

NEWSLETTER

BLACKHEATH VILLAGE LIBRARY USERS GROUP

Tel: 0208 852 4032 Email: se3villagelibrary@yahoo.co.uk

February 2010

Open meeting on the future of Blackheath Village Library.

A date for your diary -- 6.30 pm.
Tuesday 16th March in the Bakehouse
(enter from Bennett Park).

We have had a rather quiet time since our fight eleven years ago to keep our library open, and those of us who would rather use libraries than campaign for them have been able to enjoy some peaceful reading. However, although there is no immediate threat to its continued existence there are enough signs of change in the library world to mean that this is a good time to take a look at what we need to do to make sure the library service continues to provide a local service that meets our needs.

So, we have invited Antonio Rizzo, head of Lewisham's library services, to come and tell us what developments he expects over the next few years, and hear what friends of the library expect from his service.

The most obvious signpost to changes afoot is a review produced by the *Mayor's Commission on Libraries and Learning* chaired by Mayor of Lewisham, Sir Steve Bullock. The Council intends to implement its recommendations, and we have put a few notes about it in the next article.

In the longer term we might be affected by the efforts of the Blackheath Society to develop plans for a *Library Square* with flats, shops, and car parking as well as a new library. We will want to be sure that if the plans go ahead they will include an improved library, though because of the broader impact of any development on this

scale it is best for people to send their opinions direct to the Society.

The meeting is open to all; please do what you can to encourage everyone with an interest in maintaining and improving the local library service to come along.

The Mayor's Commission on Libraries and Learning

The language in which the Commission's review is written makes it hard for us to say exactly what it will mean for our local library (a "neighbourhood library" in their terms). But, we can draw out a few things.

The review does not pose an immediate threat to Blackheath Village Library's existence of which it says "*Blackheath is the busiest neighbourhood library, with a committed book focus. Last year it was host to a Richard & Judy book event. the upper meeting/exhibition space is also regularly used, particularly for local art exhibitions. Accessibility is an issue at this library, with steep stairs the only access to the 1st floor. Despite this, the space is used by a wide range of users including U3A.*"

However, as a whole, the review gives the impression that the overriding priority is a new central library for Lewisham "*.... replacing the current building, delivered as part of the town centre regeneration....*", with investment in the smaller libraries, especially those in older buildings, decidedly a second consideration. We imagine that few will regret the replacement Lewisham Library's present building. But, we need to stay alert for threats and failure to invest in our library, and to let our

councillors and officials know what we want.

The review also favours the use of library premises for “*adult learning and other community-based activity*”, and for the provision of other Council services, but does not say much about how this is to be achieved without affecting their role as libraries. This seems to fit the government thinking stated by Margaret Hodge (Minister for Culture and Tourism) at a Public Library Authorities’ conference last year when she praised a new library at Shepherds Bush which has a ‘Work Zone’, where a local college and Job Centre Plus “...*join with the Council to provide a dedicated recruitment and retention service for retailers and employers to fill their jobs locally. Residents can get work-specific training such as food hygiene certification which is needed to work in many of the restaurants, and employability skills including job interview techniques.*”

Conrad Hall, the Council's Head of Business Management and Service Support now has the job of “*Taking forward the work of the Mayor's Commission The key challenges are the need for investment and efficiency driving the Council to rationalise its estate and develop flexible multi-use buildings suitable for 21st Century services.*”

If you would like to read the review you can ask to see a copy at the library or Internet users can download one from the Council's website, www.lewisham.gov.uk (but the easiest way to find it on the Internet is enter *lewisham council "mayor's commission"* into your favourite search engine).

What do we want?

Most users probably agree that our library needs improvement, even though this means facing up to conflicting demands and making compromises about how limited space and money is used.

Some people will see better computer facilities as vital, while others think a comprehensive book stock is the continuing basis for any good library.

Other suggestions include a book drop allowing people to return books when the library is closed, simple improvements to the library's exterior to make it more visible and inviting, and book displays linked to events in the news.

A major improvement would be a lift to the upper floor. We have heard a rumour that the need to use stairs was one of the reasons for our councillors moving their surgeries out of the village.

In the past we were told that uncertainty about the length of the lease meant that the Council would not invest in a lift, but a recent statement from the library service said “*Changes on (sic) the lease of the building This has been recently renewed and should be in place for the next 20 years*”. So, it might be worthwhile revisiting this topic.

Using your Lewisham library card in other boroughs

Last September the Society of Chief Librarians announced that they were making it easier to use your borough's library card in any of the 4,000+ public libraries in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. In Greenwich we were told that in practice this means visitors showing another borough's card will be issued with a Greenwich one without their having to produce the usual proof of address etc.

This makes little real difference to our ability to visit other libraries and use their services, because we have long been free to join as many libraries as we like. But, it might encourage people to look for things in near where they work as well as their home, but it does mean that we can end up carrying a pocketful of library cards.

There has been some talk about going further by issuing a single card that will be acceptable in all libraries. But this will probably be a long time arriving because of incompatibility between the computer systems used by different boroughs. Indeed, we might all need to think about how much we want a single card usable everywhere, if it risks leading to central management and increased pressure to remove libraries and their stocks and services from local control.

The Blackheath Assembly

In September the Blackheath Assembly voted on how the Mayor's Fund of £50,000 allocated for local improvements should be used. The library service asked for £34,763 to pay for self-service book issuing equipment and extended opening hours. Part of the justification was that the equipment would free staff to help young people gain work experience in the library

The assembly rejected the request. Chatting with people after the meeting, it seemed that they had nothing against longer opening hours or the equipment, but thought these should be paid for out of the education and library budgets rather than a fund supporting suggestions from local residents and groups.

Wifi in the libraries

Our library (along with many others including Greenwich Council's library at the Standard) now has Wifi which lets most modern laptop computers use the library's connection to the Internet. Our connection is not very fast by today's standards, but seems to be well used and popular with those wanting it.

A difficulty our library shares with many others is that it is not easy for users to plug into a power supply. Most laptop computer batteries soon go flat, whatever the makers might claim, making a mains power supply important.

No doubt pressure from users will mean this will be dealt with but we need to keep an eye on how it is done. Common solutions include tables set against a wall where there are suitable sockets, but that might reduce the book shelving. Or, central tables or desks with electric supplies, which might need to be fixed in place, reducing flexibility in the use of space and, perhaps discouraging non-computer users who want to sit at a table and read a newspaper.

As so often happens, a simple problem might call for a lot of hard thinking before it is solved.

Manor House Library

The Manor House library reopened in May after its major refurbishment and is open 7 days a week.

It now has a lift to all floors, meeting rooms available to local groups and others, and a children's centre with crèche facilities. The library is on the main floor (kept there thanks to the *Users and Friends of Manor House Library*). The separation between the children's and adult sections has been reduced, causing a bit of a noise problem for those looking for a quiet refuge to do some intense study. But that is one of those conflicts we will all have to face as we decide what kind of libraries we want.

The Manor House provides an interesting insight into the Council's current thinking on how old buildings might be developed (albeit that the Manor House building is very different from ours). So, it is worth paying a visit to make up your own mind about what you like and what you don't

Signing the way to the printed word

One of the more thought provoking exhibits at last year's Library Show turned our minds to the difficulty libraries face in getting the right stock on their shelves.

DeafEducate (website www.deafeducate.co.uk/) showed “eBooks” intended to help deaf people build up reading confidence. They explained that profoundly deaf people are usually fluent in sign language but can all too easily pass through the education system without becoming comfortable readers. So, they offer DVD videos which show both the printed text of a book and the words in sign language. The range of books is designed to interest children and adults. As a bonus, the videos should also help hearing people to learn sign language.

We do not pretend to be experts on what deaf people are looking for, but this does seem one of those ideas likely to matter a lot to a minority of people.

Getting the right level of stocks of such specialised devices is clearly difficult. It does seem to emphasise the need for local libraries to be run by staff in touch with library users and their neighbourhood, and who are able to respond to them. And for collaboration between libraries to make sure users know of the wealth of material they can get from the library system.

Inter-library loans

At last year's Library Show Roy Clare CBE (Chief Executive of the *Museums Libraries and Archives Council*) mentioned improvements to the system libraries use to find books that are not in their own library stock.

Formerly, libraries would focus their search on the local area (in our case the

South Eastern Region), but now they can use databases letting them find and borrow books from any public library in the country.

We have not found out exactly how the new system works, and no doubt there will be hiccups but it promises to help those who like to read hard-to-find books.

It is worth remembering that our local library's desk is a gateway to the country's entire public library book stock. Ask, fill in a request form, and they will look for it.

Odds and ends

Our library The library is staffed by librarian Liz, deputy Christina, Emma and Liam. It is open Tue. & Thur. 9am-8pm; Fri 9am-1pm; Sat 9am-5pm. Closed for lunch 12.30-1.30 (except Fri)

Reading Group The reading group meets in the library on the first Thursday of the month, 6.30-7.30.

The Library catalogue Lewisham's library catalogue is online so those with internet access can use it at home. As well as ordinary catalogue searches you can look at your “account” and see what you have on loan, when it is due back, and renew the loan period. It also allows you to reserve books. You will need your library card and PIN numbers to get to your account.

Libraries for Life for Londoners We will be putting a slightly modified “on-line” version of this newsletter on the “Local Groups” pages of the “Libraries for Life for Londoners” website which is www.librarylondon.org.