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The Network Newsletter: tackling social exclusion in libraries, museums, archives and galleries

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The Network's Website is at www.seapn.org.uk and includes information on courses, good practice, specific socially excluded groups, as well as the newsletter archive.

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Did you see ...?

CILIP Update

The latest issue¹ includes a couple of particularly interesting articles:

- Sumbal Bukhari and Lauren LaTulip “Conversation Café”, which looks at the support for English language learners in Barnet Libraries [pp38-40]

¹ *CILIP Update*, August 2012.

- Wendy Clark and Sarah Mears “Passing the literacy baton: the reading relay”, a look at an initiative in the East of England region to use the Olympics as a motivator for getting children into reading [pp41-43].

Professional Manager

The latest issue includes an insightful article², “The trouble with boys”, which looks at the “lazy” notion that boys under-perform at school – and later – because of there being too many women in nursery and primary education; it’s more the case that many boys’ needs are not recognised and “what boys may be missing is their fathers helping to ignite their interest in their education.”

Museums Journal

The latest issue includes an article by Geraldine Kendall, “Positive actions” [pp30-33]³, where she talks to some of the participants in the Museum Association’s Diversify programme, and also highlights some of the key issues still facing the museums sector – as Lucy Shaw, the coordinator of the programme (whose evaluation report is due out shortly) says in an interview:

“There’s been a significant increase in audience numbers but museums don’t yet have the staff to represent those audiences. Why not?”

There are also two letters about museums’ role in social justice (responding to the article by Eithne Nightingale in the July/Aug issue⁴, one emphasising how key this is – and one saying that “there are many more appropriate organisations” that are fulfilling this role.

Tackling social exclusion – Other Agencies

Why inequality matters

Just published is this new booklet⁵ which draws on key findings from *The spirit level*⁶ and also presents further essential information about income inequality and its consequences.

The booklet was written by members of My Fair London⁷, a group of volunteers affiliated to The Equality Trust, and produced in association with the Trust and published by CLASS⁸.

² Catherine Gaunt “The trouble with boys”, *Professional Manager*, Sept/Oct 2012, pp38-41.

³ *Museums Journal*, September 2012. This article is available online to MA members at: <http://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/features/01092012-positive-actions>.

⁴ Eithne Nightingale “Social justice isn’t easy, but it’s important” (“Comment” column), *Museums Journal*, July/August 2012, p16.

⁵ My Fair London. *Why inequality matters*. CLASS, 2012. Available to download as a pdf (988.77 kb) from: <http://www.equalitytrust.org.uk/docs/why-inequality-matters.pdf>.

⁶ Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett. *The spirit level: why equality is better for everyone*. Penguin, 2010.

⁷ See: <http://www.myfairlondon.org.uk/>.

⁸ CLASS (the Centre for Labour and Social Studies) is a new think-tank, established this year “to act as a centre for left debate and discussion. Originating in the labour movement,

Following an introduction by journalist Owen Jones, the booklet includes:

- An overview of inequality in the UK – “There is a huge amount of evidence that inequality is extreme and increasing.” [p6]
- Why inequality matters, which pulls together key impacts of inequality, eg: “A raft of indicators shown below highlight how the UK compares to the world’s other advanced countries. The UK scores badly across the board – the murder rate is at about the half way mark, but for everything else, the UK is in the bottom third or lower.

MENTAL ILLNESS	2nd worst out of 12
LIFE EXPECTANCY	7th worst out of 23
INFANT MORTALITY	4th worst out of 23
OBESITY	3rd worst out of 22
CHILDREN’S WELFARE	Worst out of 22
TEENAGE BIRTHS	2nd worst out of 21
MURDER RATE	11th worst out of 21
IMPRISONMENT RATES	5th worst out of 21
SOCIAL MOBILITY	2nd worst out of 8
TRUST	6th worst out of 23”

[p8 – emphasis and uppercase theirs]

- What is the evidence? This chapter gathers evidence “on how inequality is harmful [which] comes from 23 of the most developed nations and from comparisons between the 50 states of America.” [p12]
- What are the links? This chapter demonstrates how inequality is a major cause of “Most problems modern societies face ...” [p24]
- How can inequality be reduced? This looks at options for reducing inequality, including: decreasing the wage gap; reforming the tax system; improving public services.
- The pamphlet concludes, optimistically:

“There is a mass of evidence about our society that offers a simple, if not easily accomplished, approach to the reduction of many of our present ills through the pursuit of greater equality.

There are different routes: in the Scandinavian countries, there is considerable state intervention; in Japan, much less. Both are far more equal societies than Britain, and suffer less from social problems, showing that reduction of inequality can be achieved by a variety of approaches. It is not the preserve of any one political philosophy.” [p29]

This is a valuable, brief introduction to the concepts in *The spirit level* (plus the evidence has been updated). Recommended.

Class works with a broad coalition of supporters, academics and experts to develop and advance alternative policies for today.” See: <http://classonline.org.uk/>.

Disability issues – Government, Government Agencies and Local Government

Quick wins ... and missed opportunities

This new report⁹ from RNIB looks at ‘the critical role that local councils and partners play in realising the aspirations of the UK Vision Strategy’ [p4].

This report, based on a major programme of RNIB research carried out by the Office for Public Management shows that:

- “Blind and partially sighted people are a diverse group of people with different experiences and needs. They have just as much to give to a local area as active citizens, as they might legitimately expect to receive in terms of support.
- In many cases, apparently modest help – from councils and from local voluntary and community groups – is nevertheless absolutely crucial. Accessible information, the ability to enjoy leisure and social activities combine with key preventative and rehabilitative services to enable blind and partially sighted people to live independent, connected and purposeful lives.
- These things are not luxuries, and they usually don’t cost much. Yet if withdrawn, the impact on blind and partially sighted people can be dramatic: tipping lives into a spiral ending in isolation, ill health and despondency. Sadly, there are plenty of cases of this happening already.
- Luckily, for every missed opportunity there’s a quick win: an example of a local authority developing or supporting a practical, inexpensive innovation, often at the behest of or in partnership with blind and partially sighted people themselves.
- Looking to the future, the impetus for more councils to adopt more of these simple but deeply valuable solutions will only become stronger. All the evidence suggests that financial and other pressures have barely begun to bite. The time is now for local authorities to help build a better future for blind and partially sighted people.” [pp6-7]

The report goes on to argue that:

“The three fundamental goals local authorities should work towards include:

1. Delivering a “bedrock” of preventative and rehabilitative services which combine to help people who lose their sight adjust to life with little or no sight. Without effective rehabilitation and skills training blind and partially sighted people cannot lead full or independent lives ...

⁹ *Quick wins ... and missed opportunities: how local authorities can work with blind and partially sighted people to build a better future.* RNIB, 2012. Available to download as a pdf (690.51 kb) from: http://www.rnib.org.uk/getinvolved/campaign/healthsocialcare/Documents/Quickwins_report.pdf. The case studies are also available to download (1000kb) from: http://www.rnib.org.uk/getinvolved/campaign/healthsocialcare/Documents/Quick_wins_case_studies.pdf.

2. Working in partnership with and involving blind and partially sighted people in the community; local organisations of blind and partially sighted people are a major asset to their communities so councils could view them as the “go-to people” to effectively reach people living with sight loss ...
3. Embedding accessibility in everything they do, beginning by setting a specific and measurable objective to systematically record blind and partially sighted residents’ preferred reading formats so all council information can be delivered in the correct way. Councils can also mainstream accessibility by involving blind and partially sighted people in decision-making on changes to the built environment and local transport ...” [p7]

The research also found that there were “five main areas which were most important to blind and partially sighted people’s lives, and where local councils could make most difference.” [p8] These were:

- Independence
- Wellbeing: “Blind and partially sighted people told us they wanted to feel part of their local communities, connected to the people and environment around them and able to pursue interests and activities that meant something to them.” [p9]
- Fulfilling potential
- Keeping informed: “Blind and partially sighted people told us they wanted to be informed citizens. They want to know about and contribute to the world around them. Research findings show that the Talking Newspaper services in particular helped blind and partially sighted people stay in touch with national and local news helping them to feel part of society.” [p11]
- Treated equally.

This important research:

“... shows how much local authorities can make a valuable difference with apparently small but significant changes to local services and the local area itself. By ensuring that transport, information, the built environment and leisure activities are accessible to blind and partially sighted people, and that local voluntary organisations and key preventative and rehabilitative services are supported, councils can help to transform lives.

If these modest changes are not made, or if things like this are actually withdrawn, then the social and financial cost will be massive. Blind and partially sighted people will – in very many cases – no longer be able to cope, and the cost to local services for health, social care and other support will spiral. Examples of more substantial changes include:

- Achieving a better understanding of need and impact – by systematically collecting, monitoring and analysing data about the needs of blind and partially sighted people in a local area, and evaluating the impact of support provided. This can be achieved through robust joint strategic needs assessments.
- Making a commitment to listening to and involving all residents – disabled people must be at the centre of decisions about services they

use. Mainstream consultation should be tailored to be accessible to blind and partially sighted people, and every opportunity should be taken to involve blind and partially sighted people in commissioning and other strategic decision making processes.

- Consideration of the needs of blind and partially sighted people – or in fact any disabled people – should never be a “bolt on” or a tick box exercise. In order to have real influence, equality impact assessment processes should be integrated into mainstream decision making. Councils should consider having a high level strategic objective that directly benefits disabled people. This could be achieved by developing a specific and measurable equality objective.
- Councils should ensure that the lived experience of blind and partially sighted people directly informs specifications used in procurement and commissioning, and that they enter into a real dialogue and partnership with the specialist voluntary and community organisations that can help to deliver support that meets people’s needs.
- Given what a big impact staff and decision makers’ attitudes can have on the quality of service provided, councils should seriously consider awareness raising for councillors, senior officers, managers and frontline staff that allows them to experience the day-to-day reality of being blind or partially sighted.

There is clearly a need for councils to take these more radical steps to make the best possible use of ever dwindling resources and to avoid disabled people being hit hardest.” [p13]

Visits to museums are mentioned in terms of their key role in combating social exclusion; and libraries are mentioned in terms of the need to continue investment [p31]; their value in aiding access to reading and literature [p34]; and the effects of cuts in service (“Recent cuts have affected the extent to which the people we spoke to were able to take part in activities they enjoyed. There was an example of cuts to a mobility library service and in a sheltered housing complex the activities coordinator post had been cut, profoundly limiting the number of activities residents participated in.” [p34]). This is an important new report which also includes lots of practical examples. Recommended.¹⁰

This Newsletter was compiled by John Vincent, and all items are written by him, unless otherwise stated. Please send any comments or items for the next issue to:

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¹⁰ Source: email from Simon Wallace.