

Review of Public Library Improvement Fund

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Introduction

The **Public Library Improvement Fund (PLIF)** has played a significant part in transforming Scotland's public library landscape since its inception nearly a decade ago. PLIF has funded numerous innovative and imaginative projects right across the country and has had enormous impact on the individuals and communities. The range of projects funded has been diverse and wide-ranging.

During 2015, Professor Peter Reid and Ms Caroline Whitehead of the Department of Information Management at Robert Gordon University, have undertaken a review of PLIF on behalf of the Scottish Library and Information Council (SLIC). This report presents the findings of this review. It is important, at the outset, to say how valuable and valued PLIF is by the Scottish public library community as the following indicate.

We have been able to introduce innovative and extremely well received new services that we would otherwise not have been able to provide without this funding.

LIBRARY SERVICE RESPONSE

PLIF is invaluable in providing small grants to libraries. A small amount of money can go a long way when getting something off the ground, and all our projects have had lasting benefit to our service.

LIBRARY SERVICE RESPONSE

For us it is the single biggest source of potential additional funding

LIBRARY SERVICE RESPONSE

The project has acted as an incentive to tempt back disengaged communities

LIBRARY SERVICE RESPONSE

This project helped to define libraries as the first place to visit for those commencing their digital journey and in an area of deprivation gave a large number of people the skills needed for digital participation.

LIBRARY SERVICE RESPONSE

The success of this project and the recognition given to it by wider partners has been incredibly significant – it has really brought the library service to the forefront.

LIBRARY SERVICE RESPONSE

The small amount of money made a significant difference and the modest scale of the project meant it was achievable and sustainable.

LIBRARY SERVICE RESPONSE

Background

The awards made through the Public Library Improvement Fund have been a catalyst for enormous good within Scotland's public libraries. The launch in 2014 of *How good is our public library service?* has afforded an opportunity to review the effectiveness and impact of the Public Library Improvement Fund, by:

- identifying projects which are regarded as 'successful';
- examining how 'success' can be measured;
- identifying how 'successful' projects, demonstrating good practice, can be more widely disseminated and shared throughout Scotland;
- identifying how Public Library Improvement Funds can be most effectively deployed.

The launch of *Ambition and Opportunity: a strategy for public libraries in Scotland 2015-2020*, presents a cogent and persuasive vision for the future of public libraries. It highlights that Scotland's public libraries are part of a shared civic ambition to fulfill the potential of individuals and communities. The Public Library Improvement Fund has, therefore, a key function in delivering the strategic aims of *Ambition and Opportunity*, namely:

1. reading, literacy and learning
2. digital inclusion
3. economic wellbeing
4. social wellbeing
5. culture and creativity
6. excellent public services

With the launch of *Ambition and Opportunity* this presents a roadmap for the future direction of public libraries in Scotland. The role of the Public Library Improvement Fund in supporting services to achieve the vision of the national strategy is therefore crucial. The three core elements, the national strategy (*Ambition and Opportunity*), the Public Library Improvement Fund and *How good is our public library service?* will work effectively together to enhance the public library landscape in Scotland.



Review Process

Feedback and evaluation of PLIF projects was sought from all Heads of Service across Scotland. A representative number of authorities responded, providing details of projects and evaluations as well as useful commentary on the processes and mechanism associated with application and bidding for funds.

The review process comprised examining the nature and scope of projects, whether they were single-authority based or collaborative, why library services selected the projects that they did for funding applications, the ways in which library services evaluated projects, considered their critical success factors and the difference they made to, or impact that they had on, communities. Additionally, feedback was obtained on what library services had learned from the process and how they might have done it differently.

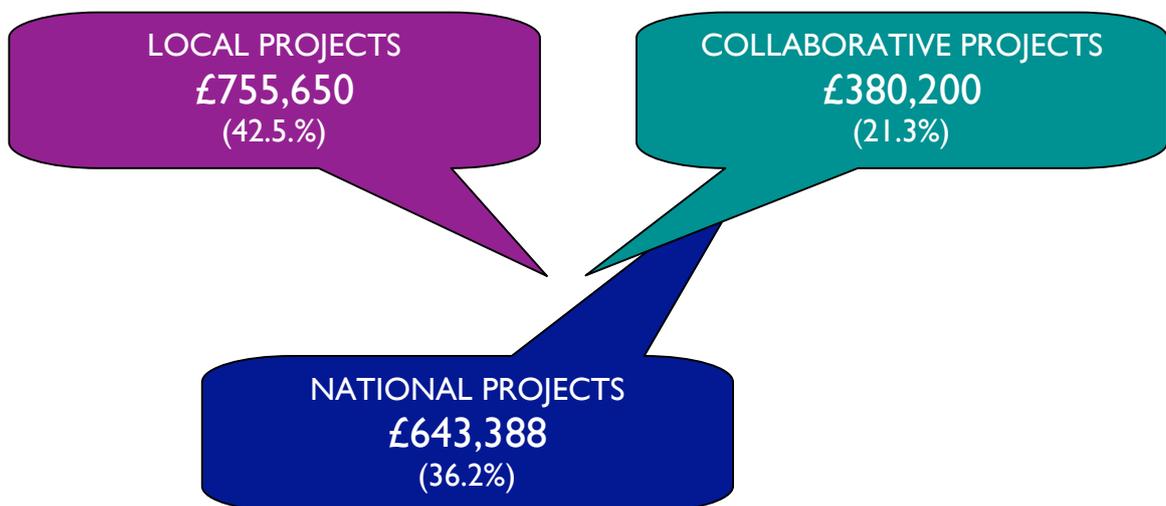
Data and information were also gathered from the SLIC website, examining the allocation of PLIF awards between 2010 and 2014. SLIC also provided PLIF Project Final Reports from 2013 and 2014 for evaluation as part of the review process.

This data was analysed by the research team to identify common themes in respect of the projects being funded, and in respect of what successful projects look like. From this, it was possible to identify key successful factors and the capacity of successful projects to be rolled out more widely across the country.

The approaches adopted were systematic and robust and yielded useful insights. It would, however, have been advantageous to have had a wider response to requests for feedback from library services. However, the timescales of the project may have counted against this.

Key Findings

Distribution of funds: The Public Library Improvement Fund is highly valued by library services, with a number of feedback comments saying that funds have allowed the library service to roll out a project which would have been otherwise impossible. Some of these projects have subsequently become mainstream services supported by core funding. Over the period included in the review, PLIF monies totalling £1,779,238, have been allocated in the following ways.



Analysis of the allocation of funding suggests that there is a wide and significant distribution of resources across Scotland through the Public Library Improvement Fund mechanism. Some library services have consistently demonstrated their ability to develop high quality, innovative projects and this has been matched by the strength of the funding applications submitted. Some other library services have, on occasions, developed projects but have, perhaps, lack the capacity to develop an effective proposal for funding.

A small number of library services have not been successful in securing funding for individual local projects. However, all but two of these services have participated in funded collaborative projects (with one of these taking part in three different collaborative projects).

Collaborative projects: Some twenty-two library services were involved in the various collaborative projects, with the Mobile App development being the most popular with fourteen library services taking part and delivering results for a total cost of £50,000. Many of the collaborative projects demonstrate scalability and the cost-effectiveness of partnership application. They are often highly productive and valued highly by library services not only for what the project can achieve but also because of added-value and the sharing or pooling of professional knowledge and expertise.

As it was a partnership project, we were able to achieve so much more than we would have if we had carried this out on our own.

LIBRARY SERVICE RESPONSE

The value of collaborative bids has extended beyond the scope of the actual projects; we feel there has been the added benefit of sharing professional expertise, and working more efficiently.

LIBRARY SERVICE RESPONSE

Funded projects which involve partnerships with other agencies in the community, such as National Health Service, Job Centre Plus, local heritage groups, schools and colleges, and other third sector organisations, have proved to be immensely beneficial for all involved. The library profile has been significantly raised in such projects bringing lasting benefits and ongoing and enduring working relationships.

The project has been successful in forging links between libraries, the NHS and other health organisations and has certainly raised the profile of the library service. Health professionals are now recognising the supportive role libraries can play. This is the start of a long-term working relationship.'

LIBRARY SERVICE RESPONSE

It is clear from the feedback obtained from library services that collaborative and partnership working is highly valued and highly effective. Not only does it encourage and foster collaborative practice across Scotland's public library network, it clearly brings efficiencies to projects by making the most effective use of the funds available. Additionally, such collaborative working is beneficial to those library services which can find it difficult to develop individual applications. Collaborative projects are, by their nature, supportive of all partners.

Success factors: One of the key benefits of, and important outcomes from, *How good is our public library service* self-evaluation process, is the sharing of good practice about what works well in public library services. Success deserves recognition and dissemination throughout the professional community. The need to measure success, value and impact is crucial for public libraries to demonstrate accountability to stakeholders as well as the difference they make to individuals and communities.

How good our public library service strongly emphasises the importance of asking the 'So what?' question when examining the range of services and activities on offer in the public library. This is also valuable when evaluating the success of Public Library Improvement Fund projects and their suitability for wider roll-out.

One clear positive outcome has been an increase in user activity with our online services. Older learners have become more confident in using smart technologies, while younger people and volunteers have gained confidence in offering help and advice to learners

LIBRARY SERVICE RESPONSE

Having the iPad has proved to be a lifeline over the Christmas and New Year period. I couldn't have managed without it. I did all my shopping online and was able to keep in touch with family and friends so didn't feel isolated or alone. This iPad has become an essential part of my life now.

HOUSEBOUND LIBRARY USER

The review has highlighted very clearly that the Public Library Improvement Fund delivers a wide range of highly successful individual local projects across Scotland as well as beneficial collaborative projects. One of the primary objectives of this present review was to identify individual projects that can be regarded as being 'successful'. Those PLIF projects that can be considered as successful are not measured purely quantitatively and, indeed, qualitative evidence is more compelling and useful.

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Indicators of success: The following table outlines factors for success in individual local or collaborative projects.

The project is clearly aligned to local and national strategic objectives	The project has materially enhanced the library service(s)	The project has had real and quantifiable impact on the community
The project has been good value for money and was delivered on time	The project has been innovative enhancing the vision of the library service	The project has become embedded as part of the core mainstream service
The project has acted as a catalyst for other developments	The project has effectively involved partnerships and collaborations	The project has been linked to the <i>How good is our public library service</i> evaluation process

It is logical to suggest that when evaluating projects against these criteria that the six levels of performance used in *How good is your public library service* can also be applied to rate the success of PLIF Projects with those being rated at Levels 5 or 6 being considered 'successful'.

<p>Level 6</p> <p>Excellent</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clearly excellent and world-class. Very best practice worth disseminating widely beyond the service. Users' experiences and achievements are of a very high quality. Outstanding delivery of core functions and range of enhanced services.
<p>Level 5</p> <p>Very good</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Major strengths. A high standard of provision, examples of good practice to share Any weaknesses do not impact on users' experience. Services will take opportunities to improve and strive to raise performance to excellent.

Additionally, when considering the potential for wider roll-out of successful projects to other library services across Scotland, the following factors require also to be considered:

The project is clearly aligned to local and national strategic objectives	The project is clearly transferable to other library services	The project is affordable and scalable for a wider role out.
<p>The project is clearly going to deliver wider impact and value to individuals and communities</p>		

Successful PLIF Projects: Projects evaluated against criteria for success, along with recommendations regarding the potential for rolling out the project more widely. Due to the amount of information available to the review team it was not deemed possible or fair to assess accurately the levels of success against the 1-6 scale. The following list is based entirely on the data gathered *for this review*. Other successful projects have undoubtedly taken place but feedback on these was not made available.

However, there are some tentative suggestions included here of examples of projects that it would be possible and feasible to roll out more widely across Scottish library services. Feedback from some projects already suggests that there is an interest from other local authorities in widening participation in particular areas.

Feedback was also received relating to projects that have already been rolled out more widely across Scotland (e.g. Training for New Technologies, Mobile App and Wifi provision) and these have been omitted when considering potential for rolling out projects.

Public Library Authority and PLIF Project Details	Success Level 1-6	Potential for rolling out
Aberdeen		
Digital Communities (Silver City Vault -phase 1 and 2)		If generalised
Training in New Technologies		--
Go Live – Mobile App		--
Angus		
Hello Ipad		✓
Lego Literacy Clubs		✓
Take Control		✓
Dumfries & Galloway		
D and G during World war 1 – its people, its places and their contribution		--
The Lockerbie Disaster – preserving sound and vision for future generations		--
Dundee		
Dundee in the Great War: Our past remembered		If generalised
Opportunities Project		✓
Reaching the Hard to Reach (Phase 2)		✓
Dundee Dementia Information Service		✓
East Dunbartonshire		
Green Screen Literacy and Learning		--
Keep Well in Your Library		✓
Training in New Technologies		--
Untold Stories of Local Women		If generalised
MOBILISED		✓
Glasgow		
Silver Surfer		✓

Mobile App		--
Mitchell Wifi		--
Inverclyde		
Learning at the Watt		✓
Training in New Technologies (TNT)		--
My Inverclyde: Local Studies in Community Libraries		✓
"All Aboard": Researching our Resources Together		--
Midlothian (PLIF report only)		
Midlothian Roll of Honour 1914-1919		--
North Ayrshire		
North Ayrshire MindFULLness for Seniors		✓
North Ayrshire MindFULLness for Early Years		✓
North Ayrshire Mobile App		--
Health Information in Public Libraries (HiPL)		✓
APPtitude		✓
Health Information in Public Libraries (HiPL) Phase 2		✓
Public Libraries and Community Engagement (PLACE)		✓
Wireless North Ayrshire		--
Perth & Kinross		
Smart SM – evidence based stock management		✓
ICT Skills and Internet Access to Vulnerable Community Groups		✓
Mobile Library App		--
Wifi in Local Libraries (WiLL)		--
Scottish Borders (PLIF report only)		
Keep the home fires burning		--
Shetland		
Click Shetland		✓
South Ayrshire		
WiFi in Carnegie Library, Ayr Project		--
West Dunbartonshire		
Digital Diamonds		--
Cyber Space		✓
Comhairle Nan Eilean Siar (W. Isles)		
Dr You: self help health information for libraries		✓

Timescales: One issue emerging from the review, was that many library services found the timescales for submitting project funding applications, especially where partnership or collaborations were involved, to be very tight and sometimes unrealistic. The review team is aware that Scottish Library and Information Council have various constraints in this respect, and are also aware that SLIC has various initiatives in mind currently to address this issue and to improve the process moving forward.

An issue has been short timescales and not always a lot of time to submit a considered bid
LIBRARY SERVICE RESPONSE

Emerging themes

Having reviewed the feedback received relating to PLIF projects funded between 2010 and 2014, a number of key themes have emerged, suggesting projects of common interest which might be appropriate for wider roll-out:

- Health information, supporting self-help groups and health practitioners in their work
- IT and digital skills development, such as those targeted at particular groups, technologies, communities
- Reminiscence work, particularly when it involves intergenerational work.
- Local history
- Community Engagement and Consultation

These themes accord well with SLIC's own current priorities:

- Community Engagement
- Digital creativity and inclusion
- Health and Wellbeing
- Methods of demonstrating the impact of public library services
- WW1 Commemorative Projects

Conclusions

The PLIF money is highly valued by library services, with a number of feedback comments saying that funds have allowed the library service to roll out a project which would have been otherwise impossible. Some of these projects have subsequently become mainstream services supported by core funding.

The roll-out of projects more widely or collaboratively can result in substantial savings over authorities developing an individual bid for funds and achieving successful delivery of the project. The process as a whole is more efficient in terms of time, money, planning and effort for all concerned, resulting in a more effective use of the fund and, importantly, in widening participation for more authorities nationally.

The sharing of good practice is clearly articulated in the three pillars of the Scottish public library landscape, namely *Ambition and Opportunity*, *How good is our public library service?* and in the Public Library Improvement Fund. The mechanism of peer-review built into *How good is our public library service* encourages sharing of knowledge and good practice to inform enhanced delivery of services throughout Scotland.

Recommendations

The Board of the Scottish Library and Information Council should attempt to reconcile the themes which have emerged from this review with their own priority areas in conjunction with the national strategy for public libraries, to harmonise the key areas which are to be funded

The review has identified very strong support for the Public Library Improvement Fund and that there is widespread support for the robustness and appropriateness of the mechanisms used by SLIC Board to assess funding applications.

Often small amounts of money can have a large impact and are highly valued by the library sector. Ensuring that small local grants are available each year is strongly recommended.

Allocation of funding between local, collaborative and national projects should be reviewed to ensure the most efficient use of PLIF monies.

There remains a clear need for enhanced training and support to ensure that all library services are able to submit good quality applications for funding of projects. Steps need to be taken to mitigate any barriers that some authorities may perceive in terms of their capacity and ability to produce strong applications in a timely fashion.

Further consideration is required by SLIC of the support requirements around the management of the PLIF mechanism (particularly in support of the wider roll-out of projects nationally).

As noted above, consideration is required of the timing and timescales of both the funding call and implementation periods, which have been a noted difficulty for some library authorities. The idea of an event to stimulate collaborative proposals and to share ideas is strongly commended to SLIC.

It is strongly recommended that at the close of each cycle of projects, a review is undertaken to identify those, using the criteria outline above, which are capable of wider roll-out across the library sector in Scotland and that this aspect is built into the funding streams for the forthcoming round of applications.

The review team recognises that some remarkably innovative projects have been undertaken. Occasionally, some projects have not initially been deemed 'successful' but have proved to be important catalysts for other significant developments. This spirit of creativity must not be lost. PLIF will always play a part in the enhancement of existing provision (e.g. such as focusing on aspects identified as a result of self-evaluation through How good is our public library service). However, equally valuable are the ambitious and imaginative and sometime "off-the-wall" ideas which lead to real innovation and have the potential to move Scottish public libraries forward.

References

Scottish library and Information Council, (2015), *Ambition and Opportunity: A Strategy for Public Libraries in Scotland 2015 – 2020*. SLIC, Glasgow.

Scottish Library and Information Council, (2014) *How Good is our Public Library Service? A Public Library Improvement Model for Scotland*. SLIC, Glasgow

