

WILL WE NEED TO SAVE OUR LIBRARIES TOO?

Sue McKerracher moved to Australia in 2007 from the UK, where she's seen firsthand the rise - and fall - of libraries. Can it happen here? Sue thinks yes, and faster than we think, unless we're on top of our game.

Have you seen what's happening to public libraries in the UK? Of course you have. You couldn't miss *Save Our Libraries Day* in February with author Philip Pullman, musician Billy Bragg and singer Lesley Garrett among the thousands who turned out to protest against the closure of more than 400 libraries. There were flashmobs, impassioned speeches, read-ins and even an all-night sit in at one south London library.

It's heartbreaking that the hard work put in by the Museums Libraries and Archives Council between 2003 and 2005 to market English public libraries should have been turned on its head. Having reversed a five year period of decline to achieve a peak of 289 million visits in 2005-2006, the official figures for 2009-2010 now show that library visits are back down at 271 million. Virtual visits provide the one saving grace – rising consistently year-on-year and now exceeding 101 million.

All of which confirms my realisation that, as someone who loves working with libraries, marrying an Aussie and moving out here from the UK in 2007 was a good move ... because no matter how tight budgets are for libraries in Australia, the situation really isn't as bad as it is in other places – yet.

As I've travelled round visiting public, school, state, territory and university libraries, I have been impressed at what a good shape the library network across this country is in. Sure, there are some sad cases that need a new lease

of life, but if you look at the overall picture, I'd say that libraries in education and the public sphere are doing OK. (I'm less convinced about government, corporate and other special libraries. While there are many bright spots, there are also libraries being merged, services reduced, and in some cases cut altogether.)

It's worrying how quickly a library system can deteriorate, though. People in the UK talk about a decade of under-investment, but the real damage was done in a period of less than five years during the 1990s. If there aren't sufficient funds, and the drive and inspiration to use them well, it doesn't take long for the rot to set in. We can't let this happen here.

So, how do we keep funding levels up? I'd suggest that we have to present a convincing argument about the vital role libraries play in their communities, and paint a picture of the exciting potential they have to deliver even greater returns in the future. It's the latter half of the last sentence that's the tricky bit. There's no shortage of future scenarios; it's choosing the right one that poses the dilemma.

The amazing and rapid advances that are being achieved in ICT make these incredibly challenging times for library and information professionals. Managing change of this magnitude requires cash. It requires new skills. On a

personal level, it requires an open mind to accommodate radical new thoughts, and an ability to deal with high levels of ambiguity. This isn't a period of change that has a clear destination. Instead, imagine a rollercoaster that bucks up and down at alarming angles and continues its journey way off into the distance. That's the kind of ride we're on.

How do you develop a five-year strategy for service delivery, infrastructure and investment, when you can't predict what the world will look like in 2016? Twitter, Facebook, the iPhone have all achieved household name status since 2006 and Google has only just celebrated its tenth anniversary.

Things are moving scarily fast and it's not as though we have any control over where this is going. We aren't the techies, developing new products and applications. Nor are we, in a work sense, the consumer. We're in the middle, with managers trying to shape their services to suit the needs of their users five years down the track, with no clear idea of what the landscape will be at that time.

I haven't met anyone yet who has been able to predict with any degree of certainty what this technological revolution will mean for libraries of every flavour – public, school, academic and special – but it is heartening to see the collegiate nature of libraries' response to this challenge. There's the NSLA

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