



Public Libraries

Briefing Paper



CHANGING MINDS • CHANGING LIVES

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Public Libraries - Briefing Paper

This short briefing paper sets out the history of the Trust's involvement in public library provision, and outlines how the Trust may re-engage in the policy debate on access to knowledge and the future of the public library service in the UK and Ireland.

1. The history of public library services and the role of Andrew Carnegie and the Carnegie UK Trust

The name 'Carnegie' is so intimately associated with libraries, that it is almost unnecessary to describe the involvement of Andrew Carnegie in promoting and supporting the development of public libraries throughout the English-speaking world. Although enabling legislation providing for the creation of library services was in place from the mid 19th century in different parts of the UK, in 1883, when the first Carnegie library was opened in Dunfermline, only 23% of the British population had access to a public library service, with only two libraries having been set up in Scotland, one in Wales and one in Ireland.

By the time the Carnegie UK Trust was established in 1913, 348 Carnegie libraries had already been established in the UK and Ireland. By the time the library programme was closed, this number had increased to 660.

In the first 50 years of the Trust, more than a third of Trust funds (35%) were dedicated to work with libraries. The Trust also supported the development of professional library qualifications, specialist library services, and inter-library loan services. There were numerous smaller initiatives

such as schemes to distribute books to boys and girls clubs, support to the National Library for the Blind, the Seafarers Education Service, and the British Sailors' Society.

The Trust brought its work on libraries to a close in 1950. Rightly feeling that the Trustees had carried out the wishes of the founder, the 1949 annual report summed this up as follows:

There has, in 36 years, been created a library system which, to borrow some words used by King George V when he opened the new building of the National Central Library, "constitutes a National University which all may attend and none need ever leave".

2. The philosophy underpinning this legacy

There are certain features of this work which are important, both in understanding why libraries were considered important, but also in understanding what position the Trust might take in relation to any new policy on public libraries.

- The library was seen as the single most effective way of providing access to education and learning for those who might otherwise not be able to, and through this, to increase social mobility.
- The policy was not an unconditional gift: it required local authorities to play their part by levying a library rate allowing them to staff and resource the building. This built in the future responsibility of local authorities for library provision, and aimed to ensure the sustainability of the service.
- The success of the policy depended on people wanting to use the service. It was not a

gift presented to people, but an offer which people had to respond to and make some effort to gain the benefit, by joining the library and taking on the responsibilities of a library user.

- The Trust recognised that this essentially local service would benefit from some national co-ordination and support, and the library building work was followed up with the creation of national structures to promote inter-library co-operation.
- The Trust almost took on the role of the state in implementing this policy in the hope that the responsibility for the service being continued would lie with other agencies, whether national or local government, or voluntary sector organisations.

3. How library services are provided and monitored

There are five different sets of structures for providing library services in the five jurisdictions covered by the Trust, with provision being in the hands of local authorities, except in Northern Ireland where there is one library authority for the territory. Local authorities have a statutory responsibility to provide an adequate library service, and since the 1964 Public Libraries and Museums Act, central government has had powers to ensure that the services provided by local authorities are comprehensive and adequate.

In all the jurisdictions there are advisory arms-length bodies and there are standards or performance measures which have been developed at national level, and which are used by library authorities and by scrutiny bodies to assess the service which is being provided.

The different jurisdictions have programmes for change, such as the Future Libraries Programme currently being run by Museums Libraries and Archives (MLA), the Government's advisory body for this sector in England.

Following the major investment in IT in libraries and the training of library staff (known as the People's Network) which was supported with funding from the Big Lottery, libraries play a key role in providing access to online services and to the internet for people who do not have computers or access to the internet at home.

The pattern of staffing of libraries has been changing with the percentage of professional staff showing a decline, with an increase in posts for unqualified staff. The percentage of qualified staff in 2008 was 21.4% against a benchmark set in 1968 of 40%.

4. Declining use of library services

Although total spending has remained broadly stable, both use of libraries and spending on books have fallen significantly over the last 20 years. There was a steady decline which was followed by an increase of use following the installation of IT equipment in libraries.

During the same period, book buying by the public increased by around 25%, with the abolition of the Net Book Agreement in 1997, book retailers improving the shop environment, and increased competition between on-line and high street retailers. There has also been a proliferation of book groups and book festivals.

Our analysis of data from recent national surveys of wellbeing in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland shows the following:

- while there is some evidence of a decline in usage levels (where trend data is available), over a third of adults in each territory had used a library in the past 12 months;
- among these, around half use libraries at least once a month;
- the most common reason for using a library is to borrow or return books;
- the reasons for not using the service were based on personal preference or circumstance

- rather than any particular barriers to access;
- reinforcing this finding, evidence from Northern Ireland suggests that extending opening hours would have little effect on people's likelihood of using the service;
- among users, satisfaction is extremely high.

There are many and complex reasons for the decline in visits to libraries and book issues, including changing patterns of leisure and changes in the nature and role of the news media.

Data about falling use alongside high satisfaction levels suggests that there is some truth in the observation that libraries hold an important place in people's hearts, but they are losing their place in people's lives.

5. Recent involvement by the Trust

5.1 Select Committee investigation 2000-2001

After 1950, the Trust did not play a central role in the debate about library provision. However, an investigation by the Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport into Public Libraries in 2000-2001 prompted the Trust to take a position and to give written evidence to the committee.

The CUKT's evidence was based on the steady stream of correspondence from members of the public about the potential loss or reduction of service in various areas. The key points made were:

- the reduction in opening hours, which resulted in less usage and therefore a vicious circle of further reduction hours;
- reduced expenditure on book buying and building maintenance making libraries less attractive, especially for young people; and
- changes in where people lived had meant that libraries were not necessarily in the most relevant places.

The Trust suggested that the library service was becoming a Cinderella service that had not been adequately updated or considered in the wider context of social change. The Trust commented that the response of local communities tended to be limited, focusing on the need to relocate or modernise services. The Trust suggested that a more wide-ranging response was needed with the library service being seen as one of a number of key community access points along with museums, health centres, arts centres, community centres, and schools, and that libraries should work more closely with other community services.

The Trust also encouraged greater community involvement and the use of volunteers. The Trust criticised the Lottery for providing funding on a topic basis (sports, heritage, leisure etc) rather than enabling communities to take a more holistic view of their needs.

The Trust called for libraries to include improved reading facilities, homework centres, communal access to computers, special activities related to books and learning, such as reading clubs, and the provision of food, coffee, tea and a café service to develop a congenial, social environment. Libraries could be located in other places, such as museums, galleries, or community centres. The Trust called for an expansion of libraries to include amenities which would expand their appeal to the wider community, and opposed any further closure of libraries or reductions in service.

5.2 Other involvement

The Trust has continued to engage with key stakeholders in the area of library services and literacy, particularly the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) through our support of the Carnegie Medal for children's literature, and of the shadowing scheme for children and young people.

6. Current challenges

6.1 The implications of public spending cuts and public sector reform

The impact of the UK coalition government's Comprehensive Spending Review of November 2010 in England has already led to proposals for changes to the library service. It has been estimated that about around 400 libraries are currently under threat or have closed or left council control since 1 April, out of around 4612 in the UK. Similar pressures exist in the other jurisdictions.

Responses to the cuts have varied, with some local authorities proposing deep cuts in library services, some creating new business structures to reduce the costs of taxation and rates, some turning to Private Finance Initiative to fund developments, while others are experimenting with the use of volunteers and developing a model for community managed services.

Public service reform is also likely to affect provision of library services in the different jurisdictions.

6.2 The campaign against library closures

There has been a vociferous campaign against library closures over the last few years, with 11 February this year designated as 'Save our libraries day', and an estimated 100 events taking place across England. In Scotland there was a lobby of the Scottish Parliament on this day, with many Scottish authors involved. The focus of the campaign is very much on the importance of the traditional role of libraries in providing access to books, reading and knowledge, and on particular library buildings.

7. Public policy in the area of library services

This short briefing paper cannot cover this in any detail, and simply sets out some of the key themes which are considered to be important in relation to library services. Libraries are important in terms of offering a neutral welcoming community space, holding large stocks of material and access to IT facilities, providing a venue for a wide range of services, such as supporting literacy through adult education or children's activities, and providing the services of trained librarians who can help members of the public find the information or resources they need. They have considerable scope to contribute to individual and community wellbeing, and address social exclusion.

Current policy development is focusing on alternative models for service provision including greater use of shared services, merged functions, support for volunteers, the use of other community buildings and new governance models. Intensive work in ten pilot areas in England involving 36 local authorities has produced evidence for other local authorities to learn from. There are four emerging change models:

- shared services across council boundaries
- reviewing the location and distribution of service points
- new provider models of delivery
- divesting library assets and services to community ownership.

8. Alternative models of provision

Alternative models are under consideration in the jurisdictions covered by the Trust, and include:

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

8.1 Creation of arm's length companies or trusts

This model is primarily used to reduce costs by avoiding tax. It has more often been adopted for leisure services than for library services. A small number of library authorities in England have used this model, which is being implemented by some Scottish local authorities.

As well as uncertainty about the impact on the statutory responsibilities of local authorities to provide library services, there are concerns about the impact of this model on accountability to the local population, and on the extent to which the new organisation engages with the community, as well as about the legal position in relation to paying councillors, and audit. There has so far been no evaluation of these new bodies.

8.2 Use of volunteers

CILIP, the professional librarians' body, has taken the view that the library must continue to be professionally managed with sufficient paid staff at the core to ensure the direction, development and quality of service provided. The use of volunteers and the development of community managed services can be seen as part of the move towards a Big Society, and the encouragement of the co-production of

local services. The use of volunteers raises some issues for those responsible for the library service, including:

- how to ensure a commitment to social inclusion if volunteers are drawn predominantly from one social group
- the extent to which volunteering is viable in areas with different socio-economic composition
- how to incentivise people to volunteer
- how to ensure good relationships between volunteers and permanent staff.

8.3 Community-managed services

The main concerns about community-managed services focus on the reduced accountability of the service, the possibility that a fragmented service will be created, and the difficulty of transferring assets and responsibilities.

Some English local authorities now have libraries run by volunteers. These models often contain a mix of community services with professional support from the centre, which might include providing IT support for all libraries and ensuring that excluded and isolated residents can access services through mobile and home library services. Some authorities provide different levels of library service in different locations, with local services being developed and run by community groups, or with extensions to opening hours being dependent on volunteers to provide.

8.4 Shared services

The MLA has recently produced a guidance note on shared library services, and shared services are one of the key features of the ten pilot projects which form the Future Libraries Programme currently running in England.

8.5 Use of the private sector

While there has been considerable debate about the role of the private sector in public service delivery generally, it has been generally agreed that the public library

service should remain in the public sector, although one London borough has contracted their library service to a private sector company.

While there has not been extensive use of the Private Finance Initiative for libraries, there are examples of imaginative new build projects which would not have happened without PFI.

9. The role of the Trust

The principles underpinning the Trust's original investment in this area will continue to inform the Trust's involvement in work on libraries in the future:

- The Trust will continue to promote access to knowledge and learning, and advocate policies promoting such access whether or not this takes place through libraries.
- The Trust will lobby for policies or initiatives which are sustainable in the long term.
- The Trust will advocate for policies or initiatives which ensure the most effective balance between local responsiveness of services with the efficiencies which may be achieved by providing or supporting services on a regional or national basis.
- The Trust will be willing to consider policy or initiatives which would be too difficult for local or national governments to promote.

While part of the Carnegie heritage lies in the library buildings themselves, it is important to recognise that the needs of the library service in the 21st century may mean that these buildings are no longer suitable. Modernising library services may require either more modern buildings or a move towards co-location of services in community centres. Inspiring new library buildings in places like Peckham and Bournemouth have seen significant increases in use of library services.

The Trust is re-engaging in work on libraries in

a range of ways. Some of this is responsive, but we are also involved in research and policy development in a proactive way.

9.1 Responsive work

The Trust has always received correspondence about libraries, and particularly about possible library closures. When Andrew Carnegie or the Trust gave library grants there were no conditions attached to these, apart from the requirement that the library authority should levy a library rate. The Trust always responds to such correspondence, expressing its continuing conviction of the importance of libraries, but stating clearly that we are unable to intervene in particular decisions by library authorities.

The Trust will support libraries which celebrate their centenary from 2011 onwards by sending them a framed certificate congratulating them on their achievement.

9.2 New proactive work

With the centenary of the Trust approaching, and with library provision increasingly in the news, the Trust will develop a clear policy on the future role of libraries and how public libraries should be supported in the five jurisdictions.

The Trust has considerable legitimacy to speak on the future of public libraries and the voice of the Trust is likely to be influential in the debate on the future of public libraries. The Trust has a strong convening power to bring together all the key stakeholders in this field. It can also bring together those working in the different jurisdictions in an area where most of the policy and pilot work has been done separately with limited learning from one another.

Following a literature review of library policy and the future of libraries, we have commissioned two pieces of work from Ipsos Mori. The first phase of this was to carry out a secondary analysis of information which is available in national surveys of wellbeing. This shows a fairly consistent pattern

of library use across the four jurisdictions covered, and of satisfaction with the service among those who use it. There is less evidence from these existing data sources about what would encourage greater use of libraries, or whether respondents see a continuing or important role for libraries. The second phase of this work is to seek evidence from all five jurisdictions covered by the Trust about library use and attitudes to library services in all five jurisdictions. This work will be carried out between August and October 2011.

9.3 Next steps

Once we have received the report from Ipsos Mori and analysed the evidence about public attitudes to the public library service, we will discuss the findings with key stakeholders including professional bodies such as CILIP, advisory bodies, and service providers, and produce a report on library services, looking at their role in relation both to providing access to knowledge and learning, and in relation to the wider role they can play in communities. The report will address the following aspects of this policy area:

- how to support access to knowledge in the 21st century
- models of library provision which meet the needs of the future in relation to:
 - the challenge of reductions in public spending
 - changing ways of accessing knowledge
 - being a delivery agent for other local and central government services
 - a central hub for community activity
 - maintaining its traditional role in supporting reading, learning and literacy
- library buildings, and what will contribute to making libraries attractive and supportive

environments, particularly for those who do not currently use them.

- the role of librarians in the 21st century. While the Carnegie Trust supported the development of professional standards and bodies to support the profession, the key questions today are the level of professional staffing needed in public libraries, and the right balance between qualified and unqualified staff and volunteers.

If you have any questions about the Trust's work in this area, please contact Liz Macdonald, Senior Policy Officer at lizm@carnegieuk.org.

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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