



Framework for the Future MLA Action Plan for Public Libraries – “towards 2013”

Individuals and communities are entitled to excellent public libraries that are integrated with other local services and responsive to local needs; offering books, information and learning resources on the high street and online for everyone at all times.

BACKGROUND

This Action Plan reflects the outcome of extensive consultation and engagement with stakeholders. MLA will work in partnership to deliver this ambitious agenda over the next five years.

WHAT DOES 'GOOD' LOOK LIKE?

Public libraries make a measurable and substantial contribution to local economies, and help to bridge social divides. They support well-being, encourage reading, spread knowledge, contribute to learning and skills and help to foster identity, community and a sense of place for people of all ages, backgrounds and cultures

The best libraries

- Are well led, entrepreneurial, efficiently managed and proactive advocates of best practice.
- Integrate with wider provision for learning and other local services, and with a wide range of culture, the arts and sport, to offer resources, books, essential information and materials that meet local needs for all people.
- Put the community at the heart of developing and delivering services, engaging with people and responding to their needs.
- Embed excellence, creativity and diversity; innovate and adapt to new working methods.
- Ensure sustainability and continuous improvement is at the heart of all they do.
- Broaden and deepen access to their information and resources.
- Perform to the highest levels and champion continuous professional development, through a workforce that comprises a wide range of talent, competency and skill.
- Are engaging, informative, creative and memorably enjoyable places for people to visit and use.

National context: “towards 2013”

- A growing, ageing and more diverse population, with 20% illiterate, 30% without level 2 qualifications and chronic inequality across socio-economic groups; public library services must demonstrate their relevance to these and other social and demographic trends.
- Local authorities increasingly demand cost-efficient, integrated delivery, with library services working in relevant ways alongside a wide range of provision for individuals and communities; this is an environment that calls for more flexible working practices and less professional demarcation.
- The traditional library concept of supplying books is in part being displaced by low cost retail offers in supermarkets and online.
- Nevertheless, through wider library provision in literacy and reading development, informal learning information services, growing digital provision and support for business, families and local history usage of library services is holding up, with more than 330 million physical visits last year suggesting underlying public support in principle.
- Library authorities need to achieve excellence, reaching all ages and backgrounds and offering a wide range of resources and services tailored to local needs.
- Results vary, however, with perceptions that many public libraries lack confidence, fail to attract local authority support and fall short of their full potential amid shortcomings in one or more of: leadership, advocacy, staffing, innovation and funding.
- Inconsistent patterns of investment stem from local political judgments and multiple priorities for local government budgets, leading to under-investment and reduced book stocks, especially where provision fails to innovate or no longer matches public need and local political and community priorities.

What we plan to do: starting in 2008

As a strategic leader, MLA will work with local government, national agencies, professional bodies, chief librarians and cultural leaders to:

- advocate the relevance of public libraries and highlight the advantages of integrated provision in response to local needs
- promote ‘best practice’, innovation and community engagement, especially in relation to local authority priorities; support improvements in learning, information and reading services.

- establish broad-based competencies for library staff and sustain investment in workforce development; plan for coherent, national digital resources and services
- report progress six-monthly.

How we will do it

Our priorities are learning, communities and supporting excellence. Success will depend upon the spreading of 'best practice', innovation and improvement; results will be gauged from satisfaction ratings, user figures, evidence of impact, integration, and through wider recognition of the role of libraries in supporting learning helping to nourish and sustain communities.

In 2008/9, MLA, in consultation with DCMS, ACL, SCL, LGA and others, will make a start on four key challenges.

Challenge one: research and evidence

Public library services reach half the adult population, with satisfaction surveyed at 75%. We need to analyse this and other information to establish evidence of integration and impact, and to work out how libraries can reach more people, improve satisfaction ratings and develop future provision of physical and online resources.

MLA will:

- **Invest in impact research and publish the results** to show the impact libraries have on reading, learning and community engagement. Use this to inform local government planning, support improvement and advocate stronger recognition of the integrated contribution made by public libraries to local outcomes for local economies, the social divide, learning, identity, communities and a sense of place.
- **Analyse the Taking Part data and publish the results** to identify trends, to provide information and advice to library authorities on how to increase and sustain participation for all ages, and help to strengthen related inputs to Local Area Agreements.

Challenge two: best practice

Successful public library services are innovative and entrepreneurial. Where appropriate, they are integrated with other services and provision to match local needs. We will identify the barriers to integration and wider use of public libraries and advocate options for improvement through promoting best practice that develops national coordination, quality assurance and consistency.

MLA will:

- **Identify and promote best practice in public libraries** scheduling regional seminars to share the achievements of the best, disseminating case studies, advising local government leaders, stimulating innovation and encouraging higher performance. Use current examples to build national awareness and

political and public understanding. Illuminate the achievements and further potential of public libraries as components of integrated provision and as deliverers of local outcomes. Identify ways to develop public access to stock and information resources, both on paper and online.

- **Promote the National Improvement Strategy (and the ‘single improvement tool’)**, launched in March 2008, to assess and improve performance and assure quality. Express goals for ‘excellence’ as advocated by McMaster. Broker expert assistance, including ‘peer review’.
- **Actively promote the benefits of capacity-building** by advocating a performance culture, with an emphasis on leadership, workforce skills, training and professional development. We will work with library authorities, Sector Skills Councils and professional bodies to encourage broad-based competencies, extend the quality and reach of training and development programmes for all staff and ensure that leadership capacity and workforce skills exceed public and local authority expectations for improved services.
- **Consult with library authorities across the UK** (via the UK Joint Forum) as well as elsewhere abroad, to extend the understanding of case studies and to share mutual experience, best practice and lessons learned.

Challenge three: innovation

Successful public libraries proactively envisage new ways to deliver better services. We will advise on and encourage innovative responses to local priorities, emphasising sustainable investment, integrated approaches, new models of service delivery and consideration of private sector partnership to improve the nature and quality of provision.

MLA will:

- **Highlight the advantages of new approaches** including relocation and rationalisation, longer and more convenient opening times, where supported by demand, and local priorities and cost-benefit analysis. Where appropriate, promote the alignment and integration of service delivery with other local provision including that of education and health authorities, museums, the arts, archives and other library services.
- **Identify barriers to further innovation and integration**, whether financial (including taxation), procedural, organisational or cultural, to report them openly and work to eradicate them or at least to ameliorate their impact.
- **Encourage engagement with local communities**, as exemplified by public libraries within the BIG Lottery Community Libraries programme, to identify and **actively** engage with local priorities and needs, and shape the development of infrastructure and services.

- **Examine options for governance, funding, management and delivery structures**, through conducting a review (in conjunction with ACL and others), to examine how to maximise the opportunity of new partnerships with the private, public and third sector, to improve the effectiveness and impact of libraries services and to establish political support for change.
- **Maintain support for national ventures** such as *Find your Talent*, the *National Year of Reading*, the *Youth Offer*, *Living Places*, the *Cultural Olympiad* and *Personalised Health Services* as a means of improving services, reducing barriers to library membership and embedding library provision in national initiatives.

Challenge four: digital change

People's Network enables access to the internet in all public libraries, free in most, but in line with best practice it needs to match the speed and capacity available in schools, FE and HE. Technical standards need to be set nationally and adopted locally as required for local services. Emerging digital opportunities need to be harnessed for digital consumers, with enhanced capacities, better databases, linked nationally, and with improvements to the scope and variety of interactive digital services and mediation.

MLA will:

- **Make an effective case for faster broadband connections** in public libraries, with greater bandwidth. Conclude discussions with JISC and the providers of JANET to confirm what can be done to correlate online public library services with those services already available in schools, FE and HE.
- **Manage digital data environments** and further extend the provision of free or low cost reference materials to public libraries through centrally negotiated contracts with providers. Contract a third party to develop strategic approaches to developing digital databases, research tools and consumer access. Explore ways to make greater use of interactive Web 2.0+ technologies, sharing best practice and leading to a more competitive market for digital services. Consider private sector partnership for specific projects.
- **Promote 'Libraries Online'** to deliver 21st century learning, information and creative digital environments. Build on Reference Online and Enquire to improve interoperability and customer services. Consult with public and private sector providers, to establish the potential for partnerships and joint ventures to pilot ways to improve round the clock online provision and to provide better services for consumers.
- **Advance a 'national membership' scheme** to establish technical parameters and other factors that surround the case (leading to a single micro-chip membership card for all) that will improve services and increase convenience for users, further enhance access to library resources nationally, and further reduces barriers to membership and use for all.

Current news, developments and information on our activities are available to view or download from our website.

www.mla.gov.uk

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