The Audit Commission promotes the best use of public money by ensuring the proper stewardship of public finances and by helping those responsible for public services to achieve economy, efficiency and effectiveness.

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Libraries are an important, valued council service, with the potential to contribute to priorities for learning, inclusion and e-government

- there were 290 million visits to libraries in 2000/01
- almost 30 per cent of the population use libraries for borrowing books or other items
- many more people visit libraries to study, use PCs and the internet, make enquiries or for community activities

But, despite growing demand for books and information (and broadly stable resources of £770 million) traditional library services are in decline

- since 1992/93 visits have fallen by 17 per cent, and loans by almost one-quarter
- twenty-three per cent fewer people are using libraries for borrowing than just three years ago

Audit Commission inspectors have found good progress in some areas...  
- libraries now have over 14,500 ICT terminals for public use – 10,000 more than five years ago
- two-thirds of inspections have found good examples of reader development work

...but core elements of the service have been neglected

- spending on books is down by one-third since 1992/93
- nine per cent fewer libraries are open for 30 or more hours per week than in 1992/93
- over one-half of library services use buildings that are poorly located or in poor condition

If the decline in use is to be reversed libraries need to rethink services from the user’s point of view

- providing more of the books and information services that people want
- improving accessibility by opening at times that suit people, sharing facilities with other services, and using the internet
- ensuring that services are easy and pleasant to use – learning, in particular, from bookshops
- building awareness among non-users of the services that libraries offer

Councils also need to make effective use of best value reviews and library plans to fundamentally challenge why and how they provide library services

- agreeing a clear vision for the future of library services – explicitly outlining the services that people can expect
- challenging working practices to increase efficiency and improve services
- building their understanding of what users and non-users want and need
- building ownership and commitment from staff and members to delivering user-focused services
- holding managers to account for the resources that they use and for delivering local and national standards

The DCMS, Welsh Assembly Government and the Audit Commission can help by improving national systems of learning and co-ordination and by holding councils to account for the delivery of improvement and standards through local plans and best value reviews.
1. Learning from Audit, Inspection and Research reports aim to pull together work from across the Audit Commission’s range of activities, and to identify key lessons for managers and policy makers. This report looks at the library services provided by councils in England and Wales. It draws on the findings of the first 36 inspections of library services, as well as a range of other research, including nationally collected statistics and findings from consultation with users and non-users of library services. It also follows up a number of key messages from the Commission’s 1997 report on library services, *Due for Renewal* (Ref. 1).

2. The report draws on a range of examples from inspection reports and other sources to identify the strengths and weaknesses of library services. It identifies how some councils are responding successfully to the challenges that library services currently face. It presents a series of recommendations for managers of library services, as well as highlighting important messages for elected members, senior council officers and national policy makers:
   - Chapter 1 looks at the key trends in library services – in particular the steady decline in the use of library services – as well as at significant external changes that library services need to respond to.
   - Chapter 2 looks at what users and non-users want from library services. It highlights four key areas for action if the decline in usage is to be reversed. It uses the findings of inspections to see how libraries currently measure up in these areas.
   - Chapter 3 looks at how councils are using best value reviews (BVRs), performance management and library plans to improve services. It identifies how libraries can effectively challenge how and why they are providing services, as well as the action needed to implement successfully the changes to services outlined in chapter 2.

3. In preparing this report the Commission has benefited from the insight and guidance of members of a study advisory group (*APPENDIX 1*). It has also been greatly assisted by the co-operation of the authorities visited. As always, responsibility for the report’s contents and conclusions rests with the Commission alone.
WHY LIBRARIES ARE IMPORTANT

4. Public libraries hold an important place in people's hearts. Unlike many of the other services that are provided by councils, they are used out of choice rather than necessity. People come to them for information, recreation and advice, rather than to settle disputes or to resolve problems. And they are popular. During 2000/01, public libraries in England and Wales received 290 million visits and loaned around 400 million books and other items. Almost 30 per cent of the population are active borrowers from libraries, while almost three-quarters of adults say that they visit a library at least once per year (Refs. 2 and 3).

5. Libraries provide a wide variety of services. These include a range of ‘traditional’ services that most libraries provide: lending books for leisure, education and information; providing books, periodicals, newspapers and other materials for reference; lending CDs, videos, etc; providing information and dealing with general enquiries; and providing space for reading and study. Most libraries also provide computing facilities for access to the internet, software (word processors, spreadsheets) and CD-ROMs. Many larger libraries also provide a number of specialist services, such as open learning training facilities, local history collections, business support, meeting rooms, music and drama collections (EXHIBIT 1, overleaf).

6. Libraries are a valued community resource and a focus for local activities and information. This role can be particularly important in areas where they are the only accessible public building or where they provide the only safe, neutral space for people to meet. Libraries have a long and proud history of promoting reading and informal education for children and adults. The value placed on libraries by the public can be measured, in part, by the controversy provoked when questions of closure arise, or, more positively, by the reaction to the opening of a number of successful ‘flagship’ libraries across the country.

7. Councils across England and Wales operate around 1,800 full-time libraries (open 30 or more hours per week) 1,600 part-time libraries and 530 mobile libraries, as well as 17,000 library facilities in institutions such as hospitals, prisons and schools. Councils spent around £770 million in 2000/01 on library services, excluding funding from the New Opportunities Fund (NOF) for the People's Network (which aims to put all libraries online by the end of 2002/03) and ICT-related training. While this represents only around 2 per cent of total council spending, it is still a substantial sum – equivalent to almost £40 per household.

---

1 The figure for loans counts renewals as extra loans (and so over estimates the number of items lent).
People use libraries for many reasons, though their core business is books and information.

Source: Institute of Public Finance (IPF) analysis of data collected via Public Library User Surveys, 2000

8. There has been growing recognition of the wider contribution that libraries can play in promoting local and national priorities:
   - social inclusion – providing books and information for excluded groups, as well as promoting access for them to council (and other) services;
   - education, including literacy and lifelong learning – ranging from reading groups and homework clubs to ‘Learn Direct’ centres and providing ‘the first rung on the ladder’ to adult education;
   - e-government – through public access to the internet via the People’s Network or developing website access to their own, and other, services and information;
   - community regeneration – taking advantage of their local profile to use libraries as a focus for regeneration work; and,
   - local cultural strategies – promoting and developing local cultural work, (for example, providing exhibition space, co-ordination of the digitization of local information).
CHANGES TO THE LIBRARY SERVICE

9. Over the last ten years there have been significant changes in the way that library services are provided and resourced. Total resources, excluding earmarked funding, have remained broadly stable – rising slightly in the early 1990s, before falling back (EXHIBIT 2). However, there has been an increase in the proportion of funding raised locally through fees, charges and other grants – up from 6 per cent of total funding in 1992/93 to 10 per cent in 2000/01. There has also been an increase in time-limited and bid-based funding – in particular, the New Opportunities Fund for the People’s Network and ICT-related training (with total funding for English and Welsh councils of around £100 million between 2000/01 and 2002/03).

10. While total resources fluctuated during the 1990s, the more significant change has been in how the money is spent. There has been a large fall in spending on books and periodicals, from £118 million in 1990/91 (adjusted for inflation) to £80 million in 2000/01 – or from 15 per cent to 10 per cent of total library service spending. As a result, libraries have significantly fewer books than they had ten years ago, and those that they do have are, on average, older. Although staff numbers have fallen over the last ten years by around 10 per cent, costs per member of staff have increased in real terms, and hence total spending on staff has increased slightly.

EXHIBIT 2 Spending on library services (adjusted for inflation, excluding NOF)

During the early 1990s total spending, adjusted for inflation, rose by 4 per cent, while during the late 1990s it fell back to its earlier level.

Note: Due to accounting changes relating to premises and capital in 1995/96, figures are not directly comparable before and after this year.

Source: Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) – Public Library Actuals 1990/91-2000/01
11. The level of service provision has also been cut – nine per cent fewer libraries are open for 30 or more hours per week than in 1992/93; there are 8 per cent fewer mobile libraries; and 7 per cent fewer libraries in total (EXHIBIT 3).

12. On the other hand, the provision of ICT services in libraries has increased significantly (EXHIBIT 4). The public now have access to over 14,500 ICT terminals in council libraries, up from 4,500 in 1995/96 – providing access to the internet, CD-ROMs, databases, local information, training materials and other software such as word processors and spreadsheets. Provision of audio-visual materials, although small compared to books, has also increased significantly. Libraries also increased the amount of space that is available for study (by one-half between 1994/95 and 1997/98, when they stopped collecting this information).

13. There has been an increasing focus on ‘reader development’ work, with a range of local and national schemes designed to promote reading and library use. These have included schemes such as ‘BookStart’, aimed at families with young children and babies; ‘Branching Out’, which has included schemes to promote world literature, science fiction, gay and lesbian literature; schemes to introduce older people to the internet; as well as a wide range of local schemes promoting reading to different groups.

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**EXHIBIT 3 Trends in provision**

Provision of library services has steadily declined over the last 10 years.

---

Source: CIPFA Public Library Actuals
14. There have also been changes in how libraries manage themselves. Councils have wide discretion over how they go about providing library services. The 1964 Public Libraries and Museums Act simply states that library authorities I should provide a ‘comprehensive and efficient library service for all persons desiring to make use thereof, and for that purpose to employ such officers, to provide and maintain such buildings and equipment, and such books and other material, and to do other things, as may be appropriate’ (Ref. 4). As a result there are wide variations in the amount different councils spend on library services and in how well library services are used (EXHIBIT 5, overleaf). In an attempt to tackle these variations the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and the Welsh Assembly Government have introduced: II

- requirements for councils to submit annual plans: Annual Library Plans, introduced by the DCMS in 1998; and, Library Plans, introduced by the Welsh Assembly Government, in 2002; and
- national standards for service delivery and performance, with targets to be reached by 2003/04 in England, by 2005/06 in Wales (see Appendix 2 for details).

I Those councils charged with running library services: London Boroughs, Metropolitan Councils, English and Welsh Unitary Councils and County Councils.

II As well as other concerns about the management of library services as expressed, for example, in Due For Renewal (Ref. 1).
EXHIBIT 5 Variations in Spending and visits (per head)

There are threefold variations both in how much different councils spend on library services and in library usage.

**Expenditure per head of population (£)**

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**Visits per head of population**

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<tr>
<th>Council type (average)</th>
<th>Counties (5.7)</th>
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<th>Metropolitan (4.9)</th>
<th>Unitaries (3.0)</th>
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Source: CIPFA 2000/01 Public Library Actuals, excluding Corporation of London

**OTHER CHANGES AND PRESSURES**

15. There have also been significant wider changes relevant to library services. People are increasingly choosing to buy their own books – with consumer book sales up by around one-quarter in real terms in the last ten years ([Ref. 5](#)). Libraries have thus faced increasing competition from bookshops which have responded to (and encouraged) the public’s rising expectations by extending opening hours, improving layouts, and increasing their ranges of books and other services. The end of the Net Book Agreement has enabled bookshops and other retailers (including supermarkets and internet booksellers) to adopt more aggressive pricing strategies, while publishers have invested significant sums in book design to make them desirable to own. In a wider sense, libraries are also competing with an increasing range of other services and activities for people’s leisure time.

16. The internet provides both an opportunity and a potential threat to library services. The introduction of internet facilities in libraries has proved to be popular with many users, while the internet itself enables libraries to offer 24-hour access to information and other services, such as renewals and reservations. It also presents an opportunity for libraries to help people navigate and make best use of online information. However, the internet is also competing directly with libraries as a source of reference information and leisure as an increasing number of people get internet access at home.

17. Communities, too, are changing. Shopping patterns have shifted as people and businesses have moved out of smaller town and village centres, leaving some library buildings isolated. Demographic changes have meant that many libraries are now serving very different communities (in terms of age, ethnicity, interests) than they were even a few years ago.
CHANGES IN USE

18. But, while demand for books and information has increased, use of libraries is in steady decline. Visits to libraries have fallen by around 2 per cent every year since 1993/94, with total visits down by 65 million to 288 million (EXHIBIT 6) – far short of the targets set in national standards, equivalent to 352 million visits per year.¹ Loans of books and other materials have fallen by almost one-quarter since 1993/94 – a trend which, if continued, would reach zero in around 20 years’ time.

19. The proportion of the population who are ‘active borrowers’, people who have borrowed items in the last year, has also fallen significantly, from 37 per cent in 1997/98 to 29 per cent in 2000/01. At the same time, user surveys show a decrease in the proportion of users aged under 55 – with some library services having less than one-half of their users in this age band.²

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¹ As library websites become more established, the opportunity to make ‘virtual visits’ to reserve or renew books becomes possible. While this should not impact on the reliability of the loans figures it may have some impact on the count of ‘visits’ (although, in most cases, users still have to come in to collect and return the loan).

² Forty per cent of councils currently have some such facilities (including many introduced in the last year) (Ref. 6). ‘Equivalent visits target’ based on targets set for different types of council.

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EXHIBIT 6 Trends in usage and user profile

There has been a steady decline in library usage over the last 10 years, and libraries are becoming increasingly reliant on older users.

---

Source: IPF Analysis, CIPFA Public Library Actuals, [Note: percentage of people over 55: 27 per cent England, 28 per cent Wales]
What factors are behind these falls? The most common reasons for visiting libraries are to borrow, return and browse for books. At a national level, the downward trends in book-stocks and opening hours, and in visits and loans, support a link between these key ‘inputs’ and ‘outputs’ of the service – although to get a fuller picture of the relative importance of these among the other changes it is necessary to look in more detail at what people say they want from library services (covered in the next chapter).

CONCLUSIONS

Library services remain one of the most valued and high profile services that councils provide. But they are a service under pressure. While the Government is expecting them to deliver more, libraries are having to compete with an increasing range of alternatives to their services – in particular, bookshops and the internet. Spending on library books and access to services have been cut significantly. Most important, usage of public libraries is in slow but steady decline, with libraries becoming increasingly reliant on their older users. With resources remaining broadly stable, this means that the productivity of library services has also fallen – the average cost per visit has risen 18 per cent over the last seven years, to over £2.60 (not far short of the cost of buying many books).

Best value challenges councils to think radically about the future provision of services. It also provides an important opportunity for them to respond to these changes. The next chapter looks behind the fall in use, to what users and non-users say they want from library services. It examines how far this fall links to cuts in book funds and opening hours, as well as the role of other factors, such as competition from bookshops. It goes on to use the findings of Audit Commission inspections to highlight how services need to improve if this decline is to be reversed.
Chapter 1 outlined the key changes that have taken place in and around library services over the last ten years. This chapter looks behind these trends to identify how changes in services, changes in attitudes and increasing competition have affected the use of public libraries. It starts by asking what people want from their library services – drawing on the results of quantitative and qualitative consultation with users and non-users. It goes on to investigate how services measure up to these expectations, drawing on the finding of the first 36 inspections of library services.¹

### WHAT DO PEOPLE WANT FROM THEIR LIBRARY SERVICE?

The trends identified in the previous chapter suggest a link between levels of stock and opening hours, and levels of visits and loans. However, while total stock levels and opening hours are clearly important, they do not tell the whole story. Firstly, these figures measure only the volume of books and opening hours, not their quality: the condition, popularity or age of books; the fit between opening hours and local demand. More important, they do not take account of the effects of changes in attitudes and competition. For example, it could be argued that because some library users have chosen to buy books, as they prefer to own them, demand for library services has fallen, and in response book funds and opening hours have been cut (rather than the other way around). In order to understand these issues it is necessary to ask:

- What do current users think of library services? What would encourage them to use libraries more?
- What do non-users think of library services? Why have some people stopped using libraries? Why do some choose not to use them at all?

### MESSAGES FROM CURRENT USERS

Most library services have a history of measuring user satisfaction through surveys. The results paint a picture of users who are broadly satisfied with the service that they are getting, with around 70 per cent giving an overall rating of ‘satisfied’ or better – a higher rating than most other council services (Ref. 8). The proportion of users rating elements of service as ‘good’ or ‘very good’ are also high: 96 per cent for staff helpfulness, 81 per cent for opening hours, 69 per cent for range of books available (Ref. 3).

¹ Thirty-three of these reviews have focused on the whole library service; two have looked at parts of it, and one was a review of cultural services, which covered library services in some detail. The reports can be downloaded from www.audit-commission.gov.uk
26. However, high satisfaction ratings among current users do not on their own necessarily mean that the service is good. Comparisons of levels of service, such as opening hours or lending stock, with related satisfaction levels show some link, but also that user satisfaction levels can be high even in services with low levels of access and provision (EXHIBIT 7). The fact that those being asked are using the service means that they are able to access the service and do want the books, and other services, on offer. Conversely, people that either cannot, or have chosen not to use library services may be significantly less satisfied. Similarly, high satisfaction levels may reflect user loyalty, and their desire to protect their service from cuts, rather than service quality (for example, one council’s BVR concluded that ‘users saw comment cards as a way of trying to protect their library’).

27. While the results of satisfaction surveys should be interpreted with care, many councils make effective use of such data, for example, to track local trends over time, to compare performance between branches or to evaluate the success of initiatives. Most importantly such data can help to identify the sort of people who are using their services – and hence who is not.

28. To identify areas of dissatisfaction and to find out what would encourage current users to visit libraries more, councils need to probe and test users’ views in more detail. Many councils have carried out such exercises, either as part of BVRs or in other elements of service planning. As part of this study, the Audit Commission asked MORI to put together the results of recent consultation exercises with library users (and non-users, discussed below). While there were differences between councils, the concerns raised by users can be grouped into four key areas (EXHIBIT 8). Further, when users are asked to prioritise among these four, a consistent picture emerges of their top two concerns: first, to increase the quality and range of books available; and second, to improve the accessibility of services through better opening hours or more convenient locations.

---

1 The report from MORI, Perceptions of Libraries, is available from the Audit Commission’s website, at www.audit-commission.gov.uk (Ref. 2).
**EXHIBIT 8 User and non-user views of libraries**

Users and non-users share many concerns, although non-users want to see more radical changes in the way that libraries operate.

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<th>USER VIEWS</th>
<th>NON-USER VIEWS</th>
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<td>&quot;Update the books they have. More choice with books. More copies of popular books as I have tried to get a certain book a few times and it has been lent out already.&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;I think the priority has to be on the books... a library at the end of the day is there for books.&quot;</td>
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<td>&quot;The computers they have are out-dated. They have no real computer access in the ones I visit, or many CDs. The range of educational books is also poor.&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;They never have new [books] or up to date ones in the library, and the ones that are there, they are a bit kind of twee, and you think they have been chosen by the librarians.&quot;*</td>
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<tr>
<th>ACCESSIBILITY: OPENING TIMES, LOCATION, PHYSICAL ACCESS</th>
<th>IMPROVING THE EXPERIENCE: CUSTOMER SERVICE, ENVIRONMENT, DISPLAY</th>
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<td>&quot;[The] opening times are OK now that I'm semi-retired, but difficult when I was working full time.&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;...If I take my two year old in there she is not quiet and I think &quot;get her out quick or I will have everybody moaning.&quot; So I would not take her in there because it is hard to keep her quiet.&quot;*</td>
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<td>&quot;Every day the opening hours change, we have to constantly remind our kids about the opening and closing times.&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;I do think that too many libraries and particularly ones that I've been in, the librarians have made it quite clear that they know everything and we know b**** all.&quot;*</td>
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<td>&quot;Like if you want to make a reservation, instead of actually having to go there, you access the database to see if they've got the books. That would be absolutely brilliant.&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;Well it would be nice if we could choose a book and depending on if you have got children go to one part of the library and if you are by yourself go to another part of the library and sit down in a nice easy chair with a cup of coffee or a cup of tea.&quot;*</td>
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<th>RAISING AWARENESS</th>
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<td>&quot;It's a publicity issue isn't it? You forget about the library. People forget that it exists as a public service. There is no advertising.&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;...communications and marketing. Libraries just seem alien really... they need to make them more appealing. People need to know what they have to offer and how have been improved.&quot;</td>
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*quote from lapsed user (that is, someone who has used library services in the past), other non-user quotes are from people who have not used the service at all, or not since they were at school.

Source: MORI (Ref. 2)/BVR Documentation
MESSAGES FROM NON-USERS

29. To reverse the decline in usage, library services also have to understand why people have stopped using their services (lapsed) and why some people choose not to use them at all. Three common issues come up: ‘Too busy’; ‘Not interested’; and, ‘Prefer to buy books’. These are far more fundamental concerns, related to peoples’ lifestyles and broader attitudes to the service. As MORI concluded when putting the results of these consultation exercises together...

‘Lapsed-users are more likely to say that they do not have the time to go to libraries anymore or do not feel the need to go (for example, having left school); whereas non-users are more likely to say they have no interest at all in going to a library – they tend not to read or have other ways of spending their leisure time.

The principal reasons why non-users do not use libraries are to do with lifestyle issues – not interested/not got time – and these will be difficult to address. It needs to be recognised that there is a significant minority of non-users who feel they will never use libraries in the future. In a study in a County Council, for example, over one-quarter of non-users said nothing would persuade them to use libraries.

However, there still remains a large number of non-users who could be attracted to using libraries – though this is likely to require some radical changes. People say they want libraries to be modern and welcoming. Raising awareness of what is available, having up-to-date stock, additional facilities, providing more information and extending opening hours may have some effect on increasing usage, and should increase satisfaction among users.’ (Ref. 2)

30. But while non-users are demanding more fundamental changes than users, their concerns can still be seen to fall into the same four categories:

- providing the books and services people want (in stock, or available fast)...
- ...at times that suit them (including weekends and evenings), in convenient locations (including via the internet)...
- ...in more welcoming and pleasant environments (with better customer service; improved library environments; with access to additional services such as coffee shops where appropriate)...
- ...with improved marketing of the range of services that libraries have to offer.

31. A particularly important message that emerges from consultation with non-users is that they are comparing libraries with their experiences of bookshops – and bookshops are coming out better. Many non-users report that bookshops provide a better range of books, in the formats that they want, better displayed (and so easier to find), with better customer service, and with more helpful staff. Research has shown that libraries and bookshops can be mutually supportive and complementary – sharing many of the same users and both supporting and encouraging reading (Refs. 9 and 10). However, national trends in book sales and library loans, alongside the results of consultation, suggest that many people have switched from borrowing to buying books. If library services are to remain comprehensive, they need to respond to this challenge.
HOW USER-FOCUSED ARE LIBRARY SERVICES?

32. Each Audit Commission inspection produces a ‘quality of service’ score and a measurement of the ‘likelihood of improvement’, as well a report on its findings. To date the Audit Commission has published 36 library inspection reports. Of these, 41 per cent have judged the service as either ‘good’ or ‘excellent’, 53 per cent have been judged as ‘likely to’ or ‘will’ improve (EXHIBIT 9). Broadly this is similar to other service areas (although it is encouraging that more library services have been judged as ‘excellent’ than many other service areas).

EXHIBIT 9 Overview of inspection scores to date

Forty-one per cent of library services have been assessed as good or excellent, 53 per cent as will, or likely to improve.

Source: Audit Commission Inspection Service (36 reports)
This section looks at the findings of inspections, as well as other research, in the light of the priorities that emerge from consultation with the public. A key aim of inspection is to assess services from a user’s point of view. Hence, as part of the inspection process, inspectors meet users, visit libraries and carry out ‘reality checks’ – looking for specific books, making test enquiries, etc. Analysis of inspection reports identifies areas of strength (where inspectors have made positive comments about the service) and weakness (the areas where inspection has focused its criticisms and recommendations) against the four key areas highlighted during consultation (EXHIBIT 10). Examples of good practice that are identified in the text are collected in the checklist at the end of the chapter.

### EXHIBIT 10 Inspection findings: positive and negative comments on service quality

Inspectors have identified a range of strengths and weaknesses in terms of how well services measure up to the expectations of users and non-users.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Percentage with negative comments</th>
<th>Percentage with positive comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learning/literacy/reading projects</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet for public use</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Other’ language/multicultural service</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delivery of other council services/information</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective use of stock</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range of stock (books, etc.)</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of IT to deliver service</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geographically well placed</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical access to buildings</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joint use with other services</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opening hours</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff helpful/knowledgeable</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment (comfort, signs, condition)</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer care</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal signage</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Usable space (study/lounge areas...)</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External signage &amp; leaflets</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promotion/marketing</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Bars show the percentage of inspection reports with positive/negative comments about the issues listed. Bars do not sum to 100 per cent where the issue was outside the scope of the BVR, where it was not covered in the inspection report or where inspection comments were neutral.

Source: Audit Commission
AVAILABILITY OF BOOKS & INFORMATION SERVICES

34. Books and information are the heart of a good library service. However, there are wide variations in how well different library services are providing them. User surveys show that only 59 per cent of visitors who come to libraries for a specific book are able to find it. In part this may reflect poor signage or shelf marking, but this figure also raises the question of whether libraries are stocking enough copies of the books that people want. While inspectors have found that the majority of councils are providing a good range of materials for some specific target groups (including Welsh speakers, minority ethnic groups and people with disabilities) 56 per cent of inspectors have raised concerns over the quality, condition and range of stock available to users in general.

35. To get a clear picture of the range of books that is available many inspections have made use of a ‘stock assessment tool’, which looks at the availability of adult fiction across 40 categories. Inspectors have found that most councils provide a good range of stock in areas such as ‘sagas/romances’, ‘new blockbusters’ and ‘crime TV tie-ins’ However, they have also concluded that many councils are neglecting a wide range of material which has been shown, when well promoted, to have widespread appeal, such as cult and fantasy fiction, 20th century American and world fiction and 20th century classics. Inspectors have also found that many library services’ stock are significantly biased towards older people, and hence unlikely to attract other potential users – understandable in meeting the needs of current users, but perhaps accelerating the overall decline in use.

36. It is also questionable whether libraries are buying enough copies of popular titles. Analysis of online catalogues for ten councils, looking at the availability of a selection of 2001 best-sellers, showed a wide variation between councils and between different titles, in how many copies were stocked – with some popular titles only stocked in very limited numbers (if at all). Demand for many of these titles was high – with 75 per cent of the stock out on loan at a time. As a result, the chance of finding a particular recent bestseller on the shelf of a particular library was often below 10 per cent.

37. The availability of books depends significantly on the level of local funds for purchasing books. These vary across England and Wales from less than £1 per head per year to over £2.50, and between 5 per cent and 20 per cent of library funding. In some councils visited, including one which spent only 5 per cent of its budget on books, 30 to 40 per cent of the book stock has been classified by the councils as worn out or out of date. Inspectors have also found that one-third of councils could make better use of their existing stock by managing it more effectively – for example, weeding stock that is ‘elderly, shoddy and not borrowed for some years’ (as described by one inspector) or by getting new books on the shelves quicker – one inspection found that it took the council three months to get newly published books available for loan.

I A sample output from this tool, which was commissioned from Opening the Book Ltd, is included in Appendix 3.

II Including ‘Atonement’ by Ian McEwan, ‘No Logo’ by Naomi Klein, ‘Learning to Fly’ by Victoria Beckham and ‘The Universe in a Nutshell’ by Prof. Stephen Hawking – see Appendix 3 for details.

III Stock management is discussed further in Chapter 3, as well as in the Commission’s report Due for Renewal (Ref. 1).
38. Libraries have a better record in the provision of information and other community facilities. Inspectors have been impressed with the progress that library services have made in introducing ICT services, in particular by the implementation of the People’s Network, and the support many libraries give to people who are learning to use the internet. They have also found that many are good at dealing with general information inquiries. User surveys show that 76 per cent of people who visit libraries to obtain information are able to find what they want (from reference material, enquiries to staff, etc.). Many library services provide good access to information on council services, and some are developing the potential of libraries to meet wider community needs (BOX A).

39. For a library service to be fully effective it needs to balance the needs of a wide range of different groups for books and information, as well as providing good access to the books that people want and expect them to provide. While inspection has found that many perform poorly in this key area, some have both maintained their book funds, despite budget pressures, and provided good access to information (CASE STUDY 1). (The next chapter looks in more detail at the policy decisions that underlie these choices).

**BOX A Providing access to council information and other services**

**Wandsworth** libraries are serving as a gateway to other council services and further information for citizens. Social Services and Housing Helplines are available at all libraries in Wandsworth. Travel permits are issued at nine branches. Local people are able to pay their council tax and rents at ‘handitills’ in three libraries. The council is also participating in the Government’s Information and Guidance Partnership, which provides information about adult learning and employment opportunities.

**Denbighshire** is developing its libraries to act as focal points for community activity and information – providing community notice boards, space for voluntary groups, health workers, MPs and councillor surgeries and community policing, as well as access to housing, social services and planning information and services.

**Gateshead’s** libraries are working with partner organisations to provide accessible information for vulnerable groups, including ‘Beyond 2000 – accessible information’, with the Department of Health; ‘Accessible Health Information for Deaf People’ as part of Health Action Zone work; and the ‘Breast Cancer Information Project’ – part of a Single Regeneration Budget project. The service uses ICT to enable access for people with sensory impairments, including: Internet and CD-ROMs for blind and visually impaired users; video conferencing in sign language for deaf people and scanning facilities to enhance access to printed documents.

*Source: Audit Commission inspection reports*
CASE STUDY 1  Sutton – Delivering the books and information that people want

Sutton council has shown a clear commitment to delivering a good core service. Their spending on books and other materials is in the upper quartile for a London borough, and has been maintained despite budget pressures. The stock is well presented – with facilities for users to record their comments on ‘reader choice’ cards and regular weeding and tidying of shelves to remove out-of-date or poor condition stock – which, when introduced, significantly increased the proportion of users who were able to find the book that they wanted.

Sutton provides a good range of materials for different ethnic groups, sharing expertise and materials with two other London boroughs. The service works closely with local groups of disabled people to identify and meet the need for other specialist materials.

It has made good progress in implementing the People’s Network, with ICT and internet facilities in all of its library buildings. The Sutton Council Information Points (SCIP) system provides access to a wide range of information about council departments, as well as information on local clubs and activities. It has developed a 24-hour reference library to provide access to library information databases via the internet.

Source: Site visit and Audit Commission inspection report

ACCESSIBILITY: OPENING TIMES, LOCATION, PHYSICAL ACCESS

40. Over one-half of inspection reports have made negative comments about library opening times. Most often these concerns link to the impact of cuts in opening hours on the accessibility of services or the failure of BVRs to properly consider evening or weekend opening. In other cases, inspectors have questioned whether the design of opening times is user-focused – for example, where libraries are closed at lunchtimes (which was the case at six of the nine libraries in one London borough) or where opening hours are complicated, and difficult to remember. Even where positive comments are made about opening hours, they are often based only on the views expressed by existing users. However, some councils have used BVRs as an opportunity to rethink, in consultation with local people, where and when services are accessed (BOX B).

BOX B  Improving opening times

When Bedfordshire piloted Sunday opening hours, there was positive take-up of the service, and evidence indicates that the pilot met its aim of increasing usage by families. Management worked with the union and staff to agree a way to provide extended hours and to deal with staff concerns about Sunday opening. To improve access beyond opening hours, Bedfordshire introduced ‘Callpoint’, a single-point telephone renewal service, which is open from 7am to midnight every day.

The inspection of Hammersmith and Fulham’s library service commended all involved for ‘putting customers first’. A major reorganisation of staff resources, roles and responsibilities resulted in more flexible working patterns and money being released to fund new library assistants and a pool of supply staff – achieving a considerable extension to opening hours without increasing the number of staff.

Barnet libraries have increased the accessibility of individual branches by extending opening hours: 30 per cent of opening hours are outside normal office hours, with three libraries already open on Sundays and a programme in place to extend this. This ties in with the main service objective to ensure that it links in with local patterns of work, recreational and retailing activity. The library service have also introduces ‘drop-boxes’ for the return of items when libraries are closed.

Source: Audit Commission inspection reports
41. Inspectors have also commented on the poor location of some libraries in around one-third of councils – particularly where local demographic changes have left libraries far from the communities that they were built to serve, or where lack of parking or local transport acts as a barrier to access. They have also found that over one-third of councils have libraries that are difficult to access for people with some disabilities.

42. Some have successfully tackled these issues by taking advantage of opportunities for joint-use of buildings with other services. This has enabled them to address poor location issues at low cost, extend opening hours efficiently, raise awareness, as well as promote the library’s role as a focus of community activity. For example, Hounslow plans to relocate its Beavers Estate library from a small Portakabin in poor condition to a new building which will also be the SureStart Centre, Middlesbrough has introduced Sunday opening at the Rainbow library as a result of sharing facilities with a leisure centre. Staffordshire’s library service has taken a range of steps to increase the accessibility of their services, including the successful introduction of shared facilities, and has seen a significant impact on visits at many sites (CASE STUDY 2).

CASE STUDY 2  Staffordshire – Improving access to library services

Staffordshire’s library service has had historically poor performance for a number of years, with low visitor numbers, neglected buildings, a book fund that had suffered significant cuts, uneven provision across the county and many buildings in poor locations and/or in poor condition. In 1998 Staffordshire introduced its ‘Library Vision’, which called for a radical reshaping of how services were provided. Central to this strategy was looking innovatively and creatively, in partnership with local people and other partners, at how access could be improved:

- Accessibility in Cheadle was improved by relocating the library from the edge of the town into a vacant shop in the town centre, Cheadle Councils Connect shared with a one-stop shop operated in partnership with Staffordshire Moorlands District Council. Over 1000 new members joined in the five months following the move, visits have more than trebled and issues are up almost 40 per cent.

- Mobile library routes, which had not been significantly revised for 20 years, were redesigned by mapping routes against the needs of local populations – identifying, for example, the need to better serve deprived urban areas, the potential to send mobile libraries to business parks, and the need for smaller mobile vehicles to reach isolated areas. By targeting and promoting these services well, membership has been boosted – particularly among teenagers.

- New collection/drop-off points have been introduced across the county, more than doubling the number of locations where services can be accessed, and making mobile library users less dependent of the service's timetable.

- An online catalogue has been introduced to enable people to reserve and renew books and other items from home.

- In order to better meet the needs of local people, Saturday, Sunday and evening opening have been introduced or extended at a number of sites, as have morning ‘lobby services’, set up to enable people to return, renew and reserve items on their way to work.

- Within libraries, accessibility has been improved by introducing ‘fast track’ areas for popular items, weeding out old stock and boosting the book fund.

- Planned improvements to library services in Wilnecote aim to relocate from an unsuitable building with poor disabled access to a new Arts Centre shared with a local High School.

- Wombourne’s library is too small for the community it serves, and is looking to relocate to an extension of the local youth centre, fully equipped with a shared internet facility in a scheme part-funded by the local parish council.
These changes have been introduced as the part of a rolling program which the council aims to complete by 2004, funded, in part, by new money, but also by the resources generated through savings and selling unsuitable buildings. These changes to have had significant impact on usage of libraries, with visits and loans up between 5 and 30 per cent in many cases (and in one case by 250 per cent). Local community partnerships are a key part of the work being carried out under the Library Vision – in Shenstone an underused library has been improved by a group of local people led by a local elected member and with support of the local staff. There are 29 such groups across the county ensuring that local people are engaged in the support and improvement of their library service.

Source: Audit Commission Inspection report, site visit

43. Many councils have identified the potential of the internet to extend access to services, with 62 councils currently offering online catalogues and giving people access to reservations, renewals, and other facilities (such as ‘email your librarian a question’) at home. Other councils have looked at the way that services are organised to see how barriers to use can be removed (BOX C).

**BOX C Removing other barriers to access**

Norfolk County Council abolished charges for damage to young children’s picture books when it found that fear of these charges was stopping local parents using their services.

Hounslow has a policy of making no charge for reservation of books that are held within its own libraries. This has opened up the stock of all libraries to all users.

Sheffield libraries run the ‘flying lap-tops’ project. This programme provides the loan of a lap-top computer so that housebound readers can learn to use the internet.

Derbyshire County Council is promoting better access to information for rural users. There is a clear policy on the level of reference materials to be made available from the largest library to mobiles, and the library service has also introduced internet facilities on its mobile libraries.

In Cardiff, users can now return books to any library. People are using the central library for its wider selection of stock, but can return books to their local branches for convenience. Fines have also been redesigned, to make them less punitive and more geared towards encouraging the earlier return of overdue items. Children’s fines have been completely removed.

Source: Audit Commission inspection reports, site visits
The barriers that stop or discourage people from using library services extend beyond the practical issues discussed above. Libraries should be pleasant, enjoyable and welcoming places and the services that they provide should be easy to use. But one-third of inspection reports have commented on the poor internal environment or condition of library buildings, while the views of users and non-users show that many services are falling short in this area.

BVRs provide an opportunity to look at services from the users’ point of view, and remodel them to improve the user experience. Even simple changes can have a real impact, for example, improving internal signage or using attractive ‘bookshop style’ displays. A number of councils now shelve reference and lending books together so that users do not have to search in two places. Some also include related videos and tapes in themed sections (so that someone going on holiday can look at guide books, travel writing and travel videos together) while others have introduced themed sections to reflect local interests.

Though existing users are often complementary about staff behavior, non-users see library staff as old-fashioned, intimidating and ‘more interested in the books than the people’. One inspector found some staff to have an approach that was ‘rather formal and could have been daunting to the reluctant caller’ and on one occasion found staff ‘quite curt, suggesting we phone a larger library, but did not offer a phone number’. Customer care training can help to address these issues, particularly where role play is used to confront staff with how their systems look from outside (for example, comparing reserving a book in a library with ordering one in a bookshop). However, these problems also demonstrate the need for councils to look more broadly at staff attitudes to users (discussed in the next chapter).

The atmosphere and general layout of libraries can also create barriers. Older libraries, in particular, can be intimidating for some people to use – with ‘official looking’ facades, imposing issue desks (with some users reporting that they feel ‘watched’), formal layouts and uncomfortable furniture. A number of libraries are trying to make their environment more inviting by introducing lounge areas, coffee shop franchises and by replacing turnstiles with electronic counters. More recently, some have introduced self-issue systems where users can check out books for themselves. This helps to deal with a number of barriers: getting rid of desks, cutting queues, overcoming the embarrassment that some people feel when getting out books that they think the librarian will disapprove of, and freeing staff from their desks to ‘floor-walk’, offering informal advice and help to users (CASE STUDY 3).

Other environmental or cultural barriers may be particularly relevant to specific groups. Consultation with young people has found that they see libraries as too quiet and formal – leading some library services to experiment with playing music to see if this helps. Similarly, families worry about whether their children will be too noisy – which some services have addressed either by using separate rooms, or by specifying certain times as ‘family times’ (so that other users will be aware that there may be more noise than usual). Consultation with ethnic minority groups shows that providing a good service extends beyond providing materials in different languages to include the way in which people are treated. In response to this some authorities have tried to recruit more representative staff or have made use of cultural awareness training.
CASE STUDY 3 Norfolk – Building services around the user

The opening of the Norfolk and Norwich Millennium Library, as well as its BVR, gave Norfolk’s Library Service an important opportunity to redesign services to better meet user needs, and address their historical poor visitor numbers.

The Millennium Library is clearly set out, with areas for study, children, local history, business information, and so on. It includes a special ‘express’ service in the lobby of the building, designed and stocked to be easy and attractive to use. This area is open until 10:30pm every night and is stocked with a wide range of paperback books (including bestsellers and popular classics) in ‘bookshop style’ displays, with themed areas (for example, for books for teenagers). The express area also contains specially designed internet terminals, that can only be used standing up, to give users quick access to the internet, while discouraging people from ‘hogging’ the machines.

The experience of using the building has been designed with the user in mind. For example, the children’s library was designed in consultation with local children, with low bookshelves, a play/reading area, ‘rummage boxes’ for picture books and mobile bookshelves that can be moved to make way for activities and events. Interactive touch-screen help points have been designed by staff to make it as easy as possible for users to get answers to commonly asked questions. The facility for users to check out books themselves via a self-issue system is central to the design of the service – and, rather than stay behind desks, staff are encouraged to come out into the library to offer assistance and advice to users.

While some of these changes were only made possible by the rebuilding of the main library, many of these ideas have also been used in local branch libraries.

The Millennium Library received 500,000 visits in the first 4.5 months after opening in November 2001 (against an annual target of 1.2 million). Since the start at 2001 visitor numbers across Norfolk have increased by 11.5 per cent – and by 15 per cent since the Millennium Library opened.

Source: Audit Commission Inspection report, site visit

RAISING AWARENESS

49. If people are to get the best from library services then they need to be aware of what is on offer. Inspectors have found many examples where this awareness is lacking, for example:

- users not aware that they can use any branch to borrow or return items;
- no publicity in branch libraries about central stocks of materials for minorities;
- one BVR concluded that ‘knowledge of [our home delivery] service depends on serendipity rather than any criteria that would ensure equality of access’;
- only existing users attended a reading group set up by one library specifically to encourage new users to join; and,
- lack of awareness of library opening times or mobile library timetables.

50. Most library services do have a good record in other aspects of promotion, through outreach work targeted at specific communities or reader development schemes (for example, summer holiday reading schemes, distributing ‘Bookstart’ packs to new parents when they attend health checks and schemes to encourage older users to use the internet). However, as one inspector concluded ‘although there is promotional outreach work occurring... there is not a co-ordinated or planned approach to promoting the service to non-users’.
Much of the promotional work that is undertaken by library services takes place in library buildings (posters, leaflets, displays, etc.) and is only seen by current users. Inspectors have found only limited examples of libraries publicising their facilities to the wider public – such as in Luton, where posters targeted at teenagers were produced in partnership with local cinemas. Two-thirds of inspections recommended that libraries adopt clear strategies for marketing their services to non-users – with many commenting that they could make a start by improving the provision of leaflets and signs outside library buildings themselves. Some councils have gone further and recruited staff with specialist marketing or promotional experiences to address what many library services acknowledge is a key weakness.

Many people visit libraries but are not regular users, for example, to make enquiries or use the toilets. These visits provide an important opportunity to introduce people to the service and show what it has to offer them (for example, Gateshead library service encourages people who come in to use the internet to become library members). Libraries need to ensure that they make a good first impression on such users by introducing the sorts of changes outlined in the section above (for example, by using professional-looking displays rather than hastily put together clip-art). They need to overcome the common view that they do not stock the books that people want. This is not just about stocking more of such items: it is also about how they display and manage existing stock.

It is inevitable that new bestsellers will be on loan much of the time, while the stock on the shelves will be older and less popular. To overcome this, some libraries display newer and more popular books prominently when they are available, use publicity materials to show what they have in stock, but which may be on loan, and make it easier for people to access stock held in other libraries through electronic catalogues and reservation systems. But libraries could also make it clearer to the public that they do stock popular books. For example, while many libraries now have customer charters which outline the quality of customer care that users can expect, few (if any) include clear statements about the stock that they buy and what should be available in different libraries.

HOW SERVICES NEED TO CHANGE

Many libraries provide a satisfactory, user-focused service to their current users – those people who are able to attend when libraries are open, and who want the books and services that they currently provide. While there has been significant investment in ICT and reader development, those areas that matter most to users and potential users have been neglected: book funds and opening hours have been cut significantly; many library buildings are in poor condition or are located away from the people that they are trying to serve. As a result library services can be hard to access and unwelcoming to use, users are finding it harder to find the books that they want and non-users are not encouraged to try their services.

To reverse the decline in use highlighted in Chapter 1, the challenge is to cater to a wider audience. Libraries need to buy more of the books people want, and make them available when they want them. Councils need to look at what it is that bookshops are getting right and rethink their services in line with rising customer expectations (particularly as bookshops have themselves learned from library services – extending opening hours, encouraging browsing, etc). Services need to be designed with the user at the centre – built
around a realisation that people use their services out of choice – and a clear understanding of the services and experience people want:

1. Libraries need to provide the books and information services people want – or people will have no reason to come.
2. These services need to be easily accessible, in terms of opening times and location – or many potential users may be put off using them.
3. They need to provide a positive and welcoming experience for the user, in terms of the environment and how easy services are to use – or people will choose to go elsewhere.
4. And, people need to be aware of the full range of services on offer and how they can get them.

56. Being user focused does not mean catering for the lowest common denominator. Providing what people want does not mean stocking only bestsellers. Learning from bookshops does not mean giving up on core values. But, if libraries are to encourage people to widen and develop their reading, they need to get them through the door in the first place. Making popular books more available will help to overcome people’s views that libraries have little or nothing to offer them.

57. The good practice identified from inspection reports and site visits shows that some services are beginning to meet these challenges. (CHECKLIST 1, overleaf, collects this good practice into a series of questions to be used when reviewing services). However, delivering these changes will be difficult. Improving opening hours and book stock will have significant implications for how library services use their resources. Rethinking services from the user’s point of view will require staff to challenge traditional ways of working. Some staff, members, and existing users may resist such changes. While this chapter has focused on the aspects of services that are visible to users, the next focuses on what is going on inside councils, looking at how they can use best value reviews, library plans and day-to-day performance management to make these changes.
CHECKLIST 1  For challenging services

Availability of books & information services

☐ Is a wide range of up-to-date stock available and is it in good condition?
☐ Are copies of popular books available?
☐ Do minority groups have access to adequate books, periodicals and information services (held locally or council-wide)?
☐ Is best use made of existing stock (through effective stock management)?
☐ Is a good range of information (for example, databases of local clubs and societies, access to information on council services) available and accessible?
☐ Is there adequate provision of internet and other ICT services?

Accessibility: Opening times, location, physical access

☐ Are libraries available when people want? (Have weekend and evening opening been properly considered?)
☐ Are there regular opening hours that people understand and remember?
☐ Is best use made of mobile libraries?
☐ Are there opportunities to make services more accessible by sharing buildings with other organisations?
☐ Could better use be made of ICT to provide access to services when libraries are closed?
☐ Are there plans to ensure that all libraries are accessible to people with disabilities?

Improving the experience: Making libraries a welcoming space

☐ Are books and information attractively displayed (for example, tidy shelves, bookshop style displays)?
☐ Is stock arranged in ways that best meet the needs of users (for example, integrating lending, reference and audio-visual stock)?
☐ Are books and information easy to find (good signage and labeling of shelves, classification systems that people can understand)?
☐ Are staff helpful, welcoming and sensitive to the needs of different users?
☐ Are other services provided (coffee shops, toilets, baby-changing facilities) where appropriate?
☐ Does the service provide access to other council services (one-stop-shop facilities, travel permits, council tax)?
☐ Does the design of the service reflect the needs of different groups of user – families (for example, with young children in pushchairs), older people, minority groups?

Raising awareness

☐ Is there a clear customer charter/standard outlining the books, information and other services that people can expect, as well as service quality?
☐ Do infrequent users get a good impression of the service when they visit? Are they encouraged to join?
☐ Is there adequate external signage and publicity materials?
☐ Is there a clear marketing strategy for raising awareness of services among non-users and infrequent users?
☐ Is there effective outreach work with specific minority groups (for example, travellers, asylum seekers)?
This chapter focuses on how councils go about implementing improvements through BVRs library plans (ALPs/LPs) and day-to-day performance management. The key issues related to improving library services can be addressed through five areas for action (TABLE 1). Focusing on these five areas can have a significant impact on services – on how well services meet the needs of the public overall and how they measure up to the expectations discussed in the previous chapter. Analysis of inspection findings shows a range of strengths and weaknesses in each of these areas (EXHIBIT 11, overleaf). This chapter looks at each of these in turn, in order to identify the underlying problems and difficulties.

### TABLE 1 The five ‘improvement’ areas to emerge from inspections of library services

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key actions</th>
<th>Why they matter</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Challenging and deciding what the service is for** | • To provide a clear vision of the future of the service.  
• As a basis for effective decision making (for example, so that opening hours/book funds do not suffer ‘death by a thousand cuts’).  
• To help to prioritise the needs of different groups and for different services.  
• To maximise contribution to wider council objectives (inclusion, learning, etc). |
| **Challenging how services are provided and resources are used** | • To redesign services to meet user needs better.  
• To challenge ‘old fashioned’ image.  
• To address underlying reasons and barriers behind the reduction in usage.  
• To tackle underlying/deep-seated problems of inefficiency or under-investment. |
| **Engaging with the public** | • To identify the barriers to use and understand what people want.  
• To identify and respond to competing services.  
• To maximise support from existing users. |
| **Involving elected members and staff** | • To get commitment to tackling difficulties and resolving problems.  
• To encourage ownership of targets and plans.  
• To minimise resistance to change. |
| **Improving planning and performance management** | • To formulate effective plans and deliver local and national targets.  
• To plan ahead, to take advantage of opportunities (and avoid ‘crisis management’).  
• To improve accountability for performance and resources.  
• To evaluate initiatives and learn what works. |

Source: Audit Commission
59. It finds that, although library plans, standards and BVRs should provide a spur to improvement, too often failure to challenge services properly, lack of commitment to a clear vision for the service, and weak performance management systems, mean that planned improvements may not materialise. The chapter goes on to look at how these problems can be overcome, drawing on inspection reports and other good practice.¹

¹ The key messages for councils in this chapter are intended to be independent of the details of the national framework, elements of which are currently under review (for example, the Welsh Assembly Government is introducing the Wales Programme for improvement).

EXHIBIT 11 Key findings – delivering improvement

Inspection reports show a range of strengths and weaknesses in library services’ improvement strategies.

Note: Bars do not total 100 per cent where the issue was outside the scope of the BVR, not covered in the inspection report or where inspection comments were neutral.

Source: Audit Commission
CHALLENGING AND DECIDING WHAT THE SERVICE IS FOR

60. Almost two-thirds of inspections have concluded that the BVR has not fundamentally challenged what the service is for or why it is needed – a key element of best value (or any strategic planning exercise). Some councils have argued that the 1964 Public Libraries and Museums Act makes this challenge unnecessary (Ref. 4). But local clarity and agreement over the role of the library service is vital for effective decision making about the future of the service. Without it, continuous ‘temporary’ cuts to book funds and opening hours can become permanent, and effective long-term decisions over investment in the service, such as refurbishment plans or deciding to open or close libraries, become impossible (Ref. 11). This is a particular problem, as people currently getting the service will be more vocal in protecting what they have than those who are currently losing out (who may not know what they are missing out on, or what they have a right to expect).

61. But what is the ‘core role’ of library services? And what are the objectives that delivering it achieves? These questions are not easy to answer. So far this report has discussed this core role in terms of the services that libraries provide – access to books, ICT and other information, and the space to use them in. But simply listing these services does not explain, or do justice to, the value that people place on libraries. Central to this value is the flexibility of library services and the freedom people have to use them as they want. Similarly, it is not straightforward to explain what this core role is ‘for’. For example, borrowing fiction, the most popular library activity, can contribute to leisure, social, cultural and/or literacy objectives. And it is because this core role is so flexible and hard to define, let alone measure in terms of outcomes, that there is a danger of it being neglected, for example, by cutting book funds or opening hours.

62. Library services also have the potential to contribute to specific local priorities for social inclusion, lifelong learning, e-government, and so on (BOX D). Inspectors have found that the quality of these contributions varies. For example, most have good links with education and lifelong learning objectives, while inspectors have raised concerns over links with social exclusion, regeneration and cultural strategies. In some cases cross-service working has been found to be ‘piecemeal and fragmented’, with library staff either not involved at key meetings or attending but contributing little.

BOX D Contributing to wider council objectives

**Bedfordshire**'s library service supports educational and inclusion priorities through a network of homework clubs in its most deprived wards, providing one-on-one support for children in liaison with local schools.

**Norfolk**'s library service has supported priorities for e-government and rural inclusion by providing internet access in joint use facilities in local towns and villages.

**Staffordshire**'s library service supports local business in Cheadle, which saw trade increase by 50 per cent when the library was relocated into a vacant shop in the town centre.

**Newcastle**'s local history and genealogy resources attract visitors from around the country and overseas.

**Wokingham**'s Maiden Earley Library is the base for BRILL (Bulmershe Resources, Information and Libraries Link) – a multi-agency project to engage with dissafected young people.

Source: Audit Commission inspection reports
63. However, there is a danger that, as a result of the high profile of these objectives, the core role of the service will be neglected. Library services should not focus on these broader social objectives to the exclusion of delivering a good core service – as it is because libraries are a trusted and valued local resource that they are able to make these wider contributions in the first place.

64. As part of statutory library planning, each library service has to outline its aims and objectives – often in terms of the services that they provide to individuals and communities, how they can be accessed, as well as the contribution that they hope to make to people’s lives (BOX E).

65. But councils need to go beyond broad outlines of the services they are to offer and the objectives they want to contribute to. In order to get consensus and commitment to the future shape of the service they need a clear framework setting out how services will be provided to different groups. This framework needs to be specific enough to enable current provision to be tested against it – for example, in terms of accessibility or the quality or range of lending materials – while being flexible enough to evolve over time and respond to local differences. Some councils have achieved this by introducing a clear system of tiered provision which sets out, for different sizes of community, minimum service levels that different people should have access to (what books/information/ICT, etc) – in effect, a local definition of a ‘comprehensive and efficient service’. It is then for individual libraries to work with their communities to identify their specific needs, wants and priorities and to agree how they the service should be delivered (CASE STUDY 4).

**BOX E Newcastle-upon-Tyne – aims and objectives**

Newcastle Libraries and Information Service aims to ‘provide quality library and information services which meet the needs of the people of Newcastle, visitors to Newcastle and the North East region and anyone with an interest in Newcastle.

‘Through our range of static and mobile service points we will provide gateways to:

- the rich world of literature, culture and the value and joy of reading;
- lifelong learning and self improvement, whether formal or informal;
- information and advice for existing businesses and new start-ups;
- information for Newcastle people on services, organisations and events in which they are interested;
- services provided by other council directorates and outside agencies;
- information on Newcastle and the immediate region for visitors and those interested in the City; and
- the rich heritage of Newcastle’s past, in both visual and print formats.

‘Our libraries are also important centres at the heart of local communities, providing a welcoming place to meet and enjoy a wide range of activities.’

*Source: Newcastle City Council Annual Library Plan, 2001*
CASE STUDY 4  Staffordshire’s Library Vision

Staffordshire’s Library Vision outlines clearly the levels of service that people in different communities should be able to expect, with:

- Populations over 50,000 served by ‘Portal Libraries’ – offering a wide range of books (measured against locally tailored standards for the availability of bestsellers, works by popular and classic authors, etc), audio visual materials and ICT facilities – with extensive opening hours decided through local consultation, café facilities and based at busy central locations.
- Populations of 20-50,000 served by ‘Town Libraries’ – again with clear standards for stock and accessibility, each of which acts as a base for a county-wide specialist function.
- Populations of 10-20,000 served by ‘Neighbourhood Libraries’ – located in joint-use buildings with other community services wherever possible.
- Community library services (including lending materials and ICT provision) operated via:
  - small drop-in service points with stock and staff in an existing community centre open ten hours a week, for populations of 5-10,000;
  - drop-off points provided in partnership with other organisations (for example, Post Offices) to provide material between mobile visits – for populations under 5,000;
  - Mobile Library Services provided in line with local needs (for example, in areas of high deprivation, rural areas or where practical and requested by three or more families);
  - services to residential and nursing homes, sheltered housing and day centres.

This Vision recognises that, in the past, the services has been ‘spread too thin’ as a result of incremental change and failure to take account of changes such as increasing car use. It constitutes ‘a deal’ between the councils and residents about how the service needs to adapt to such changes to better meet people’s needs.

The definitions in the vision are used to determine broad patterns of provision. It is then for services locally to engage with communities about the details of provision, such as opening hours and preferred types of stock. This is carried out in consultation with residents by local managers (who received training in facilitation skills), local councillors and town and parish councils (where they exist) as part of a developing ‘citizen’s advisory function’.

Source: Audit Commission inspection report, site visit, Staffordshire’s Annual Library Plan

CHALLENGING HOW SERVICES ARE PROVIDED AND HOW RESOURCES ARE USED

Councils also need to challenge how they provide their services – to ask the key questions: Who is best placed to provide this service? Can it be done more efficiently? Can it be done better/in a way which better meets user’s needs or contributes to other priorities? It is possible to analyse the types of questions that councils are asking in library BVRs. The picture that emerges shows that this level of challenge is generally missing (EXHIBIT 12, overleaf). As a result, too few of the recommendations to emerge from library BVRs have a significant impact on services (for example, in one review, seven of the eight recommendations of the BVR either simply ratified existing policies or set up further investigative work, and the eighth recommendation was only to give each library an email address).
The questions asked (and avoided) in BVRs

As a result of the narrow scope of questions asked in BVRs, many are unlikely to have a significant impact on services.

Source: Audit Commission analysis of outcomes of 40 BVRs as reported in best value performance plans

67. In some cases, lack of challenge has been a result of the limited scope of the review. A common problem has been the exclusion of mobile services from the BVR, which has made it impossible to look overall at how community needs are being met. One BVR focused only on rural services and was not allowed by members to consider closing any branches – as a result, it found ‘little room for manoeuvre’ and came up only with the options to: carry on as before, look at the closure issue, or do a BVR of the whole service. In other cases, lack of external challenge has meant that more radical options have not been considered. And even where external challenge has been used, inspectors have sometimes concluded that the council ‘was not committed to improvement outside the current framework’ or that ‘[the council] did not act on the challenging suggestions from the consultant [brought in to provide external challenge]’.

68. Most library services have a good record in working in partnership with other organisations (for example, local colleges, schools, social services and voluntary groups). However, 70 per cent of inspections have found that proper consideration was not given to using competition to improve services. In particular, few councils have looked properly at the option of outsourcing the whole library service or of introducing trust status, such as in the London Borough of Hounslow (CASE STUDY 5).

69. While one-half of library services have made good use of benchmarking data to compare their performance with others, inspectors have found only isolated examples where councils have gone further, to identify and learn from good practice elsewhere. For example, Cumbria identified good practice in the location and duration of mobile library stops. Inspectors have also highlighted examples of regional benchmarking networks, such as ‘SHARE’ in London, which has carried out comparative analyses of customer care across its eight member authorities.
CASE STUDY 5 Hounslow – Trust Status

Hounslow is the only library service in the country to be managed by a trust. The trust, Community Initiative Partnerships Ltd (CIP) manages the whole of the council’s leisure portfolio, including heritage, parks, recreation, sports centres and the arts. CIP was set up by the council in 1998 in order to achieve immediate and ongoing revenue savings and to take opportunities to attract external funding from sources that are not open to services run directly by the council. Performance is continuously measured against a range of targets and standards which are regularly reported to the CIP Board and the council’s Monitoring Officer. The materials fund element of the contract is ring-fenced and linked to inflation, thus arresting the previous decline in stock purchasing.

The management of libraries by a Trust, within the wider Leisure portfolio, allows creative solutions to funding issues, especially in terms of capital funding arrangements (as CIP fall outside local authority capital financing controls). For example, CIP have submitted funding proposals to the council to complete the roll out and ongoing maintenance of the People’s Network by means of a commercial loan which will spread the capital purchase costs over three years. The trust status and funding arrangements also enable some cross-subsidisation to take place from the budget for sports facilities. This has allowed staffing levels to be maintained and has prevented further planned and ad hoc closures.

Since the launch of CIP the council has reduced its revenue budget support by more than £2.5 million. At the same time, CIP has managed to sustain, and in some cases develop service delivery, as well as attracting external capital investment to improve facilities.

Source: Audit Commission inspection report

Chapter 2 described how some councils have identified opportunities to improve the user experience by comparing library services with bookshops. However, few services have gone further to see what they can learn from bookshops about management. While there are significant differences between the two, there are also a number of areas that are comparable and where important lessons can be learned:

- Informal discussions with library managers and booksellers suggest that bookshops are able to negotiate higher levels of discounts on stock than library services (of over 35 per cent, compared to 22-32 per cent in libraries services) – equivalent to savings of around £12 million – or 1.5 million extra books.

- Most booksellers operate ICT systems that enable them to offer faster services to customers (for example, fulfilling requests in 24 or 48 hours), make efficiency savings (for example, importing data from publisher’s databases to avoid re-cataloguing) and tailor services to local needs (for example, through local ordering).

- Bookshops have a good record in marketing their services and promoting reading to the general public, while the online catalogues provided by companies such as Amazon.co.uk give people access to reader reviews, lists of what people with similar interests bought and a range of other reader development tools that are not available in library service online catalogues.

Detailed figures on discounts are not nationally collated due to commercial sensitivity. Also, the true level of discount negotiated by libraries can be hidden by charges related to the preparation of books.
71. Less than one-quarter of inspections have found evidence of efficiency gains as a result of BVRs or other local work. The legacy of cuts to book stock and opening hours has resulted in a view that efficiency savings are not possible. For example, in one BVR the Strategic Review Team discussed the scope for efficiency savings from this review and decided that nil savings were possible. They concluded that ‘previous budget reductions and several years of under-investment meant that there is a pressing need for reinvestment in the service’. Yet analysis suggests that there is potential for challenging current patterns of expenditure in order to free up resources and redirect them to areas of priority (such as those that have undergone significant cuts):

- For the same spend per head, some services get two or three times the number of visits as others (EXHIBIT 13).
- Staff productivity – measured as staff cost per visit varies from over £3 to 90p between councils, and has, on average, declined by 10 per cent over the last seven years.
- The average cost of a book varies from less than £5 to over £12 between councils, while the proportion of expenditure on books varies from 5 per cent to 20 per cent.
- The proportion of costs recovered through charges varies from under 5 per cent to over 15 per cent between councils.

**EXHIBIT 13 Variations in spending and visits**

For the same spend per head, some services get two or three times the number of visits as others.

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**Source:** CIPFA Public Library Actuals 2000/01
However, the lessons learned from those who have looked at issues such as the management of stock or staff roles and responsibilities (discussed in greater detail in *Due for Renewal* (Ref. 1)) demonstrate the potential of such reviews to deliver better value for money (TABLE 2, CASE STUDIES 6 and 7, overleaf).

### TABLE 2 Challenging key processes: stock management

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>System</th>
<th>Can it be done... more efficiently? ...better for users?</th>
<th>Examples of benefits and measures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Acquiring new stock</strong></td>
<td>• Could we choose books better? What is best done by local staff? By specialists? By suppliers? Can we automatically trigger orders for items that are in high demand? &lt;br&gt; • How can we get new items on shelves faster (for example, delivery direct to libraries)? &lt;br&gt; • What is the ‘value added’ in how books are prepared? Do we need all the labels we use? How do they benefit users? Are we making best use of existing catalogues (publishers’, suppliers’ etc.)? &lt;br&gt; • How much does it cost to acquire stock: to order it, prepare it for display, catalogue it, pay invoices, etc – including overheads (corporate, premises, etc)? How can these costs be cut? Have we cut out all ‘double handling’ of items and ‘re-keying’ of data? Could these be done better by others, or in partnership? &lt;br&gt; • Can ICT help us to do these things better (ordering and paying invoices electronically/locally)?</td>
<td>Staff expertise shared across the council (for example, choosing graphic novels), or even between councils (for example, for stock for minority communities). Significant saving achieved by negotiating better discounts (£30,000 – £60,000). Clarity over real discount vs. cost of preparation. Books arrive at branch libraries on day of publication fully prepared. Projected savings through introduction of Electronic Data Interchange for payment of invoices.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Issuing items on loan</strong></td>
<td>• Can we make issuing, renewing and returning books easier? &lt;br&gt; • Can we make it easier for people to find what they want? &lt;br&gt; • Can we get returned books back on display faster? &lt;br&gt; • Do we have effective policies for rotating stock between libraries, disposing of out-of-date stock, and use of reserve collections?</td>
<td>Improved signage, access to user friendly online catalogues, enabling users to use all council libraries, online renewal systems. Redesigning service points to ease congestion during busy periods. Clear policy for income generation for relevant audio/visual stock.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reservations and requests</strong></td>
<td>• Can users check and reserve stock on line (at home and in the libraries)? Is the system easy to use? &lt;br&gt; • Can we get reserved items to users within 24 hours (when the item is in stock)? Where are the bottlenecks in the systems? How can they be removed? &lt;br&gt; • Do staff take responsibility for chasing requests and informing users of progress (or do they just introduce users to ‘the system’)? &lt;br&gt; • Could we deal with reservations and requests more efficiently (for example, by emailing users when items have arrived)?</td>
<td>Online catalogues introduced, on the internet, in libraries and on mobile libraries – so that users can access the whole collection from any of these points.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Site visits, Due for renewal (Ref. 1), inspection reports*
CASE STUDY 6  Sutton – Priority-based review

In 1997 Sutton council undertook a priority based review of its whole library service – evaluating the need for different skills and competencies, and looking at how different processes could be made more efficient and effective.

As a result, the service reorganised its professional staff into a central team to provide a core central resource that other libraries could access by phone, fax or email. The review of bibliographic services (ordering, cataloguing and preparing books) concluded that these functions could be done faster and more efficiently by splitting the tasks between book suppliers and local library staff.

As a result the service saved £77,000. At the same time these changes mean that new books get on to library shelves on the day of publication (where previously there had been significant delays), and job roles were redesigned so that all staff, bar the one person administering orders, undertake customer-facing work – and this includes senior managers.

Source: Audit Commission Inspection report, site visit

CASE STUDY 7  Gateshead – Commitment to effective delivery

'We found evidence from interviews with Councillors and top managers, that Gateshead Council is committed to excellence: elected members provide clear guidance through the cabinet system and its structure of advisory groups, scrutiny panels and special panels. The vision for 21st century Gateshead – ‘Beyond 2000’ – aims to ensure that all local people can realise their full potential and enjoy the best quality of life in a healthy, safe and sustainable environment. Top management provides strong and effective leadership.

'We also found evidence that Gateshead Council is changing its structures and planning processes to support more effective service delivery. The Council is reorganising its senior management structure: a small number of strategic directors now oversee the effective management of cross-cutting issues, and heads of service are accountable for providing high-quality professional expertise in service delivery. At the time of our inspection, the restructuring was already at mid-point and the new libraries’ senior management structure was in place. The Council’s service planning and review framework cascades the vision for service delivery throughout the organization.’

Source: Extract from inspection report

ENGAGING WITH THE PUBLIC

73. As a service that most people use out of choice, rather than necessity, it is vital that library services are built on a clear understanding of what people want. To build this understanding library services need to undertake effective consultation with users and non-users. They must go beyond user satisfaction surveys to engage with local people, to identify the services that they want and hence rethink and redesign how services are delivered. However, one-half of inspections have found this approach lacking – for example, where consultation had not engaged non-users or people from hard-to-reach groups, or where the results from consultation have not been acted on.¹

¹ For a guide to effective community consultation see Listen Up! Effective Community Consultation (Ref. 13)
Inspectors have also found that many services could be making better use of other feedback to supplement formal consultation and to help to drive service improvement – for example, through systems to encourage and respond to suggestions and complaints from users. Also, according to a recent survey, three-quarters of councils do not have any ‘Friends of Library’ groups, despite the fact that these groups can be used as a source of advice and suggestions, as well as a way of helping to minimise user resistance to change (which has caused problems for other councils) (Ref. 12). Suggestions from Friends groups in Barnet have lead to improvements in reservations systems and café facilities. Sutton library service has combined these approaches – effective engagement with existing users, balanced with specific consultation with target groups and non-users – to drive a range of improvements (CASE STUDY 8).

CASE STUDY 8  Sutton – Engaging with users and non-users

Sutton Council uses a range of mechanisms to engage users and non-users and hence to help drive service improvements:

- They have active ‘Friends of the Library’ groups in all but one of their libraries, which they have used to help define customer care standards and advise on stock, as well as supporting libraries through a range of initiatives (such as promoting internet facilities to older users by introducing them to how it works). These groups are also consulted on the service’s budget (although the constitution which underlies their role makes it clear that this is in an advisory capacity).

- Sutton has worked with local disabled groups to determine how it can make their branches accessible, as well as over the range of stock and other services. Specific consultation with families of children with special educational needs pointed out the need to raise awareness of the range of services on offer.

- Consultation has take place with a number of minority ethnic groups to identify and address barriers to access – this consultation, in particular pointed out the need for staff training on cultural awareness.

- The service has convened and consulted ‘Youth Juries’ to advise on the changes to stock and atmosphere that would encourage more young people to use libraries (such as playing music).

- The service is responsive to customer suggestions and complaints – which have, for example, led to improvements in layouts and queuing systems.

- The service produces the annual Sutton Link newsletter – including an assessment of performance and details of recent improvements.

As a result Sutton’s library services get very high satisfaction marks (of 94 per cent) – both from existing users and the wider public. This popularity has helped to raise the service’s profile in the council – ensuring that the views of the service are taken seriously during debates on budgets or relevant policy matters.

Source: Audit Commission inspection report, site visit
ININVOLVING ELECTED MEMBERS AND STAFF

75. Inspectors have been impressed with the general levels of commitment that they have seen from elected members, for example, where they have reversed long-term cuts in book funds highlighted by BVRs. However, many councils are not involving elected members sufficiently in BVRs or other plans. Inspectors have found limited evidence that elected members are actively engaged in monitoring the performance of the service. This can cause significant problems, particularly when difficult decisions arise (BOX F). Key to overcoming these concerns is getting members involved from the outset, and listening to their concerns, so that they feel ownership of the results (CASE STUDY 9).

76. Library services also need to involve staff in their planning processes. Frontline staff should have a good grasp of the problems that users are experiencing and ideas about how services can be improved. But almost 40 per cent of inspections found that staff were not effectively involved in the review. If staff do not feel ownership of the future of the service then they may resist attempts to introduce user-focused services. For example, in one council ‘staff complained about being required to help users to fill in forms to access concessions’ while in another ‘staff [were] not encouraged to take responsibility for interacting with users’.

77. To ensure that staff are committed to changes, senior officers need to show clear leadership and commitment, and must listen to the views of staff and provide systems of support. A particular feature of the services visited for this study was a strong focus on putting together and supporting teams – with clear roles and clear lines of accountability for performance (CASE STUDY 10). Where this is done effectively even those staff who are uncomfortable with change can be brought on board – such as in one council where a library manager who initially asked to be demoted (as she was not happy with the direction the service was headed in, in particular about working with other agencies) ended up being promoted and was a key driver for revitalizing the service locally.

BOX F Elected members on board?

One council has been left with a mobile library that is, according to its own staff, ‘surplus to requirements’ after elected members changed their minds about a plan to amalgamate two libraries and use a mobile to cover those that would lose out.

In another council, although performance information was reported to elected members, as part of the preparation of the best value performance plan and budget, ‘this process was seen by officers and members mainly as a means of pressing for additional resources for the service and there was limited evidence that members had used the opportunity to challenge the performance of the service or improve its effectiveness.’

In one council, a proposal by the Principal Librarian to close a library that had deteriorated to an extent that ‘called into question its future viability’ was rejected by members in favour of a cut in the book fund. The inspector concluded that this decision ‘was not informed by any coherent strategy for the service, with reductions in the quality of service seemingly favoured by members over more visible reductions in service levels.’

Another council used its BVR to completely redesign the service in order to provide better equality of access and geographic coverage. The plan would require a significant investment, but elected members were not involved in the review. Inspectors noted that ‘members have yet to endorse this option so we cannot say with any degree of certainty that this will be implemented’.

Source: Audit Commission inspection reports
**CASE STUDY 9  Hounslow – engaging members in BVRs**

The best value review of Hounslow Library Service was conducted by a cross-party Select Committee of elected members and trustees. This approach raised awareness of the key issues facing the library service and has not only brought about more support from all political parties but has also resulted in a consensus view on the way forward for libraries. The Select Committee has now been reconstituted and will provide the scrutiny role in the implementation of the action plan arising from the review, working in partnership with the Community Initiative Partnership Ltd.

*Source: Audit Commission inspection report*

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**CASE STUDY 10  Norfolk – Getting, and keeping, staff on board**

Norfolk’s library service recognised that they faced a particular challenge to ensure staff commitment and support during the development of the Norfolk and Norwich Millennium Library and the progress and implementation of their BVR. Some staff, in the words of one of the BVR team, had ‘forgotten why they worked in a library, and were resistant to change’.

The service identified a number of steps they could take to help and support staff during this period of change, as well as show senior management commitment to the user-focused vision for the service:

- Training programs have been developed to help staff with their changing roles. All staff attend a two-day customer care course designed to challenge behaviour (including role-playing how users experience the service) and build listening and assertiveness skills. Other training has covered ICT skills, reader development, using performance information, building partnerships, consultation and learning about how adults learn.
- Staff at all libraries are encouraged to contribute to redesigning their library space to be more welcoming to visitors. Library teams contribute to the plans for refurbishing their individual libraries, based on a five year refurbishment programme.
- Staff have been reorganized into self-directed teams, responsive to local needs – with clear lines of responsibility for performance (such as for the production and delivery of local Community Library Plans), with team and individual targets cascaded from the ALP and BVR improvement plan.
- Job-swaps have been arranged to introduce staff to different roles and encourage learning across the county.
- The service has introduced policies to support the ‘work/life’ balance, and Norfolk County Council has received Investors in People (IIP) accreditation.
- Senior managers show commitment to the user-focused values of the service – for example, all spend time ‘floor-walking’ in libraries to offer support and advice to users, as well as listen to their concerns.

To support the specific development of the Millennium Library:

- Staff were encouraged to input ideas throughout the redesign of the service (for example, designing customer help points).
- Staff roles were rethought around users needs and existing staff expertise (for example, staff with relevant expertise are given responsibility for purchasing specialist stock, such as graphic novels), unnecessary distinctions (such as between library assistants and enquiry assistants) have been removed.

*Source: Audit Commission inspection report, site visit*
Library services often form a small part of a larger department (most often education, culture or leisure). As a result, they need to be able to work effectively with other parts of the council. For example, analysis of Audit Commission inspection reports in areas relevant to libraries shows that links are being made to thematic reviews of ‘access to services’ and ‘information for the public’, where libraries were mentioned in 64 per cent of inspection reports. It is less clear that they are playing an active role in user-focused reviews, such as in reviews of services for older people, disabled people, or socially excluded groups, where libraries were mentioned in only 13 per cent of reports.

To maximize their contribution to wider council objectives, library services need to raise their profile both within their council, and with other organisations (schools, colleges, district councils, etc). Some have achieved this by taking the local lead in the delivery of e-government. For others, their presence and profile in local communities may be a way to demonstrate the potential of libraries to contribute to policy goals.

IMPROVING PLANNING AND PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

Finally, library services need effective systems to plan and implement service improvements, building on the foundation provided by national statutory library plans and service standards. While the DCMS assessments of Annual Library Plans shows that the quality of ALPs has been improving – with all the 2001/02–2004/05 plans (submitted in 2001) classified as ‘satisfactory’ or better – the findings of inspections, as well as the detail of the DCMS’s assessments, call into question whether all councils have the capacity to deliver planned improvements.

A key area of weakness is the quality of medium-term financial planning, with both DCMS assessments and many inspection reports raising concerns over the sustainability of ICT services, the quality of cost information and strategies to improve efficiency (Ref. 14). Inspectors have also raised concerns over the lack of clear plans for maintaining and refurbishing buildings, with few having a clear ‘fully costed preventative maintenance programme in place’ which, in Neath and Port Talbot, had helped to ensure that ‘despite the age of some of the library buildings, [libraries are] well presented, clean and welcoming. We did not see any particular maintenance problems that directly impact on customers’ use and enjoyment of the libraries’.

Inspection reports have also highlighted the need for councils to map current patterns of service provision and take up against community profiles, in order to plan how services can better meet the needs of those target groups who may be missing out on services (as outlined in the ‘6 point plan’ in Libraries for All, (Ref. 15)). One council’s BVR found that ‘ascertaining the needs of the various target groups is piecemeal and not continuous’ and that as a result ‘provision is uneven and variable.’ Conversely, the inspection of Gateshead’s BVR concluded that ‘[the council had] identified specific target groups within the community; looked for areas of unmet need and considered which target groups under-use the service. The improvement plan includes measures to address the findings from this study’.

The Welsh Assembly Government will be carrying out its first assessment of the library plans of Welsh authorities during 2002.
83. Over one-half of inspections have raised questions about whether the councils will deliver the BVR’s improvement plan, drawing attention to the lack of clear costs, timescales, targets or lines of responsibility in some plans, or the failure of members to give a clear commitment to delivering the resources required to achieve the actions in the plan. Where these problems are worst, inspectors have found that the improvement plan has already slipped significantly by the time the inspection took place. Finally, while some councils have managed to fit requirements to produce library plans with the delivery of BVRs, others have found this co-ordination more difficult (BOX G).

84. The most significant area of weakness highlighted by inspection has been the quality of the systems that library services use to manage their performance. Three-quarters of inspection reports comment on issues such as the inadequate use of performance data, failure to address falling visitor numbers or inadequate evaluation strategies: ‘The library service collects a range of management information and monitors a range of performance indicators about the service. While this task is undertaken diligently there is limited evidence that such information about how well the service is performing is used to drive improvements in the service. For example, the fall in visitor numbers in 1999/2000 was reported but did not result in any further management action.’

**BOX G Integrating best value with library plans (ALPs, LPs)**

Library services are required to undertake, or contribute to, a number of planning processes: to produce statutory library plans that outline, among other issues, how they intend to meet national standards; to contribute to best value performance plans, including relevant best value performance indicators; to undertake or contribute to relevant BVRs; as well as contributing to other local plans (departmental service plans, cultural plans, etc).

The DCMS assessments of library plans and inspections of BVRs have shown that many library services are co-ordinating their work across these different plans well. However, they have also highlighted some problems, such as lack of consistency between BVR improvement plans and library plans, failure of some BVRs to address national standards and difficulties related to timescales – with BVRs and best value performance indicators covering five years, while library plans and standards cover three.

Some councils have commented on the level of detail required in ALPs, and, in particular, on the impact of this detail on the resources required to produce the plan (with many in excess of 100 pages long) and the difficulties this creates for elected members to engage effectively with the plan. The Local Government White Paper *Strong Local Leadership – Quality Public Services* states that the Government will ‘review the amount of information required of councils in the Annual Library Plan, with a review to streamlining those requirements and the process’ (Ref. 16). This review will provide a key opportunity to address these issues in England.

Welsh councils were required to submit their first Library Plans by the end of March 2002. These are required to be significantly less detailed, with guidance stating that they should be a maximum of 20 pages long. The introduction of the Wales Programme for Improvement provides an opportunity for the Welsh Assembly Government to ensure that these plans fit with central requirements (which are currently under review).

A further opportunity to streamline library plans comes from the introduction of national standards. These should provide an objective base from which to compare performance between councils and over time, and hence an opportunity to focus national regulatory activity on councils that are not delivering the standards, or on particular standards where many councils are experiencing difficulties.

*Source: Audit Commission*
But effective performance management is vital if national standards are to be reached. If library services are to reach out to new users then they need effective evaluation strategies that measure the medium-term impact of initiatives on loans, membership or visits, rather than assuming initiatives are a success simply because they take place. If library services are to argue successfully for extra resources then they need to show that they are making best use of what they have, and show that they have the capacity to deliver improvements and contribute to priorities. Similarly, the service improvements discussed in Chapter 2 (changing stock levels, methods of display, opening hours, etc) will involve using resources differently, and so it is vital that their impact on resources and performance are monitored in order to learn which changes deliver most.

Library services collect a wide range of performance-related data: progress against standards, loans data, user satisfaction, income and expenditure data, information on use by different groups, and so on. Organising this volume of information into an effective performance management system is itself a challenge, requiring them to decide who monitors what, when, at what level (council-wide, by area, by library). Councils need to clarify the role of the ‘corporate centre’ (the library management team, members, other senior council officers) in ensuring the delivery of targets – how standards, local targets and resources will be monitored; how initiatives will be evaluated; how targets will be cascaded to teams and individuals; and how managers will be held to account for delivery (CASE STUDY 11). Monitoring at branch-level should focus on what they have influence over, such as visits, loans, customer care, membership, income levels and the delivery of local plans and initiatives.

Finally, it is vital that, among this information, councils do not lose sight of the most challenging targets that many of them face – indeed, one of the key achievements of Norfolk’s BVR, in the words of one senior manager, was to challenge ‘complacency about satisfaction levels’ and ensure a clear focus on visits ‘as the most stretching target that the service faces’.

CASE STUDY 11 Wandsworth – performance management

Wandsworth has a strong corporate performance management framework. The corporate policy unit plays a key role in monitoring all services across the council, and performance management is recognised as being a core element of the service. The library service collects local performance indicators that are reported quarterly to members. The service has both IIP and CharterMark accreditation. Progress against the improvement plan is monitored and reported to senior managers and members, while the achievement of the plan is linked to the staff appraisal scheme for target setting and monitoring purposes.

Source: Audit Commission inspection report
CONCLUSION

88. Best value reviews, library plans and national standards should provide a clear framework for improving library services. However, analysis of inspection findings and BVRs has demonstrated that many library services lack the capability to deliver improvement effectively. What is needed is:

- a clear and agreed framework to set out what library services are for, to act as a basis for decision making;
- the will and capacity to challenge how services can be made more effective and efficient – few councils have looked at who is best placed to provide services, or challenged traditional working practices;
- a clear view of what users and non-users want, based on thorough and engaging consultation;
- ownership and commitment from staff and members to the changes that are necessary to deliver more user-focused services; and,
- effective systems to deliver service improvements – improvement planning and performance management can be weak and unfocused, and services lack clear strategies to evaluate their work and hold managers to account for resources and performance.

89. If any of these elements is missing then the consequences on the design and delivery of services can be serious. But, while tackling these problems will be a significant challenge for many library services, valuable lessons have been learned since the introduction of best value and library plans. This chapter has highlighted many of these lessons (summarised in the checklist overleaf). The final section looks more broadly at the future of library services and summarises key recommendations for local and national action.
CHECKLIST 2  For delivering improvement in library services

Challenging and deciding what the service is for

☐ Has the council challenged why the service is needed and formulated a clear vision for its future?
☐ Is there a policy on the services to be provided to different communities? Is it specific enough to test provision against?
☐ Are services tailored locally to meet the needs of communities (for example, by providing learning facilities, welfare advice or meeting rooms)?
☐ Is the library service contributing to council priorities (for inclusion, education, health, etc.)? Does it need to raise its profile?

Challenging how services are provided and resources are used

☐ Is the scope of review work wide enough to rethink the whole service? Is effective use made of challenge from outside the service and the council?
☐ Is good practice identified and implemented (through benchmarking or by learning from elsewhere)?
☐ Are effective use made of competition and partnership to drive service improvement?
☐ Have stock management and other processes been challenged to identify savings and to make services easier to use?
☐ Have staff roles and skills been challenged against service priorities? Is best use made of staff skills (for example, choosing specialist stock)?

Engaging with the public

☐ Has the service developed effective relationships with user groups and reached out to community groups that represent potential users?
☐ Are services challenged from the users' point of view? Are barriers to access and competition from bookshops understood?
☐ Does consultation cover non-users and priority groups? Does it engage them effectively and identify barriers to use? Are the results acted on?

Involving members and staff

☐ Are staff, unions and elected members engaged early on in the process of service review and change?
☐ Are elected members engaged in planning library services? Are they working constructively with staff and local people to agree priorities and deliver improvements?
☐ Is there clear leadership and commitment to deliver user-focused services?
☐ Are staff deployed in teams that reflect their skills? Are teams, as well as individuals, developed and held accountable?

Improving planning and performance management

☐ Is service provision mapped against community profiles to identify target groups and set targets?
☐ Does the service understand its costs? Does it have sustainable plans for the ICT and buildings? Is there clear commitment to the resources identified in plans?
☐ Is the implementation of improvement and library plans monitored by elected members and senior officers?
☐ Are initiatives evaluated and measured in terms of their impact on visits, loans, membership or their contribution to council priorities?
☐ Are there clear lines of accountability for the use of resources? Are managers held responsible for local targets and national standards? Are standards and targets clear to staff and communicated plainly to users?
4. MOVING FORWARD

‘I think the libraries are marvellous because they are free. They are free and I love that. I think it is wonderful to be able to walk in there and do your reading and collect about half a dozen books, take them home with you, it costs you nothing. And it is just fantastic.’

User

‘I feel when I think of going to the library that I am alienated and I don’t feel comfortable in that environment. I would rather go to a shop because I felt comfortable there to pay for a book because of the environment.’

Lapsed-user

90. Libraries hold an important place in people’s hearts, but they are losing their place in people’s lives. If current trends in usage continue, libraries will increasingly become a minority service – driven less by the desire to access books and information than by the needs of those who cannot afford to go elsewhere.

91. It could be argued that the decline is irreversible, and that it is ‘okay’ if libraries become simply a facility for people who are not able to access books and information elsewhere. However, few seem to agree that this is the right future for the service. The 1964 Public Museums and Libraries Act calls for councils to provide a ‘comprehensive and efficient library service for all’ (Ref. 4). National standards support this position, as do government expectations that libraries will contribute to policy priorities.

92. And the public say that they want good, useful and welcoming library services. Consultation shows that libraries can provide an important and valued resource for communities. But the findings of consultation and inspection have also shown that many library services are falling far short of people’s expectations for the things that matter to them: availability of stock, accessibility of services and the quality of user experience – and that if these concerns are not addressed then the decline in use will continue. As a result, library services find it even more difficult to meet the standards expected of them.

93. To address these problems, councils need to challenge how and why the service is delivered, working with staff, members and the public to build an explicit vision for the future of the service. And for many, this challenge will be difficult. Building effective performance management systems requires trust between all those involved, as will challenging roles and responsibilities against how they contribute to service objectives. Services where resources have become out of balance between the core role of the service, and subsidiary or support activities, face difficult choices in the short term – and in the long term the choices facing the service are even more stark.
94. There is an important role, too, for the council’s corporate management – to ensure that best value is obtained from the £800 million per year spent on the service. Where difficult decisions are faced, lead officers and elected members need to give clear direction that planned improvements must be delivered, targets must be met and that under-performance and inefficiency are not acceptable. Conversely, where expenditure is low, or where services have suffered significant cuts or under-investment, and where the service can show itself to be making best use of the resources it gets, the council needs to make sure that it takes proper account of the needs and wants of library service users and the public in determining budget priorities.

95. Government and other agencies, such as the Library Association, Re:source and regional benchmarking clubs, can also help by improving national systems of learning and co-ordination. Much work has already been done in this area, for example, negotiating access to publishers’ publicity materials or co-ordinating work for specific groups, such as through the National Library for the Blind. This report has highlighted a number of areas (such as marketing, efficiency and evaluation strategies) where there is a need for national learning. Further, the Audit Commission Inspection Service, together with the DCMS and Welsh Assembly Government, will work together to ensure that national systems of regulation (many of which are currently undergoing changes) are focused on the delivery of effective library services – and, in particular, that councils are held to account for delivering improvement plans and national standards.

96. There are also significant opportunities for library services: to exploit their skills as information professionals to help people navigate the internet; to provide internet access to the 60 per cent of households which cannot access it at home (Ref. 17); to enhance their important role in supporting democracy, by encouraging the exchange of ideas, empowering citizens as learners and enabling communication with elected representatives (particularly in relation to e-government initiatives and the introduction Freedom of Information legislation). Developments in ICT provide opportunities to make library services both more efficient and easier to use, for example, via self issue, internet-based reservations or electronic ordering.

97. And by offering better, more accessible services, libraries will be able to build up their profile in communities and increase their contribution to wider council priorities for inclusion and learning. Finally, best value reviews provide a key opportunity to challenge current service delivery and evaluate options for refocusing resources and hence build better library services.
RECOMMENDATIONS

ACTIONS FOR COUNCILS AND LIBRARY SERVICES

1. Library services need to direct their resources at delivering the services that local people want, in particular...
   - providing the books and information services that people want and need
   - maximizing accessibility by opening at times that suit local people, making better use of joint-use facilities, and using the internet to provide access to their services to people at home
   - making services easy and pleasant to use – in particular, looking at what attracts people to bookshops
   - building awareness among non-users of the services they have on offer

2. Councils need to make effective use of reviews and library plans to fundamentally challenge why and how they provide library services
   - agreeing a clear vision for the future of library services – explicitly outlining the services that people in different areas and from different groups can expect, and identifying how the service will contribute to council priorities
   - challenging working practices to increase efficiency and better meet the needs of users
   - engaging effectively with users and non-users, to understand what they want and need, and overcome barriers to usage
   - building ownership and commitment from staff and members to the changes that are necessary to deliver more user-focused services
   - using effective systems of planning and performance management to design and deliver more user-focused services

3. Elected members and senior council officers should provide clear leadership and commitment to library services – contributing to and agreeing a clear vision for the future of library services and holding managers to account for the resources they use and the delivery of national standards and local targets.

ACTIONS FOR THE DCMS, WELSH ASSEMBLY GOVERNMENT AND OTHER NATIONAL AGENCIES

1. The DCMS, Welsh Assembly Government and other national and regional agencies (including the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professional and Resource) should help by improving national systems of learning and co-ordination in the areas of difficulty highlighted by this report (including marketing, managing change and performance, value for money).
   - The Audit Commission Inspection Service, together with the DCMS and Welsh Assembly Government, will work together to ensure that national systems of regulation (many of which are under currently undergoing changes) are focused on the delivery of effective library services, in particular, holding councils to account for delivery of improvement and standards through local plans and best value reviews.
APPENDIX 1: RESEARCH AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The study took place between October 2001 and February 2002. It drew on a wide range of evidence including:

- Detailed analyses of the first 36 library-related best value inspection reports, as well as further inspection reports in related areas (for example, social inclusion, information, access to services). Full copies of these reports can be downloaded from www.bestvalueinspections.gov.uk.
- Statistical analysis of nationally collated data.
- Analyses of book stocks: the range of adult fiction books and the availability of 2001 bestsellers (APPENDIX 3).
- Detailed follow-up site visit work with three authorities, with further input from a number of other authorities by telephone or via inspectors.
- Analysis of a range of other documentation, including national research, relevant value for money audit reports, relevant sections of best value performance plans, annual library plans and BVRs.
- Analysis by MORI of its 14 most recent library consultation exercises (their report can be found via www.audit-commission.gov.uk).
- Analysis by the Institute of Public Finance of the results of Public Library User Surveys.

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APPENDIX 2: NATIONAL STANDARDS

Public library standards for England were introduced from January 2001 with targets to be achieved by March 2004. Welsh public library standards were introduced in March 2002, to be achieved by March 2005 (Refs. 18 and 19). The standards in England and Wales are similar, with the exception of timing, some changes to definitions and the addition of standards in Wales for providing and promoting Welsh language material, and for the provision of space.

OUTLINE OF STANDARDS

Rules
- Book loan period at least three weeks.
- Minimum book loan item limit – at least eight books.

Access
- Percentage of households within one or two miles of a library.
- Minimum aggregate opening hours.
- Percentage of larger libraries open for more than 45 hours per week.

Books
- Minimum number of stock items added through purchase per capita.
- Time taken to replenish loan stock.
- Spending on Welsh language materials (including spending on promotions). (W)

Quality of service
- Percentage of requests for loan items met within a given time period.
- Percentage of users who rate staff helpfulness positively (95 per cent).
- Percentage of users who rate staff knowledge positively (95 per cent).
- Proportion of planned time that service points are not available.
- Quality index for books and materials. (TBD)

Other aspects of service provision
- The amount of space available per capita. (W)
- Numbers of qualified staff per capita. (TBD)
- Number of electronic work stations available per 1,000 capita.
- Percentage of libraries with access to online catalogues.

Outputs & Outcomes
- Number of visits to libraries per 1,000 capita.
- Percentage of users successfully obtaining a specific book (65 per cent).
- Percentage of users should gain information as a result of an enquiry (75 per cent).
- Number of visits to library website per 1,000 capita. (TBD)

W = Wales only, TBD = to be developed
APPENDIX 3: QUALITY OF BOOK STOCK

1. RANGE OF ADULT FICTION

Inspectors evaluate stock using a tool developed by Opening the Book Ltd and piloted in 12 authorities. This uses a list of 600 books chosen to give an overview of coverage across 41 genres of adult fiction. For each genre, the tool measures the percentage of books found in the library service’s catalogue. It also looks at the representation of first novels, authors from ethnic minorities and books that appeal to older and younger people. As such, the results give a broad indication of the range of stock available. The main results from one typical library service are shown below.

Source: Audit Commission Inspection of particular authority
### 2. AVAILABILITY OF 2001 BEST SELLERS

The table below shows for a selection of authorities, and for a selection of 2001 best sellers, the levels of stock held (including items on loan) and the chances of finding a particular title in a particular library. The figures are based on online catalogues accessed during early February 2002 (as such the figures are as accurate as these systems allow).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TITLE</th>
<th>AUTHORITY 1</th>
<th>AUTHORITY 2</th>
<th>AUTHORITY 3</th>
<th>AUTHORITY 4</th>
<th>AUTHORITY 5</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
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**Books in stock**
- Less than 1 copy per 200,000
- 1-10 copies per 200,000
- 10-30 copies per 200,000
- 30+ copies per 200,000

**Likelihood of finding on shelf**
- Less than 10% chance
- 10-25% chance
- 25-50% chance
- 50% or better chance
REFERENCES

7. Online Catalogue and Internet statistics taken from People’s Network website, www.peoplesnetwork.gov.uk