Libraries Deliver: Ambition for Public Libraries in England 2016-2021
Response from "The Network – tackling social exclusion …"

Background

The Network[1] 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?*[2]

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 consider this to be critical part of libraries' work, as outlined briefly below.

We run and contribute to 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); working with the Paul Hamlyn Foundation to promote the role that libraries play in supporting children and young people in care; as well as contributing to books, journal articles and blogposts in the UK and abroad.

Social justice

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."[3]

Working towards social justice is vital for all kinds of library services. It must involve in outline:

- Embracing equality and diversity
- Focusing on a needs-based service and targeting resources towards those who need them most
- Having a clear understanding of the whole context in which the local community operates
- Knowing and understanding the components of the local community
- Having an active, collaborative role in empathising and working in partnership with the local community

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[1] See: www.seapn.org.uk.
[2] *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.
[3] Taken from: http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20081007160501/new.wales.gov.uk/topics/socialjustice/?lang=en.

- Fully engaging the community, moving as far as possible towards co-production of service provision.[4]

A key issue for us in looking at *Libraries Deliver* is how far it considers the context in which people are living in 2016 – and what we can forecast for the years 2017-2021. There is certainly some consideration of this, particularly in the "Assumptions" section (18.2), although some of these are very woolly and some, to be frank, are fatuous – eg "Libraries will continue to focus on not only having a seat at the decision-making table but setting the table". Social justice hardly seems to touch this world …

We would want to see *Libraries Deliver* addressing some of the following issues, none of which is likely to have disappeared by 2021:

- The increasing polarisation of rich and poor, and increasing inequality in the UK
- The increasing health gap between rich and poor
- The increase in poverty, for example as manifested by the growth of food-banks
- The removal of public services and the effects this has on people dependant on them
- The reduction in the public sphere, with, for example, fewer places where people can freely meet
- The growth in racism and Islamophobia, as well as hostility to migration
- The growing evidence of corruption at the heart of society, for example in the police (Hillsborough, undercover policing), in politics (expenses scandals).

Where are these issues – which the best public libraries are engaging with – reflected in this paper?[5]

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Response to the consultation on the Independent Review and assessment of the final report

The Network responded in March 2014 to the *Independent Review of Public Libraries: a consultation*[6].

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[4] There is more about libraries and social justice in John Vincent's guest post for "Envisioning the library of the future" for ACE, https://librariesconversation.wordpress.com/2012/03/22/future-libraries-by-john-vincent-the-network/.

[5] IPPR have just published an interesting discussion paper which poses a number of other vital questions that must be grappled with – see: Gavin Kelly <u>and</u> Nick Pearce. *Don't stop thinking about tomorrow: Labour, social democracy and the 2020s*. IPPR, 2016, http://www.ippr.org/juncture/dont-stop-thinking-about-tomorrow-labour-social-democracy-and-the-2020s?utm_source=IPPR+weekly+newsletter&utm_campaign=2b921b6824-IPPR-news160429_pay-parenthd_tax-havs_comm-energy&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_0b30c067fe-2b921b6824-277593261.

[6] Available at: http://www.seapn.org.uk/uploads/files/Independent-Review-of-Public-Libraries-2.pdf.

Following publication of the final report, we assessed this in our regular Newsletter[7], and commented:

> "The report clearly takes on board some social justice issues which come through very strongly in the Foreword, eg:
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> - "Despite the growth in digital technologies, there is still a clear need and demand within communities for modern, safe, non-judgemental, flexible spaces, where citizens of all ages can mine the knowledge of the world for free, supported by the help and knowledge of the library workforce. This is particularly true for the most vulnerable in society who need support and guidance and to children and young people who benefit from engagement with libraries outside of the formal classroom environment." [p5]
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> - "The library does more than simply loan books. It underpins every community. It is not just a place for self-improvement, but the supplier of an infrastructure for life and learning, from babies to old age, offering support, help, education, and encouraging a love of reading. Whether you wish to apply for a job, or seek housing benefit, or understand your pension rights or the health solutions available to you, or learn to read, the library can assist." [p5]
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> - "[Libraries] are not only safe places for literacy and learning, they have also been the starting point of empowerment for many citizens who lack opportunities at home. And, in many cases, across the country, there are outstanding examples of libraries who benefit, and engage with, their local lives and communities." [p6]
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> - "Libraries could and should play a major role in rectifying literacy standards. A re-energised library network would be a natural and established partner for every school, as well as being the provider of courses in both literacy and adult education." [p6]
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> Yet, somehow, these strong aims get watered down as the report progresses, and it becomes more and more engaged with digital detail […]
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> [However], it doesn't seem to follow through from its strong Foreword beginnings.
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> This is exemplified by the case studies. These are all excellent library services (Northamptonshire, for example, having won the 2014 CILIP Libraries Change Lives Award, and Devon and York are clearly providing a range of services to engage the wider community), and the examples of other partnerships (such as with "Learn My Way" and with CABx) are important, but it comes across as though 'digital' has to be the answer to everything, rather than an aspect of increasing public libraries' service for socially excluded people."

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[7] *The Network Newsletter* …, 165, January 2015, pp7-11. Available at: http://www.seapn.org.uk/uploads/files/Newsletter-NS-165.pdf.

We concluded:

> "It is really important that this Review is acted upon urgently, and there are good, practical steps that can be taken immediately, but its ambition needs to be wider if it is to make a real difference to public libraries, and, more importantly, to the communities they serve."

In March 2015, John Vincent emailed Paul Blantern to say:

> "I thought that the final report was excellent, but also felt that the social justice elements had gone missing – I'm not 100% sure that everyone understands what is meant by 'social justice', or the role that libraries have!

> I'm emailing to ask if it would be possible for the Task Force to include some actions around social justice, building on some of this excellent work that is already going on."

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Response to _Libraries Deliver …_

Again, as with our response to the initial consultation, we are going to concentrate on the social justice elements. It seems most straightforward to follow the same order as the document does.

3. Context

3.1 What people want from libraries

The points about people's needs changing over time and the ability for libraries to respond to acute needs are extremely important, and the examples in Figures 2.1 and 2.2 illustrate this well.

However, whilst we take the point that "This moves away from ideas of users (people who regularly use a library over the course of their life) and lapsed or non-users", nevertheless, if people do not know what a library offers (or have not used one for a long time – if ever), then they will not know that the library provides a "cradle to grave" service or that they can respond to acute needs. Just concentrating on 'what people want' is too limited.

One small point: it would be helpful if the signposting role that libraries play was highlighted in Figure 2.2, especially, for example, for people "Arriving in the country".

There are also ways in which public libraries support people whose needs may become critical, but who are not shown in Figure 2.2, for example, young people being bullied, trans people wanting to find out more about transitioning, BME people wanting to find themselves reflected in society somewhere, sex workers wanting to read up on contraception and sources of support. We would like to see the much wider role that

public libraries play – particularly with socially excluded groups who may already be victimised/despised – highlighted here.

3.2 Envisioning the Library of the Future

Another small point, and this has been raised with ACE, but libraries are not "open to all". Repeating this statement hides just how much work there needs to be to make libraries really welcoming and 'open to all'.[8]

3.4 Legislative framework

Three issues:

- The role of the Government to intervene in clearly failing library services needs to be clarified and strengthened. At present, we appear to have a position where the buck is passed continually from central to local government, and back, without any resolution.
- At the local level, library provision is very much a 'postcode lottery', and there needs to be some form of national 'supervision'.
- The current provision lacks proper planning and monitoring, and we would recommend revisiting the Annual Library Plan, standards, and transparent monitoring of how library services perform against these.
- We agree with the point made by Leon Bolton in his guest blogpost[9]:
  - "Creation of an independent advisory body similar to the Scottish Library and Information Council."

4. Vision

The vision in this document seems right:

"We aim to support and champion a public library network that is:
- available to everyone, free at the point-of-use
- appropriately resourced and sustainable
- nationally consistent but responsive to local needs and priorities
- marketed effectively to promote use by the widest possible audience"

4.1 Libraries deliver value

"Public libraries provide free, universal access to books, online resources, information, ideas and creativity supported by skilled, friendly people and up-to-date technology."

Libraries certainly aim to provide all these (limited currently by the staffing and resources levels, and how up-to-date the technology actually is), but we do not consider these to be

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[8] See: *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.
[9] See: https://librariestaskforce.blog.gov.uk/2016/04/13/libraries-without-boundaries/.

value. For us, the value that libraries should provide is in the impact they have on people's lives – please see our comments on the following section.

4.2 Libraries deliver impact

Again, these seem right, as far as they go. However, they also seem a bit too 'safe', and it would be good if they became 'grittier', for example including how libraries can have an impact on people's lives in relation to the contextual issues mentioned above.

More importantly, we do not consider that these are really 'impacts', but examples of 'tools' that libraries may provide.

We think that what this document needs to include – and emphasise – is the impact that libraries have on people's lives. Here are just a very few examples:

- CILIP Libraries Change Lives Award finalists (and the films highlight the impact on people's lives even further)[10]:

- The impact of reading, shared reading, and bibliotherapy:

  - "I came to this event as I was curious, I was not sure I would enjoy it but my son talked me into it as he suggested I might meet people. It has been a lovely afternoon, I have not spoken to my generation so much for over 2 years, and the whole event has made me feel life is worthwhile after all. It was so nice to meet people, I have no friends here, I moved up here to be near the family when my husband died and I feel like a spare part, this has been a real treat." (Norfolk)
  - "On an acute psychiatric admission ward after a session the Occupational Therapist member of staff commented, 'That was a really good session. S hasn't been brushing her hair or wearing make-up as she usually does but she's left the session with a book to read. J was brought in wearing handcuffs the other day and yet she sat through this session and spoke and listened, left with a book to read and also the details of the Huddersfield readers group which she wants to join – and I think she will turn up.' I was giving out free copies of a World Book Night Book. And J did turn up for the group and is now a regular!" (Kirklees)[11]

- Work to support health and wellbeing:

  - "The Nostalgics is a social group which meets at Care Plus Groups' Queen Street Health and Well-being Centre in Grimsby. The group is for the over

[10] Taken from: http://www.cilip.org.uk/cilip/advocacy-campaigns-awards/libraries-change-lives-award/finalists-libraries-change-lives-award; and http://www.cilip.org.uk/cilip/advocacy-awards-and-projects/awards-and-medals/libraries-change-lives-award/past-libraries.

[11] Examples taken from: John Vincent. "An overlooked resource? Public libraries' work with older people – an introduction", *Working with Older People,* 18 (4), 2014, pp214-222. Permanent link to this document: http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/WWOP-06-2014-0018.

60s with a learning disability, many of whom had lost contact with friends over the years and who found it difficult to reconnect with them and communicate with others. Staff from the library service were invited to work with the group using photographs from the Library Local History Collection. The photographs have helped to stimulate conversation and bring back memories. Some of these memories were recorded as part of an oral history project. The secret of The Nostalgics is that it has become a hub of reconnection, drawing old friends back together and providing the building blocks for re-establishing friendships and making new ones. In some cases the group has really been a lifeline giving people a reason to go out, a new reason to be happy and providing a new support in what is often a very isolated world" (North East Lincolnshire)[12]

The impact needs to be thought through in terms of each of the Purposes, as these often have Ambitions that include counting numbers of things, rather than the impact the provision is having on individuals and communities.

6-12. Purposes

These are all absolutely vital, and clearly set out here. However, the "Ambitions for 2021" are not really much of a 'stretch' – where are the real ambitions which would give libraries, their communities and politicians something to really aim for? We have not commented on all the detail of the Purposes, just those that relate most to the social justice agenda.

6. Purpose 1: Reading and literacy

The points listed in the "Libraries deliver" section are important, but are also very limited (as, indeed, is the SCL National Offer). They seem passive (and also have a whiff of reading snobbery in them with comments such as "access to quality books" and "appropriate reading materials"). The vital importance of reading to health and wellbeing could also have been emphasised here.

The ambitions for 2021 are a striking example of the weakness of the vision for public libraries (we have taken each "ambition" and added comments to it):

- improve England's ranking for literacy in the OECD
  - How? What actions are there going to be to ensure that this happens? Is the OECD ranking even the measure that should be used?

- universal library membership for children, resulting in active borrowing and participation in reading-based activity
  - Again, how? Universal library membership is a terrific idea, but what is going to take place to ensure that it results in "active borrowing"?

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[12] Example taken from: John Vincent. "An overlooked resource? Public libraries' work with older people – an introduction", *Working with Older People,* 18 (4), 2014, pp214-222. Permanent link to this document: http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/WWOP-06-2014-0018.

- all libraries offering a wide range of reading programmes including the Summer Reading Challenge and seeing an increase in the number of children, young people, adults and families participating (both as readers and volunteers)
    - This seems too focused on the quantity of people involved, as opposed to the quality of the impact of this experience. How is the real impact on people's lives going to be assessed? It is reminiscent of those arguments in favour of class visits to libraries – in the end, the focus was always on the number of children involved and the volume of materials they borrowed, rather than whether they actually read the books, and what the impact was.

- systematic evaluation of impact of literacy and reading programmes
    - What does this mean? How? What will it prove?

- increased numbers of people reading for pleasure
    - How will we know? What baseline figure will be used? How will their "reading for pleasure" be assessed?

7. Purpose 2: Digital literacy

This is absolutely critical in so many ways, for example: the importance of people gaining and maintaining digital literacy; the increasing need to have digital skills to be able to access a huge range of services and information; the fact that those people likely to be digitally excluded are older and disabled people, those who live in social housing, those on lower incomes, unemployed and economically inactive people; and these are also the key audiences for libraries.

It seems to us that the "ambitions" are again very unambitious. For example, by 2021, surely we should have moved beyond "all public libraries delivering an active Digital Inclusion programme" – what is going to be the future role of public libraries in the 'digital world'? What kind of information should we be providing, for example to pick up on some of the issues listed at the top of page 2?

What should the impact of all this work be? The "ambitions" need to address this, and will also need to show how libraries can prove that they have made a contribution to the "Digital engagement dashboard".

8. Purpose 3: Health and wellbeing

The "ambitions" for Health and wellbeing seem particularly unambitious! To be frank, they read as 'more of the same', as well as being unclear – for example, what does "improvements in health and wellbeing indicators delivered through libraries" actually mean? How will this be achieved?

Unless more detail is added to these – and the other "ambitions" throughout – the could well be read as a series of empty promises.

9. Purpose 4: Economic growth

The role that public libraries can play in this area has been recognised for some considerable time (and, perhaps, most recently by the award of the CILIP Libraries Change Lives Award to Northamptonshire for their work).

The "ambitions" and indicators are useful, but it would also be helpful, in our view, to link this Purpose more closely to Purpose 6. Clearly there are very few areas of the UK where such provision is not needed, but the development of services such as job-clubs and enterprise hubs needs to be very closely tied into community need, not just provided because they are 'a good thing'.

10. Purpose 5: Culture and creativity

The important role of libraries as creative spaces – not just places where 'culture' is consumed – is not highlighted here; for example, reference could have been made back to the makerspaces point in Purpose 2, and to the superb work being undertaken by St Helens via its "Cultural Hubs".

The "ambitions" are very weak, and, again, there is no indication given as to how the impact of these activities will be assessed.

11. Purpose 6: Communities

In terms of Purpose 6, the set of deliverables cover exactly what we would hope libraries strive to do:

> "Libraries deliver:
> * safer and stronger communities
> * thriving neighbourhoods
> * tackling poverty and social exclusion
> * combating disadvantage
> * opportunities to 'give back' and share skills through volunteering"

However, the ambitions for 2021 seem rather broad and very weak, and the statement (from "Public libraries contribute directly to community cohesion" through to "[…] libraries will play an invaluable role in community members' lives.") lacks teeth.

We understand the purpose of setting out such an ambition document, but also consider that some of the ultra-positive statements (such as "Each public library is at the heart of its community, supported by trained staff skilled in community engagement and customer service") do not reflect the total reality, and may therefore make some people think the whole exercise is one of self-promotion.

In addition, surely an "ambition" ought to be that there are public libraries available, and available at the right time to meet people's needs?

The ambition that "By 2021, through providing free access to government information, digital government services, employment assistance and more, libraries will play an invaluable role in community members' lives" is important, but seems to again be concentrating on libraries' digital role when there are so many other aspects that should be included.

Incidentally, there do seem to be a lot of mentions of programmes being run by The Reading Agency – there is a lot of other work going on, which also deserves to be mentioned.

12. Purpose 7: Learning

It seems to us that this section is also particularly weak. For example, the role of libraries in learning – formal and informal – is not really explored, literacy and digital literacy (which one might expect to be a main focus here) are hardly covered, and, again, the "ambitions" are not a 'stretch' for many public libraries.

In more detail:

- measurable improvements in learning support provided through libraries
  - What exactly does this mean? By whom to whom? What will be measured? And how will the <u>impact</u> of this work be assessed?

- investment in learning and skills programmes in libraries
  - Again, similar questions: investment by whom? What exactly needs investment? We think that an ambition should set out how libraries are intending to develop, the means of getting there, and how the impact of this development on their communities is assessed.

- increased partnerships with learning providers including schools and colleges, prisons and the informal sector
  - There are already masses of partnerships up-and-running – what will these proposed partnerships expect to achieve? What this proposal also ignores is the impact of the cuts in funding. To take one example, the pressure on prisons' (and prison libraries') budgets means that the opportunities for partnership working within and without the prison are now curtailed.

The Indicators are also very weak. To make it clear, we are great supporters of The Reading Agency, and work with them on a regular basis. However, it seems very odd, to say the least, that a national indicator for the success of a public library policy should be participation in a Reading Agency programme!

14. Governance and delivery

14.3 Evidence-based planning

This proposed mapping of provision is much needed, especially to help resolve issues where neighbouring local authorities do not plan their services jointly. However, the

assumption that "If there is a reduction in the overall number of physical service points, we would expect the remaining libraries to provide enhanced services, eg fewer but better" is not necessarily going to be the case if there is no control introduced into how libraries are governed and funded.

In addition, surely this "evidence" needs to include assessments of impact? Throughout the document, the emphasis is on quantity – which, in our view, has been a major fault with the way that many libraries think they can prove their worth and value.

14.4 Investing in the future

We also agree with this point made by Leon Bolton in his guest blogpost[13]:

- "Direct central government funding for libraries, availability of national funding opportunities, and emphasis on realistic local income generation"

15. New ways of working

15.2 Evidence-driven decision making

This is clearly critical – but, as noted above, there also needs to be a focus on areas of library work that are not so easily counted (and the full recognition of the importance of work with target groups that may be very small in number, such as looked-after children, but where the impact on their lives is immense).

15.3 Income generation

To reiterate Leon Bolton's point, it is vital that public libraries are properly funded to start with, and, whilst there are opportunities for income-generation, these should neither replace activities with the local community nor mean that local people are then charged for services that should be provided free-of-charge.

16. Marketing and communications

16.1 National campaigns

It is vital that these opportunities are developed, but this section is far too libraries-focused. We would recommend linking with other celebrations and campaigns where libraries can make a real impact and also link with like-minded organisations: examples include Black History Month, Disability History Month, LGBT History Month, the planned commemorations next year of the passing of the 1967 Sexual Offences Act.

16.3 Making the case for libraries

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[13] See: https://librariestaskforce.blog.gov.uk/2016/04/13/libraries-without-boundaries/.

The five connected priorities are very important – we would add a sixth which is about engaging with and gathering support from local communities altogether (not just local leaders and politicians).

17. Action plan

All this is very laudable, but is also quite limited – especially being so digitally-focused, and we would want to see the action plan developed and expanded to include many more types of actions, plus ways of tackling the contextual issues – and more!