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TUESDAY 24 JANUARY 2012

TEXT SIZE

Secrets to the success of city's libraries



Stephen Naysmith
Social affairs correspondent

Libraries will become more important than ever as Scotland faces what could be years of austerity, an event in Glasgow will hear on Wednesday.

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On Burns night, aptly, a debate about the future of public libraries will ask whether they are still needed in the age of Google.

When book sales for the electronic Kindle are outstripping those of paperbacks for US distributor Amazon.com, and many of us can research happily from our own homes, do libraries still serve a useful purpose?

The question will be answered with a resounding yes from Karen Cunningham, head of libraries and cultural venues for Glasgow Life.

At Glasgow's Mitchell Library she will argue that the city's lending libraries are healthier than ever before, with visitor numbers, membership figures and the number of books issued all increasing.

However the context across Scotland and the UK is not as positive, she admits.

"Demand for our services is higher than ever before, but we are bucking what would be seen as a national trend. We are almost unique among public libraries at the moment in that we are not planning any closures, or reductions in opening hours or in our book funds."

Instead, Glasgow has continued to invest in books, online facilities and upgrading its network of community libraries, she says, claiming this continuing commitment is the secret of its success.

She readily agrees to the idea that there is a political side to libraries and that they serve an egalitarian ideal. "With people losing their jobs and austerity beginning to make its mark, there are issues that some people can no longer afford just to go out and buy books," she says.

"People's right to free access to information is probably more important than ever before. We are a free library service providing broadband access and free wi-fi."

With an increasing expectation that Government services such as equal access is a growing issue, Ms Cunningham added. "So much information is now available online. We are able to support people to find that information. It's not just about filling out forms, for example."

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Ms Cunningham dismisses the idea that ebooks are a threat, and points to the downloadable ebook services now on offer in Glasgow and other authorities.

"It is the content that matters. How you get that content doesn't matter a jot."

Other speakers at the event include curator of Glasgow School of Art's acclaimed collection of rare books, Duncan Chappell, and Sue Johns of Glasgow Women's Library. The event is being hosted by Glasgow City Heritage Trust (GCHT).

Torsten Haak, GCHT director, said the intention was also to celebrate some of Scotland's great library buildings. "We decided to hold this event as we wanted people to think about them," he said.

"At the turn of the century the Glasgow Corporation obtained money from the Scottish-born industrialist Andrew Carnegie to provide the city with 14 libraries. Many of these are not merely reading rooms with book collections, they are indulgent Baroque masterpieces that are almost cathedrals to learning.

"As the role of libraries changes in the city, we must remember to cherish these amazing buildings and to treat them with care, to understand their worth and to use them to inspire us through the 21st century."

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