

The Future of Plymouth Libraries

Submission by Val Woodward

On what evidence have you formed your opinion?

I am not submitting as an expert, but as a local resident with a passion for libraries and some professional insights. The evidence forming this submission comes mainly from being a regular library user in Plymouth and elsewhere, for about 60 years, underpinned by professional interest, experience, expertise and understanding.

I live in the Stoke area of Plymouth and regularly use the Stoke Library. I moved to my home in 1996. However, during those approximately 20 years, I returned to Birmingham for a time. I was there when the new Birmingham Central Library was built, and visited it several times, although I used the Balsall Heath Library regularly. I also used the small Rednal Library extensively as a child. This library opened up my world and ways I could go forward. I was lucky enough to go to University and have a fulfilling career. I left Birmingham to live, study and work in Scotland for many years, before moving to Plymouth (and returning to Birmingham for a while).

Although now retired, my career has been as a Community Educator. This has included working at 3 Universities, in Plymouth, Glasgow and Birmingham, teaching, researching and developing good practice in Community Education. Additionally, my experience includes extensive work with diverse groups of people across Britain, using informal adult education to empower them individually and collectively. For example, working with women of Asian origin to explore how and why they might positively engage with British democracy and agencies, plus the environment and outdoor activities.

This grassroots and academic work, complimenting my personal experience, has allowed me insights into the barriers people face in their everyday lives, and some thoughts about ways individuals, groups, communities and public agencies can begin to overcome those barriers to enable them to contribute to, and participate in our society.

My submission therefore centres on the role libraries play in helping citizens overcome barriers to positive engagement in family and community life. These barriers are often material, that is related to money or the lack of it. However, other barriers may be more pervasive, although generally hidden from quick consideration. I believe we all have a duty to ensure any such barriers are knocked down, or at least reduced, as part of a vision of a better world.

What sort of services should a library service deliver?

Library services should be part of long term thinking about improving our world. As Ann Cleeves says on her website ; <http://www.anncleeves.com/other.html>; "*Libraries matter. If we believe in equality of opportunity we must fight not just for the buildings but for the range of books inside and the skilled staff who can promote reading in all its forms. Not only do libraries encourage us to be more tolerant and better informed, they contribute enormously to the wealth of the nation.*" Ann Cleeves led a talk at the central Plymouth Library, which I attended. I am mobile and have a bicycle that I can use to get to such events. She is, of course, a highly respected and successful author, and I am lucky enough to be educated and empowered enough to have accessed her work in libraries even before it was made popular on the television. The talk was extremely well attended but I would have liked to see a greater variety of people present. An invisible barrier for people in areas such as North Prospect seems to be that such events 'are not for them'. It is also more difficult for them to travel to this city centre site. We need to ensure people living in areas such as North Prospect feel confident that such events are of interest and relevance to them. Existing work in libraries encouraging people to read literature that is not widely known about, is extremely valuable and needs to be not only retained, but expanded. People I have worked with have talked about how daunting it can be to choose books to read other than those they already know. Indeed, I tend to quickly choose my favourite authors unless I browse the shelves and/or see signposting to new or different works. I too benefit from having my horizons expanded and I do not face the barriers experienced by those less lucky than me. Book-groups and the expertise of librarians are invaluable. Talks such as that by Ann Cleeves form an integral part of this and as we need to ensure everyone can physically get to, and access, such events they should happen in North Prospect and other local libraries, not just in the city centre or a small number of widely dispersed libraries.

At this talk, Ann Cleeves also emphasised that without libraries her own career would not have been able to blossom, because initially people such as me only came across her work in libraries. She now spends a lot of her time "*talking to readers, not just to promote my own work, but a huge range of authors who deserve to reach a wider audience*". This not only benefits authors, but makes a good range of literature available that allows readers to constantly think about their own world and the wider world around them.

Many novels have stretched my knowledge and understanding of my own reality and how it interacts with the realities of others. Crucially people need to feel literature relates to them individually in some way to feel confident about starting to read it, but for a healthy society we also need people to think outside their immediate needs and perceptions. Talking with participants in community education over the years I have been made very aware that libraries provide a crucial place to browse, and consider more deeply, a diversity of potential reading material. This is true for me, but even more so for those who have little disposable

income. As a child, my local library provided useful information and resources, but crucially also provided me with space and tools to deepen and widen my belief in my ability to succeed outside the general expectations related to where I lived. Barriers to accessing a range of reading material, and beginning a journey of empowerment, are complex and often seem vague. Yet they exist and a healthy society must ensure citizens are enabled to think, develop and feel a part of a world outside, but connected to, their immediate everyday reality.

Confidence and willingness to engage in society are bound up in complex feelings of identity and community. Realistic plans to counteract the marginalisation expressed by so many in our society need to tap into existing hubs of engagement. Libraries are an invaluable asset in this process. For example, in my work in Birmingham, I encouraged people classified as highly marginalised to reconsider how the local social, physical and political environments were ones they could and should engage with. Once they experienced group events and discussions they overwhelmingly explored their learning further through accessing local library services, exploiting space and resources in the way I always have. Unfortunately, the excellent new Central Library in Birmingham was developed at great cost generally, but specifically at the cost of local facilities. The people I worked with in Birmingham were clear that while the central facility provided some exciting attractions, it did not, and could not, replace the services provided in their local library by staff that understood their needs.

I therefore wish to ensure that our library services form part of a public service and contribute to shaping a long-term vision, not just focusing on immediate perceived need and cost. We need to give people a chance to develop as active, thinking, positive, individuals. Librarians should be supported as community educators. That would allow the development of a service that truly meets the needs of our society for active, engaged, knowledgeable, thinking, positive citizens.

To what extent do you agree with the proposals for Library Closures?

I disagree with the proposals to close libraries in Plymouth. While I am particularly upset about the libraries in Stoke and North Prospect, I consider closures generally to be counter-productive as a part of developing a healthy society and democracy. I do not consider the suggested improved services for the retained libraries to justify the closure of so many others.

In ‘The Plan for Libraries’ the information about ‘where we are now’ sadly sets a tone that the consultation exercise is about cost cutting. When the Plan was presented to the public at meetings, it was denied that this underpinned the plans. I hope this is true. For me, the provision of something so valuable for our future society, should not be reduced to short term costs.

Likewise, I very much hope that the statement in ‘The Plan for Libraries’ that ‘more e-books are borrowed each year than printed books from 10 of our libraries’, is not taken to be of great significance within the context of the value of promoting reading across the whole population of Plymouth. The sale of e-books is already declining. While expanding such resources may be justifiable in terms of immediate demand, I would consider such a move to be only appropriate in the larger libraries earmarked for retention, rather than a crucial facility in community focused small libraries. Readers of e-books are not likely to be those facing the most barriers to accessing challenging works. Certainly, the groups of marginalised people I have worked with rarely accessed e-books. Any move to simply follow current trends can destroy longer term visions. E-books also do not provide a legacy in the way that books do. Research and a deep understanding of our cultural worlds depend on a legacy of the written word.

Do you have alternative proposals for the provision of the Library Service in Plymouth? What changes would be most helpful for you as an Individual / Community / Organisation?

Libraries are invaluable. Consultation about the ‘Plan for Libraries’ has highlighted that listening to the grassroots would allow the development of a service that we would be proud of and confident for our future. Librarians are doing excellent work in Plymouth. They should be further encouraged to work with local communities and provide a service that builds a positive future for Plymouth, Britain and the world.

We need to build on the strengths of local communities by providing public services that help overcome barriers. Many communities already find everyday life a struggle and lack capacity to overcome barriers without public services. However, community reactions to the Plan show that people are willing to do what they can, when they can. This needs to be supported and not worsened by the closure of local libraries. A strong and stable future can only be created if we tackle the barriers so many people face to living full and fulfilling lives. Closing local libraries creates more barriers.

Thank you for considering this brief submission. I would welcome an opportunity to discuss this further with the Scrutiny Committee.