

the reading agency

Libraries: a briefing for authors

This briefing comes from The Reading Agency, a charity working to inspire more people to read more. We reach readers through a special partnership with public libraries.

We do a lot of work with authors and publishers, and have been asked to provide a briefing on current developments in libraries. The situation is urgent as local authorities will be making decisions by February. These are our own views.

Public sector cuts

- Nearly all library services are run by local authorities (and where they are run by another organisation they are still the local authority's responsibility). Overall, as part of the government's austerity measures, English local authorities are having to save 29% of their budget over four years, with a larger proportion of the saving likely to fall in 2011/12.
- Libraries are vulnerable because local authorities are having to prioritise expenditure on "safeguarding" children and older people. We need to argue that although libraries are not a matter of life and death, their profound impact on literacy and people's life chances makes them very important.
- In some areas cuts to libraries are happening very fast. In others, work is being done to find radically different ways to run the service in order to preserve as much of the front line service as possible, e.g. by removing the costs of running separate library authorities.
- The government is running a Future Library programme with ten library service clusters - see www.mla.gov.uk - exploring solutions to providing library services in this new context.
- It is very hard to give a clear picture of the number of potential library closures because the picture changes all the time, and councils will revise plans nearer the time of final budget decisions early in 2011. Two useful sources for tracking the situation: <http://publiclibrariesnews.blogspot.com:80/> and <http://uklibrarywatch.pbworks.com/w/page/31642853/UK-Library-Watch>.
- As well as closures, new or refurbished libraries are being opened e.g. Manchester, Pimlico and Basingstoke
- Our intelligence is that most local politicians are reluctant to close library buildings because of the public outcry. Money will be saved by reducing the book fund and cutting staff. Specialist posts, including children's and adult reader development librarians, are very much at risk. These are the very people who are promoting reading for pleasure and developing new audiences for your writing.

Government responsibilities

- In England central government responsibility for libraries is unhelpfully split. Policy responsibility sits with the Department for Culture Media and Sport (DCMS). Libraries' funding comes through the Department for Communities and Local Government as part of the settlement for local authorities. Libraries' money is not ringfenced.
- The DCMS Secretary of State's responsibility for libraries is governed by the 1964 Act which says local authorities have a duty to provide a "comprehensive and efficient" library service.
- "Comprehensive and efficient" has never been defined. The last time the Act was tested was under Labour in 2009, when DCMS set up an enquiry into Wirral's proposals to close 11 libraries. The local authority eventually withdrew its plans.
- As the picture of cuts builds, there may be a real case for invoking the Act. The Minister for libraries, Ed Vaizey, has recently written to local authorities reminding them of their statutory duty.

- The real decision-makers are the local politicians responsible for libraries. They are unlikely to listen to messages which urge them not to cut libraries at all because everything is being cut. We have to find ways to convince them of libraries' impact and to think strategically about the best solutions for the future.

Good news about the modern reading service

- Library media coverage understandably tends to focus on cuts. But it is important that those making decisions about libraries' future are hearing **positive news** so they see the service as viable, and that there is a real public demand for it.
- There is a very good news story we need to get out about how libraries support literacy and reading. With one in six people in the UK struggling with literacy, **local authority decision-makers need to be reminded of the important evidence base for libraries' educational importance**. Their work with readers builds people's literacy levels, educational attainment and employability. It builds confidence, self esteem and well being.
- The last ten years have seen a profound **re-imagining of libraries' reading service**. There has been a focused explosion of creative, engaging activity - reading groups, author events, summer reading holiday activity, baby rhyme times, websites, library festivals, city read ins...
- The public response has been remarkable and **this new reading service is reversing major trends**. Children's work has been most intense and 77.9% of 5-10 year olds now use libraries. Children's borrowing has risen for 6 years running. This summer 760,000 children took up libraries' Summer Reading Challenge – to read six books. There are now 10,000 library linked reading groups. The average attendance at author events has risen to 70.
- Scarce resources should be focused on growth areas. No business would ignore the growth trends (see above) in the reading service, and no local authority should ignore the outcomes this can achieve for local people.
- The new look reading service is bringing people into contact with the library as a shared community space, and has a key role to play in creating better places to live.
- In the current circumstances we believe it is unrealistic to argue against **any** cuts to library budgets. Without cuts libraries would need to change to meet changing needs and lifestyles, including digital demands. So we should **urge decision-makers to focus on priorities and public demand**. If cuts have to be made, let's do them with an eye to the long term. Removing the staff who deliver the new reading service is short sighted.

What can authors do?

Make views known to government

- At <http://publiclibrariesnews.blogspot.com:80/> there are directions for how to write to the Secretary of State and your MP

Talk to local decision makers

- To **find out the people responsible for local library expenditure**, go to your local authority website and identify the elected member with library responsibility, the chief executive of the council and the mayor
- Write to them or if you're doing an event, invite them so you can talk about the issues and campaign for libraries.
- The kinds of **questions you might want to ask** include whether they might be in danger of breaching the 1964 Act; whether library cuts are proportionate to other cuts; whether local people have been fully consulted; whether the authority has a strategic plan for the service and what it consists of; if buildings are being shut, whether a service is being provided somehow for the affected community;
- If you feel strongly about this issue and want to get more actively involved, look at <http://alangibbons.net/> and www.voicesforthelibrary.org.uk

Profile libraries' impact

- **Draw attention to libraries' success stories**, the growth of their imaginative reading work and the difference your events and activities in libraries can make to people's lives. This message is more nuanced and harder to get out, but really needs spreading.
- **Talk to your publisher** about how you can support libraries. The Reading Agency is building new ways for libraries and publishers to work together so there are new possibilities for events. We want to unite the book universe and recently announced a new partnership with Waterstone's to spread author and family events.
- **Consider launching your new book** at one of the new, modern libraries near you
- **Blog and tweet** about how much libraries mean to you and why they matter to our community, educational and cultural life. Talk to the people in your area about why they use libraries and what they mean to them.
- **Get involved with libraries' work on World Book Day and World Book Night** - our two biggest national reading campaigns. Volunteer as a World Book Night book giver at www.worldbooknight.org.uk and work with your local library to make the most of the opportunity to profile its work.

Key facts

- 4,125 UK library sites + 573 mobiles
- 321.5million visits to UK libraries in 2009-10
- 77.9% of 5-10 year olds use libraries
- Children's book borrowing has risen year on year for six years
- Web visits to UK libraries have increased by 87.7% over four years
- The number of volunteers working with libraries rose by 7.7% in 2009/10
- 760,000 children did the Summer Reading Challenge in 2010

Thank you. **Miranda McKearney, Director, OBE.** Miranda.mckearney@readingagency.org.uk