



**Independent report considering the current structure and role of public libraries, including community libraries, in England as well as identifying any opportunities for future delivery**

**Written evidence submitted by ASCEL – The Association of Senior Children’s and Education Librarians**

## **1: Introduction to ASCEL**

ASCEL is the national network of senior managers in children’s public and schools library services. ASCEL’s aim as specified in the Children’s Promise (Appendix 1) is that *every child and young person visiting a public library is inspired by an exciting environment which makes reading for pleasure irresistible<sup>1</sup> and every school has access to a high quality school library service.*

ASCEL:

- works to stimulate children’s and schools’ library service development.
- contributes to the national dialogue around children’s and young people’s learning, reading development and library services.
- works in partnership with the Society of Chief Librarians and library partners on national initiatives.
- provides support and skills sharing for members.
- provides guidance to ensure excellence in children’s library services and to ensure that children’s services are represented in the Universal Offers<sup>2</sup>.

## **2: Executive Summary**

This response is submitted by ASCEL the national network of senior managers in children’s public and schools library services

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<sup>1</sup> ASCEL 2012 Children’s Promise [www.ascel.org.uk](http://www.ascel.org.uk)

<sup>2</sup> The Universal Offers cover the four key areas of library service which customers and stakeholders see as essential to a 21<sup>st</sup> century library service. They are the Universal Reading Offer, Information Offer, Digital Offer, Health Offer

A: What are the core principles of a public library service into the future?

The key principle is *connection*. Libraries are all about *connecting* people - to resources; to wider networks of library services and to their communities. Connection underpins the other principles which ASCEL believes are: building social capital; promoting literacy and reading for pleasure; support for learning and personal exploration; contributing to community health and well-being; enhancing cultural life; integrating digital technology into learning and reading lives; accessibility and trust and quality

B: Is the current delivery of the public library service the most comprehensive and efficient?

ASCEL recognises that separate library services run by 151 local authorities may not be the most efficient way of delivering services. There are many examples of services sharing elements of provision and management, working to national strategies and taking advantage of national programmes. Best practice should be sought from these to consider new models of delivery which could provide savings and consistent quality.

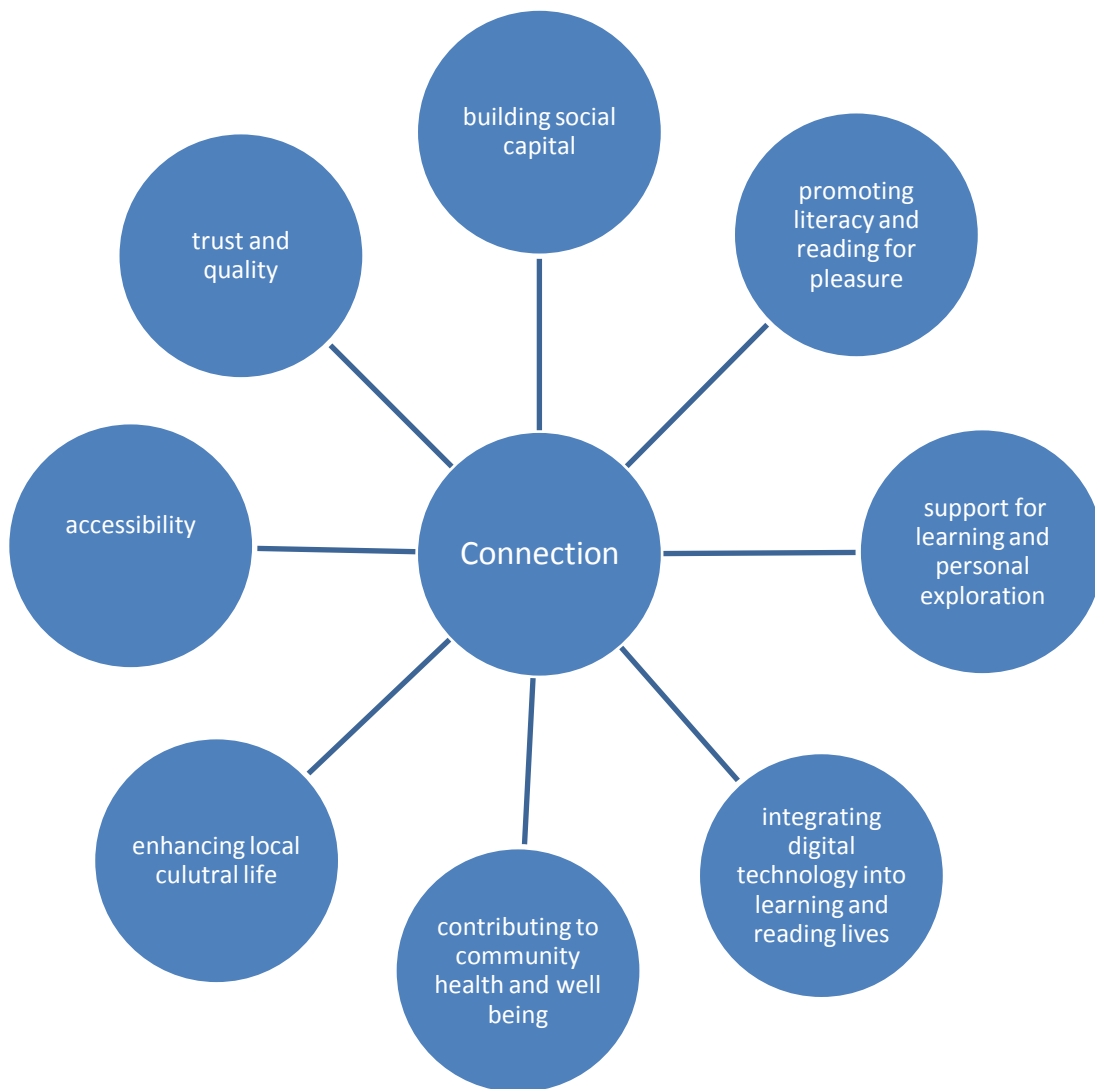
However local democracy, statutory requirements and local accountability must be taken into consideration as well as the commercial impact of new models.

C: What is the role of community libraries in the delivery of a library offer?

ASCEL believes that all children and families deserve to have access to local libraries run by paid staff and with access to specialist expertise. However ASCEL are realistic that community libraries may be the only way of providing access to a library within some communities and if linked to the rest of the library network can provide a gateway to the main library system. We recommend that where community libraries exist, they should be an integrated part of the library network rather than existing as stand-alone provision.

### 3: Evidence for consideration

**A: What are the core principles of a public library service into the future?**



ASCEL believes that the core principles of a future public service can be summed up in the chart above. The principle which underpins all the others is *connection*.

#### **Connection**

Libraries are all about *connecting* people - to resources; to wider networks of library services and to their communities.

Library *connections* should be made both physically and virtually. ASCEL feels that whilst it is important that libraries should enthusiastically and fully embrace the digital realm, it is vital that they also retain a physical presence within the communities they serve. Libraries are a valued free space providing opportunities for people to come together. This is particularly significant for people who are isolated or unable to travel – for example we know how much young parents value rhyme times as an opportunity to leave the house without having to travel great distances to meet other parents and to encourage young children’s social interaction.

One of the unique aspects of the library space is that people can use it on their own terms. When they visit, they may choose to interact with others or they may choose to be alone but they are still spending time within a safe, social space *connecting* with their community.

### **Building social capital**

Being a member of a library promotes citizenship particularly among children and young people and sense of belonging in their communities. As they participate in activities such as the Summer Reading Challenge and the increasing range of volunteering opportunities on offer for young people in libraries, they are reinforcing that sense of participation and contribution to their life of their communities which is vital to ensure safe and thriving localities.

### **Promoting literacy and reading for pleasure**

ASCEL believes that libraries will continue to have a crucial role in encouraging children to read for pleasure through year-round-promotions and activities; exciting displays; author events; reading groups and interactive digital communications and activities many in partnership with national and local organisations. Reading for pleasure is being recognised in the new National Curriculum. Public libraries and schools sharing the same messages about the importance of reading for pleasure to improve literacy; raise attainment and boost confidence will provide a holistic approach to supporting children’s future academic success.

### **Support for learning and personal exploration**

Libraries have always been local learning institutions and this role is growing. Working lives are much more fluid and change is becoming a constant, requiring individuals to frequently update or learn completely new skills. Libraries provide a wide range of structured online learning opportunities as well as homework support and informal learning. The current interest in MOOCs (Massive open online courses) has increased the potential for libraries to be involved as creators as well as providers of learning opportunities. Above all libraries provide a place for personal exploration and discovery, people are free in libraries to take risks with learning and discover new skills and interests.

## **Integrating digital technology into reading and learning lives**

ASCEL believes libraries are well placed to become trailblazers in the digital world. They should have the potential to become local digital hubs, showcasing new technologies, keeping one step ahead in exploring how new technologies can be used to support learning and reading for pleasure and to interact with others, giving people a chance to try things out and providing access to peripherals such as printing. They should be able to help individuals to understand how digital and virtual reading and learning can be blended allowing them to take control of their learning, choosing the format that is appropriate for their learning needs.

## **Contributing to health and well-being**

Libraries are playing an increasing role in providing health information and support for well-being. They have forged strong local partnerships through local authorities and clinical commissioning groups and the outcomes of the Universal Health Offer will help to further establish community expectations of provision.

Reading for pleasure promotes relaxation and stress reduction, enjoyment and excitement and particularly for children, supports some of the key behaviours which contribute to emotional well-being for example empathy and resilience.

## **Enhancing local cultural life**

Libraries are local cultural centres with a primary focus on reading as a cultural activity. New partnerships through Arts Council England and the Bridge Organisations are strengthening libraries links with other local arts and cultural organisations thus increasing children's and families' access to activities and contributing to a more vibrant local cultural economy.

## **Accessibility**

ASCEL believes that libraries should be about ensuring physical and digital access to learning, reading; social and cultural opportunities for the whole community. We believe that libraries must retain their neutrality and a non-judgemental approach to access. Ensuring access is particularly important for vulnerable; isolated people and people who are disadvantaged by poverty or disability.

## **Trust and quality**

Libraries continue to be trusted spaces and there are high public expectations of staff knowledge and skills. It is therefore crucial to the future success of libraries that the skills and knowledge of the library workforce in the areas of digital; information retrieval; books and publishing trends and customer service are enhanced and continually updated.

## **B: Is the current delivery of the public library service the most comprehensive and efficient?**

The 1964 Public Libraries and Museums Act ensured that public libraries are a statutory service. Councils have a legal duty to provide them and must ensure that the service they provide is “comprehensive and efficient”.

ASCEL recognises that separate library services run by 151 local authorities may not always be the most efficient way of delivering services. It can lead to inefficient duplication and inequalities of provision even between services in close proximity.

In practice library services are already developing regional/sub-regional models of activity; sharing elements of provision; the design and delivery of projects and new models of management.

Libraries also engage in national partnerships that enable local delivery of quality services, such as for the Summer Reading Challenge and the development of national digital projects.

Whilst there is no clear definition of what a comprehensive and efficient public library service is, the strategic national direction provided by the Universal Offers and Children’s Promise have supported the development of more consistent national provision of service – this is particularly true of the Universal Reading Offer where library services have signed up to delivering activity around a year-round reading calendar.

ASCEL believes that drawing together good practice from these to explore and design new models of delivery would be valuable and also have the potential to safeguard library services.

There are obvious benefits to larger groupings of libraries or shared library activities – for example, buying power is increased and there is the potential for more impactful quality marketing campaigns. It may also mean that with ongoing reductions in local funding, library expertise could be drawn together in hubs, giving a wider variety of specialist support; training; development and innovation for libraries delivering locally. It may also mean there is the potential for rationalising library buildings and mobile library routes in a way that is less disadvantageous to communities and ensures that there is fair and easy access to libraries for all.

However caution does need to be exercised. Local councils need to adhere to the statutory requirements of the 1964 Act. Libraries are a reflection of local democracy and local accountability. It is really important that any new structures remain locally responsive. Proposals for new structures would have to include careful decisions about governance and how localism is supported. It would also be important that larger groupings of libraries (or specific shared elements of library services), adhere to quality standards, ensuring that all libraries are supported to meet the levels of

service of the best rather than the other way round. National targets to measure success perhaps in partnership with organisations such as CIPFA and employing better systems of data analysis to identify and enable response to local needs may be a way of addressing these issues.

New models of library provision would also have an impact on those businesses that support libraries – for example book suppliers and library management systems and there would be a risk of monopolies forming and competition being reduced.

Notwithstanding these reservations ASCEL would be open to exploring new models of service delivery.

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

There are many different models of community library, some completely outside local authority control, others retained within the library service, but the common thread linking community-run libraries is the involvement of community volunteers.

ASCEL strongly believes that all children and families deserve to have access to local libraries run by paid staff, supported by quality training programmes and career development and with access to specialist expertise. These staff should have the capability and capacity to develop and deliver local services to quality standards.

We have concerns about levels of quality in community libraries in terms of physical appearance; stock management and display and the access to services highlighted as core principles for public library services in question A above. (Especially when community libraries are run completely separately from the rest of the library network). ASCEL are particularly concerned that children may not receive the level of quality service that would support the principles identified in question A and in ASCEL's Children's Promise.

We are also worried about local accountability and the risk that the neutrality for which libraries are valued can be lost if single community interest groups take over the running of local libraries and some elements of the community may be inadvertently excluded. Community libraries should reflect the needs and aspirations of the community they serve.

However ASCEL are realistic that community libraries may be the only way within some communities of providing access to a library and if linked to the rest of the library network, can provide a gateway to the main library system. We recommend that where community libraries exist, they should be an integrated part of the library network rather than existing as stand-alone provision and that through them library users should have easy access to specialist advice and support. The offer from these community libraries should be clearly defined and articulated to library

customers so that they are aware of the different levels of provision. There should be a means of monitoring and assessing the quality of community library provision to ensure customers receive a consistent quality of service from these libraries.

#### **4: Conclusion**

ASCEL welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this review at a time when the future of public libraries is the subject of national debate. Whilst the economic situation and cuts to public services are a threat, there are exciting opportunities for libraries to play an enhanced role in the support of their communities, particularly in terms of space and support; digital development; information and reading for pleasure. ASCEL would like this review to provide innovative solutions to drive the public library service forward and to ensure that children will continue to have access to the quality library services they need and deserve.

*Sarah Mears*

*National Chair ASCEL (The Association of Senior Children's and Education Librarians)*

[Sarah.mears@essex.gov.uk](mailto:Sarah.mears@essex.gov.uk)

*Tel 01245 244962*



## Appendix 1



### Children and Young People's Promise in Public Libraries

#### Vision:

- *Every child and every young person visiting a public library (physically or digitally) is inspired by an exciting environment which makes reading for pleasure irresistible.*
- *They will find a range of books and information resources to support growing confidence in literacy and formal and informal learning.*
- *There are opportunities for participation and engagement with a range of fun reading and book-based activities.*
- *They are actively involved in decisions about service developments.*
- *The public library is accessible and welcoming to all children and young people.*

#### ASCEL and The Society of Chief Librarians<sup>3</sup> will:

- Promote the value of library services for children
- Jointly agree policies and strategies to develop and sustain services
- Promote discussion and exchange of ideas through conferences, websites training and continuous professional development
- Collect and disseminate information to support members' knowledge and skills and to develop library services for children and young people
- Work with partners to ensure cohesion and integration of services to children.

*This Promise covers children and young people from birth to eighteen*

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<sup>3</sup>[www.goscl.com](http://www.goscl.com)