

Pseudo Libraries in 21st century Lewisham 24/9/2011

Time to take up the “pen” again, or, at least its modern equivalent. Five of Lewisham’s public service libraries, governed by the statutes contained in the 1964 Public Libraries and Museums Act, closed their doors on 28th May 2011. In the case of New Cross it closed on 26th May. Due to local resentment at the coming closure notes were posted on the shutters in protest. The council took the view this would lead to unrest.

Consequently the library AUTHORITY (don’t you just love that word, redolent of abuse of power) decided it would not open for its final day, the 28th. Of course, this was not public news so little kids returning their books for the last time were faced with a shuttered building. If it was not bad enough to deprive them of a library there was this too! New Cross was in a real bind, no White Knight riding to the rescue. The list of final bids to run libraries was so poor that there was virtually no choice. Eco Computer Systems came with a red alert, several actually. “Should either the financial or building related risks arise, this could lead to a reputational risk to the council.” “Officers acknowledge that these risks are real and that possible mitigation measures are limited.” So, ECS only gets 3 libraries, each on a 25 year lease, reviewable every 5 years. New Cross users? On yer bikes! This callous and cruel disregard for users, employed staff about to lose their jobs, decent governance and respect for public services paid for with public money knows no bounds.

Read on.

- Three of the libraries, Crofton Park, Sydenham and Grove Park, re-opened the following week, left in quite a state if reports are true. Blackheath opened a bit later and then had another revamp for August. The £200,000 from Lewisham residents has to be spent somewhere. The council removed large quantities of books from each of these libraries and seems to have redistributed them to its 7 hub libraries.
- Of the pseudo libraries only Blackheath is open 6 days a week, as promised, but, Monday to Thursday 2 - 7 pm, Friday 10 – 1.30 pm and Sunday 10 – 3 pm, slightly fewer hours than before. The completely distorted BBC report on Friday evening (23rd September) on “Breathing new life into Lewisham’s threatened libraries” did reveal that Lewisham had required one of the libraries to be run by a charity. And while we are on the subject the BBC did phone the Richardsons, as representatives of LLL, to ask for a view. We did not fit what they wanted to say, and they did not call back or give us air time!!! The Eco Computer Systems run libraries have slightly more hours than before, due to non-closure at lunchtime. The Sydenham library user group has complained about poor stock, so Lewisham council is involved again. On Saturday a Grove Park user complained to her local councillor about the poor stock in that library. She may be even more disappointed if the plan to turn the adult library into a café goes ahead, and all the books end up in the children’s library! Library?

What library? There are not enough books at Grove Park to accommodate childrens' visits from the 2 local primary schools or the 5 nurseries. This also applies to project books required by teachers. Users are voting with their feet, back on the bus!

- Whilst on the subject of fewer books to lend out the genius of this experiment sees the installation of self issue machines, at £59,000 a pop, usually used to relieve staff for other duties. Some sense of humour, you might say!
- It is understood that books may not be reserved at these libraries. You do it through a hub library, where you pay your 50p and have it delivered to the pseudo library. Volunteers cannot take money and cannot be privy to users' details due to the Data Protection Act. Due to the consortium of 13 boroughs you have access to 5 million books, so long as **you** make the journey. Or, unless you have the benefit of a hub library. My latest request came from Richmond libraries, not in the consortium. Can it be true that this 5 million stock did not contain the latest re-issues of Stella Gibbons' novels?

It was clear from the BBC report, and other news, that these libraries are not dealing with the same visitor numbers as before.....but, it was good to know that Eco Computer Systems, having taken over the buildings on 28th May 2011, registered for the required Hazardous Waste Producer Registration on 20th June 2011, effective 12th July 2011. Prior to that the company held only a Waste Carrier Licence (exempt Lower Tier) registered 10/9/2010. (Data obtained from the Environmental Agency.)

Just like Lewisham council, I nearly forgot, **New Cross**. Well, down in that far flung corner of the borough, community pressure has kept it open. YESSSSS!! It is on a knife edge, wanting donated books, lots of volunteers, money to feed to Lewisham Homes (ALMO of Lewisham council), but, they are hanging in there, and while it is a library, albeit much reduced, it is THERE! So, let's hear it for **NEW CROSS!**

We have not even dealt with the damage done to **the Reference library, the Local History and Archives department**. Where was the Local History Society (Patron Mayor Bullock), or the conservation societies, or the schools and the colleges? Can it be true that a most senior Library Manager actually went into the Reference library and in front of staff produced his mobile phone and said that was the future for information? On yer bike time again, this time staff.

And what about the staff, well, the council admits to 14, some say more, redundancies. It has also been rumoured that some are leaving of their own accord. Enough is enough!

This is an experiment. Lewisham council was determined to be a cutting edge borough, and implement the Quirk Report on council buildings. Quirk, who he? Oh! Chief Executive of Lewisham council... He wrote the report. He took a cut in wages, for fewer hours. Cutting spending was the cover story. Lewisham residents are the Lab Rats.

What do we have? What is the achievement? We have a completely fragmented

library service, in contravention of the 1964 Public Libraries and Museums Act. We have a two tier library service, in contravention of..... we have lost experienced staff which contributes to a contravention of..... we have a complete diminution of the service, in contravention of and is the responsibility of the Minister, Ed Vaizey MP, now in complete contravention of.....

There is no democracy, there is no accountability, there is no rule of law. New Cross residents have been treated spitefully and maliciously, the poorest area in one of the most deprived boroughs, yeh, yeh, heard it all before ... Folly rules, OK!

As we leave Grove Park two volunteer staff stand outside puffing away on quick fags.

If it all fails they will shut up shop, end of library services and that is the real agenda and that will be THEIR real achievement.

Patricia Richardson