

# Speech: Rob Wilson's speech to the London Library Ambition sector forum

I am delighted to join you this morning to support the publication of our new Ambition document. I hope it's a great opportunity to really look at some of the practical proposals it makes to help libraries thrive in the future.

It's the first time central and local government has joined with sector stakeholders to draw up a strategy for public libraries in England and commit to a plan to deliver that. It's built on – and I hope you would recognise this – extensive consultation and input from the sector. We have all signed up to what it says, and to a successful future for libraries.

And why have we done that? Libraries are hugely important for the communities they serve. They not only provide access to books and other literature, but also help people to help themselves and improve their own opportunities. They bring people together and they provide practical support and guidance.

And libraries support people in different ways at each stage of their lives, and they can help government to achieve strategic priorities by delivering services in communities – whether related to health, social cohesion, information and digital literacy, jobs and business support or the enjoyment that literature and cultural activity brings.

Now I've been a councillor myself; I know councils have to make important decisions about resources, to meet local needs and also legal requirements as well.

But I believe that if councillors think imaginatively about how libraries can help deliver their priorities, providing real leadership, then Local Authorities will start to see libraries as an asset to be developed. Ambition challenges government at all levels to think 'Libraries First' in planning services for communities – and I'll be championing that message with ministerial colleagues and councillors.

Ambition challenges councils and the library services they run to think and act differently. Standing still isn't an option. The way people use libraries and other public services is continuing to change. So we all need to think in innovative ways.

There are great examples of Local Authorities doing interesting and positive things – the Taskforce shares stories and ideas through its blog to stimulate original thinking. I've seen some great approaches during my own library visits; so for example,

- the new Curve in Slough, which is a part of the entire town's regeneration process. Alongside the library, it hosts Slough Museum, a multi-purpose community and performance space, community learning spaces, the Council's registrars services and a café with garden

terrace.

- And Farnham Common, a thriving library run by a community group with financial and professional support from the council. It raises extra income to support the library service from renting space to the children's centre and police who share the building and also through community events and fundraising.

Councils should embrace change; should seek to do things differently, and to be as bold as possible. If they do, DCMS will help them. We are already helping to spark creative new approaches – for example through grants from our new £4 million 'Libraries: Opportunities for Everyone' innovation fund to assist libraries helping people living in disadvantaged areas. We've received over 100 bids, which Arts Council England is currently evaluating.

We're also providing advice and support to councils that want to find different and more effective ways to run their library services, such as public service mutuals; 4 library services have already successfully gone down this particular route.

I believe this is a really positive direction to take as I want to see more staff owning part of the service they run – so we will offer support to Councils who want to do go down this route. The challenge is to think strategically about reform and service delivery and not to tinker piecemeal.

Some changes will of course be more challenging. People often think of libraries as buildings – But it's not just the buildings that make libraries, it's the service that's important. Sometimes their location or layout no longer suits the things local councils and local communities want.

If so, then changes – such as co-location with other services or sometimes closures may be actually justified, and indeed required, in favour of providing library services in other ways; maybe through outreach into communities or online.

But, and I want to make this absolutely clear, councils should make decisions like this based on robust evidence – rather than reducing provision in ad-hoc or very reactive ways.

Councils should be marshalling evidence about local needs, then actively discussing options to meet these with the community and with library professionals. I'll also expect councils to consider a full range of funding and delivery options before making significant reductions to their library services.

And if we receive complaints as part of our superintendence role, and where local authorities do not appear to be meeting their statutory duties, we will investigate. Where needed, I will take action under the 1964 Act. Libraries will not be seen as a soft option.

These sector events today and around the country are a start – I hope a

useful and enjoyable start – to spreading the word about Ambition and sharing learning about things we can all do to help libraries succeed. But they aren't the end – keep an eye out for future masterclasses the Taskforce will be running to delve into some of these areas in more depth.

That way we can all work together to take library services forward into a sustainable and successful future.