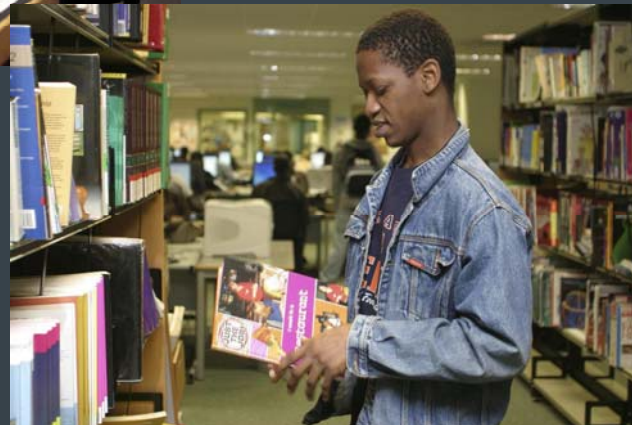


Better information, better decisions, better services

Setting library opening hours



A guide to demanding better information



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Setting library opening hours

Part 1 – The purpose of the guide



Do you need to make a decision about library opening hours?

This guide is ...

- one of a series produced by the Audit Commission alongside the national report *Is there something I should know?* More information on the study and supporting toolkit can be found at www.audit-commission.gov.uk

It is aimed at ...

- decision makers in councils: elected members, service directors and heads of service.

It will help you ...

- specify the information you need for decisions on agreeing library opening hours. Better information will help you make better decisions, which will lead to a better, more effective library service.

Setting library opening hours

Part 2 – Demanding better information

- Objectives
- The impact of different options
- The costs
- Public opinion



The information that will help you

Clarity on your objectives

- Why is this an issue in your area?
- What are you hoping to achieve?
- What are your constraints?

The impact of different options

- What are the current levels of performance and how do they compare?
- What is the potential impact of each option?
- Are opening hours matched to business needs and strategic objectives?

The costs

- What does it cost now?
- How do costs compare?
- What will the different options will cost?

Public opinion

- What are the views of existing users and the profile of non-users you need to attract?
- How acceptable are the proposals to the public?
- What impact will the different options have on the public?

Why is this an issue and what are you trying to achieve?

Objectives

Why is this an issue?

- Low general use of libraries?
- Large sections of the community not using libraries?
- Poor value for money?
- Skills of library staff not being maximised?
- Potential in library buildings not being maximised?

What are you trying to achieve?

- Increase literacy?
- Increase IT literacy?
- Use libraries as community hubs to promote community cohesion?
- Use libraries as information points for isolated communities?
- Use libraries as a focal point for adult learning?
- Increase usage and reduce cost per visit?

What are your constraints?

- Government policy and targets.
- Wider council objectives.
- Agreed library policy framework.
- Budget.

Understanding the **impact of different options**

Factors to consider	The data that will help	The analysis that is needed
Current levels of performance and how they compare	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Current levels of library use and performance against targets. • Comparative data on customer use and performance in similar councils. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analysis of current users by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - age; - geography; - frequency of use; and - times of use.
Forecasts of impact on performance and customers of each option	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comparative data, case studies and evaluations from other similar councils that have implemented each of the proposed options. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Forecast of the likely impact of each option on both performance and customers. • Analysis of previous, similar changes made by the council, with an assessment of whether a similar reaction could be expected.
Matching opening hours to business needs and strategic objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data on the options for opening hours that would be suitable for the range of services that your libraries need to provide. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Forecast of the wider implications of each option, for example, on isolated communities or on community cohesion.

Hints and tips – Understanding the impact of the options

Bear in mind that ...



Different patterns of opening hours may suit different groups of people:

- young people are more likely to use them after school hours and for longer periods during exams;
- pensioners may use them in the early morning; and
- people in employment are more likely to use them after working hours.





There will rarely be perfect forecast data on the impact of different options. But it is better to have imperfect information to use as proxy to make judgements about the most appropriate and cost-effective options.

Assessing **costs and value for money**

Factors to consider	The data that will help	The analysis that is needed
What it costs now	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Current costs (staffing and other costs). • Current cost per visitor. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analysis to identify any areas where costs are currently higher or lower than expected.
How costs compare	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cost data and case studies from other similar councils that illustrate the cost impacts of changing opening hours. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analysis to illustrate how the costs of each option compare with each other.
Projecting costs and estimating value for money	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluation data from other similar councils on the cost impact of changing opening hours. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Projections for how each option will impact on costs per visitor. • Projections for how each option will impact on overall costs. • Projections for impact of changes on library usage. • Projections for impact on other council priorities (for example, rates of adult learning, standard of literacy).

Hints and tips – Cost data

Bear in mind that ...

-  Opening for longer hours doesn't always increase unit costs. It is important to forecast both costs and usage for different days and times; increased use may reduce costs per visitor.
-  Surveys and consultations show expressions of intent that may not translate into additional users. Combine information from various sources, including history, to build an estimate of increased use.

What do the **public** think?

Factors to consider	The data that will help	The analysis that is needed
Views of existing users and the profile of non-users you need to attract	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Views of existing users on current opening hours and their views on the proposed changes to opening hours. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identification of the non-users you wish to target and attract and an analysis of the opening hours that would best meet the needs of these groups.
How acceptable are the proposals to the public?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Historical data on how the public reacted to similar changes made by the council in previous years. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Analysis of complaints, enquiries and focus groups to understand the concerns locally, broken down by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - demographic type; - geographical area; and - type of housing.
What impact will the proposals have on the public?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Comparisons of satisfaction in similar councils, with similar community profiles, who have made similar changes to library opening hours. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Analysis and forecast of the impact that each option may have on public satisfaction levels. Analysis of the views and the potential impact on other services and local businesses (for example, adult learning and improved literacy could impact on local employment rates).

Hints and tips – Public opinion

Bear in mind that ...



Identifying non-users can be difficult:

- existing user data will be a good starting point;
- focus on the groups of non-users who you think would most benefit from different opening hours;
- partners or other council service areas may have market segmentation tools that you can use.



No one source of data (for example, a survey) will give you a complete picture of public opinion. Lapsed users surveys and qualitative data (e.g. focus groups, meetings) can enrich understanding of non-users' views.

Library opening hours

Part 3 – Example and case study



Example – Combining insights in a low-cost way

A council is reviewing its library opening hours to attract parents but has no money for additional research or consultation. It can afford to open for a few extra hours but wants to ensure that it targets the increased hours in the most effective way. It gathers together what it has....

A scrutiny review of hours last year looked at opening hours and interviewed library user groups, youth clubs, schools and community groups.

A lottery bid from two years ago contained information on how some sections of the community viewed and used library services.

There are good records of enquiries from individuals and groups for changes in the opening hours of their local libraries.

A quick assessment of examples from other councils help show when maximum footfall might be gained from extended hours.

A series of 'open days' at each library after school served not only to get ideas but also to assess which library might produce more new users.

Comparing a range of imperfect information will allow the council to make a good assessment of where their limited extra resources might best be targeted.

With primary consultation and research being fairly costly, they used existing information creatively, and tested it alongside other, fresher information.

Case study – Using information to drive service planning and customer service excellence in Northamptonshire

- Northamptonshire County Council has 36 libraries used by 70,000 people each week.
- The Council uses information intelligently to plan how best to deliver their business in order to meet customer needs. They have:
 - an annual, rolling survey to gather and refresh core customer data;
 - robust performance data on number of visitors, broken by library and also by times, days and user type;
 - channels for sharing good practice;
 - processes to pick up anecdotal customer feedback.
- All of this information is combined and used to set strategic priorities for the library service and also to develop service plans for each individual library. The priorities for each library depend on the data and information that has been gathered from customers in that area.
- This information-driven approach ensures that library opening hours are matched closely to the needs of each community.