Call for Evidence: Public Libraries – What do you think?

ACRE is the national charity supporting rural community action through its founder members, the Rural Community Councils (RCCs) across England. The 38 RCC members are independent local development agencies, based at county level, addressing social, economic and environmental challenges in rural areas. They provide help, support and advice for community-led action in rural areas throughout England.

Our response is informed following consultation with our Network members. Several of these independent charities have significant and long standing involvement in public library services within their counties. This work includes supporting communities threatened with the loss of local library services, advising people interested in taking on community delivery and in a few cases running libraries themselves.

Given our remit, we address the questions from the perspective of England only.

Introduction

Public libraries were established to provide free access to information, knowledge, education and culture on the basis of equality to all. In the UK they are the responsibility of first tier authorities under the provisions of the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 which requires library authorities to provide 'a comprehensive and efficient library service for all persons desiring to make use thereof'.

Framework for the Future (2003), the long term strategic vision for the library service covered three key areas for development. These were the promotion of reading and informal learning; access to digital skills and services including e-government; measures to tackle social inclusion, build community identity and develop citizenship.

Since then and as is widely recognised, public libraries have faced significant direct challenges due mainly to impacts of cuts to local authority budgets and the growth of digital and on-line information and entertainment services. Working within this new paradigm and achieving the best possible library service are a number of linked solutions that we have set out in our responses in this call for evidence.

Underlying any practical steps or vision for the public library service of the future is the need to address the relevant communities' wishes or requirements. Strategically and operationally should involve developing and implementing creative solutions (often tailored to local need and dependent on strong partnerships), the use of volunteers and a commitment to retain accessible services within the overarching local authority remit. Also vital if library services are to remain viable in the current economic climate, is the co-operation of all relevant partners, including neighbouring authorities and the voluntary sector.

What are the core principles of a public library service into the future?

The basis of a public library service is the provision of access to knowledge through lifelong learning to support independent decision-making and cultural development of the individual and the community. This normally encompasses the following services to the public:

- Free loan of books for all ages and all levels covering books of information and creative imagination.
- Provision of other forms of free information through other sources including electronic media and trained staff.
- Free access to IT and e-books.
- Spaces for learning and private study.
- Space for community information and promotion of local events and organisations.
- Activities and events for adults, young people and children.

Intrinsic to the above, public libraries must aim for quality, reliability, accessibility and of course, cost efficiency. Other key objectives should include:

- The encouragement of young people and adults to develop a love reading for enjoyment, to develop literacy skills and their own self-education, training and competences and
- further develop the use of digitised and audio-visual media – libraries must keep abreast of the rapid developments in ICT to provide on-site services and loan facilities.

Is the current delivery of the public library service the most comprehensive and efficient?

With such a widespread service, there are inefficiencies in the delivery of library services in England for the following reasons:

- There are over 150 separate library authorities currently delivering services, which will undoubtedly lead to different levels of efficiency and effectiveness of provision. Sharing of information and the merging of services would likely bring about improvements to local services.
- Severe service reduction has meant the loss of over 470 library delivery points since April 2013.
- Reductions in levels of trained and qualified staff has been a feature of any local authority budget reductions leading to libraries being run by volunteers or being handed over to local groups/organisations – the service cannot be managed efficiently without the input of professional staff, supported by volunteers where appropriate.

- In order to create a more comprehensive and efficient service nationally, there is a need for a public library development agency with powers to ensure local authorities meet their legal responsibilities for public libraries and to encourage sharing of resources, staff and expertise.

Limited resources can often mean libraries have limited opening times, which can undermine usage. To help overcome this, the provision of library services can work benefit in collaboration with other services and support. An option for improving the comprehensiveness and efficiency of libraries is to co-locate with other existing organisations, such as community centres and village halls. This would reduce the overhead cost associated with running a library building, widen library opening times, increase footfall to both the community building and the library service, and enable library users to access a wider range of support.

The co-location model will require ongoing investment from the statutory library services. This would ensure that for example books are circulated and new books arrive at the library. However it has other following advantages:

- Cost savings - removing the overhead of a large library building and replacing with a contribution to another organisations' overheads.
- Access – the community centre is open throughout the day and into the evening, enabling local people to access the books at a wider range of times.
- Other support – the community centre is a base for other services and support in the community, such as IT facilities, a nursery, a work club, social and self-help groups. Co-location enables library user's easy access to facilities, activities and services that can improve their quality of life.

Mobile library services seem to be an underused but a valuable service for those people who use them. Their offer could and be widened to become 'travelling hubs' with other services offered alongside.

Being able to 'visit' a library is important to many people for its intrinsic social value and should not be under-estimated.

Finally in the move towards digitalisation of reading, it is important not to assume that everyone will be able or wish to use the technology. Digital competence for all is likely to be some decades away and therefore paper books and other hard copy resources will still be needed and valued by much of the public.

What is the role of community libraries in the delivery of a library offer?

Community libraries are the front-line of the service, often operating where there is little other evidence of the local authority services. They offer a solution for smaller market towns, particularly where these can co-locate with existing community facilities. However, resources still need to be found centrally to ensure that a quality library offer is provided (delivery of new books, circulation of books between libraries) and to ensure that costs incurred by community organisations in hosting a library are met.

In order to preserve these vital local facilities, the role of community libraries needs to encompass:

- The core services of public libraries within the restrictions of space and opening hours.
- Availability of space for hire to local organisations.
- Co-location with other local services – e.g. post offices, schools, village halls etc.
- Opportunities for volunteers to work alongside library staff to enable enhanced opening hours and services.

Experiments in managing services in partnership with the voluntary sector to create really local services should be encouraged. This approach needs to retain community libraries within the overall structure of the local authority service and may lead to reduced costs locally. Another key issue for community libraries is the need for better communication with each other so they can learn and enhance their services.

The experience of delivering community libraries: Summary of evidence from our member in Gloucestershire

In 2012, seven Gloucestershire communities (various sized market towns) faced with either their library closing or developing a community provision decided to run their own separate service.

These community libraries have proved very successful. There is improved maintenance of buildings, changes in layout to allow new community space, better equipment and re-vamped stock creative ideas for engaging with all age groups. Community libraries are also able to be more responsive – for example there are no complicated procurement policies to follow so that new books can be up and on the shelves the day they are released. This has led to increased footfall in the centres.

http://www.gloucestershire.gov.uk/libraries/community-list

Appendix 1

Successful co-location: Library with Village Hall, Lavenham, Suffolk

In 2004 the library manager made Lavenham Village Hall Committee aware that the library facilities at Lavenham Guildhall were becoming inadequate for its needs. A new village hall was under construction and the use of a room for the library was offered. Construction was completed in 2005.

There is a license in place between Suffolk County Council and Lavenham Village Hall which covers cost, responsibilities, opening hours, heating, lighting and maintenance of the space occupied by the library. The agreed amount is at a market rate, although when the library is used outside the agreed hours the council pays an additional hire charge.

There was some opposition to the new hall and to the library relocating. However, use of the library increased once it opened and it was able to offer additional facilities such as access to the internet.

The relocation of the library has proved advantageous because:

- The library is open outside the hours for the village hall providing extra cover for general enquiries and any incidents that may occur and vice versa.
- Security; the building is rarely unoccupied.
- Users of the library are able to return books via the automated return terminal when the library is closed and they are attending a hall function.
- Library use has increased and some residents who may not have had reason to enter the hall are made aware of the facilities available.
- Library staff benefit from modern kitchen and toilet facilities on site.

Advice for other communities considering locating a library in their hall:

- Define very clearly the space, storage and access requirements from the outset and be realistic. Lavenham Library uses foyer space for newspapers and leaflets etc on a 'grace and favour' basis which works well but could in some circumstances create tensions.
- There should be clear arrangements about use of the library space outside library opening hours – are the village hall trustees able to rent it to other hall users or does the library have exclusive use?
- Allowance should be made for the amount of administration undertaken by the hall trustees in hosting the library.
- Lavenham Village Hall was a new building so was equipped with facilities for the disabled. Older village halls considering accommodating a library will need to take access and other requirements into account.

Accommodating the library has been of great benefit to the hall and the community with good partnership working between the hall trustees, the Parish Council, Suffolk County Council and the library staff. The key to the success of this particular project has been flexibility between the village hall and library staff.