unable to act. It's more than the buildings. The library development staff are hugely at risk. Without their expertise, there can be no outreach, no informed support as people explore the world's ideas, no reading activities to act as an inspiring springboard for volunteering.

There's an urgent need for some joined-up thinking. If we're serious about creating more community activism, we surely have to be serious about having a dynamic library role at the heart of our communities.



For more about TRA's work, see: www.readingagency.org.uk

Save our Libraries 2011

Save our Libraries 2011

Why libraries matter – the internet

IN the mid-19th century a great battle was fought to establish public libraries – universal access to books and information previously only available to the fortunate.

The fight lasted many years, and was won with the help of wealthy men and women who endowed libraries for their communities. Henry Tate gave four libraries to Lambeth and Wandsworth long before he built the Tate Gallery. One of them is my local, the much-loved little Tate South Lambeth Library.

After the victory, hundreds of solid, wood-panelled Victorian and Edwardian libraries were built. The 1950s and 60s brought many more. I will call these the small libraries, even though many are grand and imposing.

The small libraries are for everyone, and everyone is welcome. Books, newspapers, reference works, CDs, DVDs and now e-books are all there for anyone to borrow who has a library card. You can use most of the facilities even without a library card.

Many libraries also run classes, events, reading campaigns, book clubs. The small libraries are the beating heart of our communities: a safe, warm, benign space with knowledgeable staff to answer our questions. The only truly public, free, indoor space we have.

Over the last 10 years the small libraries have assumed an equally vital second role. Thanks to the People's Network, the broadband-enabled computers installed (with Lottery money) in every UK public library, these buildings are also the portal to the Great Library of the world wide web.

Britain is one of the most unequal societies in the developed world. The 'digital divide' reinforces that inequality. The web is not just books, news, entertainment, education and information, it is where millions of us now buy and sell, make friends, engage with family – and work.

Once you could get a job at the Royal Mail or Sainsburys by writing an application letter – now companies like these accept online applications only.

Going online is expensive and complex. You need hardware, software

Christina Burnett says that local libraries are more crucial than ever, as the internet grows more powerful

and a stable broadband connection, all provided by competing companies and requiring maintenance. You have to be trained to use these systems and they need replacing and upgrading with terrifying regularity.

Public libraries provide our only national, free (mostly), reliable internet access resource. Libraries are long-established, trusted places – full of community and help, but where you are also left alone to use or browse at will.

No-one will throw you out when you have finished your coffee, or force you to take a course, or ask you to pay to upgrade a computer. When the system is down, it will be mended. If you are stuck, someone will help you.

For the 9+ million people in the UK who have never used the internet, and the millions more who can't afford their own connections, public libraries are the lifeline to the modern world. There is a big push – Race Online 2012 – to introduce the 'non-liners' to the web.

But how do you ensure that those millions, many of them old, young and/or poor, continue to have access after their training courses, if you close libraries with their thousands of public internet terminals?

According to NIACE (National Institute for Adult & Continuing Education), fewer than 40% of people of pensionable age live in a home with internet access.

Has anyone calculated how many hours of public internet access will be

At Tate South Lambeth we are piloting a range of innovative digital schemes which we hope may be of interest to other library groups. See www.digitaltuesdays.co.uk

lost for each closed library? Or the digital exclusion cost of reduced opening hours? At the Tate South Lambeth the seven adult computers are in use well over 80% of available hours, and it would be much more with evening opening.

When wi-fi was installed this year at another Lambeth library, Tate Brixton, monthly footfall increased between 15% and 29%. This shows there is also a huge need from those with their own laptops. But Brixton is the only library in the whole of Lambeth which has wi-fi.

We should ensure wi-fi is available in every library in the UK, and extend opening hours to 8pm at least six days a week. How else are we to ensure that people from low income families can join the digital economy?

Andrew Carnegie is the great hero of libraries. Born into poverty in Dunfermline in 1835, he used a working man's library and night school on his path to becoming the richest man in the world. To give others the same opportunities, he endowed thousands of public libraries, mainly in Britain and America.

We still have a Carnegie here in Lambeth, alongside the Tates and the Minet and the Durning – all gifts from individuals who knew what was the most precious resource they could give to their communities.

Today Bill Gates is one of the richest men in the world and his foundation is pouring money into what? Public libraries. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation even gave \$4 million towards the People's Network here in the UK.

In 2009 the Foundation reported that in America 77 million people used public libraries to access the internet. In the UK well over 36 million hours of public internet access was used in libraries in 2010.

Each time we close a library we create a digital desert at the heart of a community. Where are the 21st century philanthropists to re-endow our libraries so they can continue to provide a portal to knowledge and information everywhere – and make sure future Andrew Carnegies have somewhere to go when they need to use the internet?

Save our Libraries 2011

What are they thinking?

'THE end of local government as we know it' – thus spake Sir Steve Bullock, directly elected Mayor of Lewisham. Of course, he was not elected on this ticket, quite the reverse! Nowhere will you find that statement in the manifesto.

To boot, this has been a long considered policy (cloaked in smoke and mirrors, natch) – outsourcing services, PFIs, PPPs, ALMOs, mortgaging the taxes of our offspring, and theirs too – all a feature of local government for at least the last ten years.

Now, for the final cut of all. What remains, e.g. the statutory library service, has to go. (Remember, they rid themselves of that other statutory burden, adult education.) Lack of funding is the excuse. The death of accountable local government is the result, and always was the aim.

Did we know this was the policy? Did we vote for it? Did we heck. Has it saved us money? Do councils spend less? Do they heck. One of Mayor Bullock's first acts after re-election in May 2010 was to appoint two extra members to his cabinet (15 grand a year each for each of four years, total = £160,000.)

Who wins here? Lewisham Council is determined to push through five library closures. At first there was no alternative. No Plan B.

This is not a library ...

Now, having blackmailed and threatened library users with total loss, they agree to community libraries, run by volunteers and community groups/charities. Surely not the third sector? No coincidence, then, that one of the new cabinet appointees represents (I hope you are ahead of me) the THIRD SECTOR. Many of these groups/charities stay alive because of council grants (ie, taxpayers' money).

But where does Sir Steve fit in? He chairs the London Councils Grants Committee, which is cutting grants to those on its books, in spite of pleas from The Bigger Mayor! (See *Private Eye*: Christmas Special).

Patricia Richardson, busy campaigning in Lewisham, wonders just what lies behind the current plans ...



Lewisham councillors and MP fear the death of libraries – or maybe of all local public services ...

The nitty-gritty, for us, entailed a visit to a 'community library' which exists at the Pepys Resource Centre. Housed in an attractive, historic building in the outer galaxy of Lewisham borough, it has riverside views on Deptford Strand but a wicked, biting wind from across the Urals!

It is warm, welcoming and the member of staff on duty was an obvious treasure, articulate and capable. A community facility is needed in this peripheral area. But a library this is not.

There were about 1,000 books on the shelves, others waiting to be processed, as well as a small children's area and six or eight computers. My house has about 350 books in its sitting room, with other rooms housing more. Lewisham borough is probably littered with homes containing large book collections.

Is this what Sydenham, Crofton Park, New Cross, Grove Park and Blackheath [the five threatened libraries in Lewisham] can expect?

When people find little available, will they lose the library habit? Will community libraries die? Where will the volunteers come from? Will these new facilities meet the statutory requirements? Will they meet the requirements of a variety of users? What will they cost? How much money will really be saved?

Yet again the question is, has this really been thought through? If my assessment of the agenda is correct, then it has. However, how is it that small community and/or campaigning groups are allowed to make these decisions on behalf of all campaigners and petitioners?

Government by charity?

How democratic is government by community group/charity? Who will be responsible for public money? Who will be accountable? Politicians cannot go on pretending to govern for the majority while funding selected groups to provide services.

Ed Vaizey MP, minister at the DCMS [Department for Culture, Media & Sport – responsible for public library policy] will not be able to deem Lewisham's Library Service as 'comprehensive' and 'efficient' for all its residents.

Please do not query the meaning of those words. Bill Clinton tried that! Politicians enjoy using 'get out of jail free' cards. Go consult your dictionary.

On the other hand if the general population does not care who has their money and how it is spent with no accountability, then they have accepted the free-for-all with which we live.

Government by community group/charity will end by being costly and damaging. And it will be far too late for a 'comprehensive' and 'efficient' library service for all residents.

* Patricia, not Peter, Richardson, wrote the article 'Lost in Lewisham?' in the Summer 2010 issue. For Patricia's full-length blogs reporting the campaign, visit: www.librarylondon.org

E-books: time to move forward

THE book trade and library managements are trying to come to terms with the arrival of the e-book. Until recently, predictions of the e-book's arrival were consistently ignored and/or pooh-pooed as an aberration unlikely to make any noticeable impact.

This reaction was difficult to justify, because the evidence from devices such as the mobile phone was that a market for e-book readers almost certainly did exist and it was probably very large.

Whilst library managements have been a little slow in adapting to the new way of delivering books to the public, they have been quietly testing the possibilities that have been opened up.

Unlike the book trade, they have been able to benefit from the experience gained during the roll-out of The People's Network (the internet connection available in every public library) and have obtained a greater understanding of the need to tailor their offering to fit the market.

Last October, the Publishers Association announced a baseline agreement about lending e-books through public libraries (box, right). It was widely criticised. Alan Templeton explains why libraries are far ahead of publishers in understanding the new e-book world...

An occasional (out of touch?) commentator still suggests that e-books are currently not suitable for public libraries. But the overall resistance of the literati has declined considerably, and there is an acceptance that the growing e-book popularity has to be met by libraries.

The careful, considered approach that library managements have adopted towards the new technology is in complete contrast to that of the book trade. The bricks and mortar retailers still seem to be in denial. The publishers have retreated to an early 20th century restrictive practices ghetto.

The only part of the trade which appears to be able to accommodate the changing market is the online one. Of

course, this is dominated by Amazon. However, it is not alone and it faces increasing competition from new entrants.

The grocery trade is planning to grab a share of the online, e-book market – and the supermarkets are just as market savvy as Amazon. The half-hearted attempts of the large book retailers to establish themselves as internet traders have been less than successful and appear destined to disappear – victims of their own lack of interest and knowledge.

Libraries need publishers

With academic libraries leading the way into the digital future and public libraries not far behind, perhaps we should be happy that the library world is successfully adjusting to the changing needs of the public.

Unfortunately, the reactions of the publishers to the changing circumstances can have a major influence on how libraries develop or fail to develop. Libraries need publishers.

The publishers have taken two steps to protect their existing business model from the new technology, rather than change the model to meet the new challenges. They have reintroduced retail price maintenance in disguise, and they are seeking to restrict e-book lending from public libraries.

In the e-book 'agency model', a new version of the retail price maintenance practice, the publisher sets the retail price for the e-book and graciously allows the retailer to retain 30% of that. A retailer is



Up-to-date computers in a Hillingdon library. But it's surely missing the point to expect people to go into a library to download an e-book!

BACKGROUND:

<http://www.retail-week.com/multichannel/online-retail/tesco-to-take-on-amazon-with-online-marketplace/5019577.article>

http://www.theretailbulletin.com/news/mail_order_giants_fail_to_deliver_the_goods_22-11-10/

<http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d10423.pdf>

<http://www.sitemorse.com/survey/report.html?rt=722>

<http://lglibtech.wikispaces.com/E-Books>

<http://www.thebookseller.com/news/132038-pa-sets-out-restrictions-on-library-e-book-lending.html>

<http://www.thebookseller.com/news/hc-uk-not-ruling-out-e-lending-limit.html>

<http://mhpbooks.com/mobylikes/?p=29381>

Publishers' e-books plan provokes anger

INSTANT ANGER
GREETED news of the new Publishers Association (PA) 'agreed baseline position' on e-book lending, announced at PLA by Faber chief Stephen Page.

Librarians' concern focuses in particular on item three in a list of four. PA wants 'library users [to] come on to the library's physical premises and download an e-book at a computer terminal or to a mobile device, such as an e-reader, laptop or mobile phone'.

He was quick to add that 'some publishers may take a more relaxed view' of this bottom line. Existing subscription models will also stay in place.

But PA's principle is clear, Stephen told PLA: 'Publishers... want to support public libraries in offering access to e-books on the same terms that apply to printed books.'

The other three basics constrict libraries' offer in varying degrees. Buying a book means buying 'the right to loan one copy of one book, to one individual, for a fixed short-term period'.



Libraries must have a 'robust and secure geographical membership', with strict proof of residency and clear arrangements for visitors. Finally, the loan must expire after a set time.

Stephen stressed again that the baseline is 'an important first step along the way. No doubt once under way we'll work out further developments'.

**THE PUBLISHERS
ASSOCIATION**

not permitted to vary the selling price to obtain a competitive advantage.

The e-book market is not, therefore, able to function in the normal way. Competition is effectively stifled, to the detriment of the public. Retail price maintenance was made illegal many years ago, but the publishers have decided that this should not stop them.

Under a new scheme, proposed by the Publishers Association (PA), library users would have to make a physical visit to a library's premises to download an e-book via one of its computer terminals, rather than downloading the book at home or in the office.

This has the great disadvantage that access to e-books is restricted to library opening hours and to the speed of the library's (often rather old) computer system. The proposed scheme also demands that the library authorities provide 'robust and secure geographical-based membership'. The PA accused

some library authorities of mismanaging e-book lending, and suggested that this was the reason for the restrictions.

Growing outreach

The Publishers Association scheme is actually aimed at crippling the growing outreach activities of public libraries.

Its new 'offer' is in fact a baseline agreement that everyone was willing to sign up to. Some publishers already offer something much better. But obviously, the PA's philosophy is that progress should be made at the speed of the most reluctant to adjust.

The technique of accusing the victim of misdeeds, in order to justify draconian punitive measures, has been lifted out of the third world dictators' handbook. When challenged to provide evidence of the alleged misdeeds, the PA could only provide one, rather doubtful case.

This is a similar situation to that which the US Government Accounting Office

found, when it investigated music industry claims of widespread piracy – the evidence is sparse and sometimes manufactured.

Early in 2010, the Department for Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS) made a clear statement that e-book lending from public libraries was expected to be free of charge. The Publishers Association is not challenging this declaration directly, but has decided that it should emasculate public library attempts to carry the free lending of reading material concept into the 21st century.

Maximum inconvenience

'Free at the point of use' is to be redefined as 'free at the point of the maximum inconvenience'.

The publishers' attack on public library services and on the free market concept is intended to protect their cosy business model. This has existed for very many years, and there is a great reluctance to discard it and seize the opportunities which the new technology offers.

In the short term, assuming the government continues to sit on its hands, these defensive measures may well do what is intended – at a very high cost to the public. In the long term, they are doomed.

The members of the PA do not have complete control of the market place and new entrants will be able to take advantage of the gap left by the publishers' withdrawal into a protectionist laager. Amazon, Google and others must be thanking the gods for this gift. The dinosaurs of publishing have engineered their own extinction – no need for an asteroid.

Post script:

The above article was written at the end of October/December 2010 and the technological scene is constantly changing. Since then, we have had upgraded versions of e-book readers and a continued rapid expansion of e-book use. We have also had a further assault on public libraries' e-book lending operations by HarperCollins. This publishing house has now decreed that its e-books can only be lent to the public 26 times. The American Library Association and CILIP (the UK librarians' professional association) have responded strongly to this arbitrary action.

Letters...

Looking back ...

Demise of public libraries began under Margaret Thatcher and the rise of 'Cabinet' local government that abolished devoted committees. It was also helped along by widespread transfer of library management to 'leisure services' and the dismissal or downgrading of qualified chief librarians.

Thus in a relatively short time no-one was left to understand the purpose of public libraries. So began the selling off of irreplaceable reference stocks and the end of interlending co-operation.

It was all philistine paws to the troughs. With the serious decline in professional staff with wide bibliographical knowledge, libraries became shallow sites of entertainment – increasingly stripped of services to local prisons, hospitals and schools; and with opening hours (and days) severely trimmed.

Book selection no longer exists, as in many authorities it has been outsourced – including to US library suppliers all too eager to sell American fiction. Also lost are some good local history collections, which have been moved to the local museum – where research by members of the general public is unknown and there is little enthusiasm in answering questions from the public.

Unless the position is restored to the standard following the 1964 Public Libraries Act, there is no point in attempting to revive public libraries. They may as well remain in the hands of volunteers until they are lost in history, or be replaced by such as the old Boots 'Booklovers' Library', a few shelves at the back of the shop.

Even if library services are saved, the eventual state of their bookstocks will eventually raise the question: *Was it worth it?*

Ralph Gee MSc,
erstwhile Fellow of the Library Association (1962); Member of the Institute of Information Scientists (1980)

Looking on ...

As a former children's librarian, now living in Holland, I can only watch in despair as the library network faces

dismemberment. Bringing children and books together was such a joy – it never seemed like work.

So many initiatives to encourage reading stand to be lost, along with the buildings and the books. I think of Bookstart and Baby Book Crawl and of the Summer Reading Challenge, which parents and teachers love because it helps to address the summer holiday reading gap that can hold children back.

I think of homework help sessions, in which children are helped through the mass of Internet information to use the technology effectively to help them with school projects.

Volunteers, no matter how well-meaning, cannot initiate and develop such projects. Trained librarians are needed, and their loss will be felt. Who will have the book knowledge to encourage reading adventures, to help develop the foundations that support education and a literate society?

Were I in England now I would be joining protests and carrying placards. As it is, I can only wish the Campaign well from the bottom of my heart.

Maura Coleman

Looking lively

We have an active campaign to save our library, Highgate Library in Camden, London. It is in a grade II listed building, and was the first in Camden (then St Pancras). It was opened in 1906.

We had a packed campaign meeting with local councillors and the councillor responsible for culture on January 27, which had great publicity. Now we have forged links with our very local primary school, Brookfield. The PTA and Friends held a We Love Highgate Library day in March, which was a huge success.

The library was packed with adults and children, a number of very classy authors spoke and Celia Mitchell gave a powerful performance of one of her husband Adrian's wonderful poems. Frank Dobson, our MP, finished off the day with an entertaining speech.

Some local authors sold signed copies of their books and gave the money to the campaign. Everyone signed our petition and wrote postcard messages to the council.

We believe that small local libraries are a vital part of their community and provide a meeting point as well as a place to read, work and use computers. We also value our helpful staff.

Camden has a consultation going on – asking which libraries we would prefer to close! We are going to say: 'Keep them all'.

With best wishes,
Linda Lefevre

Looking ahead ...

I don't know how often you get positive feedback on a Campaigner article, but here is one to add to the total.

Immediately I read the short piece (summer 2010 issue) on the Manchester Libraries collaboration with Macmillan Cancer Support, a lamp lit up. This is something that should have been happening in libraries up and down the country years ago. Why had it not occurred to us?

Well, it has occurred to someone in Manchester and he/she (my bet is she, as the male part of the species has a blank spot in this area) has done something about it.

At present, we are all preoccupied with the cuts and the manoeuvring associated with them, but we should not let them obscure other major developments. This health initiative is, I believe, one of those. It can obviously do a great deal of good and it is well within the information delivery part of the public library remit.

Because I strongly believe in the use of public libraries to meet the needs of local communities, I started talking to the local voluntary side of the NHS and the Camden libraries hierarchy about the initiative. There was an almost instantaneous positive response from the health side, but a simple acknowledgement is the only reaction, so far, from the library management side. I am not very surprised by this, as public need is not high on their priority list. Further, Camden is not interested in taking even small risks. It prefers to wait until the majority of library services have shown that something new works, well before it is willing to consider it.

Name not published

The Hillingdon miracle – fact or fiction?

IT is no secret that local authority budgets are under extreme pressure at this time, and that one of the prime targets for cost savings is their libraries.

Historically, library services have been seen as the easy option when it is necessary to save money. Local government bureaucrats have always considered library closures before other options, and have often succeeded in imposing these on an unwilling population.

However, each time this occurs, the public's resistance increases. This may be of only academic interest to the bureaucrats, but it is rather important to councillors who have to face the public on doorsteps throughout their wards.

In these circumstances, sensible councillors search for alternatives to library closures. However sensible they are, these councillors are rarely very knowledgeable about public libraries and are therefore at risk of accepting at face value policies which are actually harmful to their boroughs.

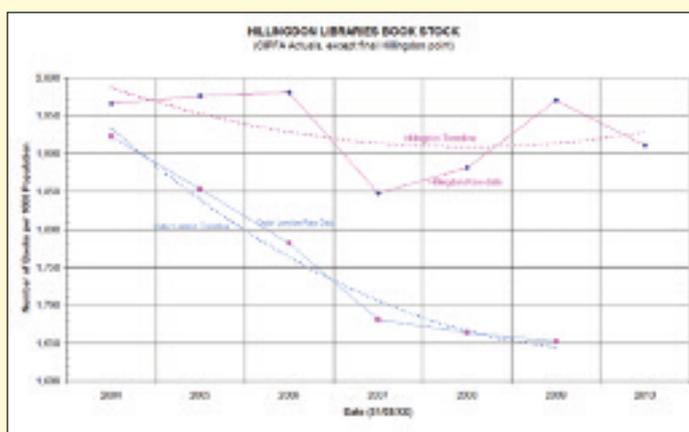
Over the last few years there has been a campaign in the media which sought to show that the London Borough of Hillingdon's public libraries had made a breakthrough in management techniques. Whilst much has been claimed for the new management regime, little hard evidence has been provided to support the contention that the performance of Hillingdon's libraries has been improved considerably.

This article is an attempt to rectify that unfortunate omission. Data contained in the Cipfa (Chartered Institute for Public Finance & Accountancy) document *Library Statistics* has been used to compare Hillingdon's recent performance with that before 2006-07, and also with other outer London boroughs.

Book stock

Most library users consider the book lending service to be the prime activity. Although e-books are rapidly gaining in popularity with the general public, printed books still dominate. Therefore, a borough's public library book stock continues to be seen by users as the yardstick to measure how well the local authority is responding to the needs of its residents.

On this measure, Hillingdon has, generally, a good record. It certainly has a better record than the average outer London borough. However, this good performance is based on an excellent performance before 2007. Changes introduced in that year sent the book stock into steep decline and threatened the good work of previous years.



Hillingdon is not planning any closures. In fact, it is refurbishing all its libraries one by one – while still saving money. But is it the whole story? Alan Templeton says the jury is still out.

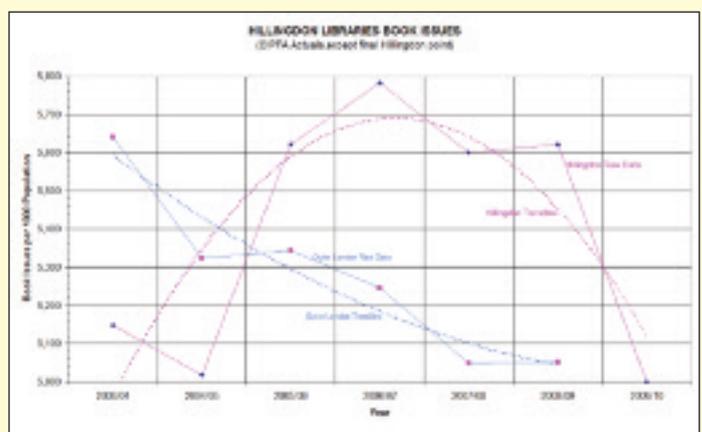
There is some evidence that there has been a reversal of the 2007 changes, but the book stock has not yet returned to the levels enjoyed by Hillingdon's residents in earlier years.

Book issues

Intuitively, one would expect that the more choice library users are given in selecting books to borrow, the greater would be the number of books borrowed. The 'more choice, the more sales' maxim works quite well in the retail trade. There is no inherent reason why it should not work in public libraries.

Of course, this is only one element of good stock management. Other aspects can have an equal effect on library performance. However, this particular cause and effect does have the advantage of being easily checked.

Generally, outer London library services show a good correlation between the size of book stocks and the number of books issued. This is not so obvious in Hillingdon, because the averaging effect has been removed. However, it is very obvious that the regime prior to 2007 produced a strong surge in book issues and the changes introduced in 2007-08 reversed this sharply. Recovery from this major setback has been anaemic.

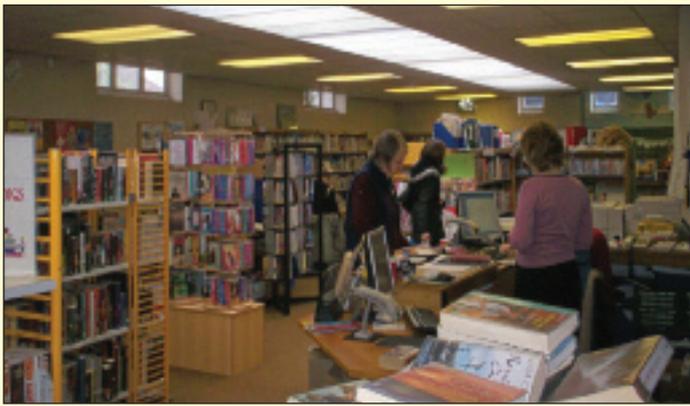


Active borrowers

Because library users visit public libraries for a number of reasons, it is possible that the correlation between the number of active borrowers and the size of the book stock may be quite weak. In theory, those who visit a library to use a computer, for example, will also take the opportunity to borrow a book.

This cross marketing does work in the retail trade, but it needs a great deal of expertise to be successful. The supermarkets are excellent examples of this in operation.

The overall outer London situation appears to be that the number of active borrowers does vary in sympathy with the size of the book stock. Deprived of the outer London averaging affect, the Hillingdon data exhibits a far greater volatility. Individual local decisions have a noticeable effect at the borough level. However,



Typical Hillingdon libraries – before and after.

the Hillingdon trendline suggests that the number of borrowers in the borough is not varying in the same way as the book stock. It is following a broadly similar trend to that of outer London.

There is cause for a little concern, in that the noticeably superior performance of Hillingdon over the average outer London case at the beginning of the period under consideration is slowly being eroded. Previous loyalties are being strained, and people are voting with their feet. At present, it is a trickle of people, but that does not mean that it will remain so.



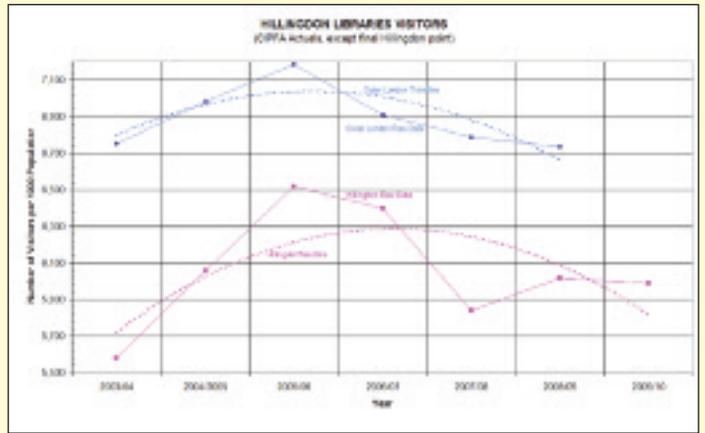
Visitors

Although library users tend to prefer using data associated with books as the yardstick to measure performance, the library profession concentrates on visitor numbers. Both approaches can be justified. The book-oriented one reflects the fact that over 80% of visits to public libraries are for the purpose of borrowing an item, usually a book. The visitor-oriented one takes note of the fact that libraries offer a wide range of services to the public. In reality, to use one without the other is to distort the picture.

Historically, Hillingdon appears to have followed a policy which is book-oriented, ie one the majority of existing users would approve of. Whether the majority of non-users (ie potential users) would approve of it is not known.

Hillingdon’s performance, when measured against its outer London peers, is consistently better on the book side. However, this is balanced by a consistently worse performance when visitors are considered.

It appears that this underperformance was recognised in the early part of the period under consideration and steps taken to rectify the problem. The gap was closing each year at a fast rate. Unfortunately, the early years’ good work was undone in the later years.



The Miracle

The first reaction of anyone looking at the Hillingdon libraries data for the last few years must surely be ‘what is all the fuss about?’ Nothing that has happened recently has greatly improved the borough’s performance. Indeed, it can be argued that the opposite is the case. Decisions made in 2007 and 2008 destroyed a generally good performance which may well have been worth boasting about. If there has been a miracle in Hillingdon, it appears to have happened before 2006.

That there has been a great deal of fuss is certain. Since around 2007, there has been a series of articles and speeches (mainly by Tim Coates) claiming that Hillingdon has made some sort of breakthrough and that other local authorities should learn from this.

There has never been any checkable data associated with these claims and requests for such have been ignored. In contrast, data presented in this article is mainly in the public domain and is, therefore, checkable. At present, the final data point of the Hillingdon series is not checkable, as it was obtained directly from Hillingdon. In a few months time the Cipfa data will catch up and allow complete verification.

It is not the purpose of this article to speculate on the motives for the publicity campaign, but the public good does not seem to be as prominent in them as is claimed. The recent Hillingdon model is not one which local authorities should impose on their populations until hard evidence suggests that there is a benefit to be gained.

When the Hillingdon programme is finally complete in 2015 and the ongoing library refurbishments ended, that evidence may be available. In the meantime, there are verifiably successful models available from boroughs quietly getting on with the business of running a good library service.