

BUILDING BETTER LIBRARY SERVICES

Libraries are an important, valued council service, with the potential to contribute to priorities for learning, inclusion and e-government

- there were 290 million visits to libraries in 2000/01
- almost 30 per cent of the population use libraries for borrowing books or other items
- many more people visit libraries to study, use PCs and the internet, make enquiries or for community activities

But, despite growing demand for books and information (and broadly stable resources of £770 million) traditional library services are in decline

- since 1992/93 visits have fallen by 17 per cent, and loans by almost one-quarter
- twenty-three per cent fewer people are using libraries for borrowing than just three years ago

Audit Commission inspectors have found good progress in some areas...

- libraries now have over 14,500 ICT terminals for public use – 10,000 more than five years ago
- two-thirds of inspections have found good examples of reader development work

...but core elements of the service have been neglected

- spending on books is down by one-third since 1992/93
- nine per cent fewer libraries are open for 30 or more hours per week than in 1992/93
- over one-half of library services use buildings that are poorly located or in poor condition

If the decline in use is to be reversed libraries need to rethink services from the user's point of view

- providing more of the books and information services that people want
- improving accessibility by opening at times that suit people, sharing facilities with other services, and using the internet
- ensuring that services are easy and pleasant to use – learning, in particular, from bookshops
- building awareness among non-users of the services that libraries offer

Councils also need to make effective use of best value reviews and library plans to fundamentally challenge why and how they provide library services

- agreeing a clear vision for the future of library services – explicitly outlining the services that people can expect
- challenging working practices to increase efficiency and improve services
- building their understanding of what users and non-users want and need
- building ownership and commitment from staff and members to delivering user-focused services
- holding managers to account for the resources that they use and for delivering local and national standards

The DCMS, Welsh Assembly Government and the Audit Commission can help by improving national systems of learning and co-ordination and by holding councils to account for the delivery of improvement and standards through local plans and best value reviews.

LIBRARY SERVICES ARE IMPORTANT

1. Public libraries are an important and valued community resource, providing lending and reference facilities, access to ICT and information services, as well as a range of specialist functions (such as learning facilities and meeting rooms). During 2000/01 library services across England and Wales received 290 million visits and loaned 400 million books and other items.^I Almost 30 per cent of the population are active borrowers from libraries, while almost three-quarters of adults say that they visit a library at least once per year.^{II}
2. Councils operate around 1,800 full-time libraries (open 30 or more hours per week) 1,600 part-time libraries and 530 mobile libraries, many of which provide a unique local presence for councils in the communities they serve.^{III} And because of this position as a trusted local resource, libraries have the potential to contribute to local and national priorities for social inclusion, education, e-government, regeneration and culture.

BUT LIBRARY USE IS DECLINING

3. But the use of library services is in decline. Visits to libraries have fallen by around two per cent every year since 1993/94, with total visits down by 65 million, and are now far short of Government standards (**EXHIBIT 1A**). Loans of books and other materials have fallen by over one-quarter since 1991/92. The proportion of the population who are 'active borrowers' has also fallen significantly, from 37 per cent in 1997/98 to 29 per cent in 2000/01, while user surveys show an decrease in the proportion of users aged under 55 – with some library services having less than one-half of their users in this age band.
4. This decline has occurred over a time when total resources, adjusted for inflation, have remained broadly stable at around £770 million per year (**EXHIBIT 1B**) – excluding £100 million provided between 1998/89 and 2001/02 from the New Opportunities Fund (NOF) for the People's Network (which aims to get all libraries online by the end of 2002/03) and ICT training. There have, however, been significant changes in how this money is spent and how services are provided. There has been a large fall in spending on books, from £118 million in 1990/91 (adjusted for inflation) to £80 million in 2000/01.
5. Nine per cent fewer libraries open for 30 or more hours per week than in 1992/93; and there are eight per cent fewer mobile libraries. But, provision of some services has increased. The public now has access to over 14,500 ICT terminals in libraries, up from 4,500 in 1995/96, many providing access to the internet. Provision of audio-visual materials, although small compared to books, has also increased, as has the space available for study. There has also been an increasing focus on 'reader development' work, which aims to promote reading and library use.
6. What factors lie behind the decline? The most common reasons for visiting libraries are to borrow, return and browse for books. At a national level, the downward trends in 'inputs' – book-stocks and opening hours – and in 'outputs' – visits and loans – support a link between these aspects of the service.

I All figures in this briefing are taken from 'CIPFA Public Library Statistics' (Actuals), unless otherwise stated.

II MORI, *Perceptions of Public Libraries*, available via www.audit-commission.gov.uk.

III As well as 17,000 library facilities in institutions such as hospitals, prisons and schools.

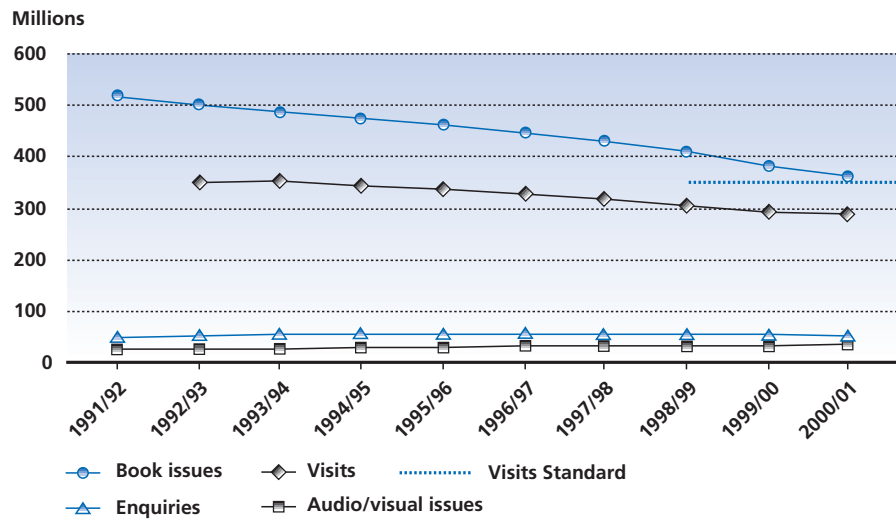
7. However, there have also been significant wider changes. Libraries have faced increasing competition. People are increasingly choosing to buy their own books – with consumer book expenditure up by around one-quarter in real terms in the last ten years.¹ Book retailers have extended opening hours, improved layouts, increased the ranges of books and services they offer, and adopted more aggressive pricing policies. The internet has provided a key opportunity to library services, with the introduction of internet facilities and online catalogues. But, libraries are also in competition with the internet as a source of information and leisure.

¹ *Book Trade Yearbook 2000, The Publishers Association.*

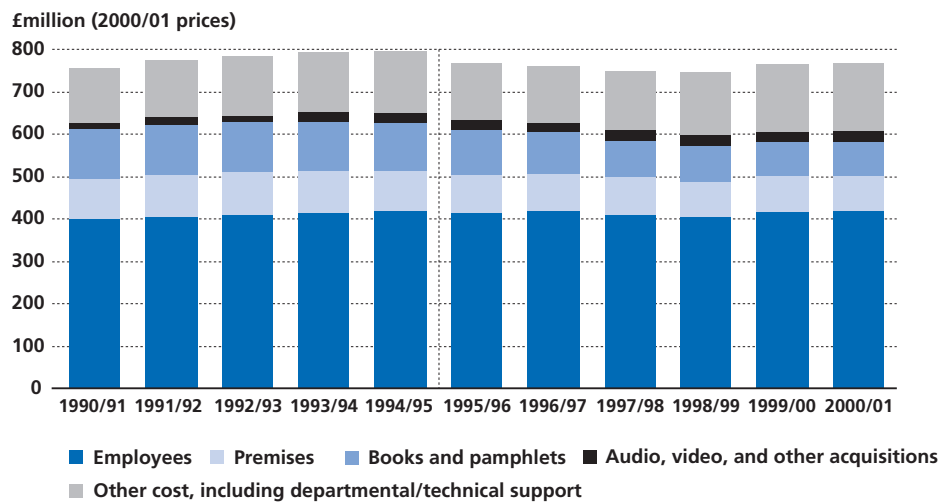
EXHIBIT 1A and 1B Library use and spending

Although total spending has remained broadly stable, both use of libraries and spending on books have fallen significantly over the last 10 years.

1A



1B



Notes: 'Visits Standard' calculated by totalling targets for individual councils. Spending excludes NOF. Accounting rules relating to premises and capital changed in 1995/96.

Source: CIPFA Public Library Actuals.

WHAT DO PEOPLE WANT FROM LIBRARIES?

8. To understand the impact of these changes, it is necessary to look at what users and non-users want from library services. The results of a range of recent consultation exercises highlights four key concerns (**EXHIBIT 2**).¹ Further, when users are asked to prioritise among these four, a consistent picture emerges of their top two concerns: first, the quality and range of available books; and second, the accessibility of services (opening hours, convenience of locations).
9. While non-users highlight similar concerns, the level of change required to meet their needs is more radical. As MORI concluded when putting the results of these consultation exercises together, although *‘there is a significant minority of non-users who feel they will never use libraries in the future. ... there still remains a large number of non-users who **could be attracted to using libraries** ... People say they want libraries to be modern and welcoming. Raising awareness of what is available, having up-to-date stock, additional facilities, providing more information and extending opening hours may have some effect on increasing usage, and should increase satisfaction among users.’* Consultation also shows that non-users are comparing libraries with their experiences of bookshops – and that bookshops are coming out better in area such as range of books, quality of display and customer service – a key challenge for libraries.

¹ The report, produced by MORI, *Perceptions of Libraries*, is available from the Audit Commission's website, at www.audit-commission.gov.uk

EXHIBIT 2 User and non-user views of libraries

Users and non-users share many concerns, although non-users want to see more radical changes in the way that libraries operate.

AVAILABILITY OF BOOKS AND INFORMATION SERVICES



‘Update the books they have. More choice with books. More copies of popular books as I have tried to get a certain book a few times and it has been lent out already.’

‘They never have new [books] or up to date ones in the library, and the ones that are there, they are a bit kind of twee, and you think they have been chosen by the librarians.’

ACCESSIBILITY: OPENING TIMES, LOCATION, PHYSICAL ACCESS



‘[The] opening times are OK now that I’m semi-retired, but difficult when I was working full time.’

‘You have to be so organised to use a library because when you want to look something up there and then you have to think if the library is open, it’s peculiar.’

IMPROVING THE EXPERIENCE: MAKING LIBRARIES A WELCOMING SPACE



‘[The] interior needs renovating. It looks like the 1950s after the war. ...everything looks shabby. Look at the paint, the carpets – old, probably 30 years old. All those things take very little money.’

*‘I do think that too many libraries and particularly ones that I’ve been in, the librarians have made it quite clear that they know everything and we know b****r all.’*

RAISING AWARENESS



‘It’s a publicity issue isn’t it? You forget about the library. People forget that it exists as a public service. There is no advertising.’

‘...communications and marketing. Libraries just seem alien really ... they need to make them more appealing. People need to know what they have to offer and how have been improved.’

Source: Audit Commission/MORI (user quotes in blue, non-user in black)

HOW GOOD ARE LIBRARY SERVICES?

- 10 Audit Commission inspections aim to assess services from a user's point of view, and so inspectors meet users and visit libraries to test service quality. Across the first 36 library inspections, 41 per cent have judged the service as 'good' or 'excellent', 53 per cent have been judged as 'likely to' or 'will' improve. Further, analysis of inspection reports identifies strengths and weakness against the four priorities that emerge from consultation (**EXHIBIT 3**).

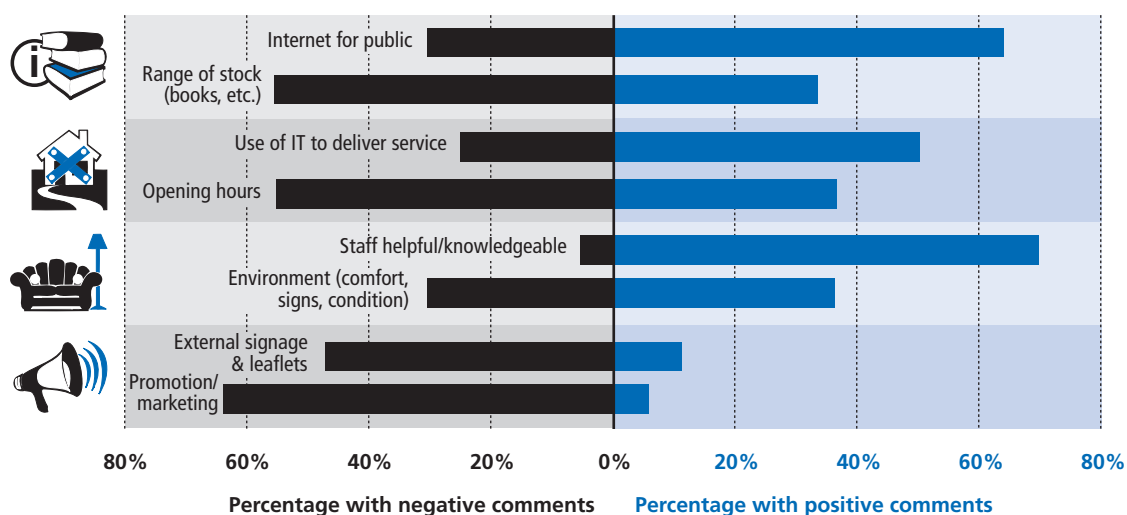
AVAILABILITY OF BOOKS & INFORMATION SERVICES



11. Books and information are the heart of a good library service. But, while inspectors have found that the majority of councils are providing a good range of materials for some minority groups, 56 per cent of inspections have raised concerns over the quality and range of stock available in general. User surveys show that only 59 per cent of visitors who come to libraries for a specific book are able to find it. Analysis of stock shows that many libraries do not stock a wide range of material with widespread appeal, that often existing stock is significantly biased towards older people (hence unlikely to attract other potential users) and that the chances of finding many recent bestsellers on the shelf of a particular library are often low.
12. Inspectors have, however, been impressed with the progress that library services have made in introducing internet access and other ICT services. They have also found that many are good at dealing with general information inquiries and provide good access to information on council services.

EXHIBIT 3 Inspection findings: positive and negative comments on service quality

Inspectors have identified a range of strengths and weaknesses in how well services measure up to the expectations of users and non-users.



Note: Bars show the percentage of inspection reports with positive/negative comments about the issues listed. Bars do not sum to 100 per cent where the issue was not covered in the inspection report or where inspection comments were neutral.

Source: Audit Commission

ACCESSIBILITY: OPENING TIMES, LOCATION, PHYSICAL ACCESS



13. Over one-half of inspection reports have made negative comments about library opening times, citing the impact of cuts in opening hours or the failure of reviews to consider lunchtime, evening or weekend opening. Inspectors have also commented on the poor location of some libraries in around one-third of councils – particularly where local demographic changes have left libraries far from the communities that they were built to serve. They have also found that over one-third of councils have libraries with poor access for disabled people.
14. Some have successfully tackled these issues by taking advantage of opportunities for joint-use of buildings with other services. This has enabled them to provide better access at low cost, extend opening hours efficiently, raise awareness, and promote the library's role as a focus of community activity. Others have used best value reviews to rethink how services are accessed: revising mobile library routes to better meet the needs of deprived urban or rural areas; setting up pick-up/drop-off points in rural post offices; or, using the internet to provide 24-hour access to reservations and renewals.

IMPROVING THE EXPERIENCE: MAKING LIBRARIES A WELCOMING SPACE



15. Successful libraries are pleasant, enjoyable and welcoming places. However the views of users and inspectors show that many services fall short of this ideal. Older libraries, in particular, can be intimidating for some people to use – with 'official looking' facades, imposing issue desks, formal layouts and uncomfortable furniture. Although existing users are generally complementary about staff behavior, many non-users see library staff as old-fashioned, intimidating and 'more interested in the books than the people'.
16. Even simple changes to services have been shown to have a real impact, for example, improving internal signage, using attractive 'bookshop' style displays, shelving reference, lending and audio/visual items together in themed sections, or introducing lounge areas or coffee shops. Some have introduced self-issue systems, which help by getting rid of desks, cutting queues and freeing up staff. In other councils, consultation with ethnic minority groups has highlighted the need to recruit more representative staff and to train staff to be more aware of cultural differences.

RAISING AWARENESS



17. Finally, if people are to get the best from library services then they need to be aware of what is on offer. While most library services have a good record in outreach work targeted at specific communities, few have (as one inspector concluded) 'a co-ordinated or planned approach to promoting the service to non-users'. Two-thirds of inspections recommended that libraries adopt clear strategies for marketing their services to non-users, often commenting that they could make a start by improving the provision of leaflets and signs outside library buildings. Some councils have gone further and recruited staff with specialist marketing skills to address what many library services acknowledge is a weakness.

CHECKLIST 1 For challenging services

Availability of books & information services



- Is a wide range of up-to-date stock available and is it in good condition?
- Are copies of popular books available?
- Do minority groups have access to adequate books, periodicals and information services (held locally or council-wide)?
- Is best use made of existing stock (through effective stock management)?
- Is a good range of information (for example, databases of local clubs and societies, access to information on council services) available and accessible?
- Is there adequate provision of internet and other ICT services?

Accessibility: Opening times, location, physical access



- Are libraries available when people want? (Have weekend and evening opening been properly considered?)
- Are there regular opening hours that people understand and remember?
- Is best use made of mobile libraries?
- Are there opportunities to make services more accessible by sharing buildings with other organisations?
- Could better use be made of ICT to provide access to services when libraries are closed?
- Are there plans to ensure that all libraries are accessible to disabled people?

Improving the experience: Making libraries a welcoming space



- Are books and information attractively displayed (for example, tidy shelves, bookshop style displays)?
- Is stock arranged in ways that best meet the needs of users (for example, integrating lending, reference and audio-visual stock)?
- Are books and information easy to find (good signage and labeling of shelves, classification systems that people can understand)?
- Are staff helpful, welcoming and sensitive to the needs of different users?
- Are other services provided (coffee shops, toilets, baby-changing facilities) where appropriate?
- Does the service provide access to other council services (one-stop-shop facilities, travel permits, council tax)?
- Does the design of the service reflect the needs of different groups of users – families (for example, with young children in pushchairs), older people, minority groups?

Raising awareness



- Is there a clear customer charter/standard outlining the books, information and other services that people can expect, as well as service quality?
- Do infrequent users get a good impression of the service when they visit? Are they encouraged to join?
- Is there adequate external signage and publicity materials?
- Is there a clear marketing strategy for raising awareness of services among non-users and infrequent users?
- Is there effective outreach work with specific minority groups (for example, travellers, asylum seekers)?

IMPROVING LIBRARY SERVICES

18. To reverse the decline in use, library services need to be built around a realisation that people use these services out of choice. Library services need to buy more of the books people want, and make them available when they want them. They need to look at what it is that bookshops are getting right and re-think their services in line with rising customer expectations. But, delivering such change will be difficult. Improving opening hours and book stock will have implications for how library services use their resources. Re-thinking services from the user's point of view will challenge traditional ways of working. And experience has shown that some staff, elected members, and existing users may resist such changes. Analysis of inspection findings highlights five key areas that library services need to get right to successfully address the concerns described above.

(i) CHALLENGING AND DECIDING WHAT THE SERVICE IS FOR

19. Almost two-thirds of inspections have concluded that the best value review (BVR) has not fundamentally challenged what the service is for. But local clarity and agreement over the role of the library service is vital for effective decision making about the future of the service. Without it, continuous 'temporary' cuts to book funds and opening hours become permanent and effective long-term investment decisions are impossible. But defining the core role of libraries is difficult. Library services can contribute to a wide range of priorities. However, central to the value people place on them is their flexibility – the freedom people have to use them as they want – a flexibility which makes their core role hard to define.
20. In order to get consensus and commitment to the future shape of the service, councils need a clear framework setting out how services will be provided to different groups – which is specific enough to test current provision, while flexible enough to respond to local differences. Some councils have achieved this by introducing a clear system of tiered provision, setting out, for different sizes of community, minimum service levels that different people can expect – services then engage locally with communities to identify their needs and priorities, and to decide how and when the service should be delivered.

(ii) CHALLENGING HOW SERVICES ARE PROVIDED AND RESOURCES USED

21. If BVRs are to have an impact on services they need to challenge: Who is best placed to provide this service? Can it be done more efficiently? Can it be done better? However, inspection has shown that this level of challenge is often missing: the limited scope of some reviews (for example, excluding mobile services) has made it impossible to look overall at how community needs are being met; 70 per cent of inspected reviews have not give proper consideration to using competition to improve services; and, lack of external challenge in many reviews has meant that more radical options have not been considered.

22. Less than one-quarter of inspections have found evidence of efficiency gains as a result of BVRs or other local work. Yet analysis suggests the potential to make better use of existing resources. For example, cost per visit varies significantly between councils, and is now, on average, over £2.60 (an increase of 18 per cent in real terms since 1992/3). Yet the lessons learned from those who have looked at issues such as the management of stock, or staff roles and responsibilities, demonstrate the potential of such reviews to deliver better value for money.

(iii) ENGAGING WITH THE PUBLIC

23. Libraries services must be built on a clear understanding of what people want. However, one-half of inspections have found consultation to be lacking – for example, where non-users or priority groups have not been engaged, where the results from consultation have not been acted on, or where the reviews has relied on satisfaction data, rather than engaging the public in more depth. Inspectors have also found that many services could make better use of other feedback – for example, by better using ‘Friends of Library’ groups or suggestion/complaint systems.

(iv) INVOLVING ELECTED MEMBERS AND STAFF

24. Inspectors have been impressed with the general levels of commitment from staff and elected members. But they have also seen the problems caused by not involving them in reviews or getting clear commitment to change – such as staff resistance or elected members avoiding long-term decisions. Managers need to engage with members and staff and build commitment to a clear vision of the future of the service. They need to ensure that adequate support and training are available during change. A particular feature of the services visited for the study was a focus on putting together and supporting teams – with clear roles and clear lines of accountability for performance. Also, to maximize their contribution to council objectives and to ensure their voice is listened to, many library services need to raise their profile within their council.

(v) IMPROVING PLANNING AND PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

25. Finally, library services need effective systems to plan and implement improvements. Inspectors have highlighted a number of concerns over planning – such as over the quality of medium-term financial planning (such as the sustainability of ICT services or maintenance programmes) or the need to map patterns of service provision and take-up against community profiles. Over one-half of inspections questioned whether the council will deliver the review improvement plan, drawing attention to the lack of clear costs, timescales, targets or lines of responsibility, or failure to get clear commitment to resources. Three-quarters of inspections have highlighted weaknesses in performance management, such as inadequate use of performance data, failure to address falling visitor numbers or inadequate evaluation strategies. But effective performance management is vital if libraries are to use their resources effectively, deliver local targets, national standards or argue successfully for extra resources. Library services need to clarify the role of library managers, members and other senior council officers in monitoring targets and evaluating initiatives.

CHECKLIST 2 For delivering improvement in library services

Challenging and deciding what the service is for

- Has the council challenged why the service is needed and formulated a clear vision for its future?
- Is there a policy on the services to be provided to different communities? Is it specific enough to test provision against?
- Are services tailored locally to meet the needs of communities (for example, by providing learning facilities, welfare advice or meeting rooms)?
- Is the library service contributing to council priorities (for inclusion, education, health, etc.)? Does it need to raise its profile?

Challenging how services are provided and resources are used

- Is the scope of review work wide enough to rethink the whole service? Is effective use made of challenge from outside the service and the council?
- Is good practice identified and implemented (through benchmarking or by learning from elsewhere)?
- Are effective use made of competition and partnership to drive service improvement?
- Have stock management and other processes been challenged to identify savings and to make services easier to use?
- Have staff roles and skills been challenged against service priorities? Is best use made of staff skills (for example, choosing specialist stock)?

Engaging with the public

- Has the service developed effective relationships with user groups and reached out to community groups that represent potential users?
- Are services challenged from the users' point of view? Are barriers to access and competition from bookshops understood?
- Does consultation cover non-users and priority groups? Does it engage them effectively and identify barriers to use? Are the results acted on?

Involving elected members and staff

- Are staff, unions and elected members engaged early on in the process of service review and change?
- Are elected members engaged in planning library services? Are they working constructively with staff and local people to agree priorities and deliver improvements?
- Is there clear leadership and commitment to deliver user-focused services?
- Are staff deployed in teams that reflect their skills? Are teams, as well as individuals, developed and held accountable?

Improving planning and performance management

- Is service provision mapped against community profiles to identify target groups and set targets?
- Does the service understand its costs? Does it have sustainable plans for the ICT and buildings? Is there clear commitment to the resources identified in plans?
- Is the implementation of improvement and library plans monitored by elected members and senior officers?
- Are initiatives evaluated and measured in terms of their impact on visits, loans, membership or their contribution to council priorities?
- Are there clear lines of accountability for the use of resources? Are managers held responsible for local targets and national standards? Are standards and targets clear to staff and communicated plainly to users?

CONCLUSIONS

'I think the libraries are marvellous because they are free. They are free and I love that. I think it is wonderful to be able to walk in there and do your reading and collect about half a dozen books, take them home with you, it costs you nothing. And it is just fantastic.'

User¹

'I feel when I think of going to the library that I am alienated and I don't feel comfortable in that environment. I would rather go to a shop because I felt comfortable there to pay for a book because of the environment.'

Lapsed-user¹

26. Libraries hold an important place in people's hearts, but they are losing their place in people's lives. If current trends continue, libraries will increasingly become a minority service. This is not what central or local government want. More important, it is not what the public want. Consultation shows that people want good, useful and welcoming library services. But consultation and inspection also show that many library services are falling short in the areas that matter most. Reversing the trend in library use is a significant challenge. But those that have responded to this challenge have shown that it can be met.
27. Government and other agencies, such as the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP), Re:source and regional networks, can help by improving national systems of learning and co-ordination in those areas which library services are finding difficult (such as marketing, efficiency and evaluation strategies). Further, the Audit Commission Inspection Service, together with the Department of Culture Media and Sport (DCMS) and Welsh Assembly Government, will work together to ensure that national systems of regulation (many of which are under currently undergoing changes) are focused on the delivery of effective library services.

¹ MORI, Perceptions of Public Libraries, available via www.audit-commission.gov.uk.

RECOMMENDATIONS

ACTIONS FOR COUNCILS AND LIBRARY SERVICES

1. Library services need to direct their resources at delivering the services that local people want, in particular...

- providing the books and information services that people want and need
- maximizing accessibility by opening at times that suit local people, making better use of joint-use facilities, and using the internet to provide access to their services to people at home
- making services easy and pleasant to use – in particular, looking at what attracts people to bookshops
- building awareness among non-users of the services they have on offer

2. Councils need to make effective use of reviews and library plans to fundamentally challenge why and how they provide library services

- agreeing a clear vision for the future of library services – explicitly outlining the services that people in different areas and from different groups can expect, and identifying how the service will contribute to council priorities
- challenging working practices to increase efficiency and better meet the needs of users
- engaging effectively with users and non-users, to understand what they want and need, and overcome barriers to usage
- building ownership and commitment from staff and members to the changes that are necessary to deliver more user-focused services
- using effective systems of planning and performance management to design and deliver more user-focused services

3. Elected members and senior council officers should provide clear leadership and commitment to library services – contributing to and agreeing a clear vision for the future of library services and holding managers to account for the resources they use and the delivery of national standards and local targets.

ACTIONS FOR THE DCMS, WELSH ASSEMBLY GOVERNMENT AND OTHER NATIONAL AGENCIES

The DCMS, Welsh Assembly Government and other national and regional agencies (including the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professional and Re:source) should help by improving national systems of learning and co-ordination in the areas of difficulty highlighted by this report (including marketing, managing change and performance, value for money).

- The Audit Commission Inspection Service, together with the DCMS and Welsh Assembly Government, will work together to ensure that national systems of regulation (many of which are under currently undergoing changes) are focused on the delivery of effective library services, in particular, holding councils to account for delivery of improvement and standards through local plans and best value reviews.

If you want to know more: the full report, *AC Knowledge – Learning from Audit, Inspection and Research: Building Better Library Services* looks at all these issues in more detail and includes background information, case studies and specific guidance.

AC Knowledge – Learning from Audit, Inspection and Research: Building Better Library Services

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