

Improving lives through reading: How the Reading Agency is working with local councils

Purpose

For discussion and direction / for decision.

Summary

Sue Wilkinson MBE, Chief Executive of The Reading Agency (TRA), will join the Board to discuss how TRA is working with nearly every public library authority to encourage reading. Sue joined TRA in January 2014 and this is an early opportunity to discuss TRA's priorities going forward.

Recommendation/s

Members are invited to comment upon and discuss the issues set out in paragraph 18 of the report.

Action/s

To be taken forward by officers as directed by Members.

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Background

1. The Reading Agency (TRA) is a charity whose mission is to give everyone an equal chance in life by helping people become confident and enthusiastic readers. They run creative programmes, which help people feel inspired and confident about reading, often in partnership with local government.
2. TRA reaches readers through their UK-wide reading programmes, delivered in partnership with 4,200 UK libraries, schools, prisons, workplaces, publishers and the media. TRA specialises in working with public libraries because of the way they open up access to reading opportunities and support.
3. The LGA has enjoyed a very positive strategic relationship with TRA over the last few years. This includes regular dialogue with the Chief Executive, TRA speakers at LGA events, sharing expertise and case studies to help shape the support we offer to library portfolio holders, and the TRA's National Youth Libraries Board is a Culture, Tourism and Sport Board outside body.
4. In view of the contribution of reading to a range of policy outcomes, there are links to the LGA's work on skills, growth, health and wellbeing and children and young people, including the Hidden Talents Campaign.

Policy context

5. There is an overwhelming body of international and national evidence that shows how literacy has a significant relationship to people's life chances.¹ Reading can help to boost attainment, lift people out of unemployment, go back to education, develop new skills, contribute towards better health and connect with each other, as well as being enjoyable and fulfilling in its own right.
6. However, in the UK today 35% of adults and 46% of young people do not read for pleasure. Only 40% of England's ten year olds have a positive attitude to reading.² Compared to international evidence, children in England report less frequent reading for pleasure outside of school than children in many other countries.³ 15% of the working age population in England (5.1 million people) are at or below the level of literacy expected of an 11 year old.⁴
7. There are some encouraging signs: visits to libraries by children are on an upwards trend, with 60% of five to 10 year olds and 77% of 11 to 15 year olds visiting a library in the last year, and children's fiction borrowing has increased for the last eight years.

¹https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/284286/reading_for_pleasure.pdf

² Taking Part 2011/12 Adult and Child Report, Department for Culture Media and Sport, 2012

³ In October 2013 English 16 to 24 year olds came 22nd out of 24 countries measured for literacy levels by the OECD. (The Survey of Adult Skills, OECD, October 2013)

⁴ Skills for Life Survey, Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2011

8. Public libraries have always been central to improving literacy rates, providing trusted spaces where people of all ages can discover and develop a love of reading.
9. As libraries have modernised and developed more creative ways to engage even more people, there has been a transformation in the way they seek to encourage reading. For example, through reading groups, parent and toddler rhyme time, homework clubs, websites and the digital offer, library festivals and city read-ins. Such initiatives often involve other council services and a wide range of public, private and voluntary sector partners.
10. Councils understand that some people want the physical engagement that comes with visiting a library and borrowing books, while others may discover reading through virtual engagement with library resources or use the library as a quiet space to read using personal electronic devices. The most exciting library services are making full use of the opportunities presented by new technology to engage new users and support reading, regardless of whether or not they actually step into the library building. For example, Derbyshire County Council is among the public library authorities pioneering e-book lending.
11. Through strong political and professional leadership, the importance of reading, and the role of public libraries in boosting literacy levels, can be embedded across a range of council services – from social services to children and young people and economic growth. For example, the Society of Chief Librarians and TRA's ground-breaking Reading Well Books on Prescription scheme was developed over two years from good practice in a small number of councils and based upon robust evidence that secured the buy-in of health professionals. Councils' new public health responsibilities provided further impetus for strengthening the links between reading and better health.
12. As more and more libraries become community hubs offering people access to other public services and advice, such as welfare reform, libraries are engaging with different people, including some who they may not otherwise have reached. This ability to reach out and engage new people chimes very strongly with the new Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport's recent keynote speech in which he emphasised the importance of widening access to culture.
13. Of course public library authorities are operating in a very challenging fiscal climate. Against a background of austerity – grants to councils have been cut 40% since 2010, and the overall path of deficit reduction is only half-way through – the future of libraries has to be considered as part of the overall council service offer to communities.
14. Libraries are most likely to be viable when they can demonstrate their value to the widest possible group of users; this means a library offer that may include co-location with other services, other ways of using buildings more creatively and efficiently; the provision of assisted digital access to a range of services, and so on, as well as the most up-to-date version of the traditional offer of written information.
15. These are the key points that the LGA made to William Sieghart as he conducts his independent review of public libraries.

Partnerships between TRA and local government

16. The TRA has been at the forefront of developing imaginative ways to encourage people to start reading and to read more. Public libraries are TRA's main focus and they work with nearly every public library authority in the country. For example:
 - 16.1 98% of UK libraries run the Summer Reading Challenge;
 - 16.2 12,000 people took the Six Book Challenge through public libraries;
 - 16.3 In 2013, took over the running of World Book Night which sees 250,000 books given away by libraries and by a wide range of other organisations and individuals;
 - 16.4 Reading Groups for Everyone is developed in partnership with the Society of Chief Librarians and has over 2,000 library-based reading groups on the website;
 - 16.5 Chatterbooks children's reading groups are run in libraries as well as in schools;
 - 16.6 Reading Well Books on Prescription is delivered by 87% of public libraries in England;
 - 16.7 Reading Activists is running in 18 libraries in some of England's most deprived areas;
 - 16.8 TNA is brokering partnerships with publishers and libraries to bring authors and readers together in local libraries and over the internet;
 - 16.9 TNA is helping libraries highlight big reading events, promote new reading recommendations and give away book prizes;
17. TNA also worked with the Society of Chief Librarians to develop the Universal Reading Offer which seeks to save resources and share work by:
 - 17.1 Prioritising key programmes and partnerships;
 - 17.2 Giving libraries a ready-made set of tools and easy ways to share information;
 - 17.3 Giving libraries access to national partnerships with the BBC, 40 publishers and other organisations;
 - 17.4 Creating shared evidence and advocacy resources to show the difference libraries make in their communities.

Potential issues for discussion

18. Ahead of the publication of the Sieghart Review at the end of this year, and taking into account the wider policy context for public libraries, and where we are in the political cycle, this is a timely opportunity for Members to explore potential shared issues with TRA. These might include:
 - 18.1 How can we continue to support library portfolio holders and professionals to develop imaginative approaches to encouraging reading, especially amongst groups of people who are the hardest to reach? For example, we might want to use the LGA / Arts Council England libraries leadership seminar on 18 September to share good practice and stimulate thinking.

- 18.2 How can we maximise new and digital technology to encourage reading? For example, this links to the Board's interest in the superfast broadband rollout. We might also want to keep up the momentum on following-up the government's review of e-book lending (also led by William Sieghart) which set-up a small number of pilots to analyse the consequences and impacts of different approaches to e-book lending.
- 18.3 How can we ensure that Ministers understand the contribution of not just public libraries, but the whole council, to boosting literacy and the importance of this for wider political outcomes, ranging from growth to skills and health?
- 18.4 How can we make the most of the opportunity presented by William Sieghart's independent review of public libraries to set out a compelling account of how the locally-led library service is harnessing the contribution of the whole council and others to boost reading levels locally within and beyond the library building?