

Andrew Beasley

My opposition to the proposed library closures falls under two main headings educational and social; I have outlined some of my arguments below. My evidence is based on my own experience as a teacher and children's author, as well as my relationship and involvement with the Federation of Children's Book Groups, the Reading Agency, The Book Trust and Scottish Book Trust, (other sources are cited).

I understand the economic pressure for change and make a special plea for Stoke library, North Prospect library, Efford library and Peeverell (possibly with relocation to its original Pounds House site).

“The National Literacy Trust says that children who go to a library are twice as likely as those who don't to read well. It is not just picking up a book. It is the social experience of reading, talking about the books, browsing, comparing what you have read with family and friends. Librarians are gate keepers in that process. They open doors to new worlds, new possibilities. They ask library visitors to evaluate the information on offer. Most importantly, they give access to narratives. Children and adults do not just need information to thrive as thinking beings, but stories. Libraries are the temple of story. They are not in decline because of some natural, historic progression, but because of the monstrous cultural vandalism of savage cost-cutting. We will pay a terrible price for the behaviour of our masters.” (Alan Gibbons)

- Oxford University study shows that **reading books improves your life chances**. Public libraries are seen as an important way to improve reading skills in **South Korea** where 180 new ones are being built. It's interesting also that Russia is expanding its libraries in order to boost Russian culture.
- Using a library **improves your children's reading ability** according to National Literacy Trust.

“... a beacon of civilisation, a mark of what we as a country stand for. For we remain, per capita, the most literate country in the world – we produce and read more newspapers and books per head than any other nation. And it's vital we keep it that way, as economic inequalities multiply, and the world divides into information rich and information poor.” (Tim Lott, The Independent)

*“Libraries are where so many children discover what books they like best and become lifelong readers. They're also great places for research. When I worked in Easterhouse library lots of local children came in to do their homework – browsing, reading and receiving help from the experts on hand, rather than sitting at home printing out reams of often irrelevant and undigested material from the internet.” **Julia Donaldson, children's laureate***

- **Scientific research has recently shown the act of reading the printed word seems to imprint knowledge better than using a computer screen.**

“A library has more effect on reading than a phonics check. Being able to have a wide range of books that appeal to different interests will do more to drive literacy than some of the government’s strategies.” Russell Hobby, general secretary of NAHT.

- The community aspect of libraries, including storytimes/rhymetimes and free picture books is especially important **for new mothers and their children**. Children can easily read five books per week and all but the most wealthy parents could not easily afford this.
- Even leaving aside books, the lack of access to the internet **can reduce exam results by a grade**. Public libraries can provide that access to children who do not have it at home.
- Lack of literacy exacerbated by lack of adequately funded libraries can **lead to problems for British business, says the CBI**.
- **Libraries are one of the places people go when school fails them** – Terry Pratchett credits his education to Beaconsfield Public Library. They’re all about **lifelong learning**.

“Anti-poverty campaigner Sam Roddick, who founded Coco de Mer, said: “Cutting the libraries is cutting the poor from the little they have. It will damn our country into the kind of poverty you see in third world countries.” (London Evening Standard, 12th April 2011)

- **Borrowing of children’s books is increasing.**
- Education is for adults and senior citizens too – senior citizens use libraries for education (notably, the U3A), students for quiet study, those new to computers for computer training.

“I have yet to meet the tiny tot who doesn’t enjoy sitting with a grown up and turning the magical pages of a book. “For many children the library is the only place they will ever be physically engaged with all the possibilities there are on the shelves. “That is why many small children’s activities are based in library buildings, a resource not to be found or replicated anywhere else. “Having a space where the sole purpose is to engage with words and pictures, to create memories that last a lifetime, is a delight and not to be given away lightly.” (Ann Chambers, deputy chief executive of Howgill Family Centre)

For the Community and Disadvantaged

“Libraries are not an indulgence. They can have a transformative power – especially for those marginalized, disenfranchised, alone, or simply open a world of stories and imagination to readers young and old.” Sharon Canavar, Chief Executive, Harrogate International Festivals.

- **A significant proportion of the population (23% according to the Office of National Statistics) does not have an internet connection at home.** Those people most in need are precisely those without an ebook or the internet e.g. unemployed, those on low incomes, senior citizen. Libraries offer **online and access** for all, often free. The United Nations has declared that **internet access is a human right** – public

libraries uphold that right. In addition, using the internet means one can take advantage of special offers (e.g. comparison websites) meaning that by not allowing libraries and thus free internet access, **the poor are being forced to pay more while the wealthier can pay less.**

- **For all but the very wealthy, public libraries are great value for money** – “In under 2 years if we had bought all the books we borrowed from the library we would have spent an estimated **£3400**, this works out roughly as a book habit of **£150 a month**, definitely not something we could afford. Our young son is the biggest user of the library in terms of number of books he borrow. I think having such a wealth and variety of books is a huge benefit in terms of his development, use of imagination, his language skills etc. Not something you can add a value to.”
- During times of recession, libraries are a **great way of saving money** by meaning one can take out DVDs/Games cheaper, read newspapers, use wifi, internet, free community space.
- Similarly, libraries offer **word-processing, printing, photocopying and fax.**
- Many people on low incomes or mental health problems use the library as there is nowhere else to go. Ironically, this is sometimes used informally as a reason *against* public libraries while others argue against libraries as being too Middle Class.
- They’re about the public good, equitable access for all members of society to public domain information of all kinds and in all formats, an appropriate balance within the law between demands from information users, and the need to respect confidentiality.
- Libraries **improve the neighbourhood and increase house values.**

“Morris Cohen, aged 90, spoke in favour of Neasden Library. He said: “Elderly people use it as a home not just a library.” Neasden used to be a no-go area but the library has been a positive influence, it will deteriorate if you close it.” (Harrow Observer)

- The library is often the **only place where the user can talk** to others. This goes directly against the stereotype of public libraries as quiet places. One user of the library where the author works has said that he would kill himself if the library closed down as there would be nothing else for him to do and no-one else he could talk to.

“But principally they are about people. People with a curiosity about life and the world around them. People who want to learn or escape into literary fantasy, people who like to meet. People who fall in love. To hack away at anything which is principally about people always seems especially harsh and counter-productive to me.” (Anne Pickles, News & Star)

- Libraries are a **free community space** otherwise rare on the High Street. This is especially the case in small communities where, unfortunately, they are currently most under threat of closure. “The government and the council forget that people live in places like Walney. When they close the post offices, the clubs and the libraries, then the local people lose meeting places.” (Sally Whittaker, 97 years old, Cumbria).

Libraries are well-used and popular, providing excellent value for money

- **When libraries are adequately funded, people use them** – see the record number of users at Hillingdon or any new library such as Portishead.
- **Reports that claim library usage is declining take no account of the number of libraries that have closed or the lack of investment** (note 25% decrease in

bookfund last year). Alan Gibbons believes the 320 million visits per year to public libraries could double with proper leadership of the service.

- **If one takes virtual visits into account, usage is increasing.**
- Libraries are **cheap to run**.
- When given a choice of losing their library or increasing council tax, people choose the library – for example, in **Wiltshire**.
- The same is the case, with many more examples in the **USA**, where there is a **strong upward trend in library use**.
- In the USA, a **FCC report** makes clear that libraries are highly used (p.216-7), especially for internet access, are proving **essential during emergencies** and usage is increasing.
- Measuring everything by cost rather than value can lead to massive problems – “This approach is tearing apart the invisible bonds of duty and loyalty, belonging and togetherness in the name of an ideology that nothing is more important than money,” said **Phillip Pullman**.

Read More <http://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/uk-news/2011/06/06/pullman-s-plea-to-save-libraries-91466-28826279/#ixzz1OWgsymay>

*“Despite their funding peril, public libraries remain one of the most popular government services and historically have fared pretty well at the ballot box. In 2009, voters passed 84 percent of library funding referendums nationwide and 54 percent of library construction measures, according to the **Library Journal**.”*

Libraries serve other purposes too

- Use the library as **information centres/ one stop shops** for council services like in **Hull**
- For family history, local newspaper archives. Many offer subscription-only online family history tools such as Ancestry, for free.
- **Start-up businesses** often use libraries, be it for free access to British Standards online or for meetings/research or for computers/fax/photocopier.
- A **“beacon of civilization”** and a symbol of “what we as a country stand for”.
- **Intellectual freedom** is basic to public libraries which help to sustain a democratic society.
- Libraries are **increasingly lend E-books**.

Libraries are *not* being made obsolete by technology.

*“Public libraries have a vital role to play in supporting the ambition to secure a truly networked nation in the UK. They are not only digital hubs which provide people with access to free or low cost PCs but also have a role in supporting people to get online and explore all the benefits that being online brings.” **Martha Lane Fox, UK Digital Champion***

- With the decline of bookshops on the High Street, Libraries may become **the only place where one can browse physical books**. The loss of book shops has led to loss of book sales – not all of it has migrated online.
- **88% of books are not available online, more print books published each year than in previous year.**

“Myth 4: Libraries are obsolete: Everywhere in the country librarians report that they have never had so many patrons. At Harvard, our reading rooms are full. The 85 branch libraries of the New York Public Library system are crammed with people. The libraries supply books, videos, and other material as always, but they also are fulfilling new functions: access to information for small businesses, help with homework and afterschool activities for children, and employment information for job seekers (the disappearance of want ads in printed newspapers makes the library’s online services crucial for the unemployed). Librarians are responding to the needs of their patrons in many new ways, notably by guiding them through the wilderness of cyberspace to relevant and reliable digital material. Libraries never were warehouses of books. While continuing to provide books in the future, they will function as nerve centres for communicating digitized information at the neighbourhood level as well as on college campuses.” (**Five Myths about the Information age**)

- **In addition, even those online are not entirely safe.** Google proposed deleting its entire video archive in April 2011 and only stopped due to public protest. The same could happen with Google Books. Equally with other groups – **Facebook have been deleting political groups without warning too.**
- **Public libraries have never been in competition with booksellers nor are they now with e-booksellers. Librarians are not booksellers.** People buy books and borrow books – one does not preclude the other. Ebooks (other than those out of copyright) are expensive and so do not necessarily threaten libraries. Another analogy is radio and television – the advent of television did not mean the death of the radio. Add to this the other functions of the public library (see above) and it is clear that the advent of ebooks therefore does not mean the death of public libraries.
- Surveys suggest that only 15% of ebook owners give up on printed books. **“Walking to the library is still the most ecofriendly way to read”**.
- **Search engines are too easy, making people think they have found the answer when they haven’t. Librarians are trained how to find the correct answer.**

“Darnton points to the fundamental role of the “library as space,” where librarians and other resources play a “service role” in helping people to access information. Traditionally, this information has been confined within the walls of an institution; in the future it will increasingly be accessed digitally. Because the Internet is harder to sort through than a library catalog, there’s a strong case that a library’s core services are actually becoming much more important.” **Stealing Libraries, Harvard Crimson**

- The internet may not be free or equal in the future. **“Net neutrality”** is currently under attack, which may lead to two levels of internet provision – a full access paid for version and a poorer quality free version.

“One of the arguments against the need for a network of public libraries is that we ‘all’ have access to the internet (of course we don’t but that doesn’t fit the narrative). This is all well and good at present, but with ‘net neutrality’ under attack and an increasing amount of content being locked behind paywalls, it won’t be long before we find that the internet as we know it is but a distant memory” (**Ian Clark, “Shut Out” ORGzine**)