

**Speech by Annie Mauger, Chief Executive of CILIP
Addressing the National Federation of Women's Institutes' AGM
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I am extraordinarily honoured to have this opportunity to address you as a librarian and as just one representative of the many people who need your help in the campaign for libraries. We want everyone to love libraries. We want the government to support libraries. We need your help to do it.

I grew up in libraries, I did my homework there, learnt to read, I discovered the world through books, met my friends in a safe and neutral space, I fell in love, studied for university, studied *at* university, brought my books back late and paid enormous fines, got my degree and decided that I wanted to be a librarian.

I didn't become a librarian because of books. I love books, because of what's in them, whether I read them on my electronic book reader or on paper is not the issue. I became a librarian because of people. I wanted to work in public services, doing something that I believed could support and help people in their daily lives. I wanted to be the person they came to for information, for help and advice, and for a warm welcome.

I didn't become a librarian for a quiet life. I wanted to work in a busy place where I was in demand to solve problems and answer questions, where children and young people would challenge me to help them learn and where I could help people to meet and interact with each other. I wanted to put the library at the heart of the community.

I don't believe I have to persuade a single one of you here today about the value of libraries but I do want to illustrate for you why today, this month and this year, it is so important that you choose to support this campaign. Because if we lose libraries, they may never come back.

We believe that 20% of the libraries in England alone are at risk. Possibly even more. Where library buildings are safe; it's staff, funding and opening hours that are at risk. We know that there have to be savings. But we believe that this level of cuts is disproportionate to other savings being made by local authorities. Libraries at risk are often in communities with the fewest nearby public facilities. As local libraries close many more people will have to make long and inconvenient journeys or will stop using the library altogether.

I talk about the importance of brains as well as bricks. When the cuts threaten to take away such a large proportion of skills and services from local communities; when they threaten to take away this vital meeting place and resource, where mums can find the right book for their child, where people who can't access the web at home can come and learn, then we have to say no. Access to the services provided by a library is a right for every community.

We could lose six hundred libraries in six hundred communities and many mobile libraries to remote areas. We know that school libraries are closing and school librarians losing their jobs all over the country. 3.6 million children in both rural and urban communities benefit from school library services that are closing daily. We know that children who use libraries do better at school and increase their life chances.

There are nine million people in the UK who do not have access to the internet at home. 20% of those people may no longer have free access at their local library.

People who use libraries sum it up best for themselves: 'A library is not an obsolete dinosaur, it is not a pointless financial drain on the Government, it is a resource that allows people to learn, to grow, to visit books and each other.'

I believe the values that the National Federation and your own Women's Institutes upholds and the reasons why libraries are important are so closely linked that it is a right step to ask for your help campaigning for libraries.

All around the country, at local meetings of your branches, librarians have been asked to come and speak to you about these issues. From Shilton in Warwickshire to Leyland in Lancashire and Pudsey near Leeds, you have been voting to help us save libraries.

You believe in family and community. The strength of your organisation with its hundreds of thousands of members is all about local participation and involvement. You know that there will be a group of like minded women near you who can become part of your life. A good friend of mine just moved to a new home, alone, a village in North Yorkshire near Boroughbridge. The two things she joined immediately were the library and the local Women's Institute.

Whether you are a new mum, unable to buy as many books as your children can read and needing advice about reading and a place for an outing, a learner, a job seeker, a teacher, a retired person wanting to get involved with local activities, one of the most important places to go is the local library.

One of the local campaigners told me about the money that had been raised in the local community to contribute to the renovation of a heritage building in the middle of a little market town as a new home for the library. Use of the library increased by 60%. The Council were proposing to close this new library as part of the budget cuts. One of the things that really stays with me is the words of a campaigner who fought the proposal, he/she said: 'I have an information specialist in the heart of my community and I am not going to lose that.'

And the essence of this is, that libraries have always been part of the heart of the community. Of course they can change; they have done and will continue to do so. Many of you will have witnessed the arrival of computers, the opening up of access, the end of the 'finger on the lips' and 'shh', the introduction of story times, the homework clubs, the WI meetings and the many other activities that have become part of the library's daily life. You understand local communities and you can be part

of influencing the debate and discussion about the future for libraries in the information age and ensuring that people still come first.

Librarians are not just custodians of books, they are people who help you to understand the incredible new world of information that is out there, to help young people to understand that not everything is true just because you see it on a computer screen and that actually, if you can't read, how can you go online?

The people who work in libraries are brokers, supporters, helpers and friends. They need your support.

The Women's Institute has a special kind of power. You have influence. You can make change happen. You campaign for the things you believe in. Whether it is the environment, food labelling or women's rights, the root of your campaigning is always the same, driving out ignorance and changing people's minds through education, information and better understanding.

We believe that libraries make change happen. Libraries change people through information and knowledge. As a child, books open up the worlds of knowledge and imagination. All through life libraries empower people through access to information beyond anything that anyone could buy for themselves.

Libraries help fight illiteracy, ignorance and exclusion. Libraries bring people access to the world beyond their horizon.

I never thought I would be quoting Keith Richards in a speech but he actually said this: 'When you are growing up, there are two institutional places that affect you most powerfully - the church, which belongs to God, and the public library, which belongs to you. The public library is a great equalizer.'

So how can you help? By asking the government, as your resolution states, to demonstrate that libraries are an essential resource and should be supported. By adding the power of your voice to the campaign.

By local involvement and campaigning, because the people who work in the libraries and whose jobs are at risk, cannot do this. Love your librarians. Adopt them and support them. Challenge them.

By using the library and demonstrating your support by making the most of what is there. Take your children, grand children, husbands, aunts, uncles and friends.

There are so many other good causes, but this issue is now, the threat is now.

The British author Hari Kunzru 'Libraries set people free. They're not a luxury. They're not a relic. We must fight to save them.'

Please vote for libraries and help us.

I urge the motion to the meeting.