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Public library services in the United Kingdom – a vision for the future

(Biblioteki publiczne w Wielkiej Brytanii – wizja przyszłości)

Słowa kluczowe: biblioteki publiczne, Wielka Brytania, XXI wiek, wizja przyszłości

Abstrakt: Biblioteki publiczne w Wielkiej Brytanii świadczą usługi szerokiej grupie społeczeństwa. Zaspokajają potrzeby informacyjne użytkowników i pomagają sprostać codziennym wyzwaniom epoki technologicznej czytelnikom we wszystkich kategoriach wiekowych, o zróżnicowanym statusie społecznym i ekonomicznym. Jednakże ograniczenia finansowe i te związane z pozyskaniem przestrzeni, w połączeniu z postępem technologicznym, niemal uniemożliwiają bibliotekom publicznym przetrwanie i rozwój. Niepokojąca liczba bibliotek publicznych zostaje zamknięta lub przejęta przez rozmaite organizacje i prowadzona przez wolontariuszy. Przyszłość bibliotek wygląda ponuro. Na tle tych zmian autorka sugeruje, że bibliotekarze zamiast polegać na mechanizmie rządowym czy filantropii, sami powinni uświadamiać znaczenie bibliotek dla lokalnej społeczności. Stawką tego działania jest nie tylko przyszłość bibliotek publicznych, ale także zawodu bibliotekarza, którego funkcjonowanie wydaje się być coraz bardziej zagrożone.

Keywords: Public libraries, U.K., 21st century, vision for the future

Abstract: Public libraries in the U.K. cater to a vast section of society, of all age-groups and across different social, economic and intellectual strata, fulfilling their information needs and assisting in the day-to-day necessities of the technological age. However, the acute constraints of space and finance coupled with the leaping advances in technology, have made it impossible for public libraries to survive and grow. An alarming number of them have been shut down or reduced or are now run by volunteers. The future looks bleak. It is against this backdrop that the author suggests that, rather than depending on the government mechanism or philanthropists, it is the library professionals themselves, who need to come out of their place behind the circulation desk and shout out aloud about their importance and place in the local community. After all it not only the future of the public library, but their own future which is at stake as well.

Introduction

A public library is an information repository reaching out to a cross section of information users and is often physically located at the centre of the community for easy access and use. The objectives and goals that the public library undertakes to accomplish contribute directly to the vision and mission of its parent body, be it the local Council of the borough, an organization or a trust. The library continues to fulfill its role as the heart of the community, providing information resources and undertaking activities for the good

of the community, despite the current trend to diversify from print and towards electronic resources. The physical building and its resources continue to exist and multiply although it might change in form and dimension adapting to the times and the inherent needs of its users.

The *UNESCO Public Library Manifesto* adopted in 1994, defines the public library as the local centre of information, making all kinds of data, information and knowledge readily available to its users. It believes that the public library is the local gateway to knowledge and provides a basic condition for life-long learning, independent decision making and cultural development of the individual and social groups [10].

Libraries change lives for the better. This is recognized in the Corporate report *Libraries deliver: Ambition for Public Libraries in England 2016 to 2021* published by the Libraries Taskforce on the Government of UK website. This report also concedes to the fact that these are indeed challenging times for public libraries shaking the very foundations of its existence. It is this critical and thought-provoking paradox that places the library professionals at the centre of the debate, marketing the products and services of the library while providing the necessary services so that the value of the profession is acknowledged and strengthened in today's information world [6].

A public library in the UK generally encompasses the following elements:

- The Library Collection,
- The Library Users,
- The services and activities.

A public library is a “One-shop-stop” for all the information related needs of the community.

The public library collection

The collection of a public library is diverse and varied in the sense that it encompasses a little bit of everything that the local community would require in order to fulfil its information need. Besides books on fiction and non-fiction, arranged on stacks, both for children and adults, there are Large print books, Audio books, CDs, DVDs, maps, photographs, magazines and newspapers, access to subscribed and free online resources, manuscripts and rare books, and even gramophone records. There seems to be something for almost everyone in the community.

The collection development policy of public libraries takes into account all the various aspects of purchase of library materials, their classification and all other routine procedures before the information resource finds its way to the stacks ready to be issued to patrons. Incidentally stock related policies are diverse as well, taking into consideration all procedures from Acquisition to Weeding. This calls for unbiased judgement, intuition and often a keen sense of vision relating to institutional and Council goals, individual library targets and the community user base.

The public library users

In the U.K., public library users encompass the very young to the very old and include the teaching fraternity and the not-so-literate, the new parents and child minders alongside the government official and research scholars. Their information requirements are diverse and vary depending on the type and format of information required.

The hesitant first timer youngster must be lured into the children's library either through attractive and eye-catching displays or an ongoing children's activity. The school going children often use the library to supplement classroom teaching through assignments and projects and need computers to download their homework or reference sources. Assistance in the use of online resources either through training or ongoing skill development is what entices the adult and older generation to walk into public libraries to fulfill their information needs or get their documentation sorted out. Regular courses and workshops cater to a fixed group of users who use the library infrastructure to conduct and draw in people focusing on a specific area of interest or skill. However random activities like festival time, exhibitions, food court or workshops draw in a larger audience, often from other geographical areas, from time to time. Research scholars often use the archives or heritage collection for old documents or photographs. Library spaces are disabled-friendly, often with step-free access and accommodate buggies, wheel-chairs and push chairs with a better ease of mobility. This makes it a favourite place for infants, toddlers and grandparents as well.

The services and activities

The Society of Chief Librarians (SCL) and the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) in their jointly published *Public Libraries Skills Strategy* have put forward this vision for the future:

The vision which drives the Strategy is of a future for public libraries in England as digital, creative and cultural centres of excellence – a thriving network of innovative virtual and physical civic spaces offering freely-accessible services that support reading and literacy, develop skills, foster creativity, promote and support health and wellbeing and provide a platform for community participation [2].

Most of the public libraries in the U.K. are run by the local Council or through a private enterprise or sometimes on other workable partnership models. However it must be appreciated that they all provide services and devise activities aimed at involving all age groups.

Public libraries in the U.K. today, especially so in the age of scarce budgets, must woo users through innovative and diverse activities, at the same time keeping in mind the likes and sentiments of the users.

Some of the more common services offered by most of the public libraries include:

- Issue/Return/Renewal/Reservation through online catalogue search;
- Internet access, scanning, printing and photocopying;
- Children's activities – Baby Rhyme Time, Story-telling, Crafts, Quiz etc.;

- School assemblies, School and nursery visits;
- Help with Homework;
- Summer Reading Challenge;
- Reading groups, Film showings, Digital Dens, Coding club, Chess and bridge clubs;
- ESOL classes (English as a foreign language);
- Coffee Morning, Knit-and-Natter, Yoga, Tai Chi groups;
- Learn-my-way sessions, Drop-in sessions for CV and Job search, assistance with filling up online forms;
- Displays, Events, Celebrations, Exhibitions;
- Citizen's Advice Bureau, Councillor's surgery;
- Tablet borrowing scheme, Home delivery service;
- Volunteering and work experience candidates;
- Spaces for Hire.

Photography 1. Book display at Roehampton Library



Source: own elaboration.

Photography 2. Book display at The Library at Deptford Lounge



Source: own elaboration.

Photography 3. Book display at The Library at Deptford Lounge



Source: own elaboration.

A brief description of some of these is outlined below.

Summer Reading Challenge

The Summer Reading Challenge is organised by the Reading Agency, began in 1999 and takes place at all libraries across the U.K. every year during the summer holidays. The activity involves signing up at the local library and then reading any six library books over six weeks to complete the challenge. After every book is read, children tell the library staff or volunteers a little about the books, its characters, what they liked and disliked about the book etc. In return children get a small prize – this may be a sticker, a toy, a bookmark, a puzzle or a medal. A certificate is awarded to every child who completes the Challenge; this certificate is given at the school assembly and is a moment of pride for the child and the family. The campaign has interesting and innovative themes; the theme in 2017 was Animal Agents while for 2018 it is “Beano”. Earlier themes included “Circus stars”, “Carnival”, “Rollercoaster” and “Mythical Maze”. It draws hordes of children into the library each year [9].

Children’s activities

Most libraries in the U.K. have rhyme time sessions for children called Baby Rhymes, Baby Bounce, Under 5s, etc. There are also story-telling sessions where stories are brought to life through library staff or volunteers with the aid of innovative props or toys. These sessions are often for 30 minutes each, held on a weekly basis, are free, and parents or child minders can drop-in at any library of their choice and convenience. Every child in England is entitled to a free Bookstart pack at 0-12 months and 3-4 years. It is a known fact that such finger rhymes and action songs in a fun-filled and often animated and noisy atmosphere, helps toddlers to develop literacy and communication skills like speech and interaction. It also helps young mothers to get together and is a great community-building activity. There is even a Saturday morning “Story-telling event” for dads. These activities depict the public library as a neutral, free, safe and welcoming place.

Most public libraries in the U.K. also conduct other innovative and varied activities for all age groups such as ESOL classes for the incoming migrant population for whom English is not the first language. There are also “Learn-my-way” sessions which is an online and interactive program to understand various aspects of computer use like e-mails, banking, online shopping, job search etc. This helps them to communicate and integrate easily into the local community or workforce. Councillor’s surgery involves the local councillor or Member of Parliament visiting the library on Saturday mornings where members of the public can approach them for a one-to-one discussion of their problems [5].

Public libraries – questions and answers

Does the U.K need its public libraries? Yes, it does. The public library transcends social, cultural, economic, regional or national boundaries and is an essential part of the local community. Just as every local community has a primary school and a doctor’s surgery, in the same way it must have a library. Although the presence and importance of the public libraries in the U.K. cannot be over-stated, the current situation forces one to raise certain queries:

- How important are public libraries to the local community?
- Does the public library benefit people of all age groups, as it lays claim to?
- Do public libraries provide products and services to support the intellectual pursuit of its citizens, among other things?

The answers to all these are seen in the Policy Report *Shining a light* published by the Carnegie Trust involving data about attitudes to and use of public libraries in 2011–2016. The report shows that around 75% of the people interviewed, believed that libraries are important to the community. Also, it is noted that 51% of the U.K. population have a current library card. The paradox to this fact is that around the same time frame, around 350 libraries closed, 8000 jobs disappeared, and opening hours and services in public libraries were drastically reduced [7].

This report brings several pertinent questions to the forefront:

- Who is responsible for libraries closing? Is it the government, the local council, or the users themselves?
- Is it financial constraints, scarcity of space or inadequacy of infrastructure and equipment?
- Is it a result of the current technologically literate population or just a lack of time among users [7]?

The answer lies in the sad fact that besides everyone else, we too, as library professionals, are responsible for the sorry state of public libraries in the U.K today. We have continued to provide the same services at the same opening times and in the same way, as we did in the past. The consistent use of and boundless advances in technology have placed a huge responsibility on the public library to ensure that no one is left behind in the technological age. In certain geographical areas much harm was not done and things continued in much the same way as before. However other areas saw a tremendous decline in users, coupled with drastic budget cuts and decision-makers vying to use the same space for alternate activities, other than libraries.

The need of the hour is to revisit our services, in the light of the statistics, and through dialogue with all the stake-holders involved, obtain feedback and devise more innovative products and services, catering to a technologically literate but time crunched community who needs information on the go. At the same time, public library professionals need to consider those who need assistance with digital technology, language skills or cannot voice their information needs in a coherent manner.

All this while the public library binds the local community together as a whole. The classic image of a public library would then be just like the sun radiating heat and light while making all planets to revolve around it and drawing all creatures towards it; the essence and importance of which cannot be undermined.

Public libraries must involve more community interaction

This vision can be achieved through a “Stop, Think and Act” methodology. The consistent and pertinent question to be asked is this - What do the local people want from their public libraries in the 21st century?

The answer to this is very aptly provided by the British Council in its online *Voices* magazine. It states that libraries provide neutral shared spaces for community use. However, the need of the hour is for public libraries to be reflections of physical as well as virtual space. Libraries must be brave and innovate and stay relevant. Library professionals must move out of the four walls of the library, just as their resources have done in the past. In much the same manner as libraries moved from a physical to a virtual presence, library professionals today must move back from their virtual presence on the web page, to their physical presence in the local community. It is through outreach activities that the library professional can stay connected with the local population, understand their needs and then devise innovative programs designed to increase library visits and usage [11].

On the other hand, just as libraries display the stock they have and market the services they provide, in the same way users must be encouraged to voice aloud their information needs, the services they would like their local community to provide and envision an image of their library as a part of their community. It is reiterated that well thought-out activities of the public library must involve more interaction from the community, not only as a receiver but also as a giver. It is only through consistent and one-to-one dialogue with users that public libraries will emerge as stronger components of the local community.

To this effect, the Society of Chief Librarians along with The Arts Council and The Reading Agency has launched a range of “Universal Offers” – a positive vision of what public libraries can offer citizens. These include Reading Offer, Information offer, Digital offer, Health offer, Learning offer and Culture Offer. This is a beginning and provides the library professional with a strong platform on which to base their ideas and services. It is the onus of the library staff to take up this challenge and emerge victorious. This move is extremely urgent and critical not only to ensure that libraries are preserved for future generations, but that Librarianship becomes the central “Sun” in the knowledge system of the future U.K.

Conclusion

The public library is a facility and a service, offered by the Government of the U.K., to its people to satisfy their information needs. It provides information through its resources, assists users through its staff and services and brings the community together through its activities and events. Public libraries are a classic example of relationship-based customer service. The clientele does not go away if the information desk is busy; they stand patiently in queue and await their turn, confident that their information needs will be met, or their problems resolved. It is a relationship of trust. This relationship needs to be encouraged and nurtured so that it grows with depth into the information world and becomes embedded as an essential part of the community. Public libraries need to survive, to thrive and grow.

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