

## **Ed Vaizey Speech to the London Libraries Conference, 5 March 2009**

### **Introduction**

This is a big week for those of us interested in reading, and who care about libraries. The latest CIPFA statistics show that book borrowing has declined steeply over the last fifteen years, from just over 550 million books a year to just over 300 million books a year. The amount spent on books continues to decline, as does the total book stock.

Today is also World Book Day, when we celebrate the importance of the book, and naturally consider the future of our libraries, which play such a central role in reading and books. As President Obama has said, “the library represents a window to a larger world, the place where we’ve always come to discover big ideas and profound concepts that help move...the human story forward...At the moment we persuade a child, any child, to cross that threshold, the magic threshold into a library, we change their lives forever, for the better. It’s an enormous force for good”.

Libraries remain as important today as they have ever been. In the last 150 years, the fortunes of libraries have ebbed and flowed. Their demise has been predicted all too often. Yet even today, in the early twenty-first century and the age of the internet, we still have almost 4000 libraries in England, local authorities spend almost £1 billion a year on them and they receive more than 300 million visits a year. The Audit Commission has described the library service as ‘one of the most valued and high profile services that councils provide’.

I would not claim a crisis in libraries. But I do think there is a crisis in leadership, in some local authorities, and particularly in central government. At a time of recession, when visits to libraries are beginning to increase, that leadership is needed more than ever.

### **Labour’s Approach**

It won’t surprise you to learn that I do not think Labour are providing leadership. It is true that they have commissioned another review, which in my view simply wastes time. In the last eleven years Labour has commissioned report after report, introduced one initiative after another, chopped and changed direction with breath taking speed.

Annual Library Plans were introduced in 1998, but replaced by Public Library Position statements in 2002. Public library service standards were introduced in 2001 but revised in 2004 and 2007. There have been Frameworks and Action plans. And now the review.

Wading through it all, it is hard to see any long term sense of direction or strategy for libraries from Government. This has been made even clearer in recent weeks. The Digital Britain report had nothing to say about libraries’ role in bridging the digital divide. And Andy Burnham’s refusal to call in the decision by Labour on the Wirral to close half its libraries renders the Libraries Act pointless.

There is a massive failure of leadership.

### **Administration of Libraries – central government**

One of the causes of all this confusion and changes of direction is the remarkable number of Government Departments, Non Departmental Government Bodies, Advisory Panels and other interested parties, involved in the sector, with no clear sense of who is actually in charge.

The DCMS is responsible for strategy and standards.

It is advised by the Advisory Committee on Libraries (ACL) and the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA). The Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals is responsible for awarding professional qualifications, although it does not have overall responsibility for training.

The DCLG is responsible for local authorities, although it does not provide any direct funding.

The Department for Children, Schools and Families is responsible for literacy, a core function of the library service. Although many of these initiatives are funded by the Arts Council, which reports to DCMS. And there are three national charities promoting reading [list]

Finally, the Audit Commission reports on standards.

So three Government Departments, four non-departmental bodies, three charities and one professional institute.

Frankly, it's a mess. Too many departments, too many agencies, too many ideas, too many strategies, too many chiefs, none of whom actually seems to be able to affect any real change or improvement.

There is a massive failure of organisation.

### **Administration of Libraries - Local Authorities**

Libraries' greatest strength – a local service - is also their weakness.

The service is patchy throughout the country, and too many local authorities see cutting libraries as an opportunity to save money when the going gets tough.

Different local authorities put libraries in different places within their organisations. Some see them as leisure, others as children's services, others as education and so on. There is very little uniformity.

And with around 150 library authorities – an increase of 50% since the mid-1990s - we have 150 ways of doing things, and 150 sets of overheads that are not necessarily going to the frontline.

Library services vary hugely in size – Kent has 102 libraries. Oxfordshire has 41. Swindon has 16. Slough has 5.

It would be surprising, therefore, if we were not thinking hard about what the future of the public library service. That thinking cannot take place in a vacuum. Libraries engender a huge amount of emotion. In the Wirral, where Labour is cutting the library service in half, a new political party has sprung up to campaign to save libraries; in Swindon, despite an investment of an additional £18 million in libraries, the threatened closure of one small library has attracted national attention. Alan Gibbons, from the Campaign for the Book, has vowed to oppose the closure of any library, anywhere. Any changes, therefore, have to carry with them the support of the public.

### **The Conservative Approach**

It is quite clear to me what principles should inform the provision of a public library service. I set them out here:

**Libraries are about books.** A library without books – lots of books – is not a library. It is in books that writers make and have made the most intimate communication. In this format we deal not just in information, but in the subtleties and graduations of life and experience. Here we include all cultures, ideas and times. Humans do not merely advertise to each other or live the lives of soap opera characters. Reading is the quietest and the deepest form of conversation, bringing most pleasure and understanding and inducing most civilisation.

Libraries are about **reading**. Literacy and numeracy remain the most important skills we can teach our children, as well as adults who have been failed by the education system. Libraries should be at the very centre of our approach to reading.

But libraries are also about **information and technology**. They are places where people go to find things out, either from traditional sources or archives, or today, from the internet. So libraries should have available the kind of technology people need today to access as much information as possible, as well as a range of things to borrow, including CDs and DVDs. In an era where we worry about the safety of the internet, and where we need guidance on the quality of the information we find there, there should be no better guide than the local library.

Libraries should be about **innovation and the future**. Libraries were innovative in the nineteenth century, a form of self-help and education for people who otherwise would not have had access. I want to go to a library not only to learn how to read, but also to try out the latest technology, be it an e-book or an i-pod, and to learn how to use the latest internet trends, be it twitter or facebook. And I want to know that in the next few years my local library will be relevant to whatever fashionable devices my children's generation will want to use.

Libraries are **a local service, provided by local councils**. Central government has limited powers, and in an age of devolution and localism, it should support innovation and investment at the local level, but not be overly prescriptive.

Libraries should be at **the heart of their communities**. Bricks and mortar still count and where libraries are located matters. Libraries are at the heart of place making. We must be careful to cherish this, even as towns change. Library developments are not all about hubs and central libraries, wonderful though these may be. Building and refurbishment programmes should also be about maintaining, designing, bringing up to date and improving the libraries in small neighbourhoods and estates, sometimes not because they are heavily used but more because they are truly needed. Co-location, with GP surgeries, or other community facilities, is a wonderful way not only of keeping libraries alive but helping them to thrive.

Libraries should be **a place to go for every member of the community of whatever age**. To read. To study. To hang out. They need quiet places for contemplation, but also places for conversation and activity and events that bring people together.

And libraries are about **freedom**. They should be a neutral place where people are free to find out things for themselves. In an age where the state is ever more intrusive, and where spin is all around, a library should stand as a place for access to untarnished knowledge.

Libraries depend on the **people who work in them**. The range of skills needed now go far beyond the traditional skills of a librarian, in terms of stock selection, cataloguing and answering enquiries. Librarians need to be technologically literate and community minded. It is a more exciting, more difficult and more challenging job than it has ever been.

In short, libraries are essential, for communities, for learning, for freedom. Any Government and every local council should aspire to a great library service.

### **Specific Policies**

Given that the library service is, first and foremost, and rightly in my view a local service, I have been giving a lot of thought to the question: what could I do to make it better?

So what is the answer? It should be possible for every local authority to emulate the best. Just look at Hillingdon, which has completely refurbished all its libraries, and increased attendance and book lending, while actually saving money. Every body knows how to a good library service should be run. The only secret is how to get that information out there and how to persuade others to do it.

The first thing we will do is provide the **clear leadership** that libraries so desperately need.

We will introduce a voluntary **Charter for Libraries and Reading**. Any local authority that signs the Charter will commit itself to providing a first-class library service, in terms of book provision, opening hours, access to technology and other services. The Charter will also include a commitment to a community-wide literacy strategy involving schools and libraries, children and adults.

It will be entirely up to a local authority whether it wants to sign up to the Charter. But we hope the Charter's existence will act as an incentive to many local authorities to look carefully at their library strategy and aspire to achieve Charter status.

We will also use the Charter to spell out more clearly the statutory obligation to provide a "comprehensive and efficient library service", which can act as a more objective guide on the appropriate use of the Secretary of State's call in powers.

We will also introduce a **national library card**. Joining your local library will give you the opportunity to have a national library card, providing you with access to all the country's libraries. The card will also be supported by a national website for libraries, to allow you to borrow on-line. We think this will help put libraries on the national stage and provide another good reason to join a library. We will ensure that we do not impose any unfunded liabilities on any local authorities.

We will establish, through the MLA, a **development agency for libraries** and we will abolish the Advisory Council for Libraries.

The MLA will be responsible for a new programme, **Renaissance for Libraries**, a four-year programme to inspire local authorities to invest in their library service and to bring the mediocre up to the standards of the best.

The key tasks of the renaissance programme will be:

- to provide regular training for cabinet members responsible for libraries
- to have a pro-active approach to identify weak library authorities and offer them help and advice
- to have a pro-active approach to encourage more library authorities to work together, not just on book-buying, but also to share overheads and heads of service
- to put in place a programme to identify appropriate management structures for local authorities, including alternatives such as trusts and contracting out
- to establish a system of regular library inspection
- to provide a clear overview of the training of librarians and library staff, including the accreditation of courses

I know that many people would like to see the responsibility for museums and libraries separated and separate services for museums and libraries established. It might well be a neater solution in the future and I am open-minded on this. But the need for action is urgent, and I do not want to waste the first twelve months of a Conservative administration reorganising a quango instead of getting down to the job.

So far, I have somewhat contradicted myself. Having said that libraries are a local government service, I have talked exclusively about what I would do in central government.

We have proposed a number of far-reaching reforms for local government that will benefit libraries. For example, we will encourage councils to **devolve a proportion of the council's budget to local ward councillors, giving them the opportunity to fund small community libraries if they think it is the right thing to do**.

We have also proposed allowing local authorities to issue bonds to finance infrastructure projects. This could be used by local authorities to finance the refreshment of their library buildings where necessary.

Finally, we have proposed local referendums on spending priorities, which would give local people the opportunity express their support for libraries where they are under threat.

There are other options open to councils. It should be possible to combine library services across council borders, in order to save costs, as already happens with book procurement. Or libraries could be put in a separate trust, as has happened in Luton and Wigan, which brings significant tax advantages. Or the service could be contracted out, as Hounslow has done.

I said at the beginning that Labour had dithered over libraries, with yet another library review. We do not need another review. As boroughs like Hillingdon have shown, it is possible for a dedicated authority to refresh its libraries, increase attendance, and not spend any more money. What libraries need is leadership, now. Government has to articulate why libraries are important, and it has to encourage and cajole library authorities to renew their commitment, by showing them what the best are capable of.

I wish that work could start now. Sadly, it may have to wait another 12 months for the election of a Conservative government.