

Response from Friends of Colehill Library (Dorset) to the questions contained in the

DCMS Consultation Document,,,,,
"Empower, Inform, Enrich"; The Modernisation Review of Public Libraries. (November 2009)

Consultation Questions

ROLE FOR LIBRARIES:

The Government believes that the public library service is vital to a democratic society, which offers equality of opportunity and intellectual freedom. Each local authority has a duty to provide a user responsive library service and the variety of demand across the country is currently met with a mixture of complementary services in different areas:

- **Providing books, learning, information and entertainment to customers:** All libraries provide a range of books and written material, often in a variety of formats, eg hard copy, audio, online and e-books. Most libraries also offer Music and Film material and provide computers with free internet access.
- **The library at the centre of the Community:** in many areas libraries are centres of the community, facilitating community meetings such as social groups or book clubs. Often, libraries work in partnership with other public services, providing signposts to customers or integrating health, learning, skills or education provisions.
- **The library as an education resource and proactive provider of information and learning** – In many areas libraries have a strong role in guiding customers through a morass of information, providing opportunities for education by linking to digital inclusion initiatives, improving literacy, offering reading events and providing learning opportunities within the library.

However, new challenges require new responses by libraries and give us an opportunity to consider afresh the role of public 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?

A 1

Yes, because the common purpose of all libraries must be to promote, encourage and support education, in all senses of the word, for which literacy is a fundamental and necessary condition. Libraries have been at the centre of education for thousands of years and throughout history the collapse of a significant library, or severe curtailment in the use and availability of books, has frequently led to social collapse. In spite of the modern rush into all things hi-tec, the written word remains the key to good communication and so at a time of declining literacy it is vital that we do all we can to strengthen the pivotal role played by libraries.

NATIONAL AND LOCAL LEADERSHIP

Library services are delivered by local authorities who have a large amount of flexibility around which services are delivered to the community and the allocation of funding from LA budgets. Central Government has a leadership role (the Secretary of State for Culture has a duty of oversight under the Public Libraries & Museums Act 1964) and provides funding to Local Authorities (this money is distributed by the Department for Communities & Local Government). National programmes rolled out to all libraries, such as the introduction of the People's Network, are initiated by central government.

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.

A2

Whilst the core purpose of libraries is unchanged, there is no doubt that they have evolved and expanded, particularly in recent years and accordingly, a review the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 seems long overdue. In particular, the way in which libraries are financed needs to be improved. In recent years, with increasing fiscal pressures, there has been a disturbing trend for Local Authorities to seriously consider closing, or in many cases actually to close, libraries. A library is invariably a key focal point for social development amongst all members of society and therefore provides an educational input throughout our lives.

Accordingly, financial allocations from Central Government to Local Authorities should include an element for the financing of libraries which is 'ring fenced', as it is for schools.

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?

A3

In principle, as a focal point for information in the community, the library is ideally suited for this purpose. It may be that the term 'library' itself is inhibiting. Certainly this is the case amongst many young people who see the library as a repository for 'dusty old books'. It might improve this image if libraries were referred to as 'Information Centres'. However, as far as public services are concerned, the information they provide should be essentially local and not embrace the wider field addressed by Central Government.

ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURES, GOVERNANCE AND FUNDING

Funding for libraries is provided by the Department for Communities and Local Government and policy responsibility for public libraries rests with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. However, many other departments have an interest in ensuring that libraries continue to contribute to a number of national and local government priorities – health, literacy & learning, business support and entrepreneurship, job hunting and employability, community cohesion, citizenship and digital inclusion.

Two DCMS public bodies – the Museums, Libraries & Archives Council or MLA (a strategic Non Departmental Public Body promoting best practice) and the Advisory Council on Libraries (providing strategic advice to the Secretary of State on public libraries) – support central government policy making. In addition, third sector organisations like The Reading Agency and BookTrust work with central government and libraries to deliver programmes supporting literacy and learning.

During the early stages of this review we spoke to the library authorities that are testing new and emerging governance models such as Trust structures and procurement to private companies, and those that are opening up new revenue streams, fund raising opportunities or radical efficiency measures. Case studies on these authorities are included in the final section of this document.

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? 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?

A4

It would seem that a move away from; 'structures' to 'structure', i.e. to a single body responsible for library policy, funding and support, must be beneficial. Too often, where the responsibilities are fragmented some overlap inevitably occurs which leads to confusion and delays through procrastination; 'paralysis by analysis'. Why isn't the DCMS all embracing in this respect?

Some of the ideas mentioned by Margaret Hodge are certainly worthy of consideration, but the opportunity for implementation will inevitably hinge on the library building itself; is there enough space, is it modern enough to attract the young readers, does it have easy access for all ages, is it ideally located within the community it serves, etc?

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 – eg the academy model for schools, social enterprise models or

Foundation Trusts for hospitals – be appropriate for library services?

A5

Undoubtedly lessons could be learned from the private sector in terms of promotion, customer understanding and service, delivery and funding. However, there remains a fundamental difference. The private sector is profit orientated whereas the library is not, or should certainly not be; its prime consideration is as an educational service. Too many other private sector/heavy industry methodologies have been taken on board by local authorities, such as Risk Analysis, and consequential Health and Safety Management, which when applied to relatively small enterprises result in escalating costs and virtual stagnation.

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?

A6

Partially answered in A4 and A5..The spread of Best Practice should be via an all-embracing DCMS.

DIGITAL

For libraries to remain useful and usable they must be responsive to changing circumstances. The internet revolutionises the opportunities for how libraries make their content available to the public and there is now a growing demand for 24/7 access to libraries with people wanting to access what they want, when and where they want it. The popularity of the download shows how libraries will have to adapt and the arrival of e-book readers will no doubt stimulate a market for books in new formats which libraries will have to embrace. The case study on Essex library service shows that this is already happening, that in a digital age libraries can capitalise on the opportunities available.

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? 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?

A7

This is clearly a complex question which absorbs much of the time of the private sector!

Whilst an ever increasing number of books are becoming available on line there will remain a strong demand for the 'written' word. We can already access catalogues, dictionaries, etc. on line; for what exactly is this 'growing demand for 24/7 access'?

We must never forget that there is still a significant proportion of the population, over one in five, that does not have access to the internet, and, as they have told us, "have no intention of getting it!".

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?

A8

The introduction of self-service in university libraries, where the cost of book losses can be high, and large

