

# **A NEW VISION FOR PUBLIC LIBRARIES**

**“A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO  
LEADING SOCIAL CHANGE”**

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## **Abstract**

This study focuses on the future of public libraries in the modern world. It reflects on the challenges the library world faces today, asking pertinent questions about why library usage is declining. Based on a personal insight of working as a professional librarian in the Idea Stores in Tower Hamlets, I will explore what libraries are offering and what they *can* and should offer.

I will also consider how new buildings are designed, and reflect on the unfortunate tendency to focus on new iconic architecture rather than on new service delivery. I am particularly passionate about delivering and developing new services to the diverse local community within the context of broader local and national needs. I will outline my personal vision, which I see as a compelling new vision and forward my development plan for creating new services, new partnerships, new builds, and new professional thinking. These are all important underlying themes that need to be addressed in order to achieve this personal vision of social change through public libraries.

There needs to be a radical change in professional thinking. The library profession lacks the vision, leadership and energy to take the profession forward. Public libraries can achieve 'social engineering' and can bring far more than they do to their local community, contributing to the much wider targets of our local authorities.

I will focus on the challenges of the modern world, reflecting on the tensions between service professionals, service providers, architects, local authorities, funding bodies and partners.

Spaces or 'places' are fundamental and crucial to achieving social change. The design of public places, and the interactions and use they ultimately stimulate, dictate the extent to which social change can be achieved in practice. It is suggested that creating exciting, accessible and challenging public places will deliver a whole cluster of new services and opportunities for people that can really achieve social change.

The principle that we can achieve more by working together has to be taken to the next level. Developing meaningful partnerships driven by a strong sense of vision for the community will and can go a long way to achieve social change.

Public libraries can no longer be static services built around the traditional service model. A radical new service model is recommended which focuses on providing joined-up services and putting a much greater emphasis on how public libraries can meet the needs of the various directorates within local authorities. Entrepreneurial selling should be the norm, 'selling my product through your product'.

## **Acknowledgments**

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Thank you to colleagues at Idea Stores, too many to name, for their continued support and inspiration for my achievements. I would like to acknowledge Tower Hamlets Council for providing me the opportunity to undertake Clore.

Acknowledgements to my wife and children who have not had my attention and time whilst I have been working on this project. They have sacrificed for me to achieve and I am indebted for this to them.

I hope that people enjoy the report.

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Background and purpose of study

This research is part of the Clore Leadership Programme (CLP) and is written in fulfilment of the requirements of a Clore Fellow. As a Library Fellow on the CLP, and a professional working in libraries for the past 14 years, I have frontline experience of working as a library assistant, as an operations manager of the flagship Idea Stores in Whitechapel, and more recently as a Strategy and Project Development Manager for Idea Stores.

My experience has embraced both traditional libraries and the innovative Idea Stores. I have undertaken this piece of work to stimulate debate on the future of public libraries and to provide a personal vision of how public libraries can deliver a holistic approach to social change.

I strongly believe that public libraries should not just be at the heart of the community but at the heart of delivering broader public services. As part of this study I will reflect on how public libraries can shape and influence the delivery of public services.

## **1.2 Rationale**

This research project is an ambitious one; it is not for the faint hearted and will not appeal to those who prefer the status quo. I have deliberately looked at a far wider and more compelling vision for the remit of public libraries. It is not the same as other research papers; I have not interviewed people, there are no questionnaires or surveys. I am outlining real life experiences and practical solutions in relation to the future of public libraries. Whatever the critical reaction or fate of my proposals, they serve as personal fulfilment: I wish to stimulate and challenge the profession in an open, frank and honest debate about the challenges facing our public libraries. In this piece of work, I have used the word 'we' to refer to professionals who work as in public libraries and to the library profession in general.

Too many researchers have concentrated on getting people's views, undertaking all the desk research and providing an analysis of where the service is at a particular point in time. That is the last thing I want to do here: my research is very different and contests professional orthodoxy.

## **1.3 Aims and Objectives**

The aims and objectives are simple for me; to ensure that public libraries are aligned to the needs and aspirations of the local community they serve. I am proposing not only some radical solutions, but also some simple and straightforward solutions to how we should develop services in the future. I am challenging both the perceptions of service quality and the very DO NOTHING



culture of professionals who sit behind the value placed on public libraries by the general public.

I am not claiming to have all the answers, but I wish to explore my particular passion that library services should be closely aligned to social needs and in doing provide solutions for the things that are wrong in society. For example, if recycling is high on the agenda today then public libraries should be providing some answers to this issue. Similarly the public library must be at the forefront by delivering new services and information about other emerging social issues in a rapidly changing world.

## 2 BACKGROUND ON PUBLIC LIBRARIES

***“What product or service in this world do people value so highly, yet hardly ever use?”***

*– Zoinul Abidin on Public Libraries.*

### 2.1 Public libraries – A definition

The traditional definition of public libraries can be classified as:

“Libraries have four key strengths. They offer neutral welcoming community space and support active citizenship. They hold enormous stocks of material. This ranges beyond books to include DVDs, videos, CDs and computer software. National Lottery investment has equipped all public libraries in the UK with ICT infrastructure offering public Internet access. They offer a wide range of services. As well as lending books, they operate as community centres of formal and informal learning. They promote reading across the age range starting with young babies and continuing through adulthood. They provide access to information and advice. And they are run by committed staff”

“Framework for the Future 2003, DCMS”

The above definition taken on its own merit suggests the public library as a very exciting place to visit. However in practice how many public libraries can or will excite members of the public when they visit? This ‘inoperable misalignment’ in public perception shapes who we are and only offers a bleak future. However the future *will* only be bleak if the profession hides behind this misalignment.

## **2.2 Primary role and function**

The primary role of public libraries is to provide free access to books and information. The role and functions are defined by statutory law as:

“The Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 requires the 149 first tier English local authorities to provide "comprehensive and efficient" public library services. The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport has a duty under the same Act to superintend the delivery of library services and to promote the improvement of public libraries”

The Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964

Interestingly DCMS goes on to explain the terms “comprehensive and efficient” as:

“The terms "comprehensive and efficient" are not defined within the 1964 Act. However, broadly speaking, the Act requires library authorities to provide free of charge access for people who live, work or study in their area to borrow or refer to books, printed material and pictures in line with their needs and requirements”

The Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964

So according to the law and DCMS, public libraries should be comprehensive and efficient. These two words on their own are rather cumbersome; they

suggest that where public money is used to deliver services then these services should be comprehensive and efficient.

If members of the public visit their local library and see three members of staff around the library desk chatting away for 20 minutes with no customers to serve, then would this tick the boxes of comprehensive and efficient? Let's not take this notion to the public just yet, but those of us in the profession might ask how often this example hits home?

The question I want to ask the profession is - are we fulfilling the basic requirement of providing a comprehensive and efficient public library service as defined in the Act?

### **2.3 Traditional v modern public libraries**

A traditional public library is defined by the nature of its physical building: they are most often in Victorian buildings that are inaccessible or require major refurbishment. The service outlook is of dull, boring and unwelcoming public spaces, although the service offered may be good, providing the important traditional services of free access to books and information.

In contrast modern public libraries are in contemporary buildings, often new or refurbished buildings. They are welcoming spaces with bright colours and often have a retail feel. They still provide the core traditional library services together with access to other formal and informal learning opportunities.

The current debate has to address the conflict between traditional and modern public libraries, and how we interpret change or, indeed, consider whether we need to change at all? As time moves on, the world moves on, and when the world moves people move. It is basic science that when things in the world change or become better, we move along with the times. We know that before the telephone and mobile phone were invented people lived happily, but both these inventions have changed the world and have become more or less necessities.

The same principle applies to public libraries; the world has changed since the first inception of public libraries in 1850 delivering public library services in Victorian buildings. We now need to move with times and provide library services in new modern buildings for the modern world.

## **2.4 Changing roles**

Public libraries are shifting their purpose and to some extent are realigning their services to meet local needs. Today the public library offers traditional library services and significant online services through the Labour Government's People's Network initiative. This provides access to the Internet in all public libraries in England and Wales.

There is good practice and good service delivery models, which mean public libraries, are providing informal and formal learning opportunities. Some libraries provide a café and other additional services. In order to achieve this there is a

significant move towards co-location with other services and the development of one-stop shops.

However I argue that the main purpose of public libraries has not changed a great deal, and in some ways, does not need to. What needs to change is the radicalisation of services to meet local needs. Whilst there are many examples of good practice in public libraries, very few local authorities have been radical in their service delivery model.

## **2.5 Changing expectations**

Public libraries should be challenging their professional staff to ensure the service delivers on the wider local government agenda. This is where we fail. Our profession is too insular in its outlook and contradicts the belief that we are doing well. We should be at the forefront, showing local government officials the value that public libraries can bring to reach its residents.

Public libraries are the only neutral spaces that can deliver wider local government agendas. Information is one of our biggest strengths and an area that we specialise in. We need to maximise this offer by promoting our services to local government officials who seek information every day.

We have to move away from the culture of a free public service and distinguish when services to local authority officers could be charged for. We know that ICT, Health & Safety, Legal Services all apply a recharge to services regardless of whether they are used or not. However, in contrast when these very services

require information from public libraries, we provide it for free. We need to work smarter and not necessarily harder. We need to place a value on the service we provide to local authority officers.

## **2.6 PEST factors which have contributed towards the need to change**

We must apply business models to shape our services, and so we need to go back to basics and look at how political, economical, social and technological factors are influencing our services. More importantly, we need to question whether the services we deliver are indeed aligned to today's PEST factors.

### **2.6.1 Political**

The public library service does not have the political clout or the infrastructure to be counted. It is not recognised within government agendas to the extent that it should be. We must raise our profile, tell our story and show how in real terms we are making a difference in our local communities.

Government leadership and intervention is therefore key. Whilst DCMS have an element of responsibility for looking after libraries there is no real direction or accountability or mechanism for resource allocation for the service.

One of the debates that needs to take place within the profession is the redistribution of resources. We need to establish a mechanism to achieve social change, and this methodology has to be aligned with emerging community needs. How does it make sense to spend more and more money each year on

books when the needs in the local community are very different? We know that learning English, job searching and educating the public on climate change are all important community needs, but the resources spent on books in these areas is minimal, if at all.

Who provides the direction on where resources should be spent and how? That is the biggest challenge the profession faces. In many ways, professionals and politicians do not have the 'bottle' to have this debate. I am not in any way suggesting that we get rid of the books, but rather am suggesting that we redirect both resources and space to meet real community needs. Why have two floors of books when you may only need one and you can use the other floor for classrooms?

### **2.6.2 Economical**

Economic factors provide an analysis of what challenges the world is facing and what crisis exists. We need to make sure that our services are aligned with the financial standing of the economy, so that we can maximise and align our services to public mood and the economy. We should be offering information about economic and financial survival for people when times are bad.

### **2.6.3 Social**

Social and cultural factors are very important in a world where people from different races, religion, culture etc. co-exist within communities. How libraries provide a service and how they contribute to social change are underlying



measures for achieving social change through libraries. So when social adaptation is required on language, the impact of terrorism, recycling and global warming issues, public libraries should have arrangements in place firstly to deliver services relating to these big issues and secondly to redistribute resources to achieve this.

Whatever community we look at there are a number of social factors that determine the basis of that community. In a complicated world where communities face pressures on very different fronts, someone needs to provide solutions or help people understand the world. My personal agenda is to achieve social change or at least contribute to achieving social change. I want to be ambitious in my approach, even when it may not make complete sense!

#### **2.6.4 Technological**

Technology is the one of the biggest challenges any public institution faces, and there can be little doubt that public libraries will continue to lag behind in this respect. However this is an area where we can ensure that new phases in technological development, such as web 2.0 and web 3.0, are within everyone's reach.

### 3 A COMPELLING NEW VISION

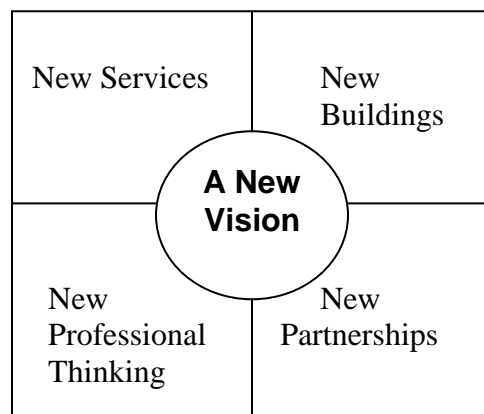
**“Anyone who thinks the sky is the limit, has limited imagination”**

- Unknown Author

#### 3.1 Introduction

I want to demonstrate how public libraries can contribute to achieving social change, and how library professionals can change the course of their communities for good. I am putting forward a new vision that will provide a solid foundation for public libraries to be relevant today and tomorrow.

This vision must go much further than new services themselves. We also require new professional thinking, new buildings and new partnerships. My approach is a compelling vision that can only be achieved if all four themes are addressed.



Vision diagram 1

#### 3.2 Broadening the offer

One of the first things that must change or improve is broadening the offer and offering more than just books. This is crucial for achieving social change as we have to adapt our services to community needs, and we should not conform to

established ideological values that suggest the book is 'king'. Although my view is that the book should be untouchable, a reliance on books should not restrict our vision of achieving social change.

Within my vision the book should be an element of the service and the stock needs to reflect what the community requires. This means that to achieve social change we must change our priorities for expenditure. If climate change is an important issue in the local area then priority should be given to acquiring books on the subject. In most communities' employment, learning English and recycling are key issues, and so the book stock should provide people with information and support on these very issues.

The service offer should be much broader than just books. Public libraries should have spaces for people to learn English, for advice on how to get a job, for recycling awareness workshops and for the impact of climate change on us all. The above does not have to be provided only by library staff, but can be delivered in partnership with the particular local authority departments or third sector organisations with responsible for these areas.

### **3.3 Promoting community cohesion**

One of the biggest strengths of public libraries is the way in which they draw people from every community. The inclusiveness of our services and our contribution to community cohesion cannot easily be replicated in other public services. When you visit the busiest libraries you can see the diversity of its

users. Public libraries up and down the country do not publicise this contribution sufficiently, if at all. When the government cries out for community cohesion, public libraries are the last to put their hands up.

Local authorities win awards for community cohesion but it is often other local authority sections that are congratulated for their efforts and not public libraries. We similarly fail to show how we contribute to other wider local government agendas. Even if we look at the wider economy and the impact public libraries have on wider society, we do not calculate or have provision to evidence this impact.

However within this new vision we need to play to our strengths and tell the story about how good we are at these things. Perhaps show rather than tell! At the same time we should tell the story about how we can do more for the local community and social change.

### **3.4 New vision around people's basic needs**

Before solving the world's problems, I want to go back to basics and establish some common sense about meeting people's basic needs. This means going back to Maslow's hierarchy of needs (refer to diagram below).

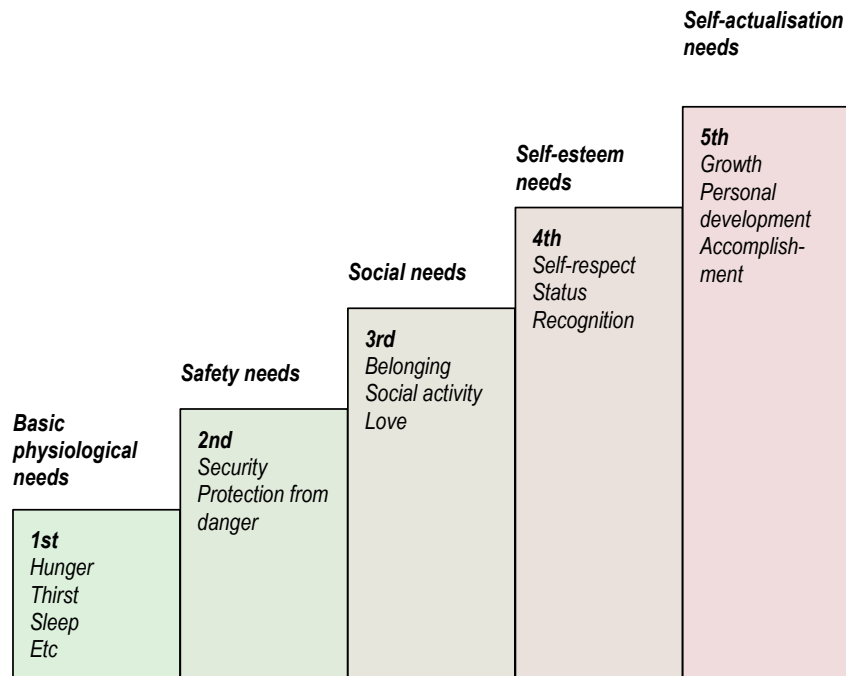


Diagram 2, Copyright © John Adair & David Faraday 2006. Published by Adair Leadership Development. Reproduced with permission

### Maslow's Needs Hierarchy

We know as human beings that all of us require and aspire to reach self-actualisation needs of the above diagram. We want to feel that we have both lived and achieved in life. In order to achieve social change we need to start from the beginning and move up the ladder. That should be our goal within the library profession.

Individuals have a right to life and the Human Rights Act makes provision for respecting life. When we look at basic needs in the context of psychological requirements we can argue that literacy is a fundamental need for people to move up the ladder of needs.

Hence we need to make provision for people to learn and this can be done through literacy and numeracy sessions. However to achieve this we need to create spaces for it to happen. We know that literacy is fundamental for people to access our services, so we should help people read and write so they are able to access our services more easily. This is where we return to the argument about creating spaces. Do we reduce the book stock to make space for learning? This is a fundamental question that we need to ask ourselves, and we need to go on asking ourselves similar questions about meeting other community space needs.

### **3.5 Promoting a healthy city**

I believe libraries should be seen as central to healthy communities, and we should be driving the government agenda for health and wellbeing by contributing to the creation of healthy cities. A healthy city will go beyond meeting safety needs to broader social needs within the needs ladder. We know that reading, learning and social interaction are crucial for health and wellbeing. We know that people with mental health issues need environments in which they feel safe and which makes provision for their needs. The library can provide that place and make provision for these needs.

Although we do provide space for book stock and a neutral meeting place, public libraries are great spaces for health partners, such as the PCT, to come and hold open days. These can enhance awareness of health issues and offer blood

pressure checks, diabetic checks and massage etc. Partnerships of this nature can be particularly beneficial for the community the library serves.

If we want to create a healthy city we should be providing workshops on stopping smoking, sexual awareness and other health related topics. I am not suggesting that every library should provide all of these services, but that libraries should respond to changing community needs and major health concerns.

### **3.6 Changing perceptions**

We have to change perceptions of how the public see public libraries and what value they place on our services. When the public library service is valued highly by the public it is often seen as a symbolic gesture of goodwill rather than a service with a concrete beneficial value. We have to turn that element of perception in to something that is of real value.

We have to apply the notion that we are doing something more than just 'good'. We must show the real way in which we are contributing to social change and that we are important in the context of shaping local communities. Public libraries assist people in meeting Maslow's needs hierarchy.

### **3.7 Redefining libraries**

What is so special about public libraries and what should their purpose be? What is our unique selling point? My vision is to redefine the purpose, which should be:

“Libraries are at the heart of providing public services; they promote reading, learning and access to information. Libraries should analyse their immediate environment and realign their service and budgets to meet local needs. When anti social behaviour (ASB) is the big concern, the library service should have stock and information on ASBs, and they should be offering space to run workshops and should work closely with the local authority’s ASB section. Ultimately public libraries will be at the heart of achieving social change.”

The unique selling point for public libraries should be that they could deliver services to meet particular local community needs. So, when a drugs awareness workshop is needed, it can be delivered in the public library. That is the beauty of public libraries; if we are serious about change we can achieve social change.

However we cannot achieve all this on merit or simply by looking at change: we need new professional thinking, new services and new buildings that are realigned to local community needs. We have to ask the question, what’s wrong within our immediate communities? And then develop services to assist in meeting those needs. If core services cannot provide what is required then we have to redistribute our resources, both our physical and financial resources, to achieve the needs.



### **3.8 Using non traditional ways of engaging people**

In order to achieve this new vision we have to be radical in our approach and use non-traditional ways of engaging people. From my personal experience I have realised that when you engage traditional models of service delivery you do not achieve the necessary change. We continue to live in a complex world which is often unpredictable. Who would have ever thought that Wikipedia, YouTube and Facebook would be so successful? People prefer new ways of engagement and so we need to apply 'smart' principles and use new ways of delivering services rather than simply to work harder.

I love ideas that raise people's eyebrows and present some examples below:

- A bouncy castle inside the Children's Library
- Premiership Club – taking penalties inside the library
- Sleepover – families spending the night at the library
- DJ mixing
- Break dancing
- Santa's Grotto – presents for every child
- Poster Competition – prize for every entrant/child

The Reading Agency describes libraries as:

"Libraries should be the 'centre of the community where exciting things happen'

Use imaginative approaches to get more people using libraries" TRA (website)

The Reading Agency is right when it describes what we need to do and this reinforces my vision of making libraries the centre of the community where exciting things happen. I have not yet come across a library where this is happening: Idea Stores, where I work, are trying to achieve this, and in many ways are not far from achieving it.

I want professionals to use imaginative approaches as the TRA suggests, breaking barriers and engaging people and encouraging increased use of our public libraries. When we are out shopping, we are excited when we see something different. A juggler in a shopping mall gets all the attention and stares simply because we do not expect one to be there. In the same way, we have to provide people with different, imaginative and, most importantly, unexpected, reasons to visit a public library.

### **3.9 Promoting healthy competition**

We can only achieve the vision if we view the paradox of markets vs. competition. We know in the private sector that Tesco, Sainsbury's and others strive to be number one. In the public sector we are not accustomed to competition, but rather to achieving 'good practice'. We tend to measure our achievements against comparative benchmarks. How can we develop meaningful services if we do not value or believe in the concept of competition? I believe without competition we will never be able to 'up our game'; competitive drivers will not only make us give our best, but will also achieve the best for the communities we serve.

It is paramount within my thinking that we instil a sense of competition and re-energise the word 'library'. Of course we do not have the profit measure to establish who is best, but we should use social drivers to see which libraries have achieved social change. Engineering social change can be a powerful political driver to showcase positive change.

## **4 NEW PROFESSIONAL THINKING**

**“The very essence of leadership is that you have to have a vision.**

- Theodore Hesburgh

### **4.1 Professional Leadership**

If libraries are considered to be in a crisis then clearly someone has to take responsibility and be accountable for this demise. There has to be collective responsibility from the profession and established organisations like the DCMS, CILIP and MLA must all face up to these realities.

However, when things do not go well it is not right to put all professionals in one basket and say - change! We know that up and down the country there are numbers of public libraries that are doing well and are bucking the trend, with increasing issues and visitor numbers. So things can be achieved so long as the vision and direction is there from professionals.

Leadership in its entity is one the major issues in the library profession. Why isn't there any clear direction or sense of vision? More importantly when there is clear direction from DCMS or MLA, there are no clear accountability mechanisms for library services that are not achieving good results. What we have is so called support available or working partnerships to help provide a better service.

It is not entirely DCMS or MLA who at fault: the whole government infrastructure, both at local and national level, sees the contribution of public libraries second to

that of health and education. This level of non-importance does not provide a good basis for the profession to move forward. However I will and have always argued that it is up to the profession to evidence our value.

One part of the answer for me is leadership in the profession. The vision I am outlining here has to be implemented and only leaders can implement change. However we all know leaders are not born, they are grown. Leaders have to be *created* as John Adair said:

“It is immoral to put someone in a leadership role without any formal training”

If one did a survey on leadership, the results would most probably show that library managers are leading teams, managing budgets, managing buildings and managing services without any formal leadership training. This is likely to be true across the country. When there is no real investment in leadership and a general lack of training, then, as far as I am concerned, the future is indeed bleak. We are only putting forward managers for failure, and unfortunately this has the greatest impact on our customers.

As a manager, managing frontline staff, there's one thing for sure, staff are our biggest asset and we need to provide them with the resources, tools, support and training to achieve this new vision. Whatever we say about change we all know that people make things happen. We live in one myth: people frequently say that

'technology has changed the world'. If you think again, this saying is totally wrong. What changes the world is people - they are the creators and inventors. In a nutshell we need people with flair and vision who can lead others: library leadership is a critical success factor. We need leaders who can do and have the following:

- The right passion, zest and attitude
- Deal with uncertainty
- Strategic thinkers – thinking 'outside of the box'
- Influence movers/shakers – art of lobbying
- Taking risks – art of leadership
- Situational intelligence – able to view their own situation & that of others
- Visionaries – skills in leading a vision change
- Achieve high performance with low costs

I have to re-address the very 'do-nothing' culture that often exists within the public sector. We know what we need to do but we often don't. The 'knowing' and the 'doing' gap is so far apart that the best option is to choose professional orthodoxy. The issue here is that we do not challenge the 'uncontested orthodoxy' that exists. We therefore *need* leaders who will confront the 'do-nothing' culture.

## **4.2 Seeking funding**

Other elements that are consistently prevalent are politics and funding. In the public sector the pound is always reducing, and resources are often redirected to the more 'important' areas like education, health or social services. There is no doubt that these are very important services, but my argument is that libraries should be seen as just as important. There is so much scope for libraries to contribute to the other local authority services, but we just sit back and hope for the best, and as always the best is only worst for us. Nevertheless we carry on with whatever little resources we get because, as I mentioned before, we are comfortable in our 'do-nothing' culture.

When will leaders see that when there is no money in the box, one has to look outside of the box? We cannot rely on the local authority funding mechanisms to always bail us out. If we want to implement this new vision, it will cost us and the money has to be found for it. Museums, galleries and music venues raise millions to survive - so why can't we? We need to learn from them and seek new funding mechanisms to give our communities more than what we give them now.

## **4.3 Social Entrepreneurship**

I want leaders to be entrepreneurial managers focused on achieving social change. The term entrepreneurship comes from the private sector and is linked to the desire for being the best and making profits. In the context of the public sector we need to achieve social entrepreneurship: our managers need to recognise social problems and organise projects or activities to make social

change happen. This in practice means that we need our leaders to act as social entrepreneurs, to raise funds and achieve social change.

## 5 NEW BUILDINGS

***“You can’t be sure how these spaces will be used. You are just creating the opportunities for things to happen”***

- Director Glasgow Caledonian University

### 5.1 Place Making

Are new buildings the answer?

Designing spaces that are fit for purpose and meet people’s needs are essential to implement the vision for social change. We know the current obsession in public libraries is about creating new buildings and new spaces. In many ways it has been one of the achievements of a number of authorities to raise the necessary funds for new buildings and refurbishments.

New buildings have gone some way to rectifying the old run down building syndrome and have addressed the ongoing lack of investment in library space. But we are still missing a big opportunity when we have investment in new buildings. Most local authorities look for iconic new buildings, with award-winning architectural features. This often brings about a tension between architects and service professionals. Architects and project managers tend to emphasise architecture rather than services. It becomes symbolic to spend public money well, but the symbolism becomes evidenced with an iconic building.



## 5.2 Iconic structures or impressive internal features?

As part of my research study visit, I travelled to the USA to see the new Seattle Public Library. Unsurprisingly, this is an amazing building. On the first day I was wondering in the foyer when a member of staff asked me if I wanted to join an architectural tour of the building! This said it all for me; not a service tour but an *architectural* tour. As passionate an advocate as I am for public library services, it always winds me up when architectural features are placed before services. I stood outside of the building and admired it. No doubt from an architect's perspective it may deserve all the credit it is receiving. It is an amazing building to look at, it does draw people's attention and your eyes can't miss it. But the big question in my mind is whether it serves its purpose?

We have many iconic buildings in this country, some have bagged RIBA awards, and yet I wonder how many of these will still be relevant in years to come. Times change and with change new architectural features take over: what is attractive today may not necessarily be attractive tomorrow. It is true that iconic buildings make a lasting impression, however with time, the wow factor may wear off.

There are many such public buildings that people are instantly impressed by as they walk past. You will find that people will talk for hours about these wonderful pieces of architecture and yet they never go inside to see what's on offer.

The challenge is not only to create iconic buildings where people say wow from the outside, but also, and more importantly, to create wonderful internal features which impress people and draw them *inside*. Imagine people talking for hours on

end about the internal features of the service, visiting the library and making use of our services. That is the real challenge.

Why is it only in the public sector that we build iconic buildings; the private sector doesn't seem to follow suit? In the retail world, we do not see Tesco's, McDonald's or Top Shop building attractive or iconic buildings because their emphasis is on the products and services delivered within. From a distance, their visual identity is not fancy buildings, but their brand. In the private sector any money invested has to make a return; hence the investment is in the service, infrastructure, internal features and core products. In contrast, within the public sector, the investment is from public money and it often becomes necessary to make a visible 'statement' with a new building.

### **5.3 Spatial Awareness**

I would now like to revisit my original vision of achieving social change, and how for me it is crucial to ensure that space is used in a strategic way to engineer social change. Any new build or a refurbishment has to consider the internal service features of the building.

The approach to do achieving this is to apply the following 'formula':

Social regeneration + public spaces = social change

There is a growing realisation that brand is an organisation's most valuable and intangible asset. This is an area that libraries need to learn from and prioritise within their own strategic thinking. Branding, especially in the retail industry is to influence customer perceptions and to drive store choice and loyalty, and is inevitably highly competitive in its nature. Branding can also have a particular significance in libraries: to serve as a visual identity, defining not only what libraries are, but also the spaces inside. The London Borough of Tower Hamlets has succeeded in creating such a brand in its modern public libraries and uniquely refers to them as 'Idea stores'.

I want to develop a social brand for public libraries that is trusted and valued by the public; but achieving this may not be easy. A social brand will encompass a visual identity that provides hope and aspiration for the communities that we serve. I want leaders who will implement change and will drive a new passion for leading innovative approaches to embrace the concept of new buildings through a new brand.

## 6 NEW PARTNERSHIPS

***“Coming together is a beginning. Keeping together is progress. Working together is success”.***

- Henry Ford

### 6.1 Vision, Mission and Values

I have extensively described the vision for change and the requirement to achieve social change. However we can neither achieve social change on our own nor provide all the services that the community needs on our own. We hear all the time about the need for joined-up services and partnership working. However real partnerships often do not exist; other parameters, such as costs, outputs and achievements, become significant barriers.

The best partnerships are those that serve a single purpose and are focused on achieving the same or similar vision, mission and values. We have to establish trust within any partnership, and trust doesn't come on a plate; leaders have to work at it. We know that bureaucratic organisations are too engulfed in partnership contracts and agreements, and these can vary between the useful and the not so useful. It is paramount to have a good trusting working relationship with partners since this enables positive progress to be made.

We have spaces within libraries where we can host a young mother's social group; we should provide them with free use of space. At first their usage may not be directly beneficial to the library, but, over time, a number of fruitful developments can emerge, such as more relevant book stock and improved

access to learning and information. It is also a way of encouraging new users to visit the library who may not do so in other circumstances.

In local government, costs or raising income is a barrier to successful partnership working and to achieving the social change I would like to see. The pressures on budgets and inflexible policies about charging make it harder for managers to establish effective partnerships. However leaders should conform to an important principle of leadership and that is to take risks. At times professional leaders have to do what is right, what makes sense and what works.

We need to establish partnerships at different levels in order to achieve social change. We may need a formal partnership with a college to deliver learning provision, or an informal partnership with a mother's group who need space to meet regularly. Leaders have to be empowered and have the authority to make these partnership decisions.

Partnerships work when there are mutual benefits and we need to evidence the good partnerships that we have. This may mean establishing a reporting mechanism for outputs, targets and performance indicators that clearly demonstrate our success. We should also celebrate any success together.

## 7 NEW SERVICES

***“No real social change has ever been brought about without a revolution – Revolution is but thought carried into action”***

- Emma Goldman

### **7.1 Evolution: new roles and services emerging from traditional core skills**

As part of this research I do not want to provide a prescriptive service model. I want, rather, to challenge leaders to start some new thinking and to establish a process whereby they could develop new service models. Our services should be aligned within the principle of community needs. For example, if the following community needs emerge, then we should do the following:

Climate Change – provide information relating to climate change, hold open days to generate awareness of our habits as they impact upon the climate.

Job Brokerage – unemployment is a big social issue and so we should provide space in our public libraries for employment organisations help members of the public. They should be providing information and advice for people looking for work and develop their job hunting skills. This should include the provision of computers for CV preparation and completing application forms.

Financial Awareness – issues relating to finance can be both personal and at an organisational level. Whilst organisations may employ finance experts, individuals do not have this privilege. Hence people require financial awareness

workshops and advice on how best to make the most of what they have or even information on the rights to claiming benefits.

Terrorism – this is a new threat to all of us living in a peaceful society. Terrorism has become the unexpected threat, and the real danger could be within our communities. We need to ensure that we provide the space for young people to learn and understand the positive elements of living in cohesive community.

Health – this is a big area since every community has underlying health issues, but very few have the benefit of preventative advice and support. Our public libraries are placed right in the heart of the community with access for our diverse communities. The PCT and NHS Trusts should be holding regular open days and providing advice and support on health and wellbeing. A radical new service would be to start a pilot where under 5's get a job in the children's library. This would provide a pleasant and non threatening environment in which to get jobs. Recently Idea Stores have offered adults a chance to have blood checks for diabetes on site and this has worked very well largely because it is a service which is not expected in a library and yet the very convenience of this innovative approach draws a crowd.

Education – We already have provision for homework clubs. However we should go one better and hold regular structured revision classes for GCSE and A Level students. We should be working even closer with schools to improve children's reading and literacy.

Partnership Open days – we should hold regular open days of all our partners to show what is on offer for the people in our communities.

Fundays – we should hold regular fun days so the community can derive added value from their library service. This builds on regular basic core services such as taking books out. It also strengthens community relations and family learning.

Adult literacy – this is key to improving people’s life chances. We need to provide adult literacy and numeracy classes, and provide opportunities for people who have never had the benefit of formal learning. They would feel much more comfortable to learn in a non traditional and non threatening learning environment like a public library.

However the ‘smart’ approach is to build services around local area agreements and key local performance indicators. All new services can be aligned to key local performance indicators, and we need to go further and ‘sell’ our services and show we are making a valuable contribution to local government targets and society at large. There is a huge opportunity for us to develop new services with new and distinctive outputs.

The most important contribution that libraries can make is to add to ‘public value’. Library services should provide spin-off benefits for the rest of society, for example, by improving adult literacy or pre-school learning. This is so important



for us to achieve and turns the 'symbolic' value to our service in to a much more worthy and significant reason for being.

## **7.2 Personalisation**

Personalisation is a new term being used by the government to deliver public services. Interestingly we in libraries have always known the art of providing personalised services: we have been doing this throughout our history. Staff in libraries spend more time with customers than perhaps any other local authority services. Our personal contact extends from personally geared conversations to finding the right books for people. As a result we get to know what is going on in their lives. The missing link is that we do not actively align our services to the real issues that are customers have in their lives. So when they complain about housing we sympathise, but we fail to respond by, for example, providing information relating to the housing situation.

Once again we often fail as an effective 'radar': a new personalised service model could be generated within the area of health. When the government launches new strands in the way that we work we should thrive on the challenge and move boundaries to implement new concepts.

## 8 CONCLUSION

I have outlined my vision of how libraries can adapt to achieve social change or, at least, to make a much greater contribution to social change. It is my view that we have a great opportunity to transform and reenergize the public library service. We can achieve this if we provide the right leadership at different levels throughout the library profession.

I have highlighted the need to realign our services with the needs of the communities we serve. In particular, we should focus our resources and energies on establishing a new vision, new professional thinking, new buildings and new services. All these pieces of the jigsaw have to fit together in order to achieve real social change. We need to be radical in our approach and in many ways contest the professional 'orthodoxy'.

As a profession we have to stand up and be counted: we must turn our backs on the 'do nothing' culture and turn around our fortunes and improve our impact on society. We need to take leadership seriously and ensure we provide our staffs with the right training to lead our services. Our libraries are not providing 'comprehensive and efficient' service required under the Public Libraries & Museums Act 1964: unfortunately this is the regrettable truth.

The world is changing everyday and the biggest problem is that we have are not changed with the times. There is a real danger that we turn a blind eye to

important changes; we prefer not to see them. It may be that we only come to realise this when it is too late and the public library service becomes an endangered species on the unthinkable brink of extinction.

## 9 RECOMMENDATIONS

I would like to put forward the following recommendations for the library profession.

1. **New Vision** – establish a new vision that encompasses the key objective as achieving social change.
2. **New Professional Thinking and Leadership** – we need to transform our managers in to effective leaders and provide them with the necessary budgets, support and training.
3. **Accountability** – a new accountable body is required with the authority to judge public library services and scrutinise failing services. We need a body that has the power to act decisively.
4. **New Buildings** – any new buildings have internal service design as the core of the planning process and all planners should concentrate on design features that have the potential to promote social change rather than simple architectural delight.
5. **Brand** - All new buildings should feature a clear visual identity through a distinctive brand.
6. **New Partnerships** – formal and informal partnerships must be established at different levels, with trust right at their heart.
7. **New Services** – leaders need to think outside the box, and introduce innovative and creative new services.

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