

The services provided by public libraries are irreplaceable, but the network needs to be modernised

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*Library services need to modernise and move into the 21st century. **Miranda McKearney** argues that we should look past the global statistics on falling library use and conduct careful strategic planning to create a library service that can adapt to the future whilst continuing to provide socially engaging services with proven impact.*



At [The Reading Agency](#), we're passionate about the future of libraries, so the opportunity to give oral evidence to a [Select Committee on library closures](#) was too good to miss.

I was really pleased that the Committee's questions went much wider than library closures. Cuts to staffing, opening hours and material funds can result in library services becoming a shell which cannot begin to provide the "comprehensive and efficient service" required by the [1964 Public Library Act](#). Staffing cuts can also erode the library service's ability to tackle disadvantage, when outreach and community liaison posts are lost. In the short term the service may look viable, but in the medium to longer term its effectiveness and appeal will be eroded.

It is often difficult for library supporters to know how best to engage with the local politicians making decisions about future library provision. We suggest a list of questions like whether library cuts are proportionate to other cuts; whether local people have been fully consulted and a needs analysis done; if buildings are being shut, whether a service is being provided somehow for the affected community.

But the million dollar question is whether the authority has a strategic plan for the service. To create a library service for the 21st century, change will be necessary. Whilst some local authorities are cutting library services disproportionately and taking deeply damaging decisions, others may be closing under-used libraries in the context of a coherent plan for the future which involves reshaping provision in line with changing population patterns and public need.

We need a bigger debate

I hope the heartfelt public campaign for libraries will act as a springboard for a much bigger debate about their value to society, and a re-imagining of their future. Even if there were no cuts, libraries would still need to change to meet changing social needs and lifestyles, including digital demands. We've seen this debate happen with museums; we need the same for libraries.

Those who argue that libraries' support for reading is no longer needed in an era of mass paperbacks and new digital platforms seem to be unaware that more of England's working age population are at the lowest level of literacy than in 2003 (1.7 million compared to 1.1 million) and there are still 15 per cent (5.1 million) at or below the level expected of an 11 year old.

In the Select Committee session, I urged MPs to look beyond the global statistics about a fall in library use. In looking to the future we need to interrogate the evidence of growth trends and public demand.

Working individually and as a network, in the last ten years library authorities have together transformed their work to create a lively, socially engaging offer to the public with a proven impact. There has been a focused explosion of baby rhyme times, reading groups, author events, summer reading holiday activity, children's book awards and festivals. 77.9 per cent of 5-10 year olds now

use libraries and children's borrowing has risen for 7 years running.

Careful strategic planning is needed to keep up the momentum of this and other work. There needs to be the right mixture of local, regional and national planning. There is a pressing need for a national vision for improvement working alongside and informing local authorities' responsibilities.

The last major nationally planned intervention was the installation of The People's Network – free internet access in every library. It had a transforming effect on footfall, and profoundly improved the local service. Now we need to create the library online – a suite of national, planned 24/7 services.

Fuelled by a powerful national vision for a 21st century library service, in five years' time we could hope to see every local authority Chief Executive recognising the library network as a massive asset for building better places to live. Libraries will be led by bold, exuberant innovators – no longer just caretakers of book warehouses. We could see the Cabinet believing that the 21st century library network is so important that it's no longer good enough to have policy in one department and money in another; believing that the network has the potential to deliver on just about every main policy area from building 21st century skills to the creative economy. So important that it's the subject of a major spending review bid, perhaps a bid combining the development of the Library at Home – superb civic spaces at the heart of every community – with the Library Away – portable library services available digitally and physically in surgeries, prisons, children's centres, schools and shopping centres. A system partnered by the BBC, the health service, the Post Office, the IT, cultural and corporate sectors.

So many of us need a modernised library system

- To a health commissioner, the 21st century library could be the new preventative weapon in your armoury. So that GPs are issuing prescriptions for the library's health information and reading groups and factoring reading into early treatment for dementia.
- If you're one of the 5 million adults with poor literacy skills, libraries should be offering easy steps into tackling the problem, with fun, creative activities and librarians who know about local classes.
- If you're an unemployed 19-year-old, the library should be the place offering accredited volunteering experiences and the chance to join a task force involving the public in shaping the service – spending budgets and interviewing staff.
- If you're a 30-year-old working all hours, the library could be an app connecting you to a national eBooks catalogue, a Twitter book group and the place with Skype author events.
- If you're an isolated 80-year-old, the library is the place that runs a telephone reading group, and helps you get online for the first time so you can talk to your grandchildren abroad.
- For teachers, libraries should be their main community ally in inspiring children to enjoy and practise reading when school's out. Such an important partner that there's a shared strategy in the school improvement plan

Lots of this is already happening. In five years' time, if we really concentrated, it could *all* be happening.

Let's hope the Select Committee moves the debate and the action forward, fast.

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About the author

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