

‘Libraries pay’: opening remarks at CILIP PMLG Teachmeet¹

There is an idea that ‘money’ is a dirty word for libraries, that it sullies our professional ethics. That libraries live in an idealised world far away from the world of commerce. But if the past eight years of austerity have taught us anything, it’s that all of the social good we deliver needs to be built on a strong foundation of economic strength.

There is a world of difference between being motivated by money – making choices that are primarily financially-driven – and seeing money as a means to deliver a social purpose. I’m a great believer in social enterprise – that we can house income-generation and value-creation under the same roof in order to deliver thrilling services that make a profound difference to people’s lives.

We can deliver balanced, universally accessible and equitable access to knowledge and literacy and still work in partnership with the private sector – so long as we are transparent and accountable and ensure that those partnerships don’t tip over into product placement.

One of the things I am most excited about CILIP PMLG Teachmeet is that it takes a balanced view of what ‘economic’ activity really means for libraries. We’re going to look at income generation alongside the wider question of the economic value we deliver for our places and our communities.

There’s a concept called the circular economy which I think is really important to be discussed. It’s also called a ‘regenerative economy’. The idea is that we both consume and create value, and the value we create – the social and economic capital – is reinvested into our communities to create a virtuous and sustainable cycle. I think we are a great example of the circular economy. Our communities invest value, money, time, support into us and we generate a huge return on that investment – socially and economically.

I think libraries have a huge amount going for them when it comes to generating both direct revenue and indirect economic impact. I think there are six components of our offer which give us a real advantage:

- brand equity: the trust and accessibility of being a library gives us a unique opportunity to develop services that are clearly differentiated from the endless noise of people trying to sell you products – there’s a wonderful line on twitter from Matt Haig which goes «libraries are the last remaining public spaces that don’t like our wallets more than they like us»;
- buildings: I always argue that we have the best physical infrastructure of attractive, accessible buildings anywhere outside the schools sector;
- audience: 265m visits in 2015 with one of the most strongly diversified audiences of any sector, anywhere;

¹ This is a transcript of the opening remarks Nick Poole gave at “Libraries pay: public libraries supporting economic prosperity”, a CILIP Public & Mobile Libraries Group (PMLG) event on 20 September 2016: <<http://www.cilip.org.uk/public-mobile-libraries-group/events/libraries-pay-public-libraries-supporting-economic-prosperity>>. We thank the author for his willingness to publish the text on *AIB studi*. The original version is at: <<http://www.cilip.org.uk/blog/libraries-pay-nick-pooles-opening-remarks-cilip-pmlg-teachmeet>>.



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- people: a profession built on a customer service ethos, with a strong professional ethic;
- value-added services: in an age of information overload and white noise, we deliver rich, meaningful experiences that help people fill a genuine need in their lives;
- relationships: your libraries are your communities – they're indivisible. You're not flying services in from outside, but directly meeting identified local needs.

So I'm really interested to learn about how we take those elements – our brand, locations, audience, people, services and relationships – and use them to build a solid foundation of economic activity and value that ensures those services are sustainable.

I also think that being able to articulate the economic impact of publicly-funded library services is one of the most fundamental elements of our political advocacy in the years ahead. In an unguarded moment, a former libraries Minister referred to libraries looking for 'handouts' from the public purse. I don't know about you, but I've got no interest in handouts. I think we have a powerful economic case to make for libraries and it is vital that we make it well.

We have some really great, credible tools at our disposal. The ALMA² UK group have published some extremely simple tools and resources including a simple guide and calculator for libraries to evaluate your economic impact. You can find them for free online³.

This highlights some really innovative ways of thinking about economic value. For example, it invites you to think about your impact as a purchaser on the local supply chain. UK-wide each year, the nation spends around £ 700m on library services. That gives us a huge economic impact, for example on the publishing sector as well as local economies.

Other examples including thinking about ways of showing people what they saved by using the library. There's an innovative example of a library that provides users with a receipt showing what they would have had to spend to buy the books they're borrowing.

There's also important research from the Arts Council England which shows not only the direct economic impact on local economies, but also the indirect, long-term value for the national economy of having access to quality library services. We already know that library services can save money for other public sectors – for example, the £ 27.5m that public libraries save the National Health Service each year by reducing dependency on general practitioners for frontline information.

So I think PMLG meeting is a real opportunity both to take a pragmatic and practical look at how economic activity can make your service more sustainable and a broader look at how we embrace economic impact as a great argument for public funding.

I think it is important to be bold, to be realistic, but also to be opportunistic in how we build a sustainable financial model for our services.

Nick Poole

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2 Asset and Liability Management Association [editor's note].

3 <<http://scottishlibraries.org/economic-value>>.