

RESPONSE

The public library and the social entrepreneur

Darren Taylor*

Eco Computer Systems, Pepys Resource Centre, Old Library, Deptford Strand, London, UK

Eco Computer Systems has been authorised by Lewisham Council to take over three of its five libraries, Sydenham, Crofton Park and Grove Park. Each library has a self-issue system and is run by volunteers guided by policy formulated by steering groups of local organisations and local people. Darren Taylor, the founder and owner of Eco Computer Systems, explains the motivation.

Back in August 2007, I set up Eco Computer Systems, a computer recycling business, in the London suburb of Lewisham. Eco Computer Systems is a social enterprise dedicated to fixing problems in society. By February 2010, Eco Computer Systems had moved into a second building, and within a month was taking on a third, the Pepys Resource Centre. When I inspected this building, I found a letter on the floor addressed to the old library. It occurred to me that the building could become a library once again. In June 2010, the library re-opened to the public, with a cafe and IT training suite.

Before dabbling in libraries, I had my own business reselling for Dell. I started with £200 and turned over £140,000 in the first year. I am a dyslexic entrepreneur. I find words difficult and I cannot fill in funding application forms. I learnt to read when I was about 23, because of love. I was given a book (it was *Jane Eyre*) by the mother of my then fiancée. Because I did not want to look stupid, I read that book with the aid of a dictionary and a thesaurus and she began to give me books every few weeks. This is what libraries are for: giving people a chance. I became passionate about libraries. My aunty worked in libraries for over 30 years and I used to visit as a child.

I remember going past that library in my childhood. And I remember, much later, the library closing down. There was an empty library next to Lewisham Hospital and I recall wondering why. Libraries are needed, and not just for reading; these days they are places for using computers, getting advice, looking for work, even bouncing babies. People argue that libraries are issuing fewer books, but they are issuing more children's books than ever. In the current economic climate, many people just cannot afford to buy books.

We have been running libraries in Lewisham for just over a year now. It is the most interesting, exciting and inspiring thing I have ever done. Lewisham Library Service still organises the service, but Eco Computer Systems has taken over the

*Email: darren@ecocom.org.uk

three buildings that were to be closed. We fit in well because we have become more than a recycling company. We have IT training for seniors in the libraries, and a community radio station in a space that was not being used before. Apart from the baby bouncing sessions, we have reminiscence sessions, sitting exercises, and reading challenges. We have job clubs, helping people into work and helping people start businesses. We are installing cafes to encourage more reading in the libraries. Lewisham also has 5 million books online. The reader goes online, selects a book and has it sent to the local library. If readers cannot do this for themselves, we train them.

We started by simply asking people what they wanted. I asked them if they would move to another library if their own closed. They answered that they would not be able to travel to the next nearest library. Let me tell you a story about one of my customers at the Pepys Resource Centre, an elderly man unable to leave his house for more than an hour because he was on an oxygen machine. He had just one hour: he came to my library and had a cup of tea, read and talked to people. He said he would never have been able to leave his house had it not been for the local library. The IT training we give is often to people who have never used a computer in their lives (there are nine million people in the UK who are yet to use the Internet).

Two of the libraries taken over by Eco Computer Systems were Carnegie libraries: Carnegie would not have been happy with what they had become. Since May 2011, Eco Computer Systems had organised a baby bounce in all libraries; IT training, with free computers for people over 55; a community radio station; Christmas, spring and summer fairs; art exhibitions; Easter egg hunts; story and drama sessions; free wifi; job clubs to help writing *curriculum vitae*, interviews and job searching; school visits; summer reading challenges; English language training; and maths and English classes for children. We even have children making model cars during library hours and racing them when the library is closed. Then there are black history events; English language training for adults; book clubs; book author promotions; an orchestra for children; Halloween parties; free newspapers (donated by the Co-op); mental health awareness sessions; advice on eating and recycling; provision of recycling facilities; local councillors' surgeries; and work experience sessions for teenagers.

We now have thousands of visitors every month, and thousands of books are taken out. The libraries are open for longer than ever before. I want to see more visits and more book issues, though this can happen only with the help of the professional staff of Lewisham Library Services. We have an 0800 number direct to professional library staff who can answer questions we cannot. Professional librarians visit every few weeks to inspect stock and provide us with new stock. Working with Lewisham Library Services is a pleasure.

The biggest challenge has been making the library buildings fit for use. The roofs leaked in all three buildings, and an upstairs room had not been used for years. Only three months ago, we raised the money to repair all three roofs, and we are now making all the rooms habitable again. Our first room was decorated last month in Crofton Park and our first tenant is City Reads London. Lewisham Council had planned to close five of its 12 libraries. With the help of Eco Systems, Lewisham now has 13 libraries.