



MUSEUMS LIBRARIES ARCHIVES

COUNCIL

... "raising standards, improving services ..."

27 January 2010

Rt Hon Margaret Hodge MBE MP  
Minister for Culture and Tourism  
DCMS  
2-4 Cockspur Street  
London  
SW1Y 5DH

**MLA response to *Empower, Inform, Enrich* - The modernisation review of public libraries**

As the Government's agency for libraries, we have been pleased to have been closely involved in the modernisation review.

The following notes build on the direct contributions we have made to date, including the essay published in the consultation document.

**Increasing user access: customer first**

A service which is open to all, and accessible by all, is a vital principle. The customer comes first.

All members of the public should feel welcome as customers (rather than exclusive members) of any library in the country, but a universal library card, enabling access to any book, from any library, could be offered as a right from birth and as a right for new citizens.

There needs to be greater understanding of people's attitudes to libraries, and library usage, gearing towards better local marketing and tailoring of the service. MLA recommends that funders undertake a survey of users and non-users before deciding to implement new customer strategies. The customer voice is prime.

A library service characterised by book borrowing, a strong information offer and an active events programme is vastly enhanced through better community engagement; stronger partnership working, proactive 24/7 digital resources and consciously excellent customer service. There are implications here for 'best practice' library staffing, training, development and career management.

MLA is working with ACE, SCL, TRA and other partners on a national campaign around reading in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This could appropriately modernise and rebrand the library offer, and be targeted at specific groups such as young people.

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**Museums, Libraries and Archives Council**

Wellcome Wolfson Building, 165 Queen's Gate, London SW7 5HD  
Tel: 020 7273 1444 Fax: 020 7273 1404 www.mla.gov.uk

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Registered Office: Grosvenor House, 14 Bennetts Hill,  
Birmingham B2 3RS  
Registered Charity Number: 1079666

### **Digital**

In providing free internet access and support for users, library services are at the forefront of the national ambition to bridge the digital divide and help improve digital literacy.

It is important that the principle of free access to reading and information is maintained in a digital age.

A new survey conducted by the MLA has revealed that 79 per cent of English local authorities do not charge for internet access, with an average of 762 hours available for access per week. Nearly all the surveyed local authorities (98 per cent) have digital services open in the evenings and at weekends with over half (59 per cent) open on a Sunday.

But more could be done by library services to market their 24/7 offer. Libraries need to come up to date with the ways that people, in particular young people, access information. Libraries have a role in ensuring that this information is of the highest quality. Libraries could expand their digital models of delivery including, but not limited to, automated systems of issue. The latter, when specified appropriately, offer substantial benefit to users and are also of great importance in terms of more efficient stock management and cost-effective delivery.

More significantly, as a strategic goal led nationally, there should be a national database of books and other products and services accessible by the public online.

This resource would augment the MLA's *Reference Online*, enable access to JISC resources and British Library archived newspapers and should be free of charge for public libraries.

On a particular point with respect to the important Digital Economy Bill, we are seeking clarification as to whether public libraries and archives are classified as an 'internet service provider', 'subscriber' or 'communications provider'. We have concerns that internet services provided by libraries may be restricted depending on their classification in an eventual Act. We are also working with the government to ensure licensing and copyright issues are resolved to enable shared online content for users. Public libraries, for example, would benefit from the exemptions enjoyed by the education sector regarding certain copy right rules, particularly in the area of music use.

### **The 1964 Public Libraries Act**

A catalyst to changing the way in which public library services are delivered would be a change to the 1964 Act. "Comprehensive and efficient" needs to be replaced with something focused on outcomes not outputs, and on excellence and innovation. A new libraries Act is also needed to clarify the respective roles of national and local government in determining the goals for a national "network" of libraries delivered locally.

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But a new libraries Act is not in itself enough.

There also needs to be a review of national indicators, which in any event should focus on outcomes not outputs. The key justification for investment in public libraries is the contribution they make to shaping a better society, contributing to well-being and building a strong economy.

Mechanisms for measuring and benchmarking should recognise these roles and contributions; the existing indicator sets are neither sufficiently discerning nor adequately ambitious.

### **Governance and delivery models**

The need to look at new ways in which services can be delivered most effectively and efficiently in response to individual and local needs, is becoming increasingly important in the current economic climate. A variety of models is being explored by MLA, including privatisation, public/private partnerships, trust status and community ownership.

Early evidence suggests that while there is no single template these models can result in: better leadership, more innovation, efficiency savings; the importing of new skills and expertise; a service more integrated with other parts of the local authority and locality (for example on Total Place lines); and the greater critical mass that come from working across a range of culture, community, sport and leisure services.

Partnerships can deliver some of the more exciting services on offer in libraries today – *Get it Loud in Libraries*, the new Shepherd's Bush library, *Workzone*, and the health activities delivered in conjunction with the PCT in Suffolk and Hillingdon are just some examples.

New partnerships should continue to be developed to develop greater efficiencies for all partners. Collaboration across local authority boundaries as well as with third sector and other partners should actively be encouraged. Again, this is in keeping with the Total Place approaches that are currently being piloted.

Shared delivery should be encouraged in ways that suit the community needs best. The plans for a combined public and university library in Worcester for example will improve both the skills levels and educational attainment of the community.

### **Sustainability**

Innovative governance structures and delivery models can deliver financial sustainability by supporting opportunities for grant funding, commissioning contracts, consumer enterprise, alternative forms of income, and by enabling organisations to hold unrestricted reserves. These models can free up organisations to respond and adapt to a continually evolving market without undue regulatory restriction.

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Many existing library buildings are not fit for purpose and we believe their modernisation, closure, relocation, co-location or redevelopment should be considered very carefully from a customer/user point of view, and with full community consultation along best practice guidelines. Every locality is different, but typically 'best practice' argues for a blend of 'super libraries', community libraries, 'library-link' and mobile provision.

Libraries have a specific role in place making, promoting well-being and building better communities. Therefore regeneration partners, property developers and the third sector should be included in development discussions. The library service (in conjunction with other local delivery) should be designed around the needs of the community and its demographics, rather than driven by short terms budget cuts. The MLA, with its partners in *Living Places*, has developed the Culture and Sport Planning Toolkit, which includes guidance on the tariff for development.

Workforce capacity building and innovation should be captured and shared across the country. The workforce needs to be more diverse and to have the skills to deliver appropriately tailored services to people and their local communities.

Volunteering provides an important bridge to the community – volunteers gain skills which lead to an increase in employability while library services benefits from added capacity. The MLA offers 'best practice' guidance on strategies for assimilating and developing volunteer capacities.

#### **National leadership and the challenge ahead**

Libraries need national support in raising standards and learning from the very best. The 'new MLA' (configured to support improvement services) is playing an increasingly significant and critical role in providing professional support, expert guidance and 'best practice' advice; brokering partnerships nationally and across boundaries and targeting investment.

Consideration should be given to the nature of the mandate for this range of activity by MLA.

Our current outputs are achieved through voluntary participation by local government. There are substantial practical and political advantages in this model; by contrast an 'inspectorate' role would require statutory backing.

It is not clear that there is a case or need for a public library 'inspectorate', but MLA would be happy to examine the options if invited to do so.

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Whether or not there is a statutory instrument, the nature of library services is a local matter, to be determined by local needs. The voice of the people and their communities is paramount. The MLA, acting as a development agency, can support improvement, working with national and local government to ensure a future service that is:

- tailored to the needs of people; the customer is first
- sustainable
- focused on community need rather than buildings; while ensuring buildings are fit for purpose and offer a valued and used community space;
- integrated with other partners rather than operating in stand alone silos (Total Place principles)
- embedded in its local learning infrastructure
- able to provide the 24/7 personalised service-on in line with a modern age
- a key partner in delivering local outcomes that are people-focused
- developing an active information role.

We believe there is a strong case to be made for an customer-focused library accreditation scheme which can be used to improve performance and to build public confidence. MLA already runs such a voluntary scheme for museums (1800 museums are accredited by this means) and, as a result of the agreed government strategy for archives, is working with TNA to develop one for archives which will be integrated with it. MLA would be happy to provide costings and options; we would begin with a survey of consumer expectations, examining the views of non-users and existing users.

We look forward to continuing to offer the Review our full support and engagement, in the aim of ensuring the public have the best library service possible for a modern age.