Interview with Shiraz Durrani 11th May 2004 (Anna Goulding)

AG We'll start off with staffing and leadership then because I know you are very involved in the Quality Leaders Project so if we can start by talking about the key issues of ethnic diversity in the workforce, what are the key problems and issues there do you think.

SD: I think one thing to keep in mind is that the issues in the library are a reflection of what's happening in society so it's not an isolated box that we live in. The library profession exists in its social context.   I think it's obvious that there's a lack of commitment to equality on the basis of diversity in the country and within libraries. Whichever way we define it - not only in the staffing issues but in the service as well. The issue is around organisational culture and connected with that there is a lot of lip service to diversity. All that lip service is not making much of a difference on the ground.

In the past, people used to go for equality training and many came back better equipped to avoid being caught out providing an "unequal" service. There is a danger of the same thing happening now. With reference to issues around Steven Lawrence Inquiry or even the Equality Standard, we need to see from the point of view of what's happening on the ground, talking to people. If we are honest, we e have to admit that it's again another of those exercises where you tick boxes and go away and do your own thing.

There is a lack of leadership or direction or guidance in the profession and definitely a lack of commitment to equality and that goes right across - it's at middle management level and also at a more senior level.

The danger point also is that some of the things that have been coming from CRE itself in terms of ethnic diversity may be giving the wrong message. Some of their statements seem to imply that political correctness is a thing of the past and not a matter of human rights. Political correctness to me means sticking to equality principles.

In the library field the Library and Information Commission commissioned the diversity report by Roach and Morrison. I don't think anybody's ever seriously bothered with looking at it or implementing it. It's nice to have those kinds of reports but what use are they if they are not taken on board at all. I went to a recent meeting organised by Improvement & Development Agency where they were launching their report, "Perspectives and perceptions". A minister said that we need to start using the Race Relations Amendment Act more creatively and forcefully. It is a powerful weapon and possibly that's true, but I don't see libraries actively using it… I mean, who is going to challenge whom in this situation? Is there a black and ethnic minority or a woman manager who sees things going wrong and will start using the law to challenge the situation? Or is it going to be a "mainstream", librarian who suddenly realises that all they have been doing in the past has been illegal, and so change?

I'm involved in Merton in a number of situations. I'm one of the managers; I used to manage the post of Equality, Policy and Research Officer (Liz Smallwood who is

on a career break at the moment). She used to represent libraries in our Department's Equality Impact Assessment process. Her post is vacant so the service makes do with lip service to equality and policy. I now go to some of these Equality meetings. I'm now also Staffside rep on equalities, so I'm taking a broader look at equality issues, slightly removed from libraries. From my observations, it appears that we have a long way to go. Crucial issues like how we use the media fund, for instance, are subjects not addressed at all. This is one area where there is a long history of unfairness and inequality entrenched in the system. We have challenged this inequality internally within the library service, with no positive results. We have also challenged this at corporate level, again with no improvement. Communities outside do not even know about such unfair practices. How is the situation going to change?

If you're not going to be open and transparent about how the money we get is being used, and be open about it and be able to justify it in the context of equality or diversity than I think there is something fundamentally wrong with the situation. I think there's a lot of resistance to have an open debate about it, let along changing unfair practices. Decisions are still made by a few individuals who seem to be above the law. So unfair decisions continue to be made as if this was a private empire. Maybe the British Empire is not dead, just turned inwards.

I don't think CILIP is giving leadership on this either, again they have their own ways of appearing to be doing something but I don't think in real terms it makes a difference. I think the whole problem in the profession as a whole is, and I think this probably comes up under other questions as well, that there doesn't seem to be a vision for libraries, someone looking ahead five years from now from the point of view of the majority of British people. There are no new ideas coming in, there is stagnation and people in positions of power are there to maintain their position. The whole issue around what libraries are for is kept out of public discussion.

AG: So things like Framework for the Future then you would say, well it has been said, not aspirational enough, not visionary enough.

SD: No. well it does go some way but it's not very much… I read in the paper yesterday about this new Equalities and Human Rights Commission. They say the Government will take a softly, softly approach and not pose any real challenge to ensure social justice. Similarly, the whole issues around Framework for the Future is that it takes a softly, softly approach… they don't want to challenge, they don't want to say this is what you have to do. Then there is the whole question surrounding the public library standards, which are again taking a very traditional approach, and not helping to bring about necessary change.

…. I think it's bankruptcy of thought really in the whole process and I wrote this little bit on Framework for the Future in the "Update"… The Framework looks at best practice currently in some places and they want everyone to reach that level. I don't think its good enough. Some current good practice will not be good enough to meet the real needs in 10 years' time – not that its good enough for today, either.

The crucial point about diversity and equality is that unless you involve the people directly, empower them, nothing is going to change. In Hackney, we had for a short period of time the situation where we formed a black workers' group which had support from the Director - Gus John who was very much committed to equality and social justice. I think we did manage to do many positive things but

there was no sustainability, as soon as some of us left it was rolled back. When it worked, the reason for its success was that we involved the community and a large number of staff. About 40- 45 people were active in what we were doing, they decided what books and other material we bought. We had library attendants, who were generally thought of as useless non-professional people, taking an active part in developing a relevant collection needed by local communities. One of these chaps was leading on our music collection. He went down to Ridley Road Market and got the real stuff that young people wanted. Police had to be called in to send young people home late at night, way past library opening time, after a highly successful music event in one of the libraries, so interested were these young people to listen to the music purchased by the newly empowered music team.

Now unless you involve people like that, unless you involve the community, unless they're empowered, you will not bring about any change. It will then be the same old characters sitting in offices making decisions without understanding their communities. I don't think that's the way to run a public service.

Another thing we set up was the Diversity Council. As with every oppressed group, there was a lot of in-fighting, but we did overcome that to a certain extent and formed the Diversity Council which brought together a number of organisations which were active at different levels. It has now become the Diversity Group of CILIP. It now makes all the right points and all the rest of it but I don't think it's going to make much of a difference.

Evidence to show equality is easily manipulated to make it appear to be doing things; I think it's reasonably easy to get higher grading with the Equality Standard or in terms of this Beacon Status if you look at it. In fact I was very critical of our own performance in Merton when we won the "Libraries Change Lives" Award. We got a lot of publicity because we did certain things, and we felt very good about it but if you look at it, whatever was positive in it hasn't continued. There is a lot of feel-good factor but that's about it. I think there's no process for supporting innovation, developing it, encouraging it… It's very difficult to talk in terms of resource redirection because there is a sort of constant battle between providing the current service which provides a service to a small group of people, a declining service anyway, but even to take that and put it to new and developing things it's an impossible job and there's not political will at local or national level to say, yes we will do it. In Merton I think we've gone much further than other authorities shown by the fact that we have what we're calling an innovation and development approach but I don't think that's going to make any long-term change unless the real issues are addressed at a much higher level and the programme is allowed to be continued.

AG: Ok, what about the Quality Leaders Project, can you tell me a bit about that and where it's going really.

SD: Yes but I won't go too much into it …, I've got stuff if you want to take it away but broadly this is what it tries to do. It connects with the national agenda in various ways. It's "management development through service development", so we're trying to get a balance between developing staffing skills and confidence and developing services. And if we look back at why we started this, it started off with a programme for ethnic minority managers because the fact was that out of 25,000 members of CILIP there were only about 280 BME members and only 3 of them earning £27,000. The idea was to develop a programme, funded from outside (Resource, now MLA) which will give new skills to Black managers and we thought

perhaps we could come to a situation where we were perhaps developing a new generation of heads of libraries from that. It didn't do that because we found it difficult to even recruit black people to even come to those courses, the people who headed libraries didn't think it was necessary to develop their Black staff and they kept saying, "Oh we can't release them".

Those who did participate eventually were at a lower level so we shifted our balance slightly… the national roll out programme (QLP3) was for ethnic minorities managers did get 6 participants at middle management level. In the current phase – QLP-Youth – we shifted the focus quite a bit. This looks at services for young people and the people who are participating in it, whose skills we're trying to improve, we left it to authorities to select. I think people are taking it much more seriously now because we've changed lots of things about it. What we have insisted on is that there should be a quality leader who works with a team and at least one person in the team has to be from ethnic minority background and we're hoping that there will be other disadvantaged groups in terms of disability, gender, sexual orientation, etc.

And this particular strand of QLP-Y does not only develop skills within the initial six months (funded by the National Youth Agency) but it has money for the following two years to implement the process (funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation). So hopefully the people who are involved in it will keep developing their skills by actually implementing it and whereas we cannot guarantee jobs at a higher level, at least they will have new skills which will enable them to apply for higher posts.

In fact one of the thoughts we had in the earliest stages was that authorities which took part must be prepared to change their staffing structure, to make sure that Quality Leaders (QLs) have an opening. This again was a bit too ambitious, but because there's an implementation stage we hope that people will get new skills and experience and hopefully they will get higher jobs. The experience we have from the pilot stage when Merton and Birmingham participated is positive. Both the QLs managed to get higher level jobs soon after completing the course. Our quality leader from Merton actually moved out of Merton which was fine in a way because he got a higher opening somewhere else and the same thing happened at Birmingham. So it does expose them to lots of new ideas, connections within the Council, making contacts outside and empowering them to do things in terms of targeting the community – all this developing their self confidence and awareness.

The fact that we could get funding from the National Youth Agency's Partnership Innovation Programme for the initial six months and the funding for the following two years implementation from the Paul Hamlyn Foundation shows the success of the idea and vision of the project. These are not the sort of people who just hand out money. We had to prove ourselves and keep sending regular reports.

An interesting fact is that one of the people who is on the QLP steering group, Dr Dean Bartlett (Deputy Director of the Management Research Centre at London Metropolitan University) has since been asked to be on the Board of the Partners in Innovation Programme at the National Youth Agency. As for QLP-Y, the initial six months finish in the next three months so we're still part way through and after that the two years will be the crucial thing. [Shows diagram of QLP programme] These are the authorities taking part and interestingly enough it's moving out of London. We are basing some aspects of QLP on something that we are doing in Merton, including what the young people are doing [Merton Sense magazine]. We've created a youth space in one of our libraries, we give them funding and

training but the content is entirely theirs and it's a partnership between Merton's libraries and youth services and they're working on issue number 4.

AG So this is a good example of partnership working then.

SD: Definitely and also libraries breaking the walls, coming out of this little shell that they have been sitting in and it has become such a high profile thing that the Cabinet members also talk about it. However there have been some changes in our youth service who were funding issue number four (the next one), but they cannot fund any more issues. We are now looking to produce a business plan to see how we finance it. Reporters from Young People Now rang us to ask "we hear that your funding is going. Why?" I think a very positive thing that people outside feel it is a worthwhile project and that we have to explain why we are cutting it and what's going to happen. Unless there is pressure from outside libraries will fall asleep again.

QLP now has two new modules besides the six sessions around Best Value, consultation, project planning, resource management etc. The two are: (1) combating racism and managing equality as an integral part of the training and (2) managing youth/library services. As part of that programme, we gave participants the task of "designing an equal library service". We say "don't worry about money or anything, you are in charge, what would you do?" I think part of the process is that we change people's thinking and give them a vision which hopefully they will take with them for the rest of their lives. And the other bit is around developing youth services. Interestingly enough out of six authorities, one is represented by their Youth Manager who has now started working closely with their library service. …… What we say is that each quality leader must be given at least two days off a week to work on this for the six months.

AG That's quite a commitment.

SD: It is yes, they don't pay any cash but they release their staff. In Westminster the pressure to join QLP came from their youth service.….. because of the way we were recruiting we sent publicity to youth services as well as libraries and it many cases it was the youth services which pushed the libraries to get involved and Westminster was one of them so at the moment they have two quality leaders, one from the youth service, one from libraries and they get one day each a week. Swansea had lots of changes but the quality leader there is also in the youth services, working with the young people. But I think another interesting example is Liverpool where the quality leader is from a youth service and has started a dialogue with the libraries in terms of developing their services for young people and they're designing a new library, a huge new development, where the ground floor of the library will be a youth library. So this has pushed authorities to start taking a joined up approach between libraries and youth service.

Birmingham is also working with us and they're also designing a new library so let's see what may come of it. But the crucial thing about this is that the proposals developed within the six months have to be developed in consultation with the young people so it's forcing them to talk to the young people, youth service as well as the young people and one of the exercises I've given them is around understanding the youth service (or the library service for QLs from youth services) so part of it is to force them to talk to each other. And again I'm using Merton as an example. Merton has another strand, which was creating a new post of youth library development officer, again a partnership with Merton libraries and youth

services. The post is based in libraries and one of the jobs which she is doing is setting up Youth Library Forum. She is a qualified youth worker, she has background in youth service but has no library experience. We wanted it like that because I don't think librarians have youth work skills. We can give her library experience but we can't do it the other way around. The young people we work with never thought that libraries could be a cool place for young people. But now with this Merton Sense magazine group, we have 50 young people working on it, not all of them come every week but they have meetings every Monday in the youth space which we have just created and now getting new furniture and they are deciding what furniture they want, in Mitcham library. We've set up this unit called the Innovations unit and we have four or five innovations projects, all of them are based there and I have a second office so every Thursday I work from there.

So the young people have a space there, quite a nice, lively room with computers which the youth service has given them and they meet every Monday. Another project is the Lending Time project working with volunteers. Through that project we recruited a former BBC journalist who's giving them technical lessons. The quality is very much dependent on his advice. Before this they had no idea about publishing and printing and all the rest of it but now they are getting experts at it. They meet at 7 p.m. when the library is closed so one of our staff, Anthony who is a Quality Leader as well, he support them and puts in a lot of time and effort in it. He say now they have to have two sessions, one at 4 p.m. and one at 7 p.m. so I said "Why?" and he said "well one of the young people who comes has electronic tagging and has to be home early but he wants to be part of this so we meet twice now" and I thought that's quite an interesting things.

We've talked about diversity and in Merton we used to have our staffing structure which had initially a section 11 funded post for "community services" and we destroyed that as the post holder was quite isolated, had no support and was quite removed from the mainstream library service. Then we created the BME/Outreach service and we found again that it too was marginalising equality, so we turned it into the Equal Access Service.

In the new (2003) structure we destroyed that completely and took a different approach because the effect of having a separate section dealing with equality issues was that we were giving a particular message the all communities and to our staff - that anything to with equality is it the job of a separate group of staff. We found this to be counter-productive and libraries and managers were not taking responsibility for services to their community if they happen to be from ethnic minority communities or if they were disabled - in which case it was, "those guys will do it". So now we mainstreamed equality.

We start with having policies that ensure that equality is mainstreamed in everything we do. As part of that approach, for example, we look at the needs of young people and of older people. In the old way we would have said "oh this is for ethnic minorities" but what left out young white boys for example. We now go by meeting specific needs of all actual and potential users by age, not necessary based on their ethnic backgrounds.

Now, instead of shouting about diversity, we say everybody is welcome and that's it, you know, and in that way we give a sense of community. Now they're taking pride in developing new services, e.g. the Merton Sense group who say "we're the

Merton Sense group", race, gender all those things are part of the programme as all-inclusive group.

Another interesting thing is that many young people have developed new skills and have felt valued. Some of them are interested in fashion. In the current issue there's someone teaching us how to "destroy" a t-shirt and turn it into something a fashion accessory. In the earlier issues there's someone writing about fashion. A national magazine liked what she had written and said "we've seen your writing, do you want to write something for us?". Another example is a young woman who writes poems for Merton Sense has won two local poetry competitions. They have talents but we're giving them skills and opportunities which are expanding their horizons.

The Editor of this magazine has now got a job in Merton through an open competitive interview. He wrote a very nice article about how he saw Merton Sense and how it developed him. He said he used to be a delivery person, going on his motor bike or bicycle delivering parcels or whatever and he said he used to go to some newspaper offices and he saw all the journalists sitting and he said "I want to be a journalist". And now he edits the Merton youth magazine. He applied in Merton for a job as a trainee youth worker and he will work there now and because of our partnership they're going to base him in the library, it's a half-time job, but he'll be based in the library developing Merton Sense and working on some other initiatives.

Another initiative we are launching through the new post of Youth Library Development Officer is around developing a youth library forum so that young people can tell us what they want. They have told us that they want a youth space in every library and they said "if you do that we will support you" and that's how we make our connections with the young people because we are not skilled to do it ourselves. It's working in different ways. So I'm connecting QLP with Merton because many of the things that we are doing in Merton are providing lessons for QLP.

AG: OK shall we move on and talk about social exclusion, you mentioned the public library standards and there are none covering social exclusion, do you think that's disappointing or it's not appropriate?

SD: It's disappointing but I'm not surprised, put it that way. When I was in Hackney we ran a Black Workers Group which submitted ideas on developing services to BME communities to the then Department of National Heritage who were doing a survey of libraries. Later on, I wrote to the Social Exclusion Unit when they started discussing services to BME communities; I wrote to the Parliamentary Culture, Media & Sport Committee. So "they" are not unaware about what needs to happen or that something needs to happen.

I think there's very often this attitude around, I think quite patronising sometimes, "oh these people are talking and shouting, let them and we'll do our own thing and we'll carry on". And we had an officer from DCMS who was asked by one of the visiting Danish librarians: "Aren't you (the government) ashamed of yourselves? In Denmark we have a lot of music and CDs and cassettes in libraries and it's all free. Now why can't a country like Britain have those kinds of free services?"

There is no doubt that in the last 7 years or so, there has been a lot of progress. There is a new momentum and a lot of positive things have happened under this

government but I think they're too scared to take a bold stand and say "this is where we want to go and this is how we want you to…" and I think the other danger is that ICT can take a higher profile. I think it's absolutely essential; it's brilliant that every library has computers, so that is breaking down those barriers in a very basic way. I think it's an essential first basic step but it has stopped there unless something new comes and this year's position statement guidance maintains that position, they don't want to shake the boat. It's almost as if they're scared of heads of libraries like the whole things around Framework for Future, "oh we're taking on board what heads of libraries think" but who the hell are these heads of libraries, what class do they represent, whose interests do they represent?

One of the projects that we have in Merton besides the youth one, we have another parallel one for older people, it's a partnership with our Chief Executive's Department who are carrying on a Best Value review of services to older people and libraries were part of that review. So we set up a partnership project between a community group, the Chief Exec's department and libraries. The three of us finance a post of Officer Services to Older People. And one of the ideas that has come there is to buy laptops for older people and to connect them because not many can come to libraries and if they don't come, does it mean that they are permanently excluded from this technology as a tool. So if you're talking about social exclusion it's age connected, it's gender connected, it's race connected. There is a need for some creative thinking about providing ICT services, and decide what the real issues are and how one connects people to technologies. We can't just put computers in library buildings and hope we've got rid of exclusion.

We had a meeting last week, one of our libraries has an open learning centre, it's funding is coming to an end next year. Now we are applying for various agencies for funding, we want to keep it going, it's highly successful in an area of deprivation and doing a good job but we just didn't want to take this forward as only a library matter. So we called a meeting of local organisations so there's local representation from the trust which works there, from the local housing association, community centre, youth and education services etc. We've now set up a smaller group to put an application together. The idea is that in terms of local needs, I'm not the one who's going to know what's happening, I could do this and all the rest of it, but the people who live there, whose interests are represented by the local schools, community groups are the ones who need to be involved and who need to decide on the direction of our services.

The area has the highest proportion of single parents in Merton so we have ICT learning sessions for them, but the need has to be established by the community themselves. So we're working with them but Merton is a very tiny place; we tend to be thinking in isolated little boxes, not only London-wide but I think we need to think more widely … Britain is not such a huge country really when you think that more people in India speak Gujarati than the whole population of Britain, that gives you some perspective on Britain's position in the world.

Within the library world there is a danger of us not understanding the forces of globalisation. It's changing lots of things, not only technology but where things happen and not happen and all the rest of it and we are simply sitting with closed eyes and minds and there are storms all around us and we think they'll go away. And the profession doesn't do much to challenge or to break people's thinking. Again in Merton, a very small area, we have what we're calling ideas forum; the idea is that we meet once a month where we talk about new things or crazy things. Staff have to move with us a certain distance and unless you start developing them

and their thinking we might be in a losing situation. A few of us might be very much aware, but what's happening to the managers who are managing libraries or to staff? And it's not that they're stupid or anything, I think there's no condition for them to develop... they're so caught up in the day-to-day running of libraries and we have to create opportunities for them to think, learn and develop. We can't say, "oh they should go home and read", we have to create conditions for them. But who is doing that kind of thinking nationally in the profession?

I don't think CILIP is doing it, I don't think DCMS is doing it, I don't think MLA (used to be Resource), I don't think they're doing it. Incidentally I should have answered your question on QLP, where does it go from here, maybe I could just very briefly say that we had a meeting with MLA, we had a meeting last week with CILIP who want to see if they can use this model in terms not only of equality but also developing leadership and other skills. There was somebody from the Employers Organisation who was interested in this model. There is a lot of government money pouring into skills and learning and they are looking at relevant models and they are looking at QLP as a possible model and QLP does give you a University diploma in work-based learning, so it's something that we've been working on for some time. So while we have funding for the next two years of QLP-Y implementation there are all these other people… I think in June or July CILIP is coming up with their reports around new approach to develop staff.

AG: So you think there needs to be more imaginative thinking?

SD: One of the things I've been talking about with the Paul Hamlyn Foundation was… I think one of the two key things that needs to happen in the profession is possibly developing an innovations unit in a big way which would collect innovations, ideas and support other people to put it into practice and document it.

AG: So they're you've saying it's very fragmented and yes, there are pockets of good practice but that needs to be brought together.

SD: We need to mainstream those activities. I've no problem in a sense with what Framework for the Future is trying to do. I think it's brought important things on to the agenda. The same thing with the report that came out last week. I think there are some very positive thoughts in it which challenge us in a number of ways and I think we need to be able to respond to those. We've been running libraries for 150 years, where have we taken them? We've taken them down a big hole I think. There are people who are challenging us and we need to start responding to that and then bringing it back to life. We have a similar situation in Merton; I had, some years ago, four or five new manager working under me and I wanted to support them so we used to have a "management development" session every month. The morning session would be me bringing crazy ideas and all sorts of things and the afternoon session was for them to come with their issues from their workplace so we all discussed issues, a case study kind of thing. During one of the morning sessions, I invited Keith Davies who at the time was the Assistant Chief Executive. He said that local authorities are changing, in five years time you won't see local authorities as they are now, education has changed, the street cleaning scene has changed, and he says, libraries will have to change. And he says, you tell me what way you want to go or somebody else will and somebody will take the agenda from you. So I started discussing this with this group of managers and one of the things that emerged from that was that paper by Liz (Elizabeth Smallwood) on communities developing communities where she is saying that the needs of the

community should be at the centre of everything we do and re-defines what libraries are all about and explained the direction they should be moving in. So the point is, if local authorities are changing, if libraries are changing, what are we going to do, I mean, if we don't move and change, in 20 years time there will be no libraries.

I'm connected with international progressive librarians group. There are a number of such groups. Some years ago they asked me similar questions you're asking me, what's the situation, how have things changed and so on – published in "bis". I don't think the situation has changed that much but the point is when I look at librarians from the USA and all these progressive groups, they're not sort of sitting in a corner saying, we're librarians and resting with that. They are saying, we are part of the society, so when film distributors stop a film being distributed, they say it is part of our job as librarians to get involved in that, that's the politics of librarianship. But in Britain, we don't even get involved in local elections. We had somebody from the Black Caucus of the American Library Association who said when they have elections for the American Library Association they start challenging candidates, what will you do for equality & diversity? And when they have elections they start wondering whether Gore or whoever is going to do anything for libraries. In a way, we in Britain, as a profession, are very narrow and inward looking, we don't think of ourselves as politicians or people who should be interested in politics. I think that is part of our problem, a middle-class sort of little elite sitting unconcerned while the earth is moving and shaking around us.

AG: You did talk a bit about the People's Network and saying it's not enough just to shove these machines in libraries and think that is going to overcome exclusion

SD: OK, I think it's a positive development; it's something that is fantastic that has changed the thinking. We had librarians or library workers sometime saying we don't want to get rid of books from libraries, why do you want space for the computers but they've now just come to be accepted. But the danger is that technology is not going to automatically address the needs of everybody, with the book and reading and the rest of it. I think it's a very, very small class of people who use the book service for instance and there's the same danger there, that unless we change and challenge the way we do things, it's the same class of people, same group of people who know how to take advantage of things, not advantage, make use of it, so that again it's going to be a marginalized service.

I mean, again, slightly unconnected but we closed two libraries in Merton some time back and when we said we wanted to redirect the resources to serve people who are not connected to libraries. Some of those who already use libraries went to their local members of parliament and councillors and made a big noise. But what we were saying was that those libraries are in the wrong place, very few people use it, it was like little local family units. But they know how to make political noise and they almost won; the council had a big problem because 4 Labour councillors resigned. The danger is to keep developing services for a small proportion of people (mostly middle class), at the expense of the rest of the people whose needs may be even more urgent.

So it's the same kind of thing; computers are there but what are they being used for and I think the whole issue around learning is marginalizing people like this so if computers are a tool, a tool for what? For whom? Those basic questions have not been even asked, let alone answered and putting computers without those kinds of

thing….. OK put more money in books but you keep buying Mills and Boon and mindless fiction, OK it's good to read but is it always good for people to read more of what they always read while the rest of the population gets nothing.

And it's an interesting perspective, I'm from Kenya, I'm a refugee so excuse me talking about refugees but I've been working on a project in Kenya developing local libraries. I didn't go to Kenya for about 19 years until the government there changed. I went there last year and when I went to the University library where I used to work, when I was there we used to have a workshop around libraries, what are libraries for, what role they play in rural development and those kinds of questions. And all those people now they're saying they are trying to set up local libraries for workers in Nairobi or the peasant areas where they come from with almost no resources, they are putting their own money in it. So I'm working on a couple of projects there but it gives you a better perspective when I come back here and we have all these resources but few questions about how they are meeting the needs of all local people.

Visitors come to UK libraries and say, oh it's fantastic, so many books. You get librarians from Africa or Book Aid International send their librarians quite regularly to Merton. And we were talking about privatisation and a librarian from Ethiopia said oh it would be fantastic if libraries in Ethiopia were privatised and somebody could run them. But no private library will go to Ethiopia as there is no profit to be made. Nothing is for free.

We think about the needs for books and computers and so on but there is a social side of libraries which has been forgotten and I think part of the danger in Britain is that public libraries are disconnected from the schools of librarianship, we are disconnected from management training and I think all the issues around social exclusion and what they used to call community librarianship, the relationship has been eroded from schools and training. These things need to be re-connected. It's happening in small ways but I think there needs to be a broader direction from somewhere that is missing and not only in public libraries.

I used to work in Kabete Library in Kenya (the library of the Agricultural-Veterinary Faculties of the University of Nairobi). This library was the only library in the area. The library was specialising in coffee, which was an export crop and all sorts of things. But the peasants who lived around the library were the women who used to grow tomatoes and potatoes and carry them on their heads to Nairobi and nobody looked at what their information needs were. If they came near the library we would have to ask them, do you speak English? Are you a graduate? As a way of creating a relevant library service, we started running film shows for them on the history of Kenya and hundreds of them would come in the evenings, it's the first time they entered that campus. And you start questioning, what are academic libraries doing, sitting in a situation like that, not opening their doors to the peasant who need a library service. And OK that was the Kenyan situation and we think they are "under-developed" and they don't know how to run libraries – let's not go down that way!

But here it's the same situation, there could be academic, public, research, health libraries in an area. But we don't talk to each other, so the building are isolated units and the people outside, we need to look at it from their point of view, what do they make of us, the academic libraries, the public libraries, if you are a graduate you go there, if you are not a graduate … I mean the messages we are giving are so contradictory and overall who is looking at this whole situation and

saying, no this is information services, this is a library service, we need to connect with everything else and promote that product.

So computers have their role in terms of preventing social isolation and for learning new skills etc. Some of the greatest users of computers and email are older people because they're establishing a new community. Now what are we in libraries doing? We have the Lending Time project where we take some volunteers to teach people to use computers but that's at the margins of real possibilities which the technology provides to us and technologies are out there, we don't know what to do with them.

AG: You mentioned libraries in the States and a lot of them are getting involved in community building and community planning and you mentioned some of the work you're doing here in Merton which can be seen within that context. Do you think there is a role there? Can libraries contribute to that.

SD: I have this quotation for you, nothing to do with libraries. It's an article written by my son who edits a magazine and for young people who were de-politicized by Thatcher. *[Anne: the quote seems to be missing. Can you please check the tape for it].* But now they are getting extremely political. I think if you put the quote in its context of what libraries ought to be, there is a need to think beyond libraries in terms of buildings or even sharing space with community groups and centres. The key message is that unless libraries are part of the people, you are not going to make any impact.

Again, connected with something we were working on in Kenya, we had a number of projects but one of them which unfortunately I couldn't get involved as I had to run away but there's an irrigation scheme in Kenya where they grow rice and the peasants have small plots, one or two acres or something, the irrigation scheme is run by the World Bank or somebody and the peasants have no control over their land or the water or the fertilizers, they're just there as labour, they're asked to do this and they do it and they get a bit of profit, while transnationals siphon off their profits. We started thinking about the information needs of those people, we're all petit-bourgeois or bourgeois or whatever, we just can't walk in there even… because we are foreigners to them as people from another class. People from Europe are called foreigners, the term they used was "wazungu" which technically means white people, but the issue is not one of colour, but of class and imperialism. The only way we can make a connection with the peasants was to live with them, to work with the people, be part of the people. And I think our profession has disconnected us from our people and our communities and unless we challenge that, just throwing computers at them will not help. So it needs much more fundamental thinking and shifting of the power balance in favour of the people. We need to stop thinking that they are stupid, that they don't know what libraries are about, I think we need to learn from them and until we do that we'll be just talking and walking in circles.

AG: Let's move on to this last section then, you've said that you can see the public library service going down and down into a hole I think you said unless it gets it act together really.

SD: Very much so. Kevin Harris from the Community Development Foundation asks: "does it really matter who provides information service to the community, as long as somebody does that?" We don't have a right from some high authority saying that librarians are the only ones who can provide information. The world is

moving on, new technology is cheaper than ever. One of the things I said in the Kenyan context is that peasants need information, public libraries don't give them that information so they're not going to wait and starve until public libraries get their act together, they develop their own systems and the information they need whether it's about rain or fertilisers or whatever so people are developing their own ways, we need to connect with them. If libraries don't provide that information and somebody else does, it could be a college, it could be a bookshop or whatever, I think it's something as librarians we should be pleased, these people are getting information, and we shouldn't be protective, we should not say "only I can give it", it's very macho thinking that we seem to be some kind of elite with particular skills and only we know how to stamp a book or whatever we do. So whether we like it or not, information in the learning world is changing and if we are proactive we will guide and give some sort of sense of direction because we do have certain skills which are essential, I'm not running those down either, but if you don't do it people are finding their own ways and we won't be part of that changed situation. Maybe libraries won't be there but something else will take its place but there's no guaranteed right of existence as far as libraries are concerned.

AG: OK ideas around the role and purpose of public libraries, well I think you said that they don't really know what they're for or we don't know what they're for, there's no vision.

SD: I don't think there is one. Let's take one examples of this. When we go to Heads of Libraries with the Quality Leaders Project, they get a ready package. There's funding, the programmes are there, they don't have to think about anything, they don't need money, they don't have to have ideas about how to develop staff or service, yet we find it difficult to recruit authorities to participate. We had to employ a consultant to recruit these authorities to make up the quota. So something is missing when libraries are reluctant to accept innovation and change – and doing the things they should be doing.

The Government itself has put a lot of money around, the Learning and Skills Councils and all sorts of places and whereas libraries… if you read Update there are lots of positive things going on and I don't want to run those things down either but it's little bits here and there. Where is the leadership going to come from? Again, I don't know that many universities teaching departments but the little that I know indicates that there is a gap there as well.   At the same time, training in management skills has also not made that much of a difference. So where is the leadership going to come from and somebody needs to provide leadership but part of the problem is political. Britain lost its empire, it was overtaken by USA and possibly, as a country, it has not recovered from that shock of loss of empire. When it had an empire it was much easier to do things, there was ready money coming up. And the loss of empire was a terrible cultural shock and the USA taking over and Blair running behind Bush; there's no national political leadership either to give us confidence as a nation. Nor has Britain found an alternative identity in Europe as the centre of progress and development moves to South, South East and East Asia. There is thus a cultural and political vacuum nationally and its effects are felt in libraries as well. So there is no answer to the question "where are we going?" The "mainstream" goes on about refugees flooding this country which is in a state of panic; we don't know where we're going. So it's the broader social-political situation in which libraries exist that we need to look at.

AG: OK so what's your vision then; if you have to give a vision what would your vision be of the public library service?

SD: The vision would be a library service which redefines the term "library" in a much broader way. The vision would accept the fact that this is a society divided by classes and that certain classes, because of the resources they control, have their own means of satisfying their needs. The service needs to reassess the role and purpose of library in a class-divided, diversified society. We need to accept the fact that public library service is not open to all and develop a needs-based service which meets the needs of people who cannot afford information and other library services, such as informal learning. The new role of libraries should ensure that the resources are used to meet the needs of people who do not have other ways of satisfying their needs. We are going through major technological change and need to look at how new technologies can help us develop new services.

It would be a library service that is possibly located in the community in a different and challenging kind of a way. Buildings are important but building in themselves are not libraries, so we need to move out of the buildings, spiritually at least, and meet the needs where people are, become the people, be where their needs are. Such a library service is "libraries without walls".

AG: But people need community space as well don't they.

SD: Yes, but redefine what library is, there are community spaces, community halls but this is not what libraries are all about and I think that one of the things we're looking at here is to connect to people's social and community life; there are other cultural needs where we don't expect libraries to take all those roles but work with the people and make it... like Merton Sense, empowering young people, enabling them or giving them power to do their own thing and our next move is to have a music group.

But we have to wage a cultural war to change people's thinking about the role of libraries, both within libraries, and also in the society if libraries are to play a greater social role. Some youth workers have asked us: "why are libraries involved in this kind of thing (youth magazine production), it's nothing to do with you, it's our job, working with young people".

Part of that vision is to change the thinking of people we provide a service to. People need to know what libraries can be, and can do, otherwise they cannot make a meaningful choice as to what they want libraries to do. I think we have to develop new ideas and broaden the thinking of staff and people in the communities. We have an important role to play in that. I think libraries should be working with arts workers, with cultural workers, with educationalists, I think redefining the terms "librarian" and the term "library" is a part of the process that needs to start urgently. Those terms have created barriers for our audience in terms of physical space but also in our thinking and in what and how we do things. Breaking those barriers should be the start of the process of starting to see a new vision for libraries.

<div align="right">9,135 words
Corrected: 11 December 2004 (SD)</div>

<div align="center">- end -</div>

Dr Anne Goulding

Reader in Information Services Management
Department of Information Science
Loughborough University

Loughborough LE11 3TU
A.Goulding@lboro.ac.uk

Innovations & Development Manager
Library & Heritage Service
London Borough of Merton
shiraz.durrani@blueyonder.co.uk

Shiraz Durrani

From: A.Goulding@lboro.ac.uk [mailto:A.Goulding@lboro.ac.uk]
Sent: 18 March 2004 09:34
To: shiraz.durrani@merton.gov.uk
Subject: Research into public libraries

Hi Shiraz

Hope you are well.

This email is a request for your participation in a study into public libraries I am undertaking under the Arts and Humanities Research Board research leave scheme.

The research is exploring contemporary discourses surrounding issues of identity, social purpose, value, strategy and service facing the public library service in the United Kingdom. Public libraries are going through an unprecedented era of change with the development of new services and initiatives which could be said to be moving them away from the ideals of information, culture, literacy and enlightenment that have sustained them for so long. The focus of the research is how key stakeholders are now justifying the public library service in the light of these changes and the impact this is having on services. The principal output of the research will be a monograph published by Avebury Publishing.

Your participation in this study would be greatly appreciated. I am particularly interested in your views and experience of the cultural diversity of staff within public libraries and the Quality Leaders project. Your participation will involve an interview of approximately 40 minutes which, with your permission, will be tape-recorded and later transcribed for analysis. Shortly after the interview has been completed, I will send you a copy of the transcript to give you an opportunity to confirm the accuracy of our conversation and to add or clarify any points that you wish. You can choose to remain anonymous or opt to have remarks, opinions etc. attributed to you. I am hoping to conduct interviews in May and June and, should you agree to participate, I will contact you to arrange a convenient time and location for the interview. It would be very helpful if you could give me some idea of when you will be available during these months. Shortly before the interview, I will send you a list of questions and/or topic areas that I would like to discuss with you. If a face-to-face interview is not convenient, perhaps we could have a telephone or even email discussion.

I very much look forward to speaking with you and thank you in advance for your assistance with this research.

Anne

--
Dr Anne Goulding
Department of Information Science
Loughborough University
Loughborough
Leics
LE11 3TU
United Kingdom
Tel: +44 (0)1509 223056
Fax: +44 (0)1509 223053