

**WRITTEN EVIDENCE TO THE SELECT COMMITTEE ON ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND, FROM THE LIBRARY CAMPAIGN.**

NB: WE HAVE CONFINED OUR COMMENTS TO ACE'S WORK ON PUBLIC LIBRARIES.

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**THE LIBRARY CAMPAIGN**

TLC, founded in 1984 and now a charity, is the sole national representative of library users and Friends groups.

We work with CILIP, Unison, Campaign for the Book and Voices for the Library through the Speak Up For Libraries coalition, holding well-attended annual conferences and working on a national SUFL website of resources.

Our own website ([www.librarycampaign.com](http://www.librarycampaign.com)) serves a large number of members and non-members, eg by maintaining the only national list of library groups. We also publish the only national magazine on public libraries.

**SUMMARY**

- \* Public libraries do not belong in ACE's arts agenda.
- \* Even allowing for this, libraries have been poorly served by ACE, at a time when they needed much support.
- \* This is especially damaging as DCMS is doing almost nothing for libraries & the independent Advisory Committee on Libraries has been effectively abolished.

**EVIDENCE**

**1.**

ACE is not seen as relevant by local groups wrestling with urgent problems in their library services.

It is doing nothing to mitigate (or even examine) the effects of widespread closures/hollowing out of the quality of remaining services, or the huge expansion of 'volunteer' libraries, which is destructive in the short term and will become unsustainable within a year or two.

*See the APPENDIX 1.*

**2.**

ACE has done nothing to consult with library users. It seems not to see this as any part of its remit.

It has consistently rejected our attempts to get it to consult users in its research (eg, Envisioning the public library of the future).

**3.**

We have seen no evidence that much thought went into where to put libraries during the 'bonfire of the quangos'.

There was initial confusion about ACE's role in libraries, including an attempt by the minister to get it to take on the supervision of libraries charged to DCMS under the 1964 Act. The confusion seems still unresolved.

We suspect that ACE is not being properly involved or respected by DCMS. eg, the controversial posting on the [you.gov](http://you.gov) website, inviting all and sundry to 'run a library', was - as far as we can ascertain via Fol enquiries, worded and posted by DCMS and DCLG, with no input from ACE. See APPENDIX 2.

**4.**

MLA had already been heavily cut and rejigged to make it the 'lean, mean' body thought to be required by the coalition government. This was ignored.

The remains of MLA were then placed under ACE and subjected to multiple, ideologically-based cuts made to ACE as a whole. We see no evidence that ACE attempted to protect library support from these further cuts.

There is now a small and largely part-time libraries team that cannot be expected to cope with the necessary work - certainly not at a time of drastic and damaging change to the whole network, when analysis and support are badly needed.

**5.**

Libraries were well served by the Library & Information Commission. Since then, under Resource/MLA, they have long suffered from the decision to mix together all staff, budget and projects into a 'generic' structure with museums & archives, and from the dominance of the museums sector in this mix.

Libraries other than public libraries faded out of the picture, and so did some of the focus on all libraries' essential work in information, education, national networking etc.

The cumulative loss over the years has become great, not least to public libraries' role as the gateway to other services.

**6.**

Unfortunately...

The situation is even worse now that public libraries are further dissolved into 'arts' under ACE.

There is some overlap, but public libraries have a far wider role than their cultural aspect: information, IT access and support, business, employment, health, education at all life stages, economic regeneration, role in deprived areas etc.

A little work has been done in some of these areas, largely in grants to other bodies, but it is indeed very little.

ACE is widely seen as tending merely to add 'and libraries' into its general pronouncements about the arts (a very different overall area).

**7.**

There is almost no sign that libraries' unique agenda is understood, or expressed, at the top levels in ACE. eg, the important 2013 ACE report on economic value of the arts did not even mention libraries. Granted, the case for libraries is strikingly different from that of the arts in general. However, it was not even considered.

**8.**

ACE has been dealt a very poor hand.

But it has played it very badly.

In particular, ACE has chosen not to stand up as an independent body willing to question or analyse - let alone criticise - library service cuts, or government policy.

(It has stood up for the arts rather better.)

**9.**

ACE is doing some little or nothing visible to deal with current issues. In particular, its first 18 months in charge of libraries were disastrous, especially the wasted time and expense (£250,000) of two useless reports:

- (i) a 'study' of 'community libraries' (ie volunteer libraries) that has been widely condemned as unconvincing, unthinking and uncritical
- (ii) the massive 'Envisioning' report on the future of public libraries (this did not consult with library users despite repeated requests), which duplicated a mass of existing valid research, while deliberately and explicitly leaving out any consideration of 'temporary' funding cuts.

These in fact will have permanent & wide-reaching effects on the service. The situation has badly deteriorated during this time. It will be impossible to compensate for this wasted opportunity.

**10.**

Further examples of poor practice by ACE:

(i) ACE has jettisoned the enormous store of information on the old MLA website (some of it can be retrieved, but only with special knowledge). This includes advocacy material, reports, case studies, information on good practice and essential advice on running events, performance licences, technical standards etc.

(ii) ACE has seemingly abandoned all work on upgrading and integrating the technical infrastructure vital for e-services and money-saving shared management systems.

(iii) ACE has done nothing to address the mass of new problems needing agreed central guidance, notably on coping with budget cuts, and on urgent issues affecting volunteer libraries (including PLR, data protection, copyright, training, support requirements, service standards, funding, sustainability and much more).

(iv) ACE's passive acceptance of an uncritical, arts-only remit is highlighted by the fact that much ACE effort is being put into distributing a £6m lottery fund, ring-fenced for spending only on arts projects that happen to use libraries as their venue.

This, in better times, might be a worthwhile expansion into new areas. In a time when serious problems need urgent attention, it has been widely seen as discrediting ACE's whole work programme on libraries.

Often, these projects have done no good to the library service (eg a project with writers in Herefordshire libraries, where the council immediately afterwards decided to close all its libraries except one).

Even worse is ACE's recent decision to award funds to convert a large part of Bury's central library into a sculpture area. Even given the ring-fenced remit, this is a serious misjudgement.

In sum, public libraries do not belong in ACE's arts agenda.

They have been poorly served, during a crucial period when they needed extra support.

This is especially damaging at a crucial time when DCMS is doing nothing to help & the independent Advisory Committee on Libraries has been abolished.

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**APPENDIX 1**

This is part of an account sent, unasked, by a TLC member who attended our AGM in 2013 and saw the newly-appointed (and thus blameless) ACE libraries director, Brian Ashley.

"It seems that ACE is little more than a cut-price version of the defunct MLA. Its only remit, it seems, is to trot out platitudes, and rubber-stamp the decisions of local authorities so that the Minister remains apparently justified in maintaining the 'hands off' approach, which even judicial reviews cannot, it seems, disturb."

**APPENDIX 2**

From Geoffrey Dron, TLC executive committee:

Dear Mr Matthews,  
Position noted.

So is it the case that ACE weren't consulted by the Cabinet Office/DCMS on the shift in policy? If it was, the documentation (notes etc.) relating to such consultation would have a significant bearing on the posting of the invitation issued by the CO to participate in the formation of community libraries.

If necessary, I'll submit a fresh request, but it would be pointless to do so if there were no consultations as mentioned. Please clarify the position.

Regards,  
Geoffrey Dron

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On Mon, Nov 11, 2013 at 4:16 PM, FOI <[FOI@artscouncil.org.uk](mailto:FOI@artscouncil.org.uk)> wrote:

Dear Mr Dron,

Thank you for your request for information from the Arts Council.

As previously mentioned, I can confirm that this request was considered in line with our obligations under the Freedom of Information Act 2000.

You requested:

"All notes, memoranda, reports or similar documents coming into being between 1st May 2010 and the posting of the Publication on the Cabinet Office's website ('Take Part - Create a community library') which relate directly to or have a significant bearing on the decision to post the Publication as aforesaid."

Our Response:

I can confirm we hold no information in respect to your request.

The 'publication' is part of the Government's official web site and, as such, Arts Council England plays no part in decisions about what is published there.

I am sorry that we have not been able to provide you with the information that you have requested. If you do have any further

queries please do not hesitate to contact me.

If you are not satisfied that the Arts Council has complied with the Freedom of Information Act in responding to your request you have the right to an internal review. Please contact me at the address above, explaining what you would like us to review under the Act.

Alternatively you can detail your concerns in writing and send them to the Chief Executive, Arts Council England, 14 Great Peter Street, London, SW1P 3NQ or email to [chiefexecutive@artscouncil.org.uk](mailto:chiefexecutive@artscouncil.org.uk)

If you are not content with the outcome of the internal review, you have the right to apply directly to the Information Commissioner for a decision. The Information Commissioner can be contacted at Information Commissioner's Office, Wycliffe House, Water Lane, Wilmslow, Cheshire, SK9 5AF.

Kind regards

Tom Matthews

Thomas Matthews

Officer, Information

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