

# **Empower, Inform, Enrich - The Modernisation Review of Public Libraries**

Department for Culture, Media and Sport

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# The Audit Commission's response

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## Summary

- 1 The key points covered in this consultation response are
  - Any future strategy for public libraries should keep a strong and continued focus on improvement and support performance management at all levels
  - Common purpose is important and the key legislative requirement for a comprehensive and efficient library service should stay.
  - Any new proposals should aim to
    - Create a streamlined, clear and efficient delivery chain
    - Encourage innovation and collaboration in delivery, drawing on a wider range of public bodies, the third and private sectors
    - At national level, focus on the delivery of high-level results, support for performance management (including the management of buildings and digital development), the provision of help where needed and remedial action when results are not achieved
    - Give detailed consideration to the digital future for libraries and how other public bodies might support it. (For example the BBC, the Education and the digital inclusion task force)

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# Detailed response

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## Introduction

- 2 The Audit Commission's roles include challenging public bodies to deliver better value for money, encouraging continuous improvement in public services so they meet diverse needs, promoting high standards of governance and public accountability and improving the quality of data. We aim to make practical recommendations to policy makers, including recommendations to central government about its interactions with local councils.
- 3 This response draws on evidence from our national studies and learning from Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA) and Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA). We carried out 53 inspections of culture services between 2003 and 2008; they included libraries alongside the whole range of culture and sport services. Our high-level conclusion was that in CPA culture services assessment scores were lower and improved more slowly and less consistently than other services. So we consider that any future strategy for public libraries should continue to focus on performance management and improvement.
- 4 This response also makes use of the Audit Commission's studies and Corporate assessments that highlight the importance of
  - Central government providing consistent strategic leadership, with coherent funding arrangements to support priorities
  - Evidence based policy making grounded in deep understanding of the realities of service delivery in the context of contracting public resources
  - Strong leadership nationally and locally
  - Performance management using high-quality data effectively to drive improvement and inform decision making at all levels.

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## Response

- 5 In our evidence to the Public Accounts Select Committee (PASC) inquiry into good government in November 2008, we said the proper role of Central Government is at a strategic level. This means setting the overall direction of policy to deliver outcomes and creating a performance framework to review delivery. We described this as needing tight control on what is to be achieved, loose control on how it is to be done and tight control on the performance management of outcomes - but not of processes. Our response to this consultation follows this approach and rather than answering each of the consultation questions in detail we have focused on what is to be achieved and how the performance management of outcomes might be framed.
- 6 The first consultation question asks if every library authority should share a common purpose. We think it is helpful for there to be a clear purpose and nationally defined

set of outcomes for public libraries, rather than descriptions of particular services building on work by local authorities, recent research and the work of the DCMS Local Government Improvement Project.

- 7** The consultation asks whether the roles defined by the 1964 Act are still appropriate. We think the statutory requirement to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service remains valid, but agree that there is a need for greater clarity around local, regional and national roles and organisations. Primary legislation might not be necessary, new guidance might suffice. The recent report by the all-party parliamentary group on libraries, literacy and information management recommended a library development agency and questioned the suitability of the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) and the Advisory Council on Libraries (ACL). We have not seen evidence that any particular organisational approach (for example a library development agency) would of itself drive improvement or greater efficiency. Setting up new organisation(s) risks diverting attention from the urgent need for reform and might slow progress. More visible and stronger leadership, reduced overlap and improved efficiency could flow from:

  - amalgamating or reducing the number of public bodies (including library authorities),
  - giving them clearly defined roles,
  - encouraging better option appraisal for delivery and more effective use of shared services.
- 8** Our inspection work showed that culture services, including the public library network, are major and sometimes unexploited assets with potential to contribute more to the outcomes for an area than they do currently. For instance we asked older people to research the ability of councils to provide information on a range of mainstream services including volunteering and leisure and social activities.<sup>1</sup> Most were referred to social care services even though they did not need social care. More than two-thirds were directed to a website without anyone checking that they could access it. Libraries did not feature significantly. In every area libraries can help the public, private and third sector organisations to communicate better with communities and achieve more. However one of the recognised strengths of public libraries is their independence. People value them as unbiased sources of information and advice. If government wishes to extend the role of libraries to undertake specific communication roles then these should be subject to regulatory impact assessment and the identification of sufficient (though not ring fenced) funding. This would help to ensure that Libraries' independence is not compromised.
- 9** We have not seen that the funding of libraries is more complicated than other public services. Generally we find there are efficiency gains to be made by reducing overlap and duplication among public bodies, the complexity and number of funding streams, and the use of short-term grant aid.
- 10** Our studies have shown that central government does not need to be too concerned with the detail of how services are delivered locally or with particular delivery

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/nationalstudies/localgov/dontstopmenow/pages/default.aspx>

models, but with effective governance and safeguarding of public assets and outcomes. In "Delivering efficiently: strengthening the links in public service delivery chains" the Audit Commission and the National Audit Office (NAO) highlighted a series of questions to help build effective delivery chains. The most relevant to central government and to the Libraries review are:

- Is the required outcome sufficiently clearly defined?
- Is the evidence base sufficiently robust?
- Is there sufficient capacity, including available resources to deliver?
- Do local, regional and national levels communicate regularly using reliable information so that there is good co-ordination? And
- Have systems to achieve efficiency been built into the delivery chain?

- 11** Taking the findings from our studies and inspection work together, we think that for libraries to be fully effective they need to be better integrated with wider delivery networks operating in localities and that communications within delivery chains need to improve.
  
- 12** A future strategy which consistently applied the questions in paragraph 10, backed up by a delivery plan which included support for them, could have a significant impact on the quality and consistency of public library policy and delivery. Governance arrangements nationally and locally should be reviewed to ensure that can be used with different delivery models, allow innovation and provide for intervention or performance management support when outcomes are at risk or are not being achieved.
  
- 13** A further series of consultation questions addresses funding issues, asking how investment in libraries can be prioritised. We think that funding needs can only be established once the outcomes for public libraries have been identified. Delivering a new policy in reality requires a complex delivery network to be mobilised towards a common end of delivering outcomes for the service everywhere and at less cost. Our work with the NAO on efficient delivery highlights the challenges of <sup>1</sup> translating policy into reality. Getting the full range of potential partners and providers engaged in delivery planning is likely to lead to more efficient use of resources and greater value for money. In our work on sport and leisure facilities we found that no single management model delivers the best overall value for money, or consistently results in more investment or higher levels of participation. Our inspections showed little evidence of strategic delivery planning for public libraries involving other potential public service partners (such as education, health, jobcentre plus, digital inclusion workers/agencies, business advice agencies) never mind those from the third and private sectors or volunteers.
  
- 14** National strategic consideration of the desired digital outcomes for libraries is needed. Again there is potential for greater efficiency and better outcomes through greater co-operation among libraries and other public bodies including the BBC, the

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<sup>1</sup> Audit Commission and National Audit Office, Delivering Efficiently: Strengthening the links in public service delivery chains, Audit Commission 2006

Digital Inclusion Task Force and Education institutions including colleges and universities. People now access digital media more than ever before and there is a recognised digital divide. Libraries may need to consider how they can increase both the digital resources that libraries provide for the public and improve the way they are used to support the business. In the current economic climate, this will increasingly need to be funded by efficiency savings or redirecting resources, but there may be significant opportunities for future savings as a result.

- 15** Public libraries can be effective providers of access to digital services for everyone and especially people who are disadvantaged, excluded or vulnerable. An MLA case study on access to software in a library shows how powerful they can be<sup>i</sup> and how they can help public access and co-production with professionals. Digital exclusion applies to both software and hardware and new technologies such as print on demand, speech recognition and translation software can be made accessible. Online cataloguing and digitisation of resources are national, as well as local considerations. The people's network has been a major success contributing to revitalisation of the service in some areas, but in others the number of terminals is small, so access is too strictly time limited to support serious study or research. Finance to maintain the network and keep it fit for purpose may not be prioritised when money is tight. WiFi is rarely available in libraries.
- 16** In our report on office functions<sup>ii</sup> we said the most successful approaches to improving back office efficiency during SR04 were redesigned business processes and improved use of Information and Communications Technology (ICT). Successful councils used a portfolio of internal (good housekeeping), mutual (shared services), and external (outsourced) methods for achieving back office efficiency gains and needed to be clear about the best combination of methods for their individual circumstances. Previous work by MLA and DCMS explored some approaches, but we have not seen widespread change or innovation resulting from their work. There may be opportunities for public libraries to learn from the health and social care sectors as they have more established experience of using commissioning frameworks and delivery chain analysis.
- 17** A further series of consultation questions asks how decisions on library closures, co-location and the make-up of the library service should be made. Our studies<sup>iii</sup> do not prescribe considerations specific to particular services; instead they recommend focusing on the quality of decision making, the quality of the evidence used to support it, thorough appraisal of options and inclusive consultation. We used this approach in the series of decision making guides published in 2009, including one on library opening hours<sup>iv</sup>. We think successful reform comes from clarity about outcomes and transparency on savings - how much is needed, where and when? Collaboration and co-operation should be encouraged to improve efficiency, develop shared understanding and a commonality of purpose. Rather than competing for

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<sup>i</sup> MLA case study [http://www.mla.gov.uk/news\\_and\\_views/news/Leeds\\_award](http://www.mla.gov.uk/news_and_views/news/Leeds_award) or [http://www.mla.gov.uk/news\\_and\\_views/news/Jodi\\_results](http://www.mla.gov.uk/news_and_views/news/Jodi_results)

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/SiteCollectionDocuments/AuditCommissionReports/NationalStudies/BackToFront8Oct08Summary.pdf>

<sup>iii</sup> <http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/SiteCollectionDocuments/Downloads/91105nothingbutthetruth.pdf>

<sup>iv</sup> <http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/nationalstudies/localgov/istheresomething/Pages/guides.aspx>

limited money, areas of spend that could link with libraries should be looked at together. For example, school and college spending on books and libraries or information and support for small business.

- 18** Separate advice on involving communities in decision making is not needed for libraries, as this is a key requirement of Section 138 of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007. The duty to involve applies whenever decisions are made and this is an area where libraries need to do more. The form of involvement specified in the statutory guidance goes far beyond informing and consulting. It suggests that engagement and empowerment should be standard practice central to service delivery, policy and decision making. What authorities do to meet the duty depends on local circumstances. They need to consider involvement in routine library functions, as well as significant one-off decisions. This legislation also suggests that volunteering and co-production of services should be a part of any modern service.<sup>i</sup>
- 19** The consultation asks how performance should be measured. In July 2009 the Commission published "Is there something I should know?"<sup>ii</sup> We found that most councils could improve the information they use. They recognised that the decisions they were making about the cost, quality and effectiveness of services were not driven by robust information. We think that most of these problems could be overcome without spending more, by good management and learning from exemplar councils. In our work on libraries we have found that much data is collected, but that it is not always what is most useful, of high-quality or well-used. The focus nationally should be on a clear set of national outcomes, backed up with a suite of nationally consistent performance indicators from which public library providers and commissioners can select and use those that will best meet their needs. Training for practitioners and the development of national tools for benchmarking, comparison and analysis will help to develop understanding of where improvement is needed.
- 20** Another key aspect of performance management is the strategic management of libraries buildings. These are too often viewed as liabilities or problems - there is little strategic planning focusing on their potential as community assets. In our study on asset management<sup>iii</sup> we said that well-planned use of property can help join up local services and improve public access. Central government could set clear expectations and offer incentives to use assets more frugally and more sustainably. The key is for the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) to treat land and property as a shared strategic resource. A collective approach should cover all publicly owned land and property, not just new build projects, and can extend beyond local public bodies, enabling councils to play a broader community leadership role. This could help libraries to keep their necessary local presence at less cost and facilitate significantly better integration of libraries with wider local service networks, supporting broader outcomes. At a more basic level managers responsible for

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<sup>i</sup> [http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/localgov/nationalstudies/publicsports/pages/default\\_copy.aspx](http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/localgov/nationalstudies/publicsports/pages/default_copy.aspx)

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/SiteCollectionDocuments/AuditCommissionReports/NationalStudies/20090730istheresomethingishouldknowsummary.pdf>

<sup>iii</sup> <http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/SiteCollectionDocuments/AuditCommissionReports/NationalStudies/roomforimprovement17jun2009REP.pdf>

library buildings should have access to defined performance indicators and benchmarking data to help them improve the management of library buildings.