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Some reflections on the future of local public libraries

After a long career in the voluntary and local government sectors Yinnon Ezra offers his own perspective of the importance of local libraries and what local government must do to keep them relevant and keep them safe.

I shall be retiring from Hampshire County Council as director of culture, communities and rural affairs at the end of March 2011 after 37 years in the voluntary and local government sectors. For more than 20 years I have had the privilege of being a chief officer in three local authorities, where the management of public libraries has been a key part of my responsibilities. Given this experience, I thought that I might offer a few thoughts and comments on local authority-based cultural services, particularly the current situation around public libraries.

One of the issues that has been apparent in recent months is the very local nature of public libraries. This may be an obvious statement to make but one I believe constantly needs reinforcing because the responsibility for running, managing and providing public libraries is the job of local authorities, not national government. This provision is statutory but no cash comes through the government grant support for local authorities to provide a public library service; it is entirely supported by the local council tax.

This is a key issue when local councillors weigh up the way stretched cash is to be distributed. Libraries are just one part of a range of statutory services, some of which are viewed as critical and some are indeed 'life and death'.

The key for me has always been the leadership at local authority level of libraries and culture. Although there has been much discussion about library closures and cuts in the arts, the reality is that the distribution of these cuts is variable across local authorities. If one looks more closely it is evident that when there is effective leadership of these services at a local level the cultural services continue to be supported, albeit having to take its fair share of the savings needed.

We are seeing in many local authorities that local members have been 'fenced' by management into the knee-jerk response when asked to cut budgets, that is, close libraries, reduce opening hours and cut book funds. The latter is a device I have had to use from time to time while we 're-balanced' budgets elsewhere. For years, members have only been offered these alternatives to making savings. This, for me, is wrong.

Libraries must look radically at how they can change to reduce the cost of providing these services, and here I am in agreement with Tim Coates and Roy Clare. People costs, technology costs, buildings and many more items of expenditure need to be chased down and reduced; this is what I mean by re-balancing. Unfortunately, doing this in a consistent way across the country does not happen and the continual search for doing things differently – and, yes, for less money – does not happen everywhere. I simply ask you to reflect on why this is the case? Progressive and enlightened local leadership will do this and will not wait for the cliff edge to force knee-jerk decisions.

My contention is that it is about how these services are managed: do they have the right skills and innovative, broad-minded, 'out of the box' thinkers to take the bold steps needed to revitalise and remodel local libraries? The answers to the practical steps required to find savings are all about this country but for some reason some local authorities just 'don't get it'. I have another contention that there are real gaps in management practice, which I hope the Museums Libraries and Archives Council (MLA), the Arts Council in its new role, the Local Government Group (LGG) and the DCMS-supported Future Libraries Programme will help to tackle. The political advocates and leaders for libraries and culture need supporting to ensure the message about the importance of



A new future for libraries: the Winchester Discovery Centre

“I have found in the last ten years or so that re-locating, co-locating or merging libraries with other common local services is another way of reinforcing the modern role for libraries as the cultural heart of local communities.”

libraries and culture gets across to other political colleagues. This support needs to be both practical including alternative sources of advice, together with the moral support to argue and present the intellectual, social and economic case for libraries and culture.

I have one further point to make about the statutory framework for public libraries or the '1964 Act', a point I feel qualified to make because I work closely with colleague chief officers, directors of children's and adult services who constantly wrestle with their 'named' statutory duties and what services can be afforded. I have always argued that public libraries are essentially local and they should reflect what local people want. A statutory framework for libraries which attempts to standardise provision in my experience pulls everyone down to the lowest common denominator, squeezing out local initiative and drive. Or, worse still, standardisation ends up with a 'tick-box' exercise which freezes a creative cultural service in time. Also, say the outcome of a legal case is to insist that a library continues to stay open, the cash base still contracts. Yes, the library is left open but book funds are cut, opening hours are reduced; in effect, although kept open, the library in question withers on the vine. I suppose what I am saying is that public libraries have moved on since the Act was put on the statute book. Any statutory framework for local public libraries must reflect current and future needs.

I am a huge supporter of local government and I recognise that the buck stops with local councils for the provision of a whole range of local services. The direct relationship with local people, which is reinforced through the regularity of local elections, is a very real referendum of whether local councillors and their professional managers are doing what is necessary to provide the right services that local people want.

I have found in the last ten years or so that re-locating, co-locating or merging libraries with other common local services is another way of reinforcing the modern role for libraries as the cultural heart of local communities. What is wonderful is that where we have been able to do this through, for example, creating our 'discovery centres', the number of books borrowed has gone up, a reversal of the national trend of decline. This different offer has helped to broaden the age range of users and has had a direct impact on the number of people who borrow books. This approach is not possible everywhere but smaller branch libraries, often in rural communities, co-located in village halls, have helped to reduce costs and link the library with other local services. Where this has been done there is much optimism that careful, relevant partnerships have revived local libraries.

Finally, there has been debate about the 'big society' and the role of volunteers. Libraries already have many dedicated volunteers. There is no doubt that voluntary effort can help to support libraries in a progressive partnership between local library authorities and communities that want to run their local libraries but this is not a universal answer. What local government must do is respond positively where local communities wish to do things themselves. Much support can be given by local library services in a non-bureaucratic way to enable this sort of local initiative but what this will not do is to fill the 'cuts gap' everywhere. There is also a deeper challenge behind this notion: whether local government is flexible enough to give up power to legitimate alternative forms of local initiative.

So, what next: local authorities working with each other, local services collaborating with innovative practice? Taking risks, being creative, not being imprisoned by the past must be the key to future development. The future health of our public library services are firmly in the hands of local government. The Arts Council and the LGG must build on the work of the MLA to harness the best practice that is around through sub-regional local authority partnership groups to share this across local authorities.

My hope is that perhaps for the first time the LGG will draw together this manifesto of positive and creative action in the management of public libraries and ensure through their regular contact with Leaders and Chief executives of local councils that progressive public libraries stay safe and supported. Unless everyone out there gets behind the LGG the headlines will continue to be full of bad news for libraries. When local authorities make libraries and culture a priority, they do wonderful things, such as build new libraries, reinvent cherished local services, use culture to regenerate cities and communities. This is local government at its very best. It is these authorities that can provide the blueprint for protecting and ensuring the future of local libraries and the public library service.

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Provocation - by John Holden (DEMOS publication)

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