

Changes in store as libraries transform to idea shops

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Camillo Fracassini

IT IS enough to make traditional librarians peer over their bifocals in disbelief. The works of literary masters may soon be touted in shopping centre "culture shops" next to supermarkets.

A local authority in London is planning to close all 12 of its public libraries and replace them with a new breed of Idea Stores, sponsored by local supermarkets.

The seven stores - which promise to combine libraries, further education colleges, galleries, cafes and performance spaces - are expected to cost about GBP 20 million and would be part-funded by local retailers over the next five years.

Tower Hamlets council, which is masterminding the project, has already been involved in talks with Tesco, Asda and Sainsbury with a view to locating the Idea Stores next to branches of the supermarkets.

The information centres would share a common Idea Store brand, but would also carry the supermarket's name as a sponsor.

While the project has been praised as a "rare combination of boldness, sensitivity and commitment" by Chris Smith, the Culture Secretary, critics fear it might sound the death knell for traditional public libraries and further blur the distinction between private enterprise and a state funded library service.

The revolutionary strategy, which hopes to heighten library use by encouraging people to visit the Idea Stores while they do their shopping, comes as libraries face increasing pressure to offer up-to-the-minute computer and internet services.

Eric Bohl, corporate director of customer services at Tower Hamlets, said books would remain the borough's libraries' core business and that more would be spent on books and librarians. However, he added change was needed to reflect the changing demands of library users in the area.

A public consultation in Tower Hamlets found a high degree of dissatisfaction with the traditional libraries in the borough, with only 18 per cent of residents visiting them.

Mr Bohl said: "The vast majority said they would use the library more if they could combine it with a visit to the shops, and if they could do other things there. There's a fantastic pent-up demand for what libraries can offer."

Julia Mainwaring, the former council leader at Tower Hamlets, said: "The new Idea Stores will build on the best elements of local libraries but will also be places where young and old can relax in a coffee bar, take a class or watch a live performance."

Don Watson, the acting editor of the Library Association Record, said he believed a fundamental change in Britain's library service was inevitable.

"With the rise of the internet, libraries are aspiring to offer more and more services to the public, however local authority budgets are declining and are forcing cutbacks on traditional library services," he said.

"Either libraries do not take on additional internet services or they have to do deals with the private sector and create super library type outlets.

"The role of the library has changed and unless libraries provide services such as internet access there is a real danger that there will be information haves and information have nots.

"The Idea Store is just one of the answers to a very difficult question: 'How do you address these increased expectations against a scenario of declining budgets?' "

It is a view shared by Robert Craig, the director of the Scottish Library Association, who believes Idea Stores could eventually replace traditional libraries across the country.

He said that libraries in Scotland which had been set up in shopping centres were already attracting more users, and generating more custom for neighbouring retailers.

"The Ideas Store concept is taking changes that have already happened in the library service in Scotland one stage further," said Mr Craig.

"In East Kilbride and Dundee central libraries have already been located in the heart of shopping centres and it works to the mutual advantage of the retailers and the libraries.

"There has already been a shift towards fewer books and more technology in libraries and that is something that will continue. This multifunctional approach is something that everyone will benefit from.

"The Idea Store is a model that could be adopted in Scotland and we are already moving in that direction. It could certainly happen here quite easily."

www.ideastore.co.uk