

ALL PARTY PARLIAMENTARY GROUP  
LIBRARIES, LITERACY AND INFORMATION MANAGEMENT

MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS

at a

PARLIAMENTARY HEARING

held in

Commons Committee Room 21

on

Tuesday 5 May 2009

Before:

Members:

Lyn Brown MP (Chairman)  
Nia Griffith MP  
Mark Pritchard MP  
Anne Snelgrove MP  
Lord Tope  
Lynda Waltho MP

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Transcript of the shorthand notes of T A Reed & Co Ltd  
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Witnesses: **MARIAN BOSTON**, Unison, **TIM COATES**, **GRAHAM FISHER**, Toynbee Hall, **CHARLOTTE HOLLOWAY**, New Local Government Network, and **DAVID MURRAY**, London Borough of Newham, Library stakeholders, gave evidence.

**THE CHAIRMAN:** We are really chuffed that you have managed to find the time to talk to us today, so thank you.

We thought we would give you a couple of minutes each, because often people come with something they want to say, before we start to ask questions, in order to get a good basis for discussion going. The format today will be to give you a couple of minutes to say something to us; we have some things that we want to ask of you collectively; and then we will give you a couple of minutes at the end to tell us what you have not told us already, if there is anything you want to say. If there is anything further that you want to submit, having heard our questions today, we would be very happy to have that.

We will introduce ourselves, then ask you to introduce yourselves, and then give you the two minutes.

**ANNE SNELGROVE:** I am Anne Snelgrove, the Member of Parliament for South Swindon.

**LYNA WALTHO:** I am Lynda Waltho and I am Member of Parliament for Stourbridge.

**LORD TOPE:** I am Graham Tope from the House of Lords. I am Cabinet member for Libraries in the London Borough of Sutton, in another life.

**THE CHAIRMAN:** I am Lyn Brown and I chair the All Party Group.

**NORMAN TURNER:** I am Norman Turner, appointed as consultant to the inquiry.

**JONATHAN DOUGLAS:** I am Jonathan Douglas from the National Literacy Trust.

**DAVID HEMY:** I am David Hemy in Lyn Brown's office with whom you have been corresponding.

**THE CHAIRMAN:** We have a stenographer, Lindsay Bickers, taking a verbatim note.

**DAVID MURRAY:** I am David Murray from the London Borough of Newham. Do you want me to do my two minute speech and to give my comments?

My role in Newham is that I am the Divisional Director for Community and Customer Services. So I manage the library services, along with things like the contact centre, the local service centres, money advice and debt services and I am also leading the council's customer access transformation programme.

The two key points that I want to make are around the fact that, first of all, I absolutely firmly believe that libraries have a crucial role to play in helping people realise their own aspirations, whatever they are. I think that is the joy of the public library system that you can walk in with the whole diverse range and needs and actually the libraries can help you deliver that. We have placed our library service in Newham within the overall boundary of

community and customer services. The staff in our libraries work in the contact centre; they work in the local service centres; they also work in the libraries. All of our staff can do those multi-functional tasks because in a borough like Newham people walk in with very diverse needs and I think our staff need to respond to those in a multitude of ways. That is the first thing I wanted to say. I think libraries are far more than just places where we come in and choose books to read. That is incredibly important and I do not downgrade that but I think in recent years sometimes libraries have driven themselves up the cul-de-sac of reader development and actually library services are far more than that.

The second point I want to make is that I think library services are very successful and in Newham both our libraries and our issue figures and our visitor figures are going up; they are going up very steadily and they have been going up now for a year or so. That is a tremendous success, I think.

One thing we lack is any sense at a national and at a regional level of a narrative that celebrates that success and helps us tackle some of the deficiencies in our services, because there are some. When you look at indicators like NI9, for example, that is probably a little short of a disaster because NI9 for a borough like Newham it discounts all of the usage that our young people make of our library services and many of the other ways that demonstrate that our service is very vibrant indeed.

So we are in the bottom quartile. I think we are third from bottom in London against NI9, but if you look at all of our local indicators, they are all resolutely successful. Again, the NI9 definition plays into the hands of demonstrating, erroneously I think, that library services are failing and we are not doing the right things to meet the needs of our communities. I think we very much need something done at a national and regional level to demonstrate some of those successes.

THE CHAIRMAN: What is the problem with NI9, David?

DAVID MURRAY: It is a very partial count. For example, it will count books that are lent to adults but it will not necessarily count books that are loaned to children. It does not count lots of other things. In a service like Newham where a minimum of 25 per cent of our library use is by the under 16s, none of that will show up in that particular indicator. NI9, the indicator of the use of public libraries, is meant to be the catch-all indicator that demonstrates whether your service is working or not. I think it is a fundamentally flawed indicator. It is done by a questionnaire, I think, and again in a borough like Newham where language and literacy levels are a real challenge, if you are a London borough like the City of London that scored 86 per cent on the NI9 indicators, of course you are going to be marvellous, are you not, because everybody lives in the Barbican and they are all quite wealthy. I live in the Barbican, I know that. I go to work every day in Newham. There are not many people like the people who live in the Barbican in the London Borough of Newham. So those surveys distort the success or otherwise of our service. If NI9 is the way that nationally we judge whether we are a success, I would argue that it is very flawed indeed.

GRAHAM FISHER: I am Graham Fisher and I am currently the Chief Executive of Toynbee Hall, but I assume I was invited here because I was the former Chief Executive of MLA London, which is the strategic regional development agency for museums, libraries and archives; it is one of MLA's old nine regional agencies and the only one that is still surviving.

I am going to take a slightly different tack to David and pretty much everything that David has said I agree with. The two minute message I would like to put across is very much about how can you make it so difficult in terms of library leadership and sectoral change?

MLA London I think was a reasonably successful organisation. I counted up on my way here and, in terms of the organisations that I have to deal with that in some shape or form are about library leadership, strategy or governance, and I am excluding local authorities here, I had to deal with 13 agencies, all of which had something to say or wanted to say something about library performance, about library improvement, about library innovation and about library change. Frankly, it could not have been more difficult if we had tried to get a clear consensus about the need for sectoral change within that environment.

I suppose my key question is really: how can that system be rationalised and improved? I do think libraries are actually doing very good things. I think they are achieving good things. I think there is much greater scope in terms of leadership and much greater scope in terms of advocacy. I also think there is much greater scope in stimulating innovation in service delivery. But that will not be achieved by a plethora of different agencies, all of which want to interfere and do a little bit of good in terms of library change. I think that is a really fundamental question that urgently requires some thinking about, some debate and some transformation.

TIM COATES: Thank you very much for asking me. I am extremely grateful. I am not sure I am worthy, really. I would say it is the first time anyone has ever called me a stakeholder, but never mind! It allows me to make a point, which is that when many government documents are published in which the lists of stakeholders of the public library service, as Graham was saying, are shown, no-one ever mentions the public. You will find in Framework for the Future and all the rest of it a whole list of initials, and of course the public library service really is for people of all kinds and shapes and sizes, many of whom have different ways of using the service and have different requirements of it at different stages of their lives, depending on their requirements.

My first observation is that we do not know what those are. I have watched for ten years, as you know, 26 different government commissions, initiatives, reviews, and we are seeing one at the moment, and in none of those has any serious, methodical, mathematical if you like, attempt been made to understand what the public needed. As David rightly says, and I completely agree with much of what he said, when you try to work out whether we are doing a good job, whether the libraries are doing a good job, or not, the judgment is not in the eyes of peer agencies or stakeholders; the judgment is in the eye of the public. All the indicators show that the public are not too pleased and the indicators show a decline generally when you look at them.

My first point is that the stakeholders are the public and unless we understand what they want, we have no chance of giving them it, absolutely none. We can all sit in reviews and committees, as people will do to the end of time, but we must begin to get that understanding. I spend all my time going round libraries. It is what I do. As you would go into a restaurant or into a community centre, a shop or museum, there is that first moment as you go in the door when you say, "I am going to like this; it is going to be nice and helpful and do what I want it to do" or not. In most libraries that I go to I feel a heart-sink moment. What you are seeing is normally dirty premises, normally a very poorly designed arrangement, normally very poor stock, normally no clear indicators about what services are being offered, whatever

they are, and staff sometimes who are very helpful but sometimes who are not. I would say whatever response at national level we try to invent, what really matters is about that bit of management which can change that experience that people get when they go into the libraries.

Whatever you say about the MLA and the DCMS and ministerial structures, and I do it just as much as anybody does, actually what really matters is what happens in a local council. I notice that over the past six or seven years we have created councillors with responsibility for public library services and yet we rarely involve them in the discussions about what the issues are, what the problems are, what the public wants. I do not see in the DCMS current review any councillors with responsibility, with portfolios.

THE CHAIRMAN: Chris White is there.

TIM COATES: Yes, but he is not a portfolio holder. He is a councillor but he is not in office and he does not have the portfolio for public libraries, with respect. I know he represents the LGA. Out of 30 people who are involved in that, one would have hoped to find 20 of them who are people faced with the day-to-day problems of how to manage them and there are none.

MARIAN BOSTON: I am Marian Boston. You will probably guess my age when I say that at the end of this you will probably use that phrase of Mandy Rice-Davies, "Oh, she would say that, wouldn't she?" Coming from a trade union, I have to speak for staff who must be trained to work in the libraries. Nevertheless, our staff are consumers and we are all consumers and users of the library, so we can all talk with a various numbers of hats on.

To keep it brief, we really want libraries to be run with the appropriate level of staffing and the appropriate level of training for these people. There is a crisis in libraries and this has been brought about by the consistent lack of investment. The main thing that is key is community engagement. These are libraries for communities and it is only people working in those libraries and in the local authorities that understand the needs of the communities.

There is one big problem about standards, which are essential. Whilst there is a statutory duty to provide libraries, there is no enforcement on how they should be run, no real guidance and no pressure on local authorities. Hence, when it comes to funding, libraries can become a soft target.

The lack of co-ordination at government level and the lack of authority at local level give a green light to local councils that want to reduce services or the service standards and yet see no threat in doing so. I can quite understand the emotive issues here. When you have desperation for home care, care of the elderly, disaffected youth and a library, you are not going to go for the library – nobody would – but local authorities should not really have to make those hard decisions.

One other thing: when I nursed, I always used to think 'cash and care do not go together', and now it has come out that targets cannot go hand in hand with running a library service. One of the great strengths of our library service and a source of trust with which it is regarded in the community is that at the moment it is not a commercial service. Public libraries are an integral part of local public services, and I believe they should remain so. No amount of

outsourcing can deliver a responsive library service, much loved by the public, from the cradle to the grave.

We believe that the Government should monitor local authority library services to ensure that proposals by local authorities do not interfere with the statutory duty to provide all residents with a comprehensive public library service. We are very pleased to welcome the inquiry by the Minister into the state of libraries in the Wirral.

Partnership working of course must be borne in mind, and that should really be with local authorities sharing experiences as a key to running a successful library.

The final bit – “she would say that wouldn’t she?” We would hope that we would see adequate resources and funding for library services, staff and premises, improved cross-governmental co-ordination and partnership working within central and local government to define objectives and standards and requisite funding for the library service. We would like to see the empowerment of staff and communities to shape these services together, to have partnership working between libraries and councils across the UK and a responsiveness to library users from all backgrounds, supported by the provision of staff training and professional development. Thank you for your time.

THE CHAIRMAN: We are going to come on to questions around volunteers and staffing as we go on. We are also going to try to talk to you about the issues of constraints about tensions between DCMS and DCLG, about statutory framework versus freedom of flexibility. We are going to ask you to talk about that. That is definitely coming up. Get your thinking caps on for that one.

There is one question I want to tease out from what has come out is this. You talked about how difficult Government makes it because there are 13 different agencies, it could be said, in London about performance, innovation, change and improvement, if I have that right. I would be really grateful for a map of that in your evidence. That would be useful. You asked how we could get sectoral change. Given that you were sitting in the MLA at one point, and you are still asking that question, I just wondered if you had found an answer.

GRAHAM FISHER: Not the way we do it because it was tortuous, I have to say, and it was needlessly tortuous. I think the MLA delivered a number of good things in the time that I was there, both nationally and in fact in London, and I think that delivered and improved service for the public, which is what we are all about. I do not think anybody disagrees with that aim. Some of that innovation worked well when we took out some ideas and a hypothesis in a formal sense and involved library leaders and practitioners in terms of testing that out and looking at how that might work in practice. Some of the work that London libraries did around basic skills is a good case in point for that.

We built the evidence base; we applied it and we actually worked with libraries to test whether it worked and whether they were doing the things that we instinctively felt they were doing. Then from that we developed a better evidence base so that we could prove that what they were doing did work and then we used that evidence base to go out and advocate for more resources and inward investment, in which we were successful again. The London Development Agency put about three-quarters of a million pounds into London’s public libraries, which is pretty small when you think about it across the board, but it was the first time ever there had been that level of investment from that type of agency into the public

library system. We generated an evidence base and delivered improved services for the public.

THE CHAIRMAN: Since we know each other really well, you are not going to mind if I interrupt you. That is all good stuff but you said you would not have done it the way we did it.

GRAHAM FISHER: No.

THE CHAIRMAN: What did we do wrong and what should we have done?

GRAHAM FISHER: If I take regional commentary as an example of how badly wrong we did it, regional commentaries are landed on my desk from DCMS who seemingly know nothing about local government whatsoever. I was expected to deliver regional commentaries in 33 London boroughs, I think in a nine-month period of time, with no standardised methodology at all and no additional resource to be able to do it, but we needed this to happen and we needed it to be a good thing. Excuse me! Try as much as we did in the MLA and try as much as we did in London in terms of working with the boroughs, it was a mess, to be perfectly frank. We made as good a job of it as we possibly could but it partly alienated people; it alienated people in the profession; they were not clear about our role – are we an inspector, what happens to this evidence, where does it go? We all spent a large amount of time doing an activity which was very ill-thought through and for really no purpose whatsoever.

I think that is a classic example of the type of initiative which comes, I have to say, from government often, which is very ill-thought through, where there are not the resources to apply it in practice, and it seriously undermines any opportunity to improve the service.

THE CHAIRMAN: That was an example where the Government asked you to do something, which was clearly not very well thought through?

GRAHAM FISHER: Yes.

THE CHAIRMAN: That is being kind and charitable to the DCMS. Structurally do you think it worked?

GRAHAM FISHER: Structurally, the relationship between MLA and local government would have to be very strong. I think it did help in certain circumstances to strengthen that relationship. The problem I have found is that DCMS do not really understand local government and local government is the body at the end of the day, as everybody has said, that is ultimately delivering this service. It always felt as though we were on the outside knocking at a door that was very firmly closed. Structurally that did not help this at all. The relationship that MLA needs to have, and hopefully it is developing and is improving that relationship with local government, has got to be strong, otherwise those resources, which are there to improve the service, are not actually being utilised effectively, and frankly you may as well get rid of them.

THE CHAIRMAN: Charlotte Holloway has just arrived. Do you want to say who you are?

CHARLOTTE HOLLOWAY: Yes, and apologies for being late. I am from the New Local Government Network. I am just here in a kind of observer capacity from the organisation. I was asked to attend on behalf of the organisation.

THE CHAIRMAN: We do not want any observers. We asked for you to participate. This is a panel.

CHARLOTTE HOLLOWAY: Yes. I have three main points that I would like to stress on behalf of the organisation. Obviously, coming in late, it is difficult for me to see where that links in with what has been said previously.

I would hope that local government could lead in library policy. There are differing tactics. I realise that I do not know what has been said. I apologise for being late. It may be better if I spoke later.

THE CHAIRMAN: It is good of you to come and we are pleased you got here. Do not worry about being late. We are all late most of the time when we are going anywhere. Just chill out. Grab a chair and participate as and when you choose. At the end we will ask you for your points and you can wrap with any points or jump in on any of the questions.

CHARLOTTE HOLLOWAY: That seems to be what will work best.

(Introductions repeated)

ANNE SNELGROVE: I do not know if anybody wants to jump in with anything now?

LORD TOPE: Graham gave me my entry and he asked me to press on the DCMS and DCLG relationship or lack of it. I was thinking during all four presentations that, in your slightly different ways, you had a common theme there. Most of my experience of local government actually is that it is largely led by DCLG to the extent that central government understands at all, whether that is partnership, community engagement, all of those things, narrative, the obvious one of funding, all of that. Then, Graham you rightly said, in my opinion, that DCMS knows nothing about local government. We all agree that the library service should remain with local government. I think that is very broadly agreed. Why is not the library service with DCLG? I would like five answers to that.

DAVID MURRAY: One of the most telling things when the current DCMS review was taking place and they had panels for various people to go along and talk started to register when the civil servants, who were absolutely lovely in DCMS, talked about the impact that public libraries are going to have on the community cohesion agenda at which the current Government is throwing literally millions of pounds on a range of schemes, some of which are great and some of which are I think farcical.

So we started to describe community cohesion through a libraries prism. That sits with DCLG. DCMS were unaware, I think on any level whatsoever, that libraries can impact positively on the community cohesion agenda. If you think about messaging for public libraries, if we are trying to recognise that public libraries need to impact on local government's core agenda, community cohesion, bringing people together, people doing things together in non-threatening, very natural ways that do not artificially channel people into strange activities, public libraries are an absolute gift for that. One might imagine that

the messaging around community cohesion and the public libraries' role would be whacking people across the whole of government between the proverbial eyes, but it seemed to come as a bit of a revelation to the people who were conducting the DCMS review as just a little bit shocking.

Then when you started to talk to them about how you make those messages and open them to DCLG, it became more shocking because then I think there was a perfect example of local government actually joining the things up in very creative ways but running up against central government not being fleet of foot enough to recognise the obvious things that were already happening.

We all talked about different things happening in our public libraries, and we can do it till the cows come home, around pensioners' groups, under-five sessions, the things that are bread and butter for public libraries, which require no reinvention whatsoever, but if you interpret them in a certain way, they fulfil I think all of the criteria for the government's community cohesion and tackling and preventing and all those bits and bobs. It is all there on a plate but I felt worried, I have to say, very worried indeed, that that kind of simple message was not on the offer list that I think public libraries very badly need and which DCMS seem to struggle continually to articulate in any meaningful way.

LORD TOPE: So the answer to my question was "yes". Does anybody want to speak not literally for DCMS but as to why the public library service should stay in the DCMS? You seem more and more to be making the case, not for restructuring government but as it is structured at the moment, for more and more the public library service as part of local government being the reason you have just articulated, David, for being in the DCLG.

DAVID MURRAY: But does it matter? In a sense, if you are operating ---

LORD TOPE: All of you have said there is a lack of leadership at local and regional levels as well but particularly at national level.

DAVID MURRAY: You may take a very pragmatic view and ask: where will it impact most? If that is DCLG, I am not sure anyone is going to take to the streets with banners protesting to stay in DCMS.

THE CHAIRMAN: Do you think there is a difference between being a big fish in a small pond and a small fish in a big pond? Would you see libraries in that way if you looked at the DCMS and DCLG analogy?

GRAHAM FISHER: My experience in DCMS is that libraries are a relatively small fish in a small pond.

THE CHAIRMAN: Even now?

GRAHAM FISHER: Even now, and I am not sure, in terms of the natural empathy and interest of DCMS at a ministerial level or indeed at an operation level, that libraries is a subject that really fires a lot of people's bellies. I have to say I think that, certainly when I have done advocacy work, there has been more fire in civil servants' bellies around DCLG or DIUS and indeed some of the other departments around the potential that libraries have to play than I have ever found in DCMS, I am very sad to say. I think not only at the leadership

level but at the very operational level, the fact that you have a government department, DCMS, leading libraries which sits outwith the core local government performance management framework is just nonsensical. I think it is just making it more difficult. For all those four and a half years that I did that job, if I could create a legacy for my successor it is: make it easier, please. Trying the two together, putting libraries into a language of local area agreement and of performance measurement which is related to what DCLG is afterwards would take things on leaps and bounds pragmatically and might free up things to do more innovative stuff around engaging the consumer, engaging the community and work around leadership.

TIM COATES: I cannot see it takes it further from the public's point of view. You still do not ask the question: why do not local councillors do a better job? That still lies on the table and is the big question. Which department does it? I do not think anyone cares.

THE CHAIRMAN: Do you think that central government has role in either providing the stick or the carrot that would make local government to a better job?

TIM COATES: It does not do it at the moment. Perhaps, but it is not that difficult a thing to do. "No excuses" I think is my answer to that question. We get so many excuses why this councillor cannot do this. I am listening to it all the time, as is Mrs Snelgrove. There is not any excuse why the budget cannot make sense. You could not possibly explain the budget to the public. So much tosh goes on in local councils. Whether anybody in central government can sort that out, one department or another, who cares?

MARIAN BOSTON: But they could with a stick and with guidance, could they not?

TIM COATES: That is not how you manage things these days. You do not manage things with sticks. That is not how anybody anywhere manages anything. That is a complete misconception, with respect. Large corporations, the Army, nobody manages things with sticks. That is not how people do things these days. They do things by sensible, good leadership, hard work, understanding and proper information; those are the ingredients that make good leadership and effect management change. It is not about sticks.

LYNDA WALTHO: I would agree that is how it should happen. My constituency is in Dudley where we had a botched reorganisation, as far as I am concerned. The difficulty with Dudley is that they will only do something properly if they feel they are going to get measured on it or embarrassed by the outcome, which usually falls to myself or my colleagues because we berate them and the press is full of articles. The only way we could get them to focus was literally to embarrass them into it. It would be wonderful if Dudley responded out of the goodness of their heart and with a corporate spirit. The thing is they do not.

TIM COATES: You are talking about government across the country.

LYNDA WALTHO: Whether it is swimming pools or leisure centres, unless they are going to be measured on it, they now do not touch it because they can then turn round and say, "Look, we are a four star council for housing and this and that" and that is where they concentrate. Unfortunately, that is where the target philosophy is misdirecting people and whole swathes of services get left or fester, basically.

TIM COATES: Do you want me to answer? You are on a management loser but that is government in the country at the moment. You could hardly say it is not to do with the cabinet; they will not do anything unless the papers tell them to. You will not get good management in local government until you leave them alone and just let them sink or swim by what they do, not telling them half the story. But you can give them some coaching. In the five years since councillors had portfolios for public libraries, you could have sat in seminar rooms and talked about the issues, not telling them what to do but saying, "These are the figure that you might find useful. These are the issues that the public will probably relate to. These are the ones that are difficult. These are the staff issues and the training issues. Let us talk about all these things." You can help people because councillors come and go. It is a very strange management arrangement but it can work, but nobody ever sits and talks about just the simple, plain, straightforward job. All we talk about are management tables and that is not the right way to manage anything.

There is a responsibility for good management and it lies with you as managers of the public service. You cannot duck out of it. Telling people what to do never works.

THE CHAIRMAN: Charlotte, do you want to respond?

CHARLOTTE HOLLOWAY: In essence I would agree with some of the points made there. Whether you have libraries in one department or another, this is the case regardless; almost the frame of what I have heard so far is that there is still this idea that management of one size fits all. I think there is a general consensus across parties that library policy should be devolved in that form. I know this is about management issues and how you get local authorities to step up to the mark and use their enabling markers such as LAAs to perform in certain areas.

There is a certain pitfall in thinking about how you conceptualise which department it is in. You do not want it to be a niche, isolated thing of libraries just because that is easier and you do not then want it to become a touched on civil service thing; whether or not the CLG would get it in another environment, I think you still run the risk of one size fits all and not allowing local authorities to step up to the mark. I think you need to give local government more credit in what they are able to achieve and use LAAs as an enabler, as a kind of pushing tool.

LORD TOPE: I am happy to move on. I never thought I would put myself in the position of being an advocate for DCLG, quite the opposite. I am asking in the context of government departments. I very broadly agree with Tim actually that the solution is much more a bottom up one, whether you call it sticks, carrots or incentives. The reality is that local government now is driven by the performance framework. Most local authorities, whether they admit to it or not, are striving for four staff plus rating.

TIM COATES: You could have another ten years of doing the same. It has hardly worked, has it?

LORD TOPE: We have to ask ourselves: part, certainly not the whole, of the reason why libraries tend to get all the things that we have said about them disregarded, to use a simple word, is because perhaps they are not yet properly part of that. He is certainly not suggesting that putting it in DCLG solves all the problems. Nobody is suggesting that. I think it is one of the reasons why it gets overlooked.

DAVID MURRAY: I disagree with Tim fundamentally that the issue of performance indicators has not resulted in better services because I think it has. They are demonstrably better. If you have a sensitive and responsible PI regime which you operate, for very good reasons that focuses attention because PIs are nothing more than indicators that make you focus on the things that matter. If you look at performance across local government generally, this is not about local government performance generally but the regimes that are in place that drive local government priorities and drive performance at the local level have demonstrably worked. I just wanted to toss that one in. If we remove a PI regime, we toss something very valuable out of the window.

I agree with Tim to a very small extent, which is a big confession for me. You need to marry what matters to people on the ground with an overarching performance agenda so that you can get the best of both. If you toss one out, the other one does not work either. To suggest that not having that performance regime might liberate us is incorrect.

TIM COATES: No, I did not say you do not have performance indicators. Of course you have performance indicators. All management has those. I am saying you do not have them set by somebody in Whitehall. You set them yourself.

DAVID MURRAY: That goes back to one of the very big challenges about public libraries around our offer. It is not attempting to spin everything. I am not suggesting that we use PR to cover up our failings because there are real issues in public libraries, and you would be a fool to suggest there were not. One of the big things that bedevils this service is that we do not have a consistent narrative around why it matters. If you look at sister services in things like the DCMS bundle at the moment, if you look at sport for example, they have woven a great story around their impact and why they matter in a way that public library services simply have not. One of the things that gets in our way is having that very neat bundle of things that we talk to people about why we matter.

ANNE SNELGROVE: Before we go any further, we have 20 minutes left and that takes me neatly on to the area I wanted to explore. You can continue to talk about PIs through this but I think it would be a shame if we just talked about that, the problems that PIs have. What should then a library service be today and what right do people have to expect a certain number of services there? What is right for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, rather than just looking back at what the library service was offering from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards?

I was very interested in NI9 what that might be saying about the way that Government is measuring. That is relevant. What is the kernel of what library services should be? What is the story that we should be getting out there just as the sports family has their story out there? What should we be getting out to our constituents, the general public? Anybody?

GRAHAM FISHER: For me it is a combination and it needs to be locally determined. You cannot just impose one solution. I think it will vary. That variation is part of the devil in the sense of how you get that across. For me the core elements are really very much about books, information, place, learning, reading, all of those factors that work together. How they work together and in what ratio I think needs to be determined in terms of that localness, so making sure that it is relevant to the local community and that the space and resources available work for them. I think there has to be that mixture and much better supported in terms of the customer/relationship/management or whatever you call it, something that

enables libraries to better understand the users, their customers, that are going in and what happens and what they do when they are there.

I was really shocked at how bad that was and then this battle with librarians to try and get them to gather information about their users because they want to be confidential and impartial and all of these other things. That is a kind of nonsense and I think it has to be more customer focused. There is something about the scale of operation which seemingly makes that infrastructure quite difficult to achieve. I think of bigger units in terms of the book world now that can enable you. I love going on Amazon to see what they have recommended and some of the time I buy half the books I am such a damn fool. People really go for that kind of stuff. Libraries do not necessarily need to replicate that but I think they need to be much more customer focused.

ANNE SNELGROVE: Does anybody else want to comment on that?

TIM COATES: The national narrative is from the people. It is consistent across the country. Of course the people in Grimsby do not say anything different to the people in Penzance but what they want from their local library in a little local circle, the use in the public, in the community, which is part of it, is very important. As to what a public library is, you will get the same story from anywhere in the country and that is what people do not listen to. If you responded to that everywhere, and it is very simple (it will not take my auntie three minutes to tell you what the library is supposed to do) we would have a wonderful public library service, but instead we have made it so complicated by indicators and all the rest of it.

GRAHAM FISHER: I am not sure that is true. Take where I live; I live between Dulwich and Peckham. Dulwich is a nice traditional, relatively white, middle-class area, and Peckham is a very multi-ethnic, very poor, very deprived area. The experience of going into those two libraries is very different. What they want in Peckham is something very different. It is a younger clientele. They want somewhere to study, some resources to be able to work from, IT facilities, a whole range of a different focus, which is less about books. If you go into Dulwich Library, it is probably slightly more traditional and there is much more of a book culture. The space to use the PC is not really in demand because everybody has one in their own homes; they do not really need the study space because everybody lives in five-bedroomed houses and they can study at home. So I think it is different and it just needs to be a variation on that theme. It cannot just be uniform, and it is wrong to think that the public think that.

THE CHAIRMAN: Has anyone ever tried to find out in a national study what people want from their libraries and whether there is a differential between them? You are saying there is a differential, or Tim is saying, on a tiny minuscule basis, but has anyone ever tried to find out? Has there ever been a national study?

GRAHAM FISHER: The only studies that exist are the MORI studies by different counties in different places and they always say exactly the same thing. I live in Cricklewood where there are 100 different languages between me and the corner. People still know what a library should be. The council gave them one with no books in it, which they thought was mad.

DAVID MURRAY: There are national studies. There are the CIPFA indicators, the children's surveys that we do every other year; there are many surveys done around what

people expect from their public library service. I think the very real dilemma for public library services is to marry the very simplistic messages that Tim is conveying and the complex measures that Graham is trying to convey around what is the core offer that allows the nuances for people to respond locally to what people need. In our own library service, for example, we will very shortly start off with debt and money advice sessions because people very badly need that. We think we can pick up a whole fleet of people who would not access that kind of service because they will be coming to the library; they would probably never dream of attempting to access that if we did not make it extraordinarily easy for them.

I think there is some truth in what Tim is saying around how to articulate what is in your library service, but the surveys illustrate very clearly – those national surveys that take place very regularly – that what people require does vary from locality to locality when you get into the detail. That is the very real dilemma around how you simultaneously offer a national service that is incredibly simple to grasp and I think needs to be focused on – books and information in its widest sense – but allows local government then to tinker with and tweak and focus the service on what it requires.

All 33 of the London boroughs I think each probably requires a slightly nuanced library service to take account of the local community; otherwise what you end up with is something like Tesco's and who wants another one of those? I do not want the libraries of Newham to look like a variation on a theme of Starbucks because why would we want that? There must be something different about the public libraries, otherwise we could franchise them to Starbucks and let them run them.

MARIAN BOSTON: I did not want to agree with Tim but I do a bit. When we write out to our library activists, and these are the people who are working in libraries, they always tell me that the public does drive in lots of areas what they want in their libraries, and particularly now.

I went to a conference in Liverpool last year about building local communities through libraries and there is going to be another one this year. I do not know if anyone else went to that. I talked to people there and in Liverpool they have an amazing system for the libraries, and it happening all over the place now. We do not want a library to be stuck in the corner of a community hub but to have a community hub where people can get rent or debt advice, or childcare advice, or actually see social workers. We do not want the library stuck in the corner but it is a very good way of getting people into a library.

I live in, I hate to say it, a very privileged area, a very Tory borough. I am like the only gay in the village on the telly. I am the only Labour supporter in my road with the girl next door. Our library is shared by our borough and a Labour borough on the other side of the road. It is heaving in there because you have all the middle and upper class parents from the paid schools demanding things, and then you have the young mums from the local council estate wanting the same, who come in. We have a homework club and the schools come in. I know it is wrong but some of the children get sent down there to do homework because they will not behave in class, but it does not really matter. The library staff do not really mind because the kids are using the facilities. When I went in last Saturday, the PCs were full of people looking for work. The library fulfils a vital social need and we need to take that on board.

THE CHAIRMAN: We are going to talk about volunteers.

LYNDA WALTHO: There has been a whole reorganisation where traditional libraries, which were very community-focused have been replaced in four of my seven wards by a library link system which is effectively, as far as I can see, an electronic ordering desk. I think there are 1500 books, which is about two big bookshelves. People rarely get what they want. There is one computer. Two of those are only open when there is something else going on in the community centre. They have a trained member of staff for two hours a day, but that is now being reduced to three days and the rest will just be if there are volunteers there. It is a major reduction.

It is not an improved service. It is nothing to do with what local people want because they wanted it the way it was but maybe with a few more books and bit more of an update, new stock and a few more computers. The staff hate it. The staff have been moved around. People who have developed expertise perhaps in archives or local history have been moved to the other end. They have all had new contracts and they are not supposed to speak to third parties, even their MPs now, without going through hoops. From the user point of view, it is a nightmare.

We now have a service in Dudley, or certainly in Stourbridge, which does not suit the staff, which does not suit the public, but ticks boxes because they can point sometimes to say they have had new books. It has achieved that but the targets were not what the public or the staff said were needed. It is just horrendous.

I am as much here as anything to say "help". How could that happen when we have all these grand people with all their training?

TIM COATES: It is about to happen in Swindon, is it not? It is awful.

LYNDA WALTHO: I am so depressed. We have had Unison working on it; we had the regional MLA on to it and it still happened. Literally, people come to me in tears. We have mums who cannot get books for their children's homework. We have all done it. My kids come home and say, "Mum, we have to do something on butterflies by tomorrow". Generally they will go to the computer. My kids tend to do that first now before books and that is it. They are in areas where there is no computer. They do not have cars.

TIM COATES: I will be straight and short too. There is a huge amount of dishonesty in the operations of government, and these are people who are highly paid. They are paid huge salaries throughout this whole structure, all these things you are talking about, all the structures of DCMS and the rest of it, and basically providing a dishonest service. We have watched that happening over ten years. It is simply because people in public life do not accept responsibility for the job that they have been given. We have watched it happen in the library profession. Unless people start behaving properly, this will happen across the country. That is the real answer. It does not matter what structures you have; unless people start to do the job that they are paid to do properly, you will not have a library service at all and there are a lot of other public services you will not have as well.

LYNDA WALTHO: Now I have that off my chest.

DAVID MURRAY: Before you get the next bit off your chest, I need to disagree with Tim on that last point. One thing I do agree with again comes back to libraries and their value and worth, collectively what we have not been able to achieve is to create advocates and people

who understand enough about libraries at very senior levels within councils to understand why what you have just outlined is probably not a good idea. In Newham where I work I am quite a senior manager these days but my passion for libraries remains undimmed. I am very conscious that I am not particularly used outside the borough. I think that there are an awful lot of people who work in boroughs and run library services who have not had very much to do with libraries because of the way portfolios are now set up and they have no real understanding of why libraries can be incredibly powerful.

What we need to get much better at is building that advocacy role so that people understand why libraries can deliver lots of agendas. Some of my criticism of things like MLA and other bits and bobs is that they simply do not draw on the resources of very senior managers who work in local government who can advocate and express why libraries are very powerful.

Norman, who was my line manager, was a very senior manager. The library narrative in Newham was always told, and told very eloquently, and we continue that now, but in boroughs or councils where that does not happen, we end up with situations, and I make no comment on yours, where I think it probably ticks some indicators but does not tick lots. That simple act of sharing knowledge and sharing understanding is something at which we are very poor. I wanted to toss that one in.

LYNDA WALTHO: In Dudley it is housing and libraries; that is where it is. It has been in education and in leisure and now it is in housing. It has never had any budget worth having. The staff are completely demoralised now and also reduced and being used in other parts of the council.

I was supposed to lead on training but, to be honest, nothing goes on in Dudley. What I am wondering, and I am sorry to keep talking about Unison but I see that at least as a way forward, is what sort of training would be the best thing, particularly for volunteers. I also have the issue now where I have local people who wanted to be volunteers but feel that they are now failing their community because they have had no back-up or effective training. I was telling my colleagues earlier that what happens now is that the local lady who does the line dancing is asked to open up. She is not a librarian but she does not want the library to close. There is no back-up whatsoever. What would you feel would be the right way forward in terms of the user volunteers but also their training and the training of staff? I know it is a massive issue.

MARIAN BOSTON: I have to look at this from two sides. I have my own side because I do voluntary work within my own life, but the other side is the Unison hat. Unison quite naturally is not against volunteers but they are not very happy about volunteers because often a volunteer is there instead of employing somebody. Therefore, you get a volunteer who should be paid and needs to be paid and needs a job or they are taking the job off someone and they have been able to get rid of somebody and have volunteers. There are lots of problems with volunteers. I have had feedback from my own local library where they have discovered that they have had an issue because two volunteers were not CRB checked and they are dealing with very young, impressionable people. This is in a wonderful library but these people were not CRB checked.

They also have the problem of staff having to supervise volunteers, where there is no reliability, and they say, "Oh, I will do Friday" and, because they are a volunteer, unless they are a really ardent volunteer, if someone else makes them a better offer – that could be

because someone is ill or whatever – they do not turn up and the library is left without anybody. It is very difficult.

As a mother and a grandmother, I agree with people giving to society and being volunteers but I really do not believe in them doing someone else's job. I think a volunteer is there to deal with all the crap issues so that the main person can get on with their proper job.

LYNDA WALTHO: Do you have any good practice stories? I would like to hear those.

MARIAN BOSTON: If you give me your card afterwards, I will pick this up with you, and I will contact Dudley branch as well, if I may.

THE CHAIRMAN: May I say that this session has been far too short. I did promise at the end I would give you a minute to talk to us about anything you have not had the opportunity to say. There is clearly some stuff you have not managed to deal with. I know you have all been very generous with your time and expertise today. If you did find a moment to be able to send us some more evidence, we would happily receive it. In particular, we would like to understand what you understand to be a public consultation. What are the basic requirements of public consultation if you are going rapidly to change your library services?

Secondly, if the rules are broken, whether it be around public consultation or not, who should be the keeper of the rules? We talked about PIs; we talked about performance indicators; and we talked about the four-star issues. How do we feel that the rules, which means a comprehensive library service, can be provided? Who should keep those rules?

We have also touched on the issue of not using volunteers. One of the things that we are clear about is that many of us around this table think that volunteering is fabulous and we love to see volunteers in our libraries but we are concerned when we hear about volunteers effectively running libraries on their own with absolutely no support or resources. We would like to have more instances of this and some understanding of what has happened.

We did talk about DCMS versus DCLG. I hope you will have some time to think about the crux of the matter, which is the tensions between freedoms and flexibilities that are demanded by the DCLG relationship with the council; firstly, those which are talked about in particular in Swindon and the Wirral, and what is a comprehensive library service and whether or not you think there are any tensions between those two, and what you think should be done to resolve that.

Finally, in your one minute summary, could you address yourselves to the issue of leadership? Is there a vacuum and what should fill it? I will start with Marian.

MARIAN BOSTON: There definitely is a vacuum and I think it should come from central government and they should have some control over local authorities to ensure and check that things are done as you would in social care or whatever, to check that they are following an agreed path of what a library means.

CHARLOTTE HOLLOWAY: I would say, maybe counter to that, that I do not think you can necessarily have a shared nationwide notion of what a library means. I think there are definitions of what it means to be literate within a library which can be quite community-specific. Leadership-wise, again I would err against any command and control type attitude

for a library. Again, with volunteers, I do not see why central government should be telling an individual library what their volunteer structure should be. I think that should come very much from the community itself and how they want to work it.

THE CHAIRMAN: Tim, tell us about the taskforce.

TIM COATES: Taskforce – whether you call it a taskforce or a national library agency, which is an expression that other people use, I would mean the same thing by that. I think there does need to be a body that concentrates on the public library service which exists to support the cabinet portfolio holders in local councils. So it is there to be a help and a guide, a constant point of contact and access for new development and so on, not as an instructing body but as a supporting body.

GRAHAM FISHER: For me the leadership is too distributed to be effective. I think it seriously undermines itself. I think, in terms of local leadership, there are many instances of strong councillors but there is more incidence of weak leadership at the political level locally, and probably Dudley is a prime example of where that has happened, because these will be political decisions that are being made on that basis.

In terms of leadership within local government, I think chief executives are, by and large, disinterested because of the dominance of the performance management regime. Either we should find a way of embedding libraries into that performance culture better or I do not think there is very much hope.

In terms of library leadership itself, in terms of the people delivering the services, again I think it is mixed. I think there are some examples of good leadership, strong leadership, which has brought about customer focused change but I think overall there is much more to be done and could be done better.

DAVID MURRAY: I think that those of us who are deeply passionate about public libraries have outsourced our leadership role to a number of quangos and other self-interested individuals and I want it back. There is an enormous amount of powerful leadership and advocacy about public libraries and it is people that make that stuff work. If you give people a framework, they flourish much better. What we probably require is a much clearer leadership framework that makes it explicit how you lead libraries at local government level, whether you are a cabinet member or a senior manager, what you do on a regional level and how that feeds in to the national library offer. If we can get those bits right, I think people can work in and local government and public libraries can capture the agenda and build on the excellent stuff that is already there. We do not need to rip it all up and start again because there are some brilliant things going on.

THE CHAIRMAN: Is anybody feeling frustrated because they have not had their two pennyworth and they want to say one more thing?

You have been really fantastic. If you have half an hour at home, submit more evidence based on the stuff we have been talking about today. We really will very gratefully receive it. Thank you very much.

Witnesses: **ROY CLARE**, Chief Executive, **SUE WILKINSON**, and **ASTRA FARQUHARSON**, Senior Parliamentary and Stakeholder Relations Officer, Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA), gave evidence.

**THE CHAIRMAN:** Welcome and thank you for coming and giving up your time. As agreed, you are going to talk to us for no more than ten minutes and then we will go round the table and chat. We are interrupting each other. We are passionate. There is likely to be a lively engagement. This is being done in select committee format as we think that will probably work. Roy, do you want to introduce yourself and then the team members will introduce themselves.

**ROY CLARE:** Thank you for the opportunity to speak. Roy Clark, Chief Executive of Museums, Libraries and Archives Council for the last 18 months.

**SUE WILKINSON:** Sue Wilkinson, Director of Policy, Museums, Libraries and Archives Council.

**ASTRA FARQUHARSON:** Astra Farquharson, Senior Parliamentary and Stakeholder Relations Officer.

**NIA GRIFFITH:** I am a former schoolteacher and inspector and Member of Parliament for Llanelli.

**ANNE SNELGROVE:** I am Member of Parliament for South Swindon

**LYNDA WALTHO:** Lynda Waltho, Member of Parliament for Stourbridge.

**LORD TOPE:** Graham Tope, here from the House of Lords, still Cabinet Member for Libraries in the London Borough of Sutton.

**THE CHAIRMAN:** Lyn Brown MP and I chair the APPG.

**NORMAN TURNER:** Norman Turner, consultant to the inquiry.

**JONATHAN DOUGLAS:** Jonathan Douglas, Director of the National Literacy Trust.

**THE CHAIRMAN:** We have a stenographer, Lindsay Bickers, who will prepare a transcript of the meeting.

**ROY CLARE:** Thank you very much for the opportunity to have a conversation. I wanted just to make a couple opening remarks about context, conscious that you have six particular areas, but I thought I would just stray a bit wider because it sets the scene both for the MPL and for public libraries. Sue will chip in either when I go wrong or when she has a particular point I think on performance we might come back to.

In terms of the MLA, just briefly at the beginning, as some of you will know, the MLA itself has been on quite a journey for the past 18 months of transformation, which was commissioned by the MLA board; they recruited me to lead transformation. Among the things we have done is to re-shape the MLA, to reduce its regional cost but to improve its

effectiveness, and we can return to that in questions. We have taken out quite a lot of money, which was important in terms of the DCMS and their funding, but, more to the point, we have also converted from being very silo into museums, libraries and archives, into broad capacities around research and evidence, improvement, local government and learning skills. I can expand on that if you like. We now have an integrated regional team, and we are therefore able to look right across England and across the capital of course and provide co-ordinated advice.

The second thing about the changes to the MLA is that we have focused distinctly on the improvement agenda for local government. There are other things we do but we have specialised in this. I would like in a moment Sue to say a bit about our approach to performance.

What I would then like to do is to say something about public libraries. You mentioned at the beginning that you have a passion, and so do we. The passion is very clear on the quality of service by public libraries for people in communities. That is not the same as a passion for keeping open all library buildings regardless of condition. No doubt we will return to that. The quality of service is key.

It is also important to us that we do not see the retreat into super-libraries at the expense of communities. We think this is a really important point and there are a number of instances around the country where we are concerned about it.

The next thing to say about local government and its stewardship of public libraries is that since 2007 and the improvement approach in local government, we have seen a different style and management by local government. We think this is positive. We think that the IDEA work that we have done collaboratively on the passion for excellence has been a good thing and we have now got really good and quality examples of best practice, which are guiding and beginning to guide effectively the development of best practice for all. The mantra we have had is that the rest should catch up with the best, and there are out there some very good, high quality library services, but not all. It is the “not all” where our focus lies.

I wanted to set that agenda and ask Sue to say a word or two about performance and then open the floor, if I may.

**SUE WILKINSON:** We are very aware that for some people performance of libraries is about a device to re-introduce something like library standards. I think, as we stressed in our reply, we feel that, given the 2007 Act, the pressure to bring back standards is not something that we would support.

What was very clear was that the new performance regime is not about outputs; it is actually about the contribution of services to the delivery of the outcomes that a local authority has identified for the people who live in that authority. That is the way in which our performance work is taking us. It is to look at how you measure these outcomes and how best libraries can contribute to the delivery of those outcomes. It is something MLA has been interested in for quite a long time. We started with what at the time was a very innovative piece of work around measuring learning outcomes. We have tried to look at measuring social outcomes. We are aware that more needs to be done in this area and we are very keen to take that forward.

We have quite a lot of ongoing work around this. We are providing support for local authorities that have chosen the N9 indicator around participation. We provide support for them in terms of understanding the data and looking at ways of increasing participation. We are very keen to see how that could roll out to other library authorities. But it is much more the broader engagement with a wider range of indicators that we are interested in because we believe libraries have an enormous contribution to make to the wider agendas of learning, health, community identity and community cohesion.

As Roy says, we have restructured the MLA. One of the ways in which we have restructured it is to be able to give much more focused and targeted support for improvement within local authorities so that what we are going to be able to do in this year and in following years is to have a conversation with the local authority about what their ambitions for their library service might be, what support they think they need from the MLA and then have resources to deliver that support.

So we are very keen to see all library services improving, but we are conscious that this has to be a discussion within a local authority about local authority outcomes for the people who live there.

**THE CHAIRMAN:** It has been suggested earlier on that there is a vacuum in leadership for the library service nationally. Would you agree with that analysis and, if so, how do you think it needs to be filled?

**ROY CLARE:** I do not think there is a vacuum in leadership. I was speaking in the present, not historically. One of the purposes for recruiting me to the MLA was to provide the MLA with a structure and a focus to provide a great many elements of what you might term a national agency for libraries. I think it is for others to judge whether we are on the trajectory to do that but I did offer to our board that it is a three-year process – a year to deconstruct, a year to put things back together in a new way, and then a year to consolidate. We are half-way through the second year. It is for others to look at that.

In terms of leadership, I think there is a vacuum in quite a number of library authorities, and I am happy to expand on this. I think there is a vacuum in terms sometimes of local political leadership and there is certainly sometimes in terms of the expertise in change management in library professionals. I think both of those are key issues in localities and we have measures in hand for dealing with both of them, but I am happy to expand.

**NIA GRIFFITH:** In terms of leadership, do you find yourself trying to serve more than one master, as they say? In other words, do you find yourself linked to more than one government department, both at national level and also within local government?

**THE CHAIRMAN:** Could I add to that question? It is more than one master perhaps in other ways too because perhaps the people out there see you wanting you to do one thing but you may well feel constrained and may well feel that you have another master in government. It is not just between departments where I presume one will be torn but actually in your relationships external to government with the library world – the Swindon residents for instance or with Stourbridge where there was no intervention. It is the question about the complexity of relationships.

ROY CLARE: I was going to refer to this. I think complex is certainly the word I would apply to this. Of course we are contributing, as are you, into the libraries' review, the modernisation review, that the DCMS are leading. I think the timing of this is good; we are very supportive of it because among the challenges the review faces is what to do about the Whitehall structures – responsibility in one ministry, funding down another one. I think there is a key issue there that I know the current ministers are certainly focused on.

In terms of the complexity of relationships, we also have sometimes the dichotomy between better public services for consumers as opposed to supporting local government where they do not have enough money to do all the things they have to do, and we have to see that in some cases they are going to cut priorities. In current cases that are running, and there are three or four of them including those that are most prominent in the media, we are sometimes on one side and sometimes on the other apparently, but the consistent point is that we are looking for the quality of services for the consumer. That sometimes means backing a campaign in one place but not backing a campaign in another, but always it means working with local government because that is the key.

I think sometimes, and there are areas we can explore, local government is not yet ready for that in all areas, but we are seeing a consistent improvement strategy in local government and we are very supportive of it.

ANNE SNELGROVE: Roy, we have discussed the Swindon issue and you know the issue well. I just wanted to take you back to what happened with Swindon and extrapolate from that what we should be looking at from local authorities when they are going to reorganise their library services and how the local community should be engaged in that. I refer to your answer on page 4 of your response, which is about community involvement in the planning and delivery of services.

What seemed to be wrong in Swindon to the local community was the decision that you made in advance of them being asked about it and they found out after it was a *fait accompli* and yet the local authority thought – I will be generous – it was a consultation. I am very grateful to you for asking the question about what that consultation actually meant and what it involved because, as we know, there is now a second consultation for the two branch libraries that are going to be closed. There has been a stay of execution for those and another two are under threat as we know. What do you think would constitute a good community involvement, given that a local authority wants to move forward, wants to open perhaps a super library – we all hope all libraries are super – and how do you get public opinion taken into account, given that sometimes local authorities are thinking that local opinion will constrain them and that means that they cannot take brave decisions?

ROY CLARE: I think Swindon is a really interesting case because at the heart of it there is a paradox. Swindon has done some really good work on public libraries. The Swindon Central Library is a good example of a good example and 0.6 of a mile away in Old Town Library there is a bunch of people who are agonised about it. There are two reasons for that: one is called a hill. It is difficult if you are not mobile to get up and down a hill. Secondly, and I think this is a really key point for local government everywhere, there was not enough care taken about what the community – the local people – needed in the way of a library service. The great pity of it was that a success story was turned on its head too rapidly. The decision to close Old Town Library is not itself a bad thing but the absence of plugging the gap in services was critical. It did, I think, hurt the local population in that they were not

considered as I thought a very appealing group of people who knew what they wanted, which was books, somewhere they could get them, on a level walking, near their shopping centre, near the surgery, near the day care centre. I thought all of that was robust and in place. In going to visit them, you can see what a big distance 0.6 of a mile is when it is at the top of a hill.

My puzzle, and this is a local councillor issue and I do not wish really to criticise individuals, is that local councillors need to walk the hill and need to be part of the process of understanding what it is like on the ground. There are across the country as I travel widely examples where local councillors do rather better at engaging in what the local issue are.

I saw a local authority just last week where they are providing books for people who cannot easily get to a public library. They are doing it through volunteers and hurrah to that. There is an individual I met who sits there one day a week, takes the books out in his own car and charges nothing. He is offering a service to 150 people. It is that kind of thing; it is not a flash of brilliance but just good management and good customer relations with the local community. I am afraid not all library services get that in one move.

SUE WILKINSON: Can I add something?

THE CHAIRMAN: Can I just follow up on the issue of the volunteer? One of the issues around this table has been our anxiety that such a service like that is not sustainable. The gentleman has to lose his licence or fall under a bus for that service then to stop. Lynda was taking to us about Stourbridge and how one of the micro libraries is dependent upon a community centre being open and then the library to be open. The people who are effectively running the services, the volunteers in the community centre, are expected to take time out of their line dancing and open the library for anybody who might wander in.

First of all, we wondered what you thought about that. Secondly, we wondered how many library authorities that you know of around the country are actually deploying volunteers, not to supplement the service but in fact to staff it and run it entirely. That did feel to us, and we would be grateful for your views on this, to be not an appropriate use of a volunteer workforce.

ROY CLARE: If the excuse, if that is the word, for using volunteers is to duck statutory responsibility, that is not good practice and we certainly would not endorse it. When they are recognising a gap in provision, which is caused in the case of the local authority I am thinking of, a county service, that county realised that it had day care centres that never have had a library service. What they have realised is that they can very effectively, through the generosity of the local population, provide one. I think that is a good motivation.

In Leicester City, for instance, they have a very large number of volunteers providing language services, which you could not provide through traditional professional sources in a very cosmopolitan city. They are providing up to 80 languages through a large number of volunteers. That is another good use of the library service.

There is probably no reason why I should not mention the county service, and it is Essex County and it is the library in Rochford where I have seen this particular volunteer who is giving his time. I got no sense that he was coerced but I did get quite a strong sense of local people participating because they could not have staged it for me. Somebody leaned out the

window as we were coming out saying, “I hear you are doing a day care run. Can you include me in it? I need a book”. That kind of high street leaning out – I am housebound at the moment – is a local community at work and I admire that. There was no sense in anything I have seen, either in Essex or in Leicester, of ducking primary responsibility.

LYNDA WALTHO: Will you come to Dudley then and have a look there?

ROY CLARE: I would love to come to Dudley because John Finch, the Director of Engagement ---

LYNDA WALTHO: Yes. He runs out of the room when he sees me. I love him to bits but I constantly nag him. He is very good.

ROY CLARE: I do think there is work that needs doing on Dudley. I am not satisfied with the position that we are on; I am sure you are not. That certainly is a priority for us.

THE CHAIRMAN: That would be an understatement.

LYNDA WALTHO: The difficulty with those volunteers who are wonderful people is that they do not want it to be further reduced, and so what they do is rely on their good offices basically to keep the service going. What they are worried about is that it will fail because of them. They are completely cut off from the whole process. When it first went down to the micro library, or the library link as they call it in Dudley, there was trained staff cover for two hours a day. I think that has now been reduced, particularly in Quarry Bank, a very poor, deprived area, not only with low book ownership but low use of local computer ownership and local service user ownership, low car ownership, lack of proper buses. You name it, it is happening in Quarry Bank. You talked about a hill but Quarry Bank is actually on two hills. (It had a quarry in the middle.) It is a cross of absolutely everything – effectively, yes, and from a physical point of view, yes. It is the worst scenario ever in the whole world. I am completely at my wit’s end now. I used to teach in a school close by and I know my constituency probably better than anybody else in terms of their needs from the educational perspective but also from the community perspective. My husband was Chair of Social Services. There are all sorts of things that I know about that community which were completely disregarded and not talked about, not taken into consideration.

As for the MLA, I have joined battle on this. It is partly your fault. What happened with the plan was that it ticked all your boxes. Whenever my colleagues or I challenged the plan, the MLA did not like it because it ticked all their boxes. That did for us in Quarry Bank. Rescue us, please.

ROY CLARE: On the situation that you describe, I fully understand and the frustration that you are expressing I share with you because I think there are two failures in here. One, if I may say and perhaps you cannot: I think local councillors should have been closer to it. Secondly, I think it is a failure of understanding of the real intensity of what a public library does for people and communities. It is understood just a few miles away in Walsall. In the little community of Bentley, that library is providing the whole regeneration focus for Bentley. They had nothing and now they are about to have a new public library. So some get it and some do not. It is a local leadership issue against a national template.

When this occurred and when you felt let down about it, that was a while ago. It is time we got on top of this and I am with you.

ANNE SNELGROVE: You identified it for Swindon. It is what the council is saying on the surface but when you dig a bit underneath it, actually something completely different is happening because the local people are understandably concerned and frustrated because they do not have a way of reflecting this. The councillors are taking no notice of them. The council has decided to do this. The council is telling you that one thing is happening and because it ticks the boxes the MLA is happy. This is where we need perhaps to encourage you to dig deeper. Where there are MPs and community activists who are exposing this, it is being dealt with but there must be many libraries around the country which I am concerned about which have not had the prominence of Swindon because they do not have a Shirley Burnham flying the flag, whatever difficulties Shirley has created elsewhere. The issue is that she has single-handedly stopped those closures.

ROY CLARE: I pay tribute to Shirley Burnham. She has done a magnificent job as a campaigner and I also recognise the situation that you are describing where the council can say one thing and do something else. I am not sure that is totally a fair representation of Swindon and I have never personally let Swindon, or the MLA has never let Swindon, off the hook. I was very clear after my visit to Swindon that it was at face value clear to me they had not had the care and attention from the local authority to the specific needs of the old town community. I have not deviated from that; that still remains the biggest consultation issue, but Shirley would say “But you must keep our library open” and that is where we part company because I am not sure it is the same thing.

ANNE SNELGROVE: Absolutely and I am sure that is where people are polarised. The other issue in Swindon, which takes us on to a broader issue for the rest of the country, is about volunteers because the Old Town is just one of the four libraries. The other one in my constituency is Walcot, which is now being staffed entirely by volunteers. Although I am very glad that there are people in the local community who will come forward to keep the library going, I do have misgivings about the amount of responsibility those volunteers are taking on and health and safety issues, which I have asked the council about but not had a response from them yet as to the long term viability of that.

There are no librarians being made redundant because volunteers are taking over. My understanding is that the librarians are being redeployed somewhere else – probably in the central library. That is fine but there are volunteers and volunteers. The example of the volunteer you gave is a wonderful community person who should be given a medal. What I have a concern about is that we have an example in Swindon where if the volunteers were not there, that library would not be there either. I have a question mark about whether that is the correct use of volunteers in the long run.

ROY CLARE: I think we have agreed already that I do not see volunteers as replacing paid staff. That is not a sustainable model but when it is a complement to how the service is being provided, I think that is very strong. The key is that there should be quality leadership, both policies and officer leadership, and that is not true in all library authorities where this is being attempted. Without that leadership, you miss a couple of things, including a practice, for example, that is common in Essex. It is not unique but it happens elsewhere and that is a development officer who travels from one community library to another on a daily basis, who knows the patch intimately, knows the strengths and weaknesses of the professional staff

and has an eye to the overall excellence of delivery. I wish all services spread across wide areas would do the same thing. There is real strength in that. When you look back at it, they have a councillor cabinet member who is totally engaged; they have a library leader who is widely experienced. She is a Lancashire woman who has been in Scotland and has come down to Essex only 18 months ago. She is fresh and vital and has things to say.

There are some library leaders, some of them very distinguished library leaders, who have been in post too long. You get stale through simply not being quick enough on your feet to see that change is needed.

THE CHAIRMAN: Could we move on to talk about the role of leadership within the library world? There has been a view, and we have had some amazing submissions to our inquiry, and the majority view about the MLA is that the MLA is too broad. It therefore cannot be the leader that we need to lead libraries in the country, basically because you are facing too many ways. Actually, one of the submissions quoted Andrew Motion last year who said that they were going to be focusing on libraries this year, which does suggest that there has not been a focus before.

ROY CLARE: Thank you for the question. Just to clear up the Andrew Motion bit, that was in the context of Andrew arriving as the Chair and stating very clearly that he saw as his mission a focus on libraries and we support him completely in that. I do not know where the evidence comes from for the breadth because if you take at face value what I am saying, it is easily the case that having a body like us, connected to central government, connected to local government, committed to improvement and committed to services for the public, that breadth applies equally across our entire range of interest. We do see common ground between museums/libraries/archives and more broadly. In the regional architecture that has emerged since Margaret Hodge's review of regional administration, we have got very much stronger linkages with the Arts Council, Sport England and also with English Heritage to deliver plans that are utterly common and around improvement in local authority delivery for local people in communities. I see a coherence in that and not a weakness in the breadth.

The leadership issue, I think if there is one, is perhaps two-fold. One, I do not think we have yet delivered sufficiently on leadership, training and development for library staff. This is not for the want of doing. We have had our own branded programme. We are abandoning that because personally – and Sue might wish to comment – I think a branded programme for the MLA alone is an unnecessary narrowing of the breadth of that and we are putting in place instead a bursary programme by which we can offer money and local government and owners of public libraries can choose where they send their people for leadership training.

The second thing is that we are in discussion with Clore. Some of the best of the cultural leaders end up going for their Clore, either the one year or the shorter courses. Not enough library staff have been applying for these. Those who have been through are very, very good. The new head librarian in Devon, for example, Ciara Eastell, is one who has been through Clore and is an exemplar in her profession of dynamic new leadership and management but she is only one and there are 151 authorities. I think we need to do more about investing in leadership. Unfortunately, this sometimes gets subverted by an accent on workforce development generally, which is important, but without quality leadership and without that essential dynamic, we will not be growing the generation of leaders prepared to take the risk. I think this is a really important ingredient to leadership and one that maybe the MLA has been guilty of not pushing hard enough.

There are, in the leadership of libraries, examples of current leaders, whether that is in Manchester with Nicky Parker, Fiona Williams in York, Tony Durcan up in Newcastle or Sue McKenzie in Brent. There are a lot of library leaders that I could name for you who do understand risk.

The second thing that arguably the MLA is only just now getting better at is understanding impact and the consequence of what we do. There has been for too long an accent on participation data, which in its own right is interesting but not dynamic enough. It does not answer a key question which is the “so what?” question. That is why we welcome the DCMS decision to invest in CASE, which is the cultural and sport evaluation partnership. We are paid-up members of it literally. We put money into it and a human being. We have also, in our new structure, invested in the research and evidence capacity in MLA because we have got to drive out social return on investment criteria that can show us what libraries are doing. That is a weakness at the moment in articulating the story. There are some, and there are some in very prominent positions, who only see libraries as a place where you can borrow a book. When you look at the social outcomes that a library is driving at, we should have more of them in more places, of course.

I could just check, with your permission, whether Sue would like to add anything on social return and other aspects.

SUE WILKINSON: I think it just links to what I was saying at the beginning about the things that really matter with libraries and how we measure them. So it is very much about if you are using a library, what difference is it making to your life? Is it improving your life chances in terms of your skills or your knowledge? Is it providing you with advice and guidance? Is it supporting you in making the right health choices for you? Those are the very particular things that we are interested in.

I think, to link it to the leadership debate, certainly one of the things we found with some of our leadership programmes is that the big gap for many people who are working in libraries is how do they get that message over; how do they convince people who are either higher up in the structure than they are or elected members or in cabinet that that is what libraries can do. That big emphasis is on not just running these services but knowing what impact they have and being able to tell people about the impact that they are having and how the library is a critical part of what the local authority is trying to do.

THE CHAIRMAN: One of the other things that has been said is that there is little advocacy of the library service at government tables and people have looked to you to deliver that advocacy, and they say that is not being delivered.

Another point that has been made is this. When I talked about big fish in a small pond, in terms of the DCMS services people have explained to me very carefully that actually the place of the library within the DCMS services is as a small fish in a small pond. The Arts Council and the Sports Council and other such services are the bigger fishes that tend to take the space. They have pointed to the fact that there are no performance indicators that properly explain the story or the narrative of libraries nationally to national politicians or to local politicians. They say there is no understanding of the value of libraries in many services that local authorities are trying to deliver and that national government feels are important. An example of that this afternoon was the community cohesion agenda. They say

that library training is not to standard, is not appropriate; it is not the type of thing that is going to provide us with the type of libraries that we want to see in this century and certainly to cater for the poorer parts of our communities. They say the use of volunteers has not been constrained and that local authorities are being able to use volunteers to open services and to run services without it being in any way challenged.

They point also to the fact that there is not the kind of funding for libraries, certainly not commensurate with the funding that has been spent on museums by the MLA, for library infrastructure and development. All of this, plus much more because I have a very long list, has been placed at the door of the MLA that was established to be that library leader nationally, an outward looking library leader that was able to enable good libraries services to put their case across and for poor local library services to get what they needed to become commensurate with the best.

ROY CLARE: I will take the advocacy point first, because you have opened a really powerful issues which is: has the MLA been an advocate or not? Of course I can only answer for the period during which I have been responsible with the two Chairs, first Martin Wood and then Andrew Motion. I would say that other people should judge this and they should judge it objectively and fairly. In creating in the MLA, an organisation that is able for the first time to know more about what is happening, the research and evidence point, that is connected to an improvement agenda that is widely respected not just by the MLA but by all of the participants who are the whole DCMS family and by the way in which we have been involved in the modernisation review by DCMS, not as a peripheral member but as a core member, all suggests that somebody is starting to believe in what the new MLA can do. As I said, I think others must judge with time. To some extent, this is history that has already been written by others and I am not going to go back beyond my responsibilities.

The second thing that I should say about this is that where I was brought up in all of this leadership is something that is done very locally and by teams and by people and by organisations that are directly responsible. I think it is unfair that people in library service across the country should look to other people to take responsibility for things that are their own to do. I think there is enough evidence that more needs to be done locally in leadership. I can elaborate on that. Not all the ills and weaknesses can be ascribed to an NDPB at a distance. However, the NDPB at a distance is found wanting if it is not astute about what those issues are, and I have already touched on some of the things we would want to invest in.

The third thing I would say, because you have also mentioned money, is that there is more than £1 billion being invested through local government into public libraries. The sad fact is that we have a situation where some of that money is being put into the upkeep and maintenance of buildings that are not fit for purpose. Where we have, and there is lots of evidence of this, local authorities that would like to move on the agenda and reduce infrastructure in order to improve service, they do not at the moment have the courage in all cases to do it because politically they are now aware of the inquiry in Wirral; they are aware of Swindon, and there are half a dozen others where anxiety grows and some local authorities have local councillors without the necessary leadership and courage to say "I hear this but I do think for the greater good we must do this".

I can name for you, but probably I should not, a number of local authorities where they have too many libraries and too weak a service because they are wasting money in ways that are

not, frankly, acceptable. This is a failure of local democracy, which I do think the Modernisation Review will be challenging, and of course that comes out later this summer. We are working closely with the DCMS to see how that could be framed. We do need to have courage shown at the local leadership level and then we can advocate more freely. One of the constraints on us has been that I do not do a blank cheque and never will do for the quality of all library authority services. They are simply not up to it. Very unfortunately, I look out of the window and see about one-third of library services that are in the big league – good and serving the public as they should; about one-third that know what to do to catch up and are determined to do it; and one-third who have not yet realised or have gone over the kerb the other way and are no longer providing, perhaps through complacency.

LORD TOPE: I will follow that because I have responsibility for a local library service. Going on from what you were saying, Mr Clare, in your evidence on page 4 you refer to publishing community engagement policy in late spring '09. Have we got to late spring yet?

SUE WILKINSON: It is on the website. It is out for consultation. The consultation is just coming to an end because we followed the Cabinet Office guidelines.

LORD TOPE: It says you have a discussion paper out for consultation.

SUE WILKINSON: The consultation is just coming to an end.

LORD TOPE: And you have an engagement policy which is not yet published?

SUE WILKINSON: No, consultation has just come to an end.

LORD TOPE: You said here too that your work is informed by the White Paper. We are talking about community engagement, community involvement, community empowerment. We have talked about community cohesion. We have talked about the local government performance framework. We have talked about libraries increasingly being provided in buildings with other services, for instance. How well does DCMS actually understand the local government world?

ROY CLARE: I think that is a question for DCMS. I am finding them very supportive of us.

LORD TOPE: You must have gained an impression from working with them as to how well they are doing.

ROY CLARE: The Modernisation Review, which was something that developed during Margaret Hodge's time as Culture Minister supported by Andy Burnham, is well timed and a good thing. When we see the span of what it is investigating, including, and we have not touched on it today yet, the important digital component of services and what we must provide for people 24 hours round the clock because that is what people increasingly expect, I think the timing is excellent. I do think we have a Whitehall issue, which is responsibility down one tube, money down another. Within that context, I know that Barbara Follett is discussing with her ministerial colleagues right now, in the context of the review, ways in which that can be interrogated. That is something that I cannot answer for but I know it is happening.

LORD TOPE: Similarly, you will want to express a view, as you have done, that the public library service would be better placed with DCLG, given the current government structure, and does have responsibly for all the things I listed and the funding.

ROY CLARE: I do not think you can excuse weak local leadership and weak service leadership by a Whitehall issue. A Whitehall issue may or may not deliver difference, as may bringing about a new NDPB not called the MLA. I am just not sure that deals with the problems that I am seeing on the ground. You used an interesting word, sir, if I may, engagement. Engagement is not consultation. Engagement is a genuine two-way dialogue in which you listen and react. The organisation I have been most impressed with is the Big Lottery because when you want money out of Big and they say “We want a community engagement strategy” and they mean engagement. One library authority said to me a few months ago: “We were so intimidated by the strength of the engagement needed, we nearly gave the money back.” I am glad they did not but they worked at it and all credit to Big for really foreseeing that issue.

THE CHAIRMAN: Can we come back to the issues about local government? As you know, I used to chair the LGA’s Cultural Services Executive. One thing that engaged and energised, committed local councillors, local MPs and local librarians, local leaders of services who talked to me about it, was their need at a national level to have advocacy, their need at national level to have partnerships in order for them to obtain capital funding, their need at national level to have a network, if you like, to enable them to develop the services. They needed support. So even those who were able and willing to drive their services forward at local level needed regional or national advocacy, help support and development. The MLA was established to provide that and there are those who would say that you have not managed it.

Coming back to the 18 months issue, the problem I think is that the MLA has existed for longer than the 18 months and there has not been in all that time a direction of travel that has suggested that this might happen. We are grateful for the intervention in Swindon. We are pleased about the intervention in the Wirral. The reality was the intervention in Stourbridge where that campaign was not assisted. There was not a regional facility there that the people locally who wanted to get some advice and development support could go to. It was just simply non-existent.

ROY CLARE: Could I take the first point first, and come back to the second, the question of leadership and how it is manifest and the national lead that is needed. You may quibble with me on the way I interpret the need. When you have a Building Schools for the Future Programme, BSF, in the first six waves of BSF there was absolutely no requirement to consider any form of culture in the building of a better school. Why? That is my question. There was a national leadership gap. From Wave 7 on, culture is, for the first time, included and we are now working on what that should mean. So there is a national lead.

Another national lead issue – and it is known that libraries contribute to wellbeing – is: why is it therefore so difficult to get the Department of Health to get its PCTs engaged in conjoint work with library services? That is a national leadership issue. We are on that case. We have pushed that and I know that DCMS is supporting it because Barbara Follett has been discussing that with her DoH counterpart. Those are just two examples but there are more. That, I think, is national leadership.

In terms of Stourbridge, if I could quote that but not go into the detail of it, at the moment we have just over 50 local authorities that are in that category of prioritised health.

THE CHAIRMAN: There is a vote going on so Anne will go. Keep going.

ROY CLARE: My point is that we have more than 50 local authorities where we have prioritised assistance and we have only talked about one. I do not think the case is over yet on Stourbridge. We are actively working on that one right now. I do not speak for what has happened in the past but I am very sure that we can be providing the kind of assistance for Dudley that we are providing for others.

THE CHAIRMAN: One of the reasons why people think, and I include myself in this, that maybe there has been a dissonance between the role that was envisaged that the MLA would play and the role it is currently playing is in relation to its relationship with Ministers. There was a change. It was not an NDPB that was outward-facing and advice on library issues and museums issues was found from within the DCMS Department. That stopped and now the MLA has been described as being the adviser to the Minister. That does suggest that you are trying to ride two horses at the same time, a horse that is advising the Minister but also a horse that is perhaps advocating government policy change. It is not physically possible or politically possible – with a small “p” – to be able to right both of those horses.

ROY CLARE: When the common denominator is the service to communities and to local people ---

THE CHAIRMAN: I am not letting you off on that one.

ROY CLARE: --- I am not seeing a dichotomy. The dichotomy has not troubled me. It may exist in the minds of some. It has not troubled me.

I would just also say that in terms of better delivery to individuals in their communities, we are sometimes too hung up on the name over the door – library, museum, archive. I have now seen a number of good examples where museums and libraries, museums and archives, museums, libraries and archives are actually sharing space, where libraries and PCTs are sharing space, where libraries and FE colleges are sharing space. I do think we need to consider each community location in its own right.

In the example we were discussing earlier of Swindon, the remarkable thing is that it would have been such an easy matter relatively to provide a better service to the local community of Old Town even if their library was closed because there are on the high street of Old Town, and I have seen them with my own eyes, opportunities where shared space could have been offered.

THE CHAIRMAN: I am going to ask one last question and then I am going to shut up. The bigger issue around Swindon/Stourbridge/Wirral is intervention and I suppose the questions are: when, why, how and what are the limitations? The other dichotomy within our portfolio here is around local government and the DCLG’s policy with local government, which is light touch, freedoms and flexibilities, and the DCMS, which has a strategy or a duty to ensure a comprehensive library service.

The first question is: intervention, when, why, how and what are the limitations? The second is: what are the real difficulties that can be found from having to balance the needs between the DCLG agenda with its local authorities and the DCMS's legal responsibility for a comprehensive service?

ROY CLARE: One way of looking at the where, why and how is to look at the way the new MLA is now engaging with its regions. With directors of engagement responsible for areas, with regional managers now in place or being appointed in all areas, we have a network that responds to the central MLA, not locally because locally is creating seven, eight, sometimes nine different interpretations, but a common interpretation of the policy of delivery.

The second thing is that that is allowing us for the very first time to have an identity of which of the local authorities we should prioritise and why. I do think that is hugely important and we are not alone. I have mentioned already the new regional agenda and the regional plan for delivery. We are doing this with others. It is interesting how often a weak culture in a library service is also weak in other areas, and therefore there is a priority that we can offer to a local authority, which may need nothing more than a peer review; it may need assistance with a business plan; it might need genuinely best practice advice. We are finding a whole range of need as we look. There are local authorities we have been dealing with just today in other areas we have not mentioned today where they are going ahead with closure programmes, but in a very articulate and community supportive way. It is possible to do, particularly when offered help. Those are services we can offer now that we could not offer before. I do think that is important.

Sue, do you want to come in on that? No.

NIA GRIFFITH: Perhaps I could come in on that? I am particularly interested in your role in supporting improvement and the use of best practice to inspire. My question is really: what more do you need in the way of tools in order to support that improvement? What are the things that you need? You have certain criteria by which services can be judged, and that might be very useful if you are trying to push around sustainability because obviously everybody looks at money and at the budgets. When you are trying to improve in other ways, do you feel you actually have the tools that you need and the things that will motivate the local authorities to do the things you think they should be doing?

ROY CLARE: Thank you for the question. I think there are a couple of things. One is that we have lived through a period when metropolitan journalists have a very particular and rather negative opinion of libraries. Of course one or two high profile cases have fed into that. Of course what journalists will never credit is that there are also some very fine services doing some really wonderful things. We are never going to change journalism, but what we could do is be better at how we articulate the positive stories, not to be in a rose-tinted land but to ensure that those who are labouring at the coal face providing decent library services feel appreciated and that those who are doing it can see their work transferring. A lot of the good ideas are transferable and the good ideas are not locked up in a few; there are a great many doing it. We need to find ways to explore that and to share it. That is what we are doing with our best practice agenda.

We need more of that and I am not suggesting that we get hold of the journalism issue; I am suggesting that we need to rise above that and not get distracted into the minutiae that it throws up.

The second thing is that I do think we need this better evidence of the impact we have had. One of the challenges for us is that we get hung up on the simplest statistics, which show book issues as a measure that everybody alights on. I am pro book, if I can say that right up-front because people tend to misunderstand. I am pro book; I am pro reading; I am pro the activities of libraries in all their respects. There are a good many people, me included and there are many others, who go to public libraries, use their services and do not borrow a book. That seems to me a legitimate activity for libraries. If you look at the biographies of some distinguished people, they often narrate their early childhood as self-taught in public libraries, often sitting in a public library and never borrowing a book. How do we credit that? We are determined and one of our own improvement agendas is to get closer to understanding how we can develop with others better measures of the total work of libraries. We have already referred to the social return on investment. I do think we need to be clearer about that to understand the impact. That is why I do celebrate the case at DCMS, the Culture and Sport Evaluation Tool. I think it is absolutely right and that is why we have invested in it ourselves.

SUE WILKINSON: I think it is a really interesting area. If you look at a lot of the research, being able to say what intervention has delivered what impact is not something that people have really focused on to date. That is something that we are trying to do in terms of evaluating current projects like the Book Ahead or Boys into Books. It is to ask, "What impact did that have on those people"? Of the very many different approaches that these projects took in individual authorities, can we begin to identify what the success factors were, so that when you are pulling out from an evaluation, you can say: those interventions worked for these reasons and therefore they can possibly be replicable in other places. I think that is something of which we want to do a lot more.

NIA GRIFFITH: You are talking about how you identify your best practice. You are also talking about how you can quantify it by different criteria, possibly different measurements, but you did mention earlier that you perhaps have one-third of areas where you really feel a lot of improvement is needed. Do you see any other tools which could be useful to you in trying to push that agenda for improvement? Also, what tools do you need to tackle lack of leadership? Take a school example, that is the head of the governors and if you have an inspection there is quite a lot of focus on where they are going. What opportunities do you have to talk to the leaders in some of these local authorities which do not have the services you would like to see?

ROY CLARK: I think there are two forms of leadership that we have to work with in local government: one is the elected leaders and the other is the officers. On the elected leaders, there is already now a programme which is voluntary where elected leaders who find themselves as cabinet leads can go for briefings, for background and to develop their understanding. I do think that is an important development. We are planning to extend that but it can only be voluntary. People have to want to do it. I do think there is an issue much wider than libraries, which is to ensure that the quality of elected councillors is the very best that we can afford and deserve, given the huge responsibility that local authorities now have. That is well beyond libraries but it is a really important area.

As far as officers are concerned, I have already referred to the fact that we see a need for more formal and informal leadership and a recognition of leadership as a key priority among the workforce development priorities because without it we are not going to develop the next

generation of leaders. The best library leaders are up with the best cultural leaders in any sphere. I do travel widely and I have seen the very best but there are also a number who are simply not quick enough on their feet. Generally speaking, there is not, as there would be in other walks of life, a guillotine which says: you are not performing as a chief executive and it is time you left. Chief executives on the whole need to know when to go and there are in some cases library leaders who simply should not be there. That is a tough thing to say. I think the improvement agenda is what is going to drive that, not somebody being dogmatic from outside because, in the end, these are local issues for local people.

**THE CHAIRMAN:** We have come to 5 o'clock and the room was only allowed to be booked until now, which means that there is going to be somebody outside very soon.

Can I just quickly run through, and then, Nia, if I have missed anything, could you jump in?

It would be very wonderful, Roy, if you might re-submit something for us that focused on the stuff we have been covering today if you think that there is anything you would like further to say. What we still have not really bottomed out that has been running through the theme of the afternoon is the issue of volunteers; we need guidance especially on where they are responsible for the provision of service. We are particularly interested to know of any local authorities that are in fact running libraries based on volunteers. We assume you would have that information so that we can approach them direct for evidence for our inquiry.

On the issue of intervention, it would be useful if that could be written out for us so that we can consider it properly – the when, the why, the how and what you think the limitations should be.

We would also like a considered piece on the tension between the DCLG insistence on freedoms and flexibilities and also the DCMS requirement to ensure a comprehensive library service. We would like to know whether or not you think there is a tension there and, if so, where the burden should lie if push came to shove.

On the issue of local leadership, the local leadership are clearly looking to you but you are clearly looking backwards to them, which is cool and groovy. Our question is around how you think we should ensure that we can recruit the best staff possible to lead our libraries locally. What do you think the training needs are of the local leadership for those in place and those who are about to come in situ or those considering coming in? What are the training needs? Do we have a training provision that currently is fit for purpose?

Finally, how do you think we could retain the very best of those leaders that we have in our library service, certainly those who work within it and those who lead it, and I mean the political leadership. If you have any thoughts on that, then I am sure we would be happy to receive that, too.

**ROY CLARE:** I would be delighted to do that. I would like, with your permission, just to check whether Astra and Sue have any points to make? Could I just, on one point of correction, though, say that I did not reflect back the leadership issue. I take full responsibility for what the MLA is responsible for and I did admit there were a couple of areas, and I did name them, where I think we should be doing more.

THE CHAIRMAN: May I say, Roy, that was a comment from a woman who used to chair the LGA. If you had the current Chair here, that person would have gone for your throat, just to let you know!

We have had a really good session this afternoon. I would like to thank you again for coming. It has been really useful.

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ALL PARTY PARLIAMENTARY GROUP  
LIBRARIES, LITERACY AND INFORMATION MANAGEMENT

MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS

at a

PARLIAMENTARY HEARING

held in

Commons Committee Room 5

on

Tuesday 19 May 2009

Before:

Members:

Lyn Brown MP (Chairman)  
Nia Griffith MP  
Anne Snelgrove MP  
Lord Tope

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Transcript of the shorthand notes of T A Reed & Co Ltd  
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Witnesses: **COUNCILLOR ANDREW CURTIN**, London Borough of Havering, **COUNCILLOR CHRIS WHITE**, Hertfordshire County Council and Local Government Association, **MIKE MORE**, Chief Executive, Westminster City Council, and **DAVID RUSE**, Director of Libraries at Westminster City Council, gave evidence.

**THE CHAIRMAN:** It is now exactly two o'clock. Can I say I am really grateful to you for coming along this afternoon, it really is very kind of you to give your time in this way. We think we made some stonking progress last time and had some really wonderful moments which you can read about in the thing, but before we start what would probably be useful is if we could introduce ourselves just so that you do absolutely know who everybody is. Jonathan.

**JONATHAN DOUGLAS:** I am Jonathan Douglas, I am Director of the National Literacy Trust.

**BOB McKEE:** I am Bob McKee, Chief Executive of CILIP.

**NORMAN TURNER:** I am Norman Turner, I am the consultant to the inquiry.

**THE CHAIRMAN:** Lyn Brown, I chair the APPG.

**LORD TOPE:** I am Graham Tope, Vice-Chair of the APPG but in real life I am Executive Councillor for Libraries in the London Borough of Sutton.

**DAVID HEMY:** I am David Hemy from Lyn Brown's office.

**MIRIAM WEISINGER:** Miriam Weisinger from T A Reed & Co Ltd.

**DAVID RUSE:** David Ruse, Director of Libraries at Westminster City Council.

**MIKE MORE:** Mike More, Chief Executive, Westminster City Council.

**CHRIS WHITE:** Chris White, I am Chair of Culture and Sport for the LGA.

**ANDREW CURTIN:** Andrew Curtin, I am the Cabinet Member for Culture and Communities in Havering.

**THE CHAIRMAN:** I do not want you to think that I have hand-picked all these people but we did. Andrew and I worked together, Chris and I worked together, David and I worked together at the MLA – Mike is the only one I am meeting for the first time today.

**DAVID RUSE:** Could I just say for the record, Chairman, that I am member of the Advisory Council on Libraries?

**THE CHAIRMAN:** Yes, this dark, shadowy body.

**DAVID RUSE:** I suspect that may come up.

THE CHAIRMAN: We are going to ask you to talk to us, just for a couple of minutes, about anything you want – it would be great if it was library-related – and we really would find it more interesting if it develops into a dialogue, and if it develops into a dialogue between yourselves that is all to the good and we are very happy with that too.

ANDREW CURTIN: Starting with me, I guess, I suppose if I tell you a little bit about the position in Havering and how we sort it out there. Essentially we have three directorates in Havering: there is the finance one, social care and learning and then the third big one us culture and communities, so that brings together the arts, children's play, sports, heritage, libraries. This is reflected in our strategic plan, so we have the *Living Ambitions* document, our sustainable communities strategy, and that has key areas of focus around towns and communities: what makes those civilised places and the important role of culture within that. Flowing from that we have a big library refurbishment programme, quite an ambitious programme – arts in libraries, so this year in Hornchurch as part of our Hornchurch Festival we will have classical music playing live in the lending libraries – a flautist or a harpist or something like that.

The second key area in the *Living Ambitions* document is around learning; learning about different communities through the arts, through libraries, learning about the environment and things that are around us; particularly learning about different communities is very important in Havering where there are a number of cohesion issues.

We then have a priority around finance, one around cleanliness and safety, and one around individuals which is about looking at gifted and talented individuals but also vulnerable people, and we have very good examples of our social care working with the library service around local studies. That then is reflected in our cultural study and what I picked up is while I would argue that that framework is quite strong in Havering, nationally there does not really seem to be such a clear focus. We have noticed this again on a sub-regional level recently in London. We have concerns over the way the Outer London Commission is working, it does not seem to have a focus on culture or libraries and the role that plays if Outer London is going to be a place to live and also the proposed changes to the London Plan.

Going up nationally, it all gets a bit vague because DCMS do not seem to have the money for libraries so where is this focus and push there, which really is about people just being people for their own sake, not as part of the labour chain, not just being healthy so you can trudge off to work, but if you want to go and read a book – and it could be trash – just because that is what is really enjoyable, that is important because that is what we do. Obviously from a Havering point of view it seems quite strong at home but maybe weaker the closer you get to the centre.

CHRIS WHITE: We would say from the LGA and I would say personally that libraries are fundamentally a local service. There are national libraries and they are a national service, and they provide a completely different role. One of the problems that the library sector has had is that it is struggling to rediscover its role; it was clear in the nineteenth century what it was and, funnily enough, a lot of what we saw in the nineteenth century about self-improvement and so forth is still valid. Some of the

lobby groups say it is still valid and also it is all about books and really nothing else; more of us need to be willing to challenge that particular assumption that a good library is one with a rising book stock, a bad library is one with a falling book stock, and it is quite difficult because as we hint at in our disposition this is a vocal constituency. I have recently gone on to Twitter and found that a number of familiar librarians were quickly following me, and therefore I have avoided commenting too much on libraries for fear of retribution of some sort or another, but it is a constituency which talks to itself quite a lot and also a constituency which is nervous about, shall we say, those from certain private sector book selling companies or formerly from book selling companies who have certain clear ---

THE CHAIRMAN: He was here last week.

CHRIS WHITE: Yes, I thought he might be – certain clear views about what libraries are. Personally I think that is a false analogy; the fact that we have two different institutions both for books does not mean that they need to be run in the same way or, indeed, much more importantly, have the same function. The function is self-improvement, the function is to provide books and indeed other materials of culture, and the function is also to be a neutral community space. As I have often said, one of the most impressive libraries I have ever seen is the Whitechapel Library – impressive for many reasons but particularly because it had rooms in which young people could do their homework so they are not surrounded by smaller, louder siblings while they are trying to study for their GCSEs. It is a small point but it is an important one and vital to their development.

There is a lot of very good practice and I should probably not embarrass Lord Tope by citing Sutton.

THE CHAIRMAN: He likes being embarrassed.

LORD TOPE: I can cope with it Chris.

CHRIS WHITE: What we would like to see at the LGA is that good practice shared because there are quite a lot of libraries still which could be more exciting places, which could be more automated, but we would not want that to be centrally dictated. Whilst there are no doubt common national expectations of what a library is, to turn those into national library standards would risk imposing a solution which makes sense in Westminster in Herefordshire, and those two authorities must by definition have rather different library services if they are to be successful. We are concerned about the intervention in the Wirral, there is no doubt about it, at the LGA; after all, it is for the people of the Wirral to decide in the ballot box whether they think the council have done a good thing and I welcome the fact that Roy Clare from MLA has always said to me that the remedy for a bad library service is for people to go down to the polling station and vote their councillors out. That would be our policy.

MIKE MORE: Thank you, Chairman. I would very much echo many of the points that Chris has just made and welcome the opportunity to meet you for the first time but also to come before the session.

I welcome the opportunity because there is a great and still positive future for the library service in this country. The best library services we see in places across the country demonstrate great leadership, great relevance to their communities and great relevance to a whole range of issues and outcomes that affect the communities which we serve. The challenge for us all is to make sure that the best practice is replicated as much as we can across the whole of the sector because I think there is a very great and positive future for the library service. The library service is as relevant now as it was when they were first created as public library services. The nature of that service will change, the nature of the offer has to change, the nature of the delivery of the offer has to change, but the relevance of the kind of material and resourcing and information and community asset that library services provide remain as valid today.

The story that Chris told us about Whitechapel I could replicate in Westminster; there are parts of north west Westminster where I have very significant overcrowding in social housing that is as densely populated as anywhere in the country and you come across families with eight or nine year olds who want somewhere quiet that they can do some reflective homework or some reflective time. The library service provides a safe place, a neutral place, where they can do that, and that sort of thing remains as relevant today as it ever has done.

Libraries make a very strong contribution to strong communities and one that perhaps as a service is not taken forward as vigorously as it could be to make sure that it connects into the range of activities that the local authority is responsible for with partners. It seems to me that strong leadership is needed at the library service to make sure it does tap into opportunity in communities to range across issues around reading, literacy, information and digital inclusion. There is a whole stack of areas where the connectivity of library services to the full range of public community services is something that we can continue to drive forward very significantly.

As a chief executive that is part of the role that I have, not as a specialist librarian but in terms of how can we make sure that the service taps into the kind of range of offer and range of opportunities that there is, as well as challenging the service to make sure that the practice of the best is replicated in my own authority and across the service, across the piece.

DAVID RUSE: Perhaps if I just colour in a bit about what we have done in Westminster specifically which nicely rounds off these introductory remarks. As you probably know, Westminster is a four-star authority for culture as well as in overall terms which we are okay about, but the thing that really drives us and encourages us are our resident satisfaction levels far more than whatever the Audit Commission might say about us. We survey our residents every year corporately and they get asked questions about library satisfaction, and last year our library satisfaction levels increased from 83 per cent to 91 per cent, so we think we are doing some things right.

That is also reflected in the increasing use, increasing membership, visits, issues, they are all rising in Westminster and we have actually seen a rapid increase in that rise since the start of the recession particularly in certain categories of stock and in certain of the activities that we do, reflecting the point that libraries are as relevant today as they were 150 years ago.

It is a very high volume service, over 3 million physical visits, about 5½ million virtual physical visits a year, into just Westminster. Nobody is going to tell us that that is a service that is past its sell by date, but as well as those headlines we are doing something like 4,500 events a year in our libraries just in Westminster, and those are attracting about 100,000 people a year – whether that is a homework club, a pre-school activity, a pensioners' advice surgery or whatever it might be, and that begins to colour in the depth of reach of a public library service that is performing well in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I guess I can say that the reason that we think we are successful is partly because we have invested in the right things and disinvested in things that we used to do that we should not be doing any longer.

We have not done all this with growth funding in Westminster, we have actually reduced our costs. We have taken 28 posts out of the service in the last five years but our customer satisfaction is increasing, our opening hours have increased and we are investing in other areas of the service. We have always maintained a high level of investment in our stock fund because we do believe that is the core of the delivery offer combined with the opening hours, but also investment in good quality customer service: looking after our customers, finding out what they want, engaging with them at community level and making sure that we deliver to a consistent standard. It seems to us that we have driven efficiencies. We know that our staff work far harder than staff in other London boroughs according to the library benchmark data, so I think there is money in the system and if we can drive some further efficiencies we can reinvest in areas of the service in all parts of the country that will see, perhaps, some of the success that we have managed to achieve in Westminster.

THE CHAIRMAN: I was going to try and pick up on the Wirral issue. Basically, the issue about the Wirral is not the diehard dinosaurs who are wanting to keep their libraries; the issue of the Wirral is something much wider, it is about a local authority who – it seems to me – does not appear to understand or value the service that it has got and therefore reduces the service. My argument has been that I will not comment on the Wirral ever because I am not there and I have not walked a mile in the moccasins, so I will not do it, but it does seem to me that you have got to a position where the library service is experiencing a level of cuts, prior to that there has been a disengagement with that service by the community and by the politicians. It keeps getting pushed all the time in the library world, the twitter world and the others, and it does beg the question of what should be the balance between a national regulatory framework and local determination. I heard Chris very strongly saying – and I do not think I would disagree with you sitting in that chair – that basically the councillors will need to hang or survive at the ballot box because of the determination. Given the 1964 Act there is a balance possibly to be struck between DCLG's freedom and flexibilities approach and DCMS's responsibility to uphold an efficient and comprehensive library service.

I just wondered if you would like to tell me how you each individually would approach that issue. Go for it – who wants to talk first?

CHRIS WHITE: Shall I kick off because I made the remark? There is an alternative model; first of all, I have no idea what the situation is in the Wirral but by definition the LGA cannot because we believe in localism and to some degree I cannot comment on what happens in East Hertfordshire either because only local people can know

where the library should be and what they should stock. I have to start, therefore, from that particular point of view. There is this rather vague wording in the 1964 Act which basically says it should have a library service worthy of the name and they could have turned it round in that particular way but the parliamentary draughtsman wanted to put in this particular phrase and that pleased this House.

Whether the secretary of state should intervene – I do not think we can ever rule that out. If the local authority were to close a library service entirely then there would have to be a situation in which intervention could take place but I think there need to be intermediate steps. One other thing that MLA used to sponsor was peer review and that is a good way of having the pressure of inspection without the bureaucracy of inspection, the pressure of innovation without the pressure of intervention. I think if we went that particular route were there a radical change, where an authority was encouraged to talk to another authority or talk even to the MLA – I know MLA is interested in having that particular role and I could see a worse scenario than that – but also have a situation in which, over a period of years, you knew you would be subject to peer review and, therefore, the results of that peer review being in the public domain, that would provide an adequate safeguard for a library service being dismantled and at the same time provide the positive benefits that I want to see out of this. We are talking about this and these are the things which have been on Twitter, these are the things which are filling my email box, but there are lots of other library services, let us be absolutely blunt, that have been moving faster and they are being left out of this all together. That is why I think a peer review system, properly funded, would actually be a good way forward, leaving the Secretary of State well out of it until extremis.

**THE CHAIRMAN:** Mike, a peer review? As a chief executive not in charge of a decent library authority let us pretend, would a peer review fill you with another dread that it would make you want to improve? Do you think the stick is large enough?

**MIKE MORE:** There is no doubt that the peer review mechanism is open and transparent, which is important. It is a mechanism which is informed, which is important, because it can take judgments that relate to the local circumstances which are different. We serve a very different client base than most other library authorities and each individual local authority will not serve exactly the same client base as another, so we inform it and take it forward.

I do agree with Chris that an over-heavy mechanism will not work because it will not reflect the differences. We have to serve a very different client base than any other; we have 250,000 residents but we have a factor of five-fold that daily visitors in the business community and all of them use the library service in varying degrees, so it cannot be something that is too heavily prescriptive and narrow. It would work if there was a framework of expectation that was reasonable, so forms of benchmarking that enabled that – and we have covered that in our submission to you.

The other aspect that I feel is important is a willingness for library services to collaborate with each other more strongly. I do not think in a London situation – and therefore I put myself in some difficulty with two London librarians to my right and my left – that it is necessarily completely sustainable to carry on borough by borough in the library service. Carrying on borough by borough in terms of branding and in

terms of accountability for the nature of the offer in that community continues to be absolutely right, but collaboration between authorities to both disseminate best practice and make sure that innovation can come forward more effectively, that would be something that would also be needed in addition to peer review.

THE CHAIRMAN: Andrew, as another politician sitting there do you think a framework of expectation would be enough to give you the kind of clout that you would need?

ANDREW CURTIN: You always hear the beginning of these stories like this nightmare in the Wirral and then – I think it was Wandsworth wanted to shut their museums and I know if I was a local resident I would have wanted someone to come in there and hit them with such a big stick. You do not like to see the government intervene in things – they intervened in social services and culture is as important as social services so why have they got different structures? We all know that often we do deal with colleagues who only do things when it is statutory, and unless you have a very strong voice there, sitting around that table, who is going to be unreasonable, they will not do it. So I can see the argument for intervention, I can see the argument for working across links and we have the book buying consortium in London which is very successful, but in terms of intervention sometimes you do just need a sanction.

When they tried to shut a library at home a number of years ago, my goodness I can remember being cross and my goodness I shouted, I became very unreasonable, and you wanted someone to come in and just say “What are you doing? Why are you doing that?” Reluctantly, I think something quite strong needs to be in place.

THE CHAIRMAN: In London we had the London Library Development Agency and it did seem to me that if there was going to be across-London working that was in areas greater than simply book-buying, that was the body that could have delivered on that. I will just introduce this point and then hand over to you. I just wondered, quite a few people have spoken about how they would like to see a development agency. Probably about half of the submissions that we received have spoken about a development agency in some form or another, and I wondered what you might think about that. Do you want to go first, David, seeing you did not get in on the last one?

DAVID RUSE: I am not sure what it would be developing. The LLDA worked for London at the time and I think made some big inroads around campaigns around different categories of stock or different user communities on a pan-local basis, and there were real economies to be derived from that in terms of the cost but also greater penetration campaigns into regional level bodies, so I think that was hugely successful but it was very much in the marketing and promotion space.

There are a number of consortia arrangements at the moment around the country looking at shared procurement and a joint booking element, but to my mind they are not getting to the heart of the issue, they are still collectives of individual authorities and it is not fundamentally transforming its approach. Arguably, the MLA is supposed to be a development agency, is it not? I have not got its aims and objects in front of me but I thought part of its role was to be an advocate for the sector in the same way that the Arts Council and other cultural agencies operate in that way. I do think you have got to keep this fundamental relationship with the local authority, so I

am not quite clear how the Government or a development agency would sit alongside that on a national basis.

LORD TOPE: Can I pursue a slightly different tack? I wanted to pursue the whole issue of leadership of the library service. I suppose the simple question without a simple answer is where should that leadership be. I do not know whether we are talking at a local level – and we all of us do believe very much in a local service – at a regional or particularly a national level. Mike quite rightly referred to the role of libraries in the stronger communities but who is articulating that? Who should be articulating that?

MIKE MORE: If I could kick off wearing a specific local authority hat, the Chairman referred earlier to a phrase I used when I was asked to do a presentation to the Public Librarians Conference last autumn, and I suggested that one of the roles of heads of library services and their teams is to be a “constructive irritant with chief executives” and what I meant by that was I could not actually recall – I have been in Westminster for a year but I was chief executive of a county council for five years before – a single occasion where there had been a gathering of local authority chief executives (I am not quite sure what the collective noun is) where the library service came up as a topic of conversation. That in a sense is quite interesting. You can imagine that schools and education, children’s services, social services and transportation came up but actually I could not recall in the last five or six years or so the library service itself coming up. It seemed to me that part of the leadership role has to be heads of library services demonstrating very clear leadership of their service into the local authority and connecting it with the agendas that that local authority is leading with. Andrew referred earlier, in the context of if there is to be a library closure, to someone coming in and raising questions. I know it was not being suggested but if you solely rely on a statutory basis actually that is untapped opportunity that the local leadership must come forward much more positively for.

The first strand therefore is what the local library service has to demonstrate very clearly, and that would have to be about being connected into our communities. We know the range of things whereby we can create better communities through the service that we offer. We are connecting with partners and others within the local authority to make sure that it is relevant and seems connected into the outcomes of the authority and of partnership local groups. That is strand number one.

Strand number two is that clearly there is a role for national leadership, there has to be a role for national leadership, and I think the role for national leadership has to be about setting expectations, about setting standards and benchmarking and about setting a challenge for collaboration because I do not think the model of single library authorities is sustainable. It is wider than procurement and it has to be about establishing a customer interface and how that is done, career patterns and how that is done, about how the service is managed. There is no reason in principle in a London context why there could not be joint ventures between local authorities in terms of the management of the service and the coherence of that, which is wholly consistent with each local authority having its own ideas of what it is commissioning a library service for, how it is branded and who is actually accountable for it in the ballot box. It is entirely consistent, so I think you have the strands of leadership that are necessary.

LORD TOPE: Chris is bursting to come in and far be it from me to dare to stop his questions, but at the national level who should be providing that leadership that presumably you are suggesting is not there or is not there strongly enough at the moment? That was to you Mike.

MIKE MORE: Who should provide that? Gosh, that is a challenging question.

LORD TOPE: It is supposed to be.

MIKE MORE: I suppose it should be DCMS.

THE CHAIRMAN: Is that what you think, Andrew?

ANDREW CURTIN: Yes.

LORD TOPE: Do DCMS feature in the stronger communities debate?

MIKE MORE: Not as strongly as it should do.

LORD TOPE: Is that a problem?

MIKE MORE: Yes.

LORD TOPE: Come on Chris. Chris has been bursting for a little while now.

ANDREW CURTIN: It should be DCMS, it absolutely should be. It is a bit odd, is it not, because all of the other benefits that come from libraries – and I know books are not everything in libraries and that is quite true, but they all flow from reading, drawing people together around that, and we have eating clubs around it as well – they all come from that. Unless we have just that intrinsic value you do not get the health benefit, you do not get the antisocial behaviour benefit, you do not get anything else. If we say we are going to provide libraries for some other instrumental value then the quality will decline because you will not have library professionals in them; the whole thing unravels. Definitely it should be DCMS and that is where I think it is a bit vague. I am sure they do their best – damning them with faint praise, sorry.

THE CHAIRMAN: Bless them.

LORD TOPE: They do their best. Come on Chris.

CHRIS WHITE: I totally disagree with that because I think it misses the point about what we are trying to achieve. One of the things that local government has actually got quite good at recently is not thinking in silos and therefore I am not interested whether it is DCMS, DCLG or indeed the Ministry of Defence. The point is that the leadership of the country needs to have some involvement even if it is only symbolic leadership, but symbolic leadership here is rather important – Lyn has heard me on this before and I acknowledge Christopher Frayling who complained that you see many politicians kicking a football – wearing a suit and kicking a football. I do not know what it is but politicians seem to want to do that. You almost never see a politician sponsoring the arts, going to the arts with honourable exceptions like Chris

Smith – or indeed reading a book. There is no particular reason for this because these are educated people who have been to university, got through many many books and no doubt read lots of them, but somehow are very shy in doing that promotion of the importance of reading and the importance of libraries. There we do need leadership, not just from the Government but from the Opposition as well in that respect.

In terms of the departmental structure, DCMS let us face it is fairly far down the food chain, that is how Whitehall works sadly, and it is never going to get anywhere near the MoD or anything like that, but it probably needs more than one ministry to recognise this as important. CLG is clearly significant here and DCSF is clearly significant, and there may well be others such as BERR for instance, given that self-improvement is significant here, and there may be another if not DIUS. So a number of ministries need to be running with this at the same time.

As for a development agency, clearly we would need to look at the remit, but we need to be careful, I think, speaking as the only non-London person in the room ---

THE CHAIRMAN: You noticed that.

CHRIS WHITE: Not to take London solutions and roll them out.

THE CHAIRMAN: We did invite people from elsewhere, they just thought it was too far to come.

CHRIS WHITE: That is right, I have come all the way in my hay cart. In my region there are 11 library authorities, a very small number, but of course some of them are absolutely huge – you have Essex, you have got Norfolk and so forth. Whether you would actually get collaboration between those 11 is anyway doubtful, particularly with the changed regional landscape. Whether collaboration more locally between Hertfordshire, the various bits of Bedfordshire and the various bits of Essex would work on a smaller basis I do not know because you would actually have less challenge and variety than you do, for instance, with the 33 London boroughs.

Whether a national agency would sensibly help the situation if it did not have significant funding I think is questionable. What are we trying to achieve? I guess one of the things we would be trying to achieve is, for instance, getting all library authorities to move to a situation in which we no longer employ graduates to scan books – the sort of situation which I have observed in Sutton and elsewhere, where you are actually getting them to advise. That may require some funding, that may require some technological advice but having worked with MLA over the last couple of years what we do not want to do is go down the route of the national ID project, because they are always a disaster. We also want to make sure that we recognise variety. It is all very well saying that Westminster, as I did, is different from Herefordshire, but I know full well that Westminster is pretty different, frankly, from Hillingdon in its operations. So a national solution has got problems and we need money behind it but a regional solution has also got problems. However, I do not want to offer a counsel of despair, this is well worth pursuing.

THE CHAIRMAN: The format that has been suggested, if anybody has spelled it out, has been effectively dividing the MLA into two, having a library development

agency which is a national thing but that has regional auspices et cetera that would then work to enable local libraries to improve on the services that they wish to provide for their own communities rather than being an organisation that would tell you what to do in your local area. The type of development agency, therefore, is very much a light touch. That has been thus far suggested. I do not think that any of the four of you are going to suggest to us that we are going to need to have a regulatory body at the centre telling you what to do, I do not get that feeling, do you?

LORD TOPE: Absolutely not. I want to stay with leadership for a moment and look 10 to 20 years into the future and see where is the library leadership going to come in 10 or 20 years time. In terms of what we have just been talking about are we attracting the right people now into the public library service? Are the leaders of tomorrow coming in? Are they coming in simply because they have a view about libraries – a rather narrow view and that maybe is where they want to work – or do they have a wider view about the role of the public library service in building stronger communities – or whatever phrase you want to use. I think we will stick with that one because it is a good one. Where is it going to be in 10 or 15 years time?

DAVID RUSE: Shall I kick off because I am the only one here that is appointing them at the moment? I have seen some absolutely inspiring young professionals – across the country, not just locally – over the last couple of years, people coming in who have got some of the vision and the passion and the energy and enthusiasm about the work that we do, that is not just very narrowly focused on wanting to stamp books out at one end of the extreme. It is much more about working with communities, developing people's individual and personal skills and identities. That gives me great comfort actually that we are managing to attract people of that calibre.

The bigger challenge that we have is that there are – and I will lose a few friends here as well – probably quite a lot of people within the existing workforce who are going to block some of that progress. I suppose I am talking about some of the people at the most senior levels, but it is that classic brigadier band of blockers at the middle management levels who are perhaps not up for change, who are perhaps not seeing the bigger picture that is emerging and have not moved with the times. If they hold back some of the aspiration of these younger people then I think we do have a very serious problem.

LORD TOPE: I must not be too anecdotal but this morning because we were having this session today I was talking to our chief executive in Sutton about exactly this and he thinks – and I think he is right – he is the only chief executive now who started his working life as a librarian. I said “Why does not the library service use you more as a role model?” and he said the only contact he had with the library service – I use the term loosely – since he ceased to be a librarian which was just a few years ago, was when he had a letter telling him he was no longer entitled to call himself a chartered librarian. Here we have the only chief executive who started as a librarian and is actually very keen to be used as a role model or that sort of thing. Why are we not exploiting these things?

CHRIS WHITE: Can I just come in on the back of both of those things and envisage what the future person might be? It is slightly too easy for us to caricature the existing librarian – I do not think David is but I am in danger of it as an elected

member – as someone who is a bit quiet and a bit retiring. It has to be someone who is actually much more outgoing with the public, who is actually out there with the public saying “Can I help you with your internet search?” “You are reading that book, would you like some advice on other books to read” so it is much more outgoing in that respect.

What struck me, however, is that a librarian that I know who is just finishing his training is not actually straight out of university, this is a career change, he used to work in IT and has indeed over the years spent time patiently plugging concepts like Web 2.0 to me. It strikes me that the IT focus is going to be incredibly important in a successful librarian, not only being on top of IT but ahead of the curve on new information technology as it develops over the next 10 one 20 years.

MIKE MORE: Can I make a related point? I was a colleague of your chief executive when he was still a librarian and in my last authority which was a county authority I think we were the only library authority in the county that opened every single library on a Sunday. We went about that as a very deliberate distancing from others; the sense was it is a different feel and on a Sunday it is a different look and feel, it is dealing with a different client group, it is dealing with different authors and it is actually employing different staff.

That was quite a challenge and David alluded in a sense to the then existing staff who felt that the library service was in a sense being taken away from what it was rather than an opportunity to develop a different marketplace and a different feel in a thought-through way. By and large it was successful and by and large it brought new people into the service, which was very positive.

I agree with Chris that actually when I spend some time with David’s middle managers they are very enthusiastic, they are very positive, they are not narrow and they are not backward-looking. What are the skills that need to be developed? Well, the skills are partly professional skills, no question about that, but if you take that as the core there are actually much more important skills to give attention to and those are the issues of how they collaborate with others, how do they network with their communities, how do they work with the voluntary sector, how do they deliver good customer service. Those seem to me to be the core areas of the discipline that need to be given developmental opportunities.

I would also be very positive about making sure that we are not regarding the library path as a separate career path but actually bringing other people in on secondments and so on as well. That way we create a less narrow professional. They are still professional because you want the core added value professionalism, but it is not a narrow professionalism. That seems to me to be fundamental.

THE CHAIRMAN: We have got 20 minutes left and I want to give you some time at the end to say anything that you want to, but the bit I would like to talk to you about is performance indicators. We started with standards or the Government started with standards, but for a time it has been clear that the library service lacks performance indicators that enable it to sell its uniqueness and its value to other parts of the corporate body about what it can achieve for it. I am just wondering whether or not

you feel it is a lack, if you feel it should be developed and, if so, who do you think should develop it?

ANDREW CURTIN: I suppose from my point of view if we have made improvements in libraries in recent years it has largely been through political bloody-mindedness.

THE CHAIRMAN: Yes, I guessed that.

ANDREW CURTIN: So performance indicators – I see they are important as a management tool for me as a local councillor, but at the moment it is perhaps not what has driven the changes that we have seen in Havering, so I am very interested to learn more about it.

THE CHAIRMAN: In Havering the value of the service has been driven because you are bloody-minded about it.

ANDREW CURTIN: Yes. Our director of finance – we do a back to the shop floor type of thing – went and worked in a library for three weeks and this was very helpful.

THE CHAIRMAN: Well done. I wish I had thought of that one.

CHRIS WHITE: As someone from the LGA of course I deplore performance indicators and as the audit commission I think they are wonderful, so I am slightly torn here. Of course the true answer is somewhere in the middle and that is that what we must not do is measure library visits, for instance. I do not have to tell you that ---  
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THE CHAIRMAN: No, you do need to tell us.

CHRIS WHITE: Measuring output or indeed, frankly, in some respects measuring inputs does not actually give you a picture at all. It is interesting of course that in David's introduction he did not mention any of that, he mentioned customer satisfaction. By customer – and I presume this is not the case in Westminster – we mean not only those who use libraries but those who do not use libraries, in other words the base that you are trying to service. That is just one of the things that we need to look at.

We cannot define it too narrowly though; I would have thought we would also want to think about the broader role that we think libraries have in society. If they are not in the front line in relation to literacy then I do not know what is and therefore one of the outcomes that we would want to measure is literacy. So those few measures are what we look at. Frankly, we collectively, nationally, should not care how you got there. I am not interested in how Westminster got its 93 per cent in one sense because that is just good news for them and they serve their community. I want to steal their ideas but that is simple theft rather than interfering in how Westminster does it.

In terms of bloody-mindedness, certainly there has been an expansion in Hertfordshire; I am an Opposition councillor in Hertfordshire and it was not due again to external pressures, it was the fact that the new director of Children, Schools and

Families, who again we stole from Westminster, managed to negotiate a larger budget and had a certain personal determination. That was what did it.

MIKE MORE: I am with Chris on that. I would not want ---

THE CHAIRMAN: I think you are right – sorry, I was holding my head and groaning because I think you are right. At the moment the only thing that we have that is about super service at local level is local champions and local circumstances and it is how do we go from there to ensuring that there is a roll-out across the country, because when the local champion leaves or dies or goes on to something better, different, et cetera – raise dogs, bake cakes – it is what then happens. It is just too scary to let that happen.

MIKE MORE: That is true of all services.

THE CHAIRMAN: What if you lose him? (*referring to David Ruse*)

MIKE MORE: We try and make sure we do not.

I agree with you, that leadership is personal is it not and the task of institutions and bodies is to promote that so that there is a succession, so you are creating a stream of people who have the same culture and attitude and approach and positivity and opportunity. That is the point and that is where the arguments about statutory come in in a sense; it is only protective in the extreme, it is not the mechanism to promote, the mechanism to promote is to create that culture of leadership and succession and positive opportunity-grabbing by people in the service.

In terms of indicators, we are doing quite a lot of hard thinking within the council at the moment because we are faced with an enormously challenging resourcing picture over the next few years. The recession in terms of income levels already has been very dramatic and of course it has not even begun to bite yet in terms of formula funding from government; that will not happen for another year or so, yet we are fully expecting the next ten years in resource impacts to be very, very challenging compared to the last ten years.

That is forcing us to do quite a lot of hard thinking around what is the role of the council? I do not mean the library service, I mean what is the role of the council, and what is the role of commissioning within the council and the distinction between commissioning and delivery within the council and how that works. Part of the hard work that we are doing is trying to think in a sense if you have got these outcomes in terms of a better quality of life and so on, what is the iteration, what is the cause and effect. If you tweak this, what impact does that have on that? That is quite complex work and I think it can only be done in place because the tweaking in Westminster will not be the same as the tweaking in Hertfordshire because the connections are going to be different, the geography is going to be different. I think part of the role that we have within our local authorities is to understand cause and effect on outcomes and make sure that we have mechanisms that are translating those in an effective way. That therefore means for the library service what creates a better childhood? It is partly reading and literacy so what are the opportunities for that to be done, in part by schools but not only schools, it is also community-based things like

homework clubs and things of that sort. The same applies to what creates a better older age? It is being able to access places where you can have social networks in a neutral environment, where you can have cultural interfaces.

So if you can be clear about the cause and effect on those outcomes I think that really is much more powerful than having just random indicators. Whenever I look at the 198 indicators the CLG produce – and I know they regard it as a great triumph to have got it down from 2000 to 198, that is a triumph. Actually when you look at them, however, the logic of why just those escapes, there is no rationale to it, there is no connection between those things, they still look very random. I think we have to try and make them less random at a local level.

DAVID RUSE: Just to add to what Mike said, this cause and effect work is extremely challenging for the whole organisation because we are having to think about everything we do and how does it join to a high level outcome and what are the steps along the way? But then we are looking at overlaying – what is the cost of that thing over here? That thing over here might be a pre-school library activity that is contributing to literacy or to positive activities at the right hand of the chart. If we get those figures right and the workings right we can demonstrate incredible value for money from interventions through libraries, perhaps compared to some other more traditional service across a whole number of things. Those of us from a library background know that libraries do punch above their weight in terms of the cost of the service, so there is a real opportunity for, rather than normal performance indicators, looking at it with a totally different approach, and that is the approach we are struggling through at the moment. I think the prize could be very precious for libraries.

ANDREW CURTIN: Thinking about longevity, actually as we were talking, we have discussed PIs and we have discussed political leadership and stuff like that. I am struck that the way to achieve it is to have people involved in running their library service to find effective ways. Community empowerment and community engagement is important, and quite right. Havering, as I am sure are many other boroughs, is absolutely awash with friends of parks groups so you are not working on your own. In a sense as long as you make sure that the community is reflected in a balanced way – that you are not just getting one part of the community while another part of the community feels there is a barrier to it – then you are not ploughing across that field on your own, you are helping people to do what they want to do with their local library service. I think from that point of view the last session today is going to be interesting because it looks as if that is getting there and that is, in a sense, the equation that we have perhaps missed out so far.

THE CHAIRMAN: Yes, the user. I promised that you would get a very short period at the end and now I am going to be really dictatorial. David, in your two minutes or minute and a half, would you talk about the ACL and whether or not you think it still has a value?

DAVID RUSE: I said at the beginning I am an appointed member of the ACL but I am not here to speak for the Advisory Council, though I guessed that you might have questions in this area. Clearly, the ACL went through a dormant period and then a new chair was appointed in Mike Thorne and it has been meeting regularly but not

that frequently over the last 18 months to two years. It is a very new body compared to the body that I was involved with about five years ago, and you were on as well.

THE CHAIRMAN: I was.

DAVID RUSE: It sees its core role as one of advising the Secretary of State and I guess by definition that advice is not going to be explicit stuff that you are going to read on the *Evening Standard* headlines, it is going to be more cautious and rounded than would perhaps go into the public domain. That perhaps adds value to the Secretary of State, it does give him a group of expert practitioners and indeed expert others – because it is not just practising librarians that are on the council – as a sounding board of sorts, but also with that council the opportunity to feed thoughts and noises off up to the Secretary of State at appropriate times.

Could it be stronger, could it be more effective? I guess the answer is bound to be yes. My natural instinct is that things can always be better but it is quite constrained by its statutory role; it has certain prescribed roles and it has to stay within those roles. Of course, it can give as much advice as it likes and that advice is usually listened to, but whether it is acted upon is a matter obviously that you might want to ask the Secretary of State.

THE CHAIRMAN: One of the questions no doubt we will. Who wants to go next with their minute? Go on, Chris.

CHRIS WHITE: I just was reflecting upon how you stop a library being closed. The very first political campaign I got involved in after leaving university was when I was a resident in the City of Westminster and I was one of the people who signed the petition to prevent the closure of the Harrow Road Library – I do not know whether that is still there or not but it was certainly reprieved at that particular time. It does strike me that if you are angry about a library being shut or the lack of a library service you should use the normal local political means, which is making a nuisance of yourself to your councillors and threatening to vote for somebody else if they will not listen. Indeed, it is amazing how many people can get very exercised about a library service when it is about to be taken away from them. They may want the Secretary of State to come in and clump around and make decisions which could well save a particular library, no doubt at the expense of another one which fewer people are attached to, and I do not need to remind Members here about what the Post Office has done – if you reprieve a post office under the review you find another one in the same area gets shut, so we actually need to remember that this is a local service and local remedies do work. It is almost bizarre in this country, we could even debate whether there should be a role for the Secretary of State which would not exist at all constitutionally in many other parts of the world. Therefore, as I say again, the intervention in the Wirral I think is unfortunate and will have adverse consequences in the future because, if anything, it is more likely to make library authorities more cautious when they are reforming.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you. I am going to leave you until the last Andrew.

MIKE MORE: I think there is a very positive future for libraries but it does need leadership at a local level to demonstrate the connection into building stronger communities.

ANDREW CURTIN: I was just thinking as we were talking about words and about literacy. This last year I was really lucky because for some reason I got an invite to hear Desmond Tutu speak at the Guildhall and he was talking about huge community tensions between the Zimbabweans and the South Africans, and he said what was at the base of some of it was that people were not understanding the language they were speaking, they did not have the words to express their emotions, therefore they could not get their frustrations off their chest, and when people spoke back to them using the language properly they felt they were being spoken down to. Libraries, in so many parts of London where there are tensions emerging, are absolutely essential in that. There was an example just a few years ago, just before the Queen's Golden Jubilee, where the then mayor – she did not come to Havering by the way for some reason in 2002 – said he was “disgusted”. I thought you cannot be, it must be the wrong word; you might be upset, you might be disappointed but surely you are not disgusted. Yet that would have wound people up on the streets – libraries can help tackle that and make people's lives better and more harmonious.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you. I must say thank you to all of you, you have been absolutely fabulous today and I hope you have had something back from the session too. We will make sure you get a copy of what we are doing and if you feel moved to write anything else for us, we will happily receive it. Thanks again for coming to the round table.

Witnesses: **NICKY PARKER**, Manchester City Council, **MICHAEL STEAD**, Bolton Council, and **JOHN HICKS**, Library Consultant, gave evidence.

**THE CHAIRMAN:** It is really generous of you to give your time up today in order to come and talk to us and we are genuinely very grateful to you for that. I have only actually worked with two of the three this time and there are people from outside London – there is a world outside London so we are all jolly pleased about that.

The format is to give you a minute or two to add anything to the submission or draw anything out of the submission that you might have made earlier if you want to, or just to talk to us for a minute or two about where you think we should be going or doing or libraries generally in the universe. We are then going to ask a few questions and then at the end we will give you time to say whatever you think we have missed. Please consider bunging in something more should you want to and if you feel constrained by professional etiquette they can always be received privately, confidentially, in a brown envelope – you know.

**NICKY PARKER:** I have never felt constrained.

**THE CHAIRMAN:** Who wants to start? John, you go first.

**JOHN HICKS:** You have had my paper; I probably look at libraries slightly differently since I am a gamekeeper turned poacher – or it might actually be a poacher turned gamekeeper, I am not sure which way round. I was chief officer of a major county authority which disappeared in 1998 and then in the intervening 11 years have been on the road as a consultant. During that period I have worked with about 45 public library services in England and a few others overseas so I tend to think that I have a fair view of some of the main themes that emerge from working with those different authorities. I have a view, which I hold very strongly, about what is the source of a lot of difficulties and it is one of the issues that you are considering – it is which department of state holds responsibility for public libraries. For several years I have been saying that whilst I am open to persuasion as to which department it ought to be, the one it ought not to be is the Department for Culture, Media and Sport which I think has failed to get a grasp of the issue since it was first created. Shall I tell you the major reason why?

**THE CHAIRMAN:** Go for it.

**JOHN HICKS:** It is a policy department, not a funding department.

**THE CHAIRMAN:** And therefore?

**JOHN HICKS:** And therefore I think the two should be together.

**THE CHAIRMAN:** Because you would see government choosing to withdraw funding from or because you think the government should use the funding as a lever for, or you see government ----

JOHN HICKS: Government could well use the funding as a lever, that has precedents in other services, but my concern is that DCMS can set wonderful policy statements and create visions with which we are all delighted; it is up to the 151 library authorities in England to implement them. Some of them – some are represented here – will do so with enthusiasm and are excellent services and there are quite a number of those, but from experience there are quite a lot – and I have to say a lot of smaller authorities as well, particularly the unitaries created in the last ten or eleven years, which are actually not doing terribly well.

THE CHAIRMAN: Super. Keep going; we want controversial views. Michael.

MICHAEL STEAD: John has set the bar quite high. I do not have the same background as these two; I have been in public libraries for almost five years and I am a team librarian, at the sharp end if you like, so I think my purpose here is to talk about how the stuff higher up the tree affects those of us attempting to deliver the service.

I find a lot to agree with in the headline summaries of the submissions to your inquiry, there is a lot of stuff that is familiar to us that we have talked about for several years. We have been talking about, as John says, the disconnect between the carrot and the stick, how it really would be tremendously helpful if we could have the two tied together, but the big issue for us is about the quality of leadership that we have. There are some public library services which have strong leadership, which have very, very effective people charged with running them. The challenge is working with the authorities who do not have that strength of leadership, who do not have the clarity of vision, and this is where some more joined-up national policy comes in.

One of the subjects that comes up time and time again in talking to colleagues of Nicky and John is that within ACL there is pretty good representation of the decent authorities, the ones who are doing well to engage with their communities to make sure that the service they deliver is appropriate, but the challenge is always what to do with those whose service is not so good. I do not think anybody has found an answer to that yet and I am not sure what it could be, but there is a definite need to try and find it and to find a way to get them to improve what they are doing. Ultimately people like me rely on clarity in order to make sure that what we do is the best and is most appropriate for our community of users.

THE CHAIRMAN: Well done. Nicky, follow that.

NICKY PARKER: He is always a hard act to follow. I am head of libraries in Manchester and prior to that I worked in Newham, and I think there are a lot of similarities between those two organisations, both in terms of all the things we know about those two places in terms of deprivation, diversity and the challenges that exist day to day. The thing that for me picks those two out and why I wanted to work in both of those is because they are two services who have gone through massive modernisation. Maybe that is why I am here, I am not sure really, but Manchester was a failing library authority five years ago, the best value review showed one star with no prospect for improvement so you really cannot get any worse than that. That was really our low moment, but it is a good point to make because what it does is show why intervention, inspection and standards are really important because, if you

use them properly, you can use them as a tool to turn your service round, and that is what we did in Manchester. We had a bit of a clean sweep and brought in a new management team and set about devising a partnership with some strong leadership within the senior management team, often against what the rest of the staff wanted to do, but we set about developing a partnership between the staff, the leadership of the organisation and within the politicians as well and also with residents.

You need to clearly articulate where you are going, that you are on a journey, things are a bit awful now, but set out where you are going. We have always said that it is going to take us ten years to sort this out; we are in year five, we have clearly articulated what the milestones are and what we expect to do, we have done all the horrible stuff to start with that has to be done around the budget and around getting the right jobs in place and the right staff – we set about building a couple of libraries to show people what the dream was about really and where we were going – and then we always said the second five years is about securing the political will and investment to then be able to really finish the job off, and that job is about replacing all the libraries in Manchester. We have set ourselves a really big task, to build 22 libraries in five years, supported completely politically, supported by residents and now supported by the staff. So we have completely turned the super tanker around; it was sinking pretty drastically, it was a very expensive service, no value for money, expensive for everything when you start actually doing the benchmarking – which had never been done actually. You start looking at yourself, not actually compared to people like Michael's authority but other big cities: we were pretty poor value for money, performance nose-diving, no accountability, staff just left in a bit of a vacuum to do what they thought was a good job but was kind of a bit misguided and was not actually contributing to the wider objectives of the council. Actually, this is not a difficult job, you just need to have a few tools in your toolbox, some goodwill, some political support and a bit of bloody-mindedness ---

THE CHAIRMAN: We have heard bloody-mindedness several times this afternoon.

NICKY PARKER: You can do it, but it has to be a partnership. The other thing that maybe marks us out and marked Newham out was an understanding that you cannot do that on your own and it has to be with other people. So our strategy is about developing libraries and integrating them with other services – other public services on the whole, but we have ventured into some private partnerships too, working with a supermarket and working with some private housing developers. The plan is, as I say, to build all these new libraries but for them not to cost the council anything, so it is quite ambitious and bold but we have said it so we have to do it now. It is also about gathering some good people together who have got the right skills and are willing to get on with it. It is about leadership, it is about political will and it is about partnerships, and it is about explaining all of that to staff because there is a lot of change there for people.

THE CHAIRMAN: Let me play something back to you which is where we were before you came in. We are not talking about the Wirral because none of us have been there, we have not walked the mile in the moccasin, but one analysis of what happened to the Wirral is that the service became a decrepit service, it lost its customer base and therefore it became politically vulnerable to cuts. That is one analysis.

You come from an area, Nicky, that lost its customer base and that is why the service was so expensive, it was politically vulnerable to cuts.

NICKY PARKER: Yes.

THE CHAIRMAN: But one could argue possibly that the thing that was different – and tell me if you think I am wrong, and I know you will because we have known each other long enough – is the inspection regime is weaker now. You have the freedom and flexibilities regime by the DCLG and the argument is that that has therefore made vulnerable library services even more vulnerable because the political side – and by that I mean both the politicians and the senior management – can decimate the library service in order to make cuts or effectively to withdraw a service that no longer commands the respect or the usage of its population.

NICKY PARKER: In my submission I kind of said that but not quite so upfront. I do believe that and I think we do need some standards back. The last lot of standards were not right either but we do need some kind of measure to demonstrate the effectiveness of the service but not in its whether or not little bubble, and that was what was wrong with the standards last time. It needs to be about how the library service is contributing to those wider priorities of the city and, actually, that is the difference between Manchester and Wirral, it is that we can demonstrate how the library service is making a difference so the politicians understand it so it does not become vulnerable. That is the big difference.

The fact that there is no big stick to wield does not really matter. It is important but it is more important to make a case and show how you are contributing, otherwise you become a bit pointless. That is what was wrong with us five years ago, we were just doing our own stuff really.

THE CHAIRMAN: Five years ago though there was more of a political stick to wield; today if you were going to Manchester possibly the situation would be different.

NICKY PARKER: There is more flexibility and freedom and we have used that to our advantage, so we do not have to do those laborious annual library plans any more which do not really demonstrate anything.

THE CHAIRMAN: No, they were a complete waste of time.

NICKY PARKER: A complete waste of time, it was just like a different way of writing your annual report really.

THE CHAIRMAN: But it actually did get you in front of the council at some point.

NICKY PARKER: It did, but there are other ways of doing that now and it is about the effective lobbying, it is about scrutiny, it is about writing a decent business case and a decent business plan, and it is about demonstrating continuous improvement – continuous improvement in terms of performance, all the things we measure and count because we love doing that, but also the wider contribution. I put in my

submission that I know how many people walked into North City Library to borrow a book and left with a job three months later: it is 66 people. That is the difference, that we are making that much of a difference – actually that is nearly as many as the job centre.

THE CHAIRMAN: I am going to hand over in a minute to my colleagues, but the inspection regime, John, has become weaker and it has allowed “Wirrals” if we can put it as a euphemism, to happen and continue to happen because no longer is there any stick or control by central government or protection if you like of the 1964 definition. What do you think?

JOHN HICKS: Some authorities will not need a stick, they will not need the incentives because you have local politicians who are dedicated to the service. You have seen what it can achieve and you can use it to deliver the council’s objectives. We could probably all sit here and write a list of who we thought those were. It might not always be the same list but we would come up with a list because they exist.

My concern is about the absence of any sort of serious inspection regime – and I do not count some of the indicators we have – and also the number of authorities that actually lack any political leadership within the council where the library service and indeed other cultural services – this is often not just about libraries, it is about museums, it is about arts, the whole cultural spectrum – are seen as services that can be reduced if there are cuts without thought about anything else. It may be just my misfortune, but I seem to work with quite a number of those, I do not seem to ever go into the big ones and the more successful ones, but that is because I am probably not needed.

The worry I have is that there are very few local politicians, particularly in smaller authorities, who can stand up and speak for libraries at a time when they are really needed. They exist, we have all been in our local councils, but out of 151 I would think you probably could say at least two-thirds of those do not have real champions who speak from the heart about it.

LORD TOPE: Whose responsibility is that and what would you do about it?

JOHN HICKS: We do need strong leadership from government for a start, we do need to have a clear purpose, and the endless vision papers of the last ten years have all got a bit confused frankly. I do believe that the existence of the public library service is for one reason and one reason above all, and that is to support learning. As a public service it will be used by lots of people for lots of things and some people will read Jane Austen for pleasure and others will read it because they have to, but it is there primarily, in my view, as a force to support learning, to develop literacy, to improve the basic skills and help people get jobs, which is obviously what Manchester are doing – it explains why I have never worked in Manchester.

I do believe that to get local politicians enthused is a real uphill task. I am not blaming any serving library chiefs because local councils have other issues and often libraries are within big portfolios and the portfolio holder will have a whole range of things to keep their fingers on. Increasingly now under the organisation that is required for children’s services, libraries are getting put into some really strange

directorates. One of those – unfortunately far too often – is adult social care and community services, and libraries will be in the community services bit.

How we tackle the need for leadership at a political level is probably something that really needs to be handled through the LGA, it needs to involve a lot of other bodies, it is not something we can do individually within authorities.

LORD TOPE: Can I bring in some personal experience when I ask the question? A few years ago our library service had the status of libraries as a community resource. I am the portfolio holder and I did quite a number of meetings, doing my bit as a politician, addressing these meetings of other authorities, and I always began by finding out who the audience was, how many were librarians and how many were politicians; it was almost always maybe one or two politicians if that, so my next question was why? Librarians never asked the politicians, they just assumed they would not want to come. In many cases that was probably a correct assumption, but there was an assumption, they did not ask, they did not suggest to their politicians that actually coming along for a couple of hours and hearing from a successful library service about the value politically, if you like, might have been a useful thing to do. So there is a failing all round but if I might say so there are some failings in the library profession too in actually just not engaging and doing that. That is just a personal experience.

NICKY PARKER: I agree that there is a role for the LGA here but I also think that it is down to people like me as well. My executive member comes to my management team meetings and we do all sorts of stuff together because we are a team. We decided that we are in a big mess and we have got to get out of it, but we are not going to do it on our own really. My assistant executive member is in her 20s, my executive member is in his 30s, so I am the old girl really and actually it is just a refreshing and completely different way to work. I think some of my colleagues would find that threatening and quite difficult to do, but once you have agreed where you are going and what you are doing then you have to do it together. When the list comes round saying here are the dates for all the scrutiny meetings, most chief officers stick their head under the table thinking “Please do not come and ask me”; I say “All right, I want to put something on scrutiny because I want to keep libraries at the top of the political agenda.” It does not matter what it is, it does not have to be anything controversial or mind-blowingly new or different, it is just about reinforcing how we are contributing to get people back into work, make the city healthier and raise educational attainment, because that is what we are about.

LORD TOPE: I bet where there are good library services more often than not it is because there is that good engagement between the political side and the officer side. It may take different forms – it probably will, different personalities – but I bet that is a common feature.

THE CHAIRMAN: I think it is the only feature.

ANNE SNELGROVE: I just wanted to make a couple of points, but before I do I think I ought to say that John and I know each other of old because I was a councillor in that large authority and voted for its demise, and I do remember about 13 years ago, John, when libraries were very controversial in Berkshire that there were attempts to

privatise the library service at the time, do you remember that? What you are saying about involvement of members is very important and keeping it on the agenda and putting items on the agenda is extremely important because otherwise the only time libraries appear on the agenda for local politicians is when something controversial has happened and it is a damn nuisance because they are taking political pain and heat and they are not seeing any of the good side. That is what has happened in the town I represent, Swindon. West Swindon Library, which is in my constituency, is an amazing library, it is fantastic what they do for youngsters there. One of the times I have been in there they had a mother and baby session on how to massage your baby, in amongst all the computers, the books and things like that, all the local schools are invited – I do not know whether they all go but I have met a number of classes there – and they have books read. There are some really seriously deprived areas in West Swindon and that is a very successful library, but if you read the local press in Swindon – and I know that it has appeared on all the library sites – you would think that Swindon was a dreadful place for libraries because although we have a brand new beautiful library and it is a lovely facility – Princess Anne is going to open it this Friday – and we are all very proud of it, there is huge community disquiet in other parts of the community where, as a quid pro quo it seems to them, their branch libraries are closing down. That is very difficult for the community to accept and what has happened is that local councillors are baffled in many cases as to how this happened as well.

You are right, therefore, to say that it needs to be on the agenda and I am also interested in pursuing John's idea of where libraries should sit, because if you have policy made in one department and funding in another department it does seem that you are going to have a mismatch. But it is a perennial problem because I remember we had this problem 15 years ago in Berkshire as to where should the library service sit. Clearly there is no easy answer to this because if there was we would have found it by now, but in some ways the library service can be seen as a nuisance – I think that came out of our other discussions last week – in that the council does not know where to put it. Therefore it is kind of where does it sit, whose portfolio, do they really want it, and if you have not got people who are willing to make a bit of a fuss running the library service then it will kind of go into a spiral of decline, which is what you were describing, Nicky, in Manchester. That is what I drew out of it as well.

**NICKY PARKER:** As well as this journey of improvement that we have been on, we have been on a bit of a journey about where we sit in the council as well, and when it was all going drastically wrong we were the smallest department in the council, we were the libraries department, we were tiny, 400 staff – children's services has got 7,000 people we have got 400 – and as we started to sort ourselves out, and clearly Manchester is a city with a lot of culture going on, lots of sport and the economy is driven by that kind of stuff – it was amazing we had not done it before really, but we put all those things together and we called it this culture department, lots of people have got them. Then very interestingly in the last year we have actually made a decision that although we know libraries are about culture and bring lots of visitors to the city and we have done some work around economic impact, we know how much a visit is worth, actually what we have done is we have taken libraries out of culture and put them at the heart of a new neighbourhood services division. We have done that because we are actually saying that across the city we are trying to position libraries as the community resource, so they need to be in neighbourhood services, they need

to be the glue that brings all the rest of the neighbourhood services together – the bin men and the road sweepers and the rest. That is where we are and although some people would say that is not where libraries should be, libraries should be with the art gallery and the museum, but actually we have done that. We have made our case, we have got the investment, people are coming back to libraries in droves, all our key performance indicators are up, it feels right to us that we are in neighbourhood services and we are delivering services at the heart of the community. We are the front face of the council; why should people have to travel from one end of the city to the town hall to see their elected member or to get their planning permission sorted out or to have their benefit validated. Why should we build one stop shops? We do not need those either, we have got them, they are called libraries. Manchester's has been there for 157 years, they are well trusted, the staff are well trained and 97 per cent of people live within half a mile. I know that is easier in an urban setting than in some of the large counties, but it is about the way you tell it.

LORD TOPE: That in many ways replicates at city level exactly what John was saying about national level; it is exactly the same, is it not?

NICKY PARKER: It is.

LORD TOPE: We are not going to debate the structure of government here ---

THE CHAIRMAN: No, no, do.

LORD TOPE: I am not going to debate it, but in my view libraries need to be wherever the debate is taking place about strong local communities and their role in the community, whether that is DCLG or whatever other concoction there might be.

THE CHAIRMAN: I think you are absolutely right; the interesting stuff is about where should the library sit in terms of a council, but there is also the argument about where should libraries sit in relation to government et cetera. If you play that analogy, you talked, Nicky, about the wider contribution of libraries to the agenda of the council and you are talking presumably about health and well-being, community cohesion, education, lifelong learning.

NICKY PARKER: Everything except transport really.

THE CHAIRMAN: And presumably you are talking about people that are outside the council, your wider neighbours at the PCT ---

NICKY PARKER: Yes, absolutely.

THE CHAIRMAN: The Learning and Skills Council et cetera.

NICKY PARKER: Yes.

THE CHAIRMAN: You said that you were demonstrating that value; one of the arguments that we have had placed before us is that there is nobody demonstrating that value at a national level to enable governments to see and to enable the DoH to understand, DCLG to understand, DIUS gets it effectively because the secretary of

state is terrible, but DCSF et cetera et cetera. Would that be something you might agree with, disagree with?

NICKY PARKER: I can answer that. I think somebody needs to be advocating for libraries. We clearly make a contribution to a whole range of different central government policies and I do not feel anybody is doing that at the moment. The stories are all out there – Manchester are not the only people doing this, there are loads of people doing it, but good practice is not being shared, there is not any research or very little research, it is not being reported properly, there is not a decent advocacy campaign, it is not happening nationally and people are having to take it into their own hands really. SCL have started to do it, I know the North West were doing it, working closely together and going to government office, and actually individual projects are doing it. I chair a project in the North West that has got all the local authorities involved around improving library services for teenagers. I have been to see DCSF in Sheffield, so that is happening but it is not happening here.

LORD TOPE: Who should be doing it?

NICKY PARKER: Whichever government department we end up in.

LORD TOPE: This is a circular argument.

THE CHAIRMAN: You have not mentioned the MLA, you have not mentioned the ACL, you have not mentioned CILIP.

NICKY PARKER: I do not think it is CILIP's job – that lets you off the hook.

THE CHAIRMAN: Who should be doing it? John.

JOHN HICKS: I will have to start by saying – I was going to say confessing but that does not sound very good, does it – that I am a member of the board of MLA. I will admit to that.

LORD TOPE: It is called declaring an interest.

JOHN HICKS: Also a former member of ACL, I was a former chair of ACL for five years because they were trying to abolish it at the time but could not get parliamentary time to get the legislation through – I know the inside stories on that one.

THE CHAIRMAN: Was that David Lammy's watch?

JOHN HICKS: No, it was before that, it was under Alan Howarth. Yes, there has been an attempt to abolish ACL before, but going back to the issue we were talking about, I am not here to speak for MLA, I hope I am here as a consultant who has experience of a large number of local authorities, but having said that there is an issue about who lobbies government and how that comes about. I think MLA does have a role. It is perfectly understandable to me when people say that MLA did not used to be interested in libraries. When I was interviewed for membership of the board of MLA I actually said to Mark Wood that one of the reasons why I was applying was

that I wanted to put the L in MLA because it did not seem to me to be focused on that – it was not focused on the A either, but that is another matter.

THE CHAIRMAN: Nobody ever does.

JOHN HICKS: It was an organisation – and I do stress was – that was very much about museums and, in particular, about the renaissance programme: excellent, very good, but it has other responsibilities. It has as you know been reorganised; that will now begin to settle down and it will shape itself. What is unfortunate of course is that the budget was slaughtered in the spending round – I think this is often forgotten. That is the reason that we have had to so reduce the regional network, not because we perversely thought it would be a good idea to leave it all empty, it is just that there is not enough money in the pot. MLA has work to do and I am not here to say it is all perfect and it is all wonderful because I think there is considerable effort that needs to go in, and I do have some issues about the fact that there is no lead library specialist, however you want to conceive that role. MLA is totally integrated and I think that the sector actually, and indeed the wider world that is interested in libraries, likes to see people who talk the same language. That does concern me and I have expressed that at board meetings to the chief executive so I am not saying things behind his back.

THE CHAIRMAN: What do you think, Michael, do we want a library development agency?

MICHAEL STEAD: We need something like that. I hope I am not going to get thrown out for it, but MLA looks like it could be interesting in ways that it has not so far. Its focus on research, which is talked about, has an awful lot of potential to do some of the things that we have just spoken about when making the work of places like Manchester and so on more visible to more of us. There has not really been anybody doing that in a realistic and measurable way, so I do have a hope for the potential that MLA has in doing that and in finding that national advocate to talk to the politicians, to get us put into whichever department we feel we ought to be in, make us visible and keep us going. But we have not seen any resolve really from MLA yet, it is all promise at the moment, as in it looks promising. I do not want to cast aspersions on what they are trying to do. It looks like it ought to do something but we have not seen it happen yet and I want that to come soon so that we can see it and start to work with it.

LORD TOPE: I want to change tack if I may and stay with Michael because you have been having a very gentle time so far. You are a team leader working in the library service and this is like practical experience. I want to develop on leadership, are we getting enough bright young people coming into the public library service generally? Those that do, what opportunities do they get to develop their career; are they getting both the opportunity and the training to look at the wider leadership role, the role of libraries in stronger communities as distinct from simply running a public library service. It is a broad question but I would really like to hear your experience on a practical level.

MICHAEL STEAD: The leadership issue is interesting because one of the most visible things MLA did in its previous form was the *Leading Modern Public Libraries* programme which was a three-tier leadership programme for heads of service, senior

managers and future leaders, which are people like me. The aim there is to build leadership capacity at all levels within public libraries with a focus on the kinds of issues that are likely to come up in that environment, so one thing it has done is it has prepared theoretically a couple of hundred people for tackling those issues that John and Nicky and their peers face and have faced.

The training issue is one that has been spoken about before. The PLA conference a couple of years ago had a debate which became at least slightly notorious; the question was about whether the requirement for a professional qualification is holding back the development of public library services. The inference you could take from that is that a lot of us require a professional membership, I have one, but some of the more progressive and interesting public library services do not require that and the focus on a qualification is in some cases a focus on old values, on the things that we really should not be doing any more – technical things, cataloguing, classification, the things that keep talented people who know a library and how it works away from the people who come in and use it.

I have learned far more working in a public library than I did from getting a professional qualification, and it is a lot more valuable as well. Ultimately it comes down to being nice to people and being able to find things out; that is what my job is on a daily basis and I think I do it quite well, but the whole issue there is around how we recruit, select and retain people to both deliver and define our services. Too often we use the qualification as a crutch when we should actually be looking for people with the qualities I just described. Does that answer your question?

THE CHAIRMAN: Yes, very eloquently.

LORD TOPE: I think you have stimulated the person next to you – I do not think it was needed really.

NICKY PARKER: We had this radical idea where we have got this whole bunch of young people who are volunteering at the moment in various programmes that we have got going in Manchester. Some of them have got themselves sufficiently organised enough to become the young people's management board in our library that is just for young people, Pearhouse Library. Actually, some of those young people have got more of the right kind of skills even though they are volunteers and aged 14 than some of my staff who have worked in central library for 40 years and do not really like people. What we are doing is that for those who want it we are seeking an accreditation route for them, so that they can get their vital bit of paper to say the things they have been doing are worth something and have some value. That is not very radical but the next bit is, that maybe we could turn some of those into apprentices, and that is what I want to do. I know my workforce breakdown, I know they are all late 50s and I am going to have a bit of a crisis in the next five years, so I have got five years to plan for this and these young people that I have got over here, who are getting accredited and could become apprentices could become fantastic employees of Manchester City Council. They are already fantastic ambassadors; we have rolled them out at several national conferences, they are really eloquent, they understand the issues, they are local, they feel passionate about the service and in that particular part of Manchester, which is not an easy part – it is Mosside, libraries are cool – so if we can do that there I think we could replicate that across the city.

Michael is hiding his light under a bushel because they have already done this twice in Bolton, because there is a young woman there – I think there are two there now – that I came across as part of this thing that I am talking about. I took two young lads from Mosside and two Asian girls from Bolton to London to speak to a room with 300 heads of service, they were brilliant. One of them is now working in Bolton Libraries, they are getting the support they need, they have probably got a few GCSEs and have not come up through the more traditional route. Our challenge is to (a) keep hold of them but (b) give them some on-the-job training, and NVQs and apprenticeships seem the way forward for me. We need to do a lot more of that and I think that is what CILIP should be doing – he is not getting off completely scot-free. That is not to say we do not need chartered librarians but we do not need whole rafts of them, we need some good people who are able to offer the technical advice that we need, but I need in Manchester local people who are committed and have got loads of common sense and feel passionate about their service. That is what I need – and who are a bit younger than the ones I have got now. That is a challenge Bob.

THE CHAIRMAN: ACL: should it be disbanded? I have been a bit surprised, I have to say, having sat on it twice I did not actually feel that I was in the vaults of Voldemort and I have been a bit staggered by some of the responses from people in the press and elsewhere about their feeling that you lot are secretive, evil people who are doing really bad things for the library service. I just wondered if you want to defend yourselves in any way, and the slime and the smoke that comes with you at the time.

NICKY PARKER: Now I have to make a declaration because I am a member of ACL but I am a new member so that is my get out of jail free card.

THE CHAIRMAN: But it is you lot that cause the problem, it was all right when we were there.

NICKY PARKER: I think I would have to say that I have been to about three meetings and I am seeking out at the moment what our purpose is. I am not ready to give up on it just yet and I think it could have a role, it just does not have a very well-defined role at the moment. It needs more engagement with the minister, that would be my first view. I have been on it a year and we have not really had that yet, I have been waiting for that moment. It does not have basic things like it does not have a work plan, or it does not have a mission. I do not really understand what it is there for though I understand it is there to advise the minister What does that mean and what do we do when we meet together in their room ----

LORD TOPE: You have not met the minister yet.

NICKY PARKER: I have met the minister in another – yes.

THE CHAIRMAN: While I was there the minister kind of popped in about once a year, said some fluffy things quite bizarrely and then left again and let you get on with the work programme, which seemed to be completely and utterly unrelated apart from a hook of three or four words possibly that he might or might not have said or was interpreted to say. Is that still the same kind of thing?

NICKY PARKER: I have not seen the minister in that role; I have seen the minister but doing other things. There is no work plan and I do not really understand what we do on a day-to-day practical level. I also think there is potentially some duplication with MLA's role in advice as well, so it just needs sorting out. I do not think that just because it does not work at the moment we need to get rid of it, it has some potential in the same way that MLA has some potential but I think the roles need a bit more clarity and there need to be some more defined things to do, otherwise it is just a talking shop. I agree about the publicity stuff, we have not been good at telling people what we have been doing, I think people probably wonder what on earth we do do.

THE CHAIRMAN: It seems to have created quite a lot suspicion.

NICKY PARKER: There is no big plot I do not think, it is more incompetence than a plot.

MICHAEL STEAD: We have got lots of these bodies, that is the thing that we have to consider, that we have lots of different organisations involved in some capacity in steering public libraries and making sure they are in the right place and so on, but we very rarely see anything concrete, certainly that I can relate to as somebody who is out there delivering the services that they are talking about, which is why I said what I said about MLA, that I want to see something happen with it.

JOHN HICKS: The ACL is a body without a mission, I would certainly agree with that. It was created when the former Library and Information Services Council was abolished; it is a statutory body so it cannot be abolished by ministerial diktat, which is what prevented the last attempt to remove it. It in effect went into limbo for almost two years because there were not any appointments and there was not a chair after I had stood down, and I do not think anybody noticed, but it was recreated, reappeared, and I would agree with everything – my perception of what Nicky has just said is that nothing has changed. As chair I used to go and see the minister once every couple of months and have a little heart to heart – I was about to say one to one, but of course that is not how you see ministers, it was one to half a dozen really – and talk about the key issues of the day that the council had talked about. I did not feel that was particularly beneficial for me or for the minister – I mean, they were very interesting chats but that is about what they were. The chair has no power, the council really has no power, it is an advisory body and it was created and came into existence when MLA did not exist, SCL was not the lobbying force that it is and CILIP did not exist in the same way.

THE CHAIRMAN: So from my perspective – argue with me if you want to, but we have only got a bit of time left so you will be arguing into your own time. From my perspective if one was a minister who was minded to think outside of her civil service team she could be a very important and valuable asset, so this is an opportunity to check out with professionals ideas that the minister might have without the dreaded hand of the civil service at your behest and on your case, especially given that we went through a period – I am not sure we are still there – where we did not actually have a library adviser at DCMS at all because the MLA were supposed to be providing that advice.

The problem for the MLA to provide that advice it seems to me is that they are dependent upon the government for their funding, and so the very people who are being employed and who are being funded by effectively civil servants to do their job, who need the regard of the civil service in order to continue to receive their pay check – it does not seem to me that they would be able to play the same role that the ACL can play if the ACL truly is what we think the ACL should be, which is a ministerial advisory body, so professionals who would be able to directly advise the minister should they believe that he or she is going totally off beam.

NICKY PARKER: I agree with that. The other good thing about ACL is that it is not just library professionals, it is half and half now, we have some other people as well. It gives a more rounded view, let us just say that, it leads to a bit more debate. On the whole the profession tend to be in agreement about the big issues. It was interesting in the summary that you sent us, there are some things where people disagree a bit but on the whole you read through it. I have read the SCL and I know what we have said in Manchester is all kind of saying the same thing really, so it does at least give a bit more debate when there are some other people. I think it could have that role, it just feels a bit directionless at the moment. It needs some work to do.

JOHN HICKS: I agree it could do but it has not in as many years as it has existed, and I have to say the dead hand of the civil service certainly keeps it away from ministers. Because the minister does not go very often, they need to be encouraged to go and meet the members, and because when the chair goes the minister and the chair are policed by the massed ranks of the civil service – you go out of the room and they do not, I suspect – I do not know – that actually much of what you have said is “Don’t worry about it.” You are right though, it could be what you have just said.

THE CHAIRMAN: It could be. My feeling on this is that we should collectively perhaps try to encourage it to be the body it might become rather than have it torpedoed in the water because there may one day be a minister who might be (inaudible).

Was there anything else you wanted to play with before we let them do their closing remarks?

LORD TOPE: Can I ask John a particular question? Emerging fairly clearly from what we are doing are some of the common characteristics of good library services and the ingredients for that. You said in your introduction that you work mostly with let me just say less good people.

JOHN HICKS: Possibly.

LORD TOPE: What are the common characteristics of less good library services and, given what we have all been discussing, what collectively could we be doing and how should we be trying to improve?

JOHN HICKS: If I go into a local authority I would ask to see the leader and the chief executive separately to talk about the value of the library service rolling out council objectives. If they say “No, you are not going to meet us because it is only

libraries and we have other things to do”, that tells me that this is not an authority where libraries are integral to the council delivering its services to people. That would be something on which I would make an immediate subjective but I think sometimes informative opinion.

I would also look to see how often they involved the public in actually deciding what they are doing, where the initiatives are, who are they talking to, who are their partners, other organisations because that is indicative as well – is the library service embedded in all that is happening across the whole of the community, or is it actually just provided as a service that you can go in and use if you want to. There are all the other measures but I have a rule of thumb about these things where I think you can detect how much are the public involved, how much are the chief exec and the leader informed about what the service does.

LORD TOPE: That was a very interesting answer. What would you actually do about it; how would you make the leader and the chief executive want to meet you; how do we get to that? One of our witnesses before you was a chief executive who said that in his memory meetings of chief executives had never ever discussed the library service.

JOHN HICKS: Yes, that is quite likely. First of all I would put pressure on the chief executive because I would virtually camp outside their door. I have one at the moment where we have just started a review this week in a southern unitary authority – it is not Swindon. We asked to see the chief executive and the leader but they did not want to see us. The leader said “Okay, the chief executive can see you” so we asked to see him and his diary has given us an appointment for 30 minutes at the end of June – the review is due to have finished by then.

We are therefore going back to knock on the door to try and explain what we are doing, we will be passing briefing papers, we go through the director because we have to go to somebody that the chief executive talks to, and we will try to gradually win them round. That sometimes is not going to succeed but we have got to try.

THE CHAIRMAN: We have a vote shortly which is a real pain – I love the function of democracy and I did not mean that at all; it is a pain because I am enjoying this. We have got a minute or so for each of you to say what you wanted to say but you have not yet said, so you do not feel you have gone out with something burning that you wanted to say that you could not say. Who wants to go first?

MICHAEL STEAD: A simple thing, a political buy-in. A cross-party policy development group for libraries which has enabled us to redefine the scope of the library service in Bolton, which is about forming partnerships with other service delivery agents, some of them within the council, some of them not, which ensures the future viability of the pattern there because we have got representatives of all three parties involved. I think that is one of the ways we get round this political issue that I was talking about.

THE CHAIRMAN: How big is that body?

MICHAEL STEAD: It is seven or eight councillors, I think, plus the AD for culture and community services and for head of libraries and anybody else that ---

THE CHAIRMAN: I am always interested in these and how they function. Do you think it has succeeded because it is quite a tightly formed body?

MICHAEL STEAD: I have not been involved with it, I should have made that clear, but it has had a clear focus, that is what it is. It has got buy-in from everybody that needs to give buy-in and it has been pretty thorough. They have called in guest witnesses from regional organisations, from other services and so on.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you. We were just saying that it would be very difficult to have one of those in Newham because it is a one-party state.

NIA GRIFFITH: You are not throwing us out a challenge, are you?

NICKY PARKER: Something we have not talked about at all is delivery models and governance within those, and I think there is more scope for library services across authorities to work together. It is something that we are doing a lot in the North West where we have almost entered a commissioning regime really where the other 22 are commissioning one authority to lead on one thing or another and are paying them to do so. You avoid duplication, you sort the gaps out, you collectively can afford things you cannot afford on your own, you can sort your back offices out and slim down. We are doing it in terms of procurement across the country but I think direct delivery of services by one authority on behalf of others is not that common and I think we could be doing that a lot more.

Ultimately – and I have not discussed this with my peers in the region – I would like to see us move much more towards one library service, either at sub-regional level or regional level. I think it just makes loads of sense. We have 22 authorities – three counties, two cities and loads of little unitaries all falling over each other. That is 22 management teams and that is unable to look at the library estate in the whole. Greater Manchester is in the middle and we are boarded by all of them. We have libraries in different authorities that are half a mile away from each other – it is nonsense really. There are huge challenges around the politics of all of that but I think, you know, we talked about archives before – we have done it for archives and there is one service for archives. I think it is going to take a lot longer and there will be a lot more hard work but we should do it for libraries too.

THE CHAIRMAN: Could I just ask you to submit something on that to us?

NICKY PARKER: Yes.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you.

ANNE SNELGROVE: The question I was going to ask, which I think you partly answered when you said the archives, is which specialist services do you think benefit from the commissioning model that you have just given?

NICKY PARKER: What we are doing at the moment is business information. Manchester has a huge business library and we are now providing that service across 13 authorities. Archives is the obvious one because they are all tiny little services with a statutory responsibility and lots of them are not meeting the minimum standards. Procurement obviously, not just in terms of books but also in terms of streamlining the back offices in terms of bibliographical services, cataloguing and all that, like the catalogues, like the management systems, RFID systems, we are all spending millions of pounds and we could be doing it a lot better if we were doing it together.

NIA GRIFFITHS: A consortium purchasing type of thing.

NICKY PARKER: Yes. There are other examples around the country of the schools library services – particularly Berkshire are doing that, we do not do that in the North West at all, but there are loads of things I think. The provision of lending stock for ethnic books, because Manchester buys loads, bulk buys quite a bit, Oldham buys quite a lot, but we do not have a buy-in and it does not mean to say that there are no people who will read things in other languages, so that could be a way around that.

The key to it is that when we are selling our services to other people I want to present it as an improvement to those other library authorities, I want to bring some income in for me and I want to present it as a financial saving to those other libraries. We can actually do it better across all of us working together, their £10,000 that they are trying to spend on their own might only be £6,000 when you are all working together. In the current financial climate that is always a good one around efficiencies, support and politicians. I will send you something on what we are doing.

ANNE SNELGROVE: What would be interesting in seeing that submission is if you think that is transferrable for rural areas. Obviously you are speaking from an urban or metropolitan view but would it transfer to the Newburys, Wiltshires, Hampshires?

NICKY PARKER: We have Cheshire, Lancashire and Cumbria, so they are pretty rural.

THE CHAIRMAN: John.

JOHN HICKS: I was going to pick up something that Nicky said actually because we do not see enough co-operation between authorities but 151 doing their own thing is not quite true because there is a lot of co-operation on the backroom services; what we do not see is much of what Nicky has just talked about, which is the front line public service where one authority leads for others. 151 services for England is far too many and it is not accidental, perhaps, that on the day that Northern Ireland went into a single authority – guided I might say by a brilliant consultant and I really would not reveal his name – England went to two more to make it 151. We are going in the wrong direction. We are not going to change that because we are not going to change the structure of local government, but we do need to get those services working together and working in partnership or, alternatively, to get local authorities to look at other models of delivering the service. We have not talked about it but of course there are two trusts and there is one service that is outsourced to the private sector – that has not fallen over.

THE CHAIRMAN: Yet. We wait.

JOHN HICKS: As the adviser to them I have to say I see no indication of that; they are extending opening hours.

THE CHAIRMAN: Then I need to come and have a look.

ANNE SNELGROVE: John, again, I would be very interested in a short note on that authority – I do not know which one it is.

JOHN HICKS: London Borough of Hounslow.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you. You have been really fabulous; we could have gone on with you for at least another half an hour to an hour, you have been absolutely brilliant. Thank you so much for being so generous with your time and your ideas et cetera. The bit that we did not talk about was the development agency, so if anybody wants to talk to us about whether or not they think that might work, especially Nicky. It does sound to me almost that Manchester is being that development agency ---

NICKY PARKER: It is not just us but I think as a region we are.

THE CHAIRMAN: If it is not exactly a development agency there might be a need for me to replicate the service you provide. It would be really valuable to have those thoughts. Thank you so much for coming.

Witnesses: **ALAN GIBBONS**, Campaign for the Book, **DESMOND CLARKE**, **KATHLEEN FRENCHMAN**, The Library Campaign, gave evidence.

THE CHAIRMAN: Shall we go round the room and do some introductions? Actually, Kathleen, why do you not start and tell everybody who you are and then we will introduce ourselves.

KATHLEEN FRENCHMAN: I am Kathleen Frenchman, very long time library user and present chairman of the Library Campaign, involved with Libraries for Life for Londoners and Friends of Islington Libraries.

DESMOND CLARKE: I am Desmond Clarke, I was chairman of Libri, the library charity, and for 30 years I was a publisher.

ALAN GIBBONS: I am Alan Gibbons, I am a children's author, I organise the Campaign for the Book, the new kid on the block, got bolshie and set it up about eight months ago.

NIA GRIFFITH: Nia Griffith, Member of Parliament.

ANNE SNELGROVE: Anne Snelgrove, Member of Parliament for South Swindon.

LORD TOPE: I am Graham Tope, a Member of the House of Lords, but in real life I am the cabinet member for libraries in a London borough.

THE CHAIRMAN: I am Lyn Brown, I chair the APPG.

NORMAN TURNER: I am Norman Turner, I am the consultant to the inquiry.

BOB McKEE: I am Bob McKee, from CILIP, adviser to the inquiry.

JONATHAN DOUGLAS: I am Jonathan Douglas, I am Director of the National Literacy Trust.

MIRIAM WEISINGER: Miriam Weisinger, stenographer from T A Reed & Co Ltd.

THE CHAIRMAN: The young man who sits here is from my office, his name is David Hemy. What we are going to do is ask you to talk to us for a few minutes about something you want to say, then we are going to ask you some questions, some of which will follow on from what you have said and others which you will probably think are off the wall and where have they come from. Before the end of our session, which will have to finish at five because that is when we lose the room, we will ask you to say what you want to say that you do not feel you have been given the opportunity to say during the session, and if you do want to submit anything else in writing afterwards you are very welcome. Who wants to go first?

ALAN GIBBONS: Essentially I became extremely worried of a situation in Doncaster when allegedly £622,000 was being withdrawn from the library budget and Mayor Winter, one of the elected mayors, denied it. It caused a huge furore in the town so I held a meeting with librarians and it came like a flash of lightning, I did not realise half of the restrictions that were occurring around the country – probably naïve as an author. So I was having all these lovely events, where I saw kids bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, going away with armfuls of books and excited about literature, and then got an image of something that was tired and under threat and misunderstood by elected representatives.

That launched us into trying to set up a campaign and it was a campaign initially where I got in touch with authors and then just anybody who would join us. It is broadly about school libraries, public libraries, the school library service and the presence of the book overall. So it does not compete with the Library Campaign, it does not compete with anybody else, we want to support anybody who wants to raise the profile of reading and books.

The kinds of things that we have come across are that it seems obvious that we need to beef up the 1964 Act. When you say “comprehensive and efficient” it seems to mean just about anything; it was amazingly frustrating when we were campaigning over Wirral, for example, that at first we were told that Andy Burnham was not minded to intervene and then three months later was minded to intervene. There seems to be a need for some kind of minimum standards and some kind of notion of when there is a trigger, what is it that triggers an investigation.

Secondly, we feel that friends and users groups have got to have a much higher profile. One meeting alone had 800 – at Wirral for example – and it was unanimously against the view that the council was putting forward, yet it was ridden over as if it did not exist – that was only one of several. I am sure my colleagues will have seen all this before, but I was shocked by the lack of response to public outrage.

The next thing that absolutely astonished me was the lack of training for councillors. I was meeting elected representatives who were put in charge of the cabinet responsibility for libraries and had not got a clue the MLA existed – that is what it felt like to me. They had not gone to the MLA, they had not discussed what might be happening in advance. I would reprimand one of the six-year olds I used to teach if they had gone so unprepared into anything and I was just appalled that you could have councillors not knowing what the hell a library was. At one meeting a councillor actually said would it not be a good idea to have computers in libraries, and I was sitting there banging my head against the table, is this man for real. It struck me that there is a need for longer periods of consultation before people can make any sort of change and I think it should be guilty until proven innocent, there should be a presupposition that libraries deserve to exist and there should be an absolutely cast-iron case before there are any service changes, and that means there has to be a really clear procedure and I do not feel that exists at the moment, it seems very variable.

The words “comprehensive and efficient” are always mentioned but the ghost at the feast, Banquo, is the word “improving” which is in the Act. That needs to be waved under every elected representative, it is supposed to be an improving service, yet this never gets mentioned, there is always this defensive response of comprehensive and efficient. Local democracy is absolutely vital. I come from exactly the same background as Lyn, or a northern version of it, and I am very proud of municipal socialism, it is one of the great democratic steps forward in British history, as is the public library in Salford. I am not being regionally biased, but Salford.

There needs to be some sort of clear guide to basic staffing levels that we can accept, even though there are regional differences and different effects in different areas. A guide to overheads seems to be worth exploring; I have not got huge knowledge of this but it does seem to be an issue, and definitely a guide to refurbishment. When I see phenomenal new libraries like Newcastle – I was taken for a walk round in advance – and then I see a tiny shop that will only cost £22,000 that is loved by local people – it could be kept open, Old Town Library, like that. The funding that is needed for that is pathetic to be honest. If there was a real, national, organised, library development agency that had a clear vision and could crusade – no, I will not say crusade because it could offend some people – a real cultural declaration of intent on a national basis that would never have happened because there would have been an overall comprehensive plan for the libraries in that town.

Finally, there are too many bodies. I have gone round and tried to talk to everybody and one body, I could not even find out where they were so they cannot be very interventionist – I did not know how to get hold of them. At least I found the MLA. That is it for a start.

THE CHAIRMAN: I bet that was the ACL. Kathleen.

KATHLEEN FRENCHMAN: I do very much agree with Alan that there is plenty of scope for starting at the top. The libraries should be much more high profile, I would like to see Lyn Brown, Lynne Brindley and Bob McKee meeting and it being news in the broadsheet papers. There is much too much of a gulf between public libraries and other libraries; the only possible little bridge is the Guildhall in London but there does seem to be a great gulf fixed between people who like to call themselves “special” libraries and public libraries and I think they should all be the same service.

I do think there should be national standards, there should be national publicity. I would like them to stay in culture, I do not want them to go to education, libraries are a cultural provision and I do not think, probably, there is a point in having a separate government department, I think DCMS is a reasonable home but it should get a bigger bite of the cake.

DESMOND CLARKE: In the few years I have been involved with the Libris charity and helping to fund reports and studies and analysis of performance within the public library service around the country there are a few things that come to mind. First of all, I do not believe the public library service is on its knees but there are dramatic differences between individual authorities and it is a little bit of a postcode lottery as to where you are. Unfortunately where I live we have lost our mobile library service; we have a pretty poor local library a few miles away and a very, very good, new, modern library about 12 or 15 miles away. For the elderly, the young et cetera that makes life extremely difficult and in many ways that is a pattern ---

THE CHAIRMAN: Where, Desmond?

DESMOND CLARKE: That is in East Sussex, but prior to that I was in Hampshire where we have just seen the first discovery centre pop up. Going around talking to chief librarians, talking to the Society of Chief Librarians et cetera, I came very much to the conclusion that the problem overall is that there has been a lack of leadership in the public library service. What is clearly missing is any shared agenda and vision for the public library service in this country. One chief librarian once said to me “We get a different agenda from government, from the profession and from local politicians and yet of course you follow what your local politicians tell you to do.” There is a confused agenda, that is the first thing, and the national bodies, in particular the strategic agency in the MLA in the seven or eight years since it was started by Matthew Evans, has failed to provide any vision and develop a vision for public libraries in this country which can be shared and supported by the profession and by local government. That is a major failing and I see absolutely no sign within the MLA that anything has happened. I have talked with Andrew Motion and he has no vision, to be frank, for the public library service and it is a serious shortfall for anybody as chairman of the MLA. The other thing is that there has been a lack of focus on those who need and use public libraries and a lack of evidence about what their needs are. There is a mass of data but it is telling us very little and every year the MLA, on behalf of the government, collects information through CIPFA and publishes performance data, but most of that data is meaningless. You have seen some of the statements that have been issued when people query it; they say it is meaningless. Why publish it? This is information that ministers are required to stand up and say and tell us about how public libraries are doing. There is a serious lack of evidence; people keep saying that it is going to be dealt with but it is never dealt with.

The final thing of course is the lack of standards. No one understands what they are supposed to be delivering.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you. I am going to ask the difficult question which is that one of the things that we get back about user groups, friends of libraries et cetera is that they take little account of the non-user and the user could be considered to be a diminishing number of people. That is our bell, so I am going to stop that question. I will go and vote, Lord Tope is going to continue but we will be back.

LORD TOPE: I am sorry about this but the reason we carry on is twofold: because we have only got the room until five o'clock, but all you say is being recorded here and so although I will be the only one who hears it, the others will have a chance to see it. I am not sure how Lyn's question was going to develop but did you get enough of it.

NORMAN TURNER: It was a question of representing non-users as well as library users. Some of the feedback we have had says that that is an issue but it may be self-limiting in its focus.

DESMOND CLARKE: Of course that is the case. The problem is that there is very little research into the needs and requirements of those who are non-users or those who have fallen away, and why have they fallen away. When people have done a number of things – Hillingdon is a very good example where they have significantly improved the ambience of the library, the book stocks et cetera and they have seen dramatic increases in use of the library, but they have focused on what their local community wants – it is not an overall solution, but what does each community want – and they have a very diverse community as you are probably aware of. How do they respond to that?

The thing that everybody needs to remember about the public library service is that yes, it is a public service but it is a public service of choice and in the end the only way to measure how successful the profession and everybody is, is in terms of how they respond to the public and how the public take up the offer. That is something that everybody forgets; there is much more need to focus on people, both users and non-users: what do they want, how do we respond to it.

LORD TOPE: I remember discussing this with Kathleen a few years ago, friends groups and user groups often are fundraisers for the library service.

KATHLEEN FRENCHMAN: No, sorry, absolutely not.

LORD TOPE: I am not saying they should be, I am saying they are. Give me a moment. They are often fundraisers for the library service, they are often the most resistant to change – they are there because they like things as they are. Where do we find the critical friend of the library service, the people who challenge in a constructive way?

KATHLEEN FRENCHMAN: The critical friends of the library service are in the Inner London Boroughs of Haringey, Camden and Islington. We do not raise money

– Haringey might actually do a bit of money-raising but when Islington was set up we said we are not fundraisers we are critical friends. We would have been called a library campaign but FOIL was such a nice acronym that we called ourselves Friends of Islington Library and we have a very nice symbol as well to illustrate it, but we do not raise funds.

LORD TOPE: I was not making an accusation.

KATHLEEN FRENCHMAN: I am sorry, I thought you said we did but we do not.

LORD TOPE: Some do, I know some do, but some do not.

KATHLEEN FRENCHMAN: All the United States ones do.

ALAN GIBBONS: The other thing I would say about users is you can have a very negative view of very small user groups if you want, if that is what you will accept. The truth is that I am not willing to accept it and lots of good library authorities are not. I was in one in Oswestry; it is a tiny market town, 18,000 people. They refurbished the library, put in IT and meet and greet points, friendly, welcoming, cinema blue lighting, had a great big bookshelf that you walk into to get more books that you can actually put outwards and are visible to the public, and by a number of methods they raised the number of people borrowing books, the number of issues, by 50 per cent. That really shows what can happen if you get a grip, show leadership and go in. As a children's author the thing that really upsets me is that I offered to Roy Clare to do an event in Oldbury Library and we put it on the MLA website. This showed the educational aspect of getting the users involved and I am keen on the young users which at the moment seem to be the most positive aspect of libraries – young people are borrowing more. I get sick of hearing people say that young people do not read, they are reading volumes. We have a problem with the bottom 30 per cent academically but not with the average and able kids. What we did that day is children came in with their schools, into Oldby Library: author talk, writing workshops, borrowing books. That sort of programme, done nationally, as an active rejuvenation of the library culture could transform the sector but it needs leadership. I am doing a number, I am doing one now in Wigan Library to show it can be done, we are putting film up of these things, we will put film on YouTube. We show that demonstrably it can be done, but actually a handful of authors cannot do it, we need a national body that is going to promote this and I think we can rejuvenate the thing. That is real users as well, not technically the friends' groups but real users, users from grassroots up from the earliest age.

LORD TOPE: Kathleen, do you want to add anything to this? You do not have to.

KATHLEEN FRENCHMAN: I was very impressed when I was in Finland; quite small towns have a cultural centre with their library, a café, lavatories – it is the centre for the town's orchestra and it all happens in this area. There are also meeting rooms for local societies and clubs and so on.

LORD TOPE: Very much a community base and a community resource.

KATHLEEN FRENCHMAN: Yes.

DESMOND CLARKE: It is interesting that where there is the biggest uproar, particularly in Swindon and the Wirral, those uproars have occurred when community libraries are threatened. You know what has happened in the Wirral and now, at last, the Secretary of State is appointing an inspector, but in the case of Swindon why everybody is up in arms, particularly in Old Town in Swindon, is because their local community library is being taken away from them or threatened to be taken away, all for the sake by the way of £23,000. The alternative is that they lose their library staff, the two part-time librarians, who have been enormously admired within the community and replaced by volunteers. Where everybody is so concerned is that at the same time an independent consultancy report was written and came up with a number of opportunities where the council could significantly improve its efficiency, and identified the fact that, by the way, Swindon had the highest overhead charge of any unitary authority imposed upon its public library service. No one will touch that, they will not even look at that report, but at the same time the people of Old Town and other communities are threatened with losing their libraries and at least losing their library staff. In that case everybody has lost their focus, they have forgotten about the people who need and use public libraries.

LORD TOPE: One of the things Lyn told me to ask about while she was away, which you have just mentioned, is the role of volunteers in the public library service. Is there a role for volunteers in the public library service and what is it?

DESMOND CLARKE: The experience in Dorset is where they have most attempted to use volunteers to staff public libraries and they really have to rely on ringing up library staff at the central library to answer questions and things like that. The role of the volunteer is extremely limited, and the other great problem they have is how do you keep people? It is all right when the library is only open for six hours a week or something, you can probably manage to keep it going, but if it is on a bigger scale it is an enormous commitment for the local community to find sufficient people throughout the year to keep that library open. What tends to happen is that they gradually die – slowly, it is a slow death – and the problem is that volunteers are not able to provide the professional support of a trained librarian. Librarians have spent several years learning their art and you cannot replace that by just anybody; that is a real worry in Swindon.

LORD TOPE: You say it is wrong for a library service to be dependent on volunteers, largely run by volunteers; is there a role at all for volunteers?

DESMOND CLARKE: Volunteers probably can do things. For example, when my mother was in a residential home there were real problems in terms of getting her a library service and the library service she was offered, by the way, turned out to be large print Westerns which she had no interest in at all. She had a much wider interest and she was extremely frustrated. This is where volunteers can help, by understanding their needs, going to the local library, borrowing the books, doing that sort of additional voluntary work out in the community. Also, and I think in Old Town, the volunteers have helped in terms of fundraising and, by the way, they made an enormous commitment in the last year to fundraising and then they are told they are threatened with closure. They are so frustrated and they are so upset. The issue – and I am sure Anne will support me – is that they feel no one is listening to them.

They have been everywhere, including raising it with the prime minister himself face to face. They are frustrated and the people they are frustrated with are the bureaucrats and the DCMS, the civil servants and the MLA. They cannot even communicate.

ALAN GIBBONS: I think it is the whole notion of moving towards helpers. One library in Swindon has been forced to by the community because they thought they would lose everything. That is just a cry of despair, to be honest, that is not policy, and we cannot afford to allow the deprofessionalisation of the library network and the demise of librarians as a profession. It is a profession and if you want the managed symbiosis of ICT, books, information retrieval, story-telling, author visits and multilingual provisions, all the things the library can produce, there is no way that a volunteer can do that. Volunteers can supplement but you have got to have the core provision and defend it tooth and nail and not allow it to be diminished or you do not have the service; what you then have is a borrowing point and a borrowing point is not a library. A library has always been a temple of knowledge, it has always been something active and energetic. I cannot say how much I disagree with allowing libraries to become book-out points with volunteers. Actually, the only place I can think of where it worked was Shawshank.

KATHLEEN FRENCHMAN: What Alan says about the shortcomings of volunteers is equally well applied to the untrained staff, of whom there are more and more. Even branch libraries do not always have a qualified or experienced librarian and it is not so much that they are untrained and unqualified, it is that they are uninspired, nothing is expected of them. When I was a Saturday girl I knew my Dewey, I knew what the stock was, I knew all about the library, but you get people there five days a week who say "I am not a librarian, I am a library assistant, therefore do not expect me to know anything." I think what Chris Smith said a couple of years ago was that there was not the sort of oomph to get the staff going and interested and happy. Just as I said at the top what libraries need is inspired leadership; I think it is what they need all the way down.

ANNE SNELGROVE: I am really glad to hear of your knowledge and your concern about the situation in Swindon, and I would like to thank you for that – actually it is very nice to put a face to the emails.

ALAN GIBBONS: I expect you get a lot of them, yes.

ANNE SNELGROVE: I do always read them and follow the links, rather late at night usually.

THE CHAIRMAN: Me too.

ANNE SNELGROVE: I would like to thank you for keeping me informed, but I am here as part of the library inquiry and I had a bit of a go at Swindon in the last session so I do not want to focus on Swindon, although I passionately believe in many of the things you have said. On the other hand, however, I do want to say that we have a magnificent new library in Swindon and all credit to the council for bringing that off because it is magnificent, but things certainly went wrong along the way.

ALAN GIBBONS: Can I just say, Anne, we have credited that, all of us, but what we are saying is we cannot afford to sacrifice the strength of the branch network for having a good central library network. I was talking to Tony Durcan in Newcastle this morning where they have built a great new city library, but they are also refurbishing and regenerating the branch libraries.

ANNE SNELGROVE: That is very interesting and it does lead me on to the consultation point I wanted to ask because you talked in your introduction, Alan, about involving the local community and the fact that 800 people turned up to the meeting that had been called by the activists, not by the council, about Old Town Library. We are looking for solutions, not to just pick over the scabs and I just wonder if you could elaborate on what you think could be done differently at the moment, to take it away from Swindon, by all councils and library providers when they are considering changing the library service and when they have perhaps got a pot of money, whether it is section 106 money or something else from developers or they have a windfall from something else, and they have got this treasured library project that they have wanted to do for years. They just go steaming ahead but what should they do; should they say stop, let us do this first?

ALAN GIBBONS: It is a good question. To be honest what I would like to see is Joanna Lumley for libraries. This does come to a serious point, I would like them to actually be very active in what they are doing and I would like them to start not from the necessity for technical change; I would like them to start by saying we want to transform library provision in this town, and here is what I meant by that, that we will get significant cultural figures from the locality, hold a big public meeting. We all know that at these little meetings in a Scout hut or a school hall or something of the cognoscenti you will get four people, a dog and a zimmer frame. What you need to do is actually have a really good set of speakers to proactively set out really good publicity and deliver a vision.

THE CHAIRMAN: But, Alan, that is only going to get people like you, me and the guardians ---

ALAN GIBBONS: I do not believe that is true.

THE CHAIRMAN: It is not going to bring you people who are not currently using, it is not going to bring in the kids that we once were if our mums and dads will not take us, so the issue is how do we do a consultation with a whole community rather than the community that is engaged? What would the library campaigners like yourselves think that a proper consultation would look like if we asked you to create one that was for the whole community and not just the engaged?

ALAN GIBBONS: I suspect it has got to be a series of seminars, it has to start with asking questions, not start with delivering fixed solutions. That is what Wirral did; they did not go and ask, they did not do the research as Desmond said. We do not even start from a knowledge base, that is the reality of it at the moment, we start from the wrong end. We start by presenting the axe effectively and the only time we get the large meetings, to be honest, is when people insult the community. That is what worries me.

NIA GRIFFITH: If I just could come in as an ex-schools inspector, you have talked specifically about improvement but I think it is a lot as well to do with expectation. The problem that you seem to be addressing here is the fact that the public do not know what to expect of a library so you can have criteria, but obviously the criteria and standards are lacking and the national overarching standard is not there. What about driving up the expectations, what about looking at the standards if you like from the users' point of view?

I think we have a real problem in that a lot of people do not know what a library is and the number that do is diminishing. The people who do use libraries have a narrow vision, very often, of what that library can provide even though they go in and out of it, they do not know the whole story. Is there a case in looking at these standards to look at it from the users' point of view as well and then to think about how we get that embodied into the democratic bodies that are dealing with it, into the general public and get more of an expectation?

ALAN GIBBONS: I mentioned before when three of you were out the one element I would say – and then Desmond can come in with the rest because he has got greater knowledge than I have on the sector – is schools. When we talk about the remit for education again and again and again we are getting huge numbers of children into libraries having great events, and that is one area to start. They are not voters but they are the users.

NIA GRIFFITH: What about other groups, do you ever have probation groups in, do you have gardeners' groups in. We do all this for children and the majority of primary schools get their kids down to the library.

ALAN GIBBONS: I have done events for travellers and various groups. I will give you an example of travellers. I wrote a book called *Moving On* and we got a travellers group together in a library. One lad, who had never read a book before other than being taught to read, went away and read a 400-page book that I had written on Jack the Ripper, that sort of stuff can be done. You can go and talk to the community workers.

NIA GRIFFITH: Is that embodied in documentation that tells the library what a good standard is?

ALAN GIBBONS: I suspect it is not.

NIA GRIFFITH: That is the question we should be asking. You are talking about good practice, we are talking about how do we spread that good practice, and that is the sort of question we need to be asking.

THE CHAIRMAN: Kathleen, you were trying to get in again. I have not heard you but Anne has a question specifically for you.

ANNE SNELGROVE: Kathleen, I was interested to hear what you said about the DCMS because opinions really differ on where the library service should be, and you were really firm about that. Something that we have explored with other people is

that DCMS set the policy and the Department for Communities provides the funding. Do you see that there is a problem there?

KATHLEEN FRENCHMAN: I do indeed.

ANNE SNELGROVE: What would you like to see?

KATHLEEN FRENCHMAN: DCMS to be the policy department for libraries and I would like it to have the money as well, and rather a lot of money.

ANNE SNELGROVE: Previous people – never mind where it sat – think that the two should go together, that there is a fatal flaw in the split between one department doing policy and one department doing funding.

KATHLEEN FRENCHMAN: Yes, I do think it is a flaw and as far as I know – and I do not know that I do know – it does not happen in many other areas.

ANNE SNELGROVE: I do not know either.

THE CHAIRMAN: It probably does not, apart from the health and social care split, and it would be interesting actually to consider that because local authorities are now delivering part of social care; I wonder if the budget is actually at the DoH or if it is at DCLG and if it is at DCLG then that would argue that the same possibly should be said of libraries.

ANNE SNELGROVE: Just to throw this in, where we have children's services there has been a revolution and instead of calling things education it is children's services now and that involves social services working in partnership. We do not seem to have that sort of pattern for the library service, it has kind of stayed behind – separate pots of funding are coming together in children's services from health, from social services, from education and making a whole, but that does not seem to be happening with the library service, unless I am completely ignorant.

THE CHAIRMAN: You are absolutely right about children's services et cetera and we all know about what is happening with the DCMS and the DCLG. There are arguments about big pond small fish, big pond big fish, but somebody last week put a torpedo through that argument and said that in the DCMS the library is not a big fish at all, it is a small fish and the big fish are in fact sports and arts. It is therefore ineffectual basically and is actually at the bottom of the food chain in an ineffectual department whereas actually what they felt should happen was that the responsibility should transfer to the DCLG because that was a bigger department and we could be a small fish in that bigger department rather than a small fish in an ineffectual department. That was the argument from last week, but the argument about funding and local authorities, the DoH et cetera is possibly the interesting one to pursue.

LORD TOPE: Funding all comes through the central grant anyway, does it not, there is not a separate library fund, but that is for discussion another time.

DESMOND CLARKE: Can I suggest that to some degree the criticism of the 1964 Act or which department libraries should be the responsibility of et cetera is in some

way creating excuses for the situations in which we find ourselves. In many ways whether at national level in the strategic agencies, or the professional bodies, in the end they are the people who are responsible for delivery and there have been far too many excuses given for the weaknesses in the public library service and not enough people saying “Yes, we have got to get together, we have to have a shared vision.” We ought to work towards getting a consensus in terms of what to do about it and we need to be able to have powerful advocacy et cetera et cetera. In all those things, whether it is coming from within the profession or whether it is coming from the strategic bodies, there has been a severe weakness and it is there when people talk about a crisis of leadership. These are all terms and they are all frameworks in which we operate, but in the end it is the people who make this happen. Those responsible are responsible for delivery and we need to be able to help the lead members, giving them training, making them aware of the issues. We clearly have a lot of opportunities for sharing services between authorities, for improving efficiency, for improving technology. I will give you one example – E for libraries, there is clearly a lot that could be done. I do not think the MLA board even understand what E for libraries means, never mind how this could help, but they commissioned a report and it is sitting with all the other reports up on the shelves. We have not got the people who have got a grip and providing real leadership, delivery and making it happen. That is what we desperately need within this service. Stop making excuses.

LORD TOPE: How can we strengthen the role of user groups? Sometimes it is down at local level, which is not for us, but I think one of you talked about greater recognition of user groups. We have some recommendations to make at the end of all of this, what should we be recommending about user groups that is deliverable?

KATHLEEN FRENCHMAN: The sad thing is that to get a really vital, busy, active user group is to threaten to close a library.

LORD TOPE: We may not be recommending the closure of libraries

KATHLEEN FRENCHMAN: Absolutely not, but this is what vitalises people.

LORD TOPE: We know, but that is a negative thing. Let us change roles; we have some recommendations to make at some point and we want to say something about the greater recognition of user groups. What should we be saying, what would you like to see us say?

DESMOND CLARKE: One of the things that should happen is that maybe every public library service should be subject to some form of peer inspection every four years or whatever, and that should be undertaken both by people who are professionals and also perhaps some lay people should be involved in that. They would actually look at the public library service and provide advice to the lead member and the cabinet as to how that service could be improved. By doing that you then bring the user groups or the friends into the process and that would be very, very valuable. At the moment no one has to think about them, they are just out there, and I think in the Wirral and in Swindon those were classic examples of what happened.

KATHLEEN FRENCHMAN: There are two breeds of user group, there are the ones that are set up by the librarian or the library staff to be friends and supporters and

there are stropy ones like the one I was involved in setting up which are there not just to support the service but to have views and to campaign against closures.

LORD TOPE: I call them the critical friends of the library service.

KATHLEEN FRENCHMAN: Yes, but very much supportive. We were campaigning against closures and cutting of hours and that sort of thing. The poor old libraries are terribly vulnerable for local authorities to cut the funding to, they are much more vulnerable than a lot of other services.

THE CHAIRMAN: I am hoping that some of those passive ones that have been set up by the librarian – there are quite a lot that turn.

LORD TOPE: Do you see any role for any sort of national umbrella body or support body or whatever for user groups?

KATHLEEN FRENCHMAN: There is the Library Campaign which is the national society for friends and user groups.

DESMOND CLARKE: One of the problems is that the DCMS and to some degree the MLA have been extremely restricted in terms of the input and advice that they have had over the last half a dozen years – and I believe that a piece is going to be done on that quite soon. The present review that has been going on and the people involved in that have not been talking to a lot of user groups to get their input. They do not necessarily have all the solutions but at least they listen to what they say. That terrible phrase, the report and minutes on the MLA last year, the famous 53/029 where we must not give a platform to Article 6 – that is very sad when a public body feels that it does not want to listen to the critics. No wonder the Rachel Cookes and the Joan Bakewells and whatever get so cross about it. The CILIP website was full of criticism of how the MLA could have such a view.

THE CHAIRMAN: I get lots of criticism too –there was some *Guardian* article I wrote and somebody wanted me to hang. Kathleen, what you just suggested to me is that the Library Campaign would be the type of body that, should there be a national library development agency, should have a seat at it in order to ensure that there was a user voice.

KATHLEEN FRENCHMAN: Indeed. I looked at the ACL which was advertising for new members and it said it wanted four librarian members. I looked at the membership and there was not one user on it.

ALAN GIBBONS: They have got to have a presence nationally; there is no point in having user groups that are small and isolated and local unless they actually get a voice nationally. That goes for librarians and it goes for authors. Andrew is a great, nationally-known figure, but the jobbing authors who schlep around the libraries all the time are users who are entertainers and who are involved. That is three users who ought to have a point on that board, otherwise you get something that is naturally by its nature bureaucratic, unwieldy and conservative (with a small c) and, to be honest, up its own backside shall I say. That is what you will get. It is not very Parliamentary language.

ANNE SNELGROVE: I was thinking it sounds very familiar.

THE CHAIRMAN: I sat on it twice – I use the term advisedly. What surprises me is the kind of opprobrium that seems to be there for it, which did not exist previously, and I do wonder where it has come from.

DESMOND CLARKE: Can I suggest a possible reason? In your time it used to publish its minutes on the web, so we all knew what was going on and what advice you were giving to the minister because, in the end, the ACL exists to provide independent statutory advice to the minister.

THE CHAIRMAN: Independent of civil servants who advise the minister.

DESMOND CLARKE: Absolutely.

THE CHAIRMAN: Which is why I personally think it could be a valuable body.

DESMOND CLARKE: Yes. Then we went through a period of nearly two years when the ACL did not even meet and then they suddenly realised they had a statutory duty to do it and said “My God, we had better to do it” and the first lot of appointments were all professional librarians, there was not anybody else. Then they brought on, if I may say it, some of the same old people that they keep talking to and who sit on every possible committee. They would not open it up and they stopped publishing their minutes, and the only way we can find out what advice they give is through the Freedom of Information Act.

THE CHAIRMAN: It is ridiculous.

DESMOND CLARKE: It is a farce that we are in that situation.

ALAN GIBBONS: If I can support that, when I started the campaign I went and tried to see everybody – I went to see MPs, I met Roy Clare of the MLA, I met numerous figures but I could not find this one. Any body has to earn its right, it has to be visible; if it is not visible then what possible presence does it have, and you might as well just say “Bye-bye” – what is the point?

THE CHAIRMAN: The point, I would argue – and then I will stop arguing and let you all do your minute so you get your final statement – is that the ACL is a chance for the minister to meet people who she does not pay in one way or another. At the moment she is paying the MLA by a grant, so the civil servants provide the grant aid to the MLA who are talking to them, and the civil servants are talking to the minister. Effectively that could be perceived – I would not like to suggest it is – that the same people with the same message are going to the minister. What the ACL could and should be is a bunch of people who understand the reality of life outside the civil service and outside an NDPB who can advise the minister and have some kind of distance – arm’s length. It can be a sensible voice from away and the minister can and should in my view appoint people whom he or she feels are big enough to be able to advise, but I do think that a voice for users would be very useful.

DESMOND CLARKE: I thoroughly support that.

THE CHAIRMAN: Kathleen, you go first, you have got your tell us what you have not told us already slot.

KATHLEEN FRENCHMAN: There is too much emphasis on asking communities what they want. There should be people to give them something wonderful that they did not know they wanted until it arrived on their doorstep; I think there is a role for inspiration.

THE CHAIRMAN: Absolutely, it is called leadership.

DESMOND CLARKE: First of all may I say that actually I very much support the idea of independent advice to the minister and that has been seriously lacking in the last three or four years. The minister has, as a result, been extremely badly advised and the problem with the MLA is that they must keep in line and they confuse their role with being an arm of government. We have lacked any independence there and lacked any vision; they just wait for what the minister tells them to do next. They have been reactive and extraordinarily defensive, and what we need is someone with courage, with a vision who can, above all else, get everybody on the same page. I believe that most people within the profession, within the campaigning groups and within local authorities actually essentially agree what the major issues are but there is no one to bring it all together, get everybody on the same page and move forward with the support by government, by the profession and by the local authority. It is really possible and we need to move forward with that very, very quickly and urgently.

ALAN GIBBONS: I would agree with that. It is possible, you see exciting additions all the time. Miranda McKearn is talking about the creative reading charter – there are huge possibilities, we have an incredibly literate population but we have to have a leadership body that is as inclusive as possible, as energetic as possible and, to be honest, as bloody-minded in defence of libraries as possible. It has got to start from defence of libraries and the place for the book distinctively within that, because that does get lost at some points. It has to defend it tooth and nail and not see itself as partially an arm of government.

DESMOND CLARKE: And stop making excuses.

THE CHAIRMAN: Very good, that is perfect. Thank you very much.