

WRITTEN EVIDENCE TO THE INDEPENDENT INQUIRY ON PUBLIC LIBRARIES IN ENGLAND, FROM THE LIBRARY CAMPAIGN.

[Posted to the LIS-PUB-LIBS discussion list on 23 March 2014]

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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 liaise with the SCL and ACE, attempt to work with DCMS, and 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) 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. Back issues can be downloaded from our website.

PREAMBLE

We look forward to meeting you personally.

We could expand at great length on any points we raise here. We know you have received very many responses, and we know that panel members really do not need us to spell out the basics. We have done so, just in case, in APPENDIX 2.

We have made no secret of our view that yet another basic inquiry on public libraries is not our chosen priority. Libraries have been in a state of crisis for some time. It is now an emergency.

Nevertheless, we welcome the tight deadline you are working to and we respect the expertise of the panel.

We are keen to help ensure that the real problems are addressed - and that this time, action follows.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We are currently unsure whether the panel will be given all the evidence collected to read in full.

If this is the case, we urge you to read our RECOMMENDATIONS.

SUMMARY

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

Numerous reports have addressed this question, many of which are listed at <http://www.publiclibrariesnews.com/useful/documents>

Most have said roughly the same things. What has been lacking is any sustained, coherent effort to put them into practice.

A short, comprehensive summary of the obvious points is the UNESCO Public Library Manifesto, to which the UK is a signatory. It is illuminating to compare its principles to the practice of the current government.

<http://www.unesco.org/webworld/libraries/manifestos/libraman.html>

Is the current model of delivery the most comprehensive and efficient?

The basic 'model' - services run by local authorities, backed up by national resources and policy - has been flexible enough to take on every new development - in delivery formats, in new social and demographic needs, in national and local government priorities.

The problems have been fragmentation of responsibility, lack of money, lack of publicity both local and national, and - especially recently - lack of action by DCMS to provide any central leadership/advice/resources or even to co-ordinate the large amount of good work being done by SCL, TRA, NLT and individual library authorities.

Certain structural problems have been pointed out for decades, in particular the waste created by having 151 separate library authorities. The evidence sent to you by Desmond Clarke expresses all we would wish to say about this, so we will not repeat it.

What is the role of community libraries?

Any functioning local library is a community library. This 'heart of the community' concept is constantly expressed by DCMS, ACE and everyone else.

If, however, the panel takes these words to mean 'volunteer' libraries, we object in the strongest possible terms. The word 'volunteer' is itself a cynical misnomer. Communities are forced to attempt to run their own libraries by local authorities that refuse to offer any alternative to wholesale closures. Many alternatives exist.

These libraries are proving to be a huge burden to carry. Their chances of survival are very poor.

Every single one of these 'volunteer' groups has made it clear that what they want is a proper professionally-run service. Every single one has campaigned long and hard for this right, with strong public support. Their formation represents a defeat for democracy and reasoned argument.

Above all - and we cannot stress this too highly - promoting them is the worst conceivable way to attempt to make savings.

Their role is akin of that of food banks - they meet, inadequately, a need that should never have been created.

SUMMARISED SUMMARY

Public libraries are uniquely trusted, well-loved, accessible, low-cost centres for information, communication and recreation. They are infinitely flexible and adaptable.

The model - outlined in many reports - is a national network of resources, clearly defined and publicised, fully accessible at local level and supplemented by extra services as required locally.

The meltdown in local library provision is already causing widespread damage.

BACKGROUND

1. It is essential that the panel take on board the new financial reality, which so far has been ignored by ACE and the DCMS.

2. The coalition government makes it clear that its aim is to reduce the public sector permanently, and to impose escalating cuts for years to come. Opposition plans are not much different.

The assumption seems to be that amateurs and volunteers have limitless capacity to run much of what we call civic society. This is manifestly not the case.

3. Local authorities are already subject to cuts of up to 50%, imposed at a speed that has made it difficult to plan ways to minimise the damage. Further documentation on this appears in Geoffrey Dron's evidence to the panel.

Meanwhile we see deprivation and social exclusion at near-Victorian levels in some areas, escalating the need for public resources such as libraries.

4. In public libraries, this comes on top of decades of salami-slicing, often by unassertive library managers content to make do and mend and unskilled in publicising their value.

Support and advocacy at national level have been inadequate.

Branch closures, cuts in expert staff, opening hours, stock quality, building maintenance etc have already made libraries less accessible, attractive and useful than they should be.

Many people already have no idea what it is to have a library that (a) is accessible and (b) delivers a full service. (The general public, however, can still clearly see libraries' obvious importance and potential.)

5. The current assault is therefore on a service already dangerously undermined.

In several local authorities, the public library landscape has already suffered damage on an unprecedented scale. In others, it survives but quality issues threaten its future. In still others, it survives or even thrives.

Basic research is badly needed to find out why/how some services cope and others do not.

DCMS

6. The libraries minister is the crux of the problem now. He is in clear breach of all his statutory duties (to 'superintend, and promote the improvement of, the public library service... and to secure the proper discharge by local authorities of the[ir] functions in relation to libraries...).

7. Whatever the background situation, he could have done something to help prevent the current crisis. The growing danger has been apparent for years. Many immediate problems could be solved with no fundamental organisational change at all.

8. One of the minister's few actions has been to abolish the ACL (his sole source of independent advice on libraries). That he apparently did not know it is a statutory requirement says much about the quality of advice he gets from his civil servants. As the emergency grew he appointed one part-time adviser (Yinnon Ezra) - now gone. We have made repeated requests via FoI to be told what advice he supplied, which have been refused.

At the time of the select committee inquiry into public library closures, the minister was attempting to place his supervisory function with ACE - which rightly declined. (The inability of ACE to carry out any proper work on libraries - and the expensive, useless research that made its first 18 months a disastrous waste of time - are outlined in our evidence to the select committee's current inquiry on the work of ACE.)

9. As a minimum, the minister should have had a coherent coping strategy, with maximum sharing of resources and expertise and the promotion of ideas for efficiencies. He could also co-ordinate, rationalise and promote existing good development work.

10. The Universal Offers (devised not by DCMS or ACE but by SCL and TRA) have even done the job for him - but they are scrabbling about to find one-off grants to finance the necessary research, training and roll-out.

11. Instead he has moved from doing a bit, to doing nothing while denying that there is any problem, to engaging in active sabotage.

We were staggered to see in October 2013 the exhortation on gov.uk to all and sundry to have a go at running a library (we have found out via FOI that the text was written by DCMS and DCLG, with no reference to ACE).

This was followed by an interview in the Telegraph hailing volunteer libraries as the future because they are 'much cheaper' to run than council libraries.

In essence he has presided over a fundamental change in the service, with no research and no consultation.

12. He has been approached many times by local people alerting him (in closely-argued detail) of planned changes that were clearly destructive. The response has been nil.

13. Currently he purports (in his report to the Commons select committee) not even to know how many closures (etc) have taken place. This is inexcusable.

14. Disseminating a working definition of 'comprehensive and efficient' would also save much wasted time and heartache. We assume DCMS has one, as it must have some rationale for turning down constant appeals for intervention at local level.

SCANDAL

15. It is hard to see how else to describe the current situation. On the whole, only library users are speaking out on the value of public libraries, and the importance of skilled staff in delivering a service adequate to the need.

Yet users/frontline staff are routinely excluded from all consultations.

16. As just one national-level example, we repeatedly asked ACE to include library users' views in its unnecessary and expensive 'Envisioning' report. It refused.

17. At local level, we can give numerous examples of local authority 'consultations' that fail to reach many of those most concerned, ignore their own findings, and refuse to consider alternative proposals for savings. We can even give examples of local authorities that have played tricks to ensure they receive only the answers they want.

18. Much of the work really needed is being done not by the bodies paid to do it, but by others in their spare time, with or without a patchy assortment of grants to support it.

As examples:

i. Publicising the value of libraries and librarians - done by local library users, The Library Campaign, Unison (not ACE, DCMS or CILIP.)

ii. A national development framework (the Universal Offers), including under-pinning research & staff training - developed by SCL and TRA (not ACE or DCMS).

iii. A national information resource on public libraries - provided by one librarian (Ian Anstice) in his spare time, using his small daughter's broken laptop (not DCMS, ACE)

iv. An advice service for 'volunteer' libraries desperate for information and support (over 130 of them so far) - Jim Brooks of Little Chalfont Community Library, latterly with some funding from the Cabinet Office (not DCMS or ACE).

The last is particularly astonishing. In May 2013, we sent the minister a list of 23 very basic questions facing volunteer libraries that need an agreed expert response (PLR, data protection, copyright, confidentiality etc etc etc). See APPENDIX 1. (This list was meant to be a starter, to be followed by proper research into the full needs of these libraries.) He replied only after a reminder sent in October, and ignored all the questions.

If he really believes volunteer libraries are worth having, it is incredible that he does nothing at all to help them.

If he really believes they are a way to save money (we doubt this), it is incredible that he leaves 151 individual library authorities floundering to find their own solutions to common problems, ensuring maximum wasted energy and minimum savings.

ACCESS

19. The over-riding core principle for public libraries is access. This is a moral principle and a practical priority.

20. The development of e-services is one vital aspect. We appreciate that the Sieghart report has made a start, and applaud the work of SCL in beginning pilot work. But there is a crying need to develop national infrastructure, standards and resources.

21. We assume we have no need to document the 'digital divide', which libraries are well placed to address and which will disadvantage millions of people for years to come - most probably for ever.

22. Buildings remain crucial. A library service is of course more than a building, but for most users it starts with a building. (Indeed, unless there is major change to current proposals on PLR and e-loans, even e-services will be concentrated on downloading at library buildings.)

23. Accessible local branches are needed now more than ever. We hardly need to explain this. The Charteris/Wirral report has analysed the matter in full. Some obvious aspects include: poverty and over-crowded housing increase the need for space and resources, literacy problems and the collapse of school libraries make pre-school and school visits increasingly important, high fares and (often) poor public transport make travel to distant

branches near-impossible, many millions of people have no internet access while government moves to make resources (including benefits) online-only... Meanwhile, thanks to the internet the smallest branch can now offer a vast range of material (if expert support is available, that is).

24. Local branches are cheap to run, universally trusted, and can take on a huge range of useful functions. Closing them, or dumping them on to 'volunteers', saves little or no money. Given the social, economic and educational damage it causes, any small savings are worthless.

25. It is quite obvious that there are better ways to make savings - notably, promoting co-operation between library authorities and curbing excessive spending elsewhere within councils, including expensive central services, outsourced contracts and consultants. This is, overall, the most important point we wish to make in this evidence.

BLACKMAIL

26. Much of what we say could be expanded with details, references and examples. We will focus on one area where we have special expertise - 'volunteer' libraries.

27. Those who run them universally feel they have been blackmailed into doing so. They are given only one choice - to see a branch library closed and the building lost for ever, or to try to keep it going until sanity returns.

28. Those who run them universally say that they really want a professionally-run service, and that what they can provide is very much second-best.

29. Those who run them are finding the task overwhelming. The workload is enormous. It is very difficult to find enough volunteers, let alone expert and reliable ones. Local spats and factions are a common problem. If they can find funding at all, it is by cannibalising resources that should be used for many other purposes, from parish council funds to assorted grants to citizens' own pockets and time.

30. It is obvious that such libraries have little chance except in communities that are affluent, skilled and largely retired. They have least chance in the deprived communities that need libraries most.

31. Those who run them say they fear that if they manage to make a go of the enterprise - no matter how inadequately - this will be cynically used as justification for a policy of closures/dumping that they passionately oppose. This, again, is blackmail.

32. The little experience there is shows that volunteer libraries cannot survive at all without considerable council support. Most current plans for volunteer take-over include a little financial support for a couple of years - with nothing said about ensuing years. We predict widespread collapse at this point.

33. ACE's sole contribution to this unfolding disaster is the much-ridiculed report on 'Community libraries' issued early last year.

This was an uncritical head-count (already well out of date at the time of publication) of a disparate collection of volunteer libraries, some yet to begin functioning, sorted into vague types, with no evaluation of what might work, or how, or what quality of service ensues, or what the usage is, and accompanied by 'guidance' that is so obvious as to be asinine. Both TLC and CILIP have repeatedly asked ACE to provide the raw data collected, as we cannot believe the findings.

The ACE report came at the same time as one from the National Institute of Women's Institutes, revealing - from experience - severe deficiencies in the support offered to volunteers, and asserting that they must not be used as 'sticking plaster' to hide gaps in the service.

34. We could supply many quotes to support all these points.

Meanwhile, local people are aware that all pay the same council tax - but some get a proper library service, others have to fund and run the service themselves.

In a dire emergency, with retired professionals, communities might be able to bodge together makeshift schools, medical services, courts, dad's armies and so on. We see volunteer libraries in the same light.

WASTE

35. A particularly tragic aspect of the current situation is the failure - over many years - to make proper use of a huge amount of research and development work.

36. A full list would be impossibly long to compile.

As random examples:

i. The National Literacy Trust has twice run a Year of Literacy that included research, development work and successful publicity. The most recent Year signed up 2m new library members via a promotion in the Sun. In each case, the work has been abandoned.

ii. TRA developed the Love Libraries campaign, with a busy website, celebrity support, promotional materials, annual awards, constant press cover etc. This had gained a great deal of momentum when it was 'taken over' by MLA - and simply killed off.

iii. TRA developed an easy-to-use matrix for children's services to checklist what they provide, identify the gaps and plan improvements. This was not promoted.

iv. The DCMS's own Public Library Standards (with compliance monitored and publicised by DCMS) achieved big improvements nationwide - without breaking councils' budgets. They are much missed by library users and staff. Similar standards still exist in Wales and Scotland. Coupled with coherent national marketing, they have demonstrably contributed to better usage of the service.

v. The MLA website, although difficult to search, contained a wealth of information, case stories and advice. Under ACE, it has disappeared.

vi. The Summer Reading Challenge, rolled out nationally, has been a huge success at minimal cost. Many other such projects are ready to go.

RECOMMENDATIONS

37. The above list is a brief indication of the wealth of research and proven initiatives that could be re-visited, revived and promoted to help with some of the damage caused by government cuts and DCMS inaction.

38. Just for starters, and as a stop-gap pending proper work on the basic structural problems, we recommend:

i. An expert panel to develop a coherent policy, guidelines on common issues and a day-to-day practical advice service for councils trying to understand what library services could do, and how to make cuts with minimal damage to the service.

(NB: We are very reluctant to suggest similar support for volunteer libraries - although they clearly need it - because we are against them. Those who run them want them to function only as a stop-gap to stabilise provision until it can be restored in full.)

ii. Basic research is urgently needed on libraries' future that actually includes what we know is happening - mass closures, local authorities reduced to a few basic functions, professional qualifications/posts much diluted, reliance on unregulated volunteer outposts.

Priority topics might include:

- whether volunteer libraries save any money at all, and their effects on usage, quality etc.

(We already have evidence that usage often declines sharply, the library function is diminished and other community activities

(understandably) dominate.

- research into how certain authorities (eg, Lancs, Southwark, Lambeth) have managed to avoid closures/reduced services

- follow-up research on the Future Libraries pilots, which had yielded no clear benefits when last evaluated by MLA (and several of which have since collapsed - why?)

iii. A checklist should be compiled listing what a proper library service provides - expert staff, appropriate stock, digital support, convenient hours and premises, outreach work, access to national resources etc etc.

This would be ticked by both council and voluntary libraries - keeping alive understanding of libraries' full functions, and providing a ready-made list of the gaps that must be re-filled.

iv. A similar checklist should be compiled - and enforced - to ensure that all library authorities are making full use of well-established ways to make non-destructive savings (including - but by no means limited to - purchasing consortia, common standards for digital infrastructure, NAG's common standards for book processing, e-invoicing, shared back office functions, full use of existing resources for book promotion, digital marketing and outreach).

v. A searchable database of research results, reference material, advice, proven pilot schemes, good practice, bright ideas for promotions, guidance on common problems. Etc. Given the huge resource achieved by www.publiclibrariesnews.com with no support at all, this should be easy.

vi. LGA should appoint full-time advisers on library efficiency, service sharing etc, as it already does for other local authority services. (Some authorities lack the expertise to negotiate innovations and can be very naïve - especially with IT and other outside contractors. The same problem has arisen with PFIs.)

vii. There should be a national campaign to publicise libraries. Research has repeatedly shown that most non-users are amazed to find out what is already provided even by the most run-of-the-mill library services.

viii. There should be - as a matter of particular urgency - nationally-produced materials to explain libraries' role to councillors, and their crucial relevance to councils' own priorities (including - but again by no means limited to - education, public health, employment, community cohesion, crime prevention, economic growth, regeneration, support for benefits claimants, use of councils' own digital service delivery routes...)

ix. DCMS should actively promote the value of public libraries to delivering the priorities of central government departments including (and again not limited to) health, jobsearch, education, literacy, digital literacy/access, citizenship, benefits system. Despite the minister's repeated promises to do this, it is only too apparent that most government departments are quite unaware that their own plans are being severely undermined by failing delivery at ground level.

x. There should be proper, regular analysis of the CIPFA figures - in particular to find out what works and what doesn't, by comparing different authorities. Much effort goes into collecting them, to little purpose. Past analysis was confined to national trends - thus failing to capitalise on the wealth of material available for comparisons. And even this was dropped by MLA.

APPENDIX 1

BASIC STARTER LIST OF PRACTICAL ISSUES FACING VOLUNTEER LIBRARIES

1. Need for proper access to/analysis of CIPFA figures.
2. PLR (relationship to national system, possible extra costs to non-statutory libraries, etc).
3. Real implications of /requirements under legislation covering health & safety, equalities, human rights, TUPE, copyright (eg, photocopying), licensing for events/music/films/alcohol, data protection. Etc.
4. Insurance
5. Protection of children & vulnerable adults, CRB etc.
6. Handling cash/security.
7. RFID.
8. LMS - small individual or linked to council system.
9. IT systems - as above.
10. Access to borough/national catalogues & inter-library loans.
11. Status of the Universal Offers & other national reading schemes, eg Summer Reading Challenge.
12. Ability to help with online benefit claims, job applications etc (IT provision, staff training, ethics/legality of volunteers handling personal information).
13. Access to national schemes like the Reference Online discount deal.
14. Access to reading group sets, music & playsets.
15. Training required to deal with all the above.
16. Organisational kit - draft constitution etc.
17. Volunteer policy.
18. General advice on funding/sustainability.
19. Safeguards for communities that can't run their own library.
20. Guidance on support that is needed by volunteers.
21. Advice on which general model to adopt in running a "community" service.
22. Stock management (eg, dealing with additions, exchanges and withdrawals for stock provided by the library authority).
23. Not least, numerous health & professional issues for trained staff having to train/work with large numbers of untrained staff.

APPENDIX 2

LOCAL LIBRARIES: A BRIEF STATEMENT OF THE OBVIOUS

1. The Charteris report includes a practical, updated checklist for authorities planning changes. It takes into account relevant legislation passed since 1964 (e.g, on equality). Especially valuable is its work in defining the duty under S7(2)a of the 1964b Act that 'a library authority shall in particular have regard to the desirability... of securing... facilities... to meet the general requirements and any special requirements both of adults and children'. The report's recommendations made it clear that the most vulnerable people must be considered in this context.

2. S7a of The 1964 Act requires a comprehensive & efficient service to be available to: 'all persons desiring to make use thereof [or at least]... those whose residence or place of work is within the library area of the authority or who are undergoing full-time education within that area' [including provision of] 'such buildings... as may be requisite'. S7b also specifies a duty of 'encouraging both adults and children to make full use of the library service'. It is not encouraging if the nearest library becomes a bus ride (or two) away. Also, if it is a large, shiny 'centre of excellence' it is likely to be intimidating. Offering a 'better' service in a remote building does not meet the needs of all residents.

3. The DCMS website in 2008 (ie immediately after the abolition of official Public Library Standards) said: 'The closure of one or even a small number of library branches is not necessarily a breach of the 1964 Act. Sometimes a local authority will close a library to ensure a better, more efficient service across its whole area. We judge such cases on the basis of the authority's overall provision. 'We would be concerned if libraries were closed, or their services disproportionately reduced, just to save money.'

4. Those who need a library most are the least likely to be able to travel to a more distant branch. Numerous real-life examples are quoted in the Charteris report. The Charteris report specifically rejected Wirral's argument that providing a service in far fewer buildings would be 'efficient' - since this would really consist simply of transferring time and costs to vulnerable people denied their local service.

5. To repeat: a library service cannot be comprehensive if it is more or less unavailable to some residents. Nor is this 'efficient' in any acceptable sense. NB: The current trend to 'save' some libraries by reducing services and/or turning them over to volunteers creates a two-tier service, which is similarly unacceptable under the Act.

6. Children and young families are very heavy users of public libraries, as are the elderly, the unemployed, and many other people who cannot access quiet study space, or find or buy all the books they could benefit from, or acquire the infrastructure and expertise needed to use the internet.

7. Fares are expensive (and rising). It is absurd to expect elderly or disabled people, or mothers with push-chairs, to travel to a distant library, or a school to take classes to visit a

library miles away, or children to head off in the dark to find a homework space after school. (In many deprived boroughs, the study spaces are packed.)

8. Public libraries are already being used much more as recession, poverty and unemployment loom. The current government aims to make 80% of benefits available only online. The needs of the most vulnerable are obviously set to increase.

9. Many people still can't afford broadband, or any e-connection at all. Even if they could, they would be unable to use it without the help of the staff - whom they can fully trust as they cannot (in other places) trust sales staff or public service 'official' types.

10. Similarly, properly trained staff at the library are a gateway to all kinds of information, and to online resources in general, that people need (or would enjoy) but don't know how to find. This guidance cannot be given remotely to everyone. Least of all to those who most need help.

11. Trained staff can also inculcate the badly-neglected skills of 'information literacy' - sorting out the good information from the dangerous rubbish. Government needs to focus more on this, instead of being preoccupied with the distribution of hardware.

12. It is ironic, then, that some local authorities are trying to close accessible local buildings just when the internet enables each one of them to offer a vast range of information and entertainment - and certainly everything that is available online at the large central libraries.

13. There is more. As we learned with the disastrous Beeching cuts, small local outposts are feeders to the larger centres. Those who take the first step at a familiar, convenient local building will be encouraged to seek wider cultural and educational experiences of all kinds. The first step should be made easier, not more difficult.

14. This is especially relevant as the UK slips further down the international literacy tables - with reading for pleasure identified as a key route to literacy, and one in which the UK is particularly deficient. Public libraries do excellent work in this area with pre-schoolers, schoolchildren and - especially - adults.

15. Libraries are a safe, quiet, sociable place for people whose homes do not offer such luxuries. As they attract all ages, classes, races, they provide a unique space to experience other kinds of people, and indeed to practise the basic rules of negotiating and sharing resources, sharing space.

16. Current research also underlines the fact that public services are more than just a means to deliver goods to the individual, isolated consumer. They embody sharing, civic qualities that we badly need to reinforce to build social capital, mutual respect, community engagement, citizenship, social cohesion, co-operation, personal responsibility. In many areas the public library is the last public building left.

17. To a great extent - a library service is a building. (Obviously some rationalisation may be desirable, but closures must be the last resort, not the first).

18. It is not difficult to appreciate the effects of closing a local community library.

19. Yet these smaller libraries are, properly viewed, a resource of huge potential. Excessive closures have already damaged this potential
- but there is still (just) a huge network of easily-reached local drop-in centres that can be of use to any agency. (When the NHS launched Patient Choice, they were going to build a network of local kiosks - until somebody pointed out the whole thing is already set up in libraries. Extrapolate that principle and see the possibilities...)