

Annex B: William Seighart article for First Magazine

Future libraries

A national digital network for libraries could help encourage change and the sharing of best practice without conflicting with the need for local approaches, writes William Sieghart

I have been asked by central government to write an independent report on the public library service in England. But it is local authorities and local government leaders who must deliver their library services, and ultimately I need your support to help create and deliver an action plan that benefits us all.

Having undertaken an extensive tour of England and met with librarians, library users and councillors, I am convinced that public libraries are vital now and in the future – as community hubs, especially where they are part of shared services and/or co-location arrangements.

They could be the solution to some of the changes that local authorities are facing, rather than being seen as part of the problem.

I am not considering changing the existing library authority structures. One size does not fit all and although there are some very good models already out there, such as Suffolk's, I know that their approach would not be appropriate or desirable for every authority.

It is possible to strengthen the service nationally without losing the local approach. My strong view is that part of the answer can be found through offering a digital network for libraries, which could include a single management system, one library card valid in all libraries in England, and a new Teach First-style programme to attract new graduates to the profession.

Once set up, this network could also be a vehicle for improving the leadership of, and vision for, libraries; more joined-up procurement; the sharing of best practice and encouraging change – without conflicting with the need for local approaches.

It could give users access to a much wider choice of materials, and help facilitate delivery of other services such as health, welfare reform and tourism.

It could also allow library services to be delivered in non-traditional library buildings such as the local pub and shop. Such provision already exists through organisations such as Pub is The Hub, and this could be extended even further to give greater provision to rural communities.

I know that many of these ideas are not new and that many of you have been restricted in the past by lack of resources. That is why I am trying to find the funding to help provide this digital network. There are already pots of money that you can bid for, such as the Transformational Challenge Award run by the Department for Communities and Local Government, and I am seeking to bring as many of these pots together as possible while highlighting the importance of libraries to helping deliver many government initiatives. My report is not yet finalised, and I welcome your thinking and ideas to help shape it into a plan that can deliver a stronger and more unified library service, as well as allowing you to make the best use of the resources at your disposal.

I would be delighted to visit your local authority to talk about any particular matters that you might be facing now or in the near future (contact Library-secretariat@Culture.gsi.gov.uk). I will also be speaking at a 'Future libraries' workshop at the LGA's annual conference in Bournemouth on 8 July (see www.local.gov.uk/events) – so please come and talk with me then.