

THE FRIENDS OF LAMBETH LIBRARIES

Chairman

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EMPOWER, INFORM, ENRICH

The DCMS is to be commended for undertaking such a wide-ranging survey. The resulting format of the inquiry is, perhaps inevitably, a complex and rather cumbersome document. It contains so many complementary and conflicting views, and so many questions, that it is hard to comment on it without risking confusion of thought. So, writing from a London borough in which several library closures have taken place, and where, only ten years ago, we had to fight hard to save three out of five under threat, I shall try to keep our response simple.

We start from the premise that libraries are absolutely essential to local communities and we urge that this premise should never be undermined. We believe that it follows from this that an efficient and comprehensive library service should be a statutory obligation for local authorities. Only in this way can there be a proper response to the needs of communities which, in a multi-racial, multi-cultural Britain, may vary enormously in their composition and requirements. To 'nationalise' would be a retrograde step at a time when we are increasingly aware of the dangers and inadequacies of too much centralisation.

We see too often how in times of financial stringency local authorities can be swift to maintain other services at the expense of libraries. We therefore believe that it must be the job of central government to ensure that they fulfil their statutory obligations. It should do so more actively than it did in the recent case of the Wirral Borough Council. Although the threat of action by the DCMS was enough to make the Council withdraw its unacceptable plans, it was not told publicly to include in its revised proposals the sensible recommendations made in the excellent report submitted to the DCMS by Sue Charteris. Had this been done it would have acted as a salutary warning to all local authorities that the DCMS both has teeth and is ready to bite if necessary. Perhaps it is not too late to act even now, and to ensure that a valuable report is not merely pigeon-holed.

Information Technology has undoubtedly changed people's expectations of what a library should offer. It has also put people in touch with sources of information for which they do not have to go to a library. It is not, we suppose, likely that such technology will eventually become as much a part of every home's equipment as a telephone. But to be over-dependent on it may be risky. Computer systems can crash; and a single mistake can result in the loss of an immense amount of information. Libraries will remain useful for people seeking access rather than storage, but they may find that the need for IT facilities gradually lessens rather than increasing.

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There is thus a continuing need for hard copy, of which books are the universal form. So we think that libraries should be full of books, despite what some of your contributors say. We agree with Margaret Hodge's definition of a library's essentials - good bookstocks, an accessible location and real quality of premises.

Maintaining and improving bookstocks should be tackled through partnerships which can secure valuable discounts. This sort of bulk buying is likely to be the easiest and most efficient method. But where co-operation with a local bookshop is possible this should always be undertaken. The shop may be able to join in some themed event at the local library with benefit to both parties. And it is important that libraries should not become rivals to booksellers. The book trade is also a vital national asset.

Most of our libraries in Lambeth were provided by generous benefactors. They were usually built in community centres where accessibility still remains high. We do not regard this as a major problem.

Although many of them are old buildings this is not necessarily a disadvantage if there is good maintenance and repair. They make a significant contribution to the local architectural environment; and their familiarity makes them objects of affection and reassurance. New buildings can be very fine but they may also be intimidating. Adaptations in the old ones can prove both more economical and more attractive.

Finally, a few miscellaneous points. We are attracted by the idea of a national library ticket. With an increasingly mobile population this could be extremely helpful. For those who work away from their home neighbourhood, but within reach of another library this could have the effect of an extension of opening hours.

The assertion by one contributor to your survey that 36% of adults in the UK have literacy skills below the level of a good GCSE is horrifying. We strongly support the development of schemes to encourage reading among the young. This is the time when an ability can be turned into a habit.

We suggest that those libraries which have windows easily seen by the public should arrange eye-catching displays of books, CD's, DVD's, etc. And library interiors should be made welcoming with the odd vase of flowers or potted plants, perhaps a coffee machine, and chairs that are comfortable to sit on (or in!).

Among your contributors' suggestions is a thorough overhaul of the 1964 Public Libraries Act. There may be a need for some changes but they should not be too sweeping or detailed. It is well said that 'to define the faith is to limit the faithful'. The element of flexibility should be kept and the DCMS should be constantly vigilant, not hesitating to intervene when it sees that a local authority is letting its standards slip or is guilty of some other misdemeanour.

Last of all (but by no means least) the development of Friends Groups in every library should be encouraged and supported by the local authority. The Friends are excellent publicists for their libraries; they arrange talks and exhibitions, co-operate closely with the staff, know their neighbourhoods and their needs and can form an effective nucleus of any local consultation.

We hope that these observations may be helpful in developing a policy which will ensure a good future for our libraries.