

# From University to Village Hall

A decade of decline in the public library service  
and in its public utility

*Libri's review of the latest data on the  
public library sector in the UK - July 2005*

## 1. Introduction

- 1.1 Perhaps only in this country would anyone think it was worthwhile to debate what public libraries are for. They're for books, stupid. For borrowing stuff to read at home or on holiday. For looking things up in reference books in clean, decent and welcoming surroundings. For somewhere quiet to get on with homework or other research. For mums and dads to have somewhere quiet to introduce their youngsters to the delights of the printed page. And of course, the service is free at point of delivery.
- 1.2 Obvious as these important functions are to the millions who still use libraries – and to many millions more lapsed users – such is the lack of focus of the majority of those in local councils responsible for libraries, of the heads of county library services, of those who advise Ministers on library policy<sup>1</sup> that an almost heated debate is today taking place in terms which are at best opaque and at worst incomprehensible. A debate for library professionals alone, where concepts such as 'Impact Measures', 'Comprehensive Performance Assessment', 'social well being' and 'cross-cutting priorities and agendas' are the *lingua franca*.
- 1.3 The task this band of inward looking library experts has set itself is to identify a role for public libraries where books are secondary - ***"Books are not everything, and book-borrowing indicators should not be used as the prime measure of how libraries contribute to local and national priorities"***<sup>2</sup>- and where public libraries deliver on an alternative new social agenda developed by the librarians and their peers in the library world as an excuse for their failure to deliver the book-based services library users want.
- 1.4 If the experts were to ask the general public what they want from libraries, they would get a simple answer: books, well-displayed in welcoming surroundings which are open at convenient times. But this is not the question they ask. Rather they enquire of the contribution libraries may make to the public health agenda, or to an agenda for the elderly, or to other socially extremely valuable agendas, all of which *are* and always have been addressed by public libraries, provided they are good libraries.
- 1.5 The conclusions of this paper which is essentially a review of developments over the past twelve months<sup>3</sup> are that:
- librarians have mis-directed the funds available, in consequence have failed to deliver the book-based service which the public expects and demands, and are no longer prepared to rectify the situation. Lending books is no longer the prime function of the public library;
  - that without urgent restorative action, the public library will disappear within the short term as the 'university of the street corner';
  - that Government and its advisers are now conniving with library professionals to identify new social roles for libraries. Underpinning this 'project' is an admission of failure both to implement the statutory responsibilities of DCMS and to meet the demands of either current or lapsed library users;

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<sup>1</sup> A large number of QUANGOs and other groupings including the Museums Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) and its regional MLACs, the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP), and the Advisory Council on Libraries (ACL).

<sup>2</sup> Professor Mark Hepworth, Foreword to PWC's report "Libraries Impact Project".

<sup>3</sup> If no other source is quoted, information is derived from CIPFA Public Library Actuals 2003/4

- To accept that libraries should be the 'village hall' of the street corner is an unacceptable dumbing down of ambition and standards.
- 1.6 Libri remains determinedly populist in approach as set out in last year's report<sup>4</sup>:
- we want renewed investment in the bookstock;
  - we want libraries smartened up so that they become welcoming places;
  - we want libraries open when users want to use them.
- 1.7 And we know that all this is possible without any additional funding by taking a knife to the incompetencies in the library system.
- 1.8 Since *Who's in Charge?* was published last year, there has been general agreement to its main thesis but no action to implement its recommendations. The situation has got worse over the past year.
- 1.9 The one bright spot has been the report on libraries from the Parliamentary Committee on Culture Media and Sport. This report approaches libraries from the rational position of the library user and makes strong recommendations which deserve the closest attention from the library community and early implementation.

## 2. Libri's proposals for change...

- The government should accept the recommendations of the Select Committee report and implement them as a matter of urgency.
- The so-called Peer Review programme should be re-thought so that the views of librarians can be leavened with the views of library users and others with relevant expertise from outside the library world.
- The MLA and ACL should now divest themselves of all non-library responsibilities to become a focused body concerned only with public libraries, directed by representatives of the public rather than by library professionals. The new group should occupy itself with providing practical help to individual local councils and be clearly charged with the proper direction of funds and the restoration of the service in a way which responds to library user demands.
- Data on library performance now takes a minimum of 15 months to be published. This must be speeded up to permit targets to be set and performance against them to be managed effectively.

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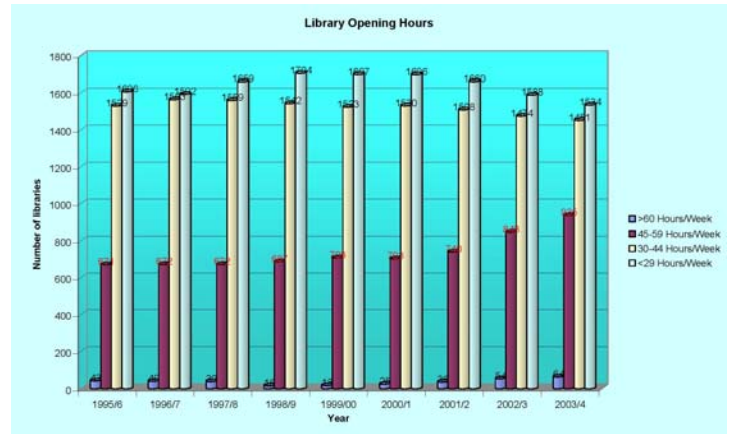
<sup>4</sup> *Who's in Charge*, Libri, 2004. Download from <http://www.libri.org.uk/>

### 3. Where we are today....

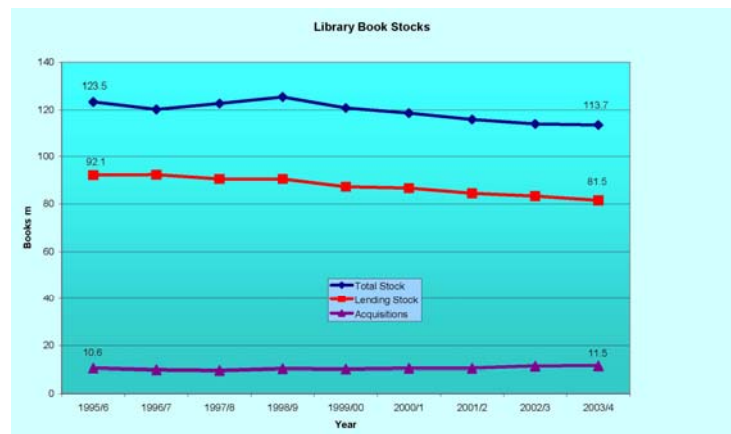
3.1 There has been insufficient investment in libraries over the past ten years to maintain an efficient book-based library service.

3.2 Insufficient funds have been made available to ensure:

- that premises are clean and welcoming;
- that premises are open at times when users can conveniently visit them;



- that book stocks are maintained at levels which ensure users can find the books they want.



3.3 As a result of this under-investment, the number of books issued each year is in free fall.

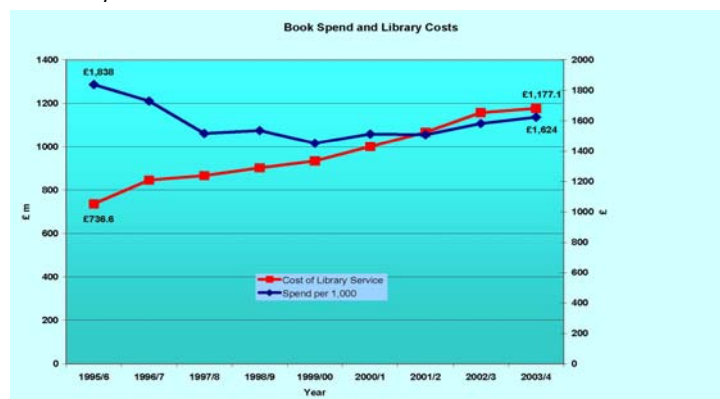


3.4 The fixed and other costs of running libraries continue to rise, with the result that of the £1bn spent on libraries today<sup>5</sup>:

- Employment and wage costs account for 60% of budgets
- Property and Maintenance add up to 12%
- Operating costs are 10%
- Council Overheads take 9%

AND

**Less than 10% of the budget is spent on books**



3.5 This change is *not* the product of market forces: library users, and more particularly *lapsed* library users, continue to see books as the *raison d'être* of the public library. In spite of the lack of investment in books and premises, the number of people using libraries for reading material<sup>6</sup> accounts for 82% of visits; borrowing or returning books – for over two thirds of visits. Other uses lag well behind, although the People's Network investment has seen internet usage double since 2001/2: internet – 14.7% visits; DVD/Video hire – 14.3% visits; CD/audio tape hire – 12.9%.<sup>7</sup>

3.6 According to MORI<sup>8</sup>, traditional library users become lapsed users for these very familiar reasons:

- Poor selection of books and reading material;
- Not open when I need it to be;
- Dirty unwelcoming buildings.

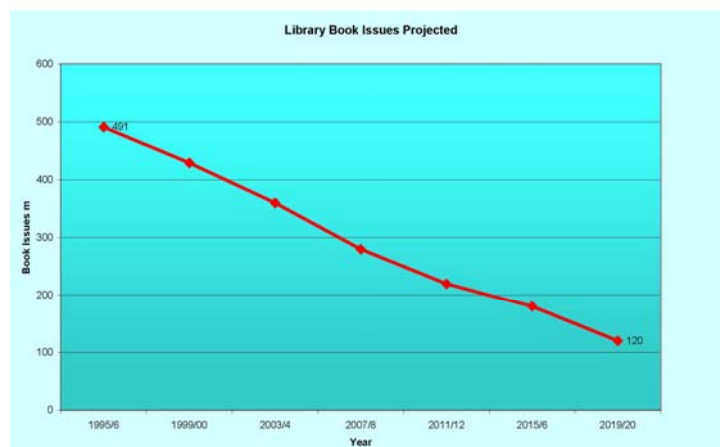
3.7 The lack of investment ensures that the core function of libraries continues to erode.

**Book issues have nearly halved in the past 25 years**

and continue to decline at >6% compound. **Issues will soon have fallen to levels last seen in the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>9</sup>.**

3.8 One inevitable result of this lack of investment and the resultant reduced emphasis on books is a sea change in the focus of library management thinking. Even if books and reading remain central for the library user...

***Many Librarians seem to believe that lending books is no longer the prime role of the public library. They are wrong.***



<sup>5</sup> CIPFA Library Actuals 2003/4

<sup>6</sup> Books, newspapers and magazines

<sup>7</sup> Percentages add to > 100 because people record several reasons for visits. CIPFA PLUS 2003-4

<sup>8</sup> MORI / Audit Commission 2002

<sup>9</sup> Continued decline at 6% rate means issues will be <180m by 2015 and <120m by 2020, equivalent to level of book issues in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century.

#### 4. What do librarians think libraries are for?

- 4.1 As pressures build on local authorities to deliver more services from fewer resources, libraries which are already seen to be in decline and librarians who are defensive about their lack of success running libraries, become an easy target for savings. As book issues continue to decline – in free fall almost – local authorities with the active assistance of library staff are seeking out ways to redefine the library service, to develop libraries possibly as some kind of one-stop shop in the High Street for council services including access to job centre, crèche, and coffee shop.
- 4.2 The degree to which the library focus has changed means that many local authorities seem to have given up on their duty to provide an efficient and well-managed book-based library service and Government lacks any kind of enthusiasm for enforcement, even though it has the powers.
- 4.3 There are, of course, many other social roles that a library can play including, according to South Gloucestershire Council in its evidence to the Culture Media and Sport Select Committee, being a physical place where people of all ages and backgrounds can develop, learn and relax; a virtual space enabling people to access knowledge and high quality resources at anytime; a place for self-learning and access to the resources and support to follow a self defined learning Path; a safe place for more vulnerable communities and groups; neutral, safe and welcoming community spaces, non-threatening and non-judgemental, they support active citizenship.
- 4.4 Amen to all these important social roles, but important as they may be, they are surely not the prime focus of a library.
- 4.5 Neither is South Gloucestershire an isolated instance. Evidence to the same Select Committee from Tower Hamlets suggested that libraries are “Safe, neutral, welcoming spaces for the entire community”; the Society of Chief Librarians said that libraries are “an opportunity for anyone to encounter a free and neutral space where they are not discriminated against”; Newcastle City Council suggested that libraries “are perceived as neutral and inclusive community spaces..... the starting point for the development of one stop shops and other initiatives to create a more outward facing presence for councils in local communities.”
- 4.6 Even if many librarians are not initiating this trend to convert libraries to supermarkets for council services, they are clearly not resisting the pressures.
- 4.7 Neither is this outward growth limited to council services: video, DVD, and computer games hire are all now widely available from the public library even though the private sector makes ample provision.
- 4.8 Since many librarians no longer know how to provide an effective book-based service, their focus is moving away from books and book-lending as the prime role of libraries. Other roles must be found, new roles which pay scant regard to the needs of current and lapsed library users, but which may result in increased use of library premises, echoing the unfocused “everything goes” evidence the Select Committee of Lyn Brown from the Local Government Association who argued “that libraries are not any more just a depository of books; they have become village halls.”

- 4.9 Library officials in Hampshire, for example, have decided that book issues will continue to decline, and that therefore they must 're-invent libraries for the modern world'<sup>10</sup>. Their plans involve transforming libraries to "Discovery Centres" and emphasising IT in the future delivery of information. Although these plans have been in operation for a number of years, officials seek to give respectability to their actions by an appeal to recent research from Loughborough University<sup>11</sup> which suggests both intrinsic and extrinsic reasons for the rapid decline in book-lending.
- 4.10 Hampshire library chiefs focus their attention on evidence in the report of increased affluence and the recent upward trends in book-buying and seem content to believe that Hampshire residents are sufficiently affluent to buy their own books:<sup>12</sup> public library provision can therefore safely be left to decline.
- 4.11 Libri contacted one of the authors of the study following publication and this revealed a rather more shaded view of libraries, the short-comings of librarians and the reasons for the decline in book lending:
- I definitely think there is a chicken and egg interaction of falling loans leading to cut-backs in funding, which can in turn lead to further reductions in loans in a vicious circle. However, unless we can get new or lapsed users into the habit of borrowing from public libraries (and libraries are not very good at promoting themselves, except to existing users), then I don't think that increasing funding will ever take borrowing back to the levels it was in the past<sup>13</sup>.*
- 4.12 In Hampshire, in addition to a library and museum service, the Gosport Discovery Centre also offers a wide range of non-library services including Tai Chi, Pilates, Get by in Spanish, Food and Recipes, and Shopping online.

*People's Network popular but fails strategic tests.....*

- 4.13 To these broad social services and social roles must be added the People's Network which kick-started the extension of library services into the more generalised social realm of digital citizenship and which has seen the introduction of some 20,000 broad band enabled PCs into public libraries nationwide.
- 4.14 The investment in PCs has not been without problems: for example many authorities now have additional costs for security to ensure that high value equipment remains on library premises. Equally the investment is 'one-off' - there is no provision for up-dating and renewing equipment as it becomes obsolete - and the rapid growth of internet access via home PC and mobile phone will limit the value of this service in coming years.

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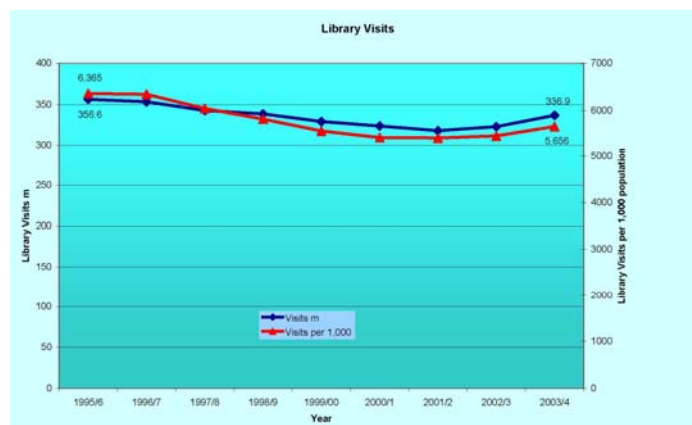
<sup>10</sup> Letter from Cllr Snaith to Hampshire Chronicle, June 24th 2005

<sup>11</sup> *The decline in adult book lending in UK public libraries and its possible causes*, Grindlay and Morris, 2004

<sup>12</sup> Of course Hampshire has its fair share of low income families. A resident writing to the Hampshire Chronicle on July 1<sup>st</sup> 2005 says this: We are forced to go to Waterstones because the books are there and not at the local library .... where stocks are mediocre, tatty, depleted, depressing and totally inadequate.

<sup>13</sup> Private communication from Douglas Grindlay, November 2004.

4.15 The People's Network is clearly popular and the increase in visits which results from these new activities is hailed as a sign of a "sea change" in library popularity with extravagant claims that "if libraries were listed companies, people would be rushing to invest."<sup>14</sup>



4.16 The increases in visitor numbers, however, seem entirely due to the introduction of largely free internet access whose main uses may not be in line either with the learning role appropriate to a public library or with the policy objectives which motivated its introduction.

4.17 Data on use of the People's Network is limited, but according to a report for the New Opportunities Fund<sup>15</sup>:

- By far the most dominant uses of PN were for the internet and email. In some places, email use was predominant, in others, the internet.
- Internet uses included web surfing and searching, downloading music and mobile phone ringtones, online games, and activities such as internet banking, online shopping and flight booking.
- Web-based chat interaction was also a common use among young people until banned by most library services for safety/security reasons.
- After these..., the use of other applications and services drops off significantly .... Use of the library or council website, including community information services was very modest, and use of the library's electronic information services was even more so.

4.18 The key public policy objective for the PN was 'lifelong learning' coupled with a focus on 'social inclusion'. While the PN appears to be succeeding with the latter by providing a place for young people to develop their computer gaming skills and for older age groups to learn about email, given the types of use identified it seems that the PN is failing in its prime policy objective of facilitating life-long learning.

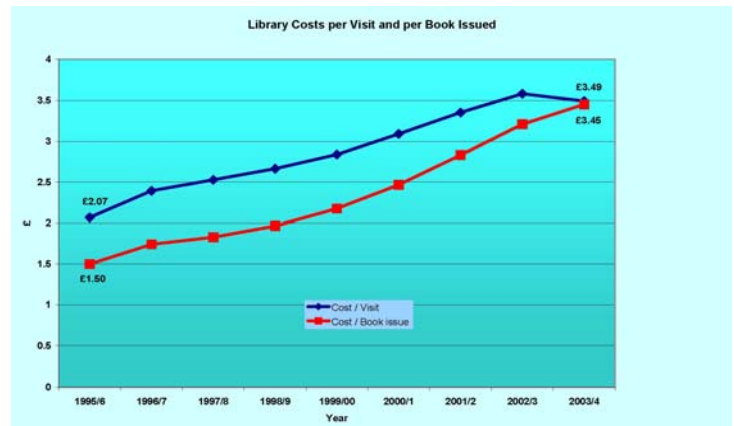
4.19 It is also suggested that if more library visits are achieved, new users will be attracted to the book-based services on offer and become traditional book-borrowing library users. On this level, the PN must also be judged a failure since the 4% increase in library visits was matched by a 6.5% decline in book issues.

<sup>14</sup> *Library Use Soars*, MLA press release May 25<sup>th</sup> 2005. Although enthusiastic about the small (4%) increase in visitor numbers, the MLA was almost mute on the >6% decline in book issues. This type of hopeful exaggeration characterises many of MLA's public pronouncements.

<sup>15</sup> *Books and Bytes: new service paradigms for the 21<sup>st</sup> century library*, Tavistock Institute, 2004

## 5. Are Libraries past redemption? Can they still be saved?

- 5.1 While the main traditional book-lending function of libraries is withering, the costs of providing the library service continue to escalate. Value for money has declined faster still.



The cost of lending a book today averages £3.50 at a time when Waterstones can sell you a Penguin Popular Classic for £1.50.

- 5.2 To many librarians, as we have seen from their actions and inactions, our question (Are libraries past redemption?) has one obvious answer: books have ceased to be the main focus and libraries need transformation to meet new visions to play new roles in society.
- 5.3 To many others, this is a defeatist attitude, given the inefficiencies which exist in the administration of the library service – at all levels from supply chain to filling the shelves.
- 5.4 Libri is anchored firmly in the efficiency camp and, in spite of only very slow progress being made over the past twelve months, continues to believe that libraries can flourish again as pre-eminent book-lending institutions and that librarians can be redeemed.
- 5.5 The “Who’s in Charge?” report identified a wide range of inefficient practices in the library service and waste of many £ millions - Hampshire library authority, for example, spends £24 each time it buys a £10 book – concluding that:
- opening hours could be expanded,
  - expenditure on books could be restored to levels which would enable libraries to maintain adequate collections, and
  - premises refurbished

All without additional funding - all that is required is to strip out the inefficiencies.

### *Hampshire makes NO progress...*

- 5.6 Hampshire was the case study for the Libri report and the report was initially welcomed by librarians in the county<sup>16</sup>:

*We readily accept many of the views expressed in the report, although feel some suggestions will be more difficult for the library world to embrace than others. Change will need to be a gradual and ongoing process, but one thing is clear – no change is not an option.*

- 5.7 So what has been achieved in Hampshire in the past year? Almost nothing.

- 5.8 Hampshire did not action any of the change recommendations of the Libri report with the following results:

- Book lending has fallen by 9.2% in just one year.
- Book loans have fallen by 32.6% over five years. From being one of the best supported lending library services in the country, at this rate of fall there will be no loans in another 10 years.
- The percentage of total funds spent on books is now just over 7%, down from nearly 13% in 1999.

- 5.9 The only bright spot has been the small increase in visitor numbers – up 2.3%, attributed to increased use of IT and the People's Network, and the locally controversial rebranding of libraries as 'Discovery Centres'<sup>17</sup>.

- 5.10 Contrary to all good sense, the Hampshire County Council executive member for Recreation and Heritage<sup>18</sup> appears to consider this litany of failure to be a successful reinvention of the library service.

### *Select Committee highlights way ahead...*

- 5.11 Although 'Who's in Charge?' appears to have had a very limited direct impact on the performance of libraries in general, it has succeeded in raising the profile of public libraries among opinion leaders and in moving the issue up the public agenda.

- 5.12 The DCMS, however, has continued to play a largely supine, low-key role, demonstrating neither leadership, nor real commitment to change, nor any willingness to exercise its statutory responsibilities to provide a 'comprehensive and efficient' library service.<sup>19</sup>

**The continued decline of in the public library service demonstrates how low libraries are on the priority list of even a junior Minister in a Cinderella department.**

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<sup>16</sup> Cllr John Waddington in Hampshire Chronicle 30<sup>th</sup> April 2004

<sup>17</sup> Visitor numbers are, however, still 13% fewer than in 1999.

<sup>18</sup> Cllr Margaret Snaith in letter to Hampshire Chronicle 24<sup>th</sup> June 2005

<sup>19</sup> The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport has the statutory responsibility to oversee the delivery of the English public library service by local library authorities and promote its development under the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964.

- 5.13 The chief political development has been the report on Public Libraries by the House of Commons Culture, Media and Sport Committee. This report took up the themes of “Who’s in Charge?” and developed them with evidence from a great number of library authorities and other experts. The report made a number of important strategic and tactical observations:
- ... traditional materials (books, newspapers and journals) must be the bedrock upon which the library services rest no matter how the institution is refreshed or re-branded in the light of local consultation. (§35)
  - ... the notion of simply reading for pleasure must be fundamental. (§7)
  - ... modern titles as well as the classics, and otherwise, of the past—newspapers and journals and the internet, all in a welcoming and safe environment at the hours that their users want. Once these fundamentals are in place, a library may then build on the range of services it offers... (§7)
  - We believe that the improvement of the quality, range and number of books in stock in our public libraries should be made a priority. The current average spend on books of 9% of total funding is very low; especially in comparison with the 1980s when 17% to 18% was the norm. (§43)
  - We regard a situation in which core performance indicators, and gross throughput, are falling—but overall costs are rising—as a signal of a service in distress. This must be reversed. (Summary)
- 5.14 The Committee concluded that “... A long hard look at efficiencies within and across the public library sector—with one eye on the potential for economies of scale (where local responsiveness will not be inhibited)—is well overdue. We recommend a new initiative aimed at inspiring an efficiency drive within libraries and library services generally; including a substantial shift of resources to frontline services. This should be co-ordinated at a national level by DCMS and MLA with the assistance of the Audit Commission. Progress should be driven by the inclusion of a value for money indicator amongst the national library standards.” (§85)

### *Management Consultancies hover...*

- 5.15 Given the strength of this support for improved efficiency, and the increased awareness of the potentially easy efficiency ‘wins’ which are available to local authorities, it is hardly surprising that management consultancies have targeted public libraries.
- 5.16 PA Consulting is promoting “Rapid transformation of public library services” to local authorities and is promising that book issues can double within three years without any increase in library funding. This offer would take book issues back to the record levels of the 1980’s.

- 5.17 Although a highly attractive offer – amounting essentially to a free consulting service funded by efficiency gains – it is clearly difficult for many library authorities to sign up since by so doing they will make two possibly unwelcome commitments and acknowledgments:
- the library authority must acknowledge that the service provided is so inefficient as to be able to fund its own remedial action;
  - the library authority must commit to a return to the traditional book-based library service.
- 5.18 These are genuinely difficult statements to agree to; they represent a real psychological barrier to the introduction of new ways of working and they will inhibit the introduction of more efficient practices.
- 5.19 The fact that the principles set out in “Who’s in Charge?” have not been implemented tends to confirm resistance to change. As with all change management processes, the first step is to change the library management – and this step has not yet been taken in the majority of authorities. But without this vital first step, libraries are sure to continue their steep decline.

## 6. Whose Responsibility? What Targets? Who’s in Charge?

- 6.1 In “Who’s in Charge?” we argued that the future of libraries should be safe in the hands of locally elected councillors, responding to the expressed views of their voters.
- 6.2 In the past year, our enthusiasm for local democracy has waned. We have seen how paid library officials manipulate local authority executive and cabinet teams to the extent that we believe there is a fundamental flaw in the administration of local democracy today. Full-time councillors ally themselves more closely with the views and aspirations of their full-time officials than they do with their electors and, as a result, are compliant to the wishes of officials and unadventurous in policy-making; **until this matter is addressed no directive or incentive is likely improve the service.**
- 6.3 We continue to believe in local democracy, but are today inclined to place more faith in local campaigning, for example in Brighton & Hove, Winchester, Lambeth and other councils in South London where local activists have made a real difference - greatly disturbing the cosiness of the relationship between officials and councillors.
- 6.4 We have argued above that librarians and officials sought easy ways out of the problem by redefining libraries as something different – one stop council shops, perhaps. This tendency is also evident among those who should know much better. The Audit Commission and others responsible for setting library standards adopt a similar position: “The fact that libraries may now be spending a much lower proportion of their total budgets on books than in the past is not necessarily a cause of concern.<sup>20</sup>”
- 6.5 The Select Committee suggested that “a situation in which core performance indicators (such as book issues, investment in materials) and gross throughput, are falling—but overall costs are rising—as a signal of a service in distress. This must be reversed.”

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<sup>20</sup> Steve Bundred, CEO, Audit Commission Oct 22 2004

6.6 We would expect the Audit Commission to share these not very radical views and it is therefore with some degree of amazement that we publish the following table showing the performance in key areas of the top thirteen library authorities measured by the Audit Commission<sup>21</sup>.

Council	5-yr change Issues	5-yr change Visits	5-yr change Cost/Visit
Bromley	-28.3%	-16.0%	+26.2%
Bury	-12.6%	-5.8%	+48.3%
Durham	-11.3%	+25.6%	+24.7%
Leeds	-32.8%	+28.1%	+31.7%
Middlesborough	-19.1%	-23.2%	+79.3%
Newcastle-on-Tyne	-14.1%	+5.3%	-3.8%
Redcar	-26.8%	+13.1%	-16.1%
Shropshire	-27.3%	-0.6%	+54.1%
Staffordshire	-15.2%	+20.4%	-8.6%
Suffolk	-24.1%	-0.3%	+36.0%
Sunderland	-12.9%	-0.8%	+20.9%
Sutton	-28.2%	-12.2%	+32.7%
Telford & Wrekin	-21.0%	-19.4%	+52.7%

Table 1

- 6.7 Not one of these high performing authorities has increased its level of book issues over the past 5 years.
- 6.8 Only three authorities have produced improved value for money in terms of cost per visit. Just five authorities have increased the number of library visits. Only three authorities show improvements on more than a single count.
- 6.9 The Audit Commission clearly has a different idea of what constitutes good performance than common sense might dictate and it is clear that the parameters they use must be flawed. Furthermore, in the process of revising and defining new criteria for their assessment of library performance, the Audit Commission conducts its consultations by peer review entirely within the community of council officials whose performance they are to assess.
- 6.10 There is neither discussion with nor attempt to understand the needs of the public, and the Audit Commission fails to fulfil its own criterion of speaking in a language which the general population would readily understand. To the ordinary library user, expressions such as "Impact measure", "Shared priorities", "Cultural Block" all have limited meaning. For managers to understand what they are to do and for the public to know whether they are getting value for money, we have to use words which all can understand.
- 6.11 The library establishment<sup>22</sup> has failed to identify the obvious role of libraries in providing reading materials for the public and is now actively developing 'impact measures' for libraries which demonstrate the role of the public library in meeting the shared priorities agreed by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and the Local Government Association<sup>23</sup>.

<sup>21</sup> Audit Commission Comprehensive Performance Assessment Dec 2004

<sup>22</sup> MLA, DCMS and the Laser Foundation are all busy in this area. Laser recently published a report "Libraries Impact Project" authored by PWC which concludes that libraries do make an impact – although not apparently in any book-related context.

<sup>23</sup> The seven priorities agreed in July 2002 are: Raising standards across our schools; Promoting healthier communities and narrowing health inequalities; Creating safer and stronger communities; Transforming our local environment; Improving the quality of life of older people and children, young people and families at risk; Meeting local transport needs more effectively; Promoting the economic vitality of localities.

6.12 Both the MLA and DCMS highlighted the efforts they are making in their evidence to the Select Committee enquiry. We have nothing to add to the Committee's comments which, we believe, deserve wider currency: A second strand of work is the development of library "impact measures". Although these measures are not yet promulgated, they do not appear to have been conceived as tools for the assessment or management of library service outcomes. DCMS wrote that:

"These [impact measures] are intended to further raise the profile of library services by highlighting the contribution that they make to corporate and national agendas in the context of shared priorities of local and central government." The Department added: "Relevance to local needs will be ensured by the linking of measures drawn up by authorities to a community profile." ***We have no idea what this means.***<sup>24</sup>

- 6.13 Notwithstanding the flight from books, there are some outstanding examples of good performance in the library world. But they have to be looked for individually in the statistics for each performance category, rather than relying on overall Audit Commission measures.
- 6.14 Orkney and Southend lead the table for book issues, both authorities with scores of more than 9,000 per 1,000 population, nearly double the average score of the Audit Commission's top-performing authorities. Comhairle nan Eilean Siar (Western Isles) tops the list for visitors with over 13,000 visits per 1,000 population – nearly three times the average score of the Audit Commission's top-performing authorities.
- 6.15 These results show what can be achieved and they are the product of determined and effective work by librarians who have learned the simple truth of running an efficient library:
- a good stock of books people want to read,
  - books displayed attractively in clean welcoming premises,
  - premises which are open at times when people can visit them.

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<sup>24</sup> §64, *Public Libraries*, report of Culture Media and Sport Committee, February 2005. Emphasis added.

## 7. Conclusion

- 7.1 The MLA defends the way libraries are managed and, via a persistent diet of good news supportive to the library profession, attempts to persuade us that the tide has turned and all is becoming well with libraries. Ministers in public continue to praise the role that libraries play and emphasise that books are central to what libraries offer.
- 7.2 However, the costs of bringing collections of books up to date, of renovating buildings and of re-skilling or replacing library management, may now be far greater than the value of the library service. The poverty of strategic organisation in the operation may be too great to remedy. For all the reasons listed in this review, and especially because no leadership has been given, the situation has decayed rapidly over the past two years.
- 7.3 Only a couple of years ago, Ministers claimed libraries as the “universities of the street corner”. Although it was probably a wishful claim when it was made, six years of mis-direction of funds and under-investment has today reduced libraries from any prospect of being universities down to the level of the urbanised village hall where drama groups, crèches, karaoke and slimming clubs are in the ascendant and the book is destined for the skip.