



**All-Party Parliamentary Group  
on Libraries, Literacy and Information Management –**

**Inquiry into the Governance and Leadership  
of the Public Library Service in England.**

**Lyn Brown MP**

**UNISON RESPONSE**

## **INTRODUCTION**

UNISON welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Inquiry, which clearly recognises the importance of a public library service and asks for responses to key questions in order to inform the Round Table meetings. As the trade union with the majority of library members, UNISON is also delighted to be part of the discussions which will take place in April and May.

The library service is essentially a local government service, with 208 library authorities in the UK. However, libraries, risk getting lost within the broader remit and competing priorities of leisure and culture functions within which they are often placed. The DCMS and their equivalents in Cymru/Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland, set policy and standards and have responsibility for the service but have no direct executive authority at local level. The lack of co-ordination at Government level and lack of authority at local level gives a green light to local councils, wanting to reduce services or service standards, and see no threat in doing so.

Many library services throughout the UK have adapted very well to the changes impacting on them from both government policy and the diverse communities they serve. There is little wrong with these services. Their main problems arise from many years of underfunding and resourcing. It is essential to be clear about the origins of the current problems in the library service so that appropriate solutions can be applied.

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**1. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the present system for the governance and leadership of the public library service in England.**

The strengths of the present system are evidenced by the excellent, innovative library services provided in many areas. The weaknesses are evidenced by the huge variation in service standards and levels of provision.

The main weaknesses arise from a lack of leadership and co-ordination of policy across Government based on a recognition of the importance of the library service to broader educational aims, community cohesion and the well-being of children. There is also a complete lack of staff and public consultation within most library services, which makes staff feel undervalued, fails to build on their experience and commitment and ultimately overlooks community needs. The CLG places great emphasis on community involvement and empowerment. Where better to start than with the library service?

The lack of guidance on minimum standards leaves a free for all situation within local authorities in relation to what they will or will not provide. It also makes libraries particularly vulnerable in a climate of 'efficiency' savings and budget cutbacks. In 1962 the Bourdillon Report on the standards of the public library service actually outlined benchmarks for the "basic requirements for an efficient public library". These need to be revisited, updated and enshrined in today's service. The Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 compels councils to run "comprehensive and efficient" services, but they are not defined.

The poor treatment of staff is manifested in the way that pay and conditions do not reflect skills, qualifications and responsibilities. With further cuts and closures, staff are also becoming deskilled and undervalued. There is a distinct lack of training and career

development opportunities for library staff. This would be particularly beneficial to library assistants, to enhance their skills to meet the demands of the service and assist them to follow a coherent career path, while qualified librarians also need to be able to update their skills and knowledge. It is appreciated that opening hours and working patterns have to be adjusted to suit the needs of communities. Along with building improvement and development, this will have a cost impact. All changes - whether to staffing arrangements, cataloguing or procurement - should be part of local negotiations with the union, whilst also being mindful of involving and informing the community on relevant issues.

The Modernisation Review of the Library Service reports in the Spring. It appears to be calling for “new business, governance and delivery models” and “relevant cross-governmental agendas”. Cross-Governmental recognition of the importance of the library service is vital and needs to be enshrined in adequate funding and clear objectives for the service. It is clear that the CLG, DCSF, DCMS and the Department of Health all have an interest in ensuring a vibrant, responsive service in order to meet their current objectives. However, setting unrelated targets alone is not the answer. Targets inevitably focus on measurables alone and can lead to arbitrary cost cutting - something to be avoided in an already cash-strapped service. Imparting the ability to seek knowledge and enabling people to enjoy literature, free at the point of entry, cannot be target driven.

One of the great strengths of the library service, and a source of trust with which it is regarded in the community, is that it is not a commercial service. Public libraries are an integral part of local public services and should remain so. No amount of outsourcing can deliver a responsive library service much-loved by the public from the cradle to the grave.

**2. Should local communities have a greater say in decisions about the public library service?**

Libraries rest on a bed of goodwill from local communities. They are valued and trusted. Much more could be done to involve both the staff and the local communities in the shaping of the service. This should involve current users, “Friends of the Library”, local stakeholders such as schools and colleges and supporters’ groups but should also involve reaching out to those who currently do not use the library.

Libraries should be at the heart of communities and it is vital that local people are engaged in service planning and delivery. Whilst co-production is the way forward, it cannot be achieved without library staff. Library staff are integral to engaging with, supporting and informing library users and, as importantly, with local user groups, schools and children’s groups who also use libraries. There has to be effective engagement with service users, and choice should be user-led. There will be many conflicting views and differing needs and priorities from different parts of the community. Staff have an important role to play in reaching communities and should be specifically trained to engage with user groups. To ensure this, they should also reflect the communities within which they work.

Lack of leadership leads to diverse standards and scale of local delivery. Libraries should all have the same recognition and high standards, whilst recognising the needs of the communities they serve.

Whilst the one-stop shop can be a hub in the community, it must be well designed and the library should not be allowed to get lost in the other services. Disaffected members of communities must be welcomed into libraries where they can make use of the many facilities, including the Internet. A library should be the place where you can find things you cannot find in a bookshop, as well as the things you can.

Library users and campaigners are passionate, committed people. They find themselves frustrated by the desire of elected representatives who cut staff and close well run and popular libraries, sometimes in order to create new, modern libraries at some distance from their homes and local community.

These 'super' 'libraries' can turn out to be just a small part of an internet service, alongside other facilities, but with very few books. On the other hand, Newcastle will open a new library in the summer for which over 200,000 new books have been purchased and this excellent new facility should act as a beacon for libraries in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. If Newcastle can do it, so can other local authorities! We do not have to build new libraries. Re-vamping old libraries is also cost-effective in the long-term. In the London Borough of Hillingdon, seventeen of the borough's existing libraries are being refurbished, to include computers and improved book stock. Negotiations with suppliers have resulted in better deals and reduced costs through delivering to the libraries individually, rather than bulk delivery to the central library. £260,000 has been saved by the local authority in the process.

Many families in these difficult times do not have facilities for their children to complete homework or research in a peaceful setting with relevant support. The library is a place of learning at all age levels, a refuge for the less fortunate and those in temporary or cramped accommodation. Libraries provide a way to the future for many through learning. By cutting back or closing libraries, we are denying many young people who may be disaffected the chance to become tomorrow's educated and skilled workforce. Some 60% of libraries run homework clubs. The Government's laudable aims for educational achievement are also undermined when a library service is run down.

There is strong evidence that the recession is increasing the demand for libraries. In the last quarter of 2008, new membership of libraries in Cumbria was up 39% on the same period in 2007 and the Borough of Westminster has seen library visits rise 10.5% to 634,000.

The first public library opened in Manchester in 1653 and in the UK today there are now 3,469 libraries and 591 mobile libraries. 1.5 million visits to Norfolk and Norwich Millennium library in 2008 made it the UK's busiest library. However 307.6 million books were issued in UK public libraries in 2007/8 – which shows a 34.8% drop in book issues since Labour came to power in 1997. A further attack on libraries can be seen in the current low expenditure on books in public libraries, which is below 8% of the total public library funds. On average, councils are spending just 1.6% of their library funding on children's titles.

### **3. Should central government do more to superintend the public library service?**

The simple answer to this is “Yes”, but within a partnership with local government which has day-to-day responsibility for the running of the service and which is charged with providing leadership in the provision of local public services. It is also vital that staff and trade unions, are consulted and involved in change. Weak leadership at Government level is reflected in the absence of overarching minimum standards and guidance on local standards. A coherent vision of what a national library service should be, reflected in core standards and funding to enhance how libraries can operate, is essential. Guidance is the foundation upon which we can ensure that all library services have a firm and common basis upon which to work and build. However, local councils and their communities should have flexibility to ensure local library services meet the needs of diverse local communities.

The Minister for Culture has a statutory responsibility to ensure everyone has access to a comprehensive and efficient service, because ready access to high quality libraries is central to a truly public service. Therefore, 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. The Inquiry into the public library service ordered by the Secretary of State in the Wirral is a welcome case in point.

Partnership working between libraries and councils across the UK should be encouraged, in order to share information and good practice. Many authorities have pioneered new ways of working which need to be more widely shared. Innovative methods of delivering the service within a publicly accountable framework should be encouraged within each library authority and lessons shared across council boundaries.

**4. Are local authorities the best agency to provide public library services?**

Without doubt local authorities are the only agency which can provide public library services that complement and support councils' broader aims for local communities and ensure co-ordination across service delivery areas. They should be responsive to rapidly changing societies and communities. Local authorities are best equipped to co-ordinate with other public services, especially in their roles as place shapers and as facilitators of Local Strategic Partnerships. Libraries should reflect the society that they serve and should be welcoming places to all sections of the community. The very best already do this, but more should be done to ensure that the library is firmly rooted in the locality.

The spectre of commercialisation and outsourcing has haunted the library service for decades and each time it has been proposed it has then been rejected. UNISON's report 'Taking Stock' reviews these proposals and their most recent manifestation - the PriceWaterhouseCoopers' report that was commissioned by CLG in 2006. It concludes that PwC's model would "push the library service into the orbit of the private sector and change irrevocably the character of the service". Only a publicly run service that is fully accountable can be sufficiently responsive to the rapidly changing needs and aspirations of local communities. And only the public sector can resolve the problem of chronic underfunding faced by the library service, which is often the motive for seeking market solutions.

**5. What are the governance and leadership roles of the Advisory Council on Libraries (ACL) the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) and the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS)?**

The ACL, MLA, the Local Government Association and DCMS should engage to a greater extent and work together to inform Government and local government's approach to the library service. They should also utilise the expertise of the staff and trade unions at the same time.

**6. What changes (if any) are required to improve and strengthen governance and leadership?**

In order for libraries to deliver a professional service, under-funding needs to be addressed to ensure adequate resources. This needs to occur in a context of agreed high standards and vibrant leadership. Despite the lack of funding, libraries continue to deliver a high quality service and are valued greatly by the communities they serve. One of the strengths of the service is that it is not a commercial service. It is an integral part of local public services and should remain so.

In order to maintain public library services and raise standards in general, UNISON would like to see:

- Adequate resources and funding for library services, staff and premises
- Improved cross-governmental co-ordination and partnership working between central and local government to define objectives and standards and requisite funding for the library service
- Empowerment of staff and communities to shape services together
- Partnership working between libraries and councils across the UK to share information and good practice
- Responsiveness to library users from all backgrounds
- Provision of staff training and professional development