

CMS 167264/DC

Chief Executive  
Local Authorities



24 February 2011

Dear Colleague,

**The future for public libraries: Ideas for local authorities to consider before closing frontline public library services**

Public library services, based around the needs of local people, provide safe and inclusive spaces for people to read, learn and access a range of community services. We have seen in recent weeks the strength of the passion amongst local communities for their library services.

In August 2010, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport launched the 'Future Libraries Programme'. This programme, led by the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) and the Local Government Group (LGG), was designed to help the leadership of services to develop new and forward-thinking ways of delivering library services in the current challenging economic circumstances. Through the experience of the 36 local authorities involved in this programme we have been able to learn real lessons about how to develop innovative and collaborative modern public library services.

I would like to set out to all local authorities that I understand that local government has some challenging decisions to make as part of reducing this country's public spending. However in considering the future of your library service, it is important that you are mindful of your statutory duty under the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service, set in the context of local need.



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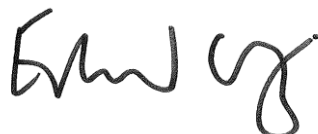
improving  
the quality  
of life for all

The Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport has a duty under this Act to superintend and promote the improvement of the public library service, and to secure the proper discharge by local authorities of their statutory duties in relation to libraries. Local authorities should start out by gaining a proper understanding of the local need for library services in their area. Library closures may not necessarily lead to an automatic breach of this duty, however, there are a number of important considerations to make before taking such a decision.

Enclosed is a short paper outlining a number of lessons learnt from the Future Libraries Programme together with examples of current good practice from a range of local authorities. The lessons learnt from this experience include: gaining an accurate picture of the costs of running your library services and of your community's library needs; considering shared services; co-location; and joined-up services across local authority boundary zones as a means of providing public library services to all.

Some local authorities, including several of those involved in the Future Libraries Programme, are looking at new ways of working with their local communities to deliver the library service. Others are looking at how community-managed libraries can be established, enabled and operated alongside a local authority-run library service. I am very keen to learn from and share the experiences of these local authorities and have therefore invited the MLA, working with the LGG and the Asset Transfer Unit, to gather evidence and to consider and present the legal and practical issues, and some case studies, in a guide published for the use of all local authorities. I intend to publish this in May 2011. The MLA will therefore be in touch with a number of local authorities over the next fortnight to request further information on how models of community involvement or community ownership of library services have been developed. If you are contacted I would encourage you to feedback your learning and experience in this area.

I would like to thank the 36 local authorities involved in the Future Libraries programme for their passion and enthusiasm during this intensive and challenging programme. I would also like to thank all those local authorities that have shared their good practice with my Department over recent months. I would encourage you all to use these findings and to build on the ideas and the vision for the future of public libraries in this country. You can find out more by approaching MLA staff on the ground and looking at the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council's web pages at [www.mla.gov.uk](http://www.mla.gov.uk)



**Ed Vaizey MP**  
**Minister for Culture, Communications and Creative Industries**

## **Sharing back office services. Ideas for delivering more efficient library services emerging from the Future Libraries Programme 2010 / 2011 and other examples from authorities not participating in the Programme**

### **1.**

Herefordshire and Shropshire have identified potential efficiency savings by using joint technical and back office services, particularly in combining digital services.

Bexley, Bromley, Croydon, Greenwich, Lambeth, Lewisham and Southwark are creating an infrastructure for the development of shared services across seven boroughs. This includes:

- joining a consortium that will provide a single Library Management System;
- creating a joint bibliographic services unit with innovative distribution solutions;
- adopting an efficient model for the delivery of home library services;
- and developing a proposal to share mobile library services across three boroughs.

### **2. Working with other Local Authorities.**

In the South West, Greater Manchester and the joint London Boroughs programmes savings are being identified from integrating staff and systems. This also rationalises provision in a way that preserves the scale which allows for improvement and innovation at the front line. The 'Beyond Boundaries' project is also looking at joining up services along the boundary between councils (see more under 7 below).

### **3. Providing services digitally.**

Northumberland and Durham are piloting new forms of digital delivery with the aim of reducing the costs of services. They are piloting 'Community Book Points'; an evaluated trial of e-book readers; a community transport 'People to Books' proposal; and enhanced SMS and email communication with readers.

### **4. Co-locating the library with other local services.**

Bradford, for example, is considering library co-location within a retail location which will result in longer opening hours. Northamptonshire County Council is looking at developing its libraries into community hubs that can offer a range of other public services.

### **5. Using library services to deliver other service outcomes and priorities.**

By better integrating library services in the delivery of wider social and economic outcomes such as children's and adult learning, preventive adult social care and integrated customer service, Councils can make overall savings across a range of budgets and therefore retain access to more local library services.

The Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead is positioning libraries as a core service for the community as part of their Big Society Vanguard approach. A police reporting point in every library means residents can now access services without having to find a police station. The use of libraries as an event space is

extending the quality of provision and raising revenue. This authority has recently announced plans to expand its library service and build a new library to serve its communities.

## **6. Better understanding your costs.**

By investigating and gaining a better understanding of what the library service costs (including overhead costs), and benchmarking these with other library services, it is possible to identify areas where savings can be made.

This approach has underpinned the work of the Greater Manchester Consortia FLP project and has allowed them to see that, not only will shared services help them improve efficiency, but that structural and managerial changes could give them further efficiency savings to help improve and deliver a higher quality service for users.

In the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead the cost of libraries provision is being reduced and the hours and scope of services expanded through the recruitment of volunteers, staff restructuring, and shared procurement.

## **7. Better understanding the community's needs and aspirations.**

Most projects in the Future Libraries Programme have highlighted the need to have better information and data about their community's different and specific needs and different aspirations for their library service. This data will enable services to be better targeted at those needs and aspirations and can therefore produce efficiencies.

Lincolnshire, Rutland, Cambridgeshire, North East Lincolnshire and Peterborough's Vivacity Trust carried out a geographical data assessment of library service usage and demand in the boundary zones. This assessment included intelligence on the crossover of catchment areas of libraries on the borders of local authorities and variations and themes in levels of provision (including specifically socio-demographic information, travel times, multi-service point usage, and the levels of over provision and under provision). Oxfordshire and Kent have been examining shopping patterns to help them make decisions about the future location of the service.

## **8. Looking at other ways of delivering the service.**

Many of the projects in the programme have started to investigate the different options for delivering the library service including trust options and partnerships with, or take over by, the community itself.

Suffolk is consulting on delegating budgets and transferring assets so that library services can be delivered through, for example, town or parish councils or other community organisations.

Northamptonshire County Council is looking at new ways of delivering library services in partnership with local communities, such as harnessing volunteer time and expertise, and sponsorship from local people and businesses.

Cambridgeshire County Council is taking a multi-strand approach to transforming its library services. This includes moving to trust status, conducting a service redesign and infrastructure review (involving more emphasis on self service and working with volunteers, and on forming multi agency community hubs), and sharing specialist and support services with four other library authorities in the East of England.