

# What are Friends for?

[a personal view from Robin Yeates]

Camden Public Libraries User Group (CPLUG) held a one-day seminar on Saturday 23rd October 1999 at the London School of Economics, against a background of plans to close three branch libraries in Camden. The seminar was run very professionally, and should be of interest to many outside Camden, not least because of the wide range of eminent speakers. The title theme was simple: **'Do public libraries have a future?'** A packed audience came to hear what libraries do, what they cost and what library users want.

LASER was invited to help promote the event (along with the Ham and High and the Evening Standard) and Robin Yeates attended to chair the opening session. What followed was a fascinating meeting that focused on the fundamental issues for library users and how they relate to current developments. It was a day not only of strong opinions and eloquence, but also of well-researched arguments and results from hard-won experience. It was perhaps unusual in bringing together speakers from higher education (librarians, academics and library researchers), public libraries, the Institute of Public Finance, and consultants, not to mention the lively contributions from the audience.

Prof Ioan Lewis, Vice Chair of the CPLUG and Emeritus Professor of Anthropology at the LSE set the scene. He wondered about library buildings that were architectural triumphs, but held no books (as in some schools). He wondered how local development plans take account of what libraries mean to those who use them. 'Developers often don't understand the local context'. He claimed they may not welcome local opinion or aspirations. Thanking Frances Hendrix, Jean Sykes and Barry Bloomfield as well as the Ham and High and Evening Standard for publicising the event, he referred to CPLUG as 'this minute guerrilla organisation', and said the day would be wide ranging, but was unable even then to cover important issues such as children's libraries or EU sources of finance.

Prof Frank Webster, Dept of Sociology, Birmingham University, gave a stirring opening speech on 'Public Knowledge and the Information Age'. He affirmed that public libraries will of course have a future (there are such a lot of them for one thing), but need to avoid becoming what he called 'zombie institutions' that have lost sight of their reasons for being.

He highlighted the general shift from public to private ownership. We must acknowledge the rapid advance of the 'neo-liberal consensus' for libraries, where provision from taxation is becoming increasingly unpopular. Prof Webster questioned its consequences for the sort of information generated and made available. The public service principle is antipathetic to this growing commercialisation.

A second factor is the 'information explosion'. It raises the problem 'that librarians may be seizing on

ICTs as their saviour without asking deep questions as to why and on what terms they ought to be doing so'.

Other developments are the sustained attacks on public library provision, for example from the Adam Smith Institute in the 1980s; the improvement in the ideological climate for libraries with Chris Smith as minister; and the People's Network. With these shifts, Prof Webster says 'it is understandable that the profession seizes the embrace of those who express some affection

But librarians should think before blindly following New Labour, he said, stopping to consider what lies at the heart of libraries. This is information as a public good, free at the point of use and untainted by commerce. This ideal may be impossible to achieve, but we need to highlight problems, make choices and not lose sight of principles in the rush to ICTs. A key problem may be that Web based information may not stay free once the rush to e-commerce reaches fruition and all will depend on how libraries have bought into the information revolution.

Often statistics are used as evidence to make investment decisions, and libraries sometimes have no way of explaining their value beyond them. This problem was addressed by Richard Proctor, Dept of Information Studies, University of Sheffield, who spoke on 'Assessing what libraries Mean to Users'. His research is intended to encourage policy makers to recognise that performance data cannot describe the value and significance of things. A 1998 study on New Measures for the New Library developed a social audit technique, looking at the benefits of a service, asking what local authorities are trying to achieve and questioning inappropriate service comparisons.

After studying users and library closures for many years, we know that what people say when questioned does not always agree with what they do. Before and after studies of branch closures have shown that from 9 to 30 percent of adult users stopped using libraries after their local branch closed, and from 18 to 66 percent of children. Reasons were found to be the inconvenience of alternative branches, fears of fines, and the weight of books to be carried with heavy shopping. Cuts in opening hours in Ealing resulted in 4 percent of users ceasing to use the library altogether, although others stayed loyal, showing that people will try their hardest to keep using their local library.

Perhaps most interesting research findings were about what people get from their library. Benefits to adults include social and community value as a meeting place, especially friendly to the elderly, young and mothers. Users were contributors as well as recipients of information in their local library, where community relationships are important. The local library also gives a quality of life, a feeling of keeping in touch and a personal touch to contact with officialdom.

For children, branch libraries enable them to make relationships with 'safe' adults. Staff know their names and arrange social events. Mothers felt that they encourage respect for the elderly, involvement in the community and a sense of responsibility through looking after borrowed materials. The breadth

and variety of stock assists homework and the development of a reading habit. The trip to the library even encourages road safety amongst the young, it was found.

Jean Sykes, Librarian and Director of Information Services at the LSE, presented the lifelong learning agenda for librarians by examining the work of the London Learning Network Group. This new networking body has as members the M25 Consortium of HE Libraries, the Association of London Chief Librarians, the Greater London Archives Network, FE Colleges (Library and IT) in London, the Southeast Museums Service, LASER and the London Metropolitan Network. LLNG aims to investigate ways of working together in support of lifelong learning, to identify suitable London-wide bodies to influence, and to liaise with appropriate national bodies. It also intends to identify needs and possible network models and eventually to prepare project proposals in London. It will also report to its constituencies and disseminate information about its work. The group is driven by national initiatives such as Community Access to Lifelong Learning (CALL), the People's Network, National Grid for Learning and spread of learning centres, recognising the need for some 'joined-up thinking'. So far six meetings had been held and four Task Forces set up, with a seminar organised for 10 December 1999. The Task Forces cover content creation and digitisation; information skills training; network infrastructure; and resource discovery and document delivery. Their membership widens participation in the group. Jean Sykes said that 'public libraries are the key' to lifelong learning. This event was the kind of opportunity to disseminate activities that would be undertaken in future.

After such speakers, it was not surprising that the audience raised many questions. Will learning not be too individualistic in future, with a risk of social isolation? Is lifelong learning really new? Several speakers acknowledged the role of ICT and networked information, but stressed the importance of public library buildings as well, since they provide access. Fears were expressed about the loss of neutrality of libraries if private funding plays a role in service provision. Many and varied points were made. In Camden, Best Value would lead to annual cuts of 2 percent, and library closures with little or no relation to actual need, one participant claimed. More co-operation with users was urged. Research in Kilburn supported Richard Proctor's findings about the social importance of branch libraries. The difficulty of communicating was demonstrated by one suggestion for a CPLUG website - there already is one. The University of the Third Age supports 100,000 learners, 40 percent with physical disabilities. They need IT but also books locally, and public libraries remain open when FE college libraries have closed. It was suggested that the public *is* prepared to pay through local taxes for comfortable, accessible libraries. There was debate about the effect of ICT on libraries and book stocks. Most speakers felt that a mixed economy will develop, although some libraries will lack the resources and staff to support ICT based resources fully. There will be a need to encourage appreciative reading and to discuss consequences of change in learning styles.

After lunch, Guy Daines of the Library Association chaired another lively session, this time on statistics and costs. The Camden context of expected library cuts added interest to the topic, as Phillip Ramsdale, Executive Director of the Institute of Public Finance, responsible for the CIPFA annual

library statistics, explained their compilation and library standards. He stressed the CIPFA statistics resulted from a voluntary survey carried out ever since 1885. Keeping up with requirements of users was difficult whilst maintaining consistent figures over time. This year £700m was spent on libraries, 1.3 percent of local authority expenditure for the service that has been referred to as the 'jewel in the crown'. There has been a decline in real terms since 1993/4 of 11 percent in manual staff, 18 percent in books, with an increase in sound and video of 19 percent. There is a higher proportion of professional staff to population in London compared with elsewhere. Phillip Ramsdale suggested that these statistics were produced mainly for the benefit of library managers, although they might be useful to library users. The new user survey PLUS+ (Public Library User Surveys) asks questions about quality and standards, and is being used by 3 out of four library authorities now. A separate survey is available for children and soon there will be one for archives.

Alan Templeton, Treasurer of CPLUG, then spoke about his research into the position in Camden, referring to 'lies, damned lies and statistics quoted by a politician'. The Best Value Report for 1997/98 published in February 1999 showed Camden with 3<sup>rd</sup> highest total expenditure in London, 5<sup>th</sup> highest spender on books, with an above average number of libraries and 3<sup>rd</sup> highest number of staff. Alan discussed the pressure to become more average, despite local user wishes and the possible importance of the change in daytime and overnight population. CIPFA statistics refer to residents, not visitors, so may mislead. For example, Alan said that libraries cost per thousand population would be 40 percent lower if the daytime population were included. This would make Camden much more of an average borough, a situation that is hard to prove, but more likely to be accurate as it reflects the perception of the local population. It was pointed out, though, that CIPFA figures used to use daytime population statistics, but agreement could not be reached about how to measure the daytime population. Alan Templeton made one comment about a topic that is surely to be of increasing interest in the digital library age, when boundaries disappear or become easier to cross: the Government currently requires public libraries to serve not merely residents of an area, but also tourists, visitors and daytime workers; yet funding allocations are based only on 'enhanced population' statistics that exclude daytime workers. Many other questions of detail were raised, although with few concrete answers.

Barry Bloomfield, former Director, Collection Development, British Library, then chaired a third session on 'What do library users want?' During his introduction, he referred to the various functions of libraries, one of which is to give access for individuals to the core literary heritage for recreation; one is to provide reference information; and another is to preserve local collections.

Miranda McKearney, co-ordinator of Well Worth Reading, and a freelance consultant with advertising agency experience, won the audience's rapt attention for her presentation on 'Readers and Reading Audiences'. She stressed that many people want access to books, and there is a danger that libraries may neglect their readers, especially adult readers of imaginative fiction. 1 6.7m people borrow books at least monthly, and 52 percent of loans are for fiction - more books than are sold in bookshops. This is vital ground that libraries should lay claim to, as 'most significant providers of the reading

experience', Miranda said. Libraries have a special relationship with readers, offering free and equal access, allowing readers to experiment creatively. What we need are ways to measure the impacts of literature, and some work is currently underway. Work with readers contributes to quality of life; building a creative nation; learning and literacy; citizenship and social inclusion; the economy. The economy of the reading industry is significant: £1 13m per year spent on books and £4m per year paid to authors. Libraries cost very little: 26 pence per person per week. New initiatives are starting to develop methods of active stock promotion in libraries. New kinds of staff are being employed, such as reader development librarians, and library development agencies, such as the proposed London Library Development Agency may promote such ideas, backed by national programmes such as Launchpad, Reading Partnership, Reading Safari and Kick-off (Random House). Research is underway into the links between buying and borrowing, and Miranda ended by referring to Asda's £250,000 outreach programme and stating the libraries are the main champions of readers.

Turning cuts around and giving people pretty much what they want was the theme of the next paper by Keith Heyes, Chief Librarian, Sandwell Libraries, who used practical experience of Best Value research to explore the role of branch libraries and the problems of trying to cater for everyone's needs. Keith explained how research had persuaded politicians to preserve local branches and secure funding for the next 2-3 years, following a cut of 10 percent (£350,000) and loss of two branch libraries, at which point 90 percent of their readers were lost to Sandwell Libraries. There was a convergence of need expressed regardless of research method and community consulted. This focused on core services, such as the bookstock and its management. He referred to the need to rediscover sight of the theme of reading development, and improve mobile services to improve access. Keith expressed surprise in some quarters that these policies also allowed creation of a big new central library, but not at the expense of local branches, which were now a key priority. Improvements were being sought to staffing levels, bookfund, marketing and midweek/Saturday opening hours, and the archives centre is being improved. The ICT budget has been reduced overall, but provision increased nevertheless. Keith stressed the importance in gaining support from a partnership with users, elected members and council officers.

Jim Agnew, Surrey's Head of Community Services, concluded the long after tea session with a witty and engaging piece questioning library professional wisdom and their view of what people want. Some controversial remarks included that professional librarians don't necessarily understand what the public wants as well as elected members do, and that the public does not want too much change. He also felt that libraries cannot all be the same, since it is not possible to manage a service that is at war with its users. Those without large resources may do 'better to be Quiksave well than Waitrose badly'. He referred to the way some professionals are confused by Government messages, especially about opening hours. On the one hand, they are exhorted to give people libraries opening longer hours, yet on the other budgets are being cut.

Jim Agnew expressed a worry that in the debate about social inclusion, too much attention was being

paid to non-users of libraries and not enough about giving a high quality service to those who already want it.

The day was rounded off with a further discussion about the benefits of free access to local libraries, the need to keep branches near users such as students and the need to understand what users want and work with councillors to provide it. A final thought was that the community thinks of a library unconsciously as security, equivalent to the local church or doctor, and as such is increasingly important.

Tom Selwyn, Chair of CPLUG and Professor of Anthropology, University of North London, summed up the event as highly successful, to be followed by further local campaign events intended to preserve Camden's library branch services. He reminded everyone of Frank Webster's broad, intellectual argument; Miranda Mc Kearney's focus on reader development, the social, psychological and cultural aspects of libraries and library spaces; the economic aspects of libraries and how co-operation and partnerships might help us work together; and organisation and management issues such as user consultation and staff development. The parting message of the day was 'library branch closures are a thing of the past'.

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