

No wonder our libraries are in crisis

I thought I would walk around the corner to my public library yesterday to investigate staff morale in the face of widespread press coverage of a highly critical report on their performance, produced by Libri, a new campaign group. Some shocking facts emerged – in one library, it costs the taxpayer £24 to provide a book which costs £10 to buy, and in another all the staff had to read a copy of *Harry Potter* before they could decide to purchase it or not. Over the last 10 years, the number of books borrowed has fallen by 35 per cent and only 9 per cent of total funds are spent on actually buying books.

Damning stuff. Sadly the doors of Finsbury Library and Local History Centre were firmly shuttered at 1pm on a Wednesday, and although I could see the odd member of staff inside the building, all the blinds were drawn. I couldn't telephone them, because they had thoughtfully removed their number from the information board.

I love libraries and I was particularly pleased to be asked to reopen this one (along with the Mayor of Islington) after extensive refurbishment last year. But what is the point of supplying local people with a service that is only open until 8pm two days a week, closes at 5pm on others, and does not open on Wednesdays at all? Okay, it's open on a Saturday, but that should be a given.

It's not surprising that the number of people visiting libraries has halved since 1984, when you have to remember that you'll only be able to get through the door after work a couple of times a week. We can visit museums, galleries, the doctor and supermarkets far more conveniently than a place to borrow books. The latest

report into the poor performance of our libraries was compiled, over a four year period, by a bookseller who has worked for WH Smith and risen to the post of managing director of Waterstone's. It makes chilling reading, concluding that, at the current rate, the library service will no longer be with us in 15 years' time.

As a child, I spent an inordinate amount of time in Fulham Library after school as a helper, and it was a haven where I could escape from my dreary parents and read books before anyone else. At home, our bookshelves contained the *Little World of Don Camillo*, a couple of Daphne du Mauriers, some *Reader's Digest* compilations and a range of lurid paperbacks about Japanese Second World War atrocities, much favoured by my father.

The library not only offered me a huge choice of reading material the *commandants* at home would have frowned on, but the whole process of putting books back on shelves and loudly stamping them with a large rubber date-stamp appealed to my nerdy, bossy, natural self.

Pretty soon I had swapped Biggles stories and Jules Verne's adventure yarns for D H Lawrence, Dickens and Trollope. Within months, I had fought my way onto the library quiz team, a useful way of honing the competitive skills which have stood me in good stead in later life.

So I am not only a huge fan of libraries, but I can see what a useful role they can play, way beyond being a place to borrow books. Libraries are also conveniently situated at the heart of our communities, and so the report's recommendation that they should increase their opening hours by 50 per cent makes perfect sense. Libraries



JANET
STREET-
PORTER

What is the point of supplying local people with a service that closes at 5pm and does not open on Wednesdays?

need to spend less time on cataloguing and indexing and thus release up to 30 per cent more money for books.

Sounds so simple, doesn't it? At a time when book sales have increased by nearly 20 per cent over the last seven years, it makes me wonder whether the people running libraries are really interested in being busy and attracting a wider range of customers. If our libraries were a commercial concern, they would have gone bust years ago.

Access to books has never been easier if you've got cash or a credit card. High Street bookstores have coffee, music, friendly staff and sofas. They have had to become accessible in order to survive competition from the internet. Look at the hordes of different kinds of people buying books at any airport before a journey and compare it to the emptiness of your local library any afternoon.

Books and reading aren't middle class activities any more. From book clubs to TV dramas about booksellers, the art of reading has never been more mainstream. Before the cry goes out for more funding to help libraries, a radical rethink is required in the way they attract the public. Just being there is no longer enough.

Where I live in the inner city, gangs of swearing, spitting young boys hang around the supermarket and street corners after school with little incentive to do anything except smoke or drink. The library needs to see these young people as an opportunity, not a threat. There has to be a way of including everyone within their walls, via events, movies, computers, whatever.

Boredom is a big problem, and these young men's pride means that they will never admit to anything as mundane as actually reading a book. That should not mean we just give up on them, but think harder and more creatively about how to get them involved. There's nothing wrong with having a "noisy" room at a library to balance the "quiet" room. And when the building itself is bright, colourful and as welcoming as a department store, then the number of users will increase.

Libraries are not just about books, but are a vital source of all kinds of information, received via newspapers,

magazines, CDs, DVDs and the internet, as well as places which can offer help on a whole range of issues from health to history to homework.

So what can be done? Don't expect my target group of foul-mouthed youths to suddenly pick up books – that's a gradual process once you've got them through the doors. Get activity groups going, use computers more and provide people with the service they require rather than one which suits you. Stop being so bloody precious about what you're doing and pay attention to a report which offers positive help along with the bad news.

And before local councils claim they cannot afford any radical rethink, let me make the case for prioritising attention to our libraries. It cannot be hard to find sponsors to provide more books and equipment. Each library needs an action plan which addresses the need to widen their appeal.

Almost every writer of note in this country has spent months of their childhood in a library and so represents a resource we should be engaging to attract the young writers and readers of tomorrow.

Charles Clarke needs to see that libraries can supplement what happens at school. Libraries are like swimming: until you've done it, it seems a pointless and rather futile activity, but once you've taken the plunge then you're an enthusiast for life. Instead of slapping Anti-Social Behaviour Orders on our recalcitrant youth, people within the community ought to find ways to engage them. The library is conveniently placed to provide a focus. If it doesn't, in a year or so the only people visiting these resources, which we all fund through our taxes, will be the very poor and the very old.