



Department for Culture, Media and Sport

Government Response to the Report of the Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee, Third Report of Session 2012-13: Library Closures

Presented to Parliament by the Secretary of State for Culture,
Media and Sport by Command of Her Majesty
January 2013

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Government Response to the Report of the Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee, Third Session 2012-13: Library Closures

Introduction

The Government welcomes the Committee's report and its wide-ranging comments on the current role and state of the public library service.

The origins of the public library service date back more than 150 years, and library services have continued to evolve over time. Library services have always been provided and paid for by local authorities, and so it is right and proper that local authorities make the key decisions about the future of their local library service.

The library service in England remains strong and popular. Key facts from the recent Chartered Institute for Public Finance & Accountancy (CIPFA), Public Library Statistics for 2011-12 are:

- In England, there are 3243 libraries (static and mobiles, open for 10+hrs p/week), and 4265 in the UK;
- Authorities in England spend £820m (net expenditure) on their library service (£1010m in UK);
- There were 256m visits to libraries in England (and 307m visits to libraries in UK); and
- There were 244m book loans in England (and 288m book loans in the UK).

This is not a service in crisis. This is a service – together with others – which is delivering against a backdrop of significant public sector efficiencies, to a population which retains an appetite for reading and engagement in council services.

The Department for Culture, Media and Sport is responsible only for the library service in England. Since taking office, the Government has:

- Transferred responsibility for supporting and developing English libraries to Arts Council England, so that libraries are more closely linked with cultural institutions;
 - Worked with Arts Council England to establish a £6 million fund to encourage cultural activities in libraries;
 - Continued to fund the Reading Agency and Booktrust, two charities which undertake a great deal of work with libraries. In addition to the funding Arts Council England allocates to them as national portfolio organisations for the duration of the spending review period (in 12/13, £315k is allocated to the Reading Agency; and £355k to Booktrust), the Reading Agency has been awarded a £127,000 grant
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from the Cabinet Office's Social Action Fund to create new volunteering opportunities in public libraries for young people; and Booktrust will receive new grant funding from the Department for Education for the next two years (2013-14 and 2014-15) with a grant of £6m per annum to provide a new book gifting programme including Bookstart.

- Worked with Arts Council England and the Department for Education to pilot automatic library membership for children and young people, to encourage them to use their local library. We are piloting different approaches during the 2012-13 academic year to test the most effective ways of supporting children and their families to use their libraries and read more widely;
- Worked with Arts Council England, the Local Government Association (LGA) and others to encourage library authorities to reform and look at new models of delivery. Guiding principles for authorities on community-managed and community-supported libraries have been commissioned by the Arts Council and the LGA, and recently published; and the findings of the Arts Council's major piece of research Envisioning the Library of the Future will be published shortly;
- Appointed a specialist adviser on libraries to the Department;
- Commissioned and published, for the first time, detailed comparative analysis by CIPFA of the performance of all library authorities in England in 2011-12;
- Launched an independent review of e-lending in libraries, to help ensure that libraries and their users, authors and publishers can all benefit as this service grows. The findings of the review will be published shortly.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusion & Recommendation 1

- The Public Library Service Standards shared the flaws of those imposed elsewhere in the public sector, in that they concentrated on the measurable rather than giving a rounded indication of the quality of service—let alone its responsiveness to changing customer needs and demands. It is noteworthy that most of our witnesses wanted a broader and more permissive approach on the interpretation of ‘comprehensive and efficient’. (Paragraph 31)

Conclusion & Recommendation 9

- There is an argument for retaining an element of national oversight. The current situation, however, where the Secretary of State has considerable reserve powers but is unwilling at present to use them, satisfies no one. We note that the Arts Council’s libraries team is based in all the regions and is intended to advise on best practice. This team could also be used to feed information on potential problem areas back to the DCMS. This system of advice backed up by intelligence should both help councils to adapt their approach to reductions in the library service—which may serve to reduce the recourse to judicial review—and enable the Secretary of State to give a swifter and clearer response to any complaints or judicial referrals. Section 10 of the 1964 Act then really would be a final resort. (Paragraph 92)

Conclusion & Recommendation 10

- We are attracted by Sue Charteris’s outline of a modern approach to the Secretary of State’s supervisory duty, with its emphasis on developing the service, promoting best practice and supporting the service through intervention at a national level in areas where there are potential efficiencies of scale. This leaves responsibility for both determining and meeting local needs to the local authorities, where it should rest. It also—as we discuss below—fits the stance taken by the Arts Council in respect of its advisory role for libraries. We do not think that adopting this approach would require any amendment to legislation, as the Secretary of State already has the duty of ‘promoting the **improvement**’ of library services. (Paragraph 93)

Response

A ‘comprehensive and efficient’ library service represents the balance to be struck by each local authority in meeting local needs within the context of available resources in a way which is appropriate to the identified needs of the communities they serve.

The 1964 Public Libraries & Museums Act does not seek to be overly prescriptive but instead anchors the delivery of a local service to the needs of the local community. The closure of one or even a number of library branches does not necessarily signify a breach of the 1964 Act.

The Government has no intention of returning to defined Public Library Service Standards (PLSS). Between 2001 and 2008 the Standards helped to define a "comprehensive and efficient" service but were withdrawn along with other government imposed performance targets in a move towards increased local autonomy.

Arts Council England, as the Committee highlights, has a development role for libraries, working with DCMS, the LGA and other sector partners to promote library services. The current staffing structure at Arts Council England allows for them to update DCMS across a range of cultural activity – including libraries – across the regions.

The Government will maintain national oversight and retain the statutory duty on local authorities to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service. It is not the case that the Secretary of State is unwilling to use her powers of intervention. The Secretary of State will use the powers of intervention where it is assessed that an authority is in breach of this responsibility. This is a serious matter, and certainly not one based on willingness and unwillingness; rather, it is a judgement on the individual facts of the case. It is worth reminding the Committee that the power to order an inquiry has only been used once in 48 years.

Since the Committee's evidence sessions at the beginning of the year, the Secretary of State has given a final decision not to intervene in the case of one authority, the London Borough of Brent; and the Minister for Culture has written 'minded to not intervene' letters to the Metropolitan Borough of Bolton, Isle of Wight Council, and the London Borough of Lewisham. Final decisions will be taken in due course.

DCMS has continued to work with and support the Arts Council and LGA's improvement agenda on libraries. We have also appointed a specialist library adviser with senior local government experience, to work with authorities where appropriate to assist with, monitor and assess their proposals for their services. This will complement the work of the Arts Council and LGA.

The Government does not intend to intervene directly to force local authorities to merge their library services, as this would run directly counter to the Government's desire to devolve greater autonomy to local authorities. However, it is clear that many library authorities would benefit from looking at a greater sharing of services, and the Government does intend to highlight potential efficiencies in the coming months.

Conclusion & Recommendation 2

- Local authorities are having to take decisions now about the funding and shape of the library service but a number appear insufficiently aware of the available guidance on the definition of 'comprehensive and efficient'. They also appear to lack information about the requirements emerging from multiple judicial reviews. It is not cost-effective for policy to be made by judicial review and it undermines democratic accountability. While we are firmly of the view that decisions ultimately are for local authorities in the light of local needs, the provision of public libraries is

mandatory and local authorities should be assisted to understand what is expected of them under the Act and subsequent guidance. We recommend that the Secretary of State provide all local library authorities with the guidance arising from the Arts Council's consultation exercise as swiftly as possible, and to take that opportunity again to remind local authorities of the recommendations of the Charteris Report. (Paragraph 36)

Response

As the Committee highlight, decisions are ultimately for local authorities in the light of local need. Each judicial review relating to library services has been brought on its own facts relating to local need and the decision-making process from which it can be difficult to draw general conclusions. Thus whilst DCMS does not think it sensible to interpret for local authorities the relevant cases, it will ensure that the findings from Arts Council England's report, *Envisioning the Library of the Future*, are disseminated amongst library authority members and officers. We note the Committee's concern that local authorities seemed unaware of their responsibilities. The Government reminded them what their responsibilities are, and we note that in the cases DCMS has reviewed, the local authority in question has clearly had regard to its responsibilities under the 1964 Act, including the implications of the Charteris review. Nevertheless, as the Committee desires it, we will re-circulate the three of pieces of correspondence which both the Minister for Culture and Secretary of State have sent to authorities in the past 24 months, together with the recommendations of the Charteris Report (which were also circulated in 2010).

Conclusion & Recommendation 3

- It may not be possible or even desirable to retain every existing library building, but wholesale closures are unlikely to facilitate an appropriate level of service. The key to ensuring that an adequate—and preferably a good—library service is available to the whole local population appears to be the retention of a distributed service, in accessible locations, but with flexibility over whether the service is provided in dedicated library buildings, in other locations, via mobile libraries, or in any other way that best fits local needs. (Paragraph 54)

Response

As the Committee highlights, the provision of a comprehensive and efficient library service is not necessarily dependent on the retention of individual library buildings – it is the provision of the service which is key. But libraries are universally recognised as trusted spaces, and many authorities are rightly looking at ways of combining a range of their services with library buildings often at the heart of that offer. Where it is practical authorities do and should continue to consider the contribution that mobile libraries make to communities; it may be the case, however, that mobile services are multi-service and not purely the provision of books, or that other mitigations are as effective (e.g., home deliveries for housebound and vulnerable groups), at a time when authorities have to carefully balance service delivery in a tight economic climate.

Conclusion & Recommendation 4

- Staff costs are a significant and have been an increasing proportion of library costs and, if the service is losing up to 35% of its budget, some staff cuts are inevitable. As with other cuts, however, local authorities need to give careful consideration to how to do least damage to the service provided to the public now and for the future. They must ensure that they retain enough experienced and/or professionally qualified staff to develop the services on offer to the public to reflect changing needs, and to support the growing number of volunteers both within their core library service and in any community libraries that may be established locally. (Paragraph 60)

Conclusion & Recommendation 6

- Volunteers have long been a valuable and valued part of the library service, and there are places where their work may help the local community to retain at least some ability to borrow books and access reference material. It will require considerable dedication by the volunteers and, as the Isle of Wight example shows, the financial costs may be high, even if buildings are made available at a nominal rent. It is not clear how sustainable some of these community libraries may be, nor what impact the change will have on some of the outreach work conducted by libraries, particularly in relation to children and reading. It is clear, however, that community libraries will fail unless given at least some support by the local authority in terms of access to stock (including new stock), retaining computer equipment and IT support, and access to the advice and assistance of professional library staff. It would be very helpful to councils to receive some guidance from the DCMS on best practice in the provision of support. Councils which have transferred the running of libraries to community volunteers must above all, however, continue to give them the necessary support, otherwise they may wither on the vine and therefore be viewed as closures by stealth. (Paragraph 79)

Response

It is inevitable that a time of tight fiscal control, all public sector services will have to make their contribution to the Government's saving plan. Professionally qualified librarians are key to the public library service. But other professions can and do have an important role to play in the delivery of the modern library service.

Volunteers have always been involved in libraries, and where locally appropriate, community-managed or community-supported libraries can present a creative way to manage resources in appropriate individual cases. They are a way of growing the library service, not replacing it.

However, such an option must be carefully balanced and fully analysed. The key priority under the legislation is fulfilment of an authority's statutory duty to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service for library users.

Arts Council England and the Local Government Association have commissioned and published the guiding principles for authorities on community-managed libraries.

Conclusion & Recommendation 5

- Some very good models of co-operation between library authorities already exist. Local authorities must ensure that they maintain and improve co-operation, both across boundaries and nationally, as this will free money for front-line library services. It is short-sighted to reduce co-operation at this time of financial constraint. (Paragraph 74)

Response

There are a number of examples of co-operation amongst library authorities, at both a management and operational level. DCMS has commissioned a comprehensive set of benchmarking reports, which were published on 19 December 2012. The detailed reports, produced by CIPFA, will help library authorities ensure they are delivering a good level of service and review any areas for improvement. The comparative profile reports compare each authority to 15 similar authorities across a wide range of indicators, including: library usage; financial information; levels of staffing; the number of volunteers; loans figures; stock levels; and book acquisitions.

The data is taken from CIPFA's annual libraries survey for 2011-12 and will allow authorities - and anyone else with an interest in libraries - to compare their services with those of similar councils, known as their "nearest neighbours". This allows authorities to compare 'like with like' when considering the delivery of their library services.

Conclusion & Recommendation 7

- There may be many other potential models for providing library services than those discussed in this report. We urge the DCMS, Arts Council and Local Government Association to evaluate the effectiveness of the different models being developed round the country and to produce an analysis for councils by the end of 2013. (Paragraph 82)

Response

Any authority should have a strategic plan in place for delivering their library service, based on local need and within available resources to fulfil their comprehensive and efficient statutory duty. These core principles inform every authority in the design and delivery of their service, but local circumstances will shape and impact on how that service is developed. A very recent example is City of York Council's decision to develop the first Public Service Mutual in library services (with support from the Cabinet Office Mutuals Support Programme). Under these plans, the city library and archive service will be transferred into an Industrial and Provident Society with Community Benefit and charitable status and both employees and the community will have a clear stake in the service design and management. As the Committee is aware, the Local Government Association also produced *Local Solutions for Future Local Library Services* in June 2012, highlighting different approaches to delivery of the statutory service reflecting local distinctiveness.

Additionally, the Arts Council and the LGA have recently published guiding principles for authorities on issues to reflect on when considering the role of volunteers in community supported and community managed libraries. We do not, therefore, consider that an evaluation would be proportionate, but that these publications – together with the correspondence between ministers and library authorities – provide adequate guidance for authorities to interpret as they consider reflect local circumstances.

Conclusion & Recommendation 8

- We very much welcome the commitment given to us by the Minister to produce a report by the end of 2014 on the cumulative effect on library services of the reduction in local-authority provision and the growth of alternatives such as community libraries. We look forward to receiving that report. Enthusiasm over the scope for volunteer involvement, and for new models of provision, is fine, but—given the importance of library services—a systematic look at the impact of funding cuts and organisation changes is needed to assess the durability of new approaches over time. (Paragraph 83)

Response

We will of course honour our commitment to publish a review of what has happened in libraries in England and what the service looks like. It is a commitment which we will fulfil, in collaboration with the LGA and the Arts Council, at the end of 2013 – rather than at the end of 2014 – and annually thereafter.

As requested during the evidence session and committed to, this review will include the range of developments across the library sector, including development work carried out by authorities, the LGA, the Arts Council and other sector partners, and the cumulative outcome of library service restructuring.

Conclusion & Recommendation 11

- We note one suggestion of a small but significant change to the current procedures and practices relating to the Secretary of State's powers to call a local inquiry into the actions of a library authority. Sue Charteris argued **forcefully that the Public Libraries (Inquiries Procedure) Rules 1992 were virtually unworkable and so adversarial that they hindered, rather than helped, to solve the underlying problem. She believed that they should be changed.** We concur. (Paragraph 94)

Response

The Libraries (Inquiries Procedure) Rules 1992 are made by statutory instrument under the Tribunals and Inquiries Act 1992. The Rules were first used by the Charteris inquiry and so Sue Charteris's evidence that the current Rules are, in practice, difficult to use, is compelling. We would agree with the recommendation that they should be reviewed, and will consult on the issue as soon as possible.

Conclusion & Recommendation 12

- We have no doubt that the Arts Council will fulfil its duties in respect of libraries efficiently and with enthusiasm. Its decision immediately to start a major consultation on how libraries should look in the future bodes well. However, rightly or wrongly, the demise of the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council—and the transfer of libraries to a much larger body with a more circumscribed responsibility for the service and a very low direct budget allocation for it—contributes to an impression that the library service in general is being afforded a lower priority than in the past. In the current climate, it is inevitable that library services will be asked to bear their share of local authority cuts and in some areas be rationalised, even though others have committed to keeping all libraries open. We believe, however, that all those involved in providing this service to the public—local authorities, Arts Council and the Secretary of State—need to work harder to demonstrate that it is still much valued and has a promising future. (Paragraph 100)

Response

The transfer of libraries to the Arts Council was designed to raise their profile and put them firmly at the centre of the central body helping to deliver local cultural provision in England. As a result of this decision, libraries are more closely linked with cultural provision, and now have access to significant funds, including £6m of the Arts Council's Grants for the Arts funding for projects delivered by libraries working in partnership with cultural organisations.

Since taking on their new role as development agency for libraries, the Arts Council has been exploring the big questions facing the sector and the findings of their 'Envisioning the Library of the Future' programme will be published shortly.

The Arts Council and Local Government Association have also recently published guiding principles for local authorities thinking about new ways of delivering their library services and working with their communities.

In addition to this community-managed libraries guidance, the Arts Council and the LGA have been working together on the Libraries Development Initiative – which has provided small grants (totalling £230k) for projects looking to make libraries more innovative and efficient.

It is inevitable that a much loved and valued library service is an important element of local life. It is also clear that libraries are and will have to change to meet the needs of existing and future visitors, within the context of changes to council-wide service delivery. Let the Committee be in no doubt, however, that all of those involved in libraries are committed to their continued use, free access and responsive to the demands of a changing way of engaging with books, learning and discovery.



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