

Notes from presentation by Sarah Mears, Programme Manager, Libraries Connected

Sarah will explore how the public library system, founded on social mobility principles, plays a crucial role within communities : - contributing to the cultural ecology, particularly in areas of low cultural engagement, supporting children in their early years and harnessing talents and aspirations that have a lasting impact on life chances.

In 1850 The Public Libraries Actⁱ gave boroughs with more than 10,000 inhabitants the power to finance public libraries from the rates. There are two schools of thought about why the Act was supported.

The first is that it was to encourage self-improvement – giving working class people the opportunity to educate themselves. The second theory is that as working people were beginning to enjoy small increases in leisure time, reformers believed that reading would offer a more productive alternative to more iniquitous past-times such as gambling.

Probably both theories were true to an extent. Even so, some of the Establishment opposed the Act.

Nevertheless, the act led to the growth of public libraries in every town and city – Charles Dickens speaking at the opening of the Manchester Public Library in 1852 – expressed the hope that the library would prove to be “a source of pleasure and improvement in the cottages, the garrets and the cellars of the poorest of our people.”

Andrew Carnegie that great philanthropist who had such an impact on the public library service definitely saw the public library as a force for social equality saying “there is not such a cradle of democracy upon the earth as the free public library, this republic of letters, neither rank, office nor wealth receives the slightest consideration.”

So fast forward 170 years – where are we now? The Social Mobility Commissionⁱⁱ State of the Nation report published on 30th April this year presented some worrying findings for the country. It revealed that social mobility has stagnated over the past four years. Essentially “Being born privileged means you are likely to remain privileged. Being born disadvantaged, however, means you have to overcome a series of huge barriers if you are to escape that disadvantage. Younger generations in the research felt most acutely that background determines where you end up. Three quarters of all those surveyed said they believed there is a large gap between social classes in Britain today.

Poverty is an increasing concern for the nation. The Child Poverty Action Group predict that by 2021 five million children will live in poverty (it is currently four million), whilst The UN's Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty Professor Philip Alston reporting in November 2018 said “for almost one in every two children to be poor in 21st Century Britain is not just a disgrace, but a social calamity and an economic disaster”. The report highlighted that austerity in the UK has dismantled many of the safety nets that have supported communities in previous generations.

Libraries have not, of course, been immune to austerity. Over 300 have closed, others are now being run by volunteers. But I want to assure you that there is still a strong network of public libraries, touching most communities. In this presentation I want to share with you my reflections about the way libraries today help communities to reduce the impact of disadvantage.

Essentially I think there are two aspects to the support libraries offer –the first is about the community and the role libraries play in creating a positive sense of place, fostering community confidence and generating community pride. And the second is about the direct impact libraries can have on individuals.

I believe the presence of a library in a town or village says something very powerful to the community it serves. Libraries are shared public spaces open to all, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, age, or socio-economic level. They are one of the few places in our community where people don't have to be consumers, just citizens. Where people are valued, trusted (if you think about it, the whole premise of the public library service is built on trust – that people will borrow and return books and that they will look after them – and in most cases they do), and libraries engender a sense of belonging and community ownership. It's amazing that when I meet someone and disclose that I am a librarian how often they will start talking about "their library" -not "the library". Often libraries are havens even in the most difficult of communities. In my previous job I was responsible for a prison library - essentially a public library for the prisoners. The sense of sanctuary, hope, opportunity and freedom in that wonderful space in the middle of a very grim Victorian prison surrounded by locked gates, window bars and barbed wire made the library an almost magical place to experience.

I think this quote from R. David Lankes, is very telling, he said "bad libraries build collections, good libraries build services, great libraries build communities".

The Victorian reformers who founded our public library service saw the library as a place of self-betterment, an engine of social mobility but libraries are also there for people in the here and now –meeting current need as well as future opportunity.

Recently two books about growing up in poverty and challenging circumstances have become best sellers. Both authors have reflected on the role of the public library in an otherwise chaotic world

Darren McGarvey in Poverty Safari

The library "acts as a safety valve. A library provides a safe and supportive environment where vulnerable people can educate themselves or mentally regroup"

"As well as not costing any money the library is one of the few places in the community that is quiet enough to hear yourself think"

Kerry Hudson writer of Lowborn says of libraries

"It's the same instant calm each time I go through the doors – more immediate than a glass of white wine on an empty stomach, better than Xanax. But it's deeper than that, it's a feeling of safety that settles softly inside me. I'm talking about walking into

a library. My whole life whatever has been happening, where ever I've been in the world, I've walked into a library, and, at least for the moment everything has been ok."

And talking of her childhood, she says:

"And when we suddenly moved to yet another new town with few possessions and no money, there was still always the comforting familiarity of a library, those books that were all my own for a full week."

Libraries enable access to services and activities that people need - key among these for many people are digital services -free access to WiFi and computers and help to complete benefit forms, job applications, and write CVS and for some, newly arrived in this country, the ability and reassurance of being able to contact far-away family and friends.

In libraries young people can find quiet spaces to study away from overcrowded, noisy homes.

It's heart breaking to me that the barriers that prevent disadvantaged children from learning can be very practical and libraries have been proactive about working with community partners to tackle some of these.

For example, many libraries have linked the Summer Reading Challenge, the major annual library reading programme for children in the summer holidays to lunch clubs – when schools are closed and school dinners are not available some children miss out on healthy lunches and library services have teamed up with local funders, tenants and residents associations to ensure children have good lunches - and that they are able to take part in the Summer Reading Challenge.

Other library services working with local councils and charities run the "tricky period" scheme offering free sanitary protection to women and girls, no questions asked allowing girls to stay in school and not miss out on critical learning.

And this seems a good point to return to the connection between social mobility and libraries. From the opportunity that leaps from book-laden shelves, to the anticipation of the person tentatively taking their first online steps....Libraries are the agents of second, third, fourth chances.....

Back to Darren McGarvey who says "walking into a library is often the first step a person takes out of social exclusion, unemployment and poverty".

Because when you step through the library doors, other doors open, whether it's developing language and literacy through reading for pleasure, learning new skills or the inspirational mood-boosting impact of creativity and cultural participation.

In "Improving children's life chances" Octavia Holland points out that vocabulary age five has been found to be the best predictor of whether children who experienced social deprivation in childhood were able to buck the trend and escape poverty in later adult life. The recent "Word Gap" research found that there are dramatic differences in the number of words children in different social economic groups know and understand. This difference is there by the time children are 18 months old.

Closing the word gap is the top priority in the UK government's social mobility action plan. Enabling parents and carers to share books and rhymes with very young children means they are exposed to more words and their understanding of language is deepened.

Local library services reach families in a non-threatening way and, particularly in the early years, libraries attract families who may not feel comfortable accessing other services.

Rhyme times happen in almost every library across the country and are particularly popular – building babies and toddlers brains and calming over-stressed parents. In Essex Libraries, research was conducted in 2017/2018 to look at the impact of rhyme times on maternal mental health and the researchers found that the proportion of families attending rhyme times from the most deprived postcodes was higher than for the library overall - indicating that these services can reach families in particular need.

St Helens libraries have developed a strong partnership with the Speech and Language Service. Library staff delivering rhyme times have been trained to specifically develop their use of language with young children, as well as using rhyme times as an opportunity for parents to access other early years support -such as the Healthy Living team and breast-feeding professionals in the relaxed, less "official" environment of a library.

In 2018 The Reading Agency published "A Society of Readers". The report highlighted that reading for pleasure is one of the most important predictors of test scores at age 16 regardless of background. Infact children from disadvantaged backgrounds who read often tend to score better than less enthusiastic readers from better-off families. Library activities that inspire children to love reading and gives them access to books are therefore really important.

The All-Party-Parliamentary-Group on hunger revealed that it can take up to six weeks of teaching for disadvantaged students to relearn reading skills lost during the summer break. The annual Summer Reading Challenge that I highlighted earlier – free to all, promoted heavily to schools, encourages all children to keep reading – it is informal, fun, with the freedom to choose any book - it ensures children are practicing reading during the summer and breaks down any barriers to library use. It also gives each child a crucial sense of achievement. Whatever their ability, every child earns a reward for what they read. Activities like the Summer Reading Challenge help children to believe in themselves as readers - for some children it is transformative and for parents, the first time they actually see their children engaging with other adults around books.

Here's award winning young adult author Juno Dawson on the subject. She says that Bingley Library moulded her into a writer. She says "working class transgender kids, statistically, probably aren't meant to end up where I have and that's in part due to the social mobility libraries and reading allowed me"

The other core business of libraries is learning. In libraries there are opportunities for group learning, self-study, the serendipity of coming across a new interest whilst

you're in the library sheltering from the rain. From books on any topic under the sun to basic skills, from starting a small business to pursuing a new hobby, libraries can help people take that first life-changing step.

Libraries offer online courses - short taster learning that can lead to further study – This is a sample of Universal Class with over 400 free online courses from Essex Libraries website and this is Learn My Way one of many basic online computer skills courses available from libraries.

For those moving on into work, the public library network has a partnership with the British Library Business and Intellectual Property Centre. 14 libraries across the country offering business advice for small businesses and those wishing to become self-employed.

As well as learning spaces, libraries are more and more becoming cultural spaces, building new connections with arts and culture organisations, Bridge organisations and participating in Cultural Education Partnerships. For many local people in disadvantaged, culturally deprived or rural communities, libraries offer people a first experience of arts and culture – both as consumers and as participants. Libraries are now part of Arts Council England's portfolio, indeed six library services have just completed their first year as Arts Council National Portfolio Organisations and this has given us greater opportunities to engage with the rest of the cultural sector and work with communities to develop a culture offer and provide the quality experiences that local people deserve.

For example: libraries are keen Fun Palace participants and all the evidence from Fun Palace evaluation suggests that they are particularly successful at engaging with more deprived communities

In 2016 libraries celebrated Shakespeare's 400th anniversary with library events and activities over several months in partnership with the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust. 716 libraries got involved across the country with the participation of 12,024 people. In addition our Shakespeare Selfie Saturday social media campaign in April where people tweeted their favourite Shakespeare quotes generated more than 6,000 tweets. I was particularly struck by one of the comments from a parent in Devon who said they could not afford to take their child to the theatre, but were thrilled to be able to watch an interpretation of a Shakespeare play in the library. Who knows what inspiration that child took from that performance – and where it might lead them.

Gloucestershire Libraries are just coming to the end of a three-year programme called "The Art of Libraries" which offered a wide range of cultural experiences through libraries specifically reaching out to communities who aren't traditional consumers of "culture". The Head of Service said "we have come to realise that Art of Libraries is fundamentally about empowering the community and partners to be involved in planning and commissioning arts and culture themselves and ensuring that the library is an integral part of this community wide programme"

I have been describing how libraries support people in deprived circumstances, but I want to emphasize that the most important feature of the library service is that it is a universal service. Services are not targeted and therefore non-stigmatising. Library

audiences are extremely diverse. Compared with other types of cultural activities, libraries reach a much broader range of age groups and social backgrounds. The library service offers opportunities for people to mix, to share and to better understand each other, building empathy and hopefully a sense of fairness and justice. And strengthening a sense of community.

So what to the future?

Libraries of course cannot solve all social ills and we certainly can't do it alone. Other services equally support people and we are more effective when we work together, sharing our skills and knowledge and perhaps overcoming some of the challenges of austerity by innovative new shared service offers. Libraries' unique contribution is that reading and learning are at the heart of everything we do. And effective and open partnerships with health, education and culture as well as ongoing partnerships with the communities themselves seem to me to be key.

It has been interesting to revisit the birth of the modern public library service and to consider how the principles that guide us have been shaped and developed over the years. I believe libraries today are built on equality, justice, aspiration and opportunity. I hope that we are enablers and empowerers and that we are both constructive partners and community collaborators.

To close a quote from Katie Hyson from Business Fights Poverty

The public library became a singular point of access to the world. A place of more. The books in my hands became both refuges and keys, and I used them to open the shut doors that lay ahead—college, career, and, to my recent astonishment, grad school.

Last night, I held a new book in my hands, a small paperback literary journal. I looked at my name in the table of contents. I didn't look at it as my 27-year-old self, with qualifiers and negations, already anxiously looking to the next milestone. I looked at it as my six-year-old self looked at that first library book: with awe. I imagined what she would think if she knew her name would be on a shelf one day.ⁱⁱⁱ

Katie Hyson: Director: Thought Leadership at Business Fights Poverty

ⁱ Paul Hamby & Ira Najowitz (1999) The Public Libraries Act of 1850, Public & Access Services Quarterly, 2:4,73-88, DOI: [10.1300/J119v02n04_06](https://doi.org/10.1300/J119v02n04_06)

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https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/798404/SMC_State_of_the_Nation_Report_2018-19.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://medium.com/s/library-stories/the-library-was-the-place-where-i-could-always-get-more-3c5b578499a5>