

# The New Professional's Toolkit

## Case Study: Professional Involvement for CPD

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### Background

I became involved in public library advocacy and activism shortly after I began studying for a Masters in Librarianship. Taking modules relating to public libraries, open access, emerging technologies and management raised my awareness of these issues on a global level. I was living in Doncaster, where I had temped in the public libraries and was aware of the challenges the service had faced over several years. The news that the council had decided to close library branches coincided with the beginning of my Masters, and I felt I ought to get involved with the local fight to prevent the cuts. I attended a Read-In and became involved with the core organisation of the Save Doncaster Libraries campaign<sup>1</sup>, applying what I had studied and my (at the time limited) understanding of public library legislation and key policies, to writing press releases for local newspapers and letters to the council. In August 2009 I submitted a piece to The Guardian's Comment is Free site, which brought national attention to the issues surrounding Doncaster Library and Information Service, which had fallen into a very poor state due to budget cuts and mismanagement<sup>2</sup>, and was facing severe cuts during the Comprehensive Spending Review. My involvement with a local campaign and discussions on Twitter about the threats to public library services yet the lack of a strong, knowledgeable voice to defend public libraries led to the development of Voices for the Library<sup>3</sup>, a group of library and information professionals engaging in advocacy for the profession and the social value of public library services.

My work with these groups has been in addition to full-time study and part-time work, and then full-time work. My involvement has been of great benefit to my personal and professional development, and in many ways the skills I have built upon would not necessarily have been developed within an ordinary workplace environment. Professional involvement outside of work has allowed me to develop in a 'safe' way; there is far less chance of me losing my 'job' as a campaigner if I take a risk and it fails, for example. There are fewer boundaries, any degree of input is beneficial to the group and any outcome, though hard to measure, is a positive.

The grass-roots and voluntary nature of campaign groups means that they are developed based on the skills and interests of those involved. As aims and objectives were developed, I became involved with activities I already had experience with, but also some new areas. Whereas in a workplace I might not have offered to get involved with these tasks for fear of going wrong, in a campaign group, some tasks were new to everyone, but needed doing. For example, I had no experience of liaising with the media, but this was an area I was interested in. I knew that some of my skills and previous experience, such as music performances, involvement in debating societies and public speaking, though not directly related, could be put to good use and give me a good foundation to build upon. If you are keen to develop your skills and experience, it may be useful to consider which areas you want to develop and think of specific ways you could do this through advocacy or activism:

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1 [www.savedoncasterlibraries.wordpress.com](http://www.savedoncasterlibraries.wordpress.com)

2 Mager, A (2010). Better Libraries, Better Lives

3 [www.voicesforthelibrary.org.uk](http://www.voicesforthelibrary.org.uk)

Activity	Skills Developed / Strengths Gained
Holding public meetings / committee meetings	Leadership, teamwork, acting as chair, minute-taking, time management, diplomacy.
Organising protests and events	Leadership, co-ordination, event management, promotion and advertising, designing publicity, knowledge of civil and political rights.
Analysing legal documents for an understanding of the key issues	Critical thinking, summary writing skills, reporting.
Analysing council documents to understand decision making processes and assess where there may be flaws	Critical thinking, developing complex arguments, communication.
Writing letters and sending press releases to newspapers	Writing press releases and content to catch journalists' interest.
Blogging about events, news, updates, opinions etc.	Self confidence, time management, organisation, credibility, demonstration of knowledge, development of network of interested people, practical social media skills.
Writing articles for journals and magazines	Writing skills (including writing to word counts and deadlines, and for specific audiences).
Giving guest lectures at Universities	Lecture planning, designing presentations, encouraging discussion, public speaking, awareness of developments/changes in academic discipline/LIS research.
Involvement on cross-disciplinary discussion panels	Reputation as knowledgeable in field, cross-sectoral involvement, networking.
Giving newspaper, radio and television interviews (local, national and international)	Interview skills, self confidence. Expert knowledge in that particular field – you become the authority on it. Keeping calm under pressure or when frustrated – managing emotions. Being able to memorise statistics, access and use them under pressure.
Networking and promoting at conferences, festivals and other events	Self confidence, networking, subject knowledge.
Developing website as a source of information for the public and the media	Social networking skills, website building, information architecture, information retrieval.
Helping newspaper journalists research for articles	Working to tight deadlines, information retrieval, presenting information in a meaningful way.
Helping lawyers put legal arguments together; giving background and history	Information retrieval, ability to manage large amounts of information.
Asking for sponsorship and statements of support	Pitching proposals, writing convincing requests.
Dealing with councillors and MPs	Diplomacy, advocacy, pitching your aims to meet interests/values of people with different priorities/interests/values.

## Benefits

The wide range of skills you can develop from involvement in advocacy and/or activism can have a positive effect on your career. Being willing to stand up for something you believe in can gain you recognition; for example, I was named a *Library Journal* Mover & Shaker 2011. Many of the skills outlined above are transferable and can strengthen your CV and job applications. Similarly, opportunities to get published can be used in applications for further study; I was able to use articles I have written as advocacy pieces in my application for PhD funding. Articles are also considered valid for inclusion in Chartership applications and can add variety to your portfolio.

## Challenges

It goes without saying of course - involvement in campaigns isn't all plain sailing! Maintaining a sensible work/life balance is important – this may come naturally, but I found that I needed to make sure I was aware of how much I was taking on in order to make sure that the balance was healthy. The benefit of working on advocacy outside of work is that although the workload can be high and there is always a lot to be done, it is also possible (and recommended) to pace this depending on whatever other pressures you have to contend with. Time management skills are a definite help, but if this is something that could be improved on when you start, it is something you quickly learn. Some people find it helpful to take time away from everything for short periods; some find that it's more helpful to keep at least a low level of involvement in projects – taking a step back rather than completely removing themselves.

Another challenge is staying positive when things go wrong or when there's bad news. If you're involved in a cause, you're most probably passionate about it and it means a lot to you, so blows and setbacks can hit hard. In-built resilience is useful, but again, taking a step away to recharge can sometimes be helpful. Building a strong network of other people who are involved in similar activities can play a significant part in maintaining energy and momentum.

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