

Briefing on ..

'Love Your Libraries' Campaign

Introduction

UNISON has always seen publicly funded libraries as essential to the social, educational, cultural and economic well-being of our communities. UNISON has recently launched a UK wide campaign "Love Your Libraries". This links to a UK government review of public libraries in England.

Whilst there is no similar review in Scotland, UNISON branches are reporting that libraries are being targeted for cuts in service. This briefing sets out the current position in Scotland and urges branches to mobilise members in support of this campaign.

Libraries in Scotland

Public library services in Scotland are a devolved issue and are administered by local authorities which have a statutory duty to secure the provision of adequate library facilities for all persons resident in their area.

Whilst local authorities run the public library service there are many other forms of library provision across Scotland's public services. These include schools, colleges and universities where libraries support learning and research. Hospitals and health boards run libraries to support clinical practice and many other services from architects to social work rely on in-house libraries.

Currently there are some 541 public libraries in Scotland and 82 mobile libraries, which serve smaller communities. Around one in five Scots are borrowers from public libraries – that's 1 million people last year. Many more use the other forms of library provision.

Borrowing books is only one measurement of library use. The introduction of learning centres and learning access points has been phased in across Scotland. The number of users of learning centres and access points in 2007/08 was just over 560,000, an increase of 12% since 2006/07. Each of them used the service an average of 8 times, a total of 4.7 million occasions.

Libraries also report that the long-heralded demise of the printed book has yet to materialise. Print on demand, use of e-books, book vending terminals, self service and downloadable audio files do mean that access to the world of the published word is vastly different. Library catalogues are web available 24/7 and virtual visits have increased in the last 12 months by over 2 million to 12,846,283.

Library book funds have declined over recent years. However, the abolition of the Net Book Agreement and negotiation of greater discounts in library supply has also impacted favourably on stock levels. In 1996/7 1,177,207 items were purchased for lending stock in libraries, compared to the 2007/8 figure of 1,239,099. More books are purchased by Scottish libraries than 11 years ago.

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Service Cuts

All public services are facing unprecedented financial cutbacks. UNISON Scotland has identified more than £300m of council cuts in the next financial year. Whilst the detailed service impact is not yet finalised it is clear from our initial survey that many authorities are looking to cut back their library provision. In particular there has been a move towards reduced opening times and employing less qualified staff.

In a UNISON survey more than 40% members reported cuts in service and two-thirds felt staffing levels were inadequate. Nearly 90% indicated public support for the service, but nearly two-thirds felt that the service was not valued by their local authority.

Since the start of the recession libraries across Scotland are reporting increases in visits and lending issues. Libraries have long promoted their value as reading plus and this is supported through a comparison of the 1996/7 visitor total of 27,603,664 to 28,609,357 in 2007/8. Libraries have diversified with the introduction of downloadable audio files and e-books.

Transfer to Arms Length Bodies

As part of the cost saving drive a number of councils have looked at transferring their library provision to an arms length body. The lead was taken by Glasgow in 2007 with the establishment of Culture and Sport Glasgow. The main financial benefit is tax avoidance and the claimed additional income it could raise through donations has not materialised. The Trust is facing a £1.7m cut this year and as a consequence wants a pay freeze and service closures. Already book buying is being drastically reduced.

To date few have followed primarily because of the legal constraints in Scots Law. Glasgow relied on their general power to promote or improve the wellbeing of the area as introduced in s20 of the Local Government in Scotland Act 2003. However this provision does not allow Councils to override other limiting statutory duties.

Such a limiting duty is the Public Libraries Consolidation (Scotland) Act 1887 that provides that the local authority shall manage, regulate and control all libraries etc. There is no provision for delegating these duties, a point recognised by the last Scottish Government who proposed to introduce just such a power in their draft Culture Bill. The current Scottish Government has not included such a power in its Culture legislation. Glasgow got around this because of the provisions of a Private Act in 1889, but other authorities are still bound by the 1887 Act.

A further problem for councils is that many library buildings were donated over the years for the benefit of the 'Common Good'. Essentially Councillors in Scotland are trustees for the proper use of these assets. Whilst they have a wide discretion they have to petition the Court of Session if they wish to dispose of assets.

Further Information

Information and Library Services Scotland - <http://www.slainte.org.uk/slic/slicindex.htm>
Love Your Libraries campaign - <http://www.unison.org.uk/localgov/loveyourlibraries.asp>

Action for Branches

UNISON member Peter Peacock MSP has tabled a motion in the Scottish Parliament in support of UNISON's campaign ([S3M-05898](#)). It has attracted cross party support and members are encouraged to write to their MSP asking them to support the motion. Branches will also wish to scrutinise the spending plans of their local authority in relation to library services and include details in their Cuts Impact Assessment.

Encourage library members to join the UNISON Scotland [manifesto project](#) and contribute to our ideas for developing libraries in Scotland. (see web site).