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The Network Newsletter: tackling social exclusion in libraries, museums, archives and galleries

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The Network's Website is at www.seapn.org.uk and includes information on courses, good practice, specific socially excluded groups, as well as the newsletter archive.

Broader issues – Libraries, Museums and Archives

Future libraries ...

Introduction

Given its importance, and the very mixed reception this report has received, it seems timely and important to look at it in more depth. No apologies, then, for this being the sole item in this month's Newsletter ...

As noted in an earlier issue¹ of *The Network Newsletter*, MLA published in March the Final Report of the Future Libraries Programme [FLP]² and also the *Final report from pilots*³.

“The Future Libraries Programme, formed by a partnership between national and local government, and driven by councils themselves, aims to help the library service during the current challenging financial

¹ *The Network Newsletter*, 121, May 2011, pp7-8. Available to download as a pdf (84 kb) from: http://www.seapn.org.uk/content_files/files/newsletter_ns_121.pdf.

² *Future Libraries Programme – Final Report to Governance Board*. MLA, 2011. Available to download as a pdf (104 kb) from:

http://www.mla.gov.uk/what/programmes/the_future_libraries_programme/~/_media/File_s/pdf/2011/libraries/Future_Libraries_Programme_Final_Report_to_Governance_Board_ashx.

³ *Future Libraries Programme: final report from pilots*. MLA, 2011. Available to download as a pdf (310 kb) from:

http://www.mla.gov.uk/what/programmes/the_future_libraries_programme/~/_media/File_s/pdf/2011/libraries/Appendix_2_Future_Libraries_Programme_Final_Reports_from_Pilots_March_2011.ashx.

situation, with an ambition to ensure libraries play a central role for communities in the Big Society.”⁴

The Local Government Group has now published the latest ‘route map’⁵:

“This publication is for leading members and chief officers and charts a route along a change process for public libraries towards a choice of destinations.” [p5]

It has already had considerable coverage in the media (including libraries media)⁶, so the intention here is to focus primarily on the social justice issues, rather than looking at the report as a whole.

However, we need to give a brief overview first:

“This publication is for leaders of councils, elected members, chief executives, corporate directors and senior managers who are reviewing their approach to the public library service. It sets out the learning from the ‘Future Libraries Programme’ which supported 10 change projects involving 36 councils, helping them to innovate and develop robust solutions to the challenges they face.” [p5]

The report is organised around the “Library reform and change model” which, they say, has emerged from the FLP. This model has, at its heart, “Improved efficiency and effectiveness”.

The report is organised into two parts:

- Part 1 outlines four models of reform, which are delivery options for public libraries
- Part 2 outlines ten “ingredients of change” [p7].

The four models of reform

The FLP tested a number of models⁷, and this report recognises that any solutions are going to be a mix of models – these include:

⁴ Taken from:

http://www.mla.gov.uk/what/programmes/the_future_libraries_programme.

⁵ *Future libraries: change, options and how to get there – learning from the Future Libraries programme Phase 1*. Local Government Group, 2011. Available to download as a pdf (1010 kb) from:

http://www.local.gov.uk/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=c6349d6d-7b26-49e4-ae5-b476de21ecbb&groupId=10161.

⁶ See for example: Boyd Tonkin “Not one more library must close”, *The Independent*, 12 August, <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/boyd-tonkin-not-one-more-library-must-close-2335952.html>; Benedicte Page “Campaigners critical over Government library blueprint”, *The Bookseller.com*, 8 August 2011, http://www.thebookseller.com/news/campaigners-critical-over-government-library-blueprint.html#.Tj-ua_ejvU.email; Voices For The Library Statement, 6 August 2011, <http://www.voicesforthelibrary.org.uk/wordpress/?p=1988>.

⁷ Although this is not made clear, presumably the Future Libraries Programme also took on board the findings of the MLA review: Jo Woolley. *Community managed libraries*. MLA, 2011. Available to download as a pdf (71 kb) from:

- “delivering the service network in different ways through co-location or new, non-traditional outlets and service points
- using external providers such as Trusts and charitable companies, other councils or through the private sector
- sharing services with other councils to varying degrees of integration
- empowering communities to do things in their own way.” [p4]

Service location and distribution

This model looks briefly at, for example, co-locating services:

“putting existing libraries at the heart of their communities by opening up council customer service points and using them as a venue for police surgeries, health centres and volunteer groups” [p9]

Where there has also been appropriate investment in co-location, we know that this is a successful model (eg Tower Hamlets’s Idea Stores, Salford’s Pendleton Library), and makes libraries more accessible to people who otherwise might never use them.

However, there is also a potential danger in creating small service points that are ‘lost’ in the bigger venue and/or that are delivering so many services that the library/information role disappears; the report says, for example:

“[Other Councils] are co-locating libraries in shops, sports centres, village halls and children’s centres ...

The Bradford pilot is developing ‘Library Link points’ in shops across the city. This will require an initial investment in self-service hardware and shelving, which will be offset by future savings.

[Library staff provide] ... a front office service that includes giving advice and recording details. This includes a range of services from waste and recycling to parking and council tax advice.” [p10][

Some of these initiatives (eg the Library Link points) are not new, of course, and more should have been made of learning from existing models. There is also a key question – unanswered by the report – on how small a library can become and still remain viable.

New provider models

At this stage, this is a very broadly written section (noting that Hounslow has “a private sector provider” (p10), that some authorities have involved leisure trusts, and that Slough’s library service is being delivered by Essex); but it concentrates on background technical issues (such as conducting options appraisals), rather than spelling out likely benefits for local people – and ways of tackling social exclusion, for example. It is one of several instances where the

http://www.mla.gov.uk/what/policy_development/communities/~/_media/0FA94424234F4EEBA40866BCB5C6F840.ashx.

report is descriptive and aspirational, rather than analytical with some proper ways forward outlined.

Shared services across council boundaries

There is a lot of sense in looking at sharing service-provision, especially in London. This section really only speculates as to what might be possible, but it does include a critical paragraph:

“This approach requires strong political engagement from the outset to negotiate and agree the optimum relationship between the level of achievable savings and maintaining acceptable levels of local accountability for the service.” [p12]

Local accountability is absolutely vital if public libraries are to continue to respond to local need and the move towards social justice. If this model is to be pursued successfully, then it will require considerable investment of time and money – is this going to prove too hard to attempt?

Empowering communities to do things their way

The report says:

“In some areas local people want to play a more active role in running libraries, and councils are working through the implications of this for their statutory duty ...” [p13]

This may well be correct in some areas, but is by no means universal – and it is clear that it is less that some local people want to play a more active role, and more that the local authority is intending to cut library facilities unless local people take them over. There is a huge difference too between wanting to play a more active role and actually running libraries!

In terms of volunteers, there are issues too, for example over recruitment. Volunteers are more likely in more prosperous neighbourhoods with high numbers of educated professional and retired people with the resources, experience and confidence to take on the role.⁸ This would suggest that the very places that need libraries most are least likely to receive volunteer support.

In terms of numbers, a briefing⁹ published in February 2011 reported that:

⁸ This point was emphasised in the notes of the discussion with Jim Brooks, chair of a community-run library in Buckinghamshire, see: <http://foclibrary.wordpress.com/2011/01/08/bucks-volunteer-library-info-casts-doubt-on-gcc-claims-that-community-libraries-will-succeed/>.

⁹ *Who volunteers? Volunteering trends based on government data: 2001-2010*. nfpSynergy, 2011. Available to download as a pdf (571 kb) from: http://www.seapn.org.uk/content_files/files/government_volunteering_trends_2001_2010.ppt.

- “Levels of volunteering has been steadily declining since 2005 on almost ever measure ... – formal or informal, once in the last month or last 12 months all having decreased, and all having decreased between 2008/9 and 2009/10
- There is no evidence that the targeting of excluded groups or ethnic minorities– such as those with no qualifications has been successful ...
- It is perplexing (even worrying) that the volunteering levels have been steady since 2003/4 despite the heavy level of investment in volunteering by government.”

The ingredients of change

The ingredients of change described in Section 2 are:

- “political and managerial leadership
- governance arrangements
- positioning library service to priority outcomes
- internal capacity to support change
- digital opportunities
- external support and challenge
- analysis of need
- understanding current and cost performance
- user and community engagement
- partner and stakeholder engagement.” [p16]

Comments here are on those areas which could have social justice implications. To be clear what this means for libraries, we can redefine social justice along the following lines:

In broad terms, "Social Justice is about every one of us having the chances and opportunities to make the most of our lives and use our talents to the full."¹⁰

For libraries, it must involve:

- Embracing equality, diversity and multiculturalism
- Focusing on a needs-based service and targeting resources towards those who need them most
- Knowing and understanding the components of the local community
- Having an active, political (with a small 'p') role in empathising with, fighting in solidarity with, and supporting the local community
- Fully engaging the community, moving as far as possible towards co-production of service provision.

Positioning library service to priority outcomes

The report states (with slightly limited vision) that:

¹⁰ See: <http://wales.gov.uk/topics/socialjustice/?lang=en>.

“The best libraries are showing they can provide a wide range of services, from helping people to find a job, to applying to be a volunteer for the 2012 Games, and being a meeting place for reading clubs and homework groups.” [p19]

This section then goes on to outline the importance of libraries’ positioning themselves correctly:

“Libraries can contribute to a wide range of better outcomes for communities – from children and young people to older people, health and wellbeing and stronger communities to access to education, skills and employment. In the current economic climate it is even more essential that library services have a clear strategic vision and purpose that powerfully demonstrates how access to public information helps the council to achieve its wider political and corporate objectives.” [p19]

It stresses the importance of “strong corporate buy-in at the level of the council executive and corporate management team” [p19], and then goes on to suggest key ways in which libraries can be positioned, including:

- “... helping to achieve outcome areas which are challenging for the council such as reading levels, access to job seeking support and information, promoting independence for older people
- providing service access points in neighbourhoods and rural communities
- providing a focus for community engagement activity through meeting space, volunteering, community activities, particularly in areas of deprivation or with low car ownership, limited public transport and low computer ownership
- empowering communities, including asset transfer and community management.” [p19]

These four points are good examples, but the report does not include any hard evidence of what has been learned – and what actually needs to be done next. It also misses two critical points where libraries can shine:

- Helping to develop, lead on and promote the council’s social justice work
- Providing the ‘reach’ into communities (eg via outreach) which other council services may not be able to achieve.

Analysis of need

This is one of the weakest sections in the whole report, and appears to take no account at all of the developments in public libraries over the last 20 years, or, indeed, the vital importance of community engagement and involvement as emphasised in the Wirral Inquiry report¹¹.

¹¹ Sue Charteris. *A local inquiry into the public library service provided by Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council, led by Sue Charteris*. Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2009. Available to download as a pdf (2190 kb) from: http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+http://www.culture.gov.uk/images/publications/wirral_local_inquiry.pdf.

There is ample evidence of the learning about community engagement and developing needs-based services – together with models of how to set about this – in, for example, the Welcome To Your Library evaluation report¹² and Good Practice Guide¹³, the Guide to working with older people¹⁴; and the case studies of CILIP Libraries Change Lives Award winners¹⁵.

Needs are assessed, according to this model, primarily via statistical data:

“Joint strategic needs assessments are already a rich data source in relation to demographic trends and social, economic, health and wellbeing measures. A number of the pilots supplemented this with data from regional observatories ... a number of pilots supplemented ward profiles and deprivation indices with commercial data sets relating to shopping patterns, travel maps and other demographic information mapping.” [p24]

This is not to argue that such data are not important, but that they have to be supplemented by the knowledge built up by library staff from their day-to-day work with and contacts in the community. It is this that will give a true picture of community need, rather than:

“Needs assessment must take account of trends and future projections and particularly the needs of the most disadvantaged communities. Equality analyses (which have replaced equality impact assessments) should be applied through the process.” [p24]

User and community engagement

This is one of the stronger sections in the report, although, rather than giving a 'balanced' view, it would have been helpful for the authors to have come down on the side of engagement in its broadest sense:

“Some suggest that engagement too early can generate fears and that engagement too late results in people feeling decisions are already made. But for a meaningful process, generally the earlier the better is the maxim.

¹² ADP Consultancy. *Welcome To Your Library: evaluation report*. London Libraries Development Agency, 2007. Available to download as a pdf (490.55 kb) from: http://www.welcometoyourlibrary.org.uk/content_files/files/WTYLEvaluationReportrevisedversion.pdf.

¹³ John Vincent and Helen Carpenter. *Welcome To Your Library good practice guide*. London Libraries Development Agency, 2007. Available to download as a pdf (235.17 kb) from: http://www.welcometoyourlibrary.org.uk/content_files/files/WTYLGoodPracticeGuideNov07.pdf.

¹⁴ Margaret Sloan and John Vincent. *Library services for older people – good practice guide*. The Network, 2009. Available to download as a pdf (539.17 kb) from: http://www.seapn.org.uk/content_files/files/library_services_good_practice_guide_1336795.pdf.

¹⁵ See: <http://www.cilip.org.uk/about-us/medalsandawards/libraries-change-lives/pages/lclawins.aspx>; <http://www.cilip.org.uk/about-us/medalsandawards/libraries-change-lives/pages/lclafinalist10.aspx>; and <http://www.cilip.org.uk/about-us/medalsandawards/libraries-change-lives/pages/finalists2011.aspx>.

There is a huge difference between engaging with communities on the future delivery of services and consulting with them on a set of proposals. The dynamics of the processes are entirely different and produce significantly different outcomes.” [p26]

And where is the route-map?

Commentary & conclusions

As the document states in the Introduction:

“The Future Libraries Programme is still ‘work in progress’ and does not purport to have all the answers. However it has invested time and effort and generated enough learning to be worthy of sharing at this stage, so that councils considering the future shape of their library services can benefit from the knowledge, experiences and emerging solutions ... It invites political and managerial leaders to invest in a change process that will have the greatest potential to deliver the statutory requirements for a ‘comprehensive and efficient library service’ which not only saves money but serves communities in a twenty first century context in terms of demographic and social trends and digital opportunities.” [p5]

Certainly, the learning from the pilot programmes is interesting and important to share, but, of course, the real test of their effectiveness (and applicability) is when they are actually running! For example, there appears to be a number of benefits from the proposed joint provision of services across three London library authorities (and not just in savings), but, until the pilot programme is actually fully clarified and applied, the real pluses and minuses cannot be assessed.

The report does identify some important requirements for libraries, eg the need for managerial buy-in across local authorities; the (re)positioning of libraries; and some of the current opportunities. However, it also fails to distinguish properly between short-term requirements to reduce costs and the longer-term need to redefine public libraries for the 21st century.

There needs too to be a real focus on what needs to happen and how to do it (eg on engaging communities and new partners), rather than on the broad aspirations which are currently at the heart of the report.

However, underlying the whole report there seems to me to be a basic problem, best summed up by the first line of Part One:

“Library services can be delivered in new and creative ways which engage and serve communities.” [p9 – emphasis mine]

Future libraries talks about the delivery of service – and emphasises this later with its talk of library link points in shops and so on – as though it is some mechanistic, technical process, whereas it ought to be concentrating on the needs of communities, of library users and non-users, of the ways in which

library staff can truly engage with their local areas and meet their library and information needs, inside buildings and in the community.¹⁶

Without this real engagement and involvement, there is a danger that Future Libraries will end up being less populated versions of what we have today – and that would be a huge problem.¹⁷

This Newsletter was compiled by John Vincent, and all items are written by him, unless otherwise stated. Please send any comments or items for the next issue to:

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¹⁶ Some of the sessions at this year's CILIP Umbrella conference highlighted this issue too – we seem to be at a moment when there are almost two distinct and very different librarianships.

¹⁷ A quick note of grateful thanks to John Dolan and Anne Harding for their comments on my draft.