

My Library By Right

Everyone in England has legal rights to quality public library services. Public libraries in England are statutory – local government must provide “comprehensive and efficient” services and central government must oversee and improve libraries. But our rights have been slowly eroded to the point where many people in government, the media and public don’t know they exist.

We all know that libraries are amazing places, run by skilled people that provide life-changing services. Whether you want to learn a new skill, improve your health, get access to information, find a job, start up a business or be entertained, your library has the answers.

For some time CILIP (Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals) had been lobbying behind the scenes to secure a positive future for public libraries. But in the face of sharp economic pressures, and austerity and devolution programmes that were implemented without a strategic plan for libraries in England, it became clear that it was the time to campaign for our rights to quality libraries to be understood and respected.

In December 2015 we launched My Library By Right, the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professional’s campaign for the public’s statutory right to a quality library service. The campaign was founded on pro bono legal advice from a celebrated human rights Barrister.

Campaign aims

My Library By Right set out to champion the public’s rights to libraries, for public libraries to be treated by central and local government as the statutory services they are; for the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) to carry out their legal duties under the 1964 Public Libraries and Museums Act; and for local authorities to have statutory guidance on their duties under the 1964 Act from DCMS.

The legal advice was clear that the duty to provide statutory guidance should be exercised under the 2010 Equality Act and 19 Human Rights Act. Under the 1964 Public Libraries and Museums Act:

- Local authorities have a statutory duty to provide “comprehensive and efficient” library services.
- The Department for Culture, Media and Sport has a legal duty for the «stewardship and improvement» of public libraries in England.

Progress

Since December we have successfully raised the profile of the public’s statutory rights to quality libraries. Internationally renowned writers Ali Smith, Joanna Trollope, Neil Gaiman and Sir Andrew Motion added their support to the campaign. Their support helped gain media coverage across national press, TV, BBC radio and local government trade press.

Partners including the Society of Authors, Authors’ Licensing and Collecting Society, the Reading Agency and English PEN gave their support to the campaign, joining libraries and library campaign groups.

14,000 people signed our petition calling on the Government to protect our statutory rights to libraries. Hundreds of you continue to leave heartfelt comments about why libraries matter.

At the same time we have been working in partnership with the Leadership for Libraries Taskforce and meeting with DCMS to secure a long-term strategic plan for public libraries in England and clearer guidance for local authorities on what makes a “comprehensive and efficient” service. The Taskforce published guidance setting out that libraries are a statutory service and government’s legal obligations shortly after we launched the campaign.

The Leadership for Libraries Task-force was established by central government to implement the recommendations in the Sieghart panel review of public libraries in England. The Task-force brings together central and local government, with the organisations and agencies with an interest, and responsibility, for improving and developing libraries – including CILIP.

At the start of 2016 Libraries Minister Ed Vaizey MP wrote to all local authority Chief Executives reminding them to observe their statutory obligations and encouraging all libraries to be part of the UK’s National Libraries Day in February. Saturday 6 February saw over 850 events take place in libraries across the country and over 600 press mentions of the important role libraries play at the heart of communities.

At the same time we have challenged the Government on their use of statistics about public libraries, because without accurate, reliable data and evidence we cannot create an effective strategic plan for developing the public library network and we will not be able to measure our impact.

We have monitored the media to identify where libraries have been incorrectly referred to as «non-statutory» and sent the correct information. We have contacted key local authorities when announcements have been made, reminding them of their statutory obligations. Library campaign groups have used the campaign in their lobbying of local authorities.

We are starting to see more push-back against library cuts and closures. For example, in March DCMS intervened to delay plans to close eight out of nine libraries in West Berkshire, with transitional funding made available.

Libraries deliver – ambition for public libraries

As part of the Leadership for Libraries Taskforce, CILIP has played an active role in lobbying for a national strategy in order to secure the future of our public libraries in England. We welcomed the publication of “Libraries Deliver: Ambition for Public Libraries” in England 2016–2021, in March 2016 as a step towards this strategy.

Now out for consultation, “Libraries Deliver”, sets out a vision of the value and impact that public libraries make. It clearly states that libraries are a statutory service and sets out seven priority areas that local and national government will work with partners to develop libraries and demonstrate impact:

- Reading and literacy
- Digital literacy
- Health and wellbeing
- Economic growth
- Culture and creativity
- Communities
- Learning

There are challenging areas – developing a realistic and achievable final plan demands that we confront difficult issues. “Libraries Deliver” covers structural reform of the public library network and examines a range of delivery models. While being challenging it does provide opportunities to create a healthy, vibrant network with strong national leadership and tailored local delivery. It clearly recognises the value of skilled library and information staff and we are committed to leading the development of a National Library and Information Skills Strategy that “Libraries Deliver” calls for.

It is essential that “Libraries Deliver” is properly resourced and supported. A practical action plan, sufficient budget and realistic long-term funding proposals, along with a transparent and timely approach to monitoring and reporting, and strong political leadership and support must be in place. We are encouraging our members to join us to secure these improvements to the plan through a consultation process.

What's next

While “Libraries Deliver” provides a welcome strategy for public libraries in England it does not change the fact that some local authorities are consulting to reduce their library service through building closures, budget reductions and cutting staff.

Which is why we have been campaigning with our members in the run-up to local elections in England on the 5 May. Together, we explained to candidates why libraries matter, and can win or lose votes. We provided a campaign kit for the elections to help lobby election candidates that included a template letter and email, key messages, facts and figures, and contact details.

We will work closely with the Leadership for Libraries Taskforce to make sure that the new strategic plan for libraries in England does deliver, and provides the framework for a strong national network and a vibrant local offer that powers progress in communities, across regions and throughout the country.



Mark Taylor

Mark Taylor leads on CILIP's advocacy and public affairs activities such as the Libraries All Party Parliamentary Group. He manages teams that produce Update magazine, organises CILIP events, coordinates campaigns and major awards, and develops CILIP's online information.

Abstract

Deutsch

Im Dezember 2015 lancierte die Organisation CILIP (Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals) die Kampagne «My Library By Right», bei der es um das gesetzlich festgelegte Recht der Öffentlichkeit auf hochwertige Bibliotheksdienstleistungen geht. Diese Kampagne ist eine Reaktion auf den zunehmenden ökonomischen Druck sowie auf die Spar- und Verlagerungsprogramme, die für Bibliotheken in England ohne strategische Planung durchgeführt wurden.

Français

En décembre 2015, l'organisation professionnelle CILIP (Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals) a lancé la campagne «My Library By Right» pour le droit légal du public à un service de qualité dans les bibliothèques. Cette campagne est une réponse à la pression économique croissante et aux programmes d'austérité et de délégation du service public qui ont été réalisés en Angleterre pour les bibliothèques sans planification stratégique.