

The future of libraries' support from The Reading Agency

Following intense recent media interest in the future of public libraries, The Reading Agency is offering its director, Miranda McKearney OBE, for further media comment.

The Reading Agency is an independent charity working to inspire people to read more (www.readingagency.org.uk). It specialises in helping libraries radically modernise their reading service.

The Reading Agency believes:

- If you dig deeper into the statistics about library use, a different picture emerges from the one of decline. It's not at all a straightforward picture of a decline in public interest and take up. Children and young people's use is steady (latest DCMS Taking Part statistics), and children's book borrowing has risen for five years running. Web visits have risen by 50% (CIPFA library statistics, May 2010)
- We must analyze what's working for the public and build on these successful trends. The evidence shows that where libraries offer a more dynamic, interactive reading service the public respond with alacrity. Two of The Reading Agency's most successful programmes the Summer Reading Challenge for children, and the Six Book Challenge for emergent adult readers prove this. Details of their success are given under 'Notes to editors' below.
- The best libraries offer reading groups and challenges, author events, baby rhyme times, and are working with a variety of partners such as adult learning services, health care providers, publishers, schools, fostering services and prisons to deliver value added and targeted resources. The social consequences of this more active approach are profound. The effort focused on changing the children's service should be applied to adults.
- In tough financial times, we cannot afford to undercut libraries' ability to create a nation of readers, our literacy skills deficit is already too large. The scale of cuts means the library network is unlikely to survive in its current shape, so prioritizing and innovating will be key. The challenge is to scale up what's working, and support the development of a dynamic, modernised reading service, that captures the interest of the public.
- We must not lose sight of libraries' radical social purpose. They are about creating a fairer society and vital community focal points. They help people become skilled readers, with major implications for their life chances. They should not be a soft target for cuts.

For more information or interviews/comment with Miranda McKearney, please contact Debbie Hyde, Oasis Media, 07956 320 486 or debbie.hyde@oasismedia.co.uk

Notes to editors

The Summer Reading Challenge:

This is an immensely popular and successful reading initiative for children aged four to 12 years. Run annually via the UK library network across the school summer holidays, it keeps children reading over the summer, helping to avoid dips in their reading levels when they return to school.

Each year the Summer Reading Challenge to children is simple. They're encouraged to read six or more books of their choice during the holidays with collectable incentives and rewards, plus a certificate or medal for every child who completes the Challenge.

The Summer Reading Challenge 2009 report showed that:

- o 725,000 children took part across the UK in the 2009 Challenge, an increase of 5% on the 2008 total. This year it is estimated that well over 750,000 children will take part.
- o 19,000 boys took part in 2009(44% of participants, up from 42% in 2008)
- o 95% of libraries in the UK were involved
- o 47,000 children signed up as new library members
- o 19.7 million children's materials were borrowed over ten weeks June to September
- o The 2009 Summer Reading Challenge was called 'Quest Seekers'. Its website attracted 106,850 visitors, visiting the site 218,000 times, with just under a million page views.
- o 216,000 children and their families took part in thousands of events run by libraries, making the connection between written works of the imagination and cultural and creative activities
- o Visit www.readingagency.org.uk/children/summer-reading-challenge for more facts and to download the 2009 report

The Six Book Challenge:

The Six Book Challenge was launched in 2008 and encourages emergent readers to develop a reading habit through choosing, reading and expressing their views about books. Participants are invited to read six books and keep a reading diary. They are supported by incentives, a certificate and creative reading activity. The Six Book Challenge is growing. 69% of library services across the UK offered the scheme in 2010 working with colleges, adult and community education, prisons and workplaces. 13,500 adults registered this year - up 50% on 2009.

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