MLA Social Justice and Inclusion Topical Workshop, 5 July 2007

Introduction

This workshop was one of 3 which were held during July 2007[1] to look in more depth at particular aspects of *Blueprint for excellence*, the consultation document produced by MLA in February 2007. The list of participants is attached as Appendix 1.

It began by discussing definitions of the various terms used (*social justice, social in/exclusion, community cohesion, community engagement*), which are attached as Appendix 2.

For the purposes of this workshop, we took the overall context in which we are working to be one of aiming for *social justice*, with tackling *social exclusion* as being a key action, along with our contribution to *community cohesion*. *Community engagement* we took to be one of the means of achieving all this.

The workshop then went on to consider four questions:

> Q1: Do you think that libraries have a strong role to play in the social justice agenda, and, if so, what kinds of work are libraries doing now?

> Q2: And what kinds of work would you like to see libraries developing?

> Q3: Do you think libraries contribute actively to community cohesion, and, if so, how? What more could they do?

> Q4: Community engagement is critical to getting this work off the ground. How well do you think libraries are doing, and what should they do differently to develop this?

This paper incorporates the proposals, points made and discussions from the workshop, and adds to that further thinking and recommendations.

What role do libraries play in the social justice agenda?

There are often assumptions that, when we talk about 'social justice' or other policy issues, this means that we should stop what we are doing now, and start working to a completely different agenda. The reality is very different: to use Alison Wheeler's phrase[2], we need to reflect both the intrinsic value (the

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[1] The others were on Literacy and Health. There were similar workshops on Workforce Development and Research and Evidence

[2] Taken from Alison Wheeler's paper to the conference, "Delivering Sustainable Communities through Libraries" 28 June 2007, "Local Area Agreements: using libraries to unlock funding and achieve local outcomes". Alison is Adult Services Manager, Suffolk Libraries, Archives and Information.

direct value to individuals, groups and communities) and the instrumental value (what libraries can do to support other services' agendas and priorities) of libraries.

We also need to continue to provide services to our existing users (bearing in mind any re-prioritising of services – see below). This must involve our re-thinking our approaches to them, as we often overlook the fact that existing users may also be socially excluded in some way.

Social justice

The Workshop was unanimous in its view that libraries can contribute hugely to social justice. We also need to be very clear about the entitlement that people should have to services from libraries.

At the same time, however, libraries also need to spend more time defining what exactly their own agenda and role are within the national social justice agenda – for example, will participating in this work help us to obtain further resources?

Tackling social exclusion

Again, the Workshop was fully agreed that libraries can play a large part in tackling social exclusion. A few examples include:

- Working with young people excluded from school
- Providing looked-after children with resources to support their move from Year 6 to Year 7
- And using knowledge gained from such work to change bureaucratic systems within the library
- Working with prisoners and ex-prisoners to help them maintain and develop their links with their families
- Providing a link for isolated elderly people with day-to-day goings-on in the outside world.

However, there is also considerable evidence that some libraries need to do much more in this area, particularly to develop effective means of community engagement.

Community cohesion

> *A good library does contribute to community cohesion, but a bad library can harm it.* [quote from Workshop participant]

Community cohesion requires a dynamic, interactive approach, not one that just works ad-hoc. As Alison Gilchrist suggests:

> "… there has been an over-reliance on 'contact theory', which argues that simply encouraging people from different groups to undertake joint

activities and to learn a bit about each other can reduce hostility and ignorance."[3]

Following some research for MLA South East, John Vincent concluded that:

> "for a piece of work to be considered as contributing to community cohesion, it needed to have:
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> - A focus on the 'bigger picture' (eg countering racism, healing inter-generational rifts)
> - The intention to contribute to community cohesion
> - A strategic approach with long-term goals
> - A change of culture for the service concerned
> - The development of strong and healthy partnerships
> - Sustainability – longer-term work, not one-off projects (unless these in turn lead to the longer-term)."[4]

There are certainly good examples of this kind of work being undertaken by libraries, eg:

- Running conversation classes and other community-based activities for groups of refugees, asylum-seekers and migrant workers
- Storytelling sessions where parents and library staff come together with young children to tell stories in a range of languages and to share 'cultural learning' (eg stories and proverbs).

What do we need to do, and what do we need to do differently, to contribute more to the social justice agenda?

Libraries and their communities

> *We should actively involve local people in the planning, design, delivery and evaluation of local services. They should have a real stake, power in spending the resources and setting their own measures of libraries' performance*. [quote from Workshop participant]

"Community" has become an over-used term, and one which means different things to different people. Here we are using it to mean the people – service-users, non-users and lapsed users – who potentially could make use of library services.

The relationship between a library service and its community is at the crux of the issues we considered. Many library services are engaging fully with local

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[3] Alison Gilchrist. *Community cohesion and community development: bridges or barricades?* Community Development Foundation, 2004, p13.
[4] John Vincent. *Libraries and community cohesion: a paper for the South East Museum, Library and Archive Council*. SEMLAC, 2005. Available at: http://www.mlasoutheast.org.uk/assets/documents/100005EAlibrariescommunitycohesion.pdf, accessed 25 July 2007.

people, moving far beyond mere provision of services, via consultation, towards community-led services – however, others seem stuck in a supply-and-demand, transactional model which is increasingly irrelevant to many people's lives (and out-of-step with the general political direction in the UK).

We would therefore recommend that libraries develop the following approaches:

- Engaging with local people – and as many people as possible, rather than just those who always engage – to develop joint approaches to providing services which reflect local people's needs (recognised and unrecognised).

- Ensuring that the 'distance' between the library and the community is made as small as possible, for example by recruiting local people to work in the library service (this in itself may, of course, contribute to community cohesion by showing that the library reflects the local community).

- Ensuring that libraries are seen as community spaces – or developed within another facility (such as Children's Centres, as in Leicester and Suffolk).

- Library staff are fully aware of the complexities of working with their communities. This requires a shift in thinking about whose library it is, how to manage tensions between different community demands, etc.

- Working with partners (eg via Local Area Agreements) to ensure that libraries are part of achieving wider outcomes, and that partners fully understand what skills and resources libraries are offering and become advocates for our services.

Overcoming barriers to the take-up of service

We need to take a good, sharp look at ourselves. During Network training courses, for example, participants look at barriers, grouped under the four headings that DCMS[5] used:

- Institutional
- Perception
- Social
- Environmental.

Apart from the liberating effect of talking about the (often) appalling image of public libraries and their staff, this work allows library workers to identify a wide range of issues which affect people's take-up of library services and, subsequently, to start working on ways of removing the barriers.

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[5] *Libraries for all: social inclusion in public libraries – policy guidance for local authorities in England.* DCMS, 1999.

- We therefore recommend that all library services carry out this kind of audit, involving all staff (frontline staff are particularly aware of many of the barriers) and also the local community and other service-providers/stake-holders.

- Drawn from work that has already been undertaken, we can identify some examples of the kinds of barriers that need to be considered for removal:
  - Complex joining procedures, requiring form-filling and ID
  - Charges, especially for children and for socially excluded people
  - Physical barriers, such as dominating issue/enquiry desks
  - Stock arrangement and labelling that employ terms used only by librarians!
  - Perception barriers, such as libraries not being for me/only being for posh, middle-class people, etc.

New ways of working

What 'new ways of working' are we talking about? The workshop discussed a number (to which more have been added). These include the need to:

- Emphasise 'outward-facing' skills, rather than internally-focused work – the importance of dialogue with local people
- Adopt a radical, forwards-looking agenda for libraries
- Focus on outcomes
- Work in partnership, making alliances with others
- Learn how to work to achieve wider outcomes than just those of the library service
- Develop greater political awareness, especially when we become more involved with different factions within a community
- Continually assess the role that libraries play – are we the right people to be delivering this particular service, or would we be better commissioning/supporting someone else to do it?
- Take positive action – for example to recruit people who otherwise might never consider working in a library.

Given this, the workshop spent some time considering staffing, especially given the huge range of issues that we expect library staff to deal with.

We agreed that, whilst some 'traditional' librarianship skills were essential, we also needed people with a range of other skills and abilities – and that it was frequently difficult to recruit librarians with the required skills (for example in working in the community). Therefore, we recommend that:

- Library services review their staffing profiles (for example, how far they reflect their local community, what age/gender spread they have) and look at ways of changing this as necessary (eg by recruiting people

with qualifications and experience in other fields, who can take on a more community-based, entrepreneurial role).

- Library services review their training priorities to ensure that they are investing in frontline staff.

- As part of this development of work towards social justice, library services also actively embrace a change of culture (for example, towards a whole-service approach).

- All development work also involves challenging staff attitudes.

- Library staff are trained to deal with the complex issues that arise via full community engagement – for example by learning to analyse what the issues are, who might be able to assist in resolving them, etc. Real community engagement is a dynamic, exciting process, not one to be shied away from.

- Leadership is critical. Libraries need leaders who will advocate, engage, communicate, support … and who will ensure that these required changes actually occur.

Prioritising resources

> *There needs to be some discrimination over what libraries offer. There is currently too much provision of varying quality. We need to find really excluded people and develop staff's awareness of the basics of people's needs.* [quote from Workshop participant]

- Libraries cannot be all things to all people, and therefore must prioritise their resources.

- At the same time, libraries must ensure that whatever services are provided are not regarded by anyone as second-class.

- Mainstreaming resources: there has been considerable reliance placed on external funding. This is fine as money to experiment with new services, to develop time/resources-limited provision, or as funding which will knowingly be mainstreamed, but, as a member of the workshop stated:
  > *We need to accept external funding only if we can make the work sustainable.*
  We recommend that library services ensure that they do not become over-reliant on external, short-term project funding for the provision of services, and find ways of mainstreaming and sustaining funding. When external funding is accepted, it should lead to a demonstration of how more capital or revenue investment would be of benefit.

- It is inequitable to introduce charges for the People's Network (which was established as a free service to support those who do not have

easy access to ICT elsewhere) – and it is clear that public libraries in Scotland have resisted calls to introduce such charges. As a member of the workshop put it:

> *Charges for the People's Network are not going to be taken up in the same way the museum charges were – it's up to us to deal with them. We need to set priorities and challenge ourselves.*

We therefore recommend that, in order to continue to provide free access to ICT resources via the People's Network, public libraries should not introduce charges for this service.

- In addition, some libraries are now charging for information that used to be free when it was on the shelf in print form, and for resources that are only available electronically, and we recommend that public libraries should cease to make such charges.

Some remaining questions and tensions

- Need for a nationally-delivered service, but with local roots, run by local people, not 'bureaucrats'.

- However, the need for services not to become local 'political footballs' (which can happen to a great extent locally).

- How to develop services in rural areas which may not have the necessary infrastructure.

- The dilemma over whether to have specialist or generic posts: having specialist posts may mean that other staff defer to the post-holder and never take responsibility for a service; having generic posts may mean that no one takes responsibility for a service.

- And, if, as part of this prioritisation work, libraries must focus on provision for the most needy, how do we achieve this without losing existing users? Are there ways in which libraries can, for example, purchase adequate stock for both sets of users/potential users? How do we successfully redistribute resources?

Appendix 1: participants in the workshop

Karen Cunningham (Glasgow); Pat Flynn (Leicester); David Garner (ADP Consultancy); Catherine Herman; Janet Holden (Norfolk); Asif Khan (MLA); Jo McCausland (MLA); Catherine Max (MLA); Geoff Mills (Birmingham); John Pateman (Lincolnshire); Julie Spencer (Bolton); John Vincent (The Network – Chair); Craig Westwood (DCMS); Adrian Whittle (Southwark)

Apologies: Inge Thornton (Birmingham)

Appendix 2: definitions of key terms

Social justice

Although 'social justice' is frequently used (eg by the new Prime Minister), it is hard to find a definition.

The former Prime Minister defined social justice as:

> "policies to expand opportunity and tackle the most deep seated causes and symptoms of social exclusion."[6]

This is the way in which the term 'social justice' is used in Scotland, for example in the Scottish Executive's strategy document[7].

In a recent book on social justice[8], the think-tank, ippr, talk about the four principles of social justice, being:

- Equal citizenship
- The social minimum – "All citizens must have access to resources that adequately meet their essential needs, and allow them to lead a secure and dignified life in today's society." [p5]
- Equality of opportunity
- Fair distribution – of "Resources that do not form part of equal citizenship or the social minimum …" [p5].

The *Blueprint* working group's working definition therefore is:

> Giving people access to the information, services and facilities that they have a right to, and making sure that they are fully aware of and know how to take up their entitlement to these services – with a particular emphasis on providing services for the most needy.

Social exclusion

The latest definition of *social exclusion* being used by the Government's Social Exclusion Task Force is:

> "Social exclusion is about more than income poverty. It is a short–hand term for what can happen when people or areas have a combination of linked problems, such as unemployment, discrimination, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime and family breakdown. These

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[6] In his letter to Lord Falconer, the former Prime Minister used this definition (taken from: http://www.pm.gov.uk/output/Page9458.asp, accessed 6 June 2007).

[7] *Social justice. a Scotland where everyone matters*. Scottish Executive, 1999. Available at: http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/158142/0042789.pdf, accessed 6 June 2007.

[8] Nick Pearce and Will Paxton (eds). *Social justice: building a fairer Britain*. Politico's Publishing, 2005.

problems are linked and mutually reinforcing. Social exclusion is an extreme consequence of what happens when people don't get a fair deal throughout their lives, often because of disadvantage they face at birth, and this disadvantaged can be transmitted from one generation to the next."[9]

As these barriers are removed, we move towards *social inclusion*, which can be seen as a journey towards a more ideal state.

Community cohesion

In terms of *community cohesion*, a cohesive community is one where:

- "there is a common vision and a sense of belonging for all communities
- the diversity of people's different backgrounds and circumstances is appreciated and positively value [sic]
- those from different backgrounds have similar life opportunities
- strong and positive relationships are being developed between people from different backgrounds in the workplace, in schools and within neighbourhoods."[10]

Being a cohesive community is also part of being a *sustainable community*:

"Sustainable communities are places where people want to live and work, now and in the future. They meet the diverse needs of existing and future residents, are sensitive to their environment, and contribute to a high quality of life. They are safe and inclusive, well planned, built and run, and offer equality of opportunity and good services for all."[11]

Community engagement

"Community engagement is the process of involving communities in the planning, development and management of services. It may also involve other issues which concern us all, or it may be about tackling the problems of a neighbourhood, such as crime, drug misuse or lack of play facilities for children."[12]

"Community engagement provides people with opportunities to have a greater say in what happens in their city and to be more active in decision making. Communities can be of place (people in a geographical area) or of interest (people who share a particular

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[9] Taken from: http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/social_exclusion_task_force/context/, accessed 6 June 2007.

[10] Taken from: http://www.communities.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1503278, accessed 6 June 2007.

[11] Taken from: http://www.communities.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1139866, accessed 6 June 2007.

[12] Scottish Centre for Regeneration, see: http://www.communitiesscotland.gov.uk/stellent/groups/public/documents/webpages/scrcs_006876.hcsp#TopOfPage.

interest, experience or characteristic). Often people belong to more than one community and communities are always diverse in some way."[13]

[13] Manchester City Council website,
http://www.manchester.gov.uk/bestvalue/engage/index.htm, accessed 6 February 2007.