



## 'Exploit your power'



In an edited version of a speech made at the PLA Conference, DAME LIZ FORGAN shows how Arts Council England and libraries can work together.

**P**ublic libraries are a glory of our nation, a central part of my life from the age of four (I was a precocious reader) and, like many other aspects of British life which some of us think are completely non-negotiable parts of a civilised society, endlessly under review, examination and challenge.

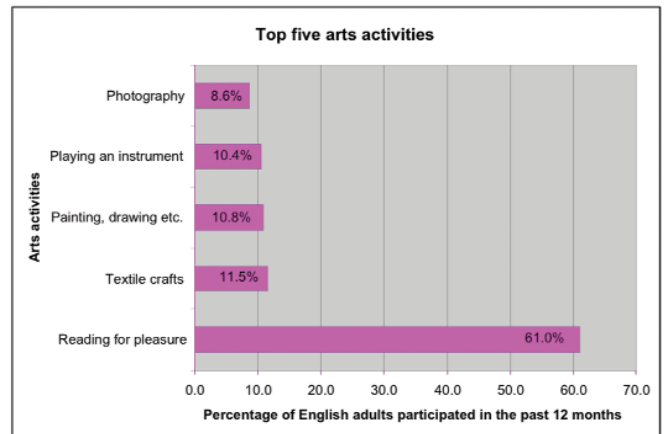
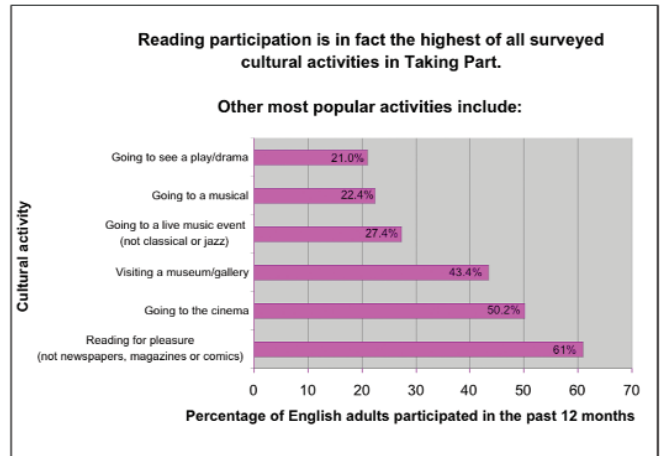
I know that public libraries today have a multitude of useful jobs to do to serve their communities – but the bit that interests me is the bit that sits right at the centre of all of that and, I insist, sits at the centre of a public library – reading. I feel slightly odd saying that in this audience. But I do it because I think that in a time of huge pressure on libraries to be everything to everyone and to accomplish an ever great range of important and desirable tasks, it is absolutely important to clamp hold of the central pillar that holds the whole thing together. And that, I suggest is reading. To be really controversial I might say reading books but I don't want to alienate the under 35s unnecessarily so let's just stick with reading.

Arts Council England has a long history – over 20 years – of working with libraries and more recently with MLA to establish reading as an exciting and central place in the library offer. We have funded reader development posts, reading promotions and joint workforce development programmes so that librarians get better at promoting reading. That is a job that is now largely embedded but still patchy across the country.

Some of our Regularly Funded Organisations like Booktrust and The Reading Agency run national programmes that work with libraries – Bookstart, aimed at babies, from the Booktrust and lots of work by the Reading Agency, including the Summer Reading Challenge and Head Space.

We fund other organisations such as writing agencies, literature festivals and independent publishers which connect writers with readers at a local level, often based in libraries, creating local communities that read together socially and as individuals.

Supporting reading is instinctive in an organisation dedicated to the arts, but these days we need an evidence base so, working closely with MLA, the Society of Chief Librarians (SCL) and the Reading Agency, we have done some research to find out more about what reading means to people. We commissioned provocation papers from writers, broadcasters, policy makers, publishers and librarians looking at the future of reading, using them to inform a series of think tanks with the sector. We wanted to hear from the public too so we commissioned some deliberative research finding out more about how people value reading, which, incidentally, has the highest rate of participation of any of the arts and we don't make enough of this.



### 'Reading is by miles the most popular arts activity.'

Because reading is often private, it gets hidden, but is the most common way for people to experience the arts. And reading holds a double role in people's lives – it is a creative experience but it is also an important tool for life. Developing reading skills and engaging with creative literature can have a range of positive outcomes – skills, employment, aspirations, health, well being and community cohesion. It gives us information as well as stimulating our minds.

The National Literacy Trust's Literacy Changes Lives clearly indicates a correlation between reading and a variety of physical and mental health and well-being outcomes<sup>1</sup> as does the recent library impact study supporting the DCMS' library service Modernisation Review.<sup>2</sup> It is hard to get on with life at every level if you cannot read.

But what we need is to hang a lantern on the contribution of libraries by assembling evidence of the difference they make. If their impact can't be measured and demonstrated, the fact is they will be viewed as marginal and not important in the big arguments about wellbeing and social purpose.

I'm sure most of you will be familiar with the Generic Social Outcomes framework to measure this impact, developed by the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council. The national

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cultural and sporting agencies are now working collectively to build upon this work, as part of their commitment to supporting Local Government Improvement. We are seeking to strengthen our ability to capture the positive impact that our sectors have on a range of social outcomes, and, critically, to link this evidence to the National Indicator set.

So we wanted to know more about what kind of difference people themselves thought reading made to them. We talked to all sorts of people, high powered, never worked, professional, manual workers etc. and we made sure our research represented a range of readers across these categories from the very engaged to the non engaged.

The powerful, overriding message from all of them was that regardless of how much people personally enjoy spending time reading; people understand that reading brings benefits. Many of these benefits relate to how they feel or how they view the world: reading offers relaxation, stimulation and broadening of the mind, new perspectives on one's own life and inspiration. Other benefits, identified, in particular by less engaged readers, are more utilitarian such as the gaining of knowledge and self development.

Really importantly, across the board, people want to see their children get pleasure from, and reap the educational benefits of reading. Many said they would like to have more time to read themselves. In short this is a mandate from the public for all of us concerned with enabling reading.

These values amplify PSA21 – “to build more cohesive, empowered and active communities” – but we don't capture the scale of reading as a contributor to them. Taking Part tells us that 49% of adults read for pleasure at least once a week – that is half the population. Yet the measurements for PSA21 do not include private reading but only attendance at book clubs (5%). Now though reading groups have more than doubled over the last two years, this is a rather weird minority of readers to pick on. It includes me – to my great pleasure – but it's not really a proper measure as any librarian will know.

The fact is, however, reading groups, literary festivals and book groups in arts venues clearly show growing activity in reading, but while these activities are growing, library visits are falling more broadly. (There is anecdotal evidence that visits are rising in the recession, but that isn't for a desired reason!) The number of active readers is greater than the number of active library visitors – are we missing a trick there?

Readers must be libraries' greatest champions. Readers are voters and council tax payers and local authorities – hard pressed and beset by claims on their resources – are very attentive to the views of both.

We looked in detail at the nature of people's experience as readers. Very engaged readers told us they were lost without a book:

*“It's that important. It's just like losing an arm, it's a comfort blanket, it's escapism, it's a friend, it's having something wherever I go, train, waiting, whatever, odd days in the bag, it's always just there.”* (regular reader)

*“I've had a hectic week this week and coming home and watching soaps and reading about it just gives me that bit of buzz. I might be sad but it makes my life happy.”* (unenthusiastic reader)

*“It can change your opinion on things, a closed mind on something and it can give you a different aspect on it, you think 'actually...' You rethink something.”* (regular reader)

Readers have a host of different reasons for loving books and reading and all those reasons are part of an unseen army

of support for libraries. Another battalion, as Alan Gibbons' campaign for libraries demonstrates, is formed of writers and the passion they have for libraries and the books inside them. The National Year of Reading built more links between writers and libraries but do we use writers well enough?

Research undertaken by National Year of Reading and Random House indicated that some groups see reading as an unsociable activity and that family time is about doing things together. This is where libraries can really come into their own. There has been a quiet revolution in the kind of reading experiences offered by libraries. Many are very family-centred, action-based and build large communities of people around reading. Take the huge success of The Reading Agency's Summer Reading Challenge which reaches 690,000 children who take part in a sustained activity over the summer.

Over two thirds of them go back to the library to get the next of their six books. Or the fact that Booktrust, one of our regularly funded organisations, has a Bookstart co-ordinator in every local authority. Between them, in 2008/9 105,206 Bookstart Book Crawl certificates were issued, representing 420,824 library visits (a certificate is given after four library visits). Schemes like these have established access routes to groups at risk of social exclusion such as teenage parents, looked after children, travelers, BME groups and connected them with libraries. Any of you interested in NI 19, NI 72 and NI 117 can see the potential benefits of reading here.

A section of the research explored people's attitudes to libraries especially the ones who don't go to them. What did they say? People did not visit libraries because they did not know what was on offer, not because of any resistance. The message here was that they don't necessarily want more – certainly not if it is too directional – but they are amazed if they are shown what there is:

*“I went to the local library... it was really a small building but plenty to offer. As soon as I walked in, the display board had great reads of fiction, the other side was biography of famous people, they was doing something for 50 plus programme for the whole year... plus they was doing a delivery service as well, there was a readers club as well. I was quite impressed. ...As I was there, I joined so I'll get my membership in about seven days.”* (Occasional reader).

The issue of more targeted marketing came up over and over again in our think tanks as it did in the learning from the National Year of Reading. We need a real push to let people know the wealth of the library offer – and there are readers out there who want it. There is a lot to be shared with other potential partners in the cultural sector including broadcasters and publishers who have experience of really targeting their audiences.

Exploit your power as the biggest cultural distribution network for the most participative of the nation's art and ACE will work with you to do so.

And it's not just ACE. You have many supporters and partners in the wider cultural sector who care passionately about reading. Publishers, broadcasters, new media and arts organisations all want to work with you. And they can help in various ways, extending the reach of what you offer readers, help work on new business and distribution models for reading in the face of digital change so that libraries keep up with the technology, sprinkle a bit of stardust on the scene.

And there are other partners – and potential champions – in the other local authority services where reading makes a difference to their clients' lives – services for children, old people, health, adult learning etc. Libraries need to be

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# A manifesto for change



In an edited version of her talk at PLA, MIRANDA MCKEARNEY sets out The Reading Agency's exciting plans for the future.

**M**y life has been transformed by the freedom libraries have given me so I feel very lucky to be running a charity that's working with you to increase libraries' impact through reading. So in this big new push, what might The Reading Agency do, what's our manifesto for change?

It's shameful that 56% of UK adults have literacy skills below the level of a good GCSE, and that some children go to school without knowing which way up to hold a book. It's horribly telling that 25% of young offenders have reading skills below those of the average seven year-old.

We've been backing and building reader development because we think it can make a serious contribution to tackling these problems, and add to the sum of human happiness. The movement is creating a livelier, more interventionist reading service that's both more attractive and socially relevant. It's about motivation, pleasure and recreation as the precursor to learning and growing. Research shows this reader development way of working has profound implications for helping people enjoy reading, for bringing

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exceptionally good at listening to and reaching all these potential users and potential champions. It is easy to be driven to defensive attitudes when libraries feel under assault or under valued. But there is no salvation in defeatism.

Front foot is what I urge on you. Pride in your amazing history, cherishing your role as the powerhouse of reading, and dancing with as many useful partners as will enlarge and enliven your work. We are here to help. We will be putting our energy into working with MLA, SCL and The Reading Agency to campaign alongside you to reinvigorate the role public libraries play in championing the value of reading – reading, the one thing that sits across all the policy documents you have been introduced to at this conference. You are central to the cultural life of Britain and reading is your jewel. May you prosper.

Dame Liz Forgan is Chair of Arts Council England. [www.artscouncil.org.uk](http://www.artscouncil.org.uk)

## References

- 1 National Literacy Trust. *Literacy Changes Lives*, NLT, 2008
- 2 DCMS. *Capturing the Impact of Libraries*. BOP Consulting, 2009

communities together, building literacy skills, for helping people feel better in and about themselves and even for increasing community volunteering.

The movement is changing the way libraries operate. Its most intense work has been with children's reading and it's no accident that children's book issues are rising. It's making ground with adults too: 15 years ago author events and proper book promotions were rare, now they are much more commonplace and professional. Library reading groups are mushrooming. We could make more ground if this new offer was more systematically developed and supported by decent book stock.

So, The Reading Agency is now seven years old. With you and with readers we've found new ways of working that have had a big impact across the library network and on people's lives. When you're experimenting, not everything works, so we've been looking at where our national role can make the most difference. You tell us that you value The Reading Agency's ability to work with you to think out of the box and see new connections – and you also tell us you value what we can do in these two ways:

## Shared national programmes

You, and readers, tell us you value the way we've created huge shared national reading programmes. These give readers irresistible experiences, improve their quality of life and literacy and at the same time drive library improvement through economies of scale and sharing good practice. The Summer Reading Challenge, Chatterbooks reading groups and the new Six Book Challenge all do this. They also support library advocacy because we can do one piece of impact research everyone can share.

## National partnerships

We're also hearing that you value our brokering of national partnerships that make a tangible local difference. We have a strategy to engage partners such as BBC Learning, UKTV, Disney and Orange so that libraries are not left out of big marketing pushes on reading. These partnerships get positive library messages to consumers and often give libraries free marketing materials. They give the public a richer local library experience, linking people into a bigger world of reading and ideas.

It's been fascinating to see the All Party Parliamentary Group For Libraries call for a national development agency and to compare that call for advocacy and shared improvement with the work we do. You could argue that we are the reading development agency for libraries! We're small, but we're making quite a difference and could do a whole lot more with more resources.

## New partnerships

In 2004 we set up Reading Partners, a partnership between the UK's major publishers and the whole of the library network.

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We set out to revolutionise the library/publisher relationship because we were so cross that library users weren't getting the chance to meet authors or get the same marketing based book choice guidance as bookshop users. Hugely flourishing, the scheme now involves 34 publishers. We're running author events in 102 authorities, and getting publishers to trust libraries enough to host authors as big as Nick Hornby. I've just been looking at the latest returns. It's so great to hear thrilled feedback from people all over – Barnley to Ramsgate – so grateful to have access to big name authors. And delighted reactions to clever, creative new models you're developing to get writers and readers together – Girls Nights In, war stories sessions, events targeting minority communities...

And then there's broadcasters. We're currently running a small but deeply promising project called Reading Detectives. It's the literature part of the BBC and Arts Council's Made in England programme. It involves five library authorities – Lancashire, Staffordshire, Derbyshire, Kent and Cumbria – where teams of readers, authors, archivists and local studies librarians are investigating undiscovered or forgotten writers with a link to the locality; their progress is followed by BBC local radio. The project seems to have injected reading into that vein of people's enthusiasm for local studies, and is wholly user driven. We think it has huge roll-out potential. We love Reading Detectives. It cheers us up on bad days! Take a look at [www.readingdetectives.org](http://www.readingdetectives.org).

So that's a gallop through phase one of The Reading Agency: innovating through shared national programmes and partnerships. What's phase two? It's a pivotal point, as we wait for the government's library review, and have Arts Council backing for a big new reading push. We also face reduced budgets and changing public demographics, expectations and need.

How can we best help library services against this background? What's next in our own manifesto for change? There's lots we're powerless to change – the government mess where library policy and finance sit in two different departments, the confusing plethora of library reports, the strange performance measures where the English indicator for libraries is just about adult library use ...

We'll be focusing on what we can change, on where you tell us we really can make a difference, and where future social trends are pointing – a much more diverse population, more children in care, continuing skills problems, an ageing population needing to keep their brains active and wanting more than the traditional housebound service...

We'll be focusing on five things, in our own manifesto for change...

### **1 Working the new shared national reading programmes harder**

So these experimental national reading programmes have taken root. Let's use their power, work them harder to make even more of a difference. So let's use the massive Summer Reading Challenge to have a sharper focus on helping looked after children love reading, and act as basis for a big increase in library volunteers. Let's target reluctant boy readers through Chatterbooks. Let's use Groupthing.org – still in closed beta but already being used by 70 authorities – to be canny about capturing a new generation of teenage library users by relating reading to their online world.

We'll be launching a new Reading Groups For Everyone programme, helping you spawn thousands more reading groups, and diversify the model to include very different people – from

asylum seekers to families. We want to expand the deceptively simple Six Book Challenge to improve the literacy levels and confidence of thousands more adult learners. It's only two years old, but 145 authorities and loads of prisons and workplaces are using it. I'm so fired up by recently meeting Mary Jervis, who says the Challenge has completely turned her life around.

### **2 Building new partnerships with publishers, broadcasters and the new media**

We'll be setting up a think tank group to take our partnership work to a new level.

Take publishers, for example. We'll be setting up a joint digital task force to work out how to take reader development online and keep up with the dizzyingly fast-moving trends on e-books and downloads from Iphones.

Our partners will connect us to the right people – like exploring with Sony whether their American model of supplying libraries with free e-readers could be applied here, and with NESTA how we might exploit the huge public interest in online gaming in the interests of spreading reading and literacy.

The first of our experimental pairings to build much stronger networks between library and publisher leaders is between Tony Durcan of the Society of Chief Librarians and Canongate's dynamic CEO Jamie Byng.

Another cross-industry development is a workforce development push on skilling librarians to host author events. I'm thrilled that publicists from publishing houses will be part of a Reading Agency training team.

We'll also be exploring new ways of working with broadcasters. My personal dream, having just met the man who created *Who Do You Think You Are*, is to roll out Reading Detectives, link it up with telly, and promote reading by tapping into that huge public passion for our local roots.

### **3 Developing a 21st century library workforce**

We'll be helping to develop a library workforce fit for the 21st century, through skills sharing work with partners from sectors from health to youth, and we'll be introducing more strategic training and consultancy support. For instance we have a new Making Reading Count training strand that helps libraries show how their reading work impacts on key local authority indicators

### **4 User power and author power**

We all know that the days of professionals deciding what public services should be like and munificently dishing them up to the public are gone. Future library planning must feature user power! Us citizens must have our say! Through reading work we hope to create a new army of author and reader campaigners for libraries

### **5 New thinking**

We'll be focusing on areas of specific social need where reading can help. Health and wellbeing is a crucial one. We've just had an important meeting with libraries and health partners and decided to work together to develop a clear national offer to the public, bringing together health information, books on prescription and reading groups. We hope to develop some pilots.

The Reading Agency is a passionate supporter of your work. We are afraid it will get marginalised in the face of massive public sector cuts. Please tell how best to help you make a clear and credible offer so that libraries' crucial reading work gets into local authority plans, benefits from new funding streams and penetrated the public consciousness. The nation needs what you, and you alone, can do.

Miranda McKearney is Director of the Reading Agency.