



DEPARTMENT FOR CULTURE MEDIA AND SPORT

EMPOWER. INFORM, ENRICH: THE MODERNISATION REVIEW OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES: A CONSULTATION DOCUMENT

RESPONSE FROM THE BRITISH LIBRARY

Introduction

1. The British Library welcomes the opportunity to submit views to DCMS's consultation about the public library service in England.
2. The British Library was established by statute in 1972 as the national library of the United Kingdom. It is one of the world's greatest research libraries - it benefits from legal deposit and is the main custodian of the nation's written cultural heritage¹. The Library's incomparable collections have developed over 250 years; they cover three millennia of recorded knowledge, represent every known written language, every aspect of human thought and a considerable sound, music and recordings archive. Sir Isaac Newton said: "If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants". This is what the BL seeks to assist its users to do. In 2008/09, more than 8.3 million British Library collection items were consulted by, or loaned to, academic researchers, business researchers, and private individuals. An independent economic impact study commissioned by the British Library suggests that the total value added to the UK economy by the Library each year is £363m, or £4.40 for every £1 of public funding.² The Library occupies a prominent place in the intellectual and cultural life of the nation. It is an integral component of the research infrastructure and it plays a correspondingly significant role in ensuring the research excellence of

¹ <http://www.bl.uk/>

² *Measuring our Value: Results of an independent economic impact study commissioned by the British Library to measure the Library's direct and indirect value to the UK economy* (December 2003).

the UK and in supporting creativity and innovation. The Library serves five principal user groups – researchers, the business community, the UK library and information network, education and the general public. The Library has a close working relationship with public libraries.

3. In addition to support provided to the public library network through document supply, bibliographic services etc members of the British Library's Executive Team meet each year with members of the Executive of the Society of Chief Librarians (SCL) to update each other on developments in their sectors, share good practice and discuss issues of mutual interest. One fruitful outcome of this relationship has been the appointment of a jointly-funded Public Libraries Communications Manager based in the British Library's Public Affairs Team and reporting to the SCL Executive. The aim of this post is to contribute towards public debate, influence changing perceptions of public libraries and reposition them for the 21st Century.

Response to the Consultation Questions

ROLE FOR LIBRARIES

Q1. Does every library authority have to share a common purpose? Are these purposes complementary and relevant? Are some more important than others? Are there other purposes we should consider?

The public library service is an integral part of the wider library network and the British Library fully supports its aim to be vital and relevant in the 21st century. The BL believes that public libraries have a key role to play: in the free exchange of information and access to knowledge in support of active citizens in a democracy; in supporting literacy and digital literacy; and in informal and lifelong learning. The Library believes that it is a particular strength of the current system of management and provision of the public library service that it allows for the development of service in response to local needs, with local accountability. This has resulted beneficially in a diverse mix of complementary services in response to local user demands. In this context the British Library would particularly underline the

importance of establishing a clear vision for the public library service national offer in which the full range of purposes are defined but user-responsive provision is determined democratically at the local level. The library's position is summarised in Dame Lynne Brindley's contribution to the consultation document, where she states: *"I believe that a core of activities and services that contribute to making a 'good library service' should be stated, championed, and evaluated and that, through local engagement and accountability, there are many opportunities for differential services to be offered"*.

NATIONAL AND LOCAL LEADERSHIP

Q2. Do you think the current roles as defined for central and local government are still appropriate? Is the 1964 legislative framework still appropriate or does it need review? If so what changes would you like to see? Is there any value in central government having a more direct role in setting the vision and objectives for the library service or is the service better managed entirely at local level.

Yes, the British Library believes that the current roles as defined for central and local government and that the 1964 legislative framework are still appropriate. In our view the policy role of central Government is central to maintaining equity of entitlement across England. However we believe there should be a more mature relationship between local and central government (similar to that governing primary and secondary education) in respect of public library provision – this is consistent with our previously-expressed view that a particular strength of the current system of management and provision of the public library service is that it allows for the development of a service in response to local needs, with local accountability – but with central Government retaining 'back-stop' powers to intervene in the case of failing public library authorities.

Q3 Could (a) central government departments, and (b) local authorities better use the public library service to communicate initiatives and contribute to other public services? Do you have any ideas on how this might work?

We believe that the public library service has the potential to act as portal to a whole range of local and central government services. Some authorities are already doing this well, e.g. Kent, and can be used as examples of best practice. (Indeed we consider that the maxim 'make the rest like the best' should be adopted generally). There is also potential for public libraries to act as portal to wider information access and navigation including 'click-through' links to the British Library itself, to the National Archives, and to other library catalogues and indexes.-

ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURES, GOVERNANCE AND FUNDING

Q4. A recent report by the All Party Parliamentary Group on Libraries, Literacy and Information Management concluded that central Government structures complicate the delivery of library funding and policy. The Report also called into question the suitability of the MLA and ACL and recommended a Library Development Agency.

The Library is neutral on the specific question of governance structure but it is clear to us that many of the functions proposed for a Library Development Agency are essential if the public library service is to fulfil its aim of being vital and relevant in the 21st century. These include: the sharing of best practice; spreading and speeding innovation; shared procurement; value for money; development of commercial expertise, etc.

Q5. The Library does not have a view on Q5

Q6. How can we prioritise investment in libraries, especially at a time of financial constraints?

The British Library stands ready to work with the Society of Chief Librarians (and any other national agency) to share and spread good practice at the BL with respect to opening up new and more revenue streams for public libraries.

DIGITAL

Q7. Digital Services: What is the future of library services in a digital environment? What changes do you envisage as a result of changes in technology over the next 5-10 years?

In Dame Lynne Brindley's December 2009 speech at the LGA Conference 1964 and all that: Modernising your library services, she described the internet and digital library developments as "an integral part of innovation and the future relevance of all libraries.... the digital future is not optional – it's already here". She identified the following key building blocks of the digital future for libraries: ubiquity of broadband; electronic books and lending, digital collections and services; user engagement; social networking opportunities; digitising content; and digital literacy.

Q8. Digital technology is already helping with the back office and administrative functions of many libraries

Some authorities are already doing this well and can be used as examples of best practice. This is another example of 'making the rest like the best'.

Q9. Do Local Authority IT strategies support or impede libraries' digital innovation? Should libraries have a national web presence? Would a national online catalogue covering all public libraries be beneficial?

A national web presence would usefully set out the national public library service offer – including click-through links to individual public library authorities. The British Library would in particular support the development of a national federated online public library catalogue on the presumption that the sector is moving towards a national library card and to underpin this important and positive new initiative.

WHAT SERVICES SHOULD BE AVAILABLE TO USERS?

Q10. Are there any services which you consider should be prescribed across all library services or should services be entirely determined at local level? Is there any value in having a clear national 'offer to consumers of the library in the 21st century'. If so which elements would be vital components? Besides hard copy books do you think there are other services which should be free at the point of delivery on a national basis?

Please see our answers to Q1 and Q21.

Q11. How can we widen usage and make libraries more accessible to the public?

The British Library believes there is a broad range of measures that can be taken to widen usage and to make public libraries more accessible, steps that are critical to the public library service's aim to be vital and relevant in the 21st century. Many of these measures are identified by the contributors to the consultation document, but of these we would highlight in particular: the crucial need to respond to new user expectations both for 24/7 service and also for all information services to be consistent with the Internet experience; the need to respond to the emergence of new media, especially e-books; the need to respond to the service opportunities offered by digital delivery; and the need for more attractive buildings and to match if not to exceed the expectations set by new retail environments.

Q12. Do we do enough to market library services? If not, what more could/should be done to promote or explain the benefits of libraries?

The Library fully supports the Society of Chief Librarians in its advocacy aim of demonstrating the value of library services to local and central government agendas, promoting good library practice, raising awareness of the full range of services offered by public libraries and providing a voice for the sector. In this context we have shared BL marketing and branding expertise with SCL, and we stand ready to work with the Society of Chief Librarians (and any other national agency) to share and spread good practice at the BL with respect to the marketing of public library service.

COMMERCIAL ACTIVITIES & PARTNERSHIPS

Q13. Commercial partnerships through libraries are not common. How might we bring more private funding into the public library service?

Q14. Where can libraries learn from the commercial sector and what private partnerships can you think of which have been useful for library services?

The British Library raises more self-generated income than any other national library and employs a wide range of business models and commercial partnerships to ensure a diversity of funding streams. We stand ready to work with the Society of Chief Librarians (and any other national agency) to share and spread good practice at the BL with respect to opening up new and more commercial revenue streams for public libraries.

LOCATION AND BUILDINGS

Q15. What are the circumstances in which a Local Authority would be justified in closing a library?

The British Library believes that it is not inherently wrong to close a public library service point. A range of circumstances – such as a change in the demographics of an area, the availability of digital service delivery, the need to re-balance provision to ensure an equitable distribution of service across an authority – might justify such a decision. However what is clear is that there should be transparency in decision making and a proper consultative process.

Q16. Co-location of libraries with other public services, schools and colleges or business is becoming increasingly prevalent. When is co-location successful and what factors should LAs consider in making co-location decisions?

The Library believes that co-location has been very successful in some cases and these can be shared as examples of best practice. This is another example of 'making the rest like the best'.

Q17. The Library does not have a view on Q17

TRAINING, LEADERSHIP AND SERVICES FOR STAFF

Q18. *How could we encourage a greater skill mix beyond traditional librarianship in the library service?*

In the British Library's view, the key imperative is to develop a cadre of effective leaders. New expectations of public service from our users, politician and from the taxpayer, together with the digital revolution and the emergence of the public library as an important social and civic space, have radically altered the kind of skills and expertise we need in our public library leaders. Business skills, change management skills, financial, commercial and negotiation skills, entrepreneurial skills; cultural leadership, skills of diplomacy and political judgement, all are now essential for the modern public library leader. Cross-sector skills and experience are increasingly important and useful and the British Library's Executive Team expressly melds public and private sector expertise. Increasingly at the top and second tiers of public library service management the focus should be placed on recruiting the best professionals rather than the best library professionals. And more work needs to be undertaken nationally in promoting the diversity of jobs in public libraries in the media.

Q19. The Library does not have a view on Q19.

HOW SHOULD WE MONITOR LIBRARY PERFORMANCE AND WHAT SHOULD WE ASPIRE TO?

Q20. *Is it important that libraries remain a statutory obligation for local authorities?*

Yes. The British Library believes it is fundamental that public libraries remain a statutory obligation for local authorities. That said, the Library welcomes diversity in the means of service provision through, for example, direct provision, partnership with other services, contracting with another service or other organisation.

Q21. *Is the obligation to provide a 'comprehensive and efficient' library service the correct one?*

Yes. The British Library fully supports the statutory requirement for local authorities to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service. The principle of a comprehensive and free public library service is a long-standing one, dating back to the origins of the service in the 19th century. In the digital age there is an overwhelming argument that the service should cover access to digital as well as to printed content and make a strong contribution to the Digital Britain agenda. It follows that there is need to define 'comprehensive and efficient' and we would commend the Chartered Institute of Information Professionals October 2009 Guidelines on public library provision in England for portfolio holders in local Councils³ as a particularly welcome addition to the tools that help to encourage consistently high standards in public libraries.

Q22. *How should we measure performance?*

As the public library service is a statutory service, the Library believes that there should be adequate safeguards to ensure that services are maintained and improved, that success stories are disseminated and good practice encouraged through the public library network and that national standards are set and achieved. A mix of key performance indicators – both quantitative and qualitative - should be developed and these should form the basis of standards capable of being used by central Government to trigger intervention as necessary in the case of failing public library authorities.

³ <http://www.cilip.org.uk/get-involved/advocacy/public-libraries/Pages/goodlibraries.aspx>

Q23. *What research do we need to do to best demonstrate the benefits of the library service to local and national leaders? Who would be best placed to initiate this research?*

The Library believes that research should be commissioned to produce better methods of measuring the real value and impact of the public library service. Overseas examples include: the *Return on Investment for Public Libraries* study by the Colorado Library Research Service (<http://www.lrs.org/public/roi/>); *Wisconsin's public libraries: economic benefits in tough economic times* (<http://www.wisconsinlibraries.org/materials/libs/EconImpactBrochure.pdf>); *The Economic Impact of Public Libraries on South Carolina* (<http://www.libsci.sc.edu/SCEIS/exsummary.pdf>). However, as it is in our view of equal importance, we would also urge that market research is commissioned into what user groups want from their public libraries. Research into technical tools should also be commissioned and widely circulated as should material on professional and managerial best practice.

The British Library

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