

# ***Independent Review of Public Libraries: a consultation.*** **Response from “The Network – tackling social exclusion ...”**

## **Background**

The Network<sup>1</sup> was formed in May 1999 as a legacy of the then Library and Information Commission-funded research project, "Public Library Policy and Social Exclusion", the report of which was published under the title, *Open to all?*<sup>2</sup>

The Network's mission is “to assist the cultural sector, including libraries, museums, archives and galleries, heritage and other organisations, to work towards social justice.”

We run courses, seminars and conferences, and publish a monthly Newsletter and regular Ebulletins, and also coordinate a number of email lists. The Network carries out specific projects; in the past, these have included working as a partner in the “Welcome To Your Library” project (public libraries' role in supporting new arrivals), and working with the Paul Hamlyn Foundation to promote the role that libraries play in supporting children and young people in care.

## **Introduction**

The intention here is to focus primarily on the key role that public libraries play in working towards social justice, and consider that this must be one of the core principles now and into the future.

In broad terms:

"Social Justice is about every one of us having the chances and opportunities to make the most of our lives and use our talents to the full."<sup>3</sup>

For libraries, it must involve:

- Embracing equality and diversity
- Focusing on a needs-based service and targeting resources towards those who need them most
- Knowing and understanding the components of the local community
- Having an active, collaborative role in empathising and working in partnership with the local community
- Fully engaging the community in all aspects of the service
- Free at point of delivery – especially free use of ICT.

## **Detailed response**

Here is our response to the three questions.

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<sup>1</sup> See: [www.seapn.org.uk](http://www.seapn.org.uk).

<sup>2</sup> *Open to all? The public library and social exclusion. Volume 1: overview and conclusions.* Resource, 2000. [http://www.mla.gov.uk/resources/assets/L/lic084\\_pdf\\_5679.pdf](http://www.mla.gov.uk/resources/assets/L/lic084_pdf_5679.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> *Social justice report 2005.* Welsh Assembly, 2005, p1, <http://www.assemblywales.org/bus-home/bus-committees/bus-committees-previous-committees/bus-committees-second-sjr-home/bus-committees-second-sjr-agendas/n00000000000000000000000000000031757.pdf?langoption=3&ttl=SJR%2008-05%20%28p-3%29%2>.

## 1. What are the core principles of a public library service into the future?

We want to look at the key role that public libraries play in working towards social justice, and consider that this must be one of the core principles now and into the future.

As noted above, for libraries, work towards social justice must involve:

- Embracing equality and diversity
- Focusing on a needs-based service and targeting resources towards those who need them most
- Knowing and understanding the components of the local community and delivering services responsive to their needs
- Having an active, collaborative role in empathising and working in partnership with the local community
- Fully engaging the community in all aspects of the service.
- Free at point of delivery – especially free use of ICT.

Work in at least the first three of these areas has gone on for as long as public libraries have existed, but is sometimes either overlooked or downplayed in favour of "number-crunching" (the number of visits or issues, the number of people attending events, etc). This is not to downplay the importance of value-for-money and cost-effectiveness, but it is often the intangible, more complex benefits that are what people remember about a service. The real danger of the numbers approach is that provision with and for particularly needy and vulnerable people – which may involve small numbers of individuals and relatively few loans – gets pushed to one side as library services try to draw crowds. For example, one of libraries' most successful areas of work is in supporting reading by and the development of literacy of looked-after children (children in local authority care), yet the numbers in any one local authority area may be quite tiny, and, because of the previous experiences of the young people, it may be a struggle at first to get them to read/borrow; however, we know that the eventual benefits may be life-changing and lifelong.

An additional core principle of the way in which public libraries work should be that they actively evaluate the impact of their practice (using, for example, "Inspiring Learning for All" and the Generic Social Outcomes) to demonstrate with tangible evidence the effect they have on their local communities.

Libraries (and mobile libraries), often situated at the heart of communities, as well as being a physical presence, play an important role in developing a literate community – supporting reading, financial literacy, IT literacy – all of which are vital for the economic development of the UK. The role of libraries in providing information to allow citizens to make informed choices should not be underestimated, along with the role that reading and learning play in the wellbeing of the nation.

One of our concerns is that the more libraries become seen as material-delivery points (with even talk of Ocado-type services), the less opportunity there will be for this work to continue and flourish; as contact between library staff and their community dwindles, so these opportunities fade too.

Yet, despite all this, there are numerous examples of extraordinary work being carried out in public libraries, not just as one-off projects, but as continuing pieces of work – many of which may also be under threat as local authorities consider scaling back library services.

Examples of outstanding work can be seen on the CILIP website<sup>4</sup>, as finalists for the CILIP Libraries Change Lives Award in 2012 and 2013, including:

- *Domestic Abuse – how Surrey Libraries can help*, Surrey County Council Libraries
- *Dementia Friendly Libraries in Kent*, Kent County Council Libraries, Registration and Archives
- *Reading and You*, Kirklees Libraries and Information Centres
- *Library Songwriters: Skipton Rewind Club*, North Yorkshire County Council & North Yorkshire Youth Music Action Zone
- *Reminiscence Collection*, Norfolk Library and Information Service and Norfolk Museum & Archaeology Service
- *The Digital Bazaar*, Lambeth Libraries and Archives.

## **2. Is the current delivery of the public library service the most comprehensive and efficient?**

As we noted in our response in January 2012 to the House of Commons Inquiry into Public Library Closures:

“Our starting point is that there may well be occasions when the closure of a public library is necessary, for example when the centre of a community has moved, and the library is simply in the wrong place and usage is falling; or when there are libraries in neighbouring local authorities, which are very close to each other (as in parts of London), and where rationalisation of the service would be beneficial.

However, since the publication of the Charteris Report, the methods for undertaking such closures – including full and thorough public consultation – have been clarified, and there should now not be occasions when local authorities decide to close libraries arbitrarily and without such consultation.”<sup>5</sup>

However, the random closure – and/or handing over to the community – of public libraries since 2012 now means that service provision in many local authorities is patchy, and, in some, moving towards being non-existent.

We believe that all the evidence required to make an assessment of the state of public library provision across the UK already exists (and query therefore why another Review has been deemed necessary); however, given that there is one, then the Review needs to grapple with the very serious issues that face public libraries today, including funding and other resources; geographical spread; purpose; governance – at the moment, it feels as though libraries are a sort of “pass the parcel” with no one taking real responsibility for them, and this needs to be sorted out urgently, for example:

- Should they remain in local authority control?
- If they do, how do we ensure that each local authority really provides a comprehensive and efficient service?
- Can we reintroduce some form of Standards and monitoring?

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<sup>4</sup> See: <http://www.cilip.org.uk/cilip/advocacy-awards-and-projects/awards-and-medals/libraries-change-lives-award/past-libraries>.

<sup>5</sup> See: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmcomeds/writev/library/lib032.htm>

- What is the role of DCMS? And the Arts Council?

We fear that, if these critical issues are not grasped, then this Review – along with others – will be filed and not acted upon.

### **What is the role of community libraries in the delivery of a library offer?**

As the Panel will be well aware, there are library services have worked tremendously hard to build partnerships with local communities, with the voluntary sector, and across the local authority in order to get closer to what people need from libraries and to find innovative ways of providing (and, in some cases, co-providing) services to meet these needs. Just a few examples include the work by Southend Library Service with Polish and other new communities; work by East Sussex Library Service around adult learning, and health and wellbeing; work by Norfolk Library Service around IT literacy for older people, and supporting people with memory loss; Suffolk Library Service's "Top Time" clubs run by and for older people; libraries' positive work with volunteers and work-experience placements.

However, we assume that it is not this form of "community library" that the Review is looking at, but the volunteer/community-run libraries that so many local authorities are experimenting with.

The danger of this approach to running library services is all too evident: poor quality services, often run by goodwill and enthusiasm, but without any real professional input; dwindling bookstock which is not actively promoted by people who (understandably) do not have the skills and experience to do so; poor levels of information-giving; and, for us, most important of all, no real understanding of or involvement in the provision that public libraries can develop to work towards social justice.

There is growing evidence that, whilst some communities may well have the 'social capital' to enable them to take over and run public services, they may, at the same time, not be the communities that most need public libraries – and, conversely, the communities that need our services most may not be well placed to volunteer to run them.

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March 2014