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READING AGENCY FULFILLING THEIR POTENTIAL NATIONAL CONFERENCE

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I'm sure I'm not the only one to have been wowed by the renovation of the reading room at the British Museum, which opened a few years ago. Until recently, only a few people in this room would have been lucky enough to enter this remarkable space.

This world famous, former part of the British Library was reserved for scholars and academics.

Since its renovation, this has all changed. Now, anybody can follow the footsteps of Karl Marx, Oscar Wilde, HG Wells, Lenin, George Bernard Shaw. You don't need to sign your name, you don't need to pay, you don't need to be a registered researcher, trailing reams of academic credentials.

It's a space that anyone who visits has a stake in and can find something that is special to them in. And it's also a fitting representation of the best of our heritage. From the brilliance of the design of Norman Foster, one of the most celebrated architects in the world, to the extensive collection of books on history, art and travel, to the rows of state-of-the-art computers that can transport readers and researchers of all classes, nationalities and backgrounds to anywhere in the world.

It's the perfect expression of the transformation of

libraries, which I believe are one of the real success stories of this century, indeed the modern age.

Because what we shouldn't forget is that the idea of public information is a actually quite a new phenomenon. The concept of a library that anyone on the street could walk into for free, and walk out of not only with a handful of books and essential information, but even perhaps a new qualification or a new skill is a relatively recent one.

To chose an example close to my own heart, after doctors' surgeries, libraries are the second most popular port of call for information about childcare.

This is several steps removed from the dusty, private family libraries of the aristocracy. Or, if we go further back, the cherished (but rarely shared, even with the most distinguished scholars) personal book collections of antiquity.

Until relatively recently, information was in many senses, the private domain of the elite and the luxury of the educated minority. And education was not a right for all, but a mark of wealth and privilege.

THE GROWING IMPORTANCE OF LIBRARIES

Things have obviously changed a lot since then. And since the establishment of universal education, local libraries have become a pivot of public services. The transformation of libraries to meet the changing needs of communities is something we should be very proud of.

Whereas twenty, even fifteen years ago or so, the typical public library was hardly seen as a place that

welcomed young people, or for that matter, anyone under fifty. The dimly lit, 1960s concrete buildings, the librarians who seemed to exist only to police noise levels, the towering corridors of empty bookshelves, the token attempt at diversification with the handful of videos – maybe Jane Fonda’s workout video, or Rambo: First Blood if you were lucky.

It’s no exaggeration to say that, largely thanks to the efforts of people in this room, libraries have undergone something of a renaissance since then. And what delights me most about this renaissance is that it’s young people who are often reaping the benefits.

Far from the library being the last resort on a rainy Saturday when they’ve been chucked out of everywhere else on the high street, modern libraries are the often the first choice for young people, with library membership rapidly increasing among this age group. And their popularity is not limited to the privileged. The most popular libraries are often situated in poorer communities, where they provide essential access to a whole range of resources and information services.

Libraries are increasingly seen as safe, neutral spaces where young people can not only access some of our finest literature, but they can also network, improve their skills, get online, access essential learning support and advice from mentors and others in the community.

Libraries often lead the way in the public sector when it comes to tackling disadvantage and challenging inequalities. In particular, they are uniquely positioned to reach out those young people who typically find our services hard to access – young people in care, young

people with disabilities or young people from traveller families, who the typical one-size-fits-all approach to public services will do little to help.

Take the Youthbox programme, run by the National Youth Agency and the Reading Agency to improve reading skills among socially excluded 13-19 year olds. Youth workers combine forces with librarians to enable more young people - in particular those who are in care or other vulnerable groups - to access the rich, creative reading resources that libraries have to offer.

Or the Powerhouse in Moss Side, near my own constituency, which incorporates a library, a recording studio, youth club sessions, education and training facilities and sports facilities. The Powerhouse has been particularly successful at engaging young people who are often at risk of underachieving at school or being excluded. Those who don't have home internet access can use the computer facilities for research, homework as well as chatting with friends or downloading music. And one thing young people repeatedly say about the Powerhouse, is how approachable the staff are - listening to them and offering helpful advice and support.

IMPORTANCE OF SUPPORTING YOUNG PEOPLE

We're at a point where this has never been more important.

Because I truly believe, there has never been a time of such opportunity for young people. This country has never been such a diverse and thriving space for young people to achieve in.

But that opportunity comes at a price. Firstly, the cost

of being left behind is greater than it has ever been.

Together, we face economic and social challenges that are very different from those our predecessors faced twenty, even fifteen years ago.

Where as before, the high-skilled services such as law, software programming and finance were once seen by us as "safe" from foreign competition, they can now be delivered electronically from anywhere in the world.

The emergence of China, India and the former Soviet Union into market capitalism has effectively doubled the world supply of workers from 1.5 billion to 3 billion.

So more workers than ever before, from across the world, are competing for jobs. And more of these jobs demand high level skills.

In the UK alone, research suggests that of the 18 million jobs that will become vacant between now and 2020, 9 million – that's 50% of them – will need to be filled by graduates. And while there are 3.4 million unskilled jobs today, by 2020, this figure will diminish to 600,000.

That means there are great opportunities for those with the skills and qualifications and scant opportunities for those without. I think it was the folk singer Pete Seeger who said that "education is what you get when you read the fine print, experience is what you get when you don't." It's no exaggeration to say that the golden age of the university of life and the school of hard knocks has already drawn to a close.

Secondly, an age of increased choice and opportunity presents its own challenges to young people. While it's

an exaggeration to say that choice is a burden, it is true to say that we need young people to be information literate.

By that, I mean making sure they are suitably skilled and informed to make what can be life-changing decisions about their future – about their education or possible career paths to think of just one example. Our job, as the people who work with and support young people is to help them develop these kind of skills. Not by spoon-feeding them, but by enabling them. Enabling them to achieve more at school and college, giving them the confidence to help themselves.

HOW BEST TO SUPPORT YOUNG PEOPLE

This has huge implications for how we deliver services. In particular, it means responding to young people as individuals, with differing starting points and talents, often facing different challenges.

And while we need to treat them as individuals, we shouldn't be responding to them as if we are individual, independent organisations working in isolation from each other.

One thing that's particularly impressed me about the library sector, is its ability to work in partnership with other service providers for children and young people. Not to see what it does in isolation, but to see what it can contribute to the bigger picture – the outcomes we established in Every Child Matters. Ensuring that young people stay safe and healthy, are achieving at school, are not living in poverty and are able to make a positive contribution, and most importantly, listening to what young people say about what's on offer and responding to what they want.

I would encourage all libraries to think about what they can bring to youth services in their area. Local Authorities are currently in the process of redesigning and reinvigorating the support they provide for young people. And they are under a legislative duty to consult young people on what they would like to see in their area.

I know that many of you are already making a fantastic contribution, and I know that sometimes, this is in spite of reluctance among some Local Authorities to truly recognise what you have to offer.

I'd like to make it very clear today that not only do I recognise the extraordinary contribution that libraries make, but also that I expect Directors of Children's Services to give serious consideration of what libraries can bring to the table when it comes to providing better services for young people. You may well be the unsung heroes of public services, but you shouldn't be made to feel like the bridesmaids as well. You are essential partners, and what you offer to young people is invaluable.

What we are seeing the beginnings of today, is a very different kind of public service ethic. With services designed around the needs of the user – in this case, parents, families and children – and not around the restrictions we place around ourselves as institutions and professions, because we think it makes our lives easier.

The age of the universal, one-size-fits-all approach to services, which too often in the past meant the same, shapeless garment for everyone, is thankfully on its last legs.

In its stead, we are seeing the creation of a state that enables people. That listens to what people say and responds to them as people not automatons or mindless statistics.

CONCLUSION

For today's young people, this has never been more important. We live in an age of increased opportunity. Where anyone can follow (literally and metaphorically) in the footsteps of the great minds that made their way up the staircase to the world famous reading room at the British Museum.

Where more young people are doing well at school and going to university than ever before.

But the achievements of our most successful young people are often overshadowed by the failure of the persistent minority.

Enabling all young people to seize the opportunities of the day is a complex business. It demands that we see young people in a much more holistic way – instead of seeing their needs in isolation, we need to see the complete picture.

And the services we provide need to accommodate that bigger picture. Working together successfully in partnership and not being limited by the (undoubtedly important) but often smaller agenda of our own organisations and the professions we represent.

Libraries have an essential contribution to make. As a first port of call for information, advice and support. But also as a central hub of the local community.

Providing safe, neutral spaces for young people to learn, develop and have fun.

And above all, to help them become the great minds of the future.

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