

Phil Hope MP – Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Skills

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I'm sorry that I can't be there in person to talk to you, but my current commitments to the Education Inspections Bill prevent me from doing so.

Libraries are often a crucial link for those people that can all too often be forgotten. The people who feel too embarrassed to speak up about wanting to learn, people who have lifestyle constraints such as work, study and caring responsibilities; and those who prefer to learn at their own pace.

But education at all levels must be accessible to all, and projects such as 'Inspire', have been identifying these displaced learners.

The aim of 'Inspire' is to create a seamless access to 4000 public libraries, almost 700 Higher Education libraries, and 3 national ones. It also aims to stretch to special libraries and those in Further Education colleges. The vision being that hopefully, by 2013, anyone who wants the opportunity will be able to train or to take a course through their library.

I can only applaud Inspire's work. You are listening to what individuals want and you are supporting and promoting local libraries.

As a Government we passionately believe in Lifelong Learning, from the cradle to the grave. This is why we remain committed to public support for Learning for Personal and Community Development and has set aside an annual budget of £210m for this type of learning in 2006/7 and 2007/8. That's around 8% of the total adult learning budget.

Contrary to what you might have been reading or hearing, we are not cutting Further Education or our spending on adult learning. In fact FE funding has increased by some £2.5billion since 1997, that's 48% in real terms. What is changing is the balance of that spending. We are rightly focusing scarce resources on those who need it most, those young people and adults who need a firm foundation of skills for employability.

Libraries have an important role for personal fulfilment, for leisure and recreation and in the provision of learning opportunities that will help people to take their first steps back into learning.

The Department for Education and Skills with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, have been working together for some years now to jointly promote the idea of learning through libraries, and to help remove the barriers that stand in the way for some learners.

It is to overcome some of these barriers that we have set out in our Skills White Papers in 2003 and 2005, and again just last month in our Further Education White Paper, a range of reforms and entitlements to learning. We also want a wide range of different providers to meet many differing needs and the cultural sector has an important role and contribution to make in helping to bring this about.

Our Testbed Learning Communities aim to support communities to develop their base of adult skills and learning and to link this to employment. They are trying to find new ways to get people involved in learning, focusing specifically on local need and making better use of the resources already in place. Libraries can play a huge part in this. Testbed Learning Communities will raise skills in each community, using the community's strengths and finding new ways to involve those who appear to not be interested in learning.

I know 'Inspire' has been encouraging libraries to work in partnership. Feedback from project groups in the West Midlands and the North West has been very enthusiastic and I am pleased to see the focus on displaced learners.

One area that has been under scrutiny for a while is Widening participation. Many of you may have heard this term only in the context of Higher Education, but our interpretation is much broader. It means awareness of what's out there for you, the individual.

If we are successful in promoting wider awareness of what you can learn, to improve your own skills, there is much greater scope for progression in your work and lifestyle.

The underlying message here is that learning is a lifelong theme, and one that doesn't stop when you leave school. It continues all through your life. Society is not what it was 50 years ago, and the expectations of the workforce have moved with that changing reality. There are many new opportunities out there today and many new ways of learning; but they will only succeed if learners make use of them. Not just by taking a course but by giving feedback. We have to know what people need and we must know what works. This is why it is so important to give people in local communities a greater say in determining the learning priorities for their communities. Community development and learning should be designed by the community for the community.

Overall inclusion and social mobility are also priorities for the Government at the moment, and libraries are a key partner in helping us to bridge age gaps and social divides. They provide more than just a place to learn. They can be learning havens for people, who have a fear or mistrust of educational institutions and statutory bodies.

The emphasis on adult education has never been so strong. Skilling our

workforce is strengthening our economy. Teaching our adults, is equipping our workforce. We want to work with the individual, and the wider community, to give people the choice to make the most of their lives.

The Reading Agency is leading libraries' involvement in the BBC's 3-year Read more And Write better campaign, to improve the nation's literary skills.

It aims to help up to 12million adults of working age who don't currently engage with reading and writing. "RAW centres" will be promoted as part of the annual Adult Learners' Week in May, in which DfES and the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education closely collaborate.

Adult Learners' Week offers a perfect opportunity at the local level to show people just what libraries can offer.

Libraries reach across intergenerational divides; they are also well placed to give out-of-school-hours study and learning. We hope that in time, all libraries will play a part in the extended schools programme. This will give safe, encouraging environments for children to go to, after the school day ends.

This intergenerational approach to learning means that staff in public libraries can provide an important learning service, from building children's love of reading; to giving encouraging advice to a pensioner who wants to learn about the internet.

And let's not forget "Love Libraries". My Ministerial colleague, David Lammy, Minister for Culture, announced the launch of Love Libraries last month.

It's an important campaign, to explore a new vision of a 21st century reading service. It kicks off with the transformation of three libraries in twelve weeks into models of a future library service, with reading at its heart.

Libraries are an invaluable asset to any community and to its' members. Teaching children from the earliest possible age, what a library can offer is vital. Introducing older members of the community to the facilities that modern libraries now offer, is equally important. This is not just about books. It's about maximising the potential of learning, advice and information facilities that are embedded at the heart of communities.

I know that libraries are often unsung, yet consistently they feature among the local services most valued by people.

I hope to see yet another increase in library visits next year, and I look forward to seeing the development of 'Inspire' with great interest.

Thank you all, for inviting me to speak to you today.
I hope you all enjoy the rest of your day.

