Where now for the UK public library service?

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Abstract

The UK Public Library Service has been in the news lately, but for all the wrong reasons. The service offered to customers/users has been steadily declining in recent years as local politicians view libraries as a "soft" option as regards budget cuts. This decline in funding is seen as being responsible for poor service levels and declining book stocks. Central Government aims to halt this decline by introducing another set of performance indicators against which libraries will be judged. However, their success will depend on what is happening at local level. This paper examines the decline in library services and its impact on users. It looks at the role of libraries in the community and offers ways for libraries to improve their product-service bundle. It further highlights the need for library services to be fairly and properly funded if their role in the community is to be maintained and service levels improved.

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Introduction

Shanghai Library is that city's leading public library as well as being a cultural landmark. As such the quality of the service it provides is perceived as directly affecting the whole image of the city. Therefore, the aim is to provide a library service that reflects this important position in Shanghai society (Wang *et al.*, 2000). Compare the status of such a library with those in the UK where the public library service has been much in the news in the last few months, but for all the wrong reasons. A recent survey in the *Independent on Sunday* reported that the UK public library service was in serious decline (Lashmar and Oliver, 2000). Over 450 libraries had closed in the last ten years, opening hours were shorter and the amount of money spent on books was found to be less than half of what it was 20 years ago. The main cause of this deterioration is believed to be Local Authority budget cuts. Libraries are viewed as a "soft" target with many branch libraries being closed and resources concentrated in central libraries. The Government plans to introduce standards for library services, including longer opening hours, improved services to borrowers and extensions of lending periods. These standards have to be delivered by 2004. Something needs to be done soon or the future of the UK public library service will be bleak indeed. The first part of this paper traces the decline of the library service and its effect on customer services. The second part suggests ways in which the quality of the service might be improved.

The decline of public library services

In the five years from 1990 to 1995 spending on books by public libraries rose from £103 million to £113 million. However, this 10 percent rise in spending masked a significant decline in the numbers of books purchased because over the same period the average book price rose by 25 percent (Fishwick *et al.*, 1997).

Then, in 1997, the Restrictive Practices Court prohibited price maintenance on books and so ended the Net Book Agreement (NBA). The NBA was an agreement among publishers that prevented retailers from selling books at prices below those fixed by the publisher. In other words, book retailers

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could not discount book prices. That agreement treated libraries that offered free access to their books as special cases. Named booksellers were allowed to give them discounts of up to 10 percent off net prices. The collapse of the NBA gave libraries an opportunity to seek out the best deal from suppliers. Book suppliers were competing on price because all suppliers were capable of providing a quality service with regard to service and delivery. Thus, the bargaining power of the local library has increased significantly since the demise of the NBA.

However, it is now clear that libraries have not been able to use their increased discount opportunities to increase book stocks. Research carried out at Cranfield University (Fishwick and Muir, 1998) identified a fall in the combined budget for books between 1995/1996 and 1996/1997 of nearly 11 percent. Libraries had been using improved discounts to cut spending rather than to buy more books. This would presumably, allow them to meet Local Authority budget targets. In effect, the Local Authority and not the library was benefiting from the discounts.

There is more worrying news on the horizon. Some of the UK's best-known authors are petitioning the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (the Government Department responsible for the library service) to demand an increase in authors' lending royalties. At issue is the Public Lending Right, which rewards authors when their books are borrowed from public libraries. The amount paid is currently two pence per loan and has not been increased for a number of years. Authors are seeking an increase in this amount. Although funded by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport it may have an impact on local libraries due to Government funding pressure, i.e. monies destined for libraries may be diverted to authors via the increased royalty payments, a case of "robbing Peter to pay Paul".

Modernisation of library services

Library services are being targeted by Central Government for modernisation. Reports in the late 1990s by the Audit Commission (1997) and the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (1998) have broadly supported the Government's modernisation plans.

High on the agenda will be the use of information technology (IT) to modernise administration and clerical functions, including the use of electronic data interchange (EDI). EDI would allow library services to manage their whole supply chain more effectively. Costs could be cut through simplifying the administration of orders, deliveries and payments of books and other resources. Research by Muir (2000) found that the use of EDI was at a very low level in public libraries. Although EDI would require libraries to spend money on the necessary hardware and relevant software, Muir (2000) concluded that the potential savings far outweighed the costs. The main concern is what the library service does with any money it saves. If it is used just to fund Local Authority spending reductions then library users/customers are unlikely to see any improvements in book stocks or services.

Impact on users/customers

The pressure on library funding has had a major impact on library users or customers. The shorter opening hours have, in effect, reduced access. The failure to increase book stocks must lead to a reduction in choice for readers, as must the reduction in library premises. The library buildings themselves, many of which are very old, are not being maintained with many looking shabby and unappealing (Lashmar and Oliver, 2000).

Yet, despite this pressure on funding and its knock-on effect on services, Local Authorities still judge the overall performance of libraries on a range of performance indicators produced for the Audit Commission and Best Value. These indicators include the number of items issued per head, number of visits per head, the cost per visit, the number of books and recordings available per head, the expenditure per head and the percentage of library users who found the book/information they wanted, or reserved it, and were satisfied with the outcome. It is a contention of this paper that such indicators are for the most part irrelevant and unfair. They may also fail to give any real indication of the quality of service provided. Indeed, only the last indicator specifically focuses on the needs of the customer.

The role of library services

The current Government is keen to address the problem of social exclusion within the UK. The Library and Information Commission's Policy Report (2000) cites three main areas under which social exclusion can be manifest: the psychology of exclusion, for example, perceiving alienation; the sociology of exclusion, for example, employment status; and the infrastructure of exclusion. It is this last area that is of particular relevance for this paper. Exclusion can be the result of the actions of those institutions that make up the infrastructure of society. It includes, *inter alia*, the extent of access to the resources or services, their quality of provision, and the geographical location of the resources or services. The Government is committed to combating social exclusion and views library services as the embodiment of the values necessary to a socially inclusive society. In a Policy Report, the Library and Information Commission (2000) viewed libraries as being symbols of accessibility, discovery, opportunity and choice, trust and respect and parity and justice. The Commission saw libraries as places of sanctuary, secure risk-free social places that are welcoming to all, a force for public good, gateways to knowledge, enabling forces for learning and catalysts for change. The report called for investment in libraries as the "life-force for learning" and the "essence of inclusion". Recent research (Train *et al.*, 2000) found that the public library played a central role in combating social exclusion, particularly where children are concerned. However they admit that not all libraries are providing such an environment. They conclude that both individuals and the local community have responsibilities for supporting the library service as a means of self-development and local development and that lifelong learning should be encouraged.

This defines a leading role for library services at the forefront of Government policy, is recognition by Central Government of the importance of maintaining a high quality library service, and seems to bode well for the future of the service. However, for this to happen meaningful standards and relevant performance indicators must be developed and Local Authorities will have to implement Government policy. To this end, they must be encouraged to view spending on library services as an investment not a cost.

Quality of library services

The UK library service offers a unique service package consisting of a number of products and the service that delivers those products. This is called the service-product bundle. The service-product bundle consists of three elements: the physical goods, the sensual service provided and the psychological service. The physical goods for a library are the books, music CDs, cassettes and CD-ROMs available for loan. The sensual service is the manner in which these products are presented and delivered to library users, for example cleanliness, decor, prompt service, heating, smart appearance of staff and the organisation of the products. The psychological service has to do with personal attention and a sense of well being and security. Therefore, to provide a quality service the library must satisfy customers in all three areas. To do that it must determine the balance of the three elements that customers expect. This leads to a definition of quality for libraries of "meeting the needs and expectations of customers now and in the future in the most efficient and effective manner". Of course this may be constrained by budget controls.

For nearly ten years, both the Conservative and Labour Governments in the UK have been keen to promote quality of service in the public sector. John Major's Conservative Government introduced the Citizen's Charter and associated Charter Mark scheme as a means of promoting excellent service delivery in the public sector. Based on the main principles of consumerism hundreds of public sector services were awarded Charter Marks. The Labour Government up-dated and broadened these aims in Service First: The New Charter Programme. These nine "new" principles of public service delivery represent what the Government thinks every public service should be striving to achieve. These principles involve every service:
(1) setting standards of service that the user can expect, monitoring performance against these standards and publishing the results;
(2) being open and communicating clearly and effectively in plain language to tell

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people about services, their cost and how well they perform;

(3) consulting and involving not just present users but also potential users of public services, as well as employees, and to use their views to improve services;

(4) making services accessible to everyone who needs them and offering a choice wherever possible;

(5) treating all people equitably, respecting their dignity and privacy, being helpful and courteous and paying attention to those with special needs;

(6) putting things right when they go wrong, handling complaints, and having a well-publicised and easy to use complaints procedure;

(7) making best use of taxpayers money by providing best value for money;

(8) looking for ways to improve the service;

(9) working with other providers to ensure the delivery of better services to users.

There is a clear relationship between the Service First programme and the Government's Best Value Policy. Best Value places a duty on Local Authorities to deliver effective services with clear performance targets, and to publish information on their performance (Cabinet Office, 1997). This means that Local Authorities have to strike a balance between quality and cost. They have to consult with local people to ensure that the services provided meet their needs.

With regard to public library services, Local Authorities are not striking this balance between quality and cost. Interestingly, of the top 21 libraries listed in the 147 considered in the *Independent on Sunday* survey (Lashmar and Oliver, 2000), only three have gained a Charter Mark for excellent service. This does not mean that the remainder are not up to standard, they might not have applied for the award. However, it would be interesting to see how the libraries in the survey measure up against the nine principles of the Service First Charter Mark and whether the performance indicators used to produce league tables, such as those in the survey, are actually counter-productive.

The major debate centres round the suitability of these indicators as measures of service quality for library services. Indeed, if longer lending periods are introduced, this will surely mean fewer visits per head. Thus in meeting one Government performance

indicator, the library service will be failing in another. There are two other main areas of concern, access and the effective use of resources. Access is about encouraging flexible opening hours, the use of new technology and offering a choice of provider. In the UK, only 11 libraries are open for more than 60 hours per week and 90 percent of all branch libraries are open for less than 45 hours per week. In fact, over the past ten years 445 branch libraries have closed and in the past 20 years the number of staff in library services has been reduced by 30 percent, all of which is suggestive of short-term cost reduction methods rather than improving the service provided. The tendency today is for Local Authorities to close branch libraries and to concentrate resources in central libraries. This is hardly improving access and choice. Many branches are being replaced by mobile libraries, a much cheaper option, but one that is hardly able to deliver the same level of service as a branch library.

In Merseyside, the Liverpool Libraries and Information Service has a large Central Library, 23 community libraries, two mobile libraries and a household delivery service. The service claims that no matter where a person lives, works or studies within the city, a library will be within easy access. However, it does not define "easy access". However, Liverpool Libraries and Information Services has, via its Central Library, become the first city centre library in the UK to open to the public on a Sunday. On the first Sunday more than 200 people used the library, with this figure increasing threefold and continuing to grow. This decision came as a result of direct consultation with library users. A further five community libraries are expected to open on Sundays from January 2001.

As for the effective use of resources, the Service First Programme states, "quality must not be sacrificed in the short-term dash for savings". It seems that Central Government Policy is not being put into practice at Local Government level.

Improving the quality of library services

The physical product
Libraries offer not just books but also music CDs, music cassettes, spoken word cassettes,

videos and CD-ROMs. Many now have non-English books as well (borrowing books is generally free of charge with small charges made for the loan of other items). Many libraries also offer computer facilities and free access to the Internet, thus helping to meet the Government's target of aiming to give every citizen access to the Internet by 2004.

In the past customers' expectations of the service have been low, probably because the service is free. Unfortunately, given the increase in consumer power, libraries should not expect this to be the case in the future. To remain relevant and to satisfy customers/users, libraries must continually up-date their stocks on a regular basis with the latest book titles or films. Some offer DVDs (formerly Digital Video Discs, now Digital Versatile Discs), and maintaining this service requires funding.

The sensual and psychological services

The Service First programme offers principles that can be directly applied to libraries in order that their service provision can be improved.

First, standards of service that users can expect should be set. These standards should ideally cover those aspects of service that are important to the users of the service, not managers or elected representatives. These standards should encompass library opening times, time taken to answer enquiries either face-to-face, in writing, by e-mail or telephone, and dealing with complaints. It is a fact of nature that people work to the targets and measures set for them and focus much of their efforts in meeting these targets, so there is a duty for elected members and service managers to ensure that the right indicators of performance are used. "What gets measured gets done" has been the catch phrase for a generation of managers. The current performance indicators for library services are not appropriate and may actually be inversely related, that is when one increases the other decreases. How can the number of visits per head and the period of loan both be used as service measures? If loan periods for books increases then the number of visits per head must decrease.

Second, the Local Authority should aim to consult its users and customers as well as employees about the current and future

direction of library services. It is a waste of time and effort to try and "second guess" users/customers and potential users of services as to their needs and expectations. Libraries should aim to survey citizens at least once every two years in order that the service can be tailored to meet customer and potential customer needs. If access is to be improved libraries must address reasons for non-use of their services. And the best people to improve procedures are the employees delivering the service, who have first hand knowledge of what works and what does not work, so they too should have their opinions sought on a regular basis.

Third, in order to make the library service as accessible as possible, no person should live further than 20 minutes away from a library using public transport. No person who wants to use them should be excluded from the use of library services.

Fourth, staff should receive continuous training or staff development in areas such as the use of IT or aspects of customer care. Perhaps the achieving of an award such as Investors in People can help align library staff training with the strategic objectives of the library service. All libraries should also be able to cater for users with special needs, for example, those with impaired vision (large print books available), those for whom English is not a first language (foreign language books available) and those with physical disabilities (ramps for wheelchair access).

Fifth, staff should be trained in the handling of customer complaints, and the library should have a leaflet explaining in various languages the mechanism for complaining. If used properly, customer complaints can be a great source of information to service managers as well as allowing the imposition of procedures to ensure that the same mistakes are not repeated.

Finance for improvements

The finance required can come from two sources. Local Authorities can fund libraries through budget allocations. Alternatively, libraries can start to charge users of their services.

The Audit Commission (2000) believes that charges as a source of income for Councils is a much neglected area, although it

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does recognise that charges have a significant role to play in service delivery through raising income, controlling access, responding to competition, funding investment and affecting user behaviour.

It may be argued that libraries are unique and that direct competition does not exist. Also there is at present no need to control demand for the service by introducing charges. However, given the poor state of much of the fabric of libraries, money generated from charges could be spent on improving the internal and external appearance of buildings as well as improving stocks of books and CDs, thus improving both the physical and the sensual aspects of the service-product bundle. However, charges may reduce access to the library services by excluding those people unable to pay the charges. This clearly is contrary to Government policy on Service First, Best Value and Social Exclusion. Local Councils could fund the library services from increased charges for parking and other charges or alternatively could increase their local Council Tax, both of which might prove unpopular with voters at election time. Whatever course of action is chosen, Local Authorities must cease to view library services as a "soft" target for spending cuts.

Central Government action

The Government is asking Local Authorities to buy 216 books, CDs or other items each year for every 1,000 residents within their Councils' boundaries. If a Council fails to buy less than the threshold of 170 items per year it would be subject to intervention. Just what that intervention would be is unclear, but may include the threat of reductions in grants or the use of punitive measures. This may be the only way to ensure that its policies regarding library services are being implemented.

Conclusion

The last two decades has seen the decline of library services in England. However, Government policies aim to put these services at the forefront of its drive for social inclusion, making the future look assured. This will only happen when Local Authorities recognise the important role and value of libraries and are prepared to provide adequate funding for the services. A number of means of improving services have been offered but the single biggest advance will come from the introduction of relevant performance indicators that reflect the new status of the library service. Only then will the nation get the library service it wants and expects.

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