

## Libraries service and reviews

### Summary

This paper updates members on the DCMS modernisation review of libraries and related policy developments.

### Recommendations

That members note the implications of the Wirral inquiry.

### Action

Subject to members' comments, officers to take forward appropriate actions.

# Libraries service and reviews

## Background

1. At its 16 March meeting, the Board met with the DCMS Libraries Modernisation review team to offer a local government steer to the development of the review. This paper updates members on the progress of the review of libraries and also on related policy developments.

## DCMS Libraries modernisation review

2. The LGA continues to be involved in the DCMS **Libraries Modernisation Review**. Following members' input at March Board the LGA have also facilitated a focus group of local authority Chief Executives to feed into the review.
3. We are expecting the DCMS to publish its findings before the Board next meets and are exploring opportunities for this to be launched at a joint event with LGA. Further details of this event will be circulated when available, and officers will provide a summary of the reviews findings at the July CTS board.

## DCMS inquiry into Wirral libraries service

4. Wirral Metropolitan District council, on 15 January 2009, agreed recommendations in its Strategic Asset Review (SAR), including that the council should close either 11 or 12 of its current 23 Libraries.
5. On 3 April, Andy Burnham announced an inquiry into the library service provided by Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council, to gather further information to help the Secretary of State decide whether the Council's plans are consistent with their statutory duty to provide a 'comprehensive and efficient' library service.
6. The Inquiry will take place at the Floral Pavilion, New Brighton, on 9 June 2009 at 9:30am. All correspondence on the library services in the Wirral sent to DCMS and received prior to the Inquiry being announced will be taken into account as part of the Inquiry. Wirral MBC will also be asked to disclose such correspondence received by them for consideration as part of the Inquiry. Individuals who have not already commented through such correspondence, or who would like to make additional points to be taken into account are encouraged to do so through representative groups such as residents associations, library user groups or national interest groups.
7. The terms of reference of the inquiry are as follows:  
"Gather information and provide advice in order for the Secretary of State to assess whether, in taking the decision to implement the proposed changes to their library service, The Wirral is in default of their statutory duties under the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964, including the provision of a comprehensive and efficient library service."

## **All Party Parliamentary Group on Libraries**

8. The **All Party Parliamentary Group on Libraries**, chaired by Lyn Brown MP, is also conducting its own inquiry into public libraries, supported by the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP). The LGA has submitted written evidence to the inquiry (attached as **Annex A**), and on 19 May Cllr Chris White will give evidence in person.

## **Definition of “comprehensive and efficient” library service**

9. In the context of the Wirral review and the APG Inquiry the LGA have written to Andy Burnham to set out that we do not believe there is a need for further definition of what constitutes a "comprehensive and efficient" library service under the 1964 Act. The LGA believes that such a definition, if pitched too high, would trigger the New Burdens doctrine, and if pitched too low would make it harder for excellent local services to justify their high standards of provision. A copy of this letter is enclosed at **Annex B**.

## **Implications of the Wirral inquiry for the libraries modernisation review**

10. We have, so far, been working with the Libraries Modernisation Review on the basis that it is likely to emphasise the local democratic accountability of the library service and encourage service transformation and modernisation. The Wirral inquiry raises a number of questions about how any further definition of “comprehensive and efficient” could mesh with the Review’s findings. Members will wish to discuss what, if any, implications this might have for our engagement with the Review and eventual response to it.

## **Financial Implications**

11. The financial implications of this work can be managed from existing resources.

## **Implications for Wales**

12. Libraries are a devolved service, and the Libraries Modernisation Review applies only to England.

Contact Officer: Steve Skelton  
Phone No: 020 7663 3074  
Email: [steven.skelton@lga.gov.uk](mailto:steven.skelton@lga.gov.uk)

# **LGA Group Submission to the APPG Libraries, Literacy and Information Management Inquiry into the Governance and Leadership of the Public Library Service in England**

**21 April 2009**

The **LGA Group** works with an on behalf of the local government sector. The Local Government Association (LGA) represents over 400 local authorities in England and Wales; together these councils speak for over 50 million people and spend £113bn a year delivering services on their behalf.

## **Lines of Inquiry:**

### **What are the strengths and weaknesses of the present system for the governance and leadership of the public library service in England?**

1. The public library service in England is a local service. It is owned, delivered, resourced, and governed by local councils. This puts libraries, and the benefits they offer to people, right at the heart of a local area. Local elected politicians provide legitimate leadership to the library service, and are democratically accountable to local residents for their actions.
2. National agencies can best use their position to offer advice and guidance to councils that adds value to local leadership and delivery experience. They can benefit from a strategic view across the library sector and economies of scale in aggregating and disseminating information and best practice.
3. Within this framework, at both the local and national levels, the governance and leadership of the library service has found itself stuck between wanting to hold on to a regulated national service based on statute and minimum standards – for fear of further marginalisation – and looking forward to promoting a local service driven by innovation and creativity to respond to local needs, community aspiration and supporting the delivery of strategic outcomes for people and communities.
4. Under the previous Comprehensive Performance Assessment libraries accounted for the majority of the “culture” block due to the existence of public library standards. This system of performance management via minimum standards served to retain the libraries sector within its own silo, and did not position it to become a major contributor to meeting local community needs and priorities, and promoting innovation and creativity. This is particularly obvious when libraries are compared to services such as sport and physical activity and even the arts.
5. The DCMS’ role under the 1964 Act is clearly understood within the sector, as is their position as the champion of the library service within government. We do not believe there is a need for further definition or exploration of the statutory basis of the library service in England.

### **Should local communities have a greater say in decisions about the public library service?**

6. Securing the input of residents and communities is key to delivering a locally responsive library service, and to improving that service over time. The more difficult question though is who should the library service be listening to and how can service managers be more responsive to changing and different community aspirations and needs.
7. There is often a traditional library audience who are generally content with the existing service on offer and do not want it to see it change. This audience is often a minority within the wider community, and can inhibit service rationalisation and redesign aimed at reaching out to new audiences and increasing use of the libraries. The result can be that many sections of the community – in particular children and young people who are not users of the service – are dissatisfied with what it offers and yet are not necessarily heard.

### **Should central government do more to superintend the public library service?**

8. The library service is fundamentally a local service. Putting central government in a position to “superintend” or regulate the service can only confuse accountability for outcomes and lead to increased bureaucracy. An innovative and creative library service that appeals to all is more likely to emerge where local determination allows freedom to respond to community needs and local opportunity.
9. We are aware of strong views in certain quarters of the culture and sports sector generally that services will remain under valued and marginalised unless they are made statutory. The LGA does not support this view, as statutory minimum standards can lead to a levelling down of existing excellent provision, and “prop up” certain service requirements which may not be to the benefit of a local population. The outcomes focus of the Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA) further mitigates against any drive to “superintend” the service against a set of standards.
10. Libraries in particular have a strong and vocal constituency that supports central regulation as a bulwark to protect traditional delivery models from those changes that are necessary to modernise and improve the library service as a whole.

### **Are local authorities the best agency to provide public library services?**

11. Local authorities are the only organisation with the legitimacy to identify and establish local need and aspirations for communities, and thereby to define the needs which can be met by a local library service. They are also best placed to provide or commission the desired type and level of service required to meet these needs. There are a range of delivery options that councils will consider including direct provision, trust and third sector and even private sector provision if these offer the best way of meeting the defined needs and providing value for money.

### **What are the governance and leadership roles of the Advisory Council on Libraries (ACL), the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) and the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS)?**

12. The DCMS is responsible for national policy relating to Libraries. They are advised in this role by the ACL. The MLA is the relevant NDPB responsible

for supporting the delivery of that policy in partnership with all the stakeholders; most significantly local government.

13. The key to getting the best from this arrangement is to develop a shared vision and strategy for the service between both local and national leaders. This goal is made more difficult because the LGA – representing local government as a whole, rather than librarians working in local government – is not fully represented on either the ACL or the MLA. Such representation would help bring together national library policy and local library policy and delivery.

**What changes (if any) are required to improve and strengthen governance and leadership?**

14. There are many examples of excellent local library services innovating and making significant contributions to local communities where local leadership has been strong politically and managerially. Unfortunately this is not the case everywhere, in particular in those service areas that wish to retain a top down governance model defined by national standards and regulation to prevent further marginalisation of the service.
15. This mixture of strategic approaches has resulted in a certain loss of unified direction and focus, which is hampering attempts to modernise and develop the service. Via the current DCMS modernisation review the Secretary of State should explicitly support visionary local leadership as the motor for transformation of the library service. The review should support a local needs and opportunity led model of service reform and modernisation. This would go a long way to removing the last vestiges of a minimalist, standards driven library service and to maximising the sector's potential.
16. Investment in a thorough and comprehensive evidence base would also go a long way to supporting attempts to modernise the service, by demonstrating the value and contribution made by libraries to key local priorities.

## Annex B

Rt. Hon. Andy Burnham MP  
Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport  
Department of Culture, Media and Sport  
2-4 Cockspur Street  
London  
SW1Y 5DH

31 March 2009

Dear Andy,

I want to thank you for addressing the LGA's Culture, Tourism and Sport conference again this year. The event is growing in both size and reputation, and a chance to hear from the Secretary of State remains key to attracting delegates.

I also want to welcome the desire, outlined in your speech to the conference, to include local government more in policy development, and at earlier stage. I think you rightly cite the current Libraries Modernisation Review of an example of where this has happened, and I too hope this is a model we can build on.

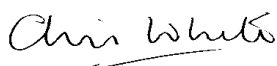
In your speech you spoke about the possibility, via the review, of further defining a "comprehensive and efficient" library service. When we spoke on Monday you clarified that you were keen not to return to the days of Public Library Standards, and I very much welcome this. Pitching such standards too high would of course trigger the New Burdens doctrine, whilst levelling down could make it harder for excellent local services to justify their ongoing high standard of provision.

You are right to refer to libraries as fundamentally local. We must avoid attempts to turn the service into a national political football. I hope you agree that is in both our interests to avoid a situation where your office is forced to engage with every difficult but necessary decision about a library closure or service restructure.

I want to retain the positive steps taken by the libraries review so far. The LGA's Culture, Tourism and Sport Board gave the review's present direction of travel a positive reception at its meeting on 16 March. We were particularly pleased that the work had grasped the central role that libraries play in engaging local communities and delivering services across the whole council.

I would welcome your thoughts on these issues; and I look forward to closer links on policy issues across the full range of DCMS and council services.

Your sincerely,



Cllr Chris White  
Chair, Culture, Tourism and Sport board  
Local Government Association