

Written submission by Desmond Clarke to the Review of the Public Library Service in England

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GENERAL BACKGROUND

1. The public library service in England is regulated by the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 and funded and operated by 151 separately managed library authorities (normally local authorities) which have a duty under the Act to provide a “comprehensive and efficient” service to all who wish to make use of it. Individual authorities can be responsible for as few as 5 libraries, or as many as 90–100.
2. Whilst the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport has a statutory duty to superintend authorities, individual authorities remain responsible for the funding and delivery of the service to their residents, and elected Members of councils, charged with setting a balanced budget, do not welcome interference from Whitehall.
3. Even before the current crisis in local authority funding (described in the LGA report (2012) ‘Funding outlook for councils from 2010/11 to 2019/20’), there were concerns about the performance and leadership of the public library service in England and this led to a number of initiatives from the MLA and the DCMS, often with the involvement of the LGA and the SCL. These initiatives included The People’s Network, Framework for the Future, Better Stock, Better Libraries and Blueprint for Excellence, as well as regional projects such as the London Libraries Initiative. The Audit Commission, the CMS Parliamentary Select Committee and the All Party Parliamentary Library Group all issued reports and the previous Minister, Margaret Hodge MP, set up a two-year Library Modernisation Review, a project managed by the DCMS. There was general agreement that the sector lacked strategic leadership and at various times ministers, shadow ministers and the APPLG have recognised the need for some form of library development agency.
4. The financial crisis has placed enormous pressures on local government, with cuts in library budgets of about 30% by 2016. The lack of any strategic framework to cope with the new financial pressures has led many authorities to take the axe to branch libraries, closing to date 349 service points; threatening to close another 474 if they are not transferred to volunteer groups; and cutting hours and front line staff in others. At the time of writing, the demands for local volunteers to take over branch libraries are accelerating as councils finalise their budgets. It is fair to say that the sector was unprepared and many elected members have been alarmed at the huge number of local protests and, even, applications for judicial review. Many authorities had been remarkably slow to seize the opportunities to

merge and share services, to make the optimum use of technology and to imaginatively market their services. A particular concern has been the failure of the professional bodies to effectively advocate the value and importance of libraries to leaders, cabinet members and chief executives of councils.

5. The public library service has also been impacted by the development of the e-book and it has, again, been slow to respond. Many authorities have failed to invest in technology, to the extent that accessing current e-lending services is often a very frustrating process. There is an increasingly held view that there should be a national e-lending service in England, possibly based on Patron (or Demand) Driven Acquisitions (PDA) to ensure that authors and publishers are fairly remunerated. We cannot afford to wait for 151 authorities individually to get their act together. At the same time there are real concerns about the quality of library management systems, the lack of standardisation, notwithstanding MLA-sponsored initiatives such as E4Libraries, and the compatibility of some RFID systems with other technology.
6. In the past three years the DCMS and ACE, which assumed responsibility for “improving and developing the public library service”, have undertaken four reviews: the Library Development Initiative (which failed to mention e-books), the Community Libraries research report, the independent E-lending Review and ACE’s Envisioning the Library of the Future. The latter review included extensive research costing almost £250,000. ACE said last year that it favoured a system of “distributed leadership” for the sector, though how that concept might actually work is difficult to discern.
7. The public library service in England has stumbled towards the current crisis, lacking effective leadership both at the strategic level and in the professional bodies, and without a proper framework for developing a modern library service that supports the cross-government agenda for digitisation, education, literacy and education or that meets the actual needs of library users. The panel need to be aware that there is much cynicism about yet another review, especially one without cross-party and local government support, when the need is for urgent action to help authorities cope with the real issues they face today.
8. Local councils are fiercely independent of the departments of central government and can be unwilling to give up direct control of services, and sometimes to even share services across local authority boundaries as was demonstrated for example, by the failed attempt to create a Greater Manchester Library Service, similar in concept to the successful Tri-borough initiative in London and the merging of six services to create the Northern Ireland Library Service. However, the number of library authorities was increased by 50% after the last local government re-organisation and the total today exceeds, for example, the number of police authorities by a factor of four. Unlike some other areas of local government, library authorities have been notably slow to share back-office functions and technology.
9. It must be recognised that the public library service is served by many committed, hardworking and enthusiastic librarians who are dedicated to supporting their communities

and individual library users. Many of the issues faced by the service are failures of leadership and structure, poor application of technologies and the absence of a proper strategic framework to deliver a modern library service.

WHAT ARE THE CORE PRINCIPLES OF A PUBLIC LIBRARY SERVICE?

10. The modern library service is a free and easily accessible community service, a place to borrow books and e-books and access online reference resources, but it is also a place in which to meet friends, to learn languages, to do homework, access the internet and receive help with completing CVs and application forms from helpful and knowledgeable staff. Libraries contribute across all of the Government's main policy areas, from education and literacy (both orthodox and digital) to health and wellbeing, providing access to government services and jobs and growth. Libraries are especially important to those living in deprived and rural areas, and to the young, the elderly and the disadvantaged.
11. ACE's Envisioning the Library of the Future research identified the value of the public library is to:
 - provide a shared neutral and safe space
 - provide a shared space to facilitate interaction and create a sense of community
 - be an environment for exploration, a point of trusted information and provide breadth and depth of knowledge
 - introduce children to books and reading, firing their imagination and at the same time supporting the development of children and young people
 - provide a learning environment and space for quiet study
 - be inclusive and open to all and provide a non-stigmatising environment.
12. Whilst libraries are especially valued by communities, the library service must extend beyond just buildings and provide ease of access from home to allow and support online research, information gathering and e-book lending. Co-locating libraries with other services is an obvious development, provided they remain a viable community hub and do not curtail resources, but authorities must invest and develop their range of services and online resources to make them available to their residents at home and at work. As for any service organisation, the focus must on fulfilling the changing and diverse needs of those they exist to serve.

IS THE CURRENT DELIVERY OF THE PUBLIC LIBRARY SERVICE THE MOST COMPREHENSIVE AND EFFICIENT?

13. The structure of the public library service is not fit for purpose, especially at a time of austerity. There are far too many small library authorities, each separately managed with its own overhead structure, technology and back-office to support a small number of libraries, often adopting different processes and systems to do essentially the same job as its neighbouring authorities. There is an unnecessary cost burden which has been estimated as

being in the range of 5-20% [LGA/MLA Future Libraries Report] of total cost depending upon how far the 151 library authorities in England are rationalised.

14. To optimise efficiency, there is a need to invest in regional library management systems which meet national standards, improve processes and support technological developments. Ireland, for example is developing a national system for its 26 counties, though some of their authorities will also be merged, and they are rationalising procurement. The Tri-borough is introducing a new system for its merged service to deliver further benefits and financial savings. Such investment also supports the delivery of online and e lending services.

15. Communities do sometimes shift over long periods, though this trend must not be exaggerated, and an MLA report showed that there has also been a serious lack of investment in the library estate. Some rationalisation of the estate is necessary with co-location with other council services and schools being a practical and realistic option, but this must not be at the expense of destroying communities or removing access to library services from those in deprived and rural areas. A particular concern has been the very significant cuts in mobile library services and the disproportionate impact that this has had on rural communities. There is a serious risk that the provision of library services can become a postcode lottery. It is interesting to note that, as a consequence, successful applications for judicial review challenging cuts have largely been based on Equalities legislation and the failure to properly consult those impacted by changes, although success has often been relative. In truth, as the CMS Select Committee has indicated, libraries policy should not be made in the courts.

16. While there is no clear definition of “comprehensive and efficient”, previous governments have worked with the profession to introduce and adapt library standards to provide some form of performance benchmark and there has also been a proposal to introduce a user’s “charter”. Wales and Scotland still retain standards or a matrix. In England, however, the DCMS has seen fit to dispense with standards.

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE COMMUNITY LIBRARIES IN THE DELIVERY OF A LIBRARY OFFER?

17. Community libraries are the “work horses” of the library service, providing ease of access to books in all formats, reference resources, the internet and a range of council and government services and a hub for community engagement. As has been shown by the hundreds of protests across the country over the past three years, they are enormously valued. Both the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister have been forced to intervene when Councils have threatened libraries within or close to their constituencies.

18. Libraries are a community hub, a place for reading, information and ideas, somewhere to meet, open to all, free and welcoming. They are at the centre of community life alongside, and in partnership with, many council services. Libraries support citizenship and provide a place for people to exercise their right to information, ideas and knowledge whether

provided by print or digital media. They also offer a range of other services such as toddlers' groups, homework clubs, reading groups and home delivery to the housebound.

19. While those libraries now described as 'community libraries' are often run by non-professional staff and are increasingly managed by non-librarians, they were in the past staffed by experienced, paid Library Assistants who were able to rely upon the support and expertise of Chartered Librarians to provide expert advice. It should be noted that library services have always been supported by part-time volunteers taking on a number of routine tasks, such as delivery to the home bound.
20. There is now much concern that many local authorities are, in effect, forcing volunteer groups to take over the management and responsibility for providing library services to communities in order to avoid closure, something not really consistent with the motivation behind the 'Big Society' project. In some authorities half of the libraries are being transferred to volunteer groups, sometimes without any support from the local authority. This development is accelerating as councils struggle to balance budgets, but there exist few tested and sustainable models to support this development and research tends to suggest that the approach is unlikely to succeed outside affluent areas. More worryingly, volunteer groups often lack advice and support to deal with the various legal, regulatory and operational issues. Almost 150 such groups had no recourse but to seek advice from the volunteers who run Little Chalfont Library who are provided with a little funding by the Cabinet Office. The MLA did flag up a number of issues related to volunteer run libraries and the Federation of Women's Institutes also raised concerns that were based on the experience of volunteers. Some councils, such as Bolton, decided that such libraries would not be sustainable or compatible with the provision of a professional service and felt it had no choice but to close libraries
21. The Library Campaign, based on analysis of reports of what is happening in every authority (collected by Public Libraries News), forecasts that by 2016, one thousand libraries could be closed or transferred to volunteer groups. That would change the structure and the sustainability of the public library service in England dramatically. Most worryingly, this seems to be happening while the DCMS and the strategic agencies, sit on their hands.

RECOMMENDATIONS

22. There is an urgent need to develop the library service in England through leadership and innovation, with a co-ordinated strategy and funding that is supported by local government and across Government departments. To make this happen there is a need for some form of library development agency, possibly chaired by a senior leader of a large council, and bringing together the necessary range of expertise.
23. Such a development agency must develop a vision for a modern library service which fulfils people's changing and diverse needs and put in place a framework which is supported by local and national government and that is also understood and welcomed by the public.

24. It must also tackle the considerable technological issues arising from a multitude of legacy systems - to support new technologies, agreed national standards and improve service delivery and efficiency. That requires investment in, possibly, regional library management systems to allow change and facilitate significant improvement.
25. Government must work with the LGA to encourage at least the smaller authorities to merge, work closely and share services with larger authorities. Not only is cross-boundary service-sharing likely to produce substantial savings, but it may prove the precursor to a longer term solution, namely statutory reform to reduce the number of library authorities to, say, the same number as police authorities with similar boundaries.
26. There is an urgent need to review the needs of community groups operating libraries, the sustainability of such libraries and, in particular, to address outstanding legal, regulatory and operational issues. Furthermore, such libraries must have support from professional staff.
27. There is need to implement a national e-lending service that is accessible to all library users, whatever their post code. We cannot wait for all 151 authorities in England to get their act together and make the necessary investment in a user-focused service.
28. We must encourage the professional bodies to enhance the quality of their leadership and the willingness of the profession to accept challenge and change. The fact that CILIP was recently unable to attract any nominations for the positions of President elect (Vice President) is worrying.
29. Government needs to work with local government and the profession to build a viable service which is available to all and serves the changing needs of users and potential users, a process which, if properly pursued, will also further central government's own objectives in, for instance, education and e-government.
30. Insofar as legislation is required, it is hoped that it will be possible to achieve cross-party consensus.
31. There is a crisis in library services. There is also an opportunity to create services fit for the 21st century. It shouldn't be wasted.

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