

The Case for a National Strategy for Public Libraries

Introduction

1. The development of overarching national or territorial strategies for public libraries has become widespread internationally. In a UK context, Scotland is the only country not to have produced some form of national strategy document. The main impetus for action elsewhere has been the recognition that library services are in a process of transition from their traditional role to meet the needs of the 21st Century landscape. Libraries across the world have been reviewing and evaluating their roles correspondingly and searching for the most appropriate policy setting to ensure that libraries deliver maximum value.
2. The conclusion in many cases has been that coordinated strategic action is required to agree a unified vision for the future, and to ensure consistency of service direction and delivery. This is supported by the Carnegie UK Trust report *A New Chapter: Public Library Services in the 21st Century*¹ which concludes in favour of national policy for library provision.
3. This paper sets out the rationale for developing a National Library Strategy in Scotland for consideration by the COSLA Sports, Arts and Culture Working Group. It includes details of related work/projects that are currently underway and considers the opportunities and challenges associated with the production of a national strategy.

Why is a National Strategy required?

4. The current economic climate and drive to identify efficiency savings is putting pressure on libraries across Scotland and many councils are having to make difficult decisions regarding funding. These constraints will inevitably make service development extremely difficult when, paradoxically, libraries are striving to deliver on many of the National Priorities (as outlined in Appendix I) and to develop new services to suit the 21st Century landscape.
5. A national strategy has the potential to assist library services in articulating the case for continued funding to support development. It could also enable library services across the country to identify opportunities for partnership working and forming strategic alliances, which could save money and prevent duplication of effort. The aforementioned Carnegie report specifically highlights the need for more shared services and cross-authority partnerships to develop effective responses to reducing budgets.
6. In light of the constraints due to the prevailing economic situation, it is important that any strategy provides a framework which can be translated into realistic deliverables and which is flexible enough for authorities to interpret in a way that reflects local circumstances.
7. Full consultation with the Scottish Heads of Public Library Services and other major stakeholders throughout the process of developing a strategy would be critical to its success. Initial discussions with the Heads of Public Library

¹ *A New Chapter - Public Library Services in the 21st Century*, Carnegie UK Trust (2012)

Services have pointed to there being broad support and, indeed, enthusiasm for the development of a national strategy.

What might happen if we continue without a strategy?

8. The concept of the public library service is going through a transition in response to the demands of the 21st Century. The existing branch network presents an opportunity for delivering a range of services to citizens to support local and national government priorities. At the same time, councils are having to make difficult decisions in light of budgetary pressures. The combination of these factors gives rise to several specific risks to library services.

9. Firstly, if there is no overarching vision for the future, library services could adopt vastly different approaches to service delivery. This could lead to fragmentation across the country which may ultimately damage the notion of public libraries as a universal service.

10. Furthermore, if the services libraries offer were to diverge, this would create confusion amongst members of the public about the role of the library and the services they might expect it to provide. The library 'brand' is a key strength at present and this public confidence could be lost in a landscape of disparate provision. Lack of awareness could also feed declining use which would be more difficult to stem if each service was to present different models of service provision. This would inhibit library services' ability to contribute to priorities and could put them at risk of being perceived as irrelevant.

What is happening in libraries now?

11. There are several ongoing national work strands that are currently being undertaken by SLIC and which could potentially contribute to the process of developing a national strategy.

Public Library Quality Improvement Matrix

12. The Public Library Quality Improvement Matrix (PLQIM) is the performance monitoring framework for public libraries that was developed by SLIC in 2007. PLQIM is currently under review to ensure that the framework keeps pace with developments affecting the library sector. As part of this work, Robert Gordon University has been commissioned to undertake research and conduct consultation exercises across the Scottish library services. This research could be used to inform the development of a national strategy document, and the new PLQIM framework will provide a consistent national measurement of progress and achievement.

Public Library Improvement Fund

13. Associated with PLQIM, the Public Library Improvement Fund (PLIF) is provided by the Scottish Government and currently is set at £500,000 per annum. Awards are made to services through a bidding process which is highly competitive due to the level of applications. This fund has enabled a very wide range of projects to be supported across Scotland over the last seven years.

Digital Participation

14. A very significant area of work for libraries is the development of the digital world both in terms of its impact on their traditional role and, increasingly, in the new roles it is creating for them. The rapidly changing technological landscape presents many challenges for people who are unaccustomed to the Internet and computers. Libraries are well placed to provide digital literacy support in our communities to assist the 22% of Scots who do not currently use the Internet to get online. This will be particularly important as more government services are delivered digitally meaning that the consequences of having no access to technology and/or lacking digital skills will be more marked. This has come to the fore in light of the UK Government's current welfare reform agenda.

15. With over 500 community hubs all connected to the Internet, libraries provide free online access points, as well as offering ad hoc support and delivering a variety of beginners IT courses to support those who need extra help. This in turn contributes to the digital economy by facilitating the development of ICT skills and enhancing employability.

16. However, the rate of change in the technology sector means that it is also challenging for library services and frontline staff to keep pace with these changes. Related to this, the pace of policy development and Scottish Government thinking on this subject has to be very responsive to keep up with developments. A single national strategy would enable library services to align themselves more closely with local and national government policy, thus improving their ability to deliver on identified priorities. A single strategy would also have the benefit of ensuring a consistent 'digital offer' – outlining a core level of digital provision - for all citizens across the country.

17. SLIC has already made significant inroads in this area through collaborative work with the Scottish Government's Digital Directorate. As part of two SG funded projects SLIC is developing a national resource mapping Internet access points and the ICT learning courses available within each local community. This will form a search tool on the Digital Scotland website to publicise what is on offer in libraries. The second project centres on the creation of a network of Digital Champions in libraries. The aim is to ensure that each library service has a technology expert who can support digital service delivery and support colleagues in the use of new technologies. The first meeting of this group took place on 31st October and each authority nominated a representative. There was broad support for the idea of developing a national 'digital offer' and SLIC will be working with the Heads of Public Library Services to pursue this in the coming months.

Get Scotland Reading

18. There is a great deal of research which demonstrates that reading for pleasure enhances literacy, life chances, general wellbeing and quality of life. Libraries aim to be a force for social change through reading. There is a huge public demand for reading activities in libraries, including: book groups, author events, Bookbug sessions for the pre-school age group, reading challenges for older children and literary festivals. Libraries have played a central role in

marking Book Week Scotland, with wide and varied programmes of activity taking place across the country's libraries both this year and last.

19. SLIC has been working closely with the Reading Agency, Scottish Book Trust and the Heads of Public Library Services to create a Reading Strategy for Scotland. Workshops for library staff are being held in December as the first stage in this process, and to establish buy-in from authorities to develop a Scottish libraries' 'reading offer'.

20. The Scottish Government's Literacy Action Plan (LAP) stresses the importance of developing literacy throughout life and of ensuring support for literacy is offered across public services, rather than purely via education departments. Libraries have a key role in delivering this policy. A cohesive national strategy could provide focus on how best to support the LAP, enabling all services to work towards agreed outcomes and creating more opportunities for partnership working and sharing best practice.

SWOT Analysis of developing a National Strategy

21. Initially it is important to focus on the value of developing a national strategy. The following SWOT analysis looks at what difference the Strategy could make.

<p>Strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gives libraries something to aspire to • Demonstrates awareness of the their importance • Shows awareness of their widening role • Recognition of role in delivering variety of policies (UK, Scottish and local Government) 	<p>Weaknesses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • LA may not buy into the aims of the strategy • Dependant on voluntary adoption of the Strategy • Assumption that all public libraries are the same and facing the same problems
<p>Opportunities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To engage with libraries and provide good strategic direction • Demonstrate support for libraries • Recognition of the role of libraries • Give libraries leverage when looking to secure funding • For libraries to identify opportunities to work together and to avoid duplication of effort; thus saving resources 	<p>Threats</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There isn't a "one size fits all" solution which risks some LAs/libraries being alienated because they feel the strategy doesn't relate to them directly • LAs and libraries may not appreciate central agencies involvement which they could feel doesn't recognise local needs • Because it's not statutory the strategy may not be enough to influence decisions within local authorities when faced with reducing budgets

What would a National Strategy look like?

22. Strategies developed elsewhere in recent times have been aspirational. Rather than taking the form of prescriptive indicators and stipulated inputs they have focused on developing an agreement on what constitutes a 'core offer'. This approach creates a strategic narrative, which offers the benefit of connecting libraries across territorial jurisdictions as providers of a unified public service, while allowing for flexibility to enable councils to factor in local priorities and needs.

23. Whilst the strategy could be capable of being tailored to local needs and drivers, there is a general consensus around its fundamental purpose which can be summarised as follows:

- To set out a unified vision of the role of libraries
- To demonstrate libraries' contribution to the wider policy areas, such as health, community engagement etc
- To assist in setting priorities for library services
- To inform communities, staff, politicians and other stakeholders about library services.

24. A strategy for Scotland could comprise a broad vision of how libraries can support a range of social and economic priorities moving forward, encompassing individual service strands that constitute the 'core offer' that public library services present to citizens. This could include:

- **Learning** – libraries provide flexible learning opportunities, supportive environments and high quality resources to enable learning throughout life for all.
- **Reading** – libraries develop a culture of reading for pleasure and supporting literacy, enabling the whole population to thrive on a ready journey.
- **Information and Technology** – libraries connect the whole population to the information needed for democratic participation, and enable all to experience the economic, social and cultural benefits of the Internet.
- **Communities** – libraries deliver services that have communities at the heart, in the heart of our communities, and preserve and promote our local heritage.
- **Health** – libraries enable people to make informed choices about health and wellbeing, and work with healthcare partners to deliver outreach initiatives in our communities.

25. These objectives could be set out in a way which aligns with Scottish and local government priorities as outlined in the appendix *Libraries and the National Performance Framework*. Examples of good practice could be presented to demonstrate potential approaches for delivering each of these offers.

Challenges and Opportunities

26. There are challenges associated with developing and implementing a national strategy for Scotland's public libraries and these could be highlighted in the proposed document. The implementation of the strategy could highlight areas requiring to be addressed for example, investment in buildings and infrastructure, shared services, collaboration and partnership, workforce development, leadership promotion and advocacy.

27. However, there are also real opportunities associated with producing a clearly articulated strategic narrative. In particular, this would present a clear picture of the work going on in libraries at an authority level, thus providing other departments and other stakeholders with the background to enable them to exploit joint working opportunities, and potentially avoid duplication of effort and resources.

28. Balancing the national policy agenda with local pressures could be mitigated by SLIC and COSLA working in partnership. SLIC's existing close working relationship with the Heads of Public Library Services could also play an important part in maintaining this balance.

How a National Strategy would be developed

29. SLIC and COSLA would establish a Group to develop the Strategy. This would consist of representatives from key stakeholder groups, including:

- Local authority heads of library services (two representatives)
- The Carnegie UK Trust
- The National Library of Scotland
- The Scottish Book Trust
- Creative Scotland

The Group would take forward the main work of developing the Strategy but there would also be stakeholder engagement via the Heads of Library Services network. SLIC anticipate that the process of developing the strategy would take around nine months to complete.

Conclusion and recommendations

30. National strategies for public libraries have been in place in a number of countries for several years. A good example is New Zealand. They first published a strategy in 2006 and the process has now come to be iterative with a follow up framework being published last year. In their case there is a clear indication that their framework has been beneficial in achieving the aims outlined in the introduction to this paper and New Zealand's public library service enjoys a first class reputation worldwide.

31. The work which SLIC is currently undertaking in digital participation and reading, along with the discussions with a range of stakeholders point to the need for clear decisive action at national level. A single national strategy which

defines libraries' role together with clear expectations of what communities and stakeholders can expect from their library services would provide a much needed framework for now and the future.

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SLIC is the advisory body to the Scottish Government on library and information services, and offers leadership focus and support to a membership base that includes public library services as well as libraries in schools, colleges, universities and a broad range of specialist information services. For more information about SLIC go to <http://www.scottishlibraries.org/>

Appendix: Libraries and the National Performance Framework*

Vision	Public Libraries: connecting communities to learning, reading, information and technology				
Purpose	Libraries are neighbourhood networks connecting people to the information and resources they need: to succeed in learning and gain new skills; to delight in our culture and be inspired to create; to participate as citizens in strong communities; to make healthy choices and live well, and to engage in the digital world throughout life.				
ROLE	Providing flexible learning opportunities, supportive environments and high quality resources to enable learning throughout life for all	Developing a culture of reading for pleasure and supporting literacy, enabling the whole population to thrive on a reading journey	Delivering services that have communities at the heart, in the heart of our communities, and preserving and promoting local heritage	Connecting the whole population to the information needed for democratic participation, and enabling all to experience the economic, social and cultural benefits of the Internet	Enabling people to make informed choices about health and wellbeing, and working with healthcare partners to deliver outreach initiatives in our communities
WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?	Individuals have the opportunity to realise their full potential, improve their life chances, overcome disadvantage and open up job opportunities	Individuals have the core skills to improve their own educational attainment, participate actively in society, and have the capacity to appreciate the cultural and personal benefits of literature and reading	Communities have local access to services that enable them to come together, share experiences, offer support and celebrate shared cultural heritage, thus enhancing sense of belonging and fostering acceptance	Individuals are well informed, well equipped and well supported to contribute to, and participate in, their communities, wider society, the global knowledge economy and the digital world	Individuals have the right information to make the right choices regarding their health and wellbeing, and are well supported in their communities to make positive changes in everyday life
STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES	Wealthier & Fairer, Smarter	Wealthier & Fairer, Smarter	Wealthier & Fairer, Smarter, Safer & Stronger, Greener	Wealthier & Fairer, Smarter	Healthier
PURPOSE TARGETS	Growth, Participation, Solidarity, Cohesion	Growth, Participation, Solidarity, Cohesion	Solidarity, Cohesion	Growth, Productivity, Participation, Solidarity, Cohesion	Population, Solidarity
NATIONAL INDICATORS	Improve the skill profile of the population; Improve levels of educational attainment; Improve people's perceptions of the quality of public services; Reduce the proportion of individuals living in poverty; Widen use of the Internet	Increase cultural engagement; Improve the skill profile of the population; Improve levels of educational attainment; Improve mental wellbeing; Improve people's perceptions of the quality of public services	Improve people's perceptions of their neighbourhood; Increase cultural engagement; Improve the skill profile of the population; Improve mental wellbeing; Improve people's perceptions of the quality of public services	Widen use of the Internet; Improve the skill profile of the population; Improve levels of educational attainment; Improve Scotland's reputation; Improve people's perceptions of the quality of public services	Improve self-assessed general health; Improve mental wellbeing

*<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/About/Performance/purposestratobjjs>

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