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FAO: Manager, Library Review Consultation

Dear Sir,

Consultation Response: Modernisation Review of Public Libraries

We welcome this opportunity to respond to the consultation on the modernisation review of public libraries.

About us

The Commission for Rural Communities acts as the advocate for England's rural communities, as an expert adviser to government, and as a watchdog to ensure that government actions, policies and programmes recognise and respond effectively to rural needs, with a particular focus on disadvantage.

It has three key functions:

- **Rural advocate:** the voice for rural people, businesses and communities
- **Expert adviser:** giving evidence-based, objective advice to government and others
- **Independent watchdog:** monitoring, reporting on and seeking to mainstream rural into the delivery of policies, nationally, regionally and locally.

See: www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk

Reaching rural communities

As recognised in your case study on a mobile library service providing services to a predominantly rural community in East Riding, libraries have the potential to play an important role in rural communities, much wider than just their primary lending function.

Rural areas present distinct delivery challenges for service providers which need to be understood and overcome. Rural areas do not all have the same characteristics which means that the delivery challenges and the most effective solutions are likely to be different in different areas. However, there are some common themes and key issues facing service users and providers in rural areas:

- **Hidden deprivation** - most people who live in rural areas experience a high quality of life. On average they live longer, have better physical and mental health and enjoy healthier

lifestyles (for example, see section 2.6 (pages 49-54) in the State of the Countryside Report 2008). However, the poorest and most disadvantaged rural residents have much poorer health outcomes and experience consistently lower levels of physical and mental health. Targeting and addressing these problems is difficult given that much rural deprivation is hidden and masked by the prevailing affluence of many rural areas.

Typically rural deprivation is scattered rather than concentrated. Although on average, rural areas suffer less deprivation than urban areas, when the scores for individual small rural areas on the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) are looked at in detail, sparsely populated areas (i.e. those in the most rural areas) show higher levels of deprivation than their less sparsely populated counterparts.

The State of the Countryside update on "Rural analysis of the Index of Multiple Deprivation 2007" published in November 2008 includes data on rural deprivation. The accompanying press release outlines the key points, including the finding that only 2.4% of deprived English areas are in rural England yet **17% of all deprived households are rural households.**

- **An ageing rural population** - the median age of rural residents is nearly 6 years older than their urban counterparts, and is increasing by 3 months every year. The rural elderly are often reluctant to use services because of the long travel times involved.
- **Access to services** - In a rural context, access to services means physical access, including travelling time, geography, opening hours, local provision of services, availability of public transport and regularity of service.
- **Delivering services** – there may be challenges to deliver cost effective services to rural communities because of the distances involved, the population spread and the fewer opportunities to take advantage of economies of scale. Innovative service delivery and cross agency/partnership working are essential to maximise opportunities to meet the needs of rural communities.

Obligation to take rural needs into account when developing policies/delivering services

Rural proofing is shorthand for a process that involves assessing how policies will work for rural people and places to ensure that the policies are implemented fairly and effectively.

Rural proofing is a commitment by Government to ensure domestic policies take account of rural circumstances and needs. It is a mandatory part of the policy process, which means as policies are developed, policy makers should:

- consider whether their policy is likely to have a different impact in rural areas, because of particular circumstances or needs;
- make proper assessment of those impacts, if they're likely to be significant;
- adjust the policy where appropriate, with solutions to meet rural needs and circumstances.

Rural proofing applies to all policies, programmes and initiatives and it applies to both design and delivery stages. The Government is committed to making rural proofing a reality at national and regional levels.

For more information, see:

<http://www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk/projects/ruralproofing/overview>

Response to consultation questions

1. *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?*

CRC is not in a position to comment on this, other than to say that it is important that the needs of rural communities are identified and fully considered when developing policy in this area i.e. any proposed policy needs to be rural proofed (see page 2).

2. *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.*

CRC is not in a position to comment on this, other than to say that it is important that the needs of rural communities are identified and fully considered when developing policy in this area i.e. any proposed policy needs to be rural proofed (see page 2).

3. *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?*

Libraries have enormous potential to help meet the needs of people living in rural areas by signposting and providing access to a range of services. Libraries need to develop more partnership and cross agency working to deliver a wide range of services in rural areas.

For example, libraries can promote or help to provide other services such as benefit and debt advice, housing advice, community police officers, support groups, employment and training advice, health services etc. This may be either by signposting, or by facilitating drop in surgeries.

There is also scope for central government to reach rural communities via rural libraries, especially for consultations, announcements of initiatives/policy changes, and through the provision of broadband access. This may be as simple as rural libraries being asked to display and draw people's attention to certain information.

4. *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? Eg Marketing and publicity, digital services? Do you see any benefit in establishing new national/local structures as set out in Margaret Hodge's essay?*

CRC is not in a position to comment on this, other than to say that it is important that the needs of rural communities are identified and fully considered when developing policy in this area i.e. any proposed policy needs to be rural proofed (see page 2).

5. *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 – eg the academy model for schools, social enterprise models or Foundation Trusts for hospitals – be appropriate for library services?

CRC is not in a position to comment on this, other than to say that it is important that the needs of rural communities are identified and fully considered when developing policy in this area i.e. any proposed policy needs to be rural proofed (see page 2).

6. *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?*

We suggest that libraries develop more partnership and cross agency working to deliver a wide range of services in rural areas, using co-design and co-delivery approaches. Integrated service delivery avoids duplication and enables local authorities and other agencies to reach people living in rural areas.

CRC is willing to help spread best practice regarding library services in rural areas.

7. *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? You might like to consider – How can we use the digital revolution to extend access to library resources? Should virtual lending (ie 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? What digital content should libraries provide? For example should all libraries make subscription online services available to users? Should this be a free service? Web 2.0 enables people and communities to contribute web content. Do you think that there is a role for libraries in Web 2.0? If so, what? Is there other content or technology which you think should be guaranteed to users? 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? What other opportunities does new technology present for libraries? Do you have ideas for innovative ways in which new technology could be applied in local libraries?*

For rural communities, libraries have an important role in supporting the digital inclusion agenda by helping to ensure people living in rural areas have access to reasonable quality broadband and training on how to use the internet.

CRC's response to the recent Digital Britain report highlighted the issues facing rural residents who cannot access broadband, many of whom are already socially disadvantaged. As a result of the limited broadband access in many rural areas, many people living in rural areas are excluded from the access to a range of services, information and social contact that other sections of the population take for granted. Libraries serving rural communities can help bridge this digital divide.

In this way, libraries can also provide support for rural enterprise, either through 'hubs' for local home workers, or by offering flexible, affordable office facilities and meeting rooms with broadband.

8. *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?*

CRC is not in a position to comment on this, other than to say that it is important that the needs of rural communities are identified and fully considered when developing policy in

this area i.e. any proposed policy needs to be rural proofed (see page 2).

9. *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 online catalogue covering all public libraries may be beneficial for people living in rural areas if it means that they have access to a wider range of books and other materials than otherwise might be the case. A national online catalogue would only provide these benefits if members of the public were able to request and reserve items for collection from their local or mobile library.

10. *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?*

For people living in rural communities, there is a balance between ensuring equality of access to a basic, universal, library service and the importance of developing services to reflect and address local needs.

This is a complex balance, so it is important that the needs of rural communities are identified and fully considered when developing policy in this area i.e. any proposed policy needs to be rural proofed (see page 2).

It is important for the Digital Inclusion agenda that pricing does not deter access to broadband services offered in libraries.

11. *How can we widen usage and make libraries more accessible to the public? For instance: On what basis should library leaders make decisions about opening hours and location? 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. 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. 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? 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? How might library users have a greater voice in decision making?*

In order to widen usage and make libraries more accessible to the public, libraries should tap into their potential to help deliver a wide range of services in rural areas, especially using co-design and co-delivery approaches. Although many rural libraries already provide venues for groups such as mother and toddler groups, exercise classes and reading groups, there is real scope for rural libraries to become a community focal point by offering a much wider range of services and information. For example, Cherwell DC in Oxfordshire currently provides internet kiosks in libraries and local shops so that users can access information about local services, report problems and pay for services without having to travel to the nearest market town.

There is scope for regular surgeries to be held in libraries, with access to training providers, housing advisers, debt counsellors, community police officers etc. In rural areas, there is a particular need for more local service provision around employment and training. As set out in the key findings of the Rural Data Series 2009, Job Centre outlets have reduced in rural areas by 35% since 2008. Nearly half (49.5%) of all people living in rural areas have to travel more than 8km to visit a Job Centre, compared with 3.6% of people living in urban areas. In 2008, the number of people chasing each unfilled vacancy in many

peripheral rural districts was far higher than the average across Britain (see [CRC Rural Recession Intelligence](#), Feb 2009). By linking with Job Centre Plus to provide outreach services in rural areas, this is one of the ways that libraries could encourage more young people to visit libraries.

Isolation and boredom are significant issues for young people in rural areas because of the lack of transport and places to meet, so another way for rural libraries to encourage more young people is through the provision of free computer and internet access. Offering spaces to sit and chat, free or subsidised wifi, and more flexible opening hours would all help to encourage more young people.

Rural libraries need to ensure that their location and opening hours are as accessible as possible. Rural libraries should consider synchronising opening times with regular events such as farmers' markets, pension/benefit collection and shop opening times. Flexible opening times, including opening in the evenings and early mornings on certain days, would help to attract a wider range of users.

In addition, it would help people living in rural areas to be able to access library services run by different local authorities – often people living in rural areas may be closer to libraries across the county boundary. It would be helpful for such people to be able to access library services via one single membership card, and to be able to return books to their nearest library.

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

It is very important that people know what the library has to offer and when it is open. This information needs to be widely available and made accessible to those without internet access, for example, via local newspapers, notice boards and parish newsletters. Where libraries are linked to the delivery of other services, this needs to be clear. Libraries should actively promote and market the benefits and opportunities available to their local communities. In rural areas, libraries may need to take a more flexible approach and do this via a range of different avenues e.g. via clubs and networks such as the WI, schools, village shops etc.

13. *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?*

CRC is not in a position to comment on this, other than to say that it is important that the needs of rural communities are identified and fully considered when developing policy in this area i.e. any proposed policy needs to be rural proofed (see page 2).

14. *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?*

CRC is not in a position to comment on this, other than to say that it is important that the needs of rural communities are identified and fully considered when developing policy in this area i.e. any proposed policy needs to be rural proofed (see page 2).

CRC is willing to help disseminate good practice.

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

Local authorities must identify and fully consider the needs of rural communities before deciding whether or not to close a library in a rural area. As libraries can play a pivotal role in helping to tackle inequality in rural areas by providing broadband access, access to learning and signposting other services, closure of rural libraries should be considered only in exceptional circumstances. Instead, local authorities should consider adapting the service so that becomes more flexible and can be linked with the delivery of other services.

16. *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?*

Although co-location of libraries with other public services is a good solution in some situations, it is very important that it does not further disadvantage people living in rural areas. For rural communities, co-location can be used successfully to provide a library service in a rural area where it would not otherwise have been provided. However, the risk with the trend towards more co-location of services is that more services are concentrated in urban areas, to the detriment of those living in rural areas.

When decisions are taken about possible co-location of services, it is important that the needs of rural communities are identified and fully considered before the decisions are made.

17. *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? For instance: What kind of customer information should library leaders have in deciding where to locate libraries? How should Library leaders make decisions about library buildings' accessibility and fitness for purpose? How should the library service be provided in small rural communities? Are there benefits from unstaffed mini-libraries, library machines and self service check out of books? How important is it that libraries should be housed in dedicated buildings?*

It is very important that library services are tailored to meet the needs of their local communities. Library service providers need to engage with local communities to develop their services.

It is essential that the wider needs of rural communities are not overlooked. Indeed, for many rural communities, libraries have huge potential to signpost and provide access to a wide range of other services that would not otherwise be available to that community.

Although CRC would encourage library service providers to consider flexible and innovative solutions when considering the make-up of their library service, it is very important that the wider benefits of libraries (especially the potential for them to play a role in delivery of other services) are recognised. Unstaffed mini libraries, machines and self service checkout may be appropriate in some situations, but we do not consider that they are an adequate substitute for full library services in rural areas.

We do, however, welcome more flexible ways to reach rural communities. Mobile library services, such as the East Riding case study included in the consultation, are especially valuable to meet the needs of some rural communities, and offer human contact to people who might otherwise be very isolated, especially older people, or households without cars. Mobile library services offer an opportunity for other services providers to reach rural communities (for example, community police officers, a range of advisers, health services) and CRC would like to see much more cross agency and partnership working in this way. It is a wasted opportunity for a mobile library to spend 10 minutes visiting a rural community simply to lend books and DVDs. It is much better for the library service to be

linked with other services, and stop for longer, as this will help to encourage wider use and echoes the wider agenda to deliver joined up, cost effective, public services.

As stated in response to questions 11 and 12 above, it is equally important that people know what the library has to offer and when it is open. This information needs to be widely available and made accessible to those without internet access, for example, via local newspapers, notice boards and parish newsletters.

18. *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?*

CRC is not in a position to comment on this, other than to say that it is important that the needs of rural communities are identified and fully considered when developing policy in this area i.e. any proposed policy needs to be rural proofed (see page 2).

19. *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?*

CRC is not in a position to comment on this, other than to say that it is important that the needs of rural communities are identified and fully considered when developing policy in this area i.e. any proposed policy needs to be rural proofed (see page 2).

20. *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?*

CRC believes that it is important for libraries to remain a statutory obligation for local authorities. The removal of statutory obligations may result in local authorities closing rural libraries and withdrawing library services from rural communities. By their very nature, services for rural communities are likely to be the least cost effective, and therefore more vulnerable to closure or reductions in service.

However, CRC would like to see more partnership and cross agency working to deliver a range of services through libraries. We would like local authorities to regard libraries in rural areas as an opportunity for innovative, joined up service delivery, rather than simply a statutory obligation.

21. *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?*

It is very important that library services are tailored to meet the needs of their local communities. A more prescriptive approach risks becoming a "one size fits all" approach that does not allow local libraries to identify and meet the needs of their local community. This is especially important for rural communities.

However, CRC would welcome further guidance for local authorities on different ways to identify and meet the needs of rural communities. Such guidance might include, for example, ways to work jointly with other service providers to offer a range of services such as debt advice, training and housing advisers. The guidance might also explain the importance of flexible opening hours, and provision of broadband internet access.

22. *How should we measure performance? You might like to consider: Is there a need for less, more or different local or national monitoring? Are visits and books borrowed still relevant?*

What else should we consider and measure when determining the efficiency and effectiveness of our libraries? Would an accreditation scheme for libraries be beneficial or are there other systems which might incentivise libraries to deliver more effectively? Is the Secretary of State's power to intervene still appropriate?

However performance is measured, it must take account of the wider benefits of library services and access to library facilities – it is not enough to just measure numbers of visits or books borrowed. It is essential that the wider benefits to communities are recognised. For example, a library serving a predominantly rural community may appear to be performing relatively poorly in terms of lending records and number of visits, but the value to those using the service may be very high because of additional factors such as signposting and access to other public services via the library, access to internet facilities, promoting learning and access to training, etc. Any performance measurement or incentive system must reflect the importance of the wider contribution libraries can make to people living in rural areas, especially in terms of promoting access to other public services.

23. *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?*

Any such research programme needs to include research that assesses the benefits of libraries to rural communities. This should cover the wider benefits such as promoting the digital inclusion agenda, helping to tackle social isolation and exclusion, signposting and access to other services such as training and debt advice.

We suggest that DCMS should work jointly with other relevant government departments, (e.g. Defra, CLG, BIS and DWP) to initiate this research. CRC is willing to provide further advice on how the research can best assess the benefits to rural communities, if required.

The Commission for Rural Communities is interested in engaging further on this matter, and we would be willing to meet to discuss the matters outlined in this response, if that would be helpful. Please let us know if you need any further information or would like to meet to discuss the content of this response.

Yours faithfully,