

DRAFT Local Government Association response to the Culture, Media and Sport Committee inquiry into library closures

4th January 2012

Introduction

The Local Government Association is here to support, promote and improve local government.

Local government is facing the most radical changes, as well as the most significant opportunities, in a decade.

We will fight local government's corner and support local authorities through challenging times by focusing on our top two priorities:

- representing and advocating for local government and making the case for greater devolution
- helping local authorities tackle their challenges and take advantage of new opportunities to deliver better value for money services.

Key messages

- Libraries are a local service. Modernisation and diversification are essential for them to thrive as places of information and learning. They play important roles as meeting places; in developing learning; giving access to the internet; supporting literacy¹, and providing information to local residents on issues such as public health and finding jobs.
- Despite unprecedented budget challenges, councils are demonstrating great innovation and resilience to provide improved library services which meet their communities' changing needs, whilst achieving value for money. Key to this is a sector led approach to improvement, supported by LGA.
- However, the Libraries & Museums Act 1964 is outdated and stifles modernisation. We are calling for the updating of this Act as sector led improvement and local accountability through the ballot box are sufficient to ensure better local libraries.
- Arts Council England's wider responsibilities mean that there is a significant opportunity for a single conversation between ACE and local authorities spanning libraries, museums and the arts.

¹ A recent study by National Literacy Trust showed almost four million children do not own a book.

Background

1. In the current Spending Review period councils have had their funding cut by 28%. They have borne the brunt of the funding cuts in a disciplined manner balancing the needs of the economy against a maintenance of vital local services. No council or council service is immune from these cuts and councils face the prospect of further reductions in future.
2. The public library service in England is a local service. It is mainly owned, resourced and delivered by local councils who spend over a billion pounds a year doing so. It provides an essential part of democracy and with a cross generational footfall that other local authority services can only dream of, it plays a fundamental role in being a gateway to information across the board, from public health to adult learning, to employment and the police to other cultural services. In addition now that public health is coming home to local government, there is an invaluable opportunity for libraries to promote health and well-being.
3. The current financial climate gives a new urgency to the drive to get better value from public services. For some councils this requires creativity to re-design their library services, coupled with a change of thinking by local communities as to how their library services are run. Councils have shown that the best way to modernise services in tough financial times is by being innovative in developing and modernising their library services.
4. The LGA have developed "Taking the Lead", an approach to self-regulation in the local government sector which is helping councils strengthen their accountability and revolutionise the way they evaluate and improve services.
5. The Future Libraries Programme (FLP) was launched in 2010 by LGA alongside the now dis-banded Museums, Libraries and Archives Council. We worked with 36 councils helping them develop their library services. Followed by the Libraries Development Initiative (LDI) launched this year in partnership with Arts Council England (ACE) with the aim of stimulating creativity and sharing learning in the development of library services. The LDI received over 100 expressions of interest from councils and other organisations keen to improve their library services. In addition, LGA will continue to support all local councils through a sector led approach by sharing emerging tools and good practice.

Comprehensive and efficient library service

6. What constitutes a comprehensive and efficient library service is often debated but never defined, because it is impossible to find a single nationwide definition. The library service is a local service and will therefore vary depending on the changing characteristics and

requirements of local communities. Strong local political leadership ensures local library services address the needs of local communities.

7. To maintain locally appropriate access to libraries in times of unprecedented cuts to funding, councils are taking a strategic approach and considering radically different solutions. Many are delivering better and more efficient services through re-design, pooling of resources and new partnerships.
8. This can only be achieved through innovation, led by the experience and energy of councils themselves. The LGA is working with ACE through the LDI to support councils to develop imaginative solutions that are locally appropriate, and owned and driven by councils themselves who are in the best position to understand their local communities' needs. There is no one size fits all blueprint for a comprehensive and efficient library service as local areas and communities' needs vary. However, the large amount of expressions of interest the LDI received demonstrates councils' appetite to ensure their library services modernise to survive and continue to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service.
9. Introduction of the Localism Act, Big Society and community budgets give opportunities for local leaders to create a more entrepreneurial and place-based approach to delivering library services. Underpinning a comprehensive and efficient library service should be strong local political leadership coupled with local accountability.
10. This welcome culture shift at national level creates opportunities for community organisations to become involved in running their library services and councils are keen to develop new, effective partnerships which deliver better services, giving local people more control over their libraries whilst still achieving value for money.² Emerging from the FLP were four models of reform: service location and distribution, new provider models, shared services across council boundaries, and empowering communities to do things their way.³
11. Councils understand that in order to maintain a successful future of libraries it is important that they listen to and reflect the changing needs of the various parts of the local community they serve. It is as important to provide services to existing users as it is to reach out to new audiences such as young people. We must open up libraries for a new generation of users through digitalisation and modernisation whilst achieving better value from public services. In times of economic hardship to many, libraries are increasingly about more than books but playing a wider role in the community through other areas such as providing space for young people to study or parents to bring their children.⁴

² See Appendix 1 for numerous examples of councils' creativity in re-designing their library services.

³ LGA and MLA's 2011 publication "Future libraries - Change, options and how to get there" explains these models in more detail.

⁴ For an excellent example of how re-design can lead to increased use of libraries, see Appendix 1 – case study on London Borough of Hillingdon where a programme to rebuild or

12. Councils know that it is essential to local democracy that the debate about the future of libraries is played out at a local level. Councillors are actively taking part in these debates which invite local people to shape their library services. However, financial pressures have made it inevitable that some changes will have to be made to secure the long term viability of library services. If local people are unhappy with those changes, after having been engaged in the decision making process, then we believe recourse should be through the ballot box in local elections instead of the courts.
13. ACE's new wider responsibilities for libraries mean that there is an opportunity for an all-inclusive conversation between ACE and local authorities spanning libraries, museums and the arts. This creates huge potential for libraries to be at the heart of a more integrated local cultural offer – as many local authorities are already doing.⁵ ACE's new role with libraries will require them to work closely with all councils to make sure they compliment a sector led approach to improvement and offer the support councils require in these challenging times. We are also urging ACE to work closely with The National Archives as in many areas they are intrinsically linked.

Libraries and Museums Act 1964

14. The judgements in the cases of Gloucestershire County Council, Somerset County Council and London Borough of Brent as well as the Charteris Report did not say that there was anything inherently wrong with library closures. They stressed that in order for re-design to be lawful, councils must carry out a full and proper consultation and comply with their public sector equality duties. In the Brent case, Lord Justice Pill said "Given the scale of the spending reductions the council was required to make, and the information available following earlier studies, a decision that the library service should bear a share of the reduction was not, in my judgment, unlawful."
15. We believe that in order to increase councils' ability to respond to local needs the Libraries Act of 1964 must be updated. Section 7 of the Act describes a service the principal function of which is the borrowing of books, instead of the provision of powerful information and providing an environment for learning. We live in an increasingly digital age with changed expectations, for example the Act refers to "gramophone records" in place of the internet.
16. The Government has removed much burdensome top down performance management and powers over local authorities. However, the Libraries and Museums Act 1964 still stands, in stark contrast to the principles of this Government's Localist agenda.
17. The present Act is a barrier to library reform. The stagnant

refurbish its libraries has provided a 50 per cent rise in visitor numbers across all revamped libraries.

⁵ See Appendix 1.

superintendent role of the Secretary of State is ineffective in allowing library services to change in line with the changing needs and expectations of local people. The library service is fundamentally a local service and should be led by local leadership, being locally accountable. Putting central government in a position to “superintend” and intervene over the service can only confuse accountability for outcomes and increase bureaucracy.

18. Councils’ focus should be on meeting local needs not working to an archaic piece of legislation. Central government should be a strategic leader not superintendent, allowing a sector-led approach to deliver better services whilst achieving value for money.
19. We agree that there should be a statutory duty on councils to provide an excellent library service, but this must be flexible. As such we would like to see the Libraries Act amended to allow councils to be creative in responding to the needs of their local areas. A modern Libraries Act without the superintendent role of central government would give councillors the scope to re-design their library services to meet local people’s needs.

Appendix 1

Good practice and innovative case studies

Bradford Metropolitan District Council – local service points in retail stores to extend access

Bradford Council is working with communities to help remodel its library service to provide major libraries in key centres across the district supported by a network of sustainable local service points called “Library Links”. Potentially many of these library link points will be located in shared outlets with extended opening times in partnership with a retail partner. A joint approach with a retail partner has the potential to relocate libraries into stores with excess space, redevelop existing library sites to incorporate new library facilities attached to retail stores and new developments of joint library/retail facilities. The council have worked with the local community to determine local needs from these alternative service points. This programme will enable Bradford to develop a remodelled and sustainable library service delivered through innovative partnership working and using a joint approach which is effective and efficient for both parties.

London Borough of Lewisham – community libraries: a social enterprise model

Eco Computer Systems (ECS) run a multi-use community library service in three buildings in Lewisham. Lewisham council are responsible for stock and have recently installed self issue facilities. ECS leases the buildings from the council and staffs the libraries with a part time community hub manager and volunteers. This has seen the council make an annual saving of around £800,000 on staff costs. The multi-purpose centres provide book loans, free internet access, free training courses and a wide range of other local services. ECS raise income to help run the library through operating a social enterprise model; raising funds through recycling IT equipment, running training courses and hiring out training rooms, running a café and selling donated books online through Amazon. These innovative income generating streams have so far been very successful and they have future ideas to install a café in each library and to expand activities, for example by running a pop-up cinema and taster poetry sessions.

London Borough of Westminster, Hammersmith & Fulham and the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea - Tri-borough partnership working

Westminster, Hammersmith & Fulham and the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea Councils have drawn up proposals for an integrated libraries and archives service planned and managed as a single service across the three boroughs, with local branding and delivery in line with local community needs and requirements as determined by the constituent Councils. This will ensure savings of more than £1 million a year and keep all of their 21 public libraries safe from closure. Once fully implemented, it will mean residents will gain

access to around 1 million books, hundreds of entertainment and cultural events and scores of weekly skills and education classes.

London Borough of Hillingdon – increased footfall through innovative re-design

London Borough of Hillingdon are just over half way through a four-million pound programme to rebuild or refurbish all 17 of its libraries within six years. Innovative ideas, such as locating libraries alongside leisure centres and installing Starbucks coffee facilities where all profits go back into funding new books for residents and other initiatives, have helped encourage more visitors through the doors. The latest books, new Apple Mac computers, free online access and WiFi as well as regular events and literary festivals are encouraging more visitors through the doors. Overall there has been a 50 per cent rise in visitor numbers across all the revamped libraries.

Staffordshire County Council – digitisation and e-books

Staffordshire County Council is making e-books available to all library members. More than 1,000 titles can be borrowed, free of charge, for three weeks for use on book reading devices like iPhones, book readers or iPads. The download 'expires' after the loan period ends and, like traditional books, they can only be borrowed by one library user at a time. They have also recently rolled out Wifi access at all its main libraries. They hope ensuring their libraries are at the forefront of new technology will give people a new way to read and bring in people who may have not used the library service before.

Herefordshire and Shropshire Councils – modernising library services in rural areas

Herefordshire and Shropshire councils face many similar challenges not least delivering services to sparse population in highly rural areas, but also a number of opportunities to create modern and effective library services. Therefore, Herefordshire and Shropshire are looking together at new partnership models for service delivery at individual library level. The programme will look at a range of delivery and management options that will shape sustainable services, including the options of charitable trust status and community run libraries. This project will ensure the needs of predominately rural counties are met by building on the innovation and best practice already found in both authorities. Discussions are taking place about setting up community libraries, largely staffed by volunteers and several schemes are in the planning stage. The number of people receiving books in Herefordshire through the home delivery service has almost doubled. Discussions are also taking place between the authorities around sharing back office and specialist functions and the introduction of new digital front-line and support services.