

**INFORMATION AND SUPPORT FOR PATIENT CHOICE  
AND THE PUBLIC LIBRARY SERVICE**

**A FEASIBILITY STUDY  
Executive Summary**

**FOR  
THE DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH  
UNDERTAKEN BY  
HEALTH LINK**

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**Purpose:** Health Link were commissioned by the Department of Health to examine the role that the Public Library and Health Library Services in London might play in supporting patients to access information about their choice of health care provider, to map the decision-making needed, to assess the funding that might be available to exploit that role and to assess the implications of extending that role nationally.

**Partnership for Patients:** A Steering Group was established comprising the London Libraries Development Agency; two Chief Librarians from London Boroughs and the Chief Librarian from the North-West London Strategic Health Authority. A literature search was undertaken, 10 Librarians interviewed and 3 Libraries visited.

**Exploring the Synergy:** There is clear synergy between the objectives of the health and library sectors, which could be exploited by siting the function of providing information and support for patient choice within the public library service:

- National Library service objectives to Promote Healthy Communities and Narrow Health Inequalities underpinned by Shared Priorities between national and local government, including measures for public libraries
- Department for Media, Culture and Sport drive to encourage the Public Library Service to have more flexible and longer opening hours, to support access to information about Health and Well-being and to work with and reflect the needs of their local communities, including hard to reach groups
- Department of Health objectives to enhance choice with the provision of information and help of skilled 'community navigators'
- Research evidence on the need for a neutral, supportive source of information for patients, without fear of health service provider bias.
- E-Government targets requiring access to IT to conduct transactions between the citizen and government online and the encouragement of IT literacy

**The People's Network:** The development of "The People's Network" with free internet access terminals in all Public Libraries, has reversed the

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previous long term decline in Library visits. The Laser Foundation has recently published an Evaluation which concluded that there was evidence of 'a clear and measurable contribution' by the Public Library Service to national priorities within the local community. With the People's Network, the role of librarian as agent for written information is changing to include a role as agent for online information.

**A Specialist Resource to back up public libraries:** in addition to the 4,776 libraries in the UK (of which 640 are mobiles and 154 are static libraries open less than ten hours per week), there are many health libraries based mainly in NHS institutions, and staffed by librarians with specialist knowledge of the health service. These libraries have the capacity to support their public library colleagues in the new role of supporting patients to access information in the more familiar community setting of the public library.

**Feasibility at local level:** Findings on national feasibility are reflected at local level. The interview summaries and statistics contain evidence of growing awareness of the benefits that can be derived from partnership between Primary Care Services and the Public Library Service. Libraries provide information as part of their core function. Increasingly this is health information, both in response to public demand and to meet national objectives. Libraries are important community resources. Although some are under threat of closure, overall there is an increase in opening hours with several libraries opening on Sundays.

**Benefits:** There are multiple benefits from using the Public Library service to support patients in accessing information about choice.

- **Patients** gain access to the type of support that studies show they value: skilled, neutral, professional and dedicated to helping people access information.
- **Primary Care Trusts and GPs** can signpost patients to a well-established, professional service with multiple local outlets which is already publicly financed.
- **Public Libraries** potentially increase their visitor numbers, for which some of them have targets. In addition they get increased opportunities to encourage people to sign up for IT training and to borrow Health and Well-being materials.

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**Pathfinders:** Given the diverse organizational cultures involved in the adoption of this function by public libraries, the Steering Group recommends

1. The implementation of Pathfinders in an appropriate selection of urban and rural areas, to generate learning for a national roll out.
2. The partnering of Health Libraries, of which there are over 100 in London alone, with clusters of public libraries, to provide specialist advice and support to public librarians if they receive queries on technical health or health service matters from patients seeking information about hospitals, such as queries about MRSA.

**The Best Organisation for the Job:** The Study concludes that the Public Library Service has a major role to play in supporting patients to access information about their choice of hospital, probably in conjunction with local voluntary sector groups who can support very disadvantaged groups such as those whose first language is not English. Indeed, the Steering Group could think of no other service which is as well suited to this particular purpose and as widely available. Public library librarians are information professionals, well placed to act as community navigators for patients, using approaches targeted to their local communities. All the evidence indicates that libraries have a crucial part to play in turning the opportunity of choice into the reality of choice, for all patients.

***Partnership for Patients is most grateful to the Chief librarians and staff in Barnet, Croydon, Harrow, Lambeth, Newham and Lincolnshire, who gave their time to assist with this project***