

Premiere League or Conference Division?

The 'Hot Topic' Libraries debate at Chief Leisure Officers (CLOA London) – 10th September 2013

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In my role as DCMS national library advisor I get to meet lots of people and to hear lots of differing opinions on the future role of libraries. One thing that is becoming increasingly clear is that, despite the often differing views, the library debate never fails to spark fervent and impassioned discussion – as was the case at the recent CLOA London meeting I attended.

I was keen to understand from local authority senior managers' and other key stakeholders, how the current public sector financial challenges, alongside the rapidly evolving world of books, due to e-technology advances amongst other things, was being addressed in London. Where, I wondered, in my fictitious league table of national local authority library teams would London boroughs rank?

- 'Division 1 players = local authorities embracing the challenges as long-term transformational opportunities;
- Division 2 players = short term, temporary 'budget-solving' library cuts made; no long term plan; no clear strategic direction of travel?
- Division 3 players = substantial cuts have been made; no plan; crisis management.

As the debate got underway, it was clear that there was a fight for premiere league status around the table – with discussions focusing on the mixed economy of opportunities that are being explored and implemented – from community management, to outsourcing (including cross-borough outsourcing), and from shared services to one-stop shop, contact centre library-based solutions.

The meeting became all the more lively when the proverbial gauntlet was thrown down - with a call to arms....a proposal for a fully integrated 'London Public Library Service'. This was met with unconditional strategic support, followed by deeper and more probing discussion about how, in reality, this would be achieved? Substantial challenges were identified – how would political differences across boroughs be managed? What about the different management models that now prevail (outsourced contracts, shared services, trusts, in-house provision)? How would libraries remain responsive to 'local' requirements? What would the governance structure be? There were definitely more questions than answers....

It was suggested that perhaps 'starting small' would be the best way ahead? The London Library Consortium (LLC) was seen as a great pan-London opportunity which should be further explored and built upon, and the development of a London-wide library card was also seen as an opportunity. Furthermore, shouldn't libraries also be included as viable services for consideration as part of the LGA's 'shared services' work stream?

The need to evidence the wider community benefits that libraries bring was also highlighted – and there was discussion about the urgent need for a more universal adoption of Outcomes Based Delivery Frameworks – so that the library sector can prove its worth, and argue its place at the corporate table, alongside other services all making a play for increasingly scarce resources.

Two other powerful views were also shared; there should be more of a focus on understanding why people don't currently visit their library, in order to reshape services to attract them into libraries...a plea to get to 'know your non-user' to ensure that libraries remain well-utilised, vibrant spaces – a bit of old fashioned 'market research'? ;

And there is a clear opportunity for senior staff to promote libraries more actively to chief executives and Leaders, as significant corporate assets, which should be used to support and showcase Councils' wider offer; libraries are ideally placed in communities, and should be used to provide a convenient, accessible and welcoming 'front door' between Councils and communities across a wide range of services.

The debate was both lively and fervent, and whilst there were differing views about how the current challenges could best be addressed, one thing was very clear – the senior managers of London library services present at the meeting are clearly aspiring for Premiership status!

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