

Event notes
Re-invigorating our libraries
A panel discussion with William Sieghart
Wednesday 14 January 2015

Introduction

The Libraries APPG hosted a panel debate event to examine the [Sieghart Independent Library Report for England](#), jointly commissioned by DCMS and DCLG, and published on 18 December 2014.

Chaired by Lord Graham Tope CBE, Chair of the APPG, the panel members were:

- William Sieghart, report author, philanthropist, entrepreneur and publisher
- Joanna Trollope OBE, author and panel member of the Sieghart report
- Paul Martin, Chief Executive of Wandsworth London Borough Council and London Lead Chief Executive for Arts, Culture and Libraries
- Alison Wheeler, General Manager of Suffolk Libraries

Paul Blantern, Chief Executive at Northamptonshire County Council and Chair of the task force recommended in the Sieghart report, also spoke at the event.



*(Left to right, top row Paul Martin, Graham Tope and William Sieghart.
Bottom row Joanna Trollope and Alison Wheeler)*

Summary

Speaking at the event Paul Blantern, Chief Executive at Northamptonshire County Council and Chair of the task force recommended in the Sieghart report, outlined his focus on delivery.

Paul said the task force would use the “catalyzation” from the report to deliver. He went on to outline the task force's timeframe for delivery of the Sieghart report, “The report says it has three to four years to deliver but if it hasn’t delivered anything in the next eight to twelve months, or eighteen months at the most, then it will have failed.”

Joanna Trollope emphasized the importance of skilled library staff and the fundamental value of library services to society, saying, “This has nothing to do with politics but the social fabric of this country. This is more fundamental to, not just the wellbeing of this country, but the future of this country than almost anything else.”

William Sieghart stated his belief that the current structure of 151 library authorities in England is a “dysfunctional way to provide a library system and what was apparent was a lack of interest at the national and local level in changing that.” He went on to explain that in his report “I didn’t want to engage in how many library authorities there are, that is something that local authorities need to work out between themselves.”

Graham Tope summed up the session with a call to action, “This is a huge time of opportunity. It is up to all of us in this room to grab it and use it. In the next few months politicians from all parties are going to be in a remarkable listening mode. It is up to us to get libraries on the political agenda.”

Notes

William Sieghart provided a presentation of his report saying, “In some ways today is a very good handover. In some ways I am yesterday on the library story, and tomorrow is Paul Blantern.”

He said that getting politicians’ attention during an election year may not be easy. “I know it is particularly difficult to do in an election year but as an ordinary citizen I can play that to an advantage. It puts all the parties on the spot. Many of you here represent people who are good at putting people on the spot. I hope you use this report and its recommendations to try and ring out concession after concession out of every political party so that, post May, we can then twist their arms and remind them what they promised.”

He said that the problems facing library authorities could be what force them to change: “It’s a dysfunctional way to provide a library system and what was apparent was a lack of interest at the national and local level in changing that... I didn’t want to engage in how many library authorities there are, that is something that local authorities need to work out between themselves.”

But he said that austerity may force a re-think on the structure of the system. He reiterated his point that the value of libraries is generally lost on Britain’s power brokers because very few of them use libraries.

“There are plenty that have a haunted 1970s feel about them and yet there are other incredible places. What is missing is the sharing of knowledge and best practice. I hope that Paul is able and empowered with the right resources to create a task force which can take the best of the country and show the worst of the country how to do it right.”

He reminded the audience not to forget the books, saying “The headlines seemed to focus on those three things (being flexible, having wifi, hot drinks) but they were three things that got repeated to me over and over. I’m afraid what didn’t get out in all of this was traditional things like books and I have to say most of the libraries I visited I was really disappointed in their books. Now that might seem like an old fashioned thing to say but I suspect that missing in all of this is that they haven’t learned from the booksellers, they don’t refresh their books enough or put so much cellophane over the covers that you can’t really see what’s inside it. I just want to make a little plea here, I don’t think the book is going away and I think our love affair with the book needs to be engendered.”

Joanna Trollope highlighted the importance of libraries as community hubs and the importance of skilled, professional library staff. She said, “This has nothing to do with politics but the social fabric of this country. This is more fundamental to, not just the wellbeing of this country, but the future of this country than almost anything else.”

She made a passionate plea for people to realize that libraries of the future had to be community hubs.

She referred to statistics in the report that at least 20% of people in England don’t have access to any digital technology of any kind what so ever. She said most people don’t know this, “but librarians know because they play a kind of social security role of getting people through their pension applications and rent rebates.”

Her second point was that none of this was going to happen without professional librarians who she said were: “so qualified, so dedicated, probably insufficiently rewarded in every way, certainly insufficiently regarded” she said that she was particularly anxious to see the implementation of the report’s recommendation for a Teach First-style work force development programme.

Paul Martin began by quoting the novel *The Leopard* saying “If you want things to stay as they are, things will have to change.”

His view was that libraries faced two problems, budget cuts and the ‘commoditization of information’ which removed the innate value of the reference library as the only source of free information for some people.

While he believes there is a possibility that libraries could be saved he doubts this will happen, “I think we need to acknowledge that what libraries need is transformational change right now, and I wish I didn’t believe it, but I think at best libraries face a future of managed decline” adding that this process will look different in different areas.

He said “without radical surgery this is what I think the service faces and so the question, if you agree, is whether that decline is inevitable?” He said “I don’t believe it is” and listed the assets that libraries can put to use: valuable state, staff and resources adding that “the most important asset of all is an emotional asset in the hearts as well as the minds of the British people and I think that is fundamentally why any proposals to close or reduce library services is met, or appears often to local politicians, to be met with a disproportionate reaction, disproportionate apparently, to the usage of the service. Because there is a support and affection that goes well beyond the use of libraries.”

He drew comparison between Post Offices and public libraries, saying they were both financially challenged, and not just liked but loved. He suggested that the detailed legal requirements that the Post Office must deliver might be useful in the library service – for example 99% of the population must live within 3 miles of their nearest Post Office.

He said that despite challenges “it is still possible to design library services in a way that they can survive and thrive but the key thing is that the service needs the capacity to create that change – the legislative framework and the capacity, and that means scale and investment and my belief is that the library services does not have that scale of leadership and investment that the Post Office enjoys.”

He said that thirty-three library services in London meant there was not the required scale. He focused on the national picture that the task force would have to address “I don’t think community involvement is going to save the library service... I hope that the task force will challenge any of the interest groups that exist to move out of our comfort zones to contemplate what might previously have been unthinkable and to preserve the library service.”

“I’m not confident that on current lines the library service will survive the next 50 years, there may not be much time left.”

Alison Wheeler was as adamant as Paul Martin that a national picture needed to be looked at but said that she believed there was plenty of evidence to support a positive view that this can be achieved.

She said the recommendations “will reduce postcode lottery. In some areas of the country there is a lack of investment and maybe of ambition, and I think that a strong library service across the country will give every citizen access to space, network and support.”

She addressed one of Paul Martin’s points, “Referring to post offices Paul, Suffolk libraries is the first to have a library that runs a Post Office, we did that because the Post Office closed two years ago and we stepped into the gap.”

She said, “It is so easy with the depressing chatter about the decline of libraries to see a doom-laden future but I think we can energetically rebut that.” She said that free Wifi does bring in new users, outlined how working with the community can be helpful, and talked about partnerships with commercial firms such as Google.

Paul Blantern outlined his focus on delivery through the task force, saying, “My one promise, and I am a delivery person, is what this task force will do with the catalyzation from William’s report is to deliver something, because for so long people have been talking about it.”

He said that a huge amount of work was being done on a broad range of issues and he was trying “to pull together a single diagram” to represent public library services that included community hubs, digital fluency, making sure books are still important, safe places, more customers, economies of scale etc.”

He said that the task force must be to show how value is added: “Sometimes the decision makers are people who do not use libraries and we need to get to the decision makers and show them what the value is.”

He reassured the audience that the publication of report on the last possible day of Parliament before Christmas recess was not to bury it but, “I’ve had absolute assurance that it was the complete contrary to that, that they wanted to get it out before Christmas because with an election coming up if it came out in January, in purdah it would have got lost and so I want to dispel that myth.”

He added that, “The report says it has three to four years to deliver but if it hasn’t delivered anything in the next eight to twelve, or eighteen months at the most, then it will have failed.”

Comments and questions from the audience

Don McCubbin, who campaigned about libraries in the Wirral, said that local authorities had a very mixed track record and were the weak link adding that campaigners shouldn’t use finance as an excuse not to put ideas into practice – said that in the 1980s it was necessary to fight for every pound.

Councillor Ian Stephens, Chair of the LGA Culture, Tourism and Sport Board said the LGA fully supported the report and the task force and asked the task force to provide a report for central government in six months

Ken Chad, consultant, called on libraries to realise that companies like Google show that “the library business is booming”.

Stephanie Crossley, Executive Head of Leisure and Libraries at the London Borough of Sutton, did not believe that changing the structures delivering library services would be as difficult as some people claim, saying “It is not as hard as you think.” She said that it cannot be done while we are struggling through Victorian structures and that Greater Manchester should be looked at.

Richard Mollett, Chief Executive of the Publishers Association, commented about “libraries falling between stools. You have library policy in the DCMS but the purse strings are in the DCLG and an incoming government should tidy up the furniture on this.’ He said, “On the point about the comprehensive service, the definition within the act needs to be looked at properly. Taken with the analogy to the Post Office, which has specific obligations, the library service needs something as tight as that in order to ensure that local authorities do deliver it and have the strength of the law behind them because when you look around the country is being interpreted in lots of different ways.”

Responses from the panel

In response to questions William Sieghart said, “The sector has suffered from a lack of leadership and what I hope now is that the task force will provide is the leadership they’ve been craving for.” He said, ‘Although we can’t announce anything yet we know there are already one or two corporate breakthroughs led by the government digital service, who will also be on the task force, in terms of delivering some new kit, some new technology.”

Paul Martin suggested that providing Wifi was not going to be a panacea for all geographic areas, “Obviously I’m talking about the perspective of a particular place, Wandsworth, it isn’t just the coffee shops that have Wifi, the town centres and the council estates have free Wifi. Most young people, even those not working, have smart phones. I think we have to be a bit realistic about access to Wifi, of course it’s not true everywhere, but access to wifi is a government policy anyway and in certain parts of the country – there will be people who come to light who haven’t got access but I

would say already that number has peaked and is likely to be diminishing already simply because of access to Wifi everywhere else.”

William Sieghart responded saying: ‘I rather disagree with you I think if this really was the government’s priority there would be Wifi available in every library in the country. I think it is appalling, it is shocking, that over 1,000 libraries don’t have wifi and many of these are libraries that have been slated for closure and across the road people are sitting in coffee shops.’

Addressing the point about the task forces’ role in making the provision of library services more uniform across the country William said that this was “more likely to be through evolution than mandation” saying that there were too many diverse stake holders and that the task force would disseminate good practice rather than change the law.

About the Libraries APPG

The Libraries All Party Parliamentary Group was established for Parliamentarians to discuss both the role and future of libraries across the UK. By developing literacy skills, providing access to information and enabling the transfer of knowledge, libraries help to build a fair and prosperous society.

About CILIP

These are notes of the event and not a transcript. These notes have been provided by the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals, who provide the secretariat for the Libraries APPG. CILIP is the leading professional body for librarians, information specialists and knowledge managers. CILIP’s vision is a fair and economically prosperous society underpinned by literacy, access to information and the transfer of knowledge. CILIP is a registered charity, no. 313014.