

Consultation Questions

ROLE FOR LIBRARIES:

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

Providing books, learning, information and entertainment to customers: All libraries provide a range of books and written material, often in a variety of formats, eg hard copy, audio, online and e-books. Most libraries also offer Music and Film material and provide computers with free internet access.

The library at the centre of the Community: in many areas libraries are centres of the community, facilitating community meetings such as social groups or book clubs. Often, libraries work in partnership with other public services, providing signposts to customers or integrating health, learning, skills or education provisions.

The library as an education resource and proactive provider of information and learning – In many areas libraries have a strong role in guiding customers through a morass of information, providing opportunities for education by linking to digital inclusion initiatives, improving literacy, offering reading events and providing learning opportunities within the library.

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

Q1

Does every library authority have to share a common purpose? Are these purposes complementary and relevant? Are some more important than others? Are there other purposes we should consider?

NATIONAL AND LOCAL LEADERSHIP

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

Q2

Do you think the current roles as defined for central and local government are still appropriate? Is the 1964 legislative framework still appropriate or does it need review? If so what changes would you like to see? Is there any value in central government having a more direct role in setting the vision and objectives for the library service or is the service better managed entirely at local level.

Q3

Could (a) central government departments, and (b) local authorities better use the public library service to communicate initiatives and contribute to other public services? Do you have any ideas on how this might work?

ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURES, GOVERNANCE AND FUNDING

Funding for libraries is provided by the Department for Communities and Local Government and policy responsibility for public libraries rests with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. However, many other departments have an interest in ensuring that libraries continue to contribute to a number of national and local government priorities – health, literacy & learning, business support and entrepreneurship, job hunting and employability, community cohesion, citizenship and digital inclusion. Two DCMS public bodies – the Museums, Libraries & Archives Council or MLA (a strategic Non Departmental Public Body promoting best practice) and the Advisory Council on Libraries (providing strategic advice to the Secretary of State on public libraries) – support central government policy making. In addition, third sector organisations like The Reading Agency and BookTrust work with central government and libraries to deliver programmes supporting literacy and learning.

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

Q4

A recent report by the All Party Parliamentary Group on Libraries, Literacy and Information Management concluded that central Government structures complicate the delivery of library funding and policy. The Report also called into question the suitability of the MLA and ACL and recommended a Library Development Agency.

- Are there benefits in changing the structures in government?
- Are there benefits in changing the structures or roles of the public bodies?
- Is there a value in a greater central function around particular issues?
Eg Marketing and publicity, digital services?
- Do you see any benefit in establishing new national/local structures as set out in Margaret Hodge's essay?

Q5

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

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

Q6

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

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

DIGITAL

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

Q7

Digital Services: What is the future of library services in a digital environment? What changes do you envisage as a result of changes in technology over the next 5-10 years? You might like to consider –

- How can we use the digital revolution to extend access to library resources?
- Should virtual lending (ie lending downloads to the home via the internet) be the future of the public library service either generally or in some areas? What challenges would virtual lending present?
- What digital content should libraries provide? For example should all libraries make subscription online services available to users? Should this be a free service?
- Web 2.0 enables people and communities to contribute web content? Do you think that there is a role for libraries in Web 2.0? If so, what?
- Is there other content or technology which you think should be guaranteed to users?

- How can libraries support the Digital Inclusion agenda? What are some of the potential obstacles to greater digital engagement within libraries, and how might these be overcome?
- What other opportunities does new technology present for libraries? Do you have ideas for innovative ways in which new technology could be applied in local libraries?

Q8

Digital technology is already helping with the back office and administrative functions of many libraries

- How can we spread best practice and maximise those opportunities?
- Self service and return technology is intended to free up library staff to deal with more complex customer enquiries. Should this technology be available in all libraries?

Q9

Do Local Authority IT strategies support or impede libraries' digital innovation? Should libraries have a national web presence? Would a national online catalogue covering all public libraries be beneficial?

WHAT SERVICES SHOULD BE AVAILABLE TO USERS?

The Government believes that the public library service should continue to be a local service which is shaped by the characteristics of its community.

We know that the services libraries offer vary across the country from opening hours to e-books to other community services. We know that there is a striking variation in the use of libraries across authorities. This must be linked to the services on offer and the responsiveness to customer demand. If we want the library service to flourish in the future we need to reverse the established downward trend in usage and ensure that libraries are relevant, popular and used by local communities. So we need to think about what libraries offer to their communities and what is effective in growing the demand by customers for libraries.

Contributors to the library review discussed whether a clear national 'offer to consumers' of the library in the 21st century needs to be articulated or whether the service content should be entirely locally led. A national offer would have the benefit of enabling coherent national marketing.

Q10

Are there any services which you consider should be prescribed across all library services or should services be entirely determined at local level? Is there any value in having a clear national 'offer to consumers of the library in the 21st century'. If so which elements would be vital components? Besides hard copy books do you think there are other services which should be free at the point of delivery on a national basis?

Q11

How can we widen usage and make libraries more accessible to the public? For instance:

- On what basis should library leaders make decisions about opening hours and location?
- Should library joining and membership arrangements be simplified across all libraries? Indeed should library membership be national so that citizens can use any library and borrow and return material anywhere.
- Do you think there are particular services which would encourage more library use?
You might wish to consider a universal home delivery service (in addition to the scheme for housebound people), and enabling people to request a book online.
- Only a third of 16-24 year olds now visit public libraries. How can we ensure that young people who leave full time education remain library users?
- How can we improve our understanding of the people who use libraries – and of the people who do not – in order to improve services to them?
- How might library users have a greater voice in decision making

Q12

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

COMMERCIAL ACTIVITIES & PARTNERSHIPS

Research shows that over 80% of library services already operate a procurement partnership; over 60% are co-located with another service and over 30% have developed shared services. While there are

excellent examples across the country of partnership working – as illustrated by our case studies – sometimes library services remain risk averse and unwilling to drive change.

Q13

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

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

Q14

Where can libraries learn from the commercial sector and what private partnerships can you think of which have been useful for library services?

- How can we better spread good practice here?

LOCATION AND BUILDINGS

In 2006 estimates prepared for MLA identified a need for £760m to make the library estate fit for purpose and Disability Discrimination Act compliant. But how many buildings and in which locations are needed to deliver a modern public library service?

Q15

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

Q16

Co-location of libraries with other public services, schools and colleges or business is becoming increasingly prevalent. When is co-location successful and what factors should LAs consider in making co-location decisions?

Q17

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

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

TRAINING, LEADERSHIP AND SERVICES FOR STAFF

Library services need a flexible and user responsive workforce to offer the level of customer experience that the public expects, but while we have discovered excellent best practice while preparing this paper, we know that many services remain unable to meet this challenge.

Traditional information skills – such as good understanding of information resources – remain important to the delivery of library services, but other skills are becoming increasingly critical for their future success.

Q18

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

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

Q19

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

HOW SHOULD WE MONITOR LIBRARY PERFORMANCE AND WHAT SHOULD WE ASPIRE TO?

Local Authorities have a statutory responsibility to provide a 'comprehensive and efficient' library service under the 1964 Act and the Secretary of State has a power to intervene if a Local Authority is in breach of that responsibility but 'comprehensive & efficient' is not defined in statute or guidance. Contributors to the initial stages of this review questioned whether introducing such a definition would discourage excellence by incentivising library services to work to the definition and provide the 'minimum required.'

Q20

Is it important that libraries remain a statutory obligation for local authorities?

- What might be the advantages and disadvantages?
- For instance, would the removal of statute allow greater flexibility for fundraising or different modes of operation currently off limits?

Q21

Is the obligation to provide a 'comprehensive and efficient' library service the correct one?

- Does it need further definition or guidance around what that means or should the interpretation be left to local authorities?
- For instance, should there be more prescription around opening hours, web presence, service provision, staff skill mix?

Q22

How should we measure performance?

You might like to consider:

- Is there a need for less, more or different local or national monitoring?
- Are visits and books borrowed still relevant?
- What else should we consider and measure when determining the efficiency and effectiveness of our libraries?
- Would an accreditation scheme for libraries be beneficial or are there other systems which might incentivise libraries to deliver more effectively?
- Is the Secretary of State's power to intervene still appropriate?

Q23

What research do we need to do to best demonstrate the benefits of the library service to local and national leaders? Who would be best placed to initiate this research?