

RESPONSE

Not a job for those who have brought libraries to crisis¹

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The current Parliamentary Select Committee inquiry into library closures is perhaps our last chance to save the public library service for many communities in England. The librarians' professional body, CILIP, estimates that perhaps 600 libraries are threatened with closure or transfer to volunteer groups, and that one in five librarians face redundancy. Access to a comprehensive and efficient service as prescribed by the 1964 Act is fast becoming a postcode lottery for many communities.

Many communities have risen in protest across the country. These protests reflect not just concern about the loss of neighbourhood libraries, but also worries about declining literacy and the degradation of the library profession. Several protest groups have tried unsuccessfully to persuade the secretary of state to set up local inquiries, as happened two years ago when Wirral Council planned to close half of its libraries. In six authorities, residents have resorted to seeking judicial review of their council's actions.

Public anger is increasingly being directed at the culture minister, Ed Vaizey, who was vociferous in support of public libraries when in opposition. He and his officials at the Department of Culture, Media and Sport, and in Arts Council England seem unable to provide leadership or effective advocacy. They sit on the fence taking notes and calling for more research. The Society of Chief Librarians also seems to have been frozen into inaction, though it did announce that 39 refurbished or new-build libraries would be opened this year. Even so, a few shiny new libraries cannot disguise a hinterland laid to waste by the loss of another 600.

While there is general acceptance that cuts are necessary and that the public library service must bear some share, there is real concern that libraries have been seen as an easy target. In the rush to deliver savings, many councils are simply wielding the axe without exploring alternative solutions. Mobile libraries and small branch libraries are the first to be threatened with closure, disregarding the special needs of rural and small town communities. Others are being transferred to volunteer groups without any blueprint for a sustainable model.

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So what are the alternatives to closing or removing neighbourhood libraries from council control? We need to ask why it is necessary to have 151 separately managed library authorities in England, almost four times the number of police authorities. Northern Ireland has recently moved to a single library authority. Westminster Council is in the process of merging its library service with those of two neighbouring authorities, saving £1.1 million per annum and cutting the number of senior managers from 10 to four. Across the country, at least £50 million could be saved by reducing the number of authorities by a third.

At the same time, a further £50 million could be saved by making better use of computer technology, standardising processes, sharing back offices and improving operational efficiency. However, progress will be painfully slow if we have to wait for all 151 separate management teams to initiate action. There are many examples of good practice and all councillors responsible for library services need to be challenged to ensure that their individual authorities emulate the best. The minister, with the full support of professional bodies, should make very clear that he expects action today to start realising such savings.

Councillors and library chiefs must be encouraged to question the basis for, and scale of, central services charges imposed by councils on library authorities. These charges, which can equate to 10–25% of total library expenditure, are often the elephant in the room when library budgets are scrutinised. Most worrying is the evidence that these charges are escalating as book stocks and other library resources are squeezed.

There is urgent need for the Department of Culture, Media and Sport, the Arts Council (as the new strategic agency for libraries) and the Society of Chief Librarians to develop viable models for volunteer-supported libraries. Councils must be told that the decision to simply transfer a local library to a volunteer group does not fulfil their statutory duty to provide a ‘comprehensive and efficient’ service. A minimum level of support by trained librarians and access to stocks and resources must be prescribed to ensure that an adequate service is provided to communities. Many campaigners and librarians would welcome the re-introduction of some form of library service standards which would help define councils’ obligations and could be linked to a library users’ charter. Such standards exist in Wales and have allowed the Welsh Assembly to monitor properly the provision of library services across the country. They may also have aided the 8.3% growth in library borrowing across Wales in 2010–2011.

Government must establish a library development agency to provide strategic leadership for the sector and to develop a vision for public libraries in the twenty-first century that can be supported by the profession and local politicians. The continuing absence of political and professional leadership has brought public libraries to this current crisis. The public library service urgently needs people with the vision and imagination to inspire every authority to provide an improving service for the benefit of the millions who rely upon public libraries. We need people who will challenge existing practices, who will raise standards in service delivery and develop new services, such as a national ebook lending service. And we need to accept that this is not a job for those responsible for the current crisis.

Note

1. This article is based on a Blog written by the author for *The Bookseller*.