

## RESPONSE

### Positive management in libraries: if you build it, they won't necessarily come

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Some while back, there was a BBC reality television programme called *Honey, We're Killing the Kids*, in which parents were shown the consequences of their poor parenting. The programme showed computer-generated images of what their children might look like as adults if they continued with their life-style, dietary and exercise habits. The name of the show was a parody on the *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids* movies. In one episode, family members were asked about their reading habits – they didn't have a book in the house. They were told about the local library, but replied 'That's not for the likes of us and anyway it's too expensive'. The pictures then showed the family's amazement and delight at a free service that opened up so many opportunities. They became library regulars, took part in the activities on offer and this made a positive contribution to their life chances. By the end of the programme, the kids' life expectancy had increased significantly – the library had truly helped save lives!

This is exactly what a library is for. One of the things it does is enhance life chances. Philip Pullman admirably describes this in his paper. However, I was reminded of that family who needed the library so much and who eventually benefited so much. Why did the members of that family not know about the library? Why did they think it was too expensive and why did they think it wasn't for them? I blame the management! In particular, I blame passive management.

For one reason or another, I have been involved with around 40 library services in England over the last 10 years. I have come to know library professionals, how they think and what they do; what their guiding principles are, what their training tells them and how they view the world. Like Philip Pullman, every librarian or library assistant I've ever met is convinced that a library is a good thing in and of

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itself. It's such a good thing that we must not charge for it. I agree with them on both points.

Every librarian and library assistant I have ever met is also convinced that the outside world also knows how marvellous libraries are. Their view of the world, to misquote *Field of Dreams*, is that if you build it, they will come. In other words, all that is needed for success is for a local council to build a library, fill it with improving stock, open the door and the populace will flock in! This is where we part company. It is no longer enough, if it ever was, simply to open a library and assume that local people will use it. This is passive, paternalistic thinking at best: at worst it is an abdication of responsibility, a top-down, provider-driven approach to match the worst in the education or health care systems.

The 'self-evident good' approach to libraries means that library staff do not have to worry about managing the service. It's enough to administer the service. It also means that staff do not have to market the service; everyone knows about it. Staff do not have to ask customers what they want; librarians already know what is good, if not necessarily popular. Staff do not have to have service training; the public will gratefully accept their largesse. Librarians don't have to attract customers; the attraction of the library will bring people to it. Councils don't have to ensure that libraries are warm and attractive places to be; the lure of the book is enough.

Of course, all this is nonsense. This is the sort of thinking that let down the young family on the BBC. Family members did not know about the library because no-one had told them. They thought it wasn't for them because they had not been invited in. They did not realise the library was free, because this had not been advertised. Just such passivity has led to one library service with which we have been involved having a sign-up rate of only 17%. Such passivity allows councillors to propose savage cuts to branches and opening hours because, to them and many taxpayers, the benefits are not self-evident and the service itself almost invisible or, at best, peripheral to the majority of society's needs. A service which no-one knows about is no service at all.

Current times and circumstances mean that the only way libraries will survive and prosper will be through committed, progressive and assertive management. Perhaps by the scientific management that Philip Pullman so despises. Perhaps (whisper it softly) by learning from the private sector. Perhaps, God forbid, by learning from the private sector in the United States.

Library Systems & Services (LSSI) is the world's foremost library management company. Founded in 1981, we operate libraries for 18 public library authorities in six US states – California, Oregon, Tennessee, Kansas, Texas and (since January 2012) Florida. We employ some 900 staff and of these, some 110 hold masters degree qualifications in librarianship. The 76 public library branches we manage total over a million square feet of space, more than the Kent and Essex county services combined. In terms of branches managed, LSSI is the fifth largest library service company in the United States.

In addition to these public library contracts, we supply library management services to such world renowned organisations as the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian Institution; to federal departments of state and to a number of corporate bodies. In short, libraries are what we do; beyond managing archives and museum services for some of our clients, libraries are effectively all we do. We believe that our experience, knowledge and expertise can be used for the benefit of the library profession and, more importantly, for the benefit of library customers.

We are marketing our services to library authorities in the UK, but finding it slow going. Nowadays the private sector helps deliver a considerable proportion of almost every local government service. Private companies have always worked alongside in-house provision and, as a result, there is healthy competition between the in-house and commercial providers. In some sectors, such as housing and leisure, not-for-profit organisations are also major players. It is now unthinkable that the private sector should not be involved in waste management and recycling, education, highway engineering, public transport, adult social care and a myriad of back office functions.

However, one area where the private sector has until now been almost totally absent is library management. Libraries were, for some reason, exempt from compulsory competitive tendering and few councils have bothered to market test this service. Why should this be? The reasons given are many and varied. Some authorities argue that there are no established and competent contractors, others that it is difficult to see how the private sector could make profits from a free service, and others that they are sufficiently efficient not to need the commercial sector. Many members of the library profession take an almost philosophical line – that the provision of an information service free to all is too pure to be tainted by any suspicion of the profit motive.

Not one of these arguments is new; all were used against the introduction of the private sector into education, social care, housing and other services. All have been shown to be unfounded by experience over the years. Why should libraries enjoy a privileged and protected position? Why should they refuse to learn from elsewhere? When over 10% of the UK's public libraries are threatened with imminent closure, it is incumbent on library authorities, on behalf of the communities they represent, to explore thoroughly all alternatives, including that offered by the commercial sector and, in particular, LSSI.

LSSI has much to offer by way of experience and expertise. LSSI's oldest public library contract, in place since 1997, is with Riverside County, California. At some 7000 square miles, Riverside County is slightly smaller than Wales and involves a range of challenges, including a large Hispanic population and significant tranches of desert. When we were commissioned to manage the service, the county had just 24 library branches. LSSI has worked closely in partnership with the county to add a further nine branches so that we now manage a total of 33 Riverside County branches.

We bring to library management a combination of professional expertise and business discipline, married to a total commitment to the concept of a free library service available to everyone and awareness of the power of libraries to change lives. LSSI believes in utterly bespoke libraries. So, in each of our 76 branches, in full consultation with the local community and local authority, we have designed and run services tuned entirely to the needs and wants of local people. We have won a wide range of awards for our literacy programmes, our work with minority communities and our outreach. We see our libraries not only as important places to read, work and study, but also as community hubs, providing access to a wide range of information and services, and as gathering places for the community. Increasingly, these gatherings are virtual through the Internet rather than sited in physical buildings.

The better local authorities view libraries not only as venues equipped with books and computers, but also as gateways to a range of other services. LSSI is also convinced of the value of libraries as community hubs – buildings open every day to provide advice and information on health, childcare, planning, crime

prevention, school applications and a range of leisure and social activities. The good ones also act as the base for a range of outreach services, including meals on wheels, literacy programmes, leisure for the housebound, and good neighbour programmes. Making better use of libraries to deliver these services is central to the LSSI approach to management. It delivers more value for the money invested in libraries and can generate income in its own right.

Some of our critics have said that this is nothing that could not be done by a well-managed and empowered service in the public sector. They are right. However, when we recently undertook a survey of staff newly transferred to us from the 'client' authority, their most frequent comment was that they now felt empowered. They now had the ability to influence directly the service to their community rather than await decisions from higher up. We are convinced that private management in library services is to the benefit of everyone concerned with the profession, especially the customer. We can envisage a situation in which, within five years, up to 15% of all libraries will be run in partnership with the commercial sector. This competition will be good for all concerned, providing better customer service, increased opening hours, higher stock levels and greater investment in online access to information. Again, a clear analogy can be drawn from the UK municipal leisure sector. Here a mixed market economy has evolved, driven by the competition imposed by compulsory competitive tendering in the 1990s, and leading to massively improved fitness and leisure facilities for the public.

The library profession has not given enough emphasis to generic management skills in such areas as finance, marketing and customer service. These hardly feature at all in the curriculum for professional qualifications, which are more concerned with the specialist skills of bibliography and information systems. Professional librarians can, therefore, be at a disadvantage against colleagues/rivals who have this training when arguing against cuts or for funding. It is not enough to know how important the service is; the ability to demonstrate this and convince the outside world is what matters.

We at LSSI have an alternative model. We offer the best of private sector discipline allied to the public service ethos. Our libraries are free, accessible and have significant capability to change lives. They are also well marketed, have positive, effective outreach and the highest standards of customer service. We not only believe in the value of libraries, we shout about it and seek partners to work with us to deliver this value. We do not accept passivity; we embrace activity and outreach. As a result, we have formed partnerships with other library services, with private businesses, with grant aiders, with philanthropic bodies and other government agencies. The net result has been an improvement in local library services and greater links to other services.

One example of this work is our involvement in the *Dia de los Ninos, Dia de los Libros* (Children's Day/Book Day) programme in California. Our Riverside County Library was one of only two libraries in the US to be the recipient of the Raul and Estela Mora Award presented by REFORMA, the National Association to Promote Library and Information Services to Latinos and the Spanish Speaking. This was in honour of our efforts to promote the programme, an annual celebration of the power of books and reading. We worked with a wide range of local partners and organisations to take books into the community and to encourage non-traditional customers to use both the library buildings and our online services. The appreciation of the new readers and the national award are testimony to the success of this approach.

Philip Pullman speaks eloquently about ‘children who need to learn that they too are citizens of the republic of reading’. We share this vision, as do the young people in Riverside County who are newly introduced to books and are benefiting from our efforts. We long ago realised that good, modern and positive management is nowadays essential to the success of any library service. It is no longer enough to build a library and assume customers will come. A good library service is a combination of the library, its books, its content, its services – and good effective management.

In summary, in the prevailing economic climate, the direct provision of library services by the host council, funded by a significant subsidy from the local authority (and therefore council tax payers) may well be a thing of the past. While partnership for library management services with the commercial sector will not necessarily suit all local authorities and their communities, it is surely an alternative worthy of robust consideration, especially in boroughs, cities and counties where the current favoured option is the reduction of opening hours and/or the closure of libraries. Philip Pullman, please come and see us in action.