

# The Guardian view on books for all: libraries give us power

## *Editorial*

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Opening facilities for longer but without librarians is a mixed blessing, though still better than closing them, as we do in Britain

**T**here is something unique and uniquely valuable about the institution of a public library. **Libraries** in themselves are one of the foundations of civilisation. They enable the conversation between the living and the dead, which keeps a culture alive. We hear the voices of past authors and read back into their texts our own preoccupations; and others, when we're dead, will hold their own discussions about the books that have resulted. But for most of history a library was a private possession. Culture, in that deep sense, was cut off from every family who had no books of its own or very few. The public library, one of the Victorian age's great social inventions, changed that. Poverty or even narrowness of parental taste could no longer imprison the curiosity of children. Anyone could read almost anything. It was their right.

This vision still is kept alive **in some countries**, but is being choked in Britain. Public libraries have been remorselessly attacked as public finances shrink. They have lost books, staff, opening hours and whole branches. More than **400 libraries** and a further 140-plus mobile libraries have been closed. The pragmatic justification is that local authorities no longer have the money to do anything right, and that **social care or housing must be higher priorities**. Others say that the internet has abolished much of the need for libraries. But it hasn't. If anything, it has made them - and librarians - even more useful than before. There must be millions baffled by the challenges of the online world and the demand to interact with the authorities through a screen; others understand how to navigate this realm, but cannot afford to do so. Even those with digital savvy and the money for their own books gain from communal life. All these need public libraries, and they need librarians.

Private libraries can supply all of the knowledge that public ones ever could - but only to their members. They say that literacy is for the privileged few. Even when we move beyond the written word, as to some extent libraries should, there is much that only a public library, properly staffed, can do. It is not just a gateway to another world. It is, at its best, a welcoming committee and a guide to the uncharted territories of the intellect. As Neil Gaiman remarked, Google can bring you 100,000 answers to a question, but a librarian can give you the right one.

The Irish government **now proposes** to extend the opening hours of 200 libraries across the country, from 8am to 10pm, seven days a week. Its ambition to double visitors within five years, instead of treating a decline in users as inevitable, is a striking and welcome contrast with the approach in Britain. But the extra hours are to be unstaffed. The libraries in that time will work only for people who already know how to work them. This is much better than nothing, but it is still a failure to grasp all that public libraries can do for their communities. Libraries are made by librarians, not by the contents of their catalogues, and the people who make them are not just public goods but public treasures.