

Overdue

How to create a modern
public library service

Laser Foundation Report
By Charles Leadbeater

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Acknowledgements

This pamphlet is based on research I have carried out into public libraries over the past year. It was commissioned by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport to help prepare *Framework for the Future*, the strategy for libraries, published in early 2003, and builds on the proposals in *Framework for the Future* by taking them further, making them more specific and fuelling further debate.

Overdue is born out of a commitment to the ideals of public libraries and a frustration at the state they are in. It may alarm and annoy some in the public library community, but its aim is to provoke a wider debate about the future of libraries. I would like to thank all the many people in public libraries who have helped me with my research over the past year, everyone who commented on drafts on this pamphlet and the Laser Foundation for asking me to write it.

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Foreword

The Laser Foundation was set up in October 2001 with the overall mission of funding proposals to improve services provided by public libraries. The Foundation was formed following the cessation of LASER (the London and South Eastern Region) library service as an operational body.

In late 2002 the Foundation launched its funding activity with a call for proposals on closely targeted themes from ex-LASER members. Several proposals were subsequently funded after a strict refereeing procedure.

Trustees are now in the process of considering how best the available funds can be used to make a major difference to the public library sector. They have consulted widely in order fully to understand the present state of, and the difficulties and challenges facing, the sector. The Audit Commission report in 2002, the Department of Culture, Media and Sport *Framework for the Future* report in 2003 and papers submitted to the Foundation by leading professionals in the library world have informed these considerations.

We have found much commonality in identifying the problems and difficulties. Although there are pockets of excellence and good practice, they are not uniform and are thinly spread; there is a need for high-quality services to be offered more consistently via every public library in the country.

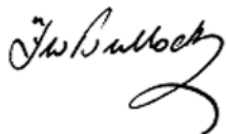
This last point has particular resonance for the Laser Foundation. Its precursor organisation, the LASER library service, had for more than 70 years pioneered and provided many first-rate services to its members, the public libraries of London and the Southeast, and to other libraries and regional library services in the UK and beyond. This is why the Laser Foundation is anxious to support the more positive proposals made in many of the recent reports, and to find and fund pathways to assist the public library sector to grow, develop and achieve the mechanisms to flourish.

As a consequence of the above considerations, the Laser Foundation Trustees decided not to announce calls for further themed funding proposals until we had assimilated all the available information and opinion on the present state and future potential of the public library sector.

To inform our future funding decisions we commissioned Charles Leadbeater to undertake a critical review of the current state of the public library sector and to give pointers to ways in which a modern library system for the future might be achieved. This, we felt, would serve

the interests of the libraries and their heads of service and staff, and would assist in helping to highlight the plight of the libraries and influence policy and policy-makers.

The result of Charles' work is this pamphlet, which will influence the programme of work of the Foundation for the next few months. The report is intended to galvanise action and help libraries walk fully alert into a brighter future.



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1. Introduction

Britain's public libraries are in serious trouble. Audit Commission figures published in May 2002 show that since 1992 visits to libraries have fallen by 17 per cent and book loans by almost a quarter. There are 23 per cent fewer people borrowing books from public libraries than three years ago, although book sales have risen by 25 per cent in the same period. The proportion of regular users of public libraries under the age of 55 is falling. More recent figures from Loughborough University show the decline is unabated.

This decline is all the more serious because it takes between five and ten years to turn around a national public service. To arrest the decline within this decade a determined and ambitious programme of renewal would have to start now. Yet the public library network lacks many of the ingredients required to set renewal in motion.

Renewal rarely starts without an honest recognition of the scale of the problem a public service faces. Yet many involved with public libraries are in a state of denial. They cite new services they are running, such as providing

internet access or adult learning, as evidence that libraries give value for money. Yet these recently developed, add-on services will not on their own provide an enduring justification for public libraries. Those who argue that the problems result from lack of resources ignore lessons from councils such as Wigan, Kent and Northumberland, which turned themselves around by first taking radical measures to improve their performance without any new money. The task of turning libraries around starts with the people running them. Libraries will attract additional resources only by putting their house in order.

Public service renewal requires strong political leadership to challenge complacency, set ambitious goals and legitimise innovation. Libraries lack such leadership. Within local government, libraries are often buried within larger leisure or education departments. Because the library system has local roots, it is difficult for public libraries to pursue common, national or even regional goals. The diffusion of responsibility within central government does not help. The Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) is responsible for library policy. The department's minister, Baroness Blackstone, has given unprecedented support to libraries, and *Framework for the Future*, published in 2003, sets out important themes for libraries to pursue in the years to come. Yet the DCMS does not fund libraries. It cannot translate its ideas into action. The department chiefly responsible for funding public libraries, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister

(ODPM), does not set their goals. The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and the National Lottery finance programmes in libraries but they do not have much influence over the public library network as a whole.

Good public services need top quality senior management. Yet management development for libraries has been neglected. Most new graduates from library schools do not go into public libraries and a core of senior librarians, recruited into public libraries 20 or 30 years ago, is on the verge of retiring. Public libraries face a shortage of management talent.

Service renewal often starts by producers being held to account against clear standards. Libraries are meant to meet national standards set by the DCMS, but failure to uphold these standards incurs no sanction – a sure recipe for drift. Public services depend on the quality and motivation of their staff but the public library workforce is stagnating. Training is rare, staff turnover limited, young recruits few and far between.

Libraries' local roots are one of their strengths. But localism can feed parochialism: current users often oppose changes in provision designed to attract new users. Localism makes it difficult for library authorities to share resources. Huge sums are wasted on duplication of administrative services across the 149 library authorities.

Because of the highly fragmented public library system, it is difficult to devise and take on projects that mobilise

libraries as a network. As a result, public libraries run many projects relating to social inclusion, learning, e-government and crime for government departments. What they lack is a sense of their own mission or of their place in a modern society, a sense that they are places for people to use to access books, information and knowledge far more easily than even ten years ago.

Public libraries used to be central to the life of many communities but they are increasingly being marginalised. People can get the information, books and other services libraries provide from many other sources. Libraries need to respond by offering a distinctive service and experience, which builds upon their historic strengths.

If they fail to rise to this challenge, public libraries may decline so far that they cannot be resuscitated. A hugely valuable public network, which should play a critical role in promoting equality of opportunity in an increasingly knowledge-driven economy, could be lost. The public library system could be sleepwalking to disaster. Saving libraries from that fate means answering two questions:

- What should libraries do? – The public library system needs to focus on a few inspirational goals.
- How should libraries deliver those goals? – Clearer goals need to be matched by a stronger capacity to deliver.

The answer to both questions should involve a new institution – a National Library Development Agency. This agency should be given a simple remit: to turn libraries around in the next decade by making a significant contribution to a handful of key national goals. The agency should be the focal point for creating a political consensus over libraries' goals and making sure those goals are delivered. It would not deliver solutions. Its job would be to orchestrate change across the library network as a whole by agreeing goals, enforcing standards, investing in better management, bringing together the many different players involved and channelling funding from central government. The agency would have a ten-year life to achieve its goal of revitalising libraries.

2. What should libraries be for?

Libraries should promote equality of opportunity in a society in which knowledge, ideas and information are increasingly important in work and hobbies, as a source of individual identity and a focus for a sense of community.

Libraries should not be defined by the equipment they provide nor the stock of materials on their shelves. *Framework for the Future* suggests that libraries should be measured by the services they deliver, the experiences they enable and the environment they create.

Libraries are curiosity satisfaction centres. Curiosity propels people into libraries to research their family history, find out about a business regulation, explore a novel, listen to some music, surf the internet or watch a video. The common thread is the excitement and satisfaction of curiosity. Libraries should excite people's curiosity and help them satisfy that appetite, either directly or by helping navigating them to colleges, bookshops, cinemas, clubs, galleries, television programmes or websites.

The public library's role is to make that experience available to those who are least likely to pursue their curiosity under their own steam. Libraries benefit most those people who are least able to afford books, computers and videos, and those who do not have internet access at home. About 7 million adults in England are illiterate. The economic returns from knowledge will go to those groups and places that are already rich in knowledge, unless institutions like public libraries can create more equality of opportunity.

Britain's public libraries should launch an imaginative marketing drive into areas where people are least likely to visit libraries, read books or learn. Public libraries need to attract new users while attacking inequalities in access to knowledge and culture.

Attractive, modern 'hub' libraries in shopping centres should be at the heart of this new offer. As new library services such as Tower Hamlets' Ideas Stores show, new users are more likely to be attracted by bright, light, attractive retail formats, which blend learning and leisure. More libraries need renewal programmes as far reaching as the Ideas Stores, Liverpool's Library Plus and Hampshire's Discovery Centres. Many library authorities should be running fewer, better libraries that draw people in from a wide range of communities. A new generation of 'hub' libraries should be combined with a 'guerrilla network' of people promoting reading, working in communities, schools, housing estates, residential homes

and early years centres. The ‘guerrilla network’ should encourage people to start reading, questioning, enquiring and learning. The ‘hub libraries’ with cafés, cinemas, music and video rooms should be one of the places people go to when they want to satisfy their curiosity.

Public libraries need to prove themselves as curiosity centres by meeting a handful of national goals in the next five years. Achieving those will be vital to build the momentum for change.

3. National offers

If the library network is mobilised to meet a few big objectives, there will be large spin-off benefits in education, social inclusion and community building. Attaining these goals will be more important than running a plethora of loosely connected initiatives. These should not be micro, operational targets. They should be stretching and general goals that spread the love and habit of reading, learning, asking, enquiring and thinking. Public libraries should be agents of cultural change, promoting an inquisitive, curious, literate culture in which reading is taken for granted. They should not be judged by their book issue figures but by their role as agents of cultural change.

National offers should build on the development of the People's Network, which has equipped public libraries with computers and broadband internet connections, and crafted according to five principles:

- Allow the flexibility to devise local solutions.
- Weave together books, computers, video and music.

- Build on approaches that have worked and which could be scaled up.
- Help achieve goals in education, social inclusion, community cohesion, lifelong learning, and health and crime prevention.
- Encourage public libraries to deepen their collaboration locally and nationally with schools, early years centres, health centres, police forces, museums and arts centres to create shared approaches to common problems.

Examples of what these national offers might be are described below.

Pre-school children

All pre-school children should have ample opportunities to play with books and start to learn to read. All new babies and their mothers should become library members automatically and be invited to a reading group at a library, nursery or 'Sure Start' centre before the babies reach their first birthday. Half of all three-year-olds should visit libraries at least four times a year.

This offer could be delivered by building on existing initiatives such as 'Books for Babies' and 'Bookstart'. The long-term aim should be to create a 'guerrilla network' of early years librarians and reading developers using libraries to promote home-based learning. If children and

parents can get used to the idea of home-based learning before they go to school it will make the education they get in school more effective.

The spin-off benefits of this investment could be huge. Children would be more ready to extend their reading skills when they reach primary school and might be encouraged to develop a habit and love of reading. Parents who find it difficult to read might be more likely to seek help.

Secondary school children

Any secondary school child should be able to ask in public libraries for help with their homework, after school, at weekends or during school holidays. Libraries should run a network of after school homework clubs, which could become weekend clubs and summer work clubs. These clubs do not need to be run by librarians. They could be set up as joint ventures with education departments, schools or voluntary groups. Half of all 14-year-olds should be able to use a public library service to study or ask a question at least four times a year.

Adult enquirers

Any adult should be able to pursue any interest through their local public library by going online, by getting help to find out more about a hobby or by studying. The library offer should be to help people study anything they

like, anywhere and anyhow. A third of adults should use public library services at least four times a year to pursue their interests.

Public libraries will only be able to deliver this goal through joint ventures with further and higher education, as well as by developing their own lifelong learning activities. A national online 'Ask a Librarian' service, linking together the many local services run by library authorities, would count towards achievement of this goal.

Curiosity clubs

Anyone who wants to develop their interests, through reading, film, music or art, should be able to join a library-based group. All public libraries should support reading groups for teenagers, young adults, single people, retired people and housebound readers. Every 'hub' library should support at least 20 reading groups and curiosity clubs with ten people in each group. The 'guerrilla network' of community librarians would encourage the development of community-based reading groups.

Delivery of these national offers will require public libraries to work far more collaboratively – regionally, nationally and through partnerships with other agencies. Public libraries will not spread the habits of curiosity, reading and learning as stand-alone institutions. They need to work in concert and through networks with other agencies.

4. Making it happen

These national offers could be pursued within the existing institutional framework for public libraries. The offer to babies and parents, for example, could be pursued as a discrete project, akin to the literacy and numeracy hour in schools or the project to roll out the People's Network. Voluntary agencies such as the Reading Agency, which has played a critical role in 'Books for Babies', could help deliver the offer.

But there are limits to how much can be achieved through time-limited, discrete projects. The People's Network, for example, has added valuable new services in libraries but it has not changed the way that the public library network as a whole works. Libraries do not need more add-on services: they need to transform the way they work, and quickly. To achieve that a bolder change is needed: the creation of a National Library Development Agency.

The chief weakness of the public library network is its excessive fragmentation. There are 149 library authorities, each with their own agenda. They are funded by a clutch

of central government departments and other agencies, such as the National Lottery, which are poorly coordinated. Public libraries need to be orchestrated as a network, so that their myriad of local activities contributes decisively to achieving national objectives. Micro management from the centre would be counterproductive, but the public library network needs a central body that will make sure resources are better aligned with policy goals, nationally and locally.

Central development agencies are orchestrating change in other parts of the public sector, for instance in the NHS Modernisation Agency and the Schools Standards and Effectiveness Unit, within the DfES. The Arts Council has recently created a stronger national centre to work with reconstituted regional arts boards. In the public library sector there are good examples of how intermediary bodies can help broker and orchestrate change across the system. The London Library Development Agency, a cooperative venture bringing together London's 33 library authorities, makes joint bids for funding and to develop shared services. Small third-sector agencies, such as the Reading Agency and Open the Book, have had huge impact on public library services despite being small organisations.

Lessons from Singapore

Another valuable model is Singapore's National Library Board. The library board operates in the context of

Singapore's highly consensual but hierarchical culture and political system. It is not a model that could be transported easily. However, it could provide useful guides to the creation of a National Library Development Agency in the UK.

Singapore's National Library Board (NLB) is in the middle of an eight-year programme to build about 90 new libraries. They are usually open from late morning to late evening. At weekends the libraries are thronged with users. The largest regional library, akin to a main municipal library in the UK, gets 20,000 visitors each weekend. Several ingredients are driving forward Singapore's libraries.

Political vision: Singapore has been pursuing a strategy to become a 'knowledge economy' since the early 1990s. Libraries are seen as part of that wider social and economic strategy. Part of the NLB's job is to market libraries to the rest of Singapore business, academia and government.

Policy consensus: The NLB was set up after three years of patient policy-making, involving many different stakeholders from outside the library world. This has provided the NLB with a secure backdrop against which to work.

Challenging targets: The NLB has a few very general but very exacting targets, for example to improve library use and membership by a factor or four or five over eight

years. The central target is to increase library use from less than 10 million visits a year at the outset to more than 30 million. Apart from one review after four years, the board has been left to get on with its job.

Efficiency first: The NLB's first priority was to eliminate queues by using new technology more effectively. Fines are paid with credit card machines. The library catalogue can be searched online. Books can be ordered online and picked up at a library. Any book can be returned to any library. Exacting performance criteria were introduced, for example, to speed the return of borrowed books to shelves. The centre set stretching goals. The means to achieve them were devised by project teams of librarians and managers.

Create services: Librarians do not process books and fines. They provide services such as answering research enquiries, organising music recitals and learning programmes.

Cultural change: The NLB recognised it would need a new breed of librarians and set out to develop them by creating new courses to help people with skills in marketing and retailing to acquire knowledge of libraries. The NLB brought in people from outside the library world in key positions.

Systematic innovation: Drive from the top is vital to set goals and develop a new culture within libraries. The NLB's chief executive, Chris Chia, has a motto: 'no sacred

cows'. As an example of this, the NLB is piloting a library aimed at teenagers in which there are no books on display. The 'bookless' library will focus instead on activities that teenagers enjoy and allow them to order books from an automatic system. Chia has created a system for prototyping new services, based on a central 'services development unit', which works up ideas that come from all over the organisation.

For all the differences, public libraries in the UK can learn lessons from Singapore's NLB, which:

- has the political vision to put libraries at the heart of wider policy for economic development
- builds a policy consensus by bringing together all stakeholders
- takes a 'project-centric' approach to innovation supported by a central service development unit
- demonstrates a constant willingness to invite challenges to the library service from outsiders
- uses efficiency and self-service to release resources to reinvest in new services.

Resource

Resource is a quango created by the DCMS in 2000 by bringing together separate bodies that used to look after

museums, archives and libraries. It should take a leading role in developing public libraries in the UK, but spent its first two years focused on internal reorganisation and regional museums. It had little credibility among library managers and limited visibility among local authorities; central government policy-makers did not regard it as a leading player in debate. However, Resource has recently begun to focus more on libraries by drawing up a workforce development plan to implement the DCMS library policy review *Framework for the Future* and by creating regional bodies to bring together museums, libraries and archives.

Nonetheless, it is difficult to see how a poorly regarded, weak quango will deliver the drive required to turn around public libraries. A bolder move is required, hence the suggestion for a dedicated National Library Development Agency to be established. The creation of a National Library Development Agency would have its own costs – time, money and effort could be wasted in a game of musical chairs – but once established the Agency would tackle the biggest challenge that public libraries face: the cultural issues that stem from the way that people think.

The creation of a dedicated Agency could help sort out a number of other factors that hold libraries back, not least the division of responsibility between the ODPM, the DCMS and other central departments that fund public libraries. The Agency's role would be to orchestrate change to make sure national and local priorities are more clearly articulated and more closely aligned.

5. The National Library Development Agency

The NLDA would have several critical roles, many of which Resource is unable to play effectively.

Political role

The NLDA would require a founding constitution and national goals that central and local government would support. The NLDA would not be the creation of a Whitehall department to be imposed on local government. It would be created by the coming together of the Treasury, DCMS, ODPM and DfES from central government and local authorities. The Agency would be their joint creation. For the first time all the players involved in funding libraries, national and local, would be brought together around a single Agency, with a few common goals. The NLDA would be governed by a board of stakeholders from its main funders and partners who would act as guardians of this vision. The Agency would initially be set up with a ten-year public service agreement

with the Treasury to deliver a handful of national offers and in the process turn around libraries. Its progress in reaching these five main goals would be assessed once every three years.

Policy-making and funding

As well as bringing together national and local government, the NLDA would bring together for the first time policy-making and funding. The DCMS would relinquish policy responsibility for libraries in favour of the Agency. DCMS expenditure on public libraries would be invested in the Agency. The ODPM and the DfES, which would be one of the Agency's major funders, would also have a direct voice in policy-making. The NLDA would become the leading voice for public libraries in national policy debates over education, social inclusion and cultural development.

Setting standards

Based on the 'national offers' the NLDA would set standards to judge public library performance. The Agency would organise a system of peer reviews and collaborative monitoring for libraries. Authorities that fell well below the required standards would be asked to produce action plans. If they continued to fail they would have to work with regional consortia to develop 'collaborative management' solutions. These might involve

neighbouring library authorities taking over the failing service. An alternative would be to require the failing authority to bring in private or third-sector management to run the service.

Any authorities that refused to cooperate would risk having their core funding withdrawn. Those that achieved their goals would have opportunities to bid for additional funding. The Agency's national standards would challenge the parochialism that affects many public library services.

Improving performance

The NLDA would help library authorities improve their performance by building on the regional groupings of authorities established by Resource. The regional consortia would share best practice, make joint bids for funding and come up with cooperative solutions for sharing back-office resources, cutting duplication and reducing administration costs. The NLDA would also be in a position to commission third-sector agencies, such as the Reading Agency and Open the Book, to promote innovation and spread best practice.

Developing people

The NLDA would take charge of workforce development planning for the public libraries as a whole. It would work with local authorities and regional groupings to ensure these development, training and recruitment targets were met.

Investing in innovation

The NLDA should be an investor in innovation, of which there is too little in the current system. Innovation is difficult to spread. The Agency should systematically invest in new service ideas that could be developed with the potential to spread across the network.

The NLDA should be funded to run a ‘Transformation Fund’. Many library authorities have old, rundown buildings in places that are no longer at the heart of communities.

Authorities face two main difficulties in reshaping buildings to match modern needs. First, they cannot afford to draw up development plans, to assess changing needs and devise plans to close underused public libraries and open new libraries in better locations. The Transformation Fund would provide seed funding for authorities to work with architects and designers to draw up plans to be used to raise additional funding. Second, even when an authority has an ambitious plan, such as Tower Hamlets’ Ideas Stores, it will probably have difficulty raising the funds to implement the plan. In Tower Hamlets the money raised by selling off old sites was not enough to fund the development of new sites. Bridging this gap would be the Transformation Fund’s second role.

Effective advocacy

Libraries need more effective national advocacy. The NLDA board should include high-profile outsiders who

could add their voices in support of libraries. In addition, the NLDA should undertake national marketing and promotional campaigns. A further possibility would be to create a national Friends of Libraries organisation to speak up for libraries nationally.

Developing services

The NLDA would broker national content and service agreements. First, agreements with online content providers, who at the moment have to sell their services to 149 separate authorities. The NLDA would broker national agreements on behalf of all public library authorities to get access to digital databases and content. Second, the NLDA would bring together overlapping local services, such as online 'Ask a Librarian' services, to offer a national network. Third, the NLDA should broker national agreements with book publishers, for example to buy bulk copies of popular bestsellers.

Challenge complacency

Public libraries can be insular. Librarians need greater exposure to outside ideas, ways of working and judgements about their services. The NLDA should be an advocate for public libraries and an intelligent critic of government policy, but in addition the Agency should challenge complacency and insularity within the public library community.

Financing the NLDA

The NLDA would be financed through a variety of routes. It would take over the combined library budgets of Resource and the DCMS. Some of its activities could be funded by top slicing library funding from the ODPM. One aim should be for the Agency to form a close relationship at the outset with the DfES, in which the Department would fund the Agency to ensure that key education and learning goals are met. In addition, the NLDA could enter into specific public spending agreements with the Treasury or apply for funds from the 'Invest to Save' budget. The Agency could also apply for funds from the Public Finance Initiative and the Capital Modernisation Fund, as well as raising funds from foundations, charities and other government departments.

The NLDA would help public libraries cohere as a network without robbing them of their local roots. Libraries must remain part of local government not least because they will have to cooperate far more closely with other local services – health, education, community safety, economic regeneration – than they have in the past. The best public library services welcome working in partnerships, which have to be brokered locally as well as nationally. The NLDA would be an attempt to devise a more productive relationship between local initiative and national objectives. Its aim would be to orchestrate local initiatives to make sure it made more of an impact nationally.

6. Conclusion

Public libraries have a diminishing capacity to respond to mounting challenges. The DCMS does not fund libraries and so is unable to drive through policies or enforce standards; the ODPM funds libraries but has no clear policy goals for them; the DfES funds a growing number of activities in libraries but has no formal policy responsibility for them; Resource is widely judged to have been ineffective. It is not surprising that the public library profession is demoralised and defensive. Too often representatives of libraries find it convenient to blame the difficulties libraries face on 'lack of resources' and too many public libraries see themselves as helpless victims. They want to blame central government for the mess they are in.

The first responsibility for turning around a failing or declining service lies with the people running it. They have to face up to the challenge and get to grips with it, starting by putting their own house in order. Only then will a once failing service start to attract additional resources, partners and support.

The time for blaming others for the plight of libraries is over. So too is the time for fiddling in central government. Unless decisive action is taken now, the decline of the public library network could become terminal by the end of the decade. The revitalised public library network should be at the heart of a socially inclusive, knowledge-rich service economy. Instead, Britain may be writing off a vital social and cultural infrastructure.

The public library system and its funders must embrace ambitious national goals to restore confidence in the public library network as a whole. That will be achieved only with a new mix of central and local initiatives, orchestrated by the National Library Development Agency. Libraries will attract additional resources only when those responsible for them – professional librarians, local politicians, central government – put their house in order. Libraries are sleepwalking to disaster: it's time they woke up.