

the reading agency

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Redesigning Libraries' Literacy and Reading Services

As a charity specialising in helping libraries make more of a social impact through their support for reading, The Reading Agency works with every UK library authority, so we've got quite a bird's eye view. We've been really moved by the huge wave of public support for libraries, and the backing of luminaries from Zadie Smith to the Archbishop of Canterbury (**slide 2**). But there are such conflicting views of what we're fighting for, and a tension between holding onto what we love and the need for radical change triggered by cuts, social need, new customer expectations, and a revolution in local authority and digital environments.

Cuts mean there can be no sacred cows. But as the service is remodelled let's be clear about libraries' absolutely core functions and areas of most social need, and then innovate to deliver differently.

I am not one who argues that **all** libraries should focus on is reading. But I **would** argue that support for literacy and reading should be a main priority, and properly resourced. It's a bedrock function. That's certainly what the public think. MLA research late last year found that the public think libraries are there to support their reading, learning and information needs.

1. THE SOCIAL NEED

But in an age of austerity, can we justify expenditure on libraries' reading work? Yes, yes, and yes! Because it's meeting a huge social need, and because the work can be sweated to deliver on a whole range of community needs, not just literacy skills.

The arguments need redesigning. We're developing a matrix (**slide 3**) to show that libraries' literacy and reading work delivers against all these pressing social issues, from skills and employability to participation in community life. I'll take just two.

Reading and Literacy

With such pressing issues facing society around literacy and reading, we can surely blow out of the water those commentators who argue that libraries' support for reading is no longer needed in an age of mass paperbacks and new digital platforms. I'm not sure where they were when these kinds of figures came out...: (**slide 4**)

- One in four pupils aged 11 can't read or write properly, and only 40% of England's young people enjoy reading.

- 16% of 16-25 year olds have a reading age of 11.
- England's reading achievement score for ten year olds has dropped from 3rd to 19th place and we're now outperformed by Latvia.

So there's a critical job to be done. And it's not just around learning and educational attainment. A person with poor literacy is more likely to live in a non-working household, live in overcrowded housing and is less likely to vote.

There's a vicious cycle of deprivation and disadvantage, but literacy skills and a love of reading can break it (**slide 5**). Recent Oxford University research found that reading for pleasure is the only out-of-school activity for 16-year-olds that is demonstrably linked to securing managerial or professional jobs. This confirms OECD research which found that reading for pleasure is more important than wealth or class as an indicator of success at school, and that students who enjoy reading the most perform much better than students who enjoy reading the least

Very little advocacy for libraries seems to be bang up to date with the new understanding of the relationship between reading for pleasure and literacy acquisition, and the life chances this opens up. Libraries don't – in general - teach the actual skill of reading; of decoding words. But they **do** play an essential role in providing access to books, in designing activities that help people both enjoy reading, and practice and build up their skills. This isn't just a nice thing we can't afford any more in an age of austerity: it's critical work.

Reading for Pleasure

The skill needed to decode words is linked to the motivation that comes from enjoying reading. This UKLA slide (**slide 6**) shows the inextricable links between reading instruction and reading for pleasure, and the different practices involved. To become a reader, both elements must be fused. I find it infuriating how so much of the discourse around literacy focuses only on the role of schools and reading instruction – there must be a joined-up approach and libraries have an essential role to play, as this slide shows.

So there is an unarguable social need around literacy and the place of reading for pleasure in developing it. Libraries are superb at the deadly-serious business of developing literacy skills by making reading fun, and social.

Let's not lose sight of the transformation in the reading service in the last ten years. Above average young readers are now twice as likely to be public library users. Children's book issues have risen for the last six years. Schemes like our Summer Reading Challenge (**slide 7**) are having a huge impact, and we're thrilled that 97% of authorities are still involved this summer. Impact evidence shows that participants become more confident readers, and enjoy it more. Doing it combats the summer holiday reading dip in reading levels.

But libraries' reading work has big implications for other social problems. Let's take one more area from the matrix: **health (slide 8)**.

One in six people suffer from mental health problems and there are huge associated costs. Libraries' early intervention work with reading should be of profound interest to planners charged with improving health and well being.

Libraries help people develop the skills and confidence to manage their own health through health information, reading groups, mood boosting reading, and support for people who are housebound. At The Reading Agency we are doing a lot of work in this area, and have created a new evidence and advocacy framework with West Midlands' Society of Chief Librarians. This has acted as the basis for a Memorandum of Understanding between West Midlands' libraries and the regional health authority. It marries research like this: **(slide 9)**

- Research into leisure interventions with a cohort of people over 75 found that reading reduces the risk of dementia by 35%
- Sussex University research shows that reading reduces stress levels by 68%.
- Other evidence shows the well-being effects of taking part in social reading activity like reading groups. This helps combat isolation, and develops concentration, memory and mental agility.

The same exercise can be done for all the areas in that social need matrix. Libraries' work with reading delivers crucial outcomes and can save money further down the line.

So there's a social and economic need, a bedrock library purpose, a hugely promising new look reading service and a radically changed environment. How do we move forward?

2. NEW LOOK READING SERVICE: Keeping up the Momentum

We're determined to find new ways to ensure the public continue to benefit from libraries' support for reading. You've all been doing amazing work to develop a new look reading service, and our partnership strategy has resulted in the involvement and investment of big hitting partners backing this work, from the BBC to 40 publisher partners, the TUC to WEA **(slide 10)**. It's going to be crucial not to lose momentum. I'll quickly outline some of the areas we're working on with SCL and other partners, and finish with an invitation to work with us on them.

Collective Action

With massively cut resources, one way through is more focused and collective action to strip out the costs of duplicated work. It's a paradox that national co-ordination can help create better local services and outcomes. There are some things that can only be done nationally, like shared subscriptions to reference sources.

With SCL we're working up plans for a new shared strategy to help libraries do fewer, bigger things together **(slide 11)**. Rather than reduce everything to a grey, pared down offer to the public, let's have some multi-colour action! We're working on a library reading year that pulls together all the big reading programmes and

partnerships, with spikes to focus action and capitalise on the effort of major partners. This will create a shared pool of resources with economies of scale, and lever in partnership investment at same time as driving change. For instance with World Book Night (**slide 12**) we can use the book gifting strand to drive forward community engagement and volunteering in exciting new ways, whilst capitalising on the massive media coverage the event attracts.

We hope this model can achieve cheaper and more effective delivery of libraries' baseline reading service, and allow for targeted outreach work in areas of most social need. It should act as a pivot for new ways of working, so where shared service work is going on, staffing could be reconfigured, with reader hit squads working across local authority boundaries to plan and deliver the big "spikes". We're looking at new cost effective ways to support teams like these, from telephone hotlines to webinars.

As part of this, we're also experimenting with smarter ways to meet public demand. Libraries are experiencing a huge wave of interest in reading groups, and we've recently launched a big new **Reading Groups for Everyone** campaign with SCL (**slide 13**). This is seen as a new model by the sector for tapping into national activity to deliver a good local service, and a smart channel shift example, as the site can help automate the council's transactions with the public. We're aiming for 20,000 library reading groups by 2013, and to get the social benefits to everyone – from the visually impaired to families with low literacy. The site's attracting really big partnership interest – we're working with Penguin to celebrate this Saturday's National Reading Group Day by offering a Dawn French visit as a prize (**slide 14**). As an action from today it'd be great if you could ensure all your service's groups are registered and using the site, to make sure they benefit.

Public Involvement

A redesigned reading service is going to have to be all about public involvement. I really like Kent's approach to making reading a springboard for an exciting volunteering programme. We're doing training in lots of authorities, developing models of volunteering that add capacity without running into job substitution issues, and which give volunteers and the people they're helping important gains. Here's one of the young people helping children get through this summer's reading challenge (**slide 15**). We're grateful to John Laing Charitable Trust for their support. But the public need to be involved in ways that go far beyond volunteering. Our Big Lottery funded MyVoice programme with 20 authorities involves disadvantaged young people in designing reading hubs and activities in their community. We're just getting going, and are really excited by what happens when libraries share power with users in this way and by the accreditation frameworks which allow young people to progress. If you can, do join us at summer roadshows in Weymouth, Sunderland, St Helens, Westminster and Great Yarmouth.

3. DIGITAL REDESIGN

And finally, digital redesign. To have an impact on the nation's literacy and engagement with reading, libraries are going to have to radically reshape their digital offer. It would be so fantastic to see a powerful national and local online and social media presence for libraries, engaging a population whose lifestyle increasingly revolves around digital media. **(slide 16)**

This is much bigger than the thorny issue of e-lending. There's an urgent need to develop a compelling digital presence and the associated staff skills, and it's an area where national planning really is needed. We're in the early stages of discussion with a range of partners about a national library website and catalogue.

And earlier this year we brought together our 40 publisher partners with the library sector to explore how we can take the mutually beneficial work we're doing to spread reading online. What does the digital version of our existing analogue partnership look like?

To inform our thinking we surveyed the sector. 113 authorities replied. The research found that the vast majority (98.2%) of authorities do **not** currently have a digital media or reading strategy, and only a third are using Twitter in their reading activities. Local authority IT arrangements are a real issue. Even really basic mechanisms such as RSS feeds from publisher web sites are difficult for many libraries. Staff and users need liberating to open up library data and share new conversations. There was an overwhelming response to the question we asked about digital skills training, and we're developing a new offer to help.

We've created a shared digital action plan which we're now fundraising for. The Department for Business, Industry and Skills has already funded us to explore the application of gaming technology to our adult literacy Six Book Challenge. Our digital action plan includes relatively easy things to get off the ground, like Skype author events, and much bigger plans like a new national digital drop box where publishers can share their digital resources with libraries. Publishers are spending a fortune creating author videos, for example, and would love libraries to be able to use them on plasma screens.

4. CALL TO ACTION

That's me done, apart from an invitation. We'd love to involve you in three areas of innovation:

- We're offering workshops to councils exploring the local application of the national reading strategy model we're developing with SCL. We want to test how a reading year with collective cost saving spikes can achieve priority local outcomes.
- On digital, we're looking into doing a bid to the new NESTA/ACE digital fund to put our digital action plan into practice, and would like to talk to interested partners.

- And finally, we're inviting clusters of authorities to work with us in rolling out a new health/reading strategy.

These are my contact details (**slide 17**). I'm here all day. Let's talk!