

Library 2020

Ten points from The Reading Agency's Roundtable 26 October 2010

The Reading Agency is currently holding a series of roundtable events exploring how best to achieve our mission of inspiring more people to read more.

Library 2020

For our latest roundtable, we drew together a broad range of contributors to discuss what could transform the library service at this crucial time. We specialise in helping libraries make more social impact through reading and want to inform how we develop this work, as well as a new Reading Groups for Everyone campaign, a digital development strategy with publisher and library partners and an extension of our work to involve the public in volunteering and shaping library services.

The debate that we had at this roundtable will inform our future strategy.

Roundtable contributors

Malorie Blackman, author

Sue Charteris, founding director, Shared Intelligence

Tim Coates, library campaigner

Rachel Cooke, journalist, The Observer

Jonathan Heawood, director, English PEN

Natasha Innocent, Race Online

Matt Locke, acting head of cross-platform, Channel 4

Neil MacInnes, head of library and information, Manchester City Council

Miranda McKearney, director, The Reading Agency

Stephen Page, chief executive, Faber & Faber

Katie Pekacar, policy adviser, Excellence, Improvement and Innovation, MLA

Lord Graham Tope, portfolio holder for libraries, Sutton Council.

We've picked ten key points among the many ideas that the roundtable contributors made about how the library service might move forward to 2020.

1. Involve the community through libraries' great public spaces

Public libraries are one of the last bastions of public, communal spaces and that gives them a fantastic selling point, said Matt Locke. "Public spaces are under attack, and libraries are one of the last remaining great examples."

Contributors also highlighted the way libraries can connect people to each other through reading. "The really radical thing about libraries is not reading, but reading in public," said Matt Locke. While Malorie Blackman said "People go the

cinema instead of buying a DVD because it's a shared experience — libraries are the obvious community place to share reading experiences.”

The roundtable discussed how libraries are developing a much more social and interactive reading service. There has been a startling rise in the number of library-based reading groups — now estimated at 10,000 in England and Wales — and initiatives like the Summer Reading Challenge are growing fast. “National trends show people really respond to this re-imagined library service,” said Miranda McKearney. “Reading could act as a springboard for bringing the community together and for inspiring a whole new wave of volunteering.”

Malorie Blackman and Tim Coates stressed the need to prioritise spending on book stocks, and Malorie joined those calling for a focus on current, popular books that keep users engaged.

2. Build on the success of work with children and young people.

The major success of libraries' work with children is often underplayed and there is an opportunity to learn from what's worked and apply it to other audiences. “Children's book borrowing has risen for five years running because libraries have had a focused effort on engaging children differently,” said Miranda McKearney. Sue Charteris argued that libraries had an invaluable role to play in providing safe, neutral spaces for young people to study and read. While Rachel Cooke pointed out that the opportunity to access books is particularly potent and potentially life changing for many young people. “If you are a kid with no books in the house, the library is the only place you can go for them.”

3. Develop an active information offer.

Natasha Innocent felt that libraries could start supporting access to information in the very active way they have developed their support for reading. Contributors discussed how, in the digital age, libraries have an important new role as gatekeepers of the vast archive of online information. “Accessing information is a clear role for libraries,” said Katie Pekacar. “And in the new learning context they can enable adults in particular to get access to free or affordable learning.” With 9.2 million people still offline in the UK, libraries can help to end their exclusion and guide them on to and through the internet. This will be crucial as so much government contact with the public is going digital. “There is a real role for public libraries in helping people to access online public services and develop media and information literacy skills,” added Natasha Innocent. “We know that older people are comfortable being supported to get online in libraries.”

4. Manage the spending cuts strategically.

Hard as the public spending cuts are, the squeeze on budgets does present a chance to do things differently. “I'd like us to think about the cuts as an opportunity rather than a threat,” said Graham Tope. “We're being forced to think radically at the moment — and that's often when the good ideas come.” There was a discussion about finding ways of stripping out waste in libraries and focusing on

priorities when re-allocating spending. “Yes, we are in a difficult financial situation,” said Sue Charteris. “But we can fund a re-energised front end by making massive savings elsewhere.” Miranda McKearney added “When prioritising spending, no local authority can afford to ignore the importance of a literate population and libraries’ crucial role here.” Tim Coates said “We are going to go through a horrible few years and from there we can build.” He highlighted the cost savings that could be made in libraries’ purchasing of books.

5. Selling the library message

Contributors felt that public libraries need a clear message and common core offer that they can ‘sell’ to the public. Graham Tope said the enormous value of libraries’ various services needed to be better conveyed. “I’d like us to stop talking about libraries and start talking about the library service — which is so much more than just buildings.” Malorie Blackman said “I don’t think enough people know what libraries are and what they’re there for – I’ve talked to people who are unaware books are free in libraries.” Several contributors argued that messages should emphasise libraries’ vital role in reading and literacy. “They should also stress their uniqueness,” argued Rachel Cooke. “There is nowhere else you can get what a library gives you — that is what we need to tell people.”

6. Engage the politicians.

Some contributors highlighted that libraries need to develop the skills to have a loud voice at local government tables. Being very clear about their purpose and impact will be essential to securing greater support and advocacy from politicians. “I long for a politically engaged library service,” said Graham Tope. “At the moment the political profile is only there when people threaten to close libraries.” “But responsibility for promoting libraries at a local level also falls to the service itself,” added Neil MacInnes. “We’ve worked hard in Manchester to make sure that the profile of the service is lifted. Library staff have a real responsibility to ensure that the perception of libraries is raised.”

7. Identify the visionary leaders.

Some contributors felt libraries needed to develop and express a strong message. “We’re not seeing enough of the sort of visionary leadership for public services that can claim durability beyond each political cycle,” said Matt Locke. “Where is the message about libraries that is so fundamentally right that it cannot be challenged?” Several people cited Andrew Carnegie as an example of a library pioneer, while others wondered whether it was possible, in the context of local government, for libraries to follow the example of cultural successes like the Tate, which has developed a clear sense of purpose and ambition under the leadership of Nicholas Serota. They cited the British Library and Open University as other examples.

8. Authors as champions.

The library plays a crucial cultural role in connecting writers to readers but authors and their publishers could play a greater role in championing libraries, argued Rachel Cooke. “Why aren’t we making better use of our authors and literary

celebrities?” she asked. “We need to relocate the excitement of major book launches into libraries.”

Authors are ready and willing to help, said Jonathan Heawood — but harnessing their energies is a difficult challenge. “Our members are up in arms about the future of libraries. But compared to other issues we’ve campaigned on, the problem is harder to get into focus. It’s not clear who’s got their hand on the lever and that makes things difficult to act on. Localism is against us.” Through the Reading Agency’s publisher scheme, publishers and their authors are already waking up to the value of libraries, added Stephen Page. “We’re realising that the library is a much friendlier place to build an audience for authors than the modern mass market book trade.”

9. Find the right mix of national and local communication

Positive messages about the purpose and value of libraries should be conveyed nationally and delivered at local level. “There’s a need for a clear marketing campaign at a national level,” said Neil MacInnes. “There’s an opportunity for a nationally led or co-ordinated campaign that can manifest itself locally,” agreed Jonathan Heawood.

Several contributors liked the idea of the National Year of Reading concept being extended into a decade-long initiative and Matt Locke called for any campaign to have long-term vision. “We need a decade-long goal that we can hold people accountable to.” And any national promotion will need to be backed up by greater collaboration between disparate library services and agencies, stressed Rachel Cooke.

10. Use the public sense of belonging

Any campaign should build on the public’s loyalty to libraries and might be based around the value of belonging to one, said Sue Charteris. “Why I love my library sounds defensive — but why I belong to my library sounds great.”

Reading Agency roundtables

The first Reading Agency roundtable was held on 25 June 2010 and looked at how online gaming might help adults develop their literacy skills. For a video report visit www.youtube.com/readingagency.

The views of the contributors are not necessarily those of The Reading Agency

Biographies of participants in Library 2020 roundtable

Sue Charteris founding director, Shared Intelligence



Sue is a public policy consultant specialising in local government and public service improvement. She led the Department of Culture Media and Sport's inquiry into the proposed Wirral library closures.

Sue has extensive knowledge in how to encourage and develop partnership working, having developed the National Neighbourhood Management Network, and other projects.

Prior to establishing Shared Intelligence, Sue led the Local Government Modernisation Team in DTLR (now the Department for Communities and Local Government) and was an associate fellow of the Local Government Centre, Warwick University Business School. She was formerly chief executive of the London Borough of Merton and prior to that executive director (Corporate Resources) for Kirklees Metropolitan Council in West Yorkshire.

Malorie Blackman author



Malorie is a much-loved writer of books for young people. Her first book was published in November 1990 and since then she has written over 50 books, including *Noughts & Crosses*. *Pig-Heart Boy* was turned into a BAFTA winning TV serial.

Malorie has won a number of literary prizes. She has also written TV scripts and plays. She is a graduate of the National Film and Television School. After working in the computing industry, she completed an acting course, then became a writer. She is a trustee of the Reading Agency.

Tim Coates library campaigner



Tim is a chair of the London Libraries Users Group and a consultant providing guidance to local councils and others on libraries. He is also a committed library campaigner and has advised and written about the public library service.

A former bookseller, he became managing director of Sherratt & Hughes, then of Waterstone's, and of WHSmith in Europe. Tim is also a writer, and publishes his own series of historic papers.

Rachel Cooke
journalist, The Observer



Rachel is a writer and columnist at The Observer. In 2006, she was named Interviewer of the Year at the British Press Awards and Feature Writer of the Year at the What the Papers Say Awards.

She is the New Statesman's television critic.

Rachel is also a fierce supporter of libraries. She spoke at the December 2009 Museums, Libraries and Archives Council Conference: Modernising Public Libraries

Jonathan Heawood
director, English PEN



Jonathan joined English PEN as director in November 2005 from the Fabian Society, where he was publisher and editor of the Fabian Review. Previously deputy literary editor of the Observer, he continues to write on culture and politics for a range of publications.

English PEN is the founding centre of International PEN, a membership association with 144 international branches, providing an active and supportive community for writers and readers around the world. PEN was founded in 1921 by Amy Dawson Scott to promote literature as a means of greater understanding between cultures.

Natasha Innocent
Race Online



Natasha Innocent is currently on secondment to the Race Online 2012 campaign from the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council. Race Online, led by the UK Digital Champion Martha Lane Fox, is working to support the 9.2 million people currently not online get connected and make the UK the first fully networked country in the world by the end of 2012. Natasha's role is to build public sector partnerships to the campaign.

At MLA Natasha was the senior policy adviser learning and skills and was responsible for building national partnerships between government and strategic bodies to ensure that the learning and skills potential of the museum, library and archive sector was fully exploited. Before joining MLA Natasha worked for the London Libraries Development Agency and specialized in reader development.

Matt Locke
acting head of cross-platform at Channel 4



In his position as commissioning editor for education and new media at Channel 4, Matt commissions online services that deliver informal learning in innovative and exciting ways to teenage audiences. Before Channel 4, Matt was head of innovation at BBC New Media and Technology. He was responsible for developing and running research programmes within the BBC and with external partners, including developing academic and industry partnerships, and developing open innovation initiatives. Matt also writes regularly about the social adoption of technology and the cultural impact of digital technology

for journals, other publications, and his own site [Test](#).

Neil MacInnes
head of library and information, Manchester City Council



Neil now runs Manchester's library service. He was previously head of service improvement at Manchester Libraries. The city council has invested heavily in the library service. As part of this, Manchester's Central Library is currently undergoing extensive refurbishment and nearly one million books are being temporarily stored hundreds of feet underground in the Cheshire salt mines.

Miranda McKearney
director, The Reading Agency



Miranda is founder director of The Reading Agency, an independent charity with a mission to inspire more people to read more. The Reading Agency particularly champions reading with children in their formative years, with young people struggling to develop reading skills and with adults who find reading a challenge. The charity works with every UK library authority through major national programmes and helps libraries modernise the way they provide access to reading and learning.

Miranda has worked as an activist in the field for 20 years and helped found the three smaller development agencies which merged to form The Reading Agency. She's married to a teacher and spends any spare weekends walking in Dorset, on Hardy's Eggardon Hill.

Stephen Page
chief executive, Faber & Faber



Stephen Page joined Faber in 2002, having previously worked at Transworld, HarperCollins and Fourth Estate, amongst others. In 2006, he became president of the Publishers Association.

Stephen is active in promoting the importance of libraries, independent bookshops, diversity, environmental issues and the areas of intellectual property that are of urgent concern to publishers: territorial rights, copyright and the opportunities offered by

digitization. Under Stephen's leadership Faber became the founding member of the innovative Independent Alliance which comprises ten independent publishers who share resources and intelligence in order to compete with corporate publishers in an increasingly consolidated retail landscape.

Stephen is a leading member of The Reading Agency's library/publisher partnership scheme, Reading Partners.

Katie Pekacar

policy adviser, Excellence, Improvement and Innovation, MLA

Katie is Museums, Libraries and Archives Council's policy adviser on innovation. She runs an online community of practice for people working on e-book and e-audiobook lending service development in public libraries. She is also responsible for collating information on health and well-being programmes in museums and libraries.

Lord Graham Tope

Sutton's portfolio holder for libraries



Graham is the Liberal Democrat Leader on the Association of London Government, which represents all 33 London Boroughs. He was Leader of Sutton Council for 13 years and pioneered many of Sutton's award-winning services.

In 1972, at the age of 29, he became Liberal M.P. for Sutton and Cheam. He was made a working peer in 1994 and is now Liberal Democrat local government spokesperson in the House of Lords.