

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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Care-experienced children & young people

How do you support care-experienced children and young people?

I am writing another book in the Facet “Libraries and Social Justice” series, this time looking at the responses that all kinds of libraries have made to care-experienced young people (whom we used to call “looked-after children”).

I’d be very grateful for any examples of work you have undertaken, large- or small-scale, and, of course, I will clear the copy with you before adding anything to the book.

Broader issues – Libraries, Museums, Archives and Cultural and Heritage Organisations

An independent review of English public libraries

This important review¹ by Baroness Elizabeth Sanderson has just been published.

The DCMS webpage² gives a brief background to the review:

“On Friday 2 September 2022 Lord Parkinson announced the appointment of Baroness Sanderson to help inform future work on a government public libraries strategy, covering England. Over the past year she has hosted a series of themed deep dive discussions involving a range of contributors. This approach was intended to engage with and hear from a wide range of voices, from those responsible for delivering public library services to sector stakeholders, and others with a keen interest in the public libraries agenda, including drawing in other government departments.”

After making a number of visits and meeting key organisations and people within the sector, Elizabeth Sanderson’s review noted 4 key themes:

1. “A lack of recognition across government, locally and nationally, of the work that libraries do” [p4]. As the review notes, this is not a new problem: it takes it back as far as *Framework for the future*³, but, of course, it is a much longer-standing issue.

¹ Elizabeth Sanderson. *An Independent Review of English public libraries*. DCMS, 2024, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65a9211ced27ca000d27b22c/An_Independent_Review_of_English_Public_Libraries_-_formatted.pdf.

² See: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/an-independent-review-of-english-public-libraries-report-and-government-reponse>.

³ *Framework for the future: libraries, learning and information in the next decade*. DCMS, 2003, https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/id/eprint/4709/21/Framework_for_the_Future1_Redacted.pdf.

2. “A lack of awareness among the general public of what the modern-day library offers, not helped by the persistent but outdated perception of libraries as somewhat strait-laced institutions where you will be told to ‘shush’ and there won’t be anything of interest to you.” [p4]
3. “A lack of comprehensive data on our libraries. We do not have an accurate national picture of how libraries are performing across the country. Nor are libraries able to prove, to an acceptable standard, just how much they contribute to key agendas from literacy to skills to health and wellbeing.” [p5]
4. “A better sense as to what the government wants to see from our libraries.” [p5]

The review makes 8 recommendations:

1. “The establishment of a national data hub to better evidence the role libraries play in our society
2. A national branding campaign to raise awareness of our libraries
3. The closer involvement of the British Library
4. An expanded library membership
5. A stronger volunteer network
6. The creation of a Libraries Minister and a more joined-up approach within government
7. The establishment of a Libraries Laureate
8. A change to the timing of Libraries Week to better involve politicians nationally and locally” [p6]

There is more on these below.

“Reflections for Local Authorities”

One of the particularly interesting parts of the report is Annex A “Reflections for Local Authorities” which records – and comments on – some key themes that came out of the discussions with the sector.

These include:

- “Fines Free”:

The report says, “Most of the people I spoke to supported going fines free. There was an understanding that some services rely on the income raised but there was also a concern about the barriers that fines create,

particularly among those parts of the community that libraries most want to reach.” [p37]

It also quotes someone as saying: “Fines were only ever meant to be about getting the books back, not about making money. I’d rather have the person back, not the book back and a couple of quid. If the person thinks they can’t come in because they owe money then that is a problem.” [p37]

The report suggests that: “The sector may wish to consider doing further research. Libraries are rightly considered to be safe, non-judgmental, spaces but barriers do still exist and fines seem to be one of the major disincentives to engaging with the library.” [pp37-38]

- Workforce:

“The real value of libraries lies in the people who work in them. A lot of people thought their skills and their knowledge of their communities had been better understood during the pandemic [...]

I completely acknowledge the difficult financial environment in which local authorities have to operate, and that all council services are experiencing workforce shortages. I understand that choices have to be made. However, I think it is worth pointing out that where local authorities have taken a wider view and found a way to invest in the library service, it has reaped significant rewards.

The importance of strong political leadership was cited as one of the driving factors as to whether a local authority decides to invest in its library service. Questions were asked as to whether libraries need to get better at engaging with their local politicians.” [pp38-39]

- Book Supply: this does not seem to have been picked up quite correctly, in that the report says:

“I was surprised to learn that there are only two suppliers of library books in England. Askews and Holts provides the adult selections while Peters provides the children’s and education books. There were other suppliers previously but they went out of business during the pandemic.” [p38]

I think what it means is that there is only that number of suppliers who undertake the servicing of library materials ... there are other suppliers, but they may not do the servicing. The report suggests “[...] that it would make sense to have one standard specification that applies to all councils.” [p40]

- Working with people who are visually impaired and print disabled:

The report talks briefly about the work of RNIB and Share the Vision⁴ “[...] who have asked that I flag their experience of how well the system can work when local authorities work in partnership with the third sector.

The RNIB is interested in sharing, more widely, their training toolkit which helps improve perceptions and understanding of modern-day sight loss which may be of interest to the sector.” [p40]

The report also suggests: “With the exception of Leicester City and a handful of others, most authorities record blind and partially sighted people under disabled rather than in their own right. Having a better sense of the numbers would obviously allow for better stock management and a more targeted service.” [p40]

- Family Hubs:

“The Family Hubs Network (FHN) works with local authorities to bring together multiple organisations in a ‘one stop shop’ which is also connected to other local family support. The aim is to ensure that families with children and young people aged 0-19 receive early help to address problems which might otherwise escalate. Each family hub is bespoke to its local community and their specific needs.

The government is investing over £300 million in a flagship Family Hubs and Start for Life network and the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) and the Department for Education (DfE) have led jointly on designing the programme which will fund 75 local authorities to provide more support to families.

It is of course for local authorities to decide how they wish to deliver a family hub in their area but I am raising here as libraries could play an important part in the network as the strategy matures. The neutrality of the library, as well as the breadth of its offer for children, young people and their parents or carers, makes it a natural partner for the local family hub network.

It also creates another route for libraries to reach those who could potentially benefit the most from their services. Some local authorities are already realising libraries’ potential to be part of the family hubs network, and in terms of the different partnerships that may be suitable for libraries, this seems to have a particular synergy.” [p41]

Reception of the report and discussion

The review has been broadly welcomed, for example by the Government (response from the Minister for Arts & Heritage)⁵; Libraries Connected⁶; CILIP⁷;

⁴ Full disclosure: I am on the Board of Share the Vision.

⁵ See:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65a814e994c997000daeb993/00356_-_Sanderson.pdf.

⁶ “We welcome this thorough, wide-ranging review and thank Baroness Sanderson for engaging so warmly with the sector.” See:

and The Reading Agency⁸; although, for example, CILIP also notes that there are areas where further/different work is required, eg over the “fragmented landscape of public library provision”.

However, in an “Opinion” column⁹ in *I/News*, Lucy Mangan suggests that the responses – especially from Libraries Connected – really mean ““Give us some ****ing money.”!!

The report and recommendations are positive, but not really radical. To start with the recommendations:

1. The establishment of a national data hub to better evidence the role libraries play in our society:

This is important, given the dearth of reliable information that can be used to build, for example, a real picture of library use and the impact that libraries are having.

However, we should also make efforts to continue to record in some way all those small interactions that we have that make differences to people’s lives – these may not feature huge numbers of people (or large book issues) but are the ‘bread and butter’ of what libraries do and have real impact.

2. A national branding campaign to raise awareness of our libraries:

Maybe important, but I think the real developments can only happen when there is in-depth work at a very local level, where library staff get to know their ‘patch’ and all the organisations within it, start to find out first-hand what local needs and demands are, and then takes that back into the library service to shape what happens next. This is where I’m with Lucy Mangan!!

3. The closer involvement of the British Library:

I feel this idea needs more development, as the report doesn’t make it clear how this might work in practice. (I also have further concerns that there are suggestions that the public library sector could be led by an outside body which may – or may not – relate to exactly how public libraries are structured and, in some cases, constrained.)

4. An expanded library membership:

<https://www.librariesconnected.org.uk/news/libraries-connected-responds-baroness-sanderson%E2%80%99s-independent-review-english-public-libraries#:~:text=The%20review's%20recognition%20of%20the,the%20work%20that%20libraries%20do..>

⁷ See: <https://www.cilip.org.uk/news/news.asp?id=662506>.

⁸ See: <https://readingagency.org.uk/news/media/the-reading-agency-welcomes-baroness-sandersons-public-libraries-review-1.html>.

⁹ Lucy Mangan “You can’t put a price on the joy of libraries”, *I/News*, 21 Jan 2024, <https://inews.co.uk/opinion/cant-price-joy-libraries-2865747>.

Vital!

5. A stronger volunteer network:

Libraries have worked with volunteers for years (the Home Visit Library Service is a good example), but it is important here to distinguish between this kind of role and the taking over and running of libraries, which, I would argue, requires more paid staff.

6. The creation of a Libraries Minister and a more joined-up approach within government:

This section of the report includes some really important areas (eg the development and improvement of digital services) – there certainly does need to be a more joined-up approach, but we also need a Libraries Minister with ‘teeth’ who, for example, has some real power in enforcing the Public Libraries and Museums Act and ensuring that the fact that public libraries are a statutory service is celebrated and shouted about!¹⁰

7. The establishment of a Libraries Laureate

This could be helpful.

8. A change to the timing of Libraries Week to better involve politicians nationally and locally:

This could also be helpful ... if it really means that politicians are going to get involved and support libraries.

Conclusions

It is heartening and helpful to have such a positive report about public libraries, and it now needs to be acted upon.

However, I was disappointed to see that there was no mention of many of the many vital areas that public libraries are involved in – eg Libraries of Sanctuary – and that the report really gave no impression at all of the work around social justice that libraries undertake. This seems to me to be a huge gap in the report’s coverage and ends up neutralising the role that libraries play. We need to make sure that Government hears and learns about this work – and need to keep pressing the point until there is some action and until they really do give us some *** money!

¹⁰ I know they were not universally popular, but the Annual Library Plans (which were assessed against Public Library Standards) did mean that there was scrutiny – and assessment – of what public libraries did, measured against standards for service provision. For more info, see: “Public Library Standards in England”, *Public Libraries News*, <https://www.publiclibrariesnews.com/useful/documents/public-library-standards-in-england>.

Come rain or shine: preparing public libraries for the future in an age of uncertainty

This report¹¹ has also just been published, and there is a link with the previous entry as Baroness Sanderson provides its foreword.

“This report presents trends analysis, horizon-scanning, scenarios and critical analysis which address the central question posed by CILIP in commissioning this Future Libraries project: *What kind of public library network will England need to support its social, economic, and industrial development over the remainder of this century?*” [p3]

From this work, the report comes to three key conclusions:

- “Public libraries are uniquely placed to meet two population scale needs driven by two of the strongest and most certain societal trends: enabling digital access (from basic skills to using advanced tech); and combatting social isolation. A ‘People’s Network 2.0’ would be both a digital enabler and a social connector simultaneously.” [p26]

These are both essential developments for public libraries.

- In terms of governance and leadership:

“Choices around governance are often seen as an important choice for a library service strategy but we know of no examples of a change in governance leading to a struggling service being turned around. Rather, leaders of services which are already high performing tend to engineer a governance model best suited to local goals and context.”

This is probably correct, but, from my own experience, does not reflect the political pressures within local government, where leaders of even high-performing services may have their service developments derailed by a change in political administration – or even a political whim!

- “Futures literacy”:

“Horizon-scanning projects explore trends and scenarios to guide action in the present and the first two parts of our conclusions do this. However, this work has also shown that one of the most valuable actions now is to think more frequently about what the future means for public libraries; we call this futures literacy. Studying the future may seem an exclusive, highly technical activity. It is quite the opposite and doing so will connect the public library sector to the growing number of public institutions also

¹¹ Shared Intelligence. *Come rain or shine: preparing public libraries for the future in an age of uncertainty*. CILIP, 2024, https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.cilip.org.uk/resource/resmgr/cilip/future_libraries/horizon_scanning_report_-_co.pdf.

developing the futures literacy of their staff and communities – often in recognition that part of building an inclusive society is choosing who gets to imagine the future.

We cannot define how this translates locally for every service. Therefore our final conclusion is that library services everywhere should test their service offer against different versions of the future for their own communities. To support this we have produced a library futures toolkit [12] alongside this report so that every library service can build their own futures literacy. When every library service can see the future not as one path but as a series of equally possible routes, they can take action today which equips them for uncertain and unpredictable outcomes – come rain or shine.” [p27]

Comments

This is all fine, but, for me, doesn't really tackle the full range of issues that libraries are dealing with and will need to deal with in the future.

One major gap is this – with increasing hostility towards all sorts of minority groups, where does the public library service stand? What can it do? What should it do?

As an example, how do we protect and promote services for trans people in a climate where anti-trans voices are loud – and also coming from within Government? Are we sure that we are providing a safe and positive space for trans people and their allies?

Some libraries are doing excellent work to support new arrivals, but, with the increased rhetoric about “the boats” for example, where does that put libraries' role? How do we deal with hostility from some people towards our work?

These are just two examples of very many. I feel that, unless there is some clear direction for and support of libraries working with these communities and developing their role in working towards social justice, as well as ensuring that all staff are aware and keeping up-to-date with the key issues, then libraries are going to seem increasingly redundant.

I would have liked to have seen this political 'lens' also used in the report; the analysis of the 48 trends does touch on some of these areas, but only just, and does not really identify the seriousness of them.

¹² The toolkit is available to download from: <https://www.cilip.org.uk/page/future-libraries>. You will need to complete a short form saying who you are.

It takes the form of a PowerPoint presentation setting out what this work covers, and a series of 'lesson plans' etc for running workshops on futures literacy: “There are two parts to this toolkit: workshop one (around 90 minutes) and workshop two (around 2.5 hours). Both workshops are designed to be held in-person.” *Future of libraries: toolkit* [p2].

Abbreviations and acronyms

CILIP = Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals

DCMS = Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport

RNIB = Royal National Institute of Blind People

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:

John Vincent
Wisteria Cottage
Nadderwater
Exeter EX4 2JQ

Tel/fax: 01392 256045

E-mail: john@nadder.org.uk

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