



Whose library? - Keynote presentation to Society of Chief Librarians Seminar June 2013

(the visuals for this presentation can be found on Slideshare)

Introduction

Pleased to be invited to this Seminar and contribute to the central theme of libraries and their role in promoting social justice.

I have been asking myself a question..

It is 4 summers ago now since I sat down to write the Wirral Report, the report talked about a key judgement point being the needs of the most disadvantaged communities- The requirements of older people, unemployed and those living in deprived areas in self assessing whether they are providing a comprehensive and efficient service'.

Since then the since then political and economic landscape has shifted dramatically – so is it time to revisit whether it is still possible to provide a public library service that actually does serve the needs of most disadvantaged communities... **Is it a pie in the sky ambition to have or core business?**

I firmly argue it has to be core business but that this needs a mind shift including / us all move from a *defending to a proactive role about who the library service is for.*

In speaking with you today I am going to draw on some insights from work with LA leaders but also inspiration I gained from a learning journey I took earlier this year to visit social enterprises in South India. There embedded poverty and disadvantage exists side by side my fellow travellers and hosts and I had heated discussion about the inbuilt paradoxes that this situation presented. How come Society there lives with these contradictions and injustices? Before I lose you completely I want to argue that there are **deep and relevant paradoxes at work** in OUR UK society, including the public library itself, it is necessary to address some of these and act on them to secure a more strategic and sustainable role for the service.

So first what are these paradoxes, I want to suggest 4:

(Paradox 1: Finances are battered right down yet but the financial context is bringing new users because libraries still trusted in these mistrusting times

1. Finances: the impact on individuals of the credit crunch means a safe place to work, study or just be is more needed than ever as many of you are finding;

These are headlines from

Newspaper cuttings from a couple of days in May!

Finance experts warn poorest will be hit hardest by spending review
'Cab calls on councils to help cash squeezed residents'

Councils urged to block access to payday lenders
Welfare reforms will increase food poverty says Trussell Trust
JRF: growing inequality in children's health
Public Health reports on differential life expectancy shocks Health Minister
Neets let down by Public transport
Closures of children's centres
Poor white kids doing less well at accessing language.

Many of you have told me that the financial context is both bringing new users into the service in previously unexpected ways (and winning political support for your role at the same time) This is nowhere more true than in the Wirral itself - universal credit and cut backs in CAB creating a tsunami of demand for help with getting on line and overcoming...

Paradox 2: The legislative framework has if anything strengthened the service' position but we need to move beyond compliance

Equality Act 2010: need to have due regard and take into account evidence of need and **adverse impact** as well as the resources available, and JR's have spelt out what is meant by consultation. (Yes, JR's have caused Council's to stop and think but we are now moving beyond compliance and justification to build new service allies and to work with communities to help redesign the service (Lambeth).

And now: **Health Duty to reduce inequality:** public health

This is bringing new allies 2. I contest those new allies able to be built with public health and GP commissioning clusters to build a range of service offers that tap into national, local, but this is just a start.

As you are finding with Books on Prescription- spot on – part of a major emphasis on building a more inclusive service, and being seen to do so

Plan the next interventions now whilst the Secretary of State for Health is still shocked by the inequalities around the recently published health data showing differential mortality etc. Ageing well/ bringing up your child?

The work that the Reading agency is doing through Reading Activists, wonderful success- how can we mainstream this approach into the core library offer?

Paradox 4: Nature of politics is changing yet localism is bringing new heroic allies:

100 years since Carnegie Trust was founded, top down visions are out of fashion but:

Local politicians have embraced localism are changing their minds when it comes to libraries

Some national and regional political leaders can own the benefits and are driving change (London literacy campaign)

I contend that elected politicians (national and local) can really see the economic benefit of PL's these changed times. Seen from recent speeches by Maria Milner(Miller) and Baguette, the emphasis being given by the LGA and the initiatives being taken by local leaders (Northants) DCLG are getting interested in new models of delivery and the role in generating enterprise.

Now we are seeing a greater emphasis on co: design... bringing new allies and partners, and possibly new audiences

Trust- and the decline in public confidence in the state can play very usefully for us here- we are going to hear much more about it, and libraries can be the **safety valve when people and institutions are under stress**

Paradox 4: Envisioning

Has provided the 21c baseline definition of what libraries are for:

I contend we need nationally as well as locally to make strongest possible use of the embedded messages in envisioning research that are pivotal to social justice.

The envisioning report says that:

“ One in Four (usually older and poorer) still do not use the internet”

ACE response:

'We may assume the digital info society available to everyone bit digital divide still exists, lack confidence or held back by poor connectivity or unable to afford Public Libraries will ensue that no one needs to be left behind”

Envisioning did not go back to the issue of literacy

But what is more fundamental is that we still have the issue of read. We need to start with Unesco's evidence(date) that reading for pleasure is a the single best indicator of social mobility and yet UK is rated 47th out of 65 nations when it comes to young people reading for pleasure': not surprising that the Summer reading challenges is so core but why is it just for children?

So what is the big intervention going to be bearing in mind the embedded warnings in the research that libraries need to secure a role and there are big interventions to overcome?

Section 3

So where does this take me

Go big time and fast on digital skills and pitch for big £

Proposition 1: Do not desert the hardest to help.

Aravind:

“ You have to focus on the non- user, and you have to passionately own the problem. You can address the barriers, only when you own, not shift the problem.”

(Photo of women with eye patches here)

The author of Aravind's autobiography says that the mindset led to the most collaborative eye care system the world has ever seen....

This means being positive about unapologetically targeting services to those who are most in local communities:

Proposition 2 : Develop a strategy for next ten years based on a framework change approach to secure success:

Thought holistically- seeing the big picture and able to convey their message to others

Vishnu Swaminathan from Ashoka India who shared his developing thinking about the role of Ashoka in promoting ' Framework change'.

To do this, he argues, requires a staged approach:

Need: plus demand

Converted are implementing changes wherever they can, but results and benefits are essentially local

Change agents start to build new ways of working

It changes when govt and other stakeholders agree that the service has a role to play

And want to be part of the solution building

But I hear you saying what is the problem that needs to be fixed” well it could be”

Public libraries are a headache how do we get rid of them? But seriously it is”

Well being and digital exclusion, the need to grow the skills base in the economy and do this through a delivery structure that already exists- this will mean us reaching those who do not currently use the service

Proposition 3: A package of 'big enough interventions:

These are my starters for ten:

Go big time as providers of digital inclusion

Build a 'teach first service for libraries'

Design some symbolic and iconic interventions to attract new audiences

All of these need local and national partners to go to scale

Proposition 4: Shout your positive messages louder:

Set out to win awards between you: mainstream good practice (Edinburgh, Devon)

Use all mayors to get people reading, however how

Be positive in ALL messaging about inclusion, sometimes this is as simple as:

.... 'Your library'