

UK libraries face devastation

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More than a hundred protest events took place across the UK February 5, against the planned closure of over 450 libraries as part of the government cuts programme.

Protesters of all ages were joined by authors, musicians and artists in “read-ins” and demonstrations at libraries across the country. This map illustrates the extent of the library closure plan.

Published authors spoke at protests at the libraries they had used as children, or maturing writers. Around 40 library users occupied New Cross Library in southeast London. The protesters staged an all-night sit-in until midday February 6.

About 50 people held a sit-down protest in Leeds Central Library against council plans to close up to 20 libraries in the city.

Glasgow-based children’s author Julia Donaldson delivered a statement of protest to the Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh.

Children’s author John Dougherty was among a group of “flying authors”, visiting a series of libraries for the Save Our Libraries campaign through Gloucestershire.

Some libraries encouraged readers to take out the maximum entitlement of books, on the basis that the library would be more difficult to close while most books are on loan. Certain libraries, such as those in Dorset, reported empty shelves.

A rally was staged outside Bolton’s central library, and in Cambridge a “flash-mob book reading” was staged outside the city’s main library.

Oxfordshire, where 20 of the 43 libraries still running are earmarked for withdrawal of funds, became a byword for official cynicism. Last September, writers such Philip Pullman and Colin Dexter were called upon to promote Oxford city’s bid to become UNESCO’s World Book Capital in 2014.

Speaking at a protest in Oxford, Dexter said, “At the

time we had the meetings I said we would have a wonderful chance.... But if the committee come along to Somertown in North Oxford we would have to take them and show them a library building with boarded-up windows. It is a sad commentary and what makes a lot of us very cross is that the argument deployed in defence is simply to ask us what we would cut. We are here to say that this is a terrible, shameful business.”

Mark Haddon, who visited Blackbird Leys Library in Oxfordshire with fellow author Jane Bingham, used to live in East Oxford. He said, “Libraries are the [National Health Service] for the mind; one of the very few places where we are all equal...where we can all read and learn and get involved in our community.”

Pullman spoke publicly against the cuts last month, condemning “market fundamentalism” in its attempts to “kill off every humane, life-enhancing, generous, imaginative and decent corner of our public life”. He attended a reading at the threatened Botley Library near his Oxfordshire village.

Arguing that the impact of the library closures would not be easily measured, he said, “It’s a kind of inward loss, a darkening of things, a narrowing of horizons that will gradually make us a less informed, less intelligent, less aware, less useful, less imaginative, less kindly people than we might have been.”

In reply to the author, the leader of Oxfordshire County Council, Keith Mitchell, had a contemptible letter published in the *Guardian* newspaper, saying the writers’ calls to exempt libraries from cuts was “a call to heap more cuts on care of the elderly, learning disabled and those with mental health problems. Have they thought through the impact of their messianic message about literature on the most vulnerable in our society?”

Writer Kate Mosse responded to the dishonest character of this official rationale in a recent TV interview, saying, “The people most in need are pitted

against each other...the library is at the heart of all of the things that touch upon social provision, about child poverty, about older people's poverty. It is the only free space."

Oxfordshire County Council says it intends to save £2 million over four years from the library cuts. As with other authorities, in the name of Prime Minister David Cameron's "Big Society", it is offering local groups the option to bid for grants to run some libraries voluntarily.

In an apt social observation, Pullman asked, "Does [the prime minister] think the job of a librarian is so simple, so empty of content that anyone can step up and do it for a thank-you and a cup of tea? Does he think that all a librarian does is to tidy the shelves? And who are these volunteers? Who are these people whose lives are so empty, whose time spreads out in front of them like the limitless steppes of central Asia, who have no families to look after, no jobs to do, no responsibilities of any sort?"

The protests continued in Oxfordshire into the following week, as hundreds of parents and children marched through the village of Kennington February 7 against the library cuts.

In South Yorkshire, comic writer Gervase Phinn sent a statement to Bawtry library describing books as "the architecture of a civilised society."

Campaigners are seeking legal action against last week's Doncaster Council Cabinet decision to go ahead with the library service review, which could see more than half of the borough's libraries close. The Save Doncaster Libraries campaign collected more than 14,000 signatures on a petition to fight the closures.

At Sheffield Central library, a "mass shhh-in" was organised by Library Workers for a Brighter Future (LWBF). At 11 a.m., protesters joined in a chorus of "shhh" (denoting the traditional silence of the reading areas) followed by three cheers for the library.

In Sheffield the "Bard of Barnsley", Ian McMillan, was banned from holding an innocuous children's creative writing workshop at one library, amid concerns by the city council over "political comments." A spokesman for LWBF, organisers of the event, said, "The event, conceived as a fun and creative way of highlighting the value of public libraries, appears to have caused great concern for the council, with the decision over whether it should be allowed to go ahead

passed all the way up to members of the senior management. The council objected on the grounds that political comments could be made at the event."

In addition to the assault on the public library system is that being waged on the national network of libraries in schools.

Birmingham City Council is the latest in an expanding list of local authorities to close its School Library Service (SLS). The authority, one of the biggest in the country, ended loans to schools in January and is now attempting to sell its book stock to schools.

Since last April, Cambridgeshire, Solihull and Kent councils have closed their school library services. Sutton has said it will close its service at the end of the current financial year. SLS in Haringey and Gateshead are also reported to be facing an "uncertain future."

A recent Times Educational Supplement (TES) survey of schools in 149 authorities last term found that 87 had their own library service, 31 had a service from another authority and 31 had no service. These services support around 3.6 million school pupils.



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