

Empower, Inform, Enrich - The modernisation review of public libraries

Introduction

Buckinghamshire Culture & Learning Service welcomes this opportunity to respond to the government's important consultation on *Empower, Inform, Enrich – the modernisation review of public libraries: a consultation document*. Responses are as follows:

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?

All public library services should share a common legally defined core purpose based around the areas identified in the consultation document: *Providing books, learning, information and entertainment to customers; The library at the centre of the Community; The library as an education resource and proactive provider of information and learning.*

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?

The 1964 legislative framework is very weak on the definition around 'comprehensive and efficient'. The definition of the core purpose of the library service should be clear, precise and quantifiable. Central government should have a role in setting overarching service standards, and for holding local authorities to account for their performance against these. There also needs to be an agreed vision for public library services with a National Development Agency to implement that vision.

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?

There often seems to be an expectation of delivery through libraries which is inappropriate. There is confusion between library services and library buildings – the service provision should be key and not driven by buildings, this does not happen to the same extent with other areas of public or private provision. Hence either direct delivery of or information about other public services can be achieved by library outreach staff working in the community, co-location of services, extended opening hours, and through the provision of electronic services.

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.

- Are there benefits in changing the structures in government?
- Are there benefits in changing the structures or roles of the public bodies?
- Is there a value in a greater central function around particular issues e.g. marketing and publicity, digital services?

Do you see any benefit in establishing new national/local structures as set out in Margaret Hodge's essay?

The division of government responsibilities around library services has produced a fragmented approach to service development and delivery and has hindered the sector's ability to respond both quickly and flexibly to fast changing situations. What is needed now is a National Development Agency for libraries - the ACL seems to fulfil no useful purpose, whilst the MLA are doing a much better job now under Roy Clare and have begun to take a much more effective strategic role for libraries.

Although libraries should share a common purpose and agreed performance standards, this does not mean that every local branch or delivery method should be the same – the service also needs to be able to adapt to local needs. What we could look at developing is a single national library authority with national membership and a national stock base (physical and virtual) but with the delivery role delegated to local councils (working to national service standards) and incorporating a national development agency which would lead on the profile and development of the service.

The internet has blurred boundaries and it makes little sense not to be able to borrow an e book from Essex just because the customer's address is Buckinghamshire. There could be better sharing of good practice, efficiencies of scale around new technology and stock management. Locally there could be decisions about the most appropriate delivery method within an area, personalisation to the local community and responses to identified needs.

It also follows that some essential workloads such as marketing would also be more cost-effectively delivered by national programmes. A good example is the 'National Reference Desk' initiative where 151 Library Authorities are all essentially attempting to deliver the same message. Thus the 24/7 public library already exists, but most local authorities do not promote or market it because it is not a council priority but it would be for a national library agency.

Q5. In 2007 the Department for Communities and Local Government published 'Developing the Local Government Services Market: New ways of working and new models of provision within the public library service but only a handful of local authorities currently deliver libraries through a trust or private company. The case studies show that alternative delivery models can be effective so how might we best encourage Local Authorities to explore the opportunities they offer? What other governance models might be suitable for library services or are there barriers to introducing these models? For instance:

- **What could libraries learn from other sectors including the private sector?**
- **Would other models of delivery and funding e.g. the academy model for schools, social enterprise models or Foundation Trusts for hospitals be appropriate for library services?**

As stated in Q4 there should be a national body which covers effectively all the 'back office' and development work leaving local bodies to run physical locations or mobiles where appropriate. This front-line delivery could be through a range of providers – local authorities, community groups, private companies – but needs to be overseen in such a way as they are not competing with each other e.g. major shopping centres should have a library but if there is already a local authority provided service there must be a restriction on a private company opening one up – maybe a series of geographic licences with performance to minimum standards.

There are examples of trust models in existence but none which tend to cover libraries only. Those that are in existence have not been so for very long and no work has been done to date to assess how effective these models are and what benefits have been achieved – this needs to be done before a particular model is adopted on a wider scale.

Q6. How can we prioritise investment in libraries, especially at a time of financial constraints? You may like to consider:

- **How we might ensure that all libraries are able to develop successful funding models which are based on a diversity of funding streams**
- **How could we help open new and more revenue streams for libraries**
- **What could libraries learn from other sectors**
- **How do we effectively spread best practice**

Until there is a clear definition of the statutory requirements around library provision, and accompanying service standards, libraries will continue to be a very low priority for some local authorities, with lead professional responsibility for the service becoming ever lower in management hierarchies. If the service has the right priority the funding overview is likely to be there.

There also needs to be a long term view taken by councils on buildings for the local authority as a whole. Whilst there may be sites where it is appropriate to only have library occupancy often the library provision should just be one of the services on offer – the building should be a public service centre with many elements – e.g. Primary Care Trusts; Social Services; Police; Adult Learning; Library service. In other areas it may be appropriate to link with the private sector so why not have a book-seller, coffee shop and library all within one venue - utilise the expertise of the private sector do not try and compete (see essay by Tony Durcan). This would spread the cost of running the building, potentially offer increased hours and attract in more people.

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?

There should be a legal requirement for access to library computers and digital services to be provided free of charge. If we end up with a mish mash of charging policies the opportunity to establish a national inclusive downloading service will be lost and commercial services will dominate the market.

How can we use the digital revolution to extend access to library resources?

Universities invest in virtual learning environments (VLE) – potential for public libraries to work with the higher education sector to extend this facility to the general public – a role for the national development agency? Also - transfer transactions, live enquiries (Enquire!) and more digital content online, making it accessible 24/7.

Should virtual lending (i.e. lending downloads to the home via the internet) be the future of the public library service either generally or in some areas? What challenges would virtual lending present?

E books will become significant within the next 5 years. If the library service is about reading then they have to engage with virtual lending. If the service is about physical books then it must accept a decreasing market and should plan to reduce over time.

The use of the internet is significant for information access so there should be computer provision in all branches but there must be a commitment to revenue as well as capital funding for this to happen.

What digital content should libraries provide? For example should all libraries make subscription online services available to users? Should this be a free service?

Free subscription online services should be available to users (it is still delivering information content albeit in a different format). Until Google makes deals with key publishers in this field, these are the only products that make libraries' information resources unique and are effectively our 'crown jewels' (international evidence indicates that libraries have been woefully inadequate in promoting this service. This contributes to the majority of citizens believing that Google/Wikipedia can satisfy all their needs!).

A cursory glance at any public authorities' online subscriptions would reveal that a number of certain titles are common to most so here there is potential for a truly nationally agreed basic online provision agreement. National negotiations would be required to resolve licensing issues and ensure that a customer living in a small unitary authority can access this material.

Is there other content or technology which you think should be guaranteed to users?

We need a new national network in our public libraries and this should be JANET, the academic network. Its power would mean the raft of online information services which have to be paid for (those of the highest quality and most up to date) would be made available cost effectively in public libraries.

How can libraries support the Digital Inclusion agenda? What are some of the potential obstacles to greater digital engagement within libraries, and how might these be overcome?

The development of 'universal membership' has to be harmonised with resolving the copyright and license issues associated with online subscriptions. Inevitably the National Reference Desk negotiations reflected our out-dated local delivery pattern so that deals were related to local population numbers and single-service sector agreements. For example, the Encyclopaedia Britannica could be provided to the same child but via two distinct deals - with local library and local school. This whole process needs to be re-examined.

Q8. Digital technology is already helping with the back office and administrative functions of many libraries. How can we spread best practice and maximise those opportunities? Self service and return technology is intended to free up library staff to deal with more complex customer enquiries. Should this technology be available in all libraries?

Self service technology is an essential step forward for library services. It should enable extended opening hours and free up staff from routine procedures, allowing them to support customers in other ways e.g. helping them with their enquiries. However, there is a danger that it will be seen by financially hard pressed local authorities as a way of reducing staffing overheads.

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?

It is understandable that local authority IT units have concerns around network security and the regulation of Web 2.0 technology, but unfortunately these concerns have led to library services being left behind in terms of digital innovation. In addition, corporate regulations around their appearance have left many local authority websites looking dull and uninteresting.

There should also be a national web presence and a national online public catalogue - in a world dominated by Google, Amazon and Wikipedia, having access to, but not being able to exploit 151 separate library authority catalogues is unacceptable in the 21st century.

Q10. Are there any services which you consider should be prescribed across all library services or should services be entirely determined at a 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?

In the digital age there is no sound argument for not having a prescribed national offer across all services with agreed service standards – this should include free access to any book properly published, access to information sources via books and internet and virtual downloads. This should be free at the point of delivery to all with the ability to have a free home delivery of books to those unable to access branches through infirmity.

This should be supported by new legislation, implemented by a new national development agency responsible for marketing 'the national offer', ensuring agreed standards are applied, innovative staff developed, academic research relating to the library market carried out and marketing undertaken.

Q.11 How can we widen usage and make libraries more accessible to the public?

On what basis should library leaders make decisions about opening hours and location?

Opening hours and library locations should be determined by local authorities in consultation with local people. There should be minimum standards related to catchment populations.

Should library joining and membership arrangements be simplified across all libraries. Indeed should library membership be national so that citizens can use any library and borrow and return material anywhere.

There should be a national membership scheme. Returning material anywhere will have very significant cost implications

Do you think there are particular services which would encourage more library use? You might wish to consider a universal home delivery service (in addition to the scheme for housebound people), and enabling people to request a book online.

A universal home delivery service would only succeed competitively with a huge investment in infrastructure.

Only a third of 16-24 year olds now visit public libraries. How can we ensure that young people who leave full time education remain library users?

If services are high quality, easy to use and relevant to their needs more young people will use them. This will require a national strategy and considerable investment. We need to stop confusing buildings with services, especially where this age group is concerned - the offer/content where/how ever accessed is what matters. We need help to overcome the hurdles (often Local Authority IT policies/strategies) which hinder libraries and librarians providing greater access to social networking sites such as Facebook – essential tools when talking to generations who expect to see, feel and hear their brands.

How can we improve our understanding of the people who use libraries – and of the people who do not – in order to improve services to them?

Proper impact measurement and national research/surveys. Local library authorities do not have the capacity to carry this work out, but a properly funded national development agency would pay dividends in this area.

How might library users have a greater voice in decision making?

Local communities need to be involved in the planning and management of the library services to their communities.

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?

- Much more could be done to market library services, however marketing budgets are extremely vulnerable to local authority budget reductions, and librarians don't necessarily have the right skills.
- There needs to be a national campaign around core services – research indicates that people are pleasantly surprised when they go into a library, which suggests a lack of prior knowledge and an erroneous view (promulgated by out-dated media imagery) of what is on offer. Therefore there needs to be a concerted effort made to ditch all the stereo-typed imagery.

- More than half the population never use a library; many non-users are potentially new consumers - their perceptions and attitudes need to be understood.
- Marketing needs to emphasise impact and outcomes, not inputs and outputs.
- Mere access to information is not sufficient. Large swathes of our population now suffer from “a lack of attention, lack of a mental map, no sense of collection, and a poor idea of what is good and relevant...” Libraries should be marketing themselves as key players in this debate (a discussion that the media is largely yet to pick up on).
- Libraries have access to millions of ‘brand advocates’ (our customers) walking, talking word-of-mouth champions who can help spread the message about the facilities available.

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

- **What commercial activities should we encourage libraries to operate? (Examples of commercial activities or partnerships might be book selling or partnerships with bookshops, provision of coffee shops, rental of certain materials, contracts with local business, national partnerships with private companies)**
- **What benefits do you think these might bring to the library service?**
- **Are there any commercial activities which you think are not appropriate for libraries to undertake?**

- Local partnerships with booksellers can be effective and should be more widely developed, but essentially the lending of in print books is against booksellers’ interests.
- Coffee shops are valuable in larger libraries but there are very few profitable examples.
- Buckinghamshire derives significant and useful income from lending DVDs and other non-book materials, but this is certain to fall away with the growth of downloading – income-generated services becoming essential to maintain core services must not be allowed to happen.
- Post recession there may be some opportunities for business partnerships, although various product placement type models have failed to deliver much income to date.

Q14. Where can libraries learn from the commercial sector and what private partnerships can you think of which have been useful for library services? How can we better spread good practice here?

Customer service and marketing – joint staffing or work shadowing for customer service

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

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 Local Authorities consider in making co-location decisions?

Use of smaller standalone libraries has been in decline for many years, for a variety of reasons. Where the key reason is changes in the social and economic nature of the community, and there are very low levels of customer demand for the service, then closure is justified and should take place. Where the key factor is the limitations of the service, in terms of size, stock, opening hours, etc., then closure is not justified and alternative service models should be considered. Recent advances in mobile library technology mean that creditable “branch library on wheels” services can be cost-effective and acceptable alternatives for local communities. However the greatest priority should be given to opportunities for co-location/multi-agency provision, especially ideal where the communities are isolated – economically, socially or geographically. This should be a key factor in planning service delivery but does need good facilities for each service – trying to adapt existing buildings especially libraries is unlikely to offer the space/teaching/consulting facilities that really work. Collectively the services must appeal to a wide cross section of the community.

Q17. There is a mixed economy of library buildings including large central libraries, smaller local libraries and mobile libraries. What should library leaders consider in making decisions about the make-up of their library service?

What kind of customer information should library leaders have in deciding where to locate libraries?

Information on population, shopping, leisure, education, parking, access to other public services within communities.

How should Library leaders make decisions about library buildings' accessibility and fitness for purpose?

Plenty of national standards plus common sense

How should the library service be provided in small rural communities?

If no demand – don't provide – accept that resources are scarce and unpopular decisions need to be made. Delivered services as fall-back for housebound, etc. Otherwise new generation mobile libraries, self-service collections in partner organisations, community partnerships all offer possibilities

Are there benefits from unstaffed mini libraries, library machines and self service check out of books? Exploiting the potential of these can lead to better access for the community and free up staff from routine procedures to assist customers.

How important is it that libraries should be housed in dedicated buildings?

Not at all – ideally all libraries should offer access to other services.

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

- **Do you think library courses have the relevant content and teach the right skills to equip the library workforce?**
- **How can we ensure that the library service attracts and nurtures leaders with the ability to drive improvement, engage in partnerships and innovate services?**
- **What other skills and/or qualifications are required to staff a modern library?**

A review of the library profession and the skills/qualifications required also needs to be done as part of this modernisation review. A library/information qualification is increasingly no longer seen as relevant for working in the public library service – this is not the case in other library sectors such as higher education. There needs to be a key focus on customer skills and business management as well as other general skills such as those around IT.

Q19. Do you think that volunteering is a useful component of the library workforce? How can we ensure that volunteering arrangements are used to best effect?

Volunteers can make a valuable contribution in a wide range of complementary roles. They should not be directly employed by local authorities as an alternative to paid staff. This needs to be made clear in national service standards. Good management policy for using volunteers needs to be in place to ensure volunteers properly trained and supported.

Q20. Is it important that libraries remain a statutory obligation for local authorities? What might be the advantages and disadvantages? For instance, would the removal of statute allow greater flexibility for fundraising or different modes of operation currently off limits?

A statutory framework is the only means by which minimum national standards of provision can be maintained, monitored and where necessary enforced.

Q21. Is the obligation to provide a 'comprehensive and efficient' library service the correct one? Does it need further definition or guidance around what that means or should the interpretation be left to local authorities? For instance, should there be more prescription around opening hours, web presence, service provision, staff skill mix?

The current definition is far too open to interpretation – what is a ‘comprehensive and efficient’ library service exactly? It needs to be much more precisely defined with clear service standards for the service.

Q22. How should we measure performance?

Libraries need to centre their performance monitoring around a defined range of core services to ensure that they are measuring the correct things.

Is there a need for less, more or different local or national monitoring?

Libraries are very good at quantitative measurement. There needs to be more help with qualitative measurement - outcomes/impact of the service

Are visits and books borrowed still relevant?

Yes, these have their place and are still important. Not just books though – it needs to be all material that are loaned + digital usage of services. However, these quantitative measures need to be combined with qualitative to obtain a more holistic picture of the effectiveness around service provision.

What else should we consider and measure when determining the efficiency and effectiveness of our libraries?

Library services are being accessed and used differently than in the past – this needs to be reflected in the VfM indicators. For example, the cost per library indicator is ‘number of visitors in person to libraries divided by the revenue budget’ – if the indicator is to be of use then it needs to be expanded in some way to include virtual users – this applies across most of the library performance indicators which are still output based and tend to reflect the more traditional usage of libraries.

Would an accreditation scheme for libraries be beneficial or are there other systems which might incentivise libraries to deliver more effectively?

Although there are a number of accreditation schemes around already, a nationally recognised scheme specifically to cover public libraries would be beneficial and raise the profile of the service – however, it will need to be effectively marketed to the public so that they are aware of what it means. It should be based around the quality of customer service and not such things as numbers of books, loans etc. – this information is already collected by CIPFA and would not give an indication of the quality of service provided.

Is the Secretary of State’s power to intervene still appropriate - Yes

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?

What libraries desperately need is evidence to show the impact that the services are having, and the contribution that they make to the wider community agenda. National research that has been done to date such as that around the Summer Reading Challenge and Bookstart has proved extremely useful to library authorities in terms of advocacy. Library authorities are too small to do this kind of thing themselves - a national library development agency should have a significant role to play in this.