

December 2007

## Reading, libraries and community engagement – the way ahead

### Successful outcome to 30 November conference

The Reading Agency, the independent charity working to get more reading to more people, and the Local Government Association are delighted to report that their joint conference on Community Engagement Through Reading (30 November, London) generated much productive and thought-provoking debate. It has also provided a starting point for exciting new work and fruitful partnerships. All delegates have committed themselves to an action inspired by the day.

The conference was a key event for professionals with an interest in reading, public libraries and the community engagement agenda being set by the Local Government White Paper, *Strong and Prosperous Communities*. Inspirational speakers from the library world, think tanks, government departments and other bodies explored the potential for using libraries work with readers as a springboard for community engagement. (see Notes to editors for more information on speakers.)

Main conclusions were:

- The conference showed that libraries have an important role to play as community anchor organisations, attracting and engaging with local communities in all their diversity.
- Libraries need to use the power of their everyday work with readers to reach out and involve local people in shaping decision about the future of local public services. Library led readers groups are an important tool, and these are spreading like wildfire.
- Libraries must seize the opportunity to convince local and national government that their reading work can contribute to community engagement strategies and feature in Local Area Agreements. They need to show how this work can help local authorities reach engagement and participation targets.
- Libraries can help make sure that a broad range of local voices are heard, not just those that are already well connected.
- The conference showcased powerful bottom up work with readers that can be built on and spread - reader dialogue and feedback, consultation and outreach.

**“Two decades of reader development work in libraries have sown the seeds for effective engagement strategies”** says Debbie Hicks, Director of Research and Policy for The Reading Agency. **“Now we need a real push to put this work with readers at the heart of local authorities’ moves to share power with local people. We mustn’t miss this major opportunity.”**

continued .

In the New Year, The Reading Agency will publish *Community Engagement through Reading*, capturing the thinking from the conference, and paving the way for further debate. This is part of The Reading Agency's *New Thinking* series of publications, which brings together creative people, strategists and activists who are passionate about reading and libraries.

The conference has marked the start of a new partnership between The Reading Agency and the Local Government Association. On 29 January 2008 they will host another joint conference entitled *Aiming High: The library offer to young people*. (For booking information, visit: <http://www.readingagency.org.uk/new-thinking/conferences/conferences-1/>)

**For further media information please contact  
Debbie Hyde at Oasis Media:  
020 7921 4310 or 07956 320 486  
[debbie.hyde@oasismedia.co.uk](mailto:debbie.hyde@oasismedia.co.uk)**

#### **Notes to editors:**

- Founded in 2002, The Reading Agency is an independent charity and reading development agency. It aims to get more reading to more people and is passionate about everyone having an equal chance to become a reader. For more general information, please visit: [www.readingagency.org.uk](http://www.readingagency.org.uk)
- The Local Government Association (LGA) exists to promote better local government. It promotes the interests of English and Welsh local authorities - a total of just under 500. These represent over 50 million people and spend around £74 billion a year on local services. The LGA works with and for member authorities to realise a shared vision of local government that enables local people to shape a distinctive and better future for their locality and its communities. It aims to put local councils at the heart of the drive to improve public services and to work with government to ensure that the policy, legislative and financial context in which they operate, supports that objective. For more general information, please visit: [www.lga.gov.uk](http://www.lga.gov.uk)
- Keynote speakers at the 30 November conference included:
  - Matt Rodda, Senior Research Fellow of the Institute of Public Policy Research
  - Alison Seabrooke, Chief Executive, Community Development Foundation
  - Janene Cox, Assistant Director, Culture and Library Services, Staffordshire
  - Roy Clare, Chief Executive, Museums, Libraries and Archives Council
  - Geoff Thompson, MBE, sportsman, youth activist and Executive Chair of the Youth Charter
  - Sarah Benioff, Deputy Director, Participation, Office of the Third Sector

**It's time to stop reading. It's time to get someone else to start.**