

The role of public libraries in multicultural relationships **Report by Helen Carpenter for Winston Churchill Memorial Trust, 2007**

1. Introduction

1.1 Aims of Travelling Fellowship

I have always been interested in people and their identity, both in how they perceive themselves and how they are seen by others, and also in places and what makes them welcoming or otherwise. Nearly all of my working life has been connected with these themes. Most recently I have been project co-ordinator for Welcome To Your Library, a ground-breaking project in the UK connecting public libraries with refugees and asylum seekers, funded by Paul Hamlyn Foundation and co-ordinated through London Libraries Development Agency.

My aims in applying for a Winston Churchill Memorial Trust Travelling Fellowship were to broaden my understanding of the role public libraries play in multicultural relationships and to:

- share learning and perspectives with those facing similar challenges in other countries
- identify good practice and how this might be transferred
- strengthen advocacy for the key role public libraries play in bringing communities together and supporting a sense of belonging
- open up international development opportunities in this field.

I visited Canada and the USA from late May to early July 2007, and Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands and Belgium from late September to early October. See Annex 1 for itinerary and websites of organisations visited. My report is based on personal observations during my travels, backed up with information obtained afterwards and reading various documents and reports. It is not intended to be more than a taster of what I experienced and learnt. While travelling I also wrote a blog¹ which can be read in conjunction with this report.

The Travelling Fellowship came at a timely moment to use the knowledge and experience gained to influence thinking in the Welcome To Your Library project and reflect on the future direction of public libraries and on their value and role.

Published at the end of November 2007, an evaluation report on Welcome To Your Library and accompanying good practice guide are available on the Welcome To Your Library website.²

¹ <http://helencarpenter.wordpress.com>

² www.welcometoyourlibrary.org.uk/listDocuments.asp?page_id=70

1.2 Why public libraries and multicultural relationships?

Migration is not a new phenomenon, but recently the speed and scale of change has quickened. This is resulting in an increasing number of people with trans-national identities.

In the UK, according to the Audit Commission report *Crossing borders: responding to the local challenges of migrant workers*³ “international migration is now the main driver of population change. In 2005, the Office for National Statistics estimated a net inflow of 185,000.” Predictions of future economic and demographic trends indicate that high levels of migration will continue. The subject has steadily risen up the political agenda, with much debate about multiculturalism and integration.

The change of pace has added to the complexity of managing the impact of inward migration and of creating conditions in which diversity can flourish, especially as this issue cuts across many policy and service areas.

In some urban areas in Britain, local councils and other agencies have long experience in meeting the needs of new arrivals. However, the dispersal of refugees and asylum seekers from 1999 onwards, combined with European Union enlargement in 2004 and the subsequent influx of people looking for work, has presented challenges in places where such rapid population change is a new phenomenon.

At the same time there is international academic and policy debate around the following concepts:

- public value (For more on this see Mark H Moore’s book, *Creating public value: strategic management in government*)
- social capital and civic participation (For more on this, see Robert Putnam’s book *Bowling alone: the collapse and revival of American community*)
- integration and social cohesion (the UK government set up the Commission on Integration and Cohesion in 2006, leading to the publication of *Our shared future*, in 2007, setting out proposals for building integration and social cohesion at a local level).

The challenges posed by these concepts and by rapid change means there is an urgent need for local councils and other organisations to think, plan and deliver more collaboratively, and to share good practice more effectively – and they need support to do so.

But why is this relevant to public libraries? Public libraries are a vital existing community asset and bring people together. They provide access to reading, learning, information and citizenship and support formal and informal skills development related to this. Public libraries are gateways to knowledge and their resources provide for individual and shared discovery, empowerment

³ Full details of all reports or books mentioned in the text (and some others) are included in the bibliography in Annex 2.

and inspiration, be it for pleasure or for a specific purpose. They could be at the forefront of the creative thinking needed for new ways of working.

However, they have been slow to anticipate changing needs, and have often been reactive, at the same time facing increasing pressure to improve performance and efficiency.

There are numerous well-documented examples of public libraries as providers of services **for** culturally diverse communities. These range from collections in different languages to internet access enabling library users to keep in touch with what is happening in other countries. Programmes have also often been targeted at specific underserved groups in such a way that they are seen as a separate “add-on” rather than part of core services, and have been over-dependent on the commitment of specific individual members of library staff. The approach adopted has tended to be service-led, rather than transformational.

This is not to say that there aren't excellent examples of connection-making and relationship-building involving the whole organisation in public libraries. Public libraries adopting this approach are bolder about the way they think and work and are changing how they are perceived and used. However, there still remain many challenges.

In my opinion, there is a lack of clarity about the role of public libraries in the 21st century in the UK, and some people feel that public libraries have lost their way. But perhaps this is because public libraries have not yet fully developed all the relationships – at every level of their organisation – that could give them renewed impetus and purpose. Just one element of this is their role in enabling people from different backgrounds to make the connections they need to participate fully in society.

1.3 My interpretation of multicultural relationships

I have never seen public librarians purely as custodians of collections. During my travels I took a broad interpretation of multicultural relationships to include:

- how public libraries connect as institutions with all relevant stakeholders
- how they plan and deliver services that reflect, support and promote diversity
- how they enable inter-cultural dialogue and encourage active citizenship in a rapidly changing environment.

Collections are vital to libraries, but this per se is not the subject of this report. Instead, I have concentrated on the way library staff fulfil their role as connectors, bringing resources and people together.

The rest of this report provides a short context note about the countries I visited, followed by examples of what I found with some reflections and learning points.

1.4 Country context

The evolution, origin and perceptions of diversity vary in different countries. I do not propose to go into a detailed discussion, but simply to note that I chose to visit places with highly developed public library services. Each operates in a very different political and cultural context, which in some cases (eg Denmark) has recently shifted away from concepts of cultural pluralism towards assimilation. Political and other constraints affect how public library work is presented and positioned everywhere.

The countries I visited vary dramatically in size and population. Density differences are even more extreme than a calculation based on the table below might suggest. For example, Canada is over 40 times the size of the UK with only just over half its population, while 90% of Canadians live within 200 miles of the US border. And in the Netherlands, the most densely populated of all the places I visited, water makes up 20% of the total area of the country, making the population density figure even higher.

I did not investigate if any relationship exists between population density and attitudes to immigration, but my travels made me think about this.

| | Canada | USA | Sweden | Denmark | Netherlands | Belgium | UK |
|-------------------|---------------|---------------|------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Population | 32m | 300m | 9m | 5.4m | 16.3m | 10.4 m | 60.2 m |
| Size | 3.8m sq miles | 3.8m sq miles | 173,732 sq miles | 16,640 sq miles | 16,164 sq miles | 11,787 sq miles | 93,638 sq miles |

Source: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/country_profiles/default.stm

2. Findings

I visited over 30 libraries and support or partner organisations, met many inspiring individuals and learnt about or participated in some wonderful activities during my trip.

Inevitably, much the same challenges face public libraries wherever I went. Some local responses were broadly similar, so this report focuses on just a few examples that illustrate my theme. The fact that I have not described all the places I visited does not imply that those omitted were less interesting or less well developed, but was simply dictated by lack of space in this report.

My findings are set out in five sections:

- Programmes and activities: strategic partnerships
- Programmes and activities: libraries as spaces for inter-action
- Role of library support organisations in sharing resources and learning
- Organisational structure, culture and workforce
- Conclusions and acknowledgements

2.1 Programmes and activities: strategic partnerships

2.1.1 Library settlement partnerships in Ontario, Canada

Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) is a government department, one of whose responsibilities is funding organisations and programmes providing settlement services to newcomers. In 2005, after the first-ever joint immigration agreement between the Canadian federal government and the province of Ontario, CIC in Ontario received significant new funding over five years for settlement and language training programmes.

When CIC consulted newcomers it found many did not know about the community agencies where settlement workers were based or the services provided. CIC then changed the location of workers and services to where newcomers would find them in the course of their daily lives.

The Settlement Workers in Schools programme (SWIS) placed settlement workers in schools with high numbers of newcomer students, providing basic services to families, including adjustment to the Ontario school system and helping school staff understand issues newcomer students are facing.

The SWIS programme then extended to public libraries over the summer holiday period when schools were closed. This was a logical step, since public libraries are among the first places newcomers go after arrival in Canada to get information on their new environment and to use public computers to contact friends and family at home.

Public libraries in Toronto,⁴ and later also in Ottawa and Hamilton, went on to pilot year-round library-based settlement services. Settlement workers provide one-to-one service from library branches in various languages on issues such as education, job information, health, housing and language instruction. Individual programmes are also offered on topics including Canadian workplace culture, the current labour market and local employment services.

I was lucky to attend part of an orientation day in Toronto for a mixed audience of about 140 settlement workers and library staff. One session involved role plays with settlement workers and librarians acting out different scenarios, with audience input to identify what strategies were being adopted to provide a welcome. The day included discussion on what library services for newcomers were considered successful, what the library could do better and the specific needs of newcomer seniors and youth which the library service might address.

Later on, in Ottawa, I met one of the newly-appointed settlement workers at a branch library and heard about the library service from her perspective. She had emigrated from China seven years earlier, and was originally a qualified heating and ventilation engineer. Her own experiences and sensitivity to cultural issues gave her a particular insight. She described some of her work with isolated older Chinese people in the local community, introducing them to specific resources relevant to their needs, which they probably would not

⁴ Websites of all the library services and organisations I visited are in Annex x

otherwise have found, as from their perspective, asking for help might have been seen as shameful.

The concept of placing a settlement worker in a library was new to the library branches and settlement agencies involved, as they come from very different organisational cultures and perspectives. It was significant that they needed to learn how to work together, and, in the orientation session in Toronto, I witnessed how the programme was able to draw on the expertise gained from the SWIS work to facilitate this process.

From what I saw, the collaborative approach between library staff and settlement workers not only benefits newcomers but is shifting the culture in library services towards greater inter-sector information- and skills-sharing and mutual learning and exchange.

The structure and management of the programme is important. In Toronto a steering committee provides leadership with cross-sector representation. This complementary expertise gives access to management intelligence such as demographic information on changing settlement patterns. The library service would not otherwise have been able to access this, or at the very least would have found it time-consuming and more difficult.

Complementary expertise also comes into play at local level. For example settlement workers in Toronto used their knowledge to make recommendations about existing public library collections related to employment and this led to relevant new stock being added to these collections across 26 branch libraries, funded through CIC.

The outreach programme facilitates early contact with newcomers, some of whom may not be familiar with the concept of a public library. The settlement workers are able to promote library services using web, print and word-of-mouth. This has led to more newcomers becoming library "regulars" and higher multilingual circulation of materials (up by 25% in the past five years). The involvement of libraries with services to newcomers has resulted in Ottawa in the creation of a library manual for instructors to use with adult literacy and language learners. The programme also offers volunteering opportunities for newcomers to use their language skills to help settlement workers with translation. This is particularly important when some newcomers would not otherwise qualify to volunteer in public libraries because of language barriers.

Toronto Public Library is developing a model so the programme can be rolled out more widely across Ontario. CIC was also commissioning an independent evaluation of the pilot to find out what worked, what needed improving and how best to expand it.

Since my visit there is now a lot more information available, including reports, tools and practical guidelines, which could be transferable to other

countries and settings. The main website⁵ has sections for newcomers and for those working with newcomers to Ontario, including library settlement partnership resources.⁶

So far the findings from this programme have shown the:

- importance of commitment and involvement from the central library and not just at branch level
- critical role of steering committees to establish clear expectations of each partner, terms of reference and effective structure and support
- importance of good coordination and communication and a realistic assessment of costs when more agencies and branches become involved
- value of learning from the SWIS model of placing settlement workers in schools.

While fully aware that is all too easy for a visitor to have an over-rosy impression, I was excited by this programme and its concentration both on bridges between libraries and newcomers and between different sectors. This process, if time and care is taken to build relationships of trust and reflect and learn as work progresses, had considerable potential to contribute to long-term systemic change.

2.1.2 Working Together

Working Together is another Canadian programme challenging public libraries to think in a different way. Funded by the federal government department Human Resources and Social Development Canada and launched in 2004, it is a partnership between public libraries and communities in Vancouver, Regina, Toronto and Halifax.

Its objectives are to:

- use a community development approach to build connections and relationships in the community
- identify and investigate systemic barriers to library use and attempt to break the barriers by influencing internal policy and procedural changes

I met the National Project Co-ordinator and colleagues in the central library in Vancouver and much of my time was taken up with talking about the challenges of taking a community-led approach. There is much more on this on the project's website.⁷

The four partner areas are focussing on the project in different ways. Toronto has specifically worked with newcomers and immigrants in two particular neighbourhoods and concentrated on women.

⁵ www.settlement.org/

⁶ http://atwork.settlement.org/sys/atwork_librarydetail.asp?doc_id=1004405

⁷ www.librariesincommunities.ca/

In the process they learnt the value of one-to-one conversations in order to listen and to foster relationships of trust. If approached individually, many people are more willing to share their thoughts and feelings, and to talk cautiously about what they do not like about the library or the kinds of services they wish the library provided. However, in focus groups, community members are hesitant to do so.

Learning by networking through community groups is also important. Observing and participating in meetings or activities hosted by community groups enables library staff to learn about concerns that would not otherwise be expressed directly. However, whilst partnerships with community agencies are important, they cannot be the *only* way for library staff to make links.

All the partners produced an asset map, documenting local resources from individuals and groups to buildings and spaces. The process is an important and positive way to start with what communities already have. It provided a reason to contact relevant organisations and open up a conversation with them. In Toronto they propose to develop this further into a social mapping exercise, working outside the library to identify where people congregate and finding opportunities to learn and understand the community more fully.

The work is now moving into collaborative planning and delivery of services including small business support programmes and conversation circles to help with English language.

2.2 Programmes and activities: libraries as spaces for inter-action

The traditional idea of a public library still lingers – a quiet place for private reflection and study, from which one can borrow books or other resources.



During my travels, I saw how public libraries meet this role within multicultural societies, for example through the development of outstanding collections in other languages than that of the majority of inhabitants – just one highly impressive example being the International Library in Stockholm.⁸

Such collections have immense value in giving access to other cultures and in enabling immigrants to sustain contact with language and culture from their place of origin. However, my focus in this report is on a few examples of the use of library spaces for activities which involve participation and exchange.

I visited six branch libraries in neighbourhoods of Copenhagen with large numbers of immigrants. Some were in inner-city environments which had an edgy, alternative feel and a lively nightlife including many ethnic restaurants (eg Nørrebro). Others were in unfashionable housing estates with few local

⁸ www.ssb.stockholm.se/templates/OneColumn.asp?id=43450

facilities where you would not be likely to go unless you lived there or were visiting someone who did (eg Tingbjerg). One library (Sundby) was located in an area that had seen a lot of investment and regeneration. It was in a wonderfully converted and extended former industrial building, and co-located with a wide range of community services. Significantly, as a result of planning as well as delivering activities with partners in the same building, the library was changing its whole way of working.

My perception, which was necessarily superficial as I didn't spend long in each library, was that the networks which libraries could tap into within these neighbourhoods varied enormously. It raised interesting questions about how far the responsibility of public libraries extends in trying to build social capital and local confidence in areas with high numbers of newcomers, and where existing networks are limited.

Tingbjerg was the last branch library I visited in Copenhagen and it seemed the most unpromising of settings. I was heartened to discover there a hidden gem put together on a small budget in what must have originally been a dingy space beneath the library. The children's librarian, working with a storyteller and artist, has created an intimate and magical storytelling room. It is a space for children in the neighbourhood, many of whom are immigrants, to learn the language, stories, songs, fairytales, dancing and traditions of their new country and a chance to share those from their countries of origin.



The room has a red and gold storyteller throne placed in front of a window with heavy drawn dark-red velvet curtains and on the floor an original Persian carpet from Iran. Gold cushions, a globe of the world, old photographs, books and domestic furniture bought from flea markets create a totally domestic sense of scale and theatre lighting provides a special atmosphere. The next-door room was filled with racks of dressing-up clothes.

Even seeing it empty, I had no difficulty imagining my reaction had I been a visiting child living in this neighbourhood, and it demonstrated to me what is possible at local level with dedication, initiative and creativity, even with scant resources. I was glad I hadn't only visited libraries with a tremendous architectural "wow" factor, such as the central libraries in Seattle and in Malmö, awe-inspiring though they were.

The children's librarian (who wasn't there on the day I visited) subsequently wrote to me with additional information about some of the programmes that have taken place here. For example in November 2007, they celebrated Astrid Lindgren's 100 year anniversary by performing an amateur production of Pippi Longstocking. This attracted about 150 local children and their

mothers (many of whom are first generation immigrants from places such as Iraq) with no need to promote it through local newspapers.



I also visited branch libraries in Sweden and in The Netherlands. Images that stay in my mind are men playing chess in the library in Rosengård, which is a suburb of Malmö, and a surge of children arriving at a branch library in The Hague for the supervised computer and homework club.

Many of the libraries I visited provide immigrants with conversation practice to learn the language of their new country, and I was able to participate in two sessions, one in Queens in New York and one in Seattle. In Seattle, the Talk Time session, run by volunteers, involved about 15 people from countries including Japan, Vietnam and Italy. It was also inter-generational with ages spanning some five or six decades. We spent time as one large group in a circle, working together in pairs and then split up into small groups to construct short stories using very simple props. It was both informal and fun. As it was the last session before the summer break, everyone got together at the end to share food from different countries, in the process putting their English into practice between themselves and with the volunteers.

The impressive New Americans Program in Queens public library service has been going for some 30 years, aiming specifically to reach the newest immigrants who didn't speak English or have a tradition of public libraries in their country of origin. I met with the team of eight staff. As well as collections development, their responsibilities include gathering relevant demographic intelligence in conjunction with other agencies in order to identify trends and plan effectively, and projects such as Health Link, a five year initiative to help increase access to cancer screenings and care among medically underserved communities in Queens. The details of activities below are part of a wider organisational commitment to equity of access that benefits everyone.

The team organises a full events programme in libraries, drawing on dance, music, film, art, crafts and literature from different cultures. The explicit aim of these is to attract 50% of the audience from people whose origin is connected to the event and 50% from the community at large, and often the performers themselves are drawn from within the local area. The events often provide opportunities for participation and interaction.

The team's work also includes an extensive, free "Enrich Your Life" coping skills programme. This comprises lectures and workshops in the most widely spoken immigrant languages on topics essential to new immigrants' acculturation, such as citizenship and job training information, advice on taking care of children and helping them learn, legal issues and information on available social services. Just one example: a workshop for Spanish-speaking

women, entitled “You are not alone: women facing relationship issues” including topics such as “immigration stress and its impact on relationships.”

These activities are in addition to computer classes and an Adult Learner programme, including English conversation classes, one of which I attended. There is more information about these and programmes in all the public libraries I visited (see Annex 1 for respective library service websites).

I have to confess I was sceptical when I heard about the Living Library project which runs on a regular basis in Malmö. This involves volunteers from different backgrounds, who may have experienced discrimination or prejudice, putting themselves forward as “living books” to be loaned in the form of a conversation in the library for a fixed period of time with anyone who wishes to borrow them.

My concern was that it could actually strengthen the very prejudices it sets out to eliminate. However, feedback in Sweden shows that the one-to-one conversations have given people the opportunity not only to ask questions and discuss issues that they otherwise wouldn't have had the opportunity to do, but in at least one case, the conversation had a big impact on their life. It has generated international publicity. Since Living Library was first tried out (at a festival in Denmark), an organiser's guide *Don't judge a book by its cover* has been published on the web⁹

Since returning to the UK, a workshop on the subject has been held by the Community Services Group of CILIP (Chartered Institute of Librarians and Information Professionals). So far as I am aware, it has not yet been run as a programme in the UK, but there is interest and I shall be curious to see if my scepticism proves to be misplaced.

2.3 Role of library support organisations in sharing resources and learning

In the exhibition hall of the American Libraries Association (ALA) annual conference in Washington, DC, I found a stand from the Office of Citizenship in the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services, part of the US Department of Homeland Security. The Director of US Citizenship and Immigration Services is the Executive Secretary of the Task Force on New Americans “a federal partnership created to strengthen the efforts of federal, state and local agencies in providing immigrants with the information they need to embrace the common core of American civic culture, learn English, and fully become American.”

The Task Force has produced a *Civics and Citizenship Toolkit*¹⁰ for public libraries, in partnership with the Institute of Museum and Library Services¹¹. A pre-publication copy was on display at the conference exhibition and I have recently received the final version in the UK.

⁹ www.eycb.coe.int/eycbwwwroot/HRE/eng/documents/LL%20english%20final.pdf

¹⁰ www.citizenshiptoolkit.gov

¹¹ www.imls.gov

I cannot provide feedback from public libraries on the American toolkit as it is too early. So far as I know, there is no central resource of this kind here for public libraries, apart from a commercially-produced software package to help people planning to take the citizenship test. However, I am very aware of the developing work by public libraries in the UK to support those who wish to take the test and help candidates prepare, so there must be an opportunity here also to develop resources centrally.

Just before the conference I met with a representative from the Office for Literacy and Outreach Services at the American Libraries Association (ALA) in Chicago. She presented me with a book, which I thoroughly recommend: *From Outreach to Equity: innovative models of library policy and practice*. This made me look at available resources on the ALA and other relevant websites. I think there are many unrealised opportunities to share good practice tools and findings from work internationally to support professional development here.

I was even more impressed when I met the team at the Urban Libraries Council, also based in Chicago, an association of public libraries in metropolitan areas and the corporations that serve them. When I returned home I read with interest on their website¹² details of a conference "Partners for success: the changing face of cities"¹³ much of which was about immigration and integration. The material available brings together an expert and thought-provoking analysis from different sectors and is just the sort of thing that would help public libraries here develop future thinking on their role in a wider context. After I returned home, I found out about other American organisations that support the role of public libraries in communities and shared information with colleagues in the UK about the information on their websites. These include Libraries for the Future,¹⁴ an organisation that supports innovation and investment in America's libraries, and Project for Public Spaces¹⁵ which includes information on public libraries as part of its web-based resources on civic centres.

In Denmark the Library Centre for Integration¹⁶ provides a centralised resource so that public libraries in Denmark do not each have to acquire resources in different languages on an individual basis. It also organises study tours, conferences and supports dialogue, partnership working and good practice. In Sweden, the International Library in Stockholm also acts as a lending facility for materials in different languages to other Swedish public libraries. I can see opportunities too for more collaboration in the UK between local authorities in multilingual collections development.

WebJunction is a US-based organisation, providing another excellent example of support, shared learning, exchange and good practice, using

¹² www.urbanlibraries.org

¹³ www.urbanlibraries.org/showcase/partners.html

¹⁴ Libraries for the Future www.lff.org

¹⁵ Project ofr Public Spaces www.pps.org/civic_centers/

¹⁶ Danish Library Centre for Integration www.statsbiblioteket.dk/sbci/

technology to great effect in creating virtual communities of interest.¹⁷ I met with some of the WebJunction team in Seattle and was particularly interested in their Spanish Language Outreach project.¹⁸ WebJunction's work means relevant research, training resources, and lots of practical information to support good practice is readily available including opportunities to participate in webinars.



In Belgium I attended a conference entitled "The multicultural library: a necessity in a creative and tolerant society."¹⁹ This was organised by the Low Countries Library Link, a co-operation between the Flemish Centre for Public Libraries, the Netherlands Public Library Association and the Goethe Institute. I appreciated the trans-national co-operation involved in organising the conference and the

international character of the delegate list and couldn't help feeling that I had been guilty of rather insular thinking before being given the opportunity to travel from the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust. I noted the involvement of the Goethe Institute and wondered if there might not be scope for more collaboration between public libraries and organisations such as this in the UK.

Amongst many interesting presentations, in one of the workshops a representative from Norway spoke about the Multicultural Library Manifesto which has recently been produced by the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA). I was also given a leaflet, also produced by the IFLA section on Library Services to Multicultural Populations, entitled *Raison d'être for Multicultural Library Services*²⁰ This explicitly makes clear that this is all about equity and therefore about everyone, rather than a specific ethno-cultural group or groups. I will be interested to see how the principles and actions suggested may be taken forward in the UK, since, in my opinion, the role public libraries can play in multicultural relationships cannot be fully realised without significant shifts in organisational culture, positioning and workforce.

2.4 Organisational structure, culture and workforce

The first thing that struck me in Toronto, the first city I visited, was that there is *one* public library service with 99 branches, amalgamated from seven library boards in the metropolitan area in 1998. It is the largest public library system in Canada and the fourth largest in North America. I could not help but compare with the fragmented situation in London, where each local authority

¹⁷ WebJunction www.webjunction.org

¹⁸ <http://webjunction.org/do/Navigation?category=7840>

¹⁹ Conference programme and presentations:
www.vcob.be/pls/portal/docs/PAGE/INFOVOORBIBLIOTHEKEN/LOW_COUNTRIES_LIBRARY_LINK/PROGRAMMA%20DEF%20OP%20SITE.DOC

²⁰ www.ifla.org/VII/s32/index.htm

has its own public library service, each with different joining procedures and rules and a bewilderingly different public “offer”. Admittedly, Toronto has a much smaller population than London, but my last visit in North America was to New York, and this only has three separate library services.

This does not mean that there are no change management and other significant challenges for large services, as staff I met during my travels were quick to point out. However, I did think in Toronto that the whole organisation was able to take a wider, more strategic view and appeared to have an enviably high profile with residents, including newcomers, and with citywide, regional and national agencies.

While travelling in Canada and the United States I was also struck with the model of governance where public library services have a high-level board of trustees or directors who are not employees of the library service nor are they all local authority councillors with particular political agendas. Again judging by the example of Toronto,²¹ the board has a powerful role and their backgrounds, skills and spheres of influence are wide-ranging and impressive.

I felt that this clearly has a bearing on advocacy, influence and leadership in the library service. In an environment with policies that strongly support diversity, and opportunities for collaborative working, public library leaders everywhere need influential critical friends from beyond the sector who can help them see the big picture and build strategic alliances that put communities into public libraries and public libraries into communities. Such alliances could have a big effect on how the role of public libraries in multicultural relationships is perceived and developed in practice in the UK.

While in Toronto, I learnt about an international conference organised by the Canadian Urban Libraries Council in partnership with Toronto Public Library (*Increasing diversity in Canadian cities: the public library response*²² 11-12 October 2007). This took place after my visit so I was unable to attend. The conference explored diversity, social integration and social cohesion, and the critical influence of public libraries. It included presentations from high-level politicians, including the former Governor General of Canada and is just one example from another country of the way public libraries are positioning themselves effectively in wider debates.

Workforce development and diversity is a big issue for public libraries everywhere, and I was interested to see how big a role volunteering plays in public libraries in the US and Canada. This is partly because volunteering while at school is not in fact “voluntary” but part-and-parcel of what everyone does and counts towards school grades. Benefits include giving young people from diverse backgrounds, who might not otherwise think of a career in this

²¹ www.torontopubliclibrary.ca/abo_boa_index.jsp (details of board members) and www.toronto.ca/abc/toc.htm (role of board)

²² Programme and presentations:
<http://culc.webexone.com/default.asp?link=%2Fdocs%2Fdocapp%2Easpx%3F%5Fcommand%3Dlist%26fid%3D10427>

field, an introduction to library work. Some volunteers, because of their own backgrounds, are able to provide support to newcomers and all volunteers, assuming they have a good experience, play a powerful role as ambassadors for the library service.

In Seattle some of the volunteers involved in literacy tutoring and teaching English were from the USA Freedom Corps/Peace Corps²³ and in several countries volunteers from the Red Cross were working in public libraries to provide support programmes for newcomers. In Malmö, I learnt about language-based student internships over two two-week periods (including in the city library service) which give children of immigrants the opportunity to practice their Swedish while learning about a profession.

It was striking that often the branch libraries that stood out during my visit as very well-networked in multi-ethnic local communities were also libraries which had staff whose background was in another sector. For example, in the library in Schilderswijk²⁴ in The Hague, one of the key staff had a background in international development work with women. There is most certainly an acknowledged need both for a workforce in public libraries that is more representative of the diversity in the communities they serve, but also for teams with complementary skills which may be drawn from other sectors. This is not to devalue librarians' qualifications or skills, but more to suggest that this is only one part of what is needed in public library settings.

An example of the changing face of the public library is the publicity campaign run by Queens library service on New York City buses featuring a member of library staff from the New Americans program team²⁵.

The image and the message *Yo soy Queen's Library* (I am Queens Library) is as far removed from the stereotype of an old-fashioned librarian as it's possible to get. The campaign makes it clear in the simple, accompanying text



what the library offers and that it's easy and free to use.

It is just one way of making sure that people see themselves reflected in the library and introduces the idea that everyone is welcome and everyone belongs there.

2.5 Conclusions and acknowledgements

My visits were fascinating and very enriching, giving me an insight into the similar issues that public libraries

²³ www.peacecorps.gov

²⁴ See <http://helencarpenter.wordpress.com> for more information about networking and my visit to this library

²⁵ See www.libraryjournal.com/article/CA6423421.html

are facing in all the countries I visited but with a multitude of different nuances and approaches to tackling them.

I was asked to give presentations on the Welcome To Your Library project in several of the places I visited and now continue to be in touch with a network of contacts who are keen to engage internationally. I have already been able to share what I learnt through my blog and by passing on web-based information from other countries. My surprise has been to discover how little international exchange, practice-sharing and cooperation there appears to be at any level currently between UK public libraries and their counterparts.

Travelling confirmed for me the value of:

- programmes and activities that encourage and co-ordinate exchange and active participation, locally, nationally and internationally
- innovation and research, sharing learning within and between sectors about what works and why
- radical thinking and action in relation to organisational culture, workforce and relationship-building at every level in public libraries to realise their full potential, including their role in multicultural relationships.

Public libraries need practical support to develop their role in multicultural relationships so they can:

- conceptualise, plan and deliver in a way that demonstrates their public value effectively
- build the skills and self confidence needed at every level for relationship-building with stakeholders and for community engagement
- make full use of global good practice, through research, events, training, publications and using web resources creatively
- identify where resource- and information-sharing could reduce duplication of effort.

I cannot thank enough all the people and organisations who made my travel possible. This includes those who encouraged me to apply in the first place, those who offered really useful advice and information, the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust for giving me this opportunity and all the people with whom I came into contact as a result. Everyone provided their time and expertise freely and gave me a warm welcome. I much appreciate it and I have learnt a great deal which I have already used subsequently in my work here and which I hope I can use in future to good effect. If there are any errors or omissions in this report they are entirely mine.

Annex 1

The Role of Public Libraries in Multicultural Relationships

Itinerary and websites

| Date (2007) | Location | Organisation/s | Website/s |
|---------------|------------------------|---|--|
| 30 May- 3 Jun | Toronto, Canada | Toronto public library service | www.torontopubliclibrary.ca |
| 3 -5 Jun | Ottawa, Canada | Ottawa public library service Libraries and Archives Canada Multicultural resources and services | www.biblioottawalibrary.ca www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/multicultural |
| 5-11 Jun | Vancouver, Canada | Vancouver public library service Working Together programme | www.vpl.ca www.librariesincommunities.ca |
| 11-15 Jun | Seattle, USA | 1. Seattle public library service 2. WebJunction | www.spl.org www.webjunction.org |
| 15-21 Jun | Chicago, USA | 1. Urban Libraries Council 2. American Libraries Association (ALA) | www.urbanlibraries.org www.ala.org |
| 21-26 Jun | Washington DC, USA | 1. ALA conference 2. DC public library service | www.ala.org/ala/confservices www.dclibrary.org |
| 26 Jun-4 Jul | New York, USA | 1. Queens public library service 2. New York public library service | www.queenslibrary.org www.nypl.org |
| 19-23 Sep | Stockholm, Sweden | Stockholm public library service (also Nacka, Botkyrka, Huddinge) | www.ssb.stockholm.se www.nacka.se www.botkyrka.se www.huddinge.se |
| 23-25 Sep | Malmö, Sweden | Malmö public library service | www.malmo.se/kulturbibliotek/malmostadsbibliotek.4.33aee30d103b8f15916800078640.html |
| 25-30 Sep | Copenhagen, Denmark | 1. Copenhagen public library service 2. Danish Library Centre for Integration | www.bibliotek.kk.dk www.statsbiblioteket.dk/sbcj |
| 30 Sep-3 Oct | The Hague, Netherlands | 1. Netherlands Public Library Association 2. The Hague public library service | www.debibliotheken.nl www.bibliotheekdenhaag.nl |
| 3 Oct-6 Oct | Mechelen, Belgium | Conference: "The multicultural library: a necessity in a creative and tolerant society" www.vcob.be/portal/page?_pageid=374,3444281&_dad=portal&_schema=PORTAL | |

Annex 2

Selective bibliography

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Audit Commission: London. January 2007.

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Equally Spaced. Public space and interaction between diverse communities.
Report for the Commission for Racial Equality by Hannah Lownsborough and Joost Beundermann of DEMOS. July 2007 www.demos.co.uk/files/Equally%20Spaced.pdf

From Outreach to Equity: innovative models of library policy and practice. Edited by Robin Osborne. American Library Association: Chicago, 2004

The IFLA Multicultural Library Manifesto – a tool for creating a better world. Presentation by Kirsten Leth Nielsen, Head of Multilingual Library, Deichmanske bibliotek/Oslo Public Library, Norway at the 73rd IFLA General Conference and Council, 19-23 August 2007, Durban, South Africa. www.ifla.org/IV/ifla73/papers/150-Nielsen-en.pdf

Libraries for all. The role of public libraries in a multicultural society. Multicultural Center Prague, 2005. www.mkc.cz/en/our-publications.html#libraries

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