

Chapter 1

Public libraries: the modern context

Introduction

As an evolving collection of national institutions, public libraries have been in existence for over 150 years, and for much longer as a series of ad hoc libraries serving local communities. Over that period they have grown from being an informal network to a nationwide, statutorily accountable service.

In recent years there have been several key reports that have examined the UK public library sector and its perceived challenges. These have come from varying sources including the expected government advisory departments as well as advocacy groups and think tanks. A key strand in all of them is the desire to create a modern mission for the public library within the information society. How for instance does an idea that was adopted in the Victorian era to enhance access to learning and knowledge remain relevant in an age when many people now have such access within their homes via the world wide web? All of this has led to what has been dubbed as a volatile time for its history (Goulding, 2006, 3).

To set the scene for the remainder of the book, this chapter will discuss some of the recent discourse around public libraries in the UK, with emphasis on key government reports and contributions to the discussion

from researchers in public librarianship, and interested other parties such as library advocacy groups.

The 21st century context

The picture of the public library service in the UK in any given period can be accurately gleaned from the twin publications of the Library and Information Statistics Unit (LISU) entitled *Annual Library Statistics* and *Public Libraries Material Fund and Budget Survey*. According to *Annual Library Statistics*, during 2004–5:

- Public library expenditure increased for the seventh consecutive year, to £18.32 per head of population.
- Although the greatest part of this was on library staff, over £95 million was spent on books with a further £29 million on audiovisual and electronic materials. Increasing staff costs reflect in part an increase in opening hours.
- The number of visits to public libraries continued to increase, although fewer books are being borrowed overall. An estimated 48% of the adult population visit the library each year, drawn in part by the information and communications technology (ICT) facilities available in 97% of branches.
- The proportion of children's books in stock has been increasing, and issues of children's material had increased for the first time since 1996–7. (LISU, 2006)

Thus libraries remain popular public institutions in the UK, with large swathes of the population in active membership and regularly using their services. The statistics also reflect an evolving service, with the introduction of information and communications technology (ICT) facilities via the People's Network programme offering a new service strand for many library authorities and one that is proving popular across the country.

Yet as the service evolves it also seeks to deliver traditional services alongside the new, and this brings potential tensions. ICT facilities require space in the library building for equipment, and with the introduction of

the People's Network this space often had to be provided at the expense of space previously devoted to book shelving or other support for the traditional services.

Thus the traditional has had to learn to co-exist with the modern, and this has been a fundamental theme for the public library sector in the 21st century, in terms of service ethos, infrastructure and staff roles.

Public libraries and modern life

As will be seen in Chapter 2, one of the key motivations for those who first advocated the introduction of public libraries in the mid 19th century was for the working classes to use their leisure time in culturally beneficial ways. Certainly in this period several major factors influenced how people spent their leisure time: mainly lack of money, and a lack of interesting leisure options to keep them entertained and amused. In the 21st century this is no longer an issue for the majority of the population as standards of living rise and they have more disposable income to spend on their leisure pursuits. People also have more leisure options, such as restaurants, theatre, cinema, television, DVDs, travel, book clubs and many more. This essentially means that public libraries may no longer be fulfilling as much of a leisure role for people as they used to, even recently.

There are two ways of addressing such a scenario. One is to attempt to position the public library as a viable leisure option in competition with others that exist and thus aggressively market it to its local community in a modern way to be seen as a potential cultural and leisure option for all. The alternative is to accept that as a public service the library simply cannot or should not compete in this way with other commercial options and instead should target its potential users in a more strategic way, aiming services more directly at users with special needs and those who are excluded from society. Although public libraries are charged with offering services for the entire community, realistically many within the community do not wish to use the services or simply do not need to. In such an environment marketing and selection of the user groups to market to becomes an immensely important decision.

The issue of targeting will be touched on in the discussion of government reports below, and in more detail in Chapter 3.

Politics and public libraries

The relationship of the library profession with the Conservative Government that was in power in the UK from 1979 to 1997 could be most accurately described as tetchy. It was broadly felt within the profession that the Conservative ideals prevalent in the 1980s and the subsequent cuts to local government were incompatible with a high quality public library service. There was also a feeling that the then government was keen on privatizing or charging for public services where possible, and the publication in 1986 of *Ex Libris*, a report advocating this by the Conservative think tank the Adam Smith Institute, did not help the relationship between profession and government (Adam Smith Institute, 1986).

The election of the New Labour Government in 1997 was generally felt to be an opportunity for public libraries to be placed back on the political agenda. The party had been keen to position combating social exclusion at the heart of its political mission, and identified early on the role of the public library in aiding this mission. This was a commonsense approach, since the national network of public libraries across the country was well placed at the heart of many communities that the government had identified as being socially excluded. The potential politicization of the profession notwithstanding, public librarians could see a more clearly defined role for their services through the political priorities of the new government.

However it would be churlish to suggest that the Conservative policies that rankled with the profession for so long were completely forgotten with the introduction of the New Labour administration. The emphasis on quantitative performance measurement, more commercialism in the public sector, and the quest to modernize and transform public services was as much a policy backbone of New Labour as it was the previous administration.

Government publications

The Museums Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) is the advisory body for libraries in England. It operates as a non-departmental public body responsible to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), its role to lead strategically on public library development in England, and its reports have a major influence on the development of public libraries. Discussion of some of the more service-specific reports will take place in

Chapters 3 to 6 where appropriate, but, for the purposes of this context-setting chapter, three documents will be highlighted in more detail: *Framework for the Future* (DCMS, 2003), *Blueprint for Excellence* (Dolan, 2007) and a DCMS Select Committee Report published in 2005.

Framework for the Future

The Department for Culture, Media and Sport published its major vision for public libraries in 2003. *Framework for the Future* sought to establish a set of principles for the service to build a new vision around. The vision was to encompass four key strands:

- *evolution*: building on libraries' traditional core skills in promoting reading, informal learning and self-help
- *public value*: focusing on areas where public intervention will deliver the largest benefits to society including support for adult literacy and pre-school learning
- *distinctiveness*: building on libraries' open, neutral and self-help culture; they should not duplicate the efforts of other public and private sector providers but complement them through partnership working
- *local interpretations of national programmes*: developing national programmes that will raise the profile of the public library service as a whole but which are sufficiently flexible to be adapted to local needs.

(DCMS, 2003)

And these in turn should be built around three service strands:

- the promotion of reading and informal learning
- access to digital skills and services including e-government
- implementing measures to tackle social exclusion, build community identity and develop citizenship.

(DCMS, 2003)

It was no surprise that the service strands mirrored New Labour's own government priorities, which included lifelong learning, expansion of the digital economy, and targeting of social exclusion. Thus it could be seen

that the document placed the public library as a key facilitator in delivering central government priorities.

At the root of the report was the need for public libraries to engage more with their communities and assert their roles in partnership with other local government organizations and groups within the community. The report featured various case studies to highlight best practice on each of the visionary strands, notably highlighting success stories where communities had seen their library rebuilt into a modern, vibrant community space. Other case studies highlighted libraries that had experimented with innovative service provision, such as enhanced opening hours and rebranding initiatives.

The report also advocated more of a role in such partnerships for the private sector, highlighting the successes achieved by The Reading Agency in attracting sponsorship for national reading programmes, as well as successes in Private Finance Initiative contracts between local authorities and private companies to finance the construction of new library buildings.

The key researcher involved in the project was Charles Leadbetter who worked for the think tank Demos. He revisited his work in a later publication commissioned by a library advocacy group, as will be seen below.

Blueprint for Excellence

In early 2007 the MLA produced a consultation document that sought to test a vision for the public library service for the period 2008-11 (Dolan, 2007). The vision was encapsulated under six propositions for public libraries. The first three proposals are focused around the purpose and role of libraries in the modern era and the challenges inherent in delivering them:

- Proposition 1 - the purpose of the public library - is to be:
 - focused on reading, knowledge of all kinds and formats, essential information, and the active engagement of the library in community cohesion and life
- Proposition 2 - the key roles of the public library - are to be a:
 - community place, where communities can engage with knowledge in a safe and comfortable environment

- development agency, where the library partners other groups to enhance community skills
- digital library, providing access to digital content and the equipment to access it
- Proposition 3 - nine key challenges for improvement - are to provide:
 - a clear definition of what library users can expect from their service as a national entitlement
 - funding: adequate resources to provide this level of service
 - partnership, and to work with partners of all sectors to deliver it
 - improved buildings and access: good opening hours and high quality facilities
 - what users want: comprehensive high quality stock
 - the digital library: access to library materials, 24/7 where possible
 - staff who are customer-focused and strategic
 - innovation, exploring new service models and partnerships
 - advocacy and research to raise awareness of quality service and celebrate success. (Dolan, 2007, 6-7)

Dolan focuses on what he sees as fundamental questions for the future of the public library service, namely what the public should expect of them: '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' (Dolan, 2007, 6-7).

The other three propositions focus on what the final product the user will experience should look like, and how success can be measured. They are:

- Proposition 4 - essential elements for success
- Proposition 5 - what excellence will look like for people, communities and funders
- Proposition 6 - actions and outcomes 2008-11.

Blueprint for Excellence revisits some of the territory of previous reports, emphasizing user wants as the centre of the public library service, and reinforcing that the public library must be seen as a viable service that

contributes to the community cohesion of everyone. It also emphasizes the importance of partnership working within both the public and the private sectors. Thus it mirrors policy areas discussed previously in *Framework for the Future*, suggesting the ongoing importance of these to the policy of the Labour Government.

DCMS Select Committee Report

In October 2004 the Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee of the House of Commons issued a call for evidence in its investigation of the state of UK public libraries. Specifically it was keen to investigate issues related to:

- accessibility
- funding
- new models of provision and new policy demands
- the legislative, strategic and administrative framework
- recruitment and training of library staff
- the role of institutional and specialist libraries
- performance and maintenance of the People's Network.

(Culture Media and Sport Committee, 2005)

The Committee gathered evidence and testimony in late 2004 and delivered its report to Parliament in February 2005.

The subsequent report is perhaps the most holistic look at public libraries in the modern era, since evidence was gathered from stakeholders of all backgrounds, professional, governmental, advocacy and public. The Committee addressed several key issues related to services, funding and staffing. For instance it advocated that public libraries should re-emphasize their core mission: 'We are in no doubt that, while libraries are about more than books (and newspapers and journals), these traditional materials must be the bedrock upon which the library services rest no matter how the institution is refreshed or re-branded in the light of local consultation' (Culture Media and Sport Committee, 2005, 44).

The Committee had concerns that there was a danger of placing too much pressure on libraries in terms of delivering community enhancement

agendas outwith their core mission: 'Libraries and their staff cannot be expected to constitute a one-stop shop for all a community's demands for information and advice without the appropriate allocation, and clear demarcation, of resources' (44).

The Committee encouraged library authorities to allocate more money to the provision of books, suggesting that '[a] substantial increase in the percentage of funding spent by each library authority on books should be a priority' (45). Concerns were raised regarding the public library infrastructure, and, while acknowledging some excellent examples of newbuilds, the report suggested that putting right the crumbling infrastructure would cost £240-650 million.

Other issues highlighted by the report included the need for public library staff to be recruited from a wider pool of talents, including staff with skills in: 'knowledge management; IT; leadership; public relations and customer service expertise; managers; business-minded people; those qualified in marketing and finance; web management and many more' (39).

There was also a need to focus on leadership issues within the profession and to 'recognise its shortcomings in this area of leadership and advocacy and plan both to train its staff internally and to recruit people with appropriate experience from outside the profession' (39).

The Coates Report

Public libraries also see great interest in their role from those outside government. As publicly funded institutions that spend a great deal of public money each year, it is inevitable that advocacy groups are very interested in exactly how that money is spent.

Perhaps the most controversial report to be produced in recent times was published by the Libri Trust in partnership with the LASER Foundation. The Libri Trust was a charity that aimed to 'encourage a vibrant and relevant public library network, focused on its prime responsibility of providing the public with a good choice of books for reading and reference' (Libri Trust, 2005). It had a belief in what public libraries should be and felt that the service they provided had declined:

We believe that the public library service has important lessons to learn from all sectors of the book trade and the information provision sector. Learning the lessons will help create a public library service that is efficient, serves the needs of local communities and maintains public libraries as the heart of community life.

(Libri Trust, 2005)

The LASER (London and South Eastern Library Region) Foundation had operated for over 70 years as a regional interest group for libraries in that part of England. It became a grant-making trust in 2001 and dispersed the remainder of its funds in commissioning research into public libraries in the UK. *Who's in Charge* (Coates, 2004), commonly referred to as the Coates Report after its author Tim Coates, was perhaps the most widely known report of its kind commissioned under the auspices of the LASER Foundation.

The main thesis of the Coates Report was that libraries were in decline and risked becoming obsolete in a period of 10–15 years if current usage figures continued to develop at their current rate. The reason for this decline was obvious to Coates (7):

because their local libraries have poor selections of books and reading material, they have short opening hours and they are often inconveniently situated, dilapidated and, even, unsafe to work in. The public does not want a new kind of library; they just want a good efficient library that is up to date and pleasant to use.

Coates was also critical of what he saw as a dangerous emphasis for reports into libraries to be aimed at the profession, when in reality only councillors and perhaps senior officials had the power to make any significant changes to the state of libraries. The main recommendations of the report called on councillors in local authorities to:

- treble expenditure on books and reading material
- increase opening hours by 50%
- institute a programme of library redecoration and redesign.

Crucially Coates believed that all of the above should be done within existing resources through the introduction of efficiencies. Criticism of the report from within the profession was prevalent, with some questioning how such improvements could be made with no additional funding. The report was also criticized for using one authority, Hampshire County Library Service, as the basis for the research. Coates has subsequently developed a Good Library Blog (www.goodlibraryguide.com/blog/) to continue his campaign for the improvement of public libraries.

The LASER Foundation also funded follow-on work on *Framework for the Future* from the consultant who authored that report (Leadbetter, 2003). The report, entitled *Overdue*, cited the case of Singapore's national public library system, and one of Leadbetter's key proposals was the formation of a National Libraries Development Agency (NLDA) in England to allow co-ordination of policy and practice. A key argument of the report was that it was difficult to create a national network of quality when the funding for that network is agreed and administered locally. Thus local authority priorities can mean libraries have funding cut in one authority and increased in others, leading to an imbalance in provision. Leadbetter's warning was stark, however, suggesting that: 'Libraries are sleepwalking to disaster, it's time they woke up' (Leadbetter, 2003, 35).

Research on public libraries

Although government bodies and advocacy groups fund specific aspects of public library research, within the university departments that continue to teach librarianship as a degree subject the efficacy of research into public library topics remains strong, especially at two of the foremost schools in the subject, the University of Sheffield and Loughborough University. In both institutions some excellent work continues to be done into the major issues facing public libraries, and at all departments in the UK teaching librarianship a continuing stream of Masters students annually investigate the challenges through their dissertation research.

Perhaps most notably the Centre for the Public Library and Information in Society (CPLIS) based in the University of Sheffield's Department of Information Studies has undertaken major research into public library impact, performance measurement and reader development. Thus issues

around public libraries and their users continue to be important areas not only of professional and political concern, but also of academic concern.

Service challenges

Although any public service always faces challenges, the nature of what public libraries exist to do means they face challenges that are unique to them as well as challenges that are general and impact on the entire public sector.

Falling price of books

Members of the public can purchase copies of books more easily now than ever before. The most notable reason for this is the collapse of the Net Book Agreement (NBA) and the subsequent growth in book selling cheaply through the internet and supermarkets.

The NBA coloured book selling for almost the entire 20th century. This was an agreement between publishers and booksellers that books on sale would only be sold for the price agreed by the publishers themselves. Any bookseller deviating from this stance risked having all supplies from that publisher ended. The NBA was obviously useful for both publisher and bookseller, since it kept the price of books relatively high, which benefited both parties. The NBA also benefited libraries from a service standpoint, since the high cost of hardback books in particular meant that borrowing from the library was an alternative that was attractive to many avid readers.

The NBA began to unravel in the mid 1990s when some larger booksellers began to offer discounts. This was followed by the examination of the agreement by the Office of Fair Trading, and it was clear that the 90-odd-year history of the agreement from this point onwards was coming to an end. Several large publishers withdrew from the agreement in 1995, and it was finally deemed illegal in 1997.

The collapse of the agreement led to many more outlets for book buying for the public. Supermarkets began to use their buying power to sell on books with heavy discounts, and large booksellers also sold books at a great discount. There is no question that this led to people who may have been frequent library users in the past being more able to purchase

books, and the effect of the collapse of the NBA on the usage of libraries cannot be underestimated.

Retail model

Bookshops responded positively in the 1990s to customer lifestyle expectations by focusing on making their premises more user friendly. The modern bookshop is now a lifestyle facility where people can visit and read a book over a coffee before they decide to buy it. This fitted well into the 1990s coffee-house culture and has only gained in popularity as bookshops have increasingly become social as well as commercial spaces.

This has led to increasing calls for public libraries to mirror this development and learn from the benefits of the modern bookshop model. These developments and the advice given to public libraries on how to achieve them will be discussed more fully in Chapter 11.

New technologies

Public libraries serve a vital function in making ICTs available to the public. Although many homes now have fast and reliable access to the internet, a large portion of society remains disenfranchised from the information superhighway. Public libraries are in an excellent position to bridge this gap and help to close the digital divide. The provision of high quality ICTs via the People's Network programme created a culture of quality in provision of computer-based services, and despite the burden being passed on to local authorities once the sponsorship money ran out, regularly renewing these technologies is a key priority for public libraries.

Of course public libraries can do much more than just provide access; they can offer assistance in gaining competence with the technologies to enhance their lifelong learning role. Chapter 6 will discuss some of the initiatives currently in use to address this issue.

Equity and excellence

Recently a noted academic in the field of public librarianship in the UK, Bob Usherwood, has challenged what he feels is a culture of dumbing down by public libraries (Usherwood, 2007). The heart of his thesis is that public libraries are not being equitable in pandering to populist tastes at the

expense of breadth of collection. In other words providing a professional public service is not always related to giving the public what they want; rather, the needs of the community require some consideration. He argues that 'Good professionals prescribe for a particular set of conditions, they do not always give people what they want' (2007, 26). Usherwood (2007, 4) is concerned that public libraries are increasingly seen as places of entertainment:

Where a public library might once have been regarded as a place for study and reflection it is now primarily seen by some as a place of entertainment. Those in the profession who dare to argue against the current orthodoxy are attacked as traditionalists, and accused of ignoring social exclusion.

Usherwood also voices concern over the potential of the populist approach to lead to ignorance in the populace.

The emergence of the citizen-consumer

Linking to the themes discussed by Usherwood is the emergence of what has been dubbed the citizen-consumer. This is the notion that the public now interact with and expect the same levels of service from their public services as they do from any commercial service they deal with. The key issue is one of choice, that is the public have a choice in whether or not to use public libraries and public librarians need to ensure that the choice is an attractive one.

The notion of the citizen-consumer has had a great deal of political and professional capital in the UK, with discourse continually advocating a more commercial approach to service design and delivery. As previously mentioned, *Framework for the Future* advocated a larger role for the private sector in public library partnerships, and this was not merely related to issues of sponsorship but also to staff development in public libraries. For instance it is argued that librarians can learn better marketing and promotion skills by working with the private sector.

Expanding Usherwood's equity and excellence debate a little, it is yet to be proven how the choice paradigm can enhance equity. The belief that

the citizen has a choice in whether to use the public library or not assumes that a viable alternative to the service exists elsewhere; although this may be true of paid services such as DVD or CD rental, it is difficult to see the efficacy of the argument in terms of free book lending. While bookshops may sell what public libraries lend, it makes comparisons superficial in nature.

Conclusion

Although the early years of the 21st century are undoubtedly an exciting period for the development of public libraries, there are also potential pitfalls for them in terms of the prevailing discourse. The over-arching emphasis of numerous studies initiated by the government and think tanks has been a call for a reappraisal of the public library model from the point of view of the needs of the internet age. Much of the language of the New Labour Government since 1997 has been about the transformation of public services, and public libraries have not been immune from such calls to modernize and change their ethos and outlook to be more responsive to the user needs of the modern population, and to prove their worth in this context through enhanced and expanded performance measurement criteria.

A common thread in all of the reports discussed is a quest to delineate a modern mission for the public library. In essence this is a desire to make the service relevant to the needs of the modern citizen, and ensure that it is done in as efficient a way as possible. This modern mission needs to encompass traditional and new services, and in practice often involves a re-imagining of environment and location for many public library authorities who feel that the old way of doing things no longer sustains enough interest with the public.

The politics of how public services are encouraged to see their users also has a major bearing on how services are professionally interpreted and delivered. The emergence through the politics of New Labour of the citizen-consumer has led to calls for public libraries to be more retail-like, and as will be seen in future chapters many are indeed becoming so. All of these factors have made for a challenging period for public library

services in interpreting user needs and developing services that are relevant to them in the modern era.

The next chapter of the book will take a dip into the history and development of public libraries in the UK and explain how the modern network of service points we are now familiar with originated, and the social and political pressures that led to their ongoing evolution.

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