

## **A CILIP STATEMENT ON THE POSITION OF THE PUBLIC LIBRARY SERVICE IN ENGLAND**

**Prepared by the Community Libraries Panel of CILIP  
on Save Our Libraries Day, 5 February 2011**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The public library service is a popular service that is held in high public esteem. The immense support the service enjoys was demonstrated by activity across the country on Save Our Libraries Day designed to celebrate the value of libraries and draw attention to the threats of closure and other reductions. Currently English public libraries are visited by over three quarters of a million people a day and cost each person (through national and local taxation) just under 40p per week. They are about the “good” things of life delivering tangible outcomes in economic regeneration, learning, literacy and health as well as providing opportunities for personal enrichment and fulfilment. In a time of recession libraries are needed even more with information for jobseekers, support for the development of new skills and knowledge, and a “free” public space encouraging community cohesion and a wide range of activities: they are beacons of hope for a better future. People want and need a public library service and politicians should take note!

However CILIP acknowledges the need and mandate of government to tackle the national debt. But it opposes public libraries being seen as a soft option or taking a disproportionate level of cuts – they are a frontline statutory service. In reviewing the service reduction proposals of local authorities CILIP looks for a library plan or strategy informed by a user needs analysis, evidence of professional library and information advice, proper public consultation on proposals, proportionality in the savings expected and compliance with the requirements of the 1964 Public Libraries and Museums Act<sup>1</sup>. It supports innovation, the better exploitation of technology and partnership working in developing new models of delivering the public library service as well as a continuing drive for greater efficiencies. But it fears that this alone will be insufficient to avoid cuts to frontline services and notes that many participants of the Future Libraries Programme are also proposing reductions in service provision.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1964/75?view=extent>

The Secretary of State, in his statutory role to “superintend and promote the improvement of the public library service”, has a vital role in encouraging and ensuring that public library authorities plan, deliver and evaluate the quality of the services they provide. National leadership is also important in developing digital services, researching and facilitating innovation, advocating partnership working and new models of service, and making strategic links with other government programmes. This must be about aspiring to the library service of the future as well as dealing with exigencies of the moment. It will also be important to help ensure that the local management capacity to research and manage such change and innovation is not stripped away in the current expenditure cutting exercises.

### **THE CURRENT SITUATION**

CILIP’s Community Libraries Panel met on Save Our Libraries Day to review the current position in regard to proposed and actual public library service cuts. It noted with concern the level and extent of proposals being made across England and in particular:

- a. The frontloading of reductions to the local government grant that has meant the need for radical proposals to be implemented sooner, often in 2011/12, and without proper preparation and consultation
- b. The extent of central local authority charges (for shared services such as finance, human resources, health & safety etc) and the fixed costs of libraries (e.g. library management systems) meaning that a 20% cut to the service may become a much higher cut in areas of discretionary spend on the frontline service
- c. The Impact of cuts in other areas, with recent public debate on buses and citizen advice bureaux, meaning that planned reductions in libraries often take place in isolation from other proposals yet all will interact in unforeseen ways on each other

The Panel noted that we were looking at proposals that could add up to:

- d. Proposals for the closure of up to 20% of library service points, especially where community managed libraries don’t actually happen
- e. A probable 4-6000 (full-time equivalent) reduction in the number of staff employed by public libraries

It is important that DCMS keep this situation under constant review so that they are able to assess the lawfulness of individual proposals and the cumulative impact of all proposals on the provision of an effective public library network across England. We are concerned that the winding down of the MLA and the abolition of the Advisory Council

on Libraries (ACL) will hinder the proper collection and interpretation of such information and that DCMS Ministers may not receive the expert advice necessary.

### **COMMUNITY MANAGED LIBRARIES AND OTHER PROPOSALS**

CILIP's overall concern is with the quality of service provided by public libraries and the access to this service enjoyed by all parts of society. Public library services should be needs driven rather than demand led. We have especial concerns about the widespread proposals for community managed libraries, which mostly means managed and run by local volunteers. It is often unclear as to the status of these libraries – will they be part of the local public library network, contributing directly to the provision of a comprehensive and efficient library service, or will they be outside the network? CILIP believes that volunteers can and do enrich the provision of a public library service but that they should be an integral part of a professionally managed service fully supported in their work by the necessary training and library infrastructure. As MPs, who spoke at the recent Westminster Hall debate on the future of libraries<sup>2</sup>, noted volunteers should “extend”, “supplement” and “enrich” provision and do not replace the need for a professionally run service. The proper management and deployment of volunteers requires investment and is not a cheap substitute for other forms of provision. It is unclear from many of the proposals being put forward by public library authorities as to what support, if any, will be offered to community managed libraries and, if offered, whether a charge will be made. In many cases it is feared they will just be left to sink or swim without any support at all.

One point needs emphasizing. It has been suggested that community managed libraries might charge subscriptions for use as a way of funding their operation. If such libraries are to be part of the public library network then this would be an unlawful act under the 1964 Public Libraries and Museums Act where all people are entitled to consult printed material on library premises without charge, and those who live, work or study in an area to borrow books and other printed material without charge. This needs to be made clear from the outset and local authorities should not use any resources from the library service to support any institutions making such charges. Community managed public libraries are a new departure for most public library authorities and there is a pressing need for coordinated guidance on good practice and research into how existing examples of such libraries are performing. They should be seen as gateways to the full public library service and, for instance, provide access (physically or remotely) to the

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<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmhansrd/cm110125/halltext/110125h0001.htm#1101255000513>

expertise of professional librarians. This is work that DCMS should sponsor with the Local Government Association and include input from bodies like CILIP.

Although the viability and effectiveness of community managed libraries is the major issue raised so far by the local proposals for public library service reductions, other aspects also cause concern. The continued assault on materials funds (including bookfunds) which in many instances are already too low to provide the quality, choice and range of materials across all media that should be available as part of a comprehensive service. Again where library services are not proposing closures there is usually a proposal for a widespread reduction in opening hours making it increasingly difficult to access services. The position of specialist services causes alarm too – more authorities have recently announced the closure of the Schools Library Services (for instance, Kent, Birmingham and Solihull) impacting especially on primary schools and the richness of learning resources they can provide to support the curriculum or to encourage reading by pupils. The worry is that it will be the already disadvantaged that will suffer most – those living in deprived communities where there is not the social capital or resilience to attract volunteers, children and the elderly in isolated rural communities unable to access the resources of a professionally managed service, the unemployed and other marginalised groups

### **ACTION REQUIRED**

In light of our review of the current position CILIP calls on the Secretary of State for Culture, as part of his responsibility to superintend and promote the public library service in England, to :

- a. Collect and publish information on proposed service reductions and their potential impact on the library service locally and nationally
- b. Intervene where local proposals are disproportionate or where there is genuine concern that a local authority will fail to comply with the 1964 Public Libraries & Museums Act – the factors identified in the report of the Inquiry into the Public Library Service provided by the Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council (2009)<sup>3</sup> are pertinent, especially the need for a library strategy based on an analysis and assessment of local needs
- c. Provide guidance on best practice for community managed libraries and make it clear that that any library that charges for the borrowing of books or visiting a

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[http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20100407120701/http://www.culture.gov.uk/reference\\_library/publications/6485.aspx](http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20100407120701/http://www.culture.gov.uk/reference_library/publications/6485.aspx)

library cannot be regarded as contributing to an authority's obligation to provide a "comprehensive and efficient" service and nor should it be supported by public resources

- d. Commission urgent research into the performance of existing community managed libraries with a view to inform future development elsewhere
- e. Ensure that the Arts Council (England) is able to properly scrutinise the library plans of local authorities and advise the Minister where there are problems that need addressing

For its part CILIP will

- a. Continue to monitor service reduction proposals of local authorities and where cuts are disproportionate make representations to the authority concerned and/or refer to the DCMS
- b. Actively engage in the public debate on the value of public libraries and alert the public to the dangers of extensive cutbacks
- c. Increase the awareness of politicians at national and local levels regarding threats to the public library service
- d. Work with others in making the case for the value of public libraries – including authors, publishers, celebrities, learning organisations, unions, users, etc

## **CONCLUSION**

Libraries are a national service as well as a local facility – both aspects need recognition and the national dimension should not be lost in the Big Society or localism. They are part of England's national heritage bequeathed to us by the Victorians and ours must not be the generation that destroys this heritage. The vision of the Victorians has enriched subsequent generations and, refocused and energised, public libraries will continue to be a dynamic and vibrant part of society enriching, challenging and meeting the needs and aspirations of individuals and communities. We must all work to ensure that we develop an exciting and innovative public library service which not only serves the information and cultural needs of current people but is equipped to help future generations in their discovery and use of knowledge.

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