

THE LIBRARY CAMPAIGN

Briefing Paper for the All Party Parliamentary Library Group

1.0 Introduction

Campaigners are grateful for the opportunity to meet the All Party Parliamentary Library Group (APPLG). We hope this paper will highlight some of the issues that most concern library campaigners, library users and the volunteers who are increasingly being forced to run library services. The needs of all these groups are routinely ignored by government (both central and local). It might also perhaps enable the APPLG to discuss some or all of these issues with the DCMS (the ministry responsible for supervising and improving the English public library system) and Arts Council England (ACE), whose remit is to investigate how the service is to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

- 1.1 We recognise the financial pressures facing local government. Councils must make tough decisions in allocating resources. Despite its statutory nature, the public library service is often first in line for cuts (and too often thought by decision-makers to be a 'discretionary' service).
- 1.2 Campaigners acknowledge that not all professionals have promoted the service effectively, delivered maximum efficiencies or improvements, or made the best use of new technologies. However, there is also a failure by both local and central government to grasp the “joined-up government” agenda, insofar as there is little appreciation of libraries’ impact on the priorities of the public sector and of national policies. These include health, social welfare, business, digital access and education (a human right in law, encompassing both orthodox and digital literacy).
- 1.3 Also ignored is extensive research demonstrating the economic and health benefits of comprehensive and efficient library services, available to all who wish to use them.

2.0 The “Leadership Void”

The underlying issue is what the APPLG once described as the “leadership

void”. Both the current Minister and the Shadow Minister have acknowledged the problem. There is no single body that provides strategic leadership, or a shared and implementable vision, or advice/support for individual authorities, or a means to share best practice.

- 2.1 When in Opposition the Minister supported the idea of a library development and improvement agency. However, the DCMS and ACE now favour “distributed leadership” (a concept that defies definition), by means of a poorly-co-ordinated mix of official bodies, agencies and a part-time DCMS library advisor. Many resources deemed essential by library users and volunteers are not provided at all.
- 2.2 Public libraries have been the subject of numerous reports and consultancy studies in recent years including Framework for the Future, Blueprint for Excellence, the two-year Library Modernisation Review, the Future Libraries Programme, the Libraries Development Initiative and the most recent, Envisioning the Library of the Future. It could be argued that the sector has been over-researched, but has lacked leadership and effective action.
- 2.3 There is a generally held view that the public library service is in crisis, and the DCMS, ACE and the Society of Chief Librarians are failing to provide bold, imaginative and effective leadership, or to advocate a powerful message about the value of public libraries.

3.0 The Current Situation

- 3.1 The DCMS and ACE, surprisingly, do not monitor closures or the transfer of libraries to volunteer groups. They rely on data collected by CIPFA, which is limited and is published many months in arrears. The most recent CIPFA data is for 2011-12, when 201 library “service points” were closed.

The only up-to-date national information service, Public Libraries News (PLN), is provided by one individual, unfunded, in his spare time. PLN publishes a comprehensive list of closures based on local press reports. This shows that at least 78 libraries were closed or transferred in 2012-13, and a further 335 have been threatened since 1 April 2013. This suggests that at least 614 libraries will have closed or transferred within three years, matching CILIP’s December 2012 forecast of about 600. For the current position in individual local authorities the APPLG is referred to <http://www.publiclibrariesnews.com/about-public-libraries-news/information>

- 3.2 As the service can expect significant further cuts in the next two years (2014-16), The Library Campaign predicts that at least 1,000 libraries could be lost by 2016. This does not seem an unreasonable estimate.
- Almost all the closures will be branch libraries, providing essential services to communities, notably in deprived and rural areas and small towns. This represents a radical change in the whole concept of the service. Yet neither DCMS nor ACE has addressed the implications.
 - Where libraries remain open, there is widespread 'hollowing out' and de-professionalisation of the service. Expert staff are made redundant, opening hours and stock reduced, building maintenance neglected, outreach and specialist services cut, access to information and national networks lost because counter staff lack training. Often communities - especially those most in need - lose many of the benefits offered by a 'proper' library service. Nationwide, people are forgetting what these are. The damage will thus become permanent.
- 3.3. We recognise that a number of new or refurbished libraries have opened. These are mainly large central libraries, notably in Birmingham, Manchester and Liverpool. However, a few shiny, new or refurbished libraries cannot disguise the nationwide loss of hundreds of community libraries. Indeed, their high costs frequently contribute to the closure of branches.
- 3.4 The number of library authorities in England totals 151. This is a 54% increase from before the last major local government re-organisation. Yet in Northern Ireland there is now just one single library authority. The Minister has suggested that the number of separately managed library authorities in England could perhaps be reduced by 30%, a percentage which some would regard as a minimum.
- 3.5 CIPFA reported that the total operating cost of the public library service in England was £896 million in 2011-2 with the main areas of expenditure as follows:
- Library staff and management: £484m (54%)
 - Buildings: £104m (11.6%)
 - Council corporate services charges: £144m (16%)
 - Books: £55m (6.2%)

The main change in recent years has been the very significant increase in corporate service charges, funded by substantial reductions in professional staff, book and material funds.

4.0 The Impact of Closures

4.1 Announcements by individual councils that they intend to close libraries have been met with widespread local protest. Several requests have been made to the Secretary of State to intervene, using his/her powers under the 1964 Act, without success. This unwillingness to intervene is surprising, given the Minister's support for a more active policy when in opposition. It has led to a number of applications for judicial review against local authorities, based on procedural failures in putting together closure schemes. As the CMS Select Committee has said, library policy should not be made in the courts.

4.2 Even where campaigners have been successful, the reaction of the local authorities has often been to remedy the procedural faults, but impose substantially the same scheme.

4.3 The major concerns have been:

- failure to consult properly; that local groups have been forced to save their local library by taking it over, without proper support or advice; and
- the impact of closures on the disadvantaged: those living in rural communities and those in areas of severe deprivation (the latter group whose interests the Minister strongly supported when Shadow Minister, and which were highlighted in the widely respected Wirral inquiry, under the 1964 Act).

4.4 The Culture Minister has written to councils on three occasions, reminding them in general terms of their statutory duty. However, there has been no government guidance to define the "improving", "comprehensive and efficient" service for all who wish to use it that is required by the 1964 Act, let alone to ensure that every authority provides it. Yet clear standards are laid down in both Wales and Scotland.

4.5 Again there seems to be a lack of "joined up government" in failure to ensure that:

- local libraries are located in conformity with the guidance on accessibility of public facilities contained in the National Planning Policy Framework, or
- in conformity with the guidance on health issued by, for example, NICE

Nor is there any understanding that accessible local branches are needed, if libraries are to contribute to improving literacy (including digital literacy), education and access to the government's online services.

4.6 Ironically, the closure or transfer of small branch libraries often delivers relatively small savings. The big costs are in overheads and infrastructure (and in charges for corporate services). Yet the impact on rural, small towns and deprived areas can be huge. Significantly, there is no agreed or sustainable model for volunteer-run libraries. There is no guidance on core issues such as:

- health and safety;
- child protection; and
- compliance with copyright and data protection legislation.

The Library Campaign has given a list of 23 such issues to DCMS and to ACE, with no result.

4.7 Nor has anything been done to ensure that volunteer libraries are properly supported by librarians or receive adequate resources, including internet access, access to the local library management system, printed books and e-books. The lack of central support has ensured much muddle and duplicated effort at local level, further reducing any possible savings.

5.0 The Sustainability of Volunteer-run Libraries

There is increasing concern that many branch libraries have been “cast off” by their local authority without adequate support. Many are not sustainable without adequate funding, resources and professional support.

5.1 Many volunteer groups are struggling to save their local library. They have no source of advice except The Library Campaign (unfunded) and the volunteers who run Little Chalfont Community Library. The latter have so far provided ad hoc free advice to 130 organisations (latterly with some Cabinet Office funding).

5.2 The Museums, Libraries & Archives Council (MLA) did flag up some of the issues relating to volunteer-run libraries before its demise almost two years ago. The DCMS has promised to provide a report on the impact of volunteer run libraries to the CMS Parliamentary Select Committee before the end of 2013. However:

- volunteer groups have already been struggling with these issues for over two years.
- Volunteer-run libraries may work, after a fashion, in well-heeled areas, but are less likely to do so less prosperous parts of the country.
- significantly, some councils - such as Bolton - have already concluded that volunteer libraries are not the solution to the problems facing the library service.

6.0 The Closure of The Advisory Council on Libraries (ACL)

The 1964 Act requires an independent body to provide advice to the Secretary of State. When the ACL last met in 2010 it had eight members, with a wide range of expertise. The annual direct cost of the ACL was just £2,500. The head of the DCMS library unit acted as secretary.

- The Minister announced that the ACL would be closed, not realising that it was statutory. In 2012 he appointed a retired local government officer as his part time advisor. This means greater cost, but considerably reduced expertise coupled with a perceived lack of independence.
- The DCMS has belatedly realised that the decision to close the ACL will have to be subject to public consultation, which gives an opportunity to question its correctness.
- To date, the advisor has not met any local campaign groups or civic trusts that have submitted formal complaints or requests for intervention about their council's plans or, it is thought, even the councils in question. Perhaps the advisor might be asked to explain his role to the APPLG, particularly as there is a gap in engagement with local communities which the DCMS has not attempted to fill, seemingly preferring to make decisions from the comfort of its Whitehall offices.

7.0 The Arts Council's Involvement

ACE replaced the MLA two years ago as the strategic agency responsible for public libraries. However:

- there seems to have been some initial confusion as to its role but we now understand this is to “improve and develop” public libraries.
- ACE has only a part-time library director and five regional relationship managers to support 151 library authorities.

7.1 ACE recently completed a research study costing close to £250,000 (£222,814 - plus undeclared internal costs). This repeated the results of many previous studies. It identified four traditional priorities, but specifically excluded mentioning the cuts which will fundamentally change all the report's underlying assumptions, viz :

- place the library at the hub of the community;
- make the most of digital technology and creative media;
- ensure libraries are resilient and sustainable; and
- deliver the right skills for those who work in libraries).

7.2 ACE has also published a report on volunteer-run libraries. It has been widely condemned for its unquestioning acceptance of this fast-accelerating trend and its failure to analyse the implications.

7.3 ACE's libraries director recently met representatives of The Library Campaign. A report of that meeting was published, with ACE's approval, by Public Libraries News. It is fair to say that there was considerable disappointment with what ACE had to say, focused on:

- ACE's failure to provide any practical support;
- the fact that after two years it is unable to describe any clear plan of action for “improving and developing” public libraries; and
- the failure to list the outcomes that it hopes to deliver.

There is, therefore, some scepticism about ACE's level of commitment, its understanding of the issues, its level of expertise in the sector and its

ability to deliver. In a recent BBC radio programme, the director referred to the desirability of amalgamating libraries, but the problem demands far more radical solutions.

8.0 E-book Lending

8.1 A research firm has been appointed to undertake pilot studies to assess the benefits and impact of e-book lending in public libraries. The results may not be known until late in 2014. This is a disappointment to many library users and librarians, and will further weaken the ability of public libraries to compete with commercial e-book providers such as Amazon.

8.2 There is a need for a national e-book catalogue and lending service. Otherwise 151 separately managed authorities must get their act together and find funding to invest in the required technology (which is, currently, often unfriendly to users). Campaigners note the interest in the USA for Patron Driven Acquisition (PDA). This enables suppliers to give access to a comprehensive catalogue, but make payment (to publisher and author) only for actual loans.

9.0 Conclusions

This brief can give only a summary of some key issues and concerns of library campaigners. We believe that:

- bolder and more imaginative initiatives, many of which are applicable to local government in general, could be taken by library authorities to manage their resources better, including controlling corporate charges, sharing services with other authorities, simplifying management structures, outsourcing support services, making optimum use of technologies and implementing best practice; vested interests in councils should not be permitted to prevent consideration of such steps and their adoption where appropriate.
- despite the problems in many authorities, others continue to find efficiencies and improve their libraries to meet the specific needs of their communities. There is a woeful lack of research to identify the factors for success. The current library advisor to the Minister wrote that the service is “variable”. Others argue that the provision of a proper library service for many communities is fast becoming a postcode lottery.
- the APPLG in the past, together with the current Minister, Shadow

Minister and the professional bodies, have discussed the issue of leadership. It is clear that the very real problems faced by the service cannot be ignored if we are to improve literacy, education and access to information, knowledge and the digital world.

- there is an urgent need for all those responsible for delivering a “comprehensive and efficient” public library service for all to up their game. Austerity and cost-driven vandalism must not become an excuse for authorities to close libraries, transfer them to volunteers or “hollow out” the remaining libraries. Superior solutions are available, as some of the better-managed services have shown. There is a crisis; it can be an opportunity.