



Re-inventing the library

The role of strategic planning, marketing and external relations, and shared services at the National Library of Scotland

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of the paper is to explore the impact of strategic planning, marketing and external relations, and shared services on library development.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper uses the National Library of Scotland as a case study.

Findings – The introduction and development of strategic planning has provided a clear basis through which NLS has defined and achieved a new role within and beyond Scotland. Longer term planning is being informed by Thriving and Surviving – a future library project which has identified the transition to digital, the need for an outward focus and the development of an agile library as fundamental to a successful future for NLS. Strategic planning also supported the successful development of new legislation for NLS which was passed by the Scottish Parliament in 2012. Marketing and external relations have been vital in promoting the library's role, and widening the use made of its collections and services. The development of "shared services" is changing the way back office services are provided, achieving some savings and adding operational resilience.

Originality/value – The paper will be of interest and relevance to library managers seeking to address the issues facing libraries in the 21st century who are seeking management tools and techniques that will help them with the challenges they face.

Keywords Library management, Library services, Strategic planning, Marketing, Scotland, National libraries

Paper type Research paper

This is a remarkably challenging and invigorating time to work in library and information services. The entire operating model upon which libraries of all kinds were established is being fundamentally challenged by the digital revolution, redefining the way that knowledge and information is created and distributed, stored, preserved, accessed and used. Digital and social developments are changing the expectations and demands of users, and further challenges are being provided by the difficult financial position that many libraries face.

However, the core role and purpose of libraries remains unchanged. For a national library this is to collect, preserve and make available the country's publications in all formats, to enable citizens to explore and enjoy the collections, and to support learning and research. In the case of the National Library of Scotland (NLS) the Library also acts



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as the national public research library, working with other library services to ensure free access to knowledge, information and culture to support a well informed and engaged society.

For libraries to continue to achieve their role and purpose they must respond to the digital, financial and societal changes by similarly challenging their own ways of working. If libraries do not rise to this challenge, they are likely to be increasingly marginalised by commercial organisations which can use the ubiquity of the internet to provide services, without necessarily providing the quality of content or equality of access.

In recent years NLS has addressed these issues head on, looking afresh at how it achieves its role and purpose both as a national library and as a major public research library. It is developing new services, using new ways of working, and enhancing the skills of its staff. Like all major change it has been an exciting, challenging and rewarding process.

For NLS the key stages of managing the change process have included:

- (1) developing a clear vision, role and purpose for the library;
- (2) introducing a strong strategic planning process;
- (3) developing annual operating plans with effective monitoring and performance management;
- (4) realigning financial resources to match changing priorities;
- (5) reviewing staffing structures to align these to priorities and bring new skills into the library;
- (6) adopting new competencies for all management posts, the development of professional/technical competencies, and a skills development programme to ensure a highly skilled workforce;
- (7) encouraging innovation and development at all levels, particularly using IS/IT;
- (8) ongoing development and delivery of new services, particularly to support remote customers and new audiences;
- (9) major changes in the approach to collection development to more clearly reflect demand;
- (10) introducing effective marketing and external relations to ensure greater awareness of the Library and its services to potential audiences and stakeholders; and
- (11) most recently, the establishment of a new legislative framework which extends and future proofs the role and purpose of NLS, together with its governance.

For this paper I intend to focus on three elements of the change process – strategic planning, marketing and external relations, and the role of shared services.

Although only established in 1925 the NLS has its origins in the creation of the Library of the Faculty of Advocates in Edinburgh in 1689. At that time the advocates – the lawyers in Scotland – established a general library rather than just a legal library. This gained the right of legal deposit in 1710 and provided public access to these collections.

In 1925 the collections of Advocates Library, apart from the legal books and manuscripts, were donated to the nation to form the core of the new NLS. The right of legal deposit was given to NLS, although legal publications are still transferred to the Advocates Library. These legal collections can be consulted in NLS reading rooms.

NLS was established by the National Library of Scotland Act, 1925 which identified that the Library could:

- create statutes for the administration of the library, preservation of books, and admission to the library;
- accept and receive gifts or bequests;
- dispose of books in a few specified circumstances;
- acquire books and other articles;
- lend items to other bodies for display/exhibition purposes;
- appoint staff; and
- perhaps most helpfully “do such other things as appear to the board to be necessary or expedient for furthering the interests and increasing the utility of the Library”.

However, the Act did not define the role and purpose of NLS. With little guidance from its founding legislation the Library maintained a rather traditional view of its role based around the concept of being a “library of last resort”. A high priority was given to the preservation of its collections and entry only offered to those who could demonstrate that they had tried all other potential locations for the items that they wanted to consult. In practice this meant that the principal users were academics or students studying for higher degrees, and that there were significant barriers – physical and service based – which restricted the use made of NLS by the majority of the citizens of Scotland.

The introduction of a clear strategic planning process, supported by annual plans, helped define a new direction for the Library.

Strategy is a process, not a task. NLS’s strategic planning process ensured that it could develop the operational plans, and the momentum, to achieve its long term vision and objectives. A three year cycle of strategic planning has been established which ties in with the budgeting cycle of the Scottish Government. Each plan is developed through a highly participative process involving both trustees and staff, and is based upon evidence gathered from monitoring use of the collections and services, customer feedback, market research and horizon scanning.

The first strategic plan was developed in 2004, symbolically entitled *Breaking Through the Walls*. This articulated a new vision and mission, together with policies that would help NLS achieve them (NLS, 2004).

Although the vision and mission was rather inelegant, it provided the foundation for a real shift in the Library’s ambitions:

The National Library of Scotland will enrich lives and communities, encouraging and promoting lifelong learning, research and scholarship, and universal access to information by comprehensively collecting and making available the recorded knowledge of Scotland, and promoting access to the ideas and cultures of the world.

Alongside the vision and mission, NLS adopted an entitlement model (whereby everyone is entitled to use and join the National Library) with a commitment to equalise access, as far as is practicable, for all the citizens of Scotland. This was complemented by a rebalancing of priorities between preservation and access, whereby they were to be given equal emphasis in future.

There was also a clear response to the digital revolution. The strategy signalled a clear commitment to exploit the opportunities created by a shift towards digital, both in terms of the collections and access.

A second strategic plan entitled *Expanding Our Horizons* built upon the first and covered the period 2008-2011. Whilst the vision and mission remained the same, the objectives were simplified into four themes. The principal theme of widening access to knowledge was supported by work to develop the national collections, developing the organisation and building relationships. The commitment to developing a digital NLS was reinforced, as was remote access to collections and services (NLS, 2008, 2011).

During the implementation of *Expanding Our Horizons* some key issues were identified that prompted deeper thinking on the future of the Library. These included:

- (1) The banking and financial crisis which engulfed Europe and other countries made it clear that major public expenditure reductions would affect the Library in future years.
- (2) The Scottish Government was planning a new legislative framework for the Library.
- (3) Regulations to allow NLS to collect e-publications were being prepared by the UK Government.
- (4) Experience gained since 2004 demonstrated the breadth of the opportunities available to the Library through digital developments. It also showed the high level of potential demand to NLS collections and services, especially for remote access.

In 2010 the Library commissioned *Thriving and Surviving: The National Library of Scotland in 2030*. This was a major piece of research by Hunter and Brown (2010), two members of the Library's staff, which identified the key issues facing NLS and other national libraries over the next 20 years. This report provided a strong evidence base upon which the next strategy was based.

The report identified three fundamental themes:

- (1) *The transition to digital*. Particularly the anticipated ubiquity of broadband and wireless access. Coupled with a challenge to current assumptions about the nature of collections, access, customers and how we measure success, this will fundamentally change the nature of national libraries in the future.
- (2) *The need for outward focus*. The shift from physical to digital and from stewardship to access – implies a broader change in the mindset of libraries in a world of increasing uncertainty. National libraries will need to cater for an ever increasing diversity of users, collections, means and services, which will require a fuller understanding and consideration of the end-user's needs.
- (3) *An agile library*. In an era of increasingly scarce funding for public services in many countries, and rapid technological change, libraries must be agile if they are to continue to be relevant to customers and potential customers. They will need to demonstrate their value to both funders and society as a whole. This shift will require different managerial and strategic approaches with libraries being comfortable with change and flexibility.

These priorities were in line with those identified in *Expanding our Horizons*, and the Library used this valuable report to inform its most recent strategic plan – *Connecting Knowledge*. In this plan the Library’s role and purpose has been redefined simply “to advance universal access to knowledge in Scotland and about Scotland”.

To achieve this, a new approach to service delivery has been developed with a clear “offer” for both remote audiences and visitors to NLS. A range of online services has been developed that can be used by the residents of Scotland wherever they are, with a smaller selection of content available for non-residents due to licensing constraints. In addition there are a number of additional services that can be delivered to those able to visit the Library. Plans continue to provide higher levels of service for remote users. For example, collaboration is providing new opportunities such as the delivery of NLS content and services through public libraries.

The strategic planning process used by NLS has continually clarified and refined the Library’s objectives, and helped NLS develop a clear, strong focus on its priorities. This has helped the Scottish Government and other stakeholders more clearly understand and appreciate the role of the Library. It has also helped inform the new legislative framework for NLS.

It has become clear that the National Library of Scotland Act (1925) described above no longer reflects the role of NLS in Scotland, the UK or internationally. Equally, it was recognised that its governance was outmoded. A new NLS Bill was passed by the Scottish Parliament in 2012. At the time of writing it was awaiting Royal Assent, but once this is completed in summer 2012 the Act will be found on: www.legislation.gov.uk (NLS, 2012).

In contrast to the 1925 Act the new Act provides clear functions for the Library:

- preserving, conserving and developing its collections;
- making the collections accessible to the public and to persons wishing to carry out study and research;
- exhibiting and interpreting objects in the collections; and
- promoting collaboration and the sharing of good practice with and between other persons providing library and information services, and the adoption of good practice by those persons.

NLS is to exercise its functions with a view to:

- encouraging education and research;
- promoting understanding and enjoyment of the collections;
- promoting the diversity of persons accessing the collections; and
- contributing to understanding of Scotland’s national culture.

This legislation, together with a commitment to strategic planning, will enable NLS to effectively plan for the future.

NLS’s emphasis on strategic planning has been supported by effective marketing and external relations. This has helped inform the Library’s planning and development through market research, and an innovative, successful and award winning approach to publicity and promotion. Together these have doubled awareness of the Library

within Scotland, helped increase use significantly, and promoted the developing range of services to current and potential audiences.

In line with its strategic plan NLS introduced marketing and external relations expertise to the Library in 2004. Since then an ongoing programme of market research has provided invaluable information on how customers use the Library, and how they view the services. Research has covered non-users as well as visitors to the library and online customers. It also covers stakeholders such as heads of public and academic libraries. Research has also informed how the Library identifies items for digitisation. Market research techniques have included national surveys within Scotland, focus groups, online surveys and “mystery shoppers”.

The research has supported marketing campaigns that have worked to promote the Library and its services. The Library publishes an award winning magazine for its customers entitled *Discover* both in print and online (see www.nls.uk) which promotes different parts of the collections, as well as exhibitions and events. Professionally produced campaigns have set out to challenge traditional assumptions about national libraries. For example, in addition to traditional media such as leaflets and newspapers, NLS has advertised on the outside of buses and taxis and at railway stations, as well as using more unusual techniques such as web videos, “pop-up” sculptures and pavement advertising.

External relations have also been an integral element of spreading the message about NLS. A clear plan has identified key stakeholders and influencers to meet and invite into the Library. This has included senior business people, media and press, and politicians as well as potential funders and partners. This has been particularly effective during the past two years when the politicians have been focusing on the new NLS Bill. Media coverage of what is essentially a technical Bill has been excellent, and the debate in the Scottish Parliament provided a strong and positive message about the work of the Library.

This work has been extended with a new focus on fundraising and development. A small but effective team has helped NLS raise £6.5m to complete the purchase of the John Murray Archive – a unique publishing archive valued at £32m – and then move on to consistently raise significant extra funds for the Library.

The combination of significant service developments together with imaginative and high quality marketing and external relations have resulted in awareness of NLS in Scotland more than doubling, together with substantial increases in the use made of NLS both by visitors to the Library and by remote users:

- membership of NLS has increased by 51 per cent since 2010;
- visits to the Library have increased by over 70 per cent since the opening of the visitor centre and new public spaces; and
- use of online resources increasing by over 50 per cent since 2010, reflecting improved remote access to these, and more comprehensive monitoring of use.

A more recent focus for managing change has been the development of shared services, particularly for back office services. The idea of public bodies sharing services is increasingly common, and is a major policy for the Scottish Government to improve the efficiency of the public sector.

NLS is a medium sized organisation with a revenue budget of around £12m and a staff of 275 fte. The Library has long recognised the benefit of collaborative working

with other library services – for example in the provision of its library management and resource discovery systems. Extending this further to backroom services, where resources are relatively stretched, is a logical next step.

After detailed discussions with a number of bodies, a deep and ground breaking collaboration has been established with the National Galleries of Scotland (NGS) to develop shared services. Both organisations are a similar size, have a similar service philosophy and recognise the benefits of joining forces to share services.

The trustees of both organisations are strongly supportive and, in the case of NLS, adopted a policy that the Library should consider any arrangement where the same level of service could be provided at a lower cost, where a greater level of service could be provided for the same cost, or – ideally – where a greater level of service could be provided for a lower cost.

A four step model for developing shared services has been adopted:

- (1) assess the feasibility and develop a business case for sharing defined services;
- (2) bring together policies and procedures to develop a common approach;
- (3) integrate service delivery into a shared model (usually delivery by one body);
and
- (4) allow other organisations to join the shared service once it is working smoothly.

It is anticipated that NLS and NGS will incrementally merge back office services including finance, HR, IS/IT and facilities management whilst further exploring areas such as retail and enterprise services. The first successful shared service was the establishment of a joint fund raising body in the USA – the American Patrons of the National Library and Galleries of Scotland. This was a sensitive project, and it has been clear that the establishment of strong ground rules has provided a firm foundation for the current shared service programme. A second project has seen both organisations implementing the same finance and procurement systems.

The shared services programme at NLS and NGS is regarded as an exemplar by the Scottish Government. Some aspects have required a significant level of investment, particularly in IS/IT, which has had wider benefits for the two organisations. However, it is clear that shared services are not a “magic bullet” that will produce large savings in the short term. Initial benefits have been focused on improving the resilience of the delivery of support services – important in itself for smaller organisations. Financial savings have so far been modest, but it is expected that these will grow and become more substantial in the long term. In particular, it is anticipated that there will be significant cost avoidance in the future as shared services become embedded and grow with the inclusion of other government bodies.

The re-invention of NLS – and indeed all libraries – is an ongoing process. Effective strategic planning, strong marketing and external relations and the growth of shared services have all contributed to this process and will continue to do so.

During our change process we have learned some key lessons including:

- (1) Change is a way of life, and your vision must evolve.
- (2) You need your governing body to share your vision and give you their commitment and support.
- (3) You need to ensure you have the support of enough staff to make the change happen.

- (4) Librarians and information workers are developing new roles and skills – but they should leave some roles and functions to other experts.
- (5) You need flexibility as chaos theory applies to the management of libraries! There are too many variables to control to ensure that you will achieve exactly what you set out to.
- (6) There is little new in this world ... do not be afraid to learn from others' experiences.
- (7) Even with good planning, something will always go wrong – but nothing is irretrievable.
- (8) We live in an exciting world.

Indeed, this is probably one of the most exciting and challenging times that there has ever been for librarians. We face unique opportunities and threats – but the former by far outweigh the latter. We all work to make people's lives better, and we have some terrific opportunities to continue to do this in all sorts of exciting ways. Let's not be daunted, but simply get on and do this.

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