

## **Jacqueline Cooper - Librarian - West Berkshire Libraries - Public Librarian of the Year 2014**

I've worked for West Berkshire Libraries since 2002. I didn't set out to be a public librarian, nor even a librarian at all.

Originally I had a place to read Music at university, then moved to Applied Social Science because I was fascinated by people and human behaviour and had some vague desire to help others and build a better society. Most of the other students on my course became social workers, but that wasn't quite right for me. I had other things I wanted to pursue as well. I was already a habitual organiser – of people and things, information and activities – and I had a keen interest in the IT developing around me. Librarianship seemed to offer scope to include all of these.

My first job was at London University in the Institute of Education Library. I did the MA Librarianship course at Sheffield because I liked the IT component (I learned COBOL programming, which I haven't used yet...) and after that I joined the British Library, where I spent 2 happy years in Bibliographic Services before picking up my musical interest again with a post at City of London Libraries, working at the newly opened Barbican Library as an Assistant Librarian in music.

I loved all these jobs, but couldn't resist it when an exciting opportunity came up with a North American library systems supplier which was about to open an office in London. I spent 5 years working for CLSI, ending up as Marketing Communications Manager for Europe. I travelled a fair bit and saw *a lot* of different libraries during those years! Then I had 2 children and work slipped a long way down my list of priorities, disappearing off the bottom completely for a while.

In 1997 we moved to Newbury and I looked for something to fit in with family commitments. I did 4 years as a secondary school librarian, working term-time only – ideal at the time, but eventually I wanted to work as part of a bigger team and so joined West Berks Libraries, working at the then newly opened Newbury Library, where I've been ever since.

I love the sheer variety of my current role – a mix of stock work, service development, front line customer services, budgeting, marketing and promotional activities, staff management and more. I've been lucky enough to lead on a number of projects over the years, including staff training for the introduction of a new LMS, a partial refurbishment at Newbury Library and introduction of RFID and self service, and most recently the development and delivery of an ACE-funded project to encourage arts in libraries, which I'm told was partly what led to my nomination for the Public Librarian of the Year award.

In this, with fantastic help from West Berkshire's Arts Development Officer, we commissioned professional artists to work with targeted groups in community venues and libraries over 6 months (25 outreach sessions) and we also ran a 7 week 'LibraryFest' between World Book Day and World Book Night, which included professional shows, author talks, digital workshops and a range of arts and crafts activities for all ages, introducing people to new skills and encouraging new members into the library (a total of 31 public events and a further 10 closed events for groups such as schools). We were

particularly successful in reaching a number of mental health groups in the area and these are contacts we hope to develop further over the coming year. This also led to closer working with colleagues in West Berks Public Health, plus our participation in a Dementia Action Alliance launch event in the town centre of Newbury.

These types of activities, where we take the library service to events outside our buildings, can bring valuable feedback on the major concerns of local residents, show us opportunities to help in ways that other organisations cannot and create important links with other groups. For instance, at the DAA event I began chatting to participating volunteers from our local Citizens Advice centre. It wasn't long before they were telling me about the overwhelming demands they are receiving from job seekers, who now need to make online job applications in order to receive benefits and yet are frequently unable to use a computer sufficiently well to make this practical. In turn, I was able to tell them about a new post we are establishing which will offer 1 to 1 help for people in these situations. We talked about what exactly is needed and how best to let people know. A lot can be achieved in a 15 minute informal discussion like this.

As you'll gather, I've not been as focussed on *public* library work over the years as many of my colleagues and, apart from when I was involved with IAML(UK), I haven't held any positions within our professional organisations. I've always spent my 'spare' time working with numerous community organisations, usually on events management of various sorts. It was always my intention, though, to return to full time, paid employment once my children had left home. But it was not to be. With fantastically bad timing, I met the common place service cuts of recent years coming in the opposite direction. Five years ago we had 6 f.t.e. librarians in West Berks; now we have 3 and none of us works full time.

As a result, in recent years I've often had paid work outside libraries as well and perhaps this has given me a different perspective. There's always a chance, when we're considering what libraries should be doing, that librarians end up talking only to each other. But if libraries are changing, perhaps librarians are, too. I've worked with so many different people, in the private sector and in various voluntary and community groups in varied capacities, that whenever I send someone an email outside of work, it always starts something like "Wearing my XXX hat...", since it could be one of many! The overlap is useful and actually I'm never quite 'off duty' so far as library work is concerned. For instance, I am a member of our town council's working group looking at commemorations for World War One across the district. I'm representing Newbury Choral Society at this, as part of a committee involved in putting together a programme for an autumn concert with a First World War theme. But I was also able to tell the working group that West Berks Libraries will have a display of resources relating to WWI at Newbury Library throughout September. It's really a question of finding out what's going on, what local people are talking about, what they need, what concerns them and being involved with them.

Since the PLY award stressed my community work, this is what I've told you a bit about here. But actually I think public libraries should always be looking towards the national picture as well; both, once again, to be aware of major public concerns and areas where we can help, but also in order to promote a coherent picture of a 21<sup>st</sup> century public library service. Our role in assisting those who find it hard to cope with a general move towards 'digital by default' (such as the job seekers mentioned above) is important everywhere.

Likewise the need to communicate in different ways with library users, especially through social media, is common place – your ‘community’ surely includes a virtual one now. I think that national schemes such as the Summer Reading Challenge and Books on Prescription are great ways to show people what public libraries can do *everywhere*; and it is fantastic for us to have professionally produced resources and evidence for the effectiveness of these services provided for us by The Reading Agency. I hope we’ll see more of these across-the-board initiatives in the future and then it is up to us as librarians to build relationships with our local schools, GPs and medical practitioners, job centres and other organisations, in order to show them how what we do can benefit everyone in our local communities.

You asked me for any ‘tricks of the trade’ when it comes to positioning public libraries at the centre of their communities. I’m not sure there are any. The conversations are already happening. We just need to join in and then the rest should follow.