

PRESS RELEASE

London, October 18th 2004

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NOT FOR PUBLICATION BEFORE 00.01 OCTOBER 18TH 2004

The death of the library book?

*Latest official figures show massive 5 year decline in book-lending...
Double digit lending decline in nineteen of the twenty largest authorities...
Decline in past year at 5% continues downward trend... Book lending
increases in only seven of 200 library authorities... Latest data from CIPFA¹
confirm Libri analysis...*

Statements claiming an increase in library usage in the year ended April 2003 do not give a true picture of the state of libraries today, according to an analysis of library book-lending by Libri. According to Libri's analysis of the most up-to-date CIPFA statistics, book-lending continues its long-term decline with only seven of the 200+ library authorities reporting increases. Lending in the top twenty largest authorities representing one third of the population has declined by an average of 21% in the past five years. The latest one year 5% decline shows that this trend is steady if not increasing.

Figures published earlier this year showed an increase in library usage. This was used by politicians and others as proof of a revival in library fortunes. However, according to CIPFA data, over the five year period 98/9 – 02/03, library visits in the UK as a whole have declined by more than 6%.

The very small increase – 1.6% - in visitor numbers in 2002/3 did not take library visits back even to the level of 200/01 and has been achieved almost entirely as a result of the massive initial investment in the People's Network IT project:

- Annual library expenditure increased by 17.9% - the majority of this being spent on IT;
- The amount of money spent on books fell to a mere 7.5% of funds available;
- Value for money of the library service declined dramatically as a result - the cost of each library visit increased by one third to £3.89.

¹ Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Administration, *Public Library Actuals Statistics 2002/3 compared to Public Library Actuals Statistics 1998/9*

Libri

Charity for Libraries

Under-investment in books is a national phenomenon. Book-lending increased in only seven library authorities – Liverpool, Swansea, Westminster, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar (Western Isles), Hammersmith and Fulham, Lambeth², and Haringey. Book lending declined in the remaining 190+ authorities with the Vale of Glamorgan, Edinburgh, Merton, Torfaen, Redbridge and Aberdeen authorities all showing declines of more than 35%.

According to Libri, the figures show an alarming lack of focus on the true role of libraries:

“Although libraries have diversified and now offer a wide range of community services, providing an efficient source of books for reading and reference is, and will continue to be, the main purpose of the nation’s libraries. All available research says that this is what the majority of library users want.”

“The current focus on diversification and IT investment has been at the expense of books. Libraries today are consequently failing to deliver the service required by the tax-payers who provide the £1 billion spent each year on libraries. In our earlier report we suggested that by 2020, libraries would stop being used. These latest figures show that in the same time-scale, we may also see the death of the library book.”

To assist local library groups, Libri has posted book-lending data on its website - www.libri.org.uk – and has set up an email enquiry service to handle requests from library groups for information on local library performance.

“Since the publication of the report “Who’s in Charge?” we have been contacted by a number of local library groups who do not have easy access to the information they require to engage meaningfully with their local library authorities. This new service is a significant step in improving access to information”, says Libri.

“Local Councillors, however, have not generally responded to the challenge we set and have not embraced the vital role they play in securing an efficient library service. Councillors must no longer defer to the expertise of the library professionals. When asked, Libri will provide councillors the help they need.”

“Since the DCMS library ‘Summit’ meeting in June, the Government has indicated its support for the views expressed in “Who’s in charge”. But Ministers have so far failed to take the lead in restoring the primacy of books in libraries and the increases required in opening hours so that services are available when people can use them.”

Editor’s Notes:

In April **Libri** published a report authored by Tim Coates – Who’s in Charge? A number of library authorities are working with Libri and the report’s author to implement local change programmes focused on delivering a modern efficient service to library users.

Libri is a new charity whose mission is to encourage a vibrant and relevant network of public libraries, each library developing as a centre of community involvement.

² Although Lambeth increased book-lending by 7%, it nevertheless lends fewer books than any other single authority.