

Leadership, community and the power of storytelling

AMINA Shah was appointed National Librarian and Chief Executive of the National Library of Scotland in 2022, coming into the role at a time of social change – from the impact of Covid and Brexit to the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement and culture wars. As the head of Scotland’s National Library, **Amina** is conscious of how these changes need to be reflected in the way the library reaches its community. Here she talks to **Rob Green** about leadership, community, and engagement.

AMINA began her life in libraries shortly after graduating from university, with a degree in English. She took a job at Strathclyde University Library as a Library Assistant, before embarking on a library qualification and then a post with the Mitchell Library in Glasgow.

Looking back on her career since that first appointment, Amina admits that she never had a “grand plan”, and certainly leading Scotland’s National Library wasn’t in her mind back then. However, dig a little deeper into her experience and attitude and it is not surprising that she is where she is, despite (in her own words) having “absolutely no idea how I got to where I am”.

From the start of her career (and even before), Amina has been keen to get involved in outside activities – volunteering, board roles and other opportunities that have come her way. When she embarked on her Chartership in 1997, while working at the Mitchell Library, she volunteered at the Glasgow Women’s Library, which “at the time it was just a small library above a shop – of course it is now this amazing collection, with a wonderful reputation, but then it was right at the start of the journey and I volunteered there for a while.”

Even before that she would be involved in



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volunteer work, looking for opportunities while still at school. She says this has been driven by curiosity, adding: “I have just taken the plunge on things, with no expectation, and some wonderful things have happened. I never set out with a plan.”

Looking back now she can see how that desire to broaden her experience whenever possible has allowed her career to develop, despite not being part of a “grand plan”.

She says: “I am passionate about these things and it’s never something I’ve considered as part of my career. It’s because I’m

curious, and I want to learn more.

“In order to be involved, you have to be willing to not be an expert. I think it is useful to start in a position where you don’t know everything and to be comfortable with that position of learning.

“Looking back, taking on those different things probably has been helpful – developing my knowledge, my networks and understanding, and critically, seeing how my work in libraries intersect with all these other organisations. It can be hard to look in and see those connections, but I have developed a view of how all these organisations support quality of life for people and communities.”

Now at the National Library of Scotland, Amina continues to see and use those connections. One of the key drivers of her time at the library will be to look at how collections can both be more representative and more accessible. The solution lies, to a large extent, in connections – either utilising existing connections, or forging new ones.

Amina says that the library’s five-year strategy, *Reaching People*, looks at how the library can “open its doors even wider”. The strategy is halfway through its life, and despite being written in 2019, it has some prescient points that chime with events that have developed since it was launched in 2020.

Amina says: “It was just before Black Lives Matter and just before Covid. All those things that have happened have really shone a light on the importance of these issues for the library.

“When we talk about collecting memories and preserving memories and sharing memories, we need to ask ourselves some really hard questions about whose memories. What is our role as the gatekeepers to those stories and memories, and how do we become more porous as



Amina Shah.

an organisation. How do we let more in, and let more out?

“How do we let our buildings breath, and let our stories breath? How do we make sure we are fit for the future, relevant for the future and have a role in the future.”

It is not a unique problem for Scotland, and Amina says that all national library directors are thinking about these types of issues. She points to Canada and Estonia as having embraced cultural change in an inspiring way, and says: “We all need to look at how we build connections, how our institutions become a bridge between people and the collections that they (the public) own.

“Institutions sometimes talk about ‘our collections’, and protecting those collections as though they belong to the institution. That is always an important role, but what we should focus on more is how do we build relationships with communities – and make sure collections are for and of those communities.”

One answer is obvious, if not always easy: “You need to go where people are.”

Amina goes on: “We have that opportunity through the public library network,

but we also need to do it through raising public consciousness by sharing our collections through the media; working with other organisations to reach people; making sure people understand our collections. We need to find ways to put resources into the hands of teachers, students and families who are in those communities.”

There is a burden of history on many institutions – not only in how collections have been created, but also in how they are accessed. Amina says: “We need to think carefully about the buildings, because they can be intimidating to people. We used to talk about hard-to-reach people and communities, but now we are realising that we have hard-to-reach institutions. Historically, it is the institution that is putting up the barriers – our building was built in such a way as to keep the books in and the people out, and that is a huge challenge for us.

“Something that I, and lots of my colleagues, would dearly love to address is how do we open the doors and become much more welcoming to everyone. I love what they have done with Oodi in Helsinki, which is that living room for the



city. An actual community space that belongs to the people.”

And while buildings can be difficult and expensive to adapt, the welcome that you receive in them is easier. Amina says: “We need to take a look at what we are doing and making sure we are fully welcoming and reaching out. It should be a core part of what we do, not an add on or extra kudos for the service.

“If we are not actually welcoming and being meaningful, important and relevant in people’s lives then we might as well pack up and go home.”

Digital is increasingly important in opening new routes for people to engage with collections, and the National Library of Scotland has set ambitious targets around this. Previous National Librarian, John Scally wanted to see a third of collections digitised by 2025 – that has already been achieved and now Amina is keen for that work to be capitalised upon.

While many people did switch to digital engagement through necessity during Covid, many were unable to make the leap and lockdowns only made the digital divide wider. The trend is moving back towards

in-person events and human contact as people look to make serendipitous connections. There is a balance between those in-person experiences and ensuring that the digital proposition adds value.

One area where there are clear benefits is the intersection between digital engagement and EDI aspirations. While Covid may have made the impact of the digital divide more obvious, it also highlighted how effective digital-reach can be.

There is an increasing realisation that none of these things sit in isolation, and again the solution lies in how institutions talk to people – and perhaps more importantly, how they listen to people.

Amina says: “It’s about listening to audiences and hearing what they have to say – it’s less about pushing content out, and more about listening to what is relevant to our audience and giving them those things.

“It’s about leading in different ways – enabling and empowering other people’s voices. You have to build relationships, and one way is to invite people to talk to you – but do it in a really meaningful way and building relationships for the long term. We are constantly learning, and we are open to the idea that we don’t have all the answers right now.”

Those conversations will inform how an institution should look if it really wants to represent its audience. And it is not just in national libraries, or public library settings. Any service needs to understand its audience – and that can’t happen through intuition or guesswork, because “if you go to an audience and tell them what you can do for them without listening, you are going to miss something”.

For the National Library of Scotland that means that “thinking about co-curation and how we can work with communities to tell stories together and collect together. As a legal deposit library, we have built-in



diversity for our collection because we get everything that is published. But how we tell the story about those things is where we can really benefit from working outside of the library sector.

“We need to move beyond the idea of gatekeepers – people have felt responsible for collection development and protecting collections and have seen that as the primary role. We need to get to the point where we see that an essential part of being a librarian is about community engagement and reaching out to people. Engagement should be embedded in the collection development and the stories we tell about those collections.”

Leadership

That notion of leading in a different way, doesn't end with the way the institution interacts with its community. Amina is passionate about allowing different leadership styles to prosper. She warns that if we only recognise one style of leadership, then many capable leaders will either be ignored or feel unable to be authentic.

Amina says: “If we have an image of a leader being a really assertive older man, then that is probably what you are going to get. We should aspire to seeing leaders who can also be humble, be unsure, ask questions, be empathetic. If we don't, then we aren't going to make it a space for diverse leaders, not just women, but from all backgrounds.

“If we don't broaden our image of what a leader is then we make it hard for people in terms of authenticity and being allowed to be yourself. Why would someone want to become a leader if they can't be authentic?”

For Amina, a more nuanced approach to leadership is about trying to give voice to the best talents in an organisation. She says: “Another hugely undervalued skill is the ability to see connections. For me, being a leader isn't about being brilliant all the time, but it's about making other people brilliant – whether its members of the community, members of your organisations, or partners, or stake holders. It's not about the individual, it's about everyone.

“Sometimes it can take bravery to say ‘I don't know the answer, what do you think?’, and to be open to other people's ideas. You also need to be able to be inspiring, to give people hope and have a vision, but it is not always about being at the front of the charge.”

That notion of leadership being about more than a title, is something that Amina can see in the new generation of talent entering the profession. As CILIPS president in 2022, she was able to meet some of these “bright stars” and says:



“We have a lot to be proud of and a lot to be hopeful for in the future. They seem to be driven by these strong values and ready to embrace change with sustainability, EDI, and decolonisation – they are a very impressive group of people. It makes me really proud to be part of the profession when I see what they are doing.”

Telling the right stories

Although Amina is optimistic that the next generation will ensure a bright future for the information profession, she warns that there are hard times ahead.

“We cannot rest on our laurels because there are huge challenges coming up,” she says. “The issue at the moment is to reassert that libraries are an investment in communities – money for libraries is a preventative spend because we are part of the solution to all the other problems that we can see in society.”

Unfortunately, many key decision-makers do not fully appreciate the value of libraries, with assumptions based on their childhoods, or student experiences. Amina says: “They look back at when they used them, but don't see the reality today. If we can bring them in and show them round, then they start to get it. If you tell a councillor a story about somebody from their constituency and why the library was valuable to them, that gives them something to be proud of and they start to tell that story.

“A lot of the advocacy is about storytelling, finding those stories and using them as a tool to show how important libraries are. That is not only true for public libraries – in academic libraries, for instance, the lecturers are not in that space so they don't see that libraries are the places where students come to and spend time in. They sometimes don't know the extent to which librarians are supporting them.

“We have to reflect those stories back to the people who are influencing decisions. As a profession we are quite good at talking to each other about how good we are, but we don't often step outside and have conversations with other unlikely partners.”

The value of stories was clearly demonstrated when Amina was Chief Executive of SLIC (Scottish Library and Information Council), leading on the development of the first National Strategy for Public Libraries in Scotland. Amina was keen to share as many positive stories as possible – the end result is not just the adoption of a nationwide strategy, but also an additional £5m in funding to help ensure its success.

Amina says Scotland is an ideal place for those types of conversations to take place, describing it as a Goldilocks environment. She says: “We are just the right size for those conversations and collaborations to take place. We know each other, we know the stakeholders and we work closely together and across sectors. It makes it easier to make a clear case to politicians about what libraries are doing and what they can do for communities.”

Wales and Northern Ireland are similar in size, but whether England can replicate that “Goldilocks environment” through more devolved power to the regions remains to be seen. But even where it does not happen at government level, more institutions are looking at local partnerships, closer ties with existing stakeholders and building connections.

These moves help to strengthen the profession and Amina reminds us that “if libraries didn't exist, it would cost a huge amount of money to re-invent them. We should be nurturing them and showing them even more love in these times of difficulty.” **IP**