

Discussion paper

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A New Chapter

Public library services in the 21st century



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1 Introduction

Throughout the UK and Ireland public library services face considerable challenges, but also huge opportunities. These challenges come from several fronts: public spending cuts; public sector reform; the impact of new technology and digital services; and changes in the needs and expectations of service users, with people's behaviour as readers and information seekers changing as a result of developments in technology and evolving lifestyles. The library of the future has to respond to these challenges and changes.

These facts are all well-known. But there are other considerations which need to be addressed if a new vision for the public library service of the future is to be developed, and if that vision is to be supported by the communities they serve.

The first is the gap between what people say and what they do. This gap was evident in our research in two ways. On the one hand people say they value libraries very highly for their communities but the level of use of

libraries is considerably lower. On the other hand, people say that having a refurbished or modernised library would not affect their use of the library, when there is clear evidence that this has a major impact on use. Effective policy and strategy must be based on evidence, and must seek to close the gap between attitudes and behaviour – by providing services that people actually use, in the way they want to use them.

The second issue is the divergence in policy and practice in the five jurisdictions covered by the Carnegie UK Trust (England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland) following devolution, and the independence of Ireland. This divergence is completely legitimate, and it means that there is experience within the five jurisdictions of alternative models of public library provision. The public library service as a whole can only be strengthened by each jurisdiction learning from the others. We believe that the shared heritage of our public library services in these islands provides a forum within which a renewed vision for

library services can be developed and tested for all five jurisdictions working together, even if the way the service is provided differs between the jurisdictions.

This paper draws on the findings of research carried out by the Trust in 2011, and on the current policy debate about public libraries. The research was commissioned from Ipsos MORI, and consisted of an omnibus survey throughout the UK and the Republic of Ireland using a sample of over 1000 people in each of the five jurisdictions. A full research report is available on the Carnegie UK Trust website at www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk and there are also five factsheets containing more detailed information about the findings in each of the five jurisdictions.

2 Background

When Andrew Carnegie made grants for the creation of public libraries at the start of the 20th century he described libraries as ‘instruments for the elevation of the masses of the people’: they were seen as providing access to learning and advancement for people who would otherwise have limited opportunities for education or self-improvement. Their purpose was clearly educational, and they were open to everyone in a community who wanted access to books and to learning.

Public libraries today retain these characteristics: they provide a universal service open to all through around 5,000 premises in the UK and Ireland, and they continue to provide access to books, and information. Many are offering on-line services, making use of technology to improve the way they provide services, and providing information in new formats such as ebooks. They support access to computers and IT, and provide training and advice for those who need it. Public libraries are also important as community spaces which can be used to provide other local authority services, to provide space for community activities, or simply as neighbourhood centres where people can go without any requirement to spend money.

Between 1883 and 1929, 660 libraries were built in the UK and Ireland as a result of support from Andrew Carnegie and the Carnegie UK Trust. The Trust fulfilled many of the promises made by Carnegie, and continued to support public library development after his death. It never assumed that one model of public library provision would meet all needs, and when it moved away from funding library buildings, constantly considered how the service could be improved, how unmet need in particular areas could be addressed, and how the service could develop.

Andrew Carnegie's philanthropy contributed significantly to a model of public library provision in the UK and Ireland with shared values and a common purpose, set up in a similar way. The Trust supported that model from 1913 until 1950, supporting rural library services, the creation of central libraries for adult learners in each jurisdiction, and tackling unmet need in areas such as services for visually impaired people, seamen, and lighthouse keepers. The Trust supported the first training courses for librarians, and in its first 50 years used more than a third of its income on library services.

3 Key questions

Based on our own research and on a review of literature on public libraries, we believe that the following questions are all critically important in considering the future role of public libraries in these islands.

3.1 What is the relationship between public libraries and individual and community wellbeing?

Public libraries are valued as community assets – this applies both to the buildings and to the services provided within those buildings. Our research demonstrates very clearly the importance which people in all five jurisdictions attach to the service provided by public libraries, with over

two thirds saying that this service is either essential or very important to their community. More than half of those who do not use a library themselves still believe that library services are essential or very important to their community. While many fewer said that libraries were either essential or very important to them personally, there are still relatively high levels of use of libraries, with roughly half the population visiting a public library at least once in the previous year. However, as stated above there is a considerable gap between the value which people ascribe to public libraries, and their personal use of them.

Public libraries can become particularly important at different life stages, for example for families with young children. Our research showed a significant relationship in every jurisdiction except Wales between library use and having children of school age. It also shows the greater use made of the service by people who are not working full-time, by women and by those who read at least one book every six weeks (defined as prolific readers).

We believe that people do not always clearly distinguish between the public library service and the buildings within which it is provided. The following table sets out the strengths which we believe the library service and library buildings have, for individuals and for communities.

Public library service	Library buildings
Access to material for education or leisure: books, newspapers, journals and reference material.	Safe, neutral spaces within communities which can be used by people without any requirement to join, spend money or communicate with others.
Access to information which can support people to lead independent and fulfilling lives, for example information about job opportunities, health, benefits, or training.	A very extensive network of buildings and spaces which can be used to provide a wide range of public services.
Access to IT and online services, both by providing the use of computers and IT without charge, and by providing the support needed to enable people to use this technology, which is increasingly the main way of accessing services including job applications, benefits, and travel.	Spaces within which communities can create and provide their own services and organise community activity.
Can contribute directly to many of the social priorities and agendas of local and national government.	Public libraries can contribute to social cohesion and the integration of new communities.
Services provided in other settings, for example in schools and prisons.	
The presence of qualified staff to support library users.	

While there has not been a generally agreed way of measuring the value which the public library service, or public libraries as hubs and community spaces, add to individual or community wellbeing, we would argue that there is a clear link, and it is essential to develop ways to measure and demonstrate this more clearly.

There are strong links between library services and education, digital participation, access to information, the promotion of literacy and social

inclusion which support the argument for this service remaining a universal public service.

3.2 Do the aims of the library service need to be redefined for the 21st century?

The changes and the challenges which the public library service currently faces, and the opportunities provided by technological developments makes this a good time to reassess what the public library service is for and how it should be provided in the 21st century.

Many people and organisations have attempted to define what the core aims of the library service should be. They generally fall within the following broad areas:

- support for reading and learning
- provision of information and advice about a wide range of services and issues
- support for lifelong learning
- access to IT
- promotion of information and digital literacy by supporting and facilitating access to IT
- space for community activities.

Encouraging reading through the provision of books and other information should remain a core part of the library service. Our research clearly demonstrates the continuing importance of books and reading to those who currently use public libraries. For this group of service users it will clearly be important to maintain access to the services they value and use. However, the way this is done must take account of the alternative ways in which people may choose to access the written word – using e-readers, smartphones or MP3 players for instance.

New technology creates opportunities to provide some services on a jurisdiction-wide, nationwide or even international basis. The library service of the future is likely to be a variable mix of locally-specific services with services provided on a regional,

national or international basis; of virtual services, with physically-located services requiring the presence and support of library staff.

Technology allows public libraries to provide new and innovative services such as providing facilities for video-conferencing, providing net-based workspaces, or e-learning facilities.

At the same time, digitisation of resources can provide libraries with new opportunities to contribute to very local services such as the development of local history resources, the digitisation and publishing of local records and archive materials.

There are many complex factors which affect whether or not people choose to engage with new technology, and the Trust is actively involved in researching these factors. Whatever the barriers, public libraries have a role to tackling digital exclusion and have been involved in supporting digital participation among those at risk of exclusion from on-line services, such as older people. Libraries provide both the computers and internet access, but also training and support from library staff. Evidence from England shows that half of those who do not have access to the internet at home, but use the internet in public places, use the facilities provided in a public library.

Any redefinition of public library services must take place in the context of the wider goals of local authorities,

and the range of community services provided by those authorities and by other agencies working on their behalf. It is not enough, as it was in Carnegie's day, to look at library services in isolation from other services.

To take just one example, in Denmark, 'citizen services' is the term used to refer to services through which the state and citizens interact, such as social security, tax, passports, driving licences, change of address, and change of GP. Local authorities in Denmark are encouraged to work through libraries to provide these services. This is described as decentralisation, and is closely linked to the digitisation of public services, with librarians seen as having the skills to facilitate and support this move to online services.

3.3 How should the library service be provided in future?

The question of how the public library service should be provided can involve considerations about:

- the type of building or setting within which the service is provided;
- the kind of skills librarians should have;
- how staff interact with members of the public;
- the impact of IT on how the service is provided; and
- opening hours and accessibility.

The **physical assets** available in particular communities will affect decisions about where library services are provided. There is no right or wrong model, but if public libraries are believed to be an essential community service there will need to be enough outlets to meet the needs of these communities.

Many services can be provided on a 24/7 or virtual basis, including providing online services such as reserving and renewing loans, and providing services such as national enquiries on a national basis.

Library staff will need to acquire or develop new skills if they are to contribute to wider social goals, including information and digital literacy, community development and promoting individual wellbeing, as well as being able to work in other settings like schools and prisons.

It is clearly essential, as part of any proposals to develop public services, that there is effective **public and community engagement** which is a legal requirement in relation to any changes to service provision. There is also evidence that engagement leads to positive perceptions of local libraries, and to increased use.

It is clear from our wider research in this field that there are many examples of innovative and creative practice in providing library services in all five jurisdictions, at a time when all five

jurisdictions face similar challenges in terms of public spending cuts, public sector reform, digital participation and community engagement.

Alternative models of provision

The following alternative models of providing the public library service are currently being pursued in different parts of the UK:

- creation of arm's length companies or trusts;
- the use of volunteers;
- community managed services;
- shared services with other local authorities;
- use of the private sector.

Some of these alternative models are more common in particular jurisdictions. Many Scottish local authorities have set up **arm's length trusts**, while **community managed services** and the use of **volunteers** has mostly happened in England and can be seen as part of the Big Society initiative. The pros and cons of these different models are explored more fully in the main research report. The main issues which arise from these different models are:

- the impact on the democratic accountability of the service
- the impact on community engagement
- the impact on the statutory duties of library authorities

- the creation of two-tier or fragmented services
- the ownership of assets
- the need for effective support for volunteers and community managed services
- the reduction or dilution of professional management
- the impact on legal requirements such as data protection, disclosure, insurance and health and safety.

In relation to **sharing services** between library authorities there are concerns about:

- the loss of political control
- the possible need to close some services and make staff redundant
- loss of branding and local identity of the service
- harmonising pay scales and terms and conditions of employment
- need for investment in single library management systems.

Alternative providers can come either from the **private or public sector**, but there has been limited experimentation with private provision. At least one English local authority has its library service provided by a neighbouring authority, and in Northern Ireland they have created a single library authority for the territory.

Private sector finance is likely to continue to be part of the response to the pressures on public spending.

3.4 What is the future role of public library buildings as community assets?

One of the most valued aspects of libraries is the neutral community space they provide, which people can use without having to buy anything or even speak to anyone if they don't want to. However, they are currently one among many similar services which are valued as community assets, and which have the potential to be used more widely. These include post offices, pubs, churches, art centres and community shops. The strength which libraries have is in the extensiveness of the network, and the size of the premises, although sometimes this size may itself constitute a weakness.

Whether library services continue to be provided in their current buildings or whether they move to new premises, or share premises with other community services, it is very important to maintain an accessible network of neutral community spaces for local populations. It would be helpful if there were standards about how to ensure an accessible network of community spaces, similar to the access criteria which have been developed for post offices.

The places which currently demonstrate the strongest commitment to public libraries, with new openings and renovations, appear to be those where the role of libraries has been very closely identified with the other key objectives of local authorities, such as

regeneration, access to employment, education, and access to digital services. This was one of the key findings of the ten pilots carried out in England under the Future Libraries Programme¹. Having clear policy goals can support or preserve the physical presence of community assets, and also lead to new or improved buildings from which to offer services.

Less attention has been paid in the UK than in some other European countries, including Ireland, to the role of libraries as cultural venues. There will almost certainly be scope to develop this kind of use of library buildings in some places.

The impact of new or refurbished buildings as locations for library services on levels of use has been shown to be considerable, for example in research for the Big Lottery, and in experience in Wales, Newcastle and Tower Hamlets.

3.5 Would more policy direction or co-ordination at jurisdictional or cross-jurisdictional level be helpful?

One of the challenges facing libraries is that they are essentially a local service. Unlike education or housing services, which local authorities provide within a clear national policy context, there is less 'national' policy or leadership for public libraries within each jurisdiction. This creates a tension between a service which responds primarily to the needs of local communities and the desire for national standards or benchmarks, which enable

comparisons and judgments to be made about the quality of services, and to achieve best value through economies of scale.

There is a degree of national oversight within each jurisdiction, with a varying amount of national policy development, which operates in different ways in the different jurisdictions, but the predominant model is through arm's length advisory bodies. Public libraries can contribute to different national policy agendas, and there are usually several government departments with an interest in the service.

This has led some people and organisations to call, for example, for a single national library development agency in England which would lead on policy development, encourage the development of services on a national basis and provide advice and support to local services.

As the public library service changes and develops, it will be essential to be able to measure the impact and benefit of the service in relation to the most important outcomes it seeks to achieve, which are likely to be a wide range of indicators of wellbeing for different groups in society, and not just the narrow measures which have traditionally been used for this service such as spending on books, and levels of borrowing. For example, their impact on the wellbeing of children and older people, on education and health, on social inclusion and community cohesion will all be critical. Clear links

with wider governmental agendas in each jurisdiction will also be important.

A greater degree of national leadership within each jurisdiction could contribute to:

- defining what the core library service should consist of;
- developing assessment criteria which relate directly to measures of wellbeing;
- ensuring appropriate engagement and involvement of local communities;
- providing guidance on alternative models of provision such as arm's length trusts, community managed services and the use of volunteers;
- promoting the role of public libraries in promoting digital inclusion and participation;
- promoting the development of shared services across local authority boundaries;
- promoting the most effective use of IT to improve efficiency; and
- exploring services which can most effectively be provided on a national basis.

The Trust also believes that there is a case for considering these issues across the five jurisdictions covered by the Trust. This would build on the common legacy shared by public libraries in the UK and Ireland. We believe that almost one hundred years after the creation of the Trust, there is much which the different jurisdictions can learn from each other. The future of the

public library service will be stronger if there are strong shared visions for the aims of the service, and shared understanding of how those aims can most effectively be achieved.

4 Next steps

During 2012, the Carnegie UK Trust will use this discussion paper as a starting point for discussion with service providers, politicians and community groups. We want to help to develop discussion and debate which will contribute to the development of a consensus and a stronger vision about:

- the aims of the public library service in the 21st century;
- how public library services are best provided;
- how the community assets represented by the buildings in which they are located can best be used; and
- how the value of these services can be measured.

We will draw on learning and experience from the five jurisdictions to develop a shared understanding of the threats to the public library service, the opportunities which exist, and the kind of solutions which will contribute to the long term sustainability of a re-invigorated public library service.

All five jurisdictions have examples of good practice to share. Pilot programmes of alternative and innovative approaches to improving the service or the way it is provided

have been run in England. There are also now several examples of alternative methods of providing library services in England, including community provision by social enterprises, volunteer-run libraries, and private provision. It is important to learn more about both the advantages and disadvantages of these developments.

At the same time, the other jurisdictions can demonstrate aspects of alternative approaches to library provision. For example, Northern Ireland can show the impact of having a single library authority, bringing possible benefits of scale and greater efficiencies. Ireland can demonstrate the impact of a strong central organisation (An Chomhairle Leabharlanna) before its closure in 2012, and the impact of capital spending. Wales can show how the development of ambitious national strategies can support libraries at local, regional and national level. Finally the experience in Scotland can demonstrate the advantages and disadvantages of arm's length trusts providing the service on behalf of local authorities.

The Trust will carry out a programme of work which we hope will contribute to:

- a better understanding of the role of public library services in relation to individual and community wellbeing amongst policy makers at national and local level
- the development of clear national policies on public library provision in each jurisdiction

- the encouragement of forward thinking by local authorities about services such as public libraries, and of joint working between local authorities and between services within local authorities
- support for and promotion of innovative practice as models for further development or replication
- greater involvement in and acceptance by local communities of decisions about the redesign of public services, including public library services.

In carrying out this work, the Trust will not be constrained by a historic model of the library service, or by the

historic legacy of buildings created with support from Andrew Carnegie or the Trust.

Linked publications

The following publications are available from our website:

Full research report: *A New Chapter – public library services in the 21st century*

Research finding factsheets for each of the five jurisdictions covered in our research: England, Northern Ireland, Republic of Ireland, Scotland and Wales

The Carnegie UK Trust works to improve the lives of people throughout the UK and Ireland, by changing minds through influencing policy, and by changing lives through innovative practice and partnership work. The Carnegie UK Trust was established by Scots-American philanthropist Andrew Carnegie in 1913.

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