

CPLUG's TENTH ANNIVERSARY REVIEW, 2008

This year will mark the tenth birthday of CPLUG. It is not clear what the actual date of birth is, as it was a rolling event, driven by mounting opposition to Camden's ill thought-out library closure policy. That we still have the same number of public libraries in Camden as ten years ago is a testament to CPLUG's effectiveness and proves that, however firm a grip a political party has on a Council, that group should beware of trying to destroy that which the public values highly.

Thus, CPLUG initially achieved great success and, if judged by the number of public libraries in the borough, it continues to have success. However, a Library Service is not only made up of buildings. A library building gains its name not from any design attribute but from its contents. The contents define the building and, if the contents are removed, the building ceases to be a library.

Since its inception, CPLUG has been concerned by the low priority placed on the borough's library book stock. It has made the point again and again that the public considers that book lending is the principal activity of a library service. If the service does not meet this expectation, it will be considered to have failed. This has had no effect on the long-term policy of the Camden Library Service and book stock degradation has resulted in a continuous fall in library issues (charted in CPLUG web pages at www.librarylondon.org/localgroups/camden).

The Office of National Statistics has stated that a quarter of UK adults did not read a book in 2007 and that a half of males between 16 & 24 years of age did not read one. Other surveys have shown that the population of the country is becoming less and less literate and dangerously innumerate.

Recognising the gravity of the situation, the Government campaign, the National Year of Reading, now aims to persuade reluctant readers, particular males, to start reading. Traditionally, the public library services would be in the forefront of such an initiative. However, because of the reduced availability of books, there is some doubt that Camden's Library Service will be able to contribute to this campaign in an effective way.

Of course, the suggestion that Camden is largely uninterested in running a traditional library service has been denied as often as it has been made. Nevertheless, there is a large amount of evidence to show that the suggestion is valid. As an illustration, some relevant CIPFA 31/03/06 Actual figures are:

	Books Issued / 1000 Population	Total Book-stock /1000 Population	Annual Additions / 1000 Population
Camden	3,564	1,874	216
Inner London	4,497	1,931	222
Greater London	5,110	1,895	233
UK	5,366	1,742	204

Thus, in both quantity and quality (annual additions being taken as a measure of quality), Camden's book stock is well below average when compared with its London peers. If this situation occurred in one year only, it would be unfortunate. However, it is the usual situation and, because the effects are cumulative, it is leading towards disaster. The magnitude of this debilitating cumulative effect is shown in the following table for the period 1999/2006.

TOTAL BOOK STOCK PER 1000 POPULATION (CIPFA data)

31st March 1999 31st March 2006 % Change

Camden	3,003	1,874	-38
Inner London	2,595	1,931	-26
Greater London	2,664	1,895	-29
UK	2,081	1,742	-16

The 38% reduction in the number of library books available to a Camden resident between 1999 and 2006 has been caused by the removal of 142,795 books from the libraries and a rapid increase in the resident population. As a large proportion of the population increase was caused by an influx of foreign workers, failure to support the integration of these people into British culture can be added to the charge of failure to aid the fight against falling literacy in the indigenous population.

The policy of reducing the size of the book stock has a similar overall effect on the population as closing libraries and the magnitude of the stock reduction between 1999 & 2006 is equivalent to closing 3.5 1999 average libraries. What Camden failed to do openly in 1998, it has now succeeded in doing stealthily.

A decade ago, there was an immense amount of goodwill for Camden's Library Service. Now, there are complaints about that Service in the local newspapers – much of the goodwill has been frittered away.

With central government's financial squeeze on London's boroughs, it may be expected that the cause of the poor book stock support has been a lack of money in the Camden Library Budget. This is not the case, as can be seen from the tables below.

TOTAL REVENUE EXPENDITURE PER 1000 POPULATION (CIPFA data)

	2005/06 Actuals £	2006/07 Estimates £
Camden	34,916	34,801
Inner London	28,586	29,303
Greater London	28,586	25,893
UK	18,803	18,822

TOTAL REVENUE EXPENDITURE PER 1000 POPULATION (CIPFA Actuals data)

	1998/99 (£)	2005/06 (£)	Change %
Camden	30,836	34,801	+12.9
Inner London	23,089	29,303	+26.9
Greater London	20,547	25,893	+26.0
UK	13,840	18,822	+36.0

Although Camden's funding has been slowly falling towards the average, its Library Service has been supplied with significantly above average levels of funding, but this situation has not been reflected in its second most important asset, its book stock (the library buildings are the most important asset, of course).

So, CPLUG has started checking how the taxpayer's money is spent by the Service. There is no doubt that, in spite of protestations that the book stock was considered to be of great importance, Camden has

traditionally spent proportionally less on this than its peers and the proportion has reduced further with time (see table below).

PERCENTAGE OF REVENUE EXPENDITURE SPENT ON BOOK STOCK

	1998/99	2005/06
Camden	6.4	5.0
Inner London	8.9	6.2
Greater London	9.4	6.8
UK	11.1	9.0

As it is obvious that Camden places a low priority on providing books for its library users, to what does it give a high priority? Compared to the UK as a whole, Camden spends noticeably more on direct employee costs and on the purchase of support services (see table below). If both of these aberrations were reduced to the national average, the damage to the book stock would begin to be repaired. As it will take many years to fully repair the Camden book stock, this requires a real commitment to the provision of good library services in the borough and a willingness to make hard decisions. In fact, it requires good management.

CAMDEN LIBRARIES REVENUE EXPENDITURE (CIPFA data)

Type of Expenditure	2005/05 Estimates		2005/06 Actuals		2006/07 Estimates		Political Regime Change
	Camden	National	Camden	National	Camden	National	
Employees	58.11	55	57.31	55.06	57.84	55.92	?????????
Premises	9.40	10	9.24	11.12	10.45	10.96	
Books	5.00	9	5.05	8.28	4.62	7.89	
Other Material	2.62	4	7.70	3.56	2.54	3.87	
Support Services	20.75	10	19.99	10.4	20.13	10.27	
Other	4.13	12	5.76	11.56	4.41	11.09	

NOTES

1. In order to make it possible to compare regions of different sizes and to compare one year with another, CIPFA has found it necessary to “normalize” the data by dividing the relevant number by the size of the population for that area. This results in the understating of the difference between Camden and other areas, as Camden has a very high commuter workforce. Camden has the responsibility of providing library services for these people, as well as its own residents. The Camden book stock is thus in a worse state than has been shown.

2. The size of the book stock of an average 1999 Camden library (40,457) was calculated by dividing the borough book stock by the total number of “service points” (14). The “service points” total includes the mobile library, but also the large Swiss Cottage Central Library.

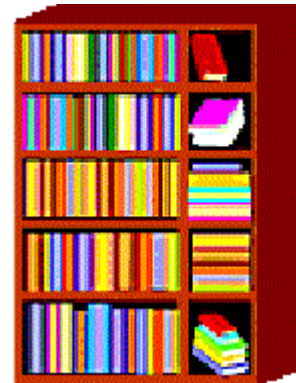
3. All published statistics present a historic picture of the subject under consideration. So, it is not possible to use them to give an accurate, up-to-date analysis of the state of Camden's Library Service. Nevertheless, it is possible to make an estimate. Assuming that the book stock attrition has continued unabated (observation indicates that it has), we must conclude that the reduction of the book stock since 1999 is now over 180,000 books – equivalent to 4.5 average 1999 libraries.

4. The government is shortly to introduce a national public library performance requirement (NI9) - to meet a minimum limit for the number of adults entering the libraries. Thus, central government is suggesting that the country's Library Services could ignore book lending activities and concentrate on other things – a suggestion reinforced by the reduction in Public Lending Rights funding. For a borough that has already run down its book stock, such as Camden, this could be the signal to give up completely. Some of the existing Library Standards requirements may be included in a voluntary Library Benchmarking operation – seen by some as an exercise in toothless supervision.

5. The accepted authority on the nation's vocabulary, The Oxford English Dictionary, defines a library as: "A building, room, or set of rooms containing a collection of books for use of the public or of some particular portion of it, or of the members of some society or the like; **a public institution or establishment charged with the care of a collection of books, and the duty of rendering the books accessible to those who require to use them.**"

**"As good almost kill a Man as kill a good Book.
Who kills a Man kills a reasonable creature,
God's Image; but he who destroys a good Book
kills reason itself."**

John Milton, "Areopagitica", 1644.



A.T. Feb 2008