



A blueprint for excellence

Public Libraries 2008-2011

“Connecting People to Knowledge and Inspiration”

John Dolan

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section one

purpose, context, process

Through consultation on *A Blueprint for Excellence*, the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) will set out a shared universal understanding of the role of the modern public library and of the core services that the public can expect.

The core offer will be a universal entitlement for children, young people, families and communities to:

- an accessible local library – in village, town, suburb, city centre – as a place of resource and expertise at the centre of community life
- a library service working in partnership to engage with communities and enable people to access resources and expertise, information and knowledge
- a global, interactive information, resources and communications service, 24/7, for learning knowledge and inspiration.

To reach this goal requires challenge and change so that public libraries will have:

- the right level and quality of resources, services and facilities
- a culture of responding to and leading on community expectations and need
- effective and efficient leadership and management
- ongoing improvement and contribution to the priorities of local government provision and performance
- recognition by national, regional and local policy makers of the vital importance of public libraries to personal, family and community development.

Introduction

The purpose of this document is to describe a process of consultation on the improvement of England's public library service during the next four years. It outlines the existing strengths and weaknesses of the services and improvement work already undertaken nationally through MLA's Framework for the Future programme. In the first section of the paper there is also a proposal for the process and timescale of consultation and the subsequent steps necessary to the preparation of an action plan for guide investment until 2011.

The second part of the paper presents a series of propositions that will form the basis for the process of consultation. Critical to the future success of the public library service will be a clear sense of purpose and value shared by policymakers, service managers and staff, communities and stakeholders of every variety. It is only with this shared sense of purpose that it will be possible

to develop a strong and compelling narrative about the worth of public libraries that will put them at the heart of future policies.

The propositions for consultation

- One – The Purpose of the Public Library.
- Two – The Key Roles of the Public Library.
- Three – Eight Key Challenges for Improvement.
- Four – Essential Elements for Success.
- Five – What Excellence Will Look Like for People, Communities and for Funders.
- Six – Actions and Outcomes 2008-2011.

Strengths and Weaknesses

The network of public libraries in England is a unique resource provided by all metropolitan and county councils which reaches into every community in the country. Libraries are places where children learn to love books and reading, where people of all ages have access to the knowledge and information they need to enrich their lives and the world about them. Libraries are at the heart of formal and personal learning, building individual and community identity and enabling creativity. They help young people observe and learn community and citizenship values and older people to stay young at heart and in mind. Through static, mobile, outreach and electronic services public libraries reach remote or excluded communities that may have little regular local contact with other community services. In these ways public libraries support the aims of local authorities helping sustain community life, support education, learning, regeneration and the national strategies for children, young people and families.

However, it is certainly the case that the quality of library services varies across the country, as reflected in the achievement against national service standards, and in the need to improve the efficiency and impact, identified in studies commissioned by the MLA. Furthermore there is justifiable concern about the quality of resources, notably book stocks and the state of many buildings. It is also clear that, with increased competition for public resources, there is a need to place future activities within a clear narrative that offers wide support for compelling messages about the ways in which public libraries are able to enrich the lives of everyone.

Recent steps and achievements

Between 2003 and 2007 the *Framework for the Future* policy and associated action plan has sought to sustain improvement across England's public

libraries. Much has been achieved. *Framework for the Future* has enabled over 450 senior staff in libraries to undertake professional development and leadership training. It has funded peer reviews of library services to lead to significant improvements in participating authorities, research to identify need and barriers to progress and it has commissioned studies to improve efficiency and audit the library estate. Between 2000 and 2003 public libraries successfully demonstrated their ability to work to a common goal in the creation of the Lottery funded *People's Network* that, in the words of the David Lammy, Minister for Culture, "created for millions a bridge across the digital divide"; it provides millions of people with supported access to the Internet and online information and learning in every library in the country. The evaluation of the first phase of *Framework* observes that library programmes in literacy, children's and family reading have "helped library services to develop better quality customer services"; national reading and learning activities have enabled libraries "to make a strong contribution to shared, local public policy priorities".

The need for improvement, the need for change

Libraries continue to be highly regarded and popular. Making 290 million visit last year a significant percentage of the population uses the library. But are they getting the service they need and want; what about others who are not using the service? At a time of increasing pressure on local authority budgets, even more expectations of efficiency savings and with the Local Government White Paper calling for improved models of delivery and more customer focus, it is time for the public library service to take a hard look at both its role in society and the services it can and should be providing.

This approach to future improvement does not call for complete re-invention of public libraries as we know them today but makes an explicit commitment to ensuring the services of the best public libraries are supported and provided to every citizen, everywhere. To achieve this requires two things.

First an unequivocal statement of purpose and second a funded action plan to encourage improvement and innovation. The former is essential to performance and to strong advocacy nationally, regionally and locally, while the latter will be the mechanism to help poorer performing services to gain the competency to achieve the quality of the very best.

Process and timeline

As the government's lead strategic body for libraries MLA is mandated to drive public library improvement. The MLA Partnership will therefore be the delivery mechanism for the action plan that will be needed, working with stakeholders and partners with appropriate experience and expertise.

The essential first step will be consultation and engagement to form the consensus on purpose and roles that will deliver real improvement. This calls for wide involvement. MLA proposes the following outline timetable:

February	Preparation of a communications plan Focus group testing of A Blueprint for Excellence, including confirmation of key stakeholder list
March	Public consultation begins
March – May	Consultation seminars and discussions across England
June – July	Revision of the purpose, roles, priorities, etc to produce the action plan and narrative
September	Circulation of final documents to key stakeholders
Autumn	Launch campaign to promote public libraries and to gain support for continued improvement

section two

six propositions for public libraries

Proposition One – The Purpose of the Public Library

The purpose of the Public Library is to be a trusted community resource providing a universal entitlement to:

- The skills and joy of reading.
- Knowledge in all its forms, including print, audio, visual and digital media.
- Essential information, learning and knowledge at all stages of life.
- Involvement in the social, learning and creative life of the community.

It will achieve this by being at the very heart of the community, engaging with local people, offering informed guidance to them and supporting their needs, interests and aspirations.

Proposition Two – The Key Roles of the Public Library

1. Community Place: a place for the whole community to come together as individuals, in families and as a community to read, learn and discover – providing books, newspapers, magazines, information and study resources, learning & communications technologies with help from trained staff, a place to meet, learn and discover.
2. Development Agency: joining with partner agencies for targeted interventions to develop the skills and knowledge of individuals, families and communities. Whether for learning to read, growing skills, learning for life, or supporting disadvantaged and vulnerable groups, the public library is uniquely placed to provide information, practical solutions and leadership.
3. The Digital Library: moving with urgency and excitement to the digital age, create a universal entitlement to remote and 24 hour, interactive access, trusted library resources and expert help to explore global resources and to solve urgent questions online, anywhere, anytime.

Proposition Three – Nine Key Challenges for Improvement

A national entitlement – an unequivocal definition of the library service with a clear expression of what users and communities can expect and the performance evaluation to enable informed public response.

1. Funding – adequate to deliver effective, responsive services.
2. Partnership – working increasingly in partnership – with public, private and third sector partners – to deliver shared outcomes from jointly secured financial and other resources.

3. Improved buildings and access – up to 70% of community library buildings do not meet the needs of disability access or safety standards. They are dated and deter potential users. Well designed libraries are ‘attractors’ both externally and in the configuration and presentation of services. Opening hours and staffing must reflect diverse user needs and contemporary lifestyles.
4. What users want – to counter the continuing decline in spend on books and other resources and secure sustained investment to provide current and comprehensive stocks to meet demand and need.
5. The Digital Library – an entitlement to 24/7 online access to catalogues, resources, interactive content, communications and expert help through sustained information, learning and communications technologies.
6. Staff – enabled and empowered to lead and deliver customer-focused services that meet the national entitlement.
7. Innovation – exploring new service models and new partnerships better to meet changing customer needs and offer new approaches to service delivery and evaluation.
8. Awareness raising and celebrating success – the narrative, the research and the evidence to raise political and public awareness of library services; to increase the user base and to energise policy makers, stakeholders and funders in promoting the value of libraries.

Proposition Four – Essential Elements for Success

1. Focus on the user, potential users and the community.
2. Agreement of DCMS and the sector on a shared purpose and an action plan to achieve it.
3. Public libraries firmly established at the heart of national, regional and local policy agendas.
4. Adequate funding to for improvement and innovation.
5. A well resourced communications strategy.
6. Mechanisms to provide and coordinate national programmes that achieve buy in locally.
7. Motivated and skilled workforce.
8. Means to foster partnership working nationally and regionally.

Proposition Five – What Excellence Will Look Like for People, Communities and for Funders

Improvement in all library services towards:

1. Services that are accessible, inviting, match community need provide a modern, active and attractive experience both in the community and online.
2. Sustained increase in library use across all services.
3. A universal understanding of the library's role and core offer.
4. Provision of books, other materials and media and digital resources and facilities of adequate quality and range to meet the needs of all users.
5. Attractive well located libraries that are a source of pride and community identity.
6. Staff enabled and competent to lead the development of new ways of maximising the potential of public libraries to change and enrich people's lives and to support communities.
7. Increased efficiency and ongoing improvement in management and service delivery.
8. Contributing to the priorities of Local Area Agreements (LAA) for children and young people, safer and stronger communities, healthier communities and older people, and economic development and environment.¹
9. Contributing to excellent local authority performance and citizen satisfaction in the emerging Comprehensive Area Assessments.
10. Recognition by national, regional and local policy makers of the vital importance of public libraries to individual, family and community development, and funding to match that recognition.

¹ At the time of writing the LAA priorities were under review.

Proposition Six – Actions and Outcomes 2008-2011

People and communities

1. Engage local communities in the development of and priorities for their local library service generating a transformational change in service quality.
2. Define a core offer setting out what every citizen can expect from their local library service promoted through a public communications plan.
3. Build the case for a national capital programme for library buildings renewal as well as the successful delivery of the Big Lottery Fund's Community Libraries Programme.
4. Support for the creation of long-term partnerships locally, regionally and nationally focused on individual, family and community development.
5. A programme of targeted national offers around reading and literacy.

Improvement and innovation

1. Customer-focused standards and outcome indicators and an improvement tool that aligns with local government performance assessment.
2. Workforce culture change to build commitment to modernisation, efficiency, innovation, customer focus and community engagement.
3. Establish structures and systems for procurement and service innovation for increased productivity, efficiency savings and a greater customer focus in services and resource management.
4. Help for failing services to reach a state of continuous improvement; with support and advice in partnership with regional MLAs.
5. Campaign for increased investment in stock, training for staff and longer opening hours.
6. Horizon scanning in digital, learning and communications technologies to capture and adopt emerging opportunities.
7. Programme to create evidence base of good practice for advocacy.

To respond to *A Blueprint for Excellence*, please visit

<http://mla.wufoo.com/forms/blueprint/>

and complete our online questionnaire by Thursday 31 May 2007.