Framework for the Future

Libraries, Learning and Information in the Next Decade

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Foreword by Minister of State for the Arts

Going to the library to borrow books and find information has been a part of our way of life for well over a hundred years. We can be justifiably proud of our public libraries. As Minister of State for the Arts, I consider it a privilege to have responsibility for the public library service. Over the past year I have had the opportunity to take a close look at the range of services on offer today in our libraries and the impact they are making on people's lives.

This has convinced me that the public library service is every bit as important today as it was when the first libraries opened. Equality of access to information and to learning is vital if we are to offer everyone the opportunity to achieve their full potential. This is all the more true in a society where we recognise that learning must be a habit for life, not just something which happens at certain points in our lives. One of the triggers of a desire for lifelong learning comes from the pure enjoyment of reading, which libraries can help to foster. As we move towards a more knowledge-based society driven by digital technologies, the need to ensure access to information for everyone adds a new dimension. December 2002 saw the completion of The People's Network programme to create ICT learning centres in all public libraries and now 52,000,000 online hours are available to library users throughout England. By adopting UK online centre status, libraries are playing a vital role in delivering the Government's commitment to universal internet access.

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My ambition is to take this vision of what libraries can offer to a wider audience, to work across government, with local authorities and other partners to begin to raise the standards of all public library services and to ensure that the best continue to evolve.

During the past year eight library authorities have received Beacon Council awards for their community library services. Others too are worthy of praise. Inspections carried out by the Audit Commission and other assessments show this to be the case. However, they also show that other local authorities have failed to provide a modern library service of high quality which is attractive to readers. Nor have they recognised the full potential that exists in the public library service to support their own corporate agendas and in so doing contribute to wider government objectives on social inclusion, education and modernisation. Local authorities collectively spend some £780 million annually on public library services. This is more than twice the combined expenditure of the Arts Council and Sport England and three and a half times the annual expenditure by local authorities on museums and galleries. It is vital that this substantial sum provides good value for money and makes a positive impact on the communities libraries serve.

Framework for the Future is a long-term strategic vision for the public library service, which has been put together following extensive consultation with Resource (The Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries), the library community including the Advisory Council on Libraries, The Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals, The Society of Chief Librarians and other key stakeholders in the education, community and voluntary sectors. The proposals are presented as a framework to encourage imaginative innovation and greater operational effectiveness and efficiency, adapted to local need and circumstance. I am grateful to the many people who have helped us formulate them.

My ambition is to take this vision of what libraries can offer to a wider audience, to work across government, with local authorities and other partners to begin to raise the standards of all public library services and to ensure that the best continue to evolve. The public library community has asked for clear guidance and leadership from the centre and we have responded. Resource is to publish an action plan, which will set out the first phase of implementation.

I firmly believe that if we focus on this vision we will deliver a public library service able to respond to the needs of society at the beginning of the 21st century in the way our Victorian forebears did when public libraries were first launched. If we succeed, our public libraries will continue to attract admiration and to be emulated around the world.

TESSA BLACKSTONE

Executive Summary

Introduction

1. Libraries are a much valued public institution built around a shared ideal: to make available resources that can be used by all members of the community to stimulate imagination and inquiry, through literature and reference, for culture and commerce. They are open to all and should benefit most those least able to afford private provision.

2. More people go to the library than to cinemas or football grounds. The public library service is a huge asset handed down by generations of social reformers. Its role is just as relevant in the twenty-first century as in the nineteenth.

3. *Framework for the Future* will help local and library authorities agree on the modern mission for this vital service with central government and their local communities. It will give the public library service network a shared sense of purpose. It concentrates on libraries' roles in developing reading and learning, digital skills and services, community cohesion and civic values.

4. *Framework for the Future* is the Government's vision for the public library service based on extensive consultation with Resource (The Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries), library authorities, professional and advisory bodies, including the Advisory Council on Libraries (ACL), the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP), and the Society of Chief Librarians (SCL) and other key stakeholder organisations, as well as libraries' partners in national and local government.

The Position of Libraries

5. Libraries have four key strengths. They offer neutral welcoming community space and support active citizenship. They hold enormous stocks of material. This ranges beyond books to include DVDs, videos, CDs and computer software. National Lottery investment has equipped all public libraries in the UK with ICT infrastructure offering public internet access. They offer a wide range of services. As well as lending books, they operate as community centres of formal and informal learning. They promote reading across the age range starting with young babies and continuing through adulthood. They provide access to information and advice. And they are run by committed staff.

6. Libraries have the potential to do still more. Knowledge, skills and information are becoming more important to our lives economically, socially and as citizens. Libraries have a central role to play in ensuring everyone has access to the resources, information and knowledge they need – particularly those groups in society who will otherwise be disadvantaged, including people who are less affluent and people with literacy problems.

7. The best libraries are showing the way forward. Librarians are developing new skills to help library users access ICT and use the internet. There has been a big expansion in reader development work. Eye-catching new library buildings have opened in a number of cities and other places are seeking radically to re-define the ways in which library services are delivered.

8. But the innovation is not evenly spread and is frequently short-lived because of a number of constraints. The public library service in England is run by 149 separate library

authorities operating through 3,500 public libraries, including mobile services. It is difficult for national policy makers to communicate with the public library service as a whole and opportunities for local innovation to be translated into national programmes which attract public funding may be lost.

9. Fragmentation of this kind impedes the spread of good practice between authorities. Within local authorities, libraries are frequently part of a much larger department. Innovative authorities recognise the role libraries can play in the wider corporate agenda but in other authorities they can be overlooked and undervalued.

10. The Audit Commission Report, *Building Better Library Services*, May 2002, points to a decline in library visits and book loans. It notes a tendency amongst libraries to focus on current users rather than non-users, and patterns of opening hours which do not match the needs of would-be users.

11. Libraries also face intense competition in recruiting and retaining staff. Graduate librarians are attracted by private sector salaries. There has been little turnover of the workforce at senior level, promotion opportunities are limited and there is an urgent need to develop a new generation of library leaders.

Libraries' Modern Mission

12. Libraries need a modern mission. They need constantly to renew and communicate their purpose to the communities they serve. Their modern mission should be based on:

- **Evolution:** building on libraries' traditional core skills in promoting reading, informal learning and self-help

- **Public value:** focusing on areas where public intervention will deliver the largest benefits to society including support for adult literacy and pre-school learning

- **Distinctiveness:** building on libraries' open, neutral and self-help culture. They should not duplicate the efforts of other public and private sector providers but complement them through partnership working

- **Local interpretations of national programmes:** developing national programmes which will raise the profile of the public library service as a whole but which are sufficiently flexible to be adapted to local needs.

13. The following three areas of activity meet these criteria and should be at the heart of libraries' modern mission:

- The promotion of reading and informal learning
- Access to digital skills and services including e-government
- Measures to tackle social exclusion, build community identity and develop citizenship.

Books, Learning and Reading

14. Some libraries can be proud of the range and comprehensiveness of their book stock. But, the Audit Commission Report noted that only 59% of users find the book they come to borrow or use, an under-supply in some types of book particularly those of appeal to younger readers, and a reduction in book buying. The report also notes that stock could be managed more effectively in one-third of the authorities inspected.

15. This matters because reading is ever more important in modern life. The rise of the internet has not displaced reading since most

web pages are text based. People cannot be active or informed citizens unless they can read. Reading is a pre-requisite for almost all cultural and social activities.

16. Innovative libraries recognise this and are integrating reading and learning strategies. Reader development strategies have become far more widespread and sophisticated. The emergence of organisations such as The Reading Agency is helping libraries create economies of scale through the development of national programmes, such as the Summer Reading Challenge.

17. Public libraries provide a learning network that supports formal education but also extends far beyond it. Reading, literacy and learning are inextricably linked. The self-motivated learning which libraries promote is central to the creation of a lifelong learning culture in which people expect and want to learn throughout their lifetime.

18. Research has demonstrated the importance of early learning activities in supporting early cognitive development. The Sure Start programme, which provides co-ordinated and integrated support to young families and their children in disadvantaged areas, has set a target for its projects, which aims to 'increase the use of libraries with parents by young children'. The challenge to libraries is to make this early years provision part of a national early years strategy.

19. Many library services are developing closer relationships with school age children to support the work of schools. This is providing a vital complementary learning service, which can be developed further by:

   ■ Working with local schools to provide planned programmes of reader development to enrich and enhance the curriculum

   ■ Forging stronger partnerships with schools in the poorest areas

   ■ Creating a national network of homework clubs – either physical or online

   ■ Using the national Summer Reading Challenge to help children to continue to learn during the summer vacation and so help minimise the 'summer learning dip'

   ■ Developing a national programme for working with children in care and young offenders institutions.

20. As participation rates in further and higher education climb so will the demand from students for study space and support materials. Public libraries can play a critical role as study centres for people engaged in distance learning programmes, including those offered by **learndirect**, where libraries provide both access to equipment and staff trained in learner support, and for students returning home in university vacations.

21. Libraries also have a vital role to play in supporting adults with basic literacy problems. Seven million adults in England have levels of attainment in reading and writing lower than that expected for children aged eleven. The Government's Skills for Life strategy aims to improve the literacy, language and numeracy skills of 1.5 million adults by 2007. Libraries are ideally placed to recognise and support people who might benefit from tuition.

22. DCMS and DfES, working with Resource, the National Learning and Skills Council and the National Literacy Trust, will continue to explore ways in which libraries can support adult basic skills provision.

Digital Citizenship

23. Lottery funding from the New Opportunities Fund has enabled almost all public libraries in England to establish UK online learning centres by the end of December 2002, as well as providing library staff with computer literacy and learner support skills. A related £50 million programme is creating online content. The People's Network in public libraries has a vital role to play in delivering the Government's commitment to universal access to the internet and the provision of e-government services.

24. Resource has hosted wide-ranging discussions with library authorities on how The People's Network should develop. Ideas emerging include:

   - **Communities online:** public libraries could offer to create, host and manage websites for local community groups

   - **Culture Online:** Culture Online will create new online content and interactive services. Libraries have a role in providing access and in generating new content

   - **National content:** Resource could act as a central agent brokering national online content agreements on behalf of the public library service

   - **Alliances with broadcasters:** libraries could be an important physical point of contact for people learning through broadcasters' online services

   - **Information:** Resource will consider the scope for a national service to answer queries online building on similar services already offered by some library authorities.

25. Resource is developing plans for the future services to be provided through libraries.

These plans will address the need for central development of national services and support for delivery of local services.

Community and Civic Values

26. Libraries are public anchors for neighbourhoods and communities. For the majority of the population, libraries are acknowledged as safe, welcoming, neutral spaces open to all in the community. For libraries to continue to play this role in civic life they have to remain relevant to the needs of the communities they serve.

27. Libraries face a number of pressing challenges: renewing the building stock and reaching non-users while continuing to meet the needs of existing users. Well used and attractive library buildings draw people to town centres and so contribute to economic activity while providing people with personal space which is an alternative to shopping and commercial entertainment. Some new library buildings have been a result of successful Private Finance Initiatives. Elsewhere authorities have used imaginative design principles to modernise and improve ease of access to services. There are valuable lessons to be learned from these initiatives, which have unlocked new sources of funding. DCMS and Resource propose to work together to disseminate good practice from these.

28. Libraries need to re-double their efforts to reach non-users. One route to non-users is through collaboration with other public services, for example by co-locating public libraries with other services such as education, social services, health or leisure services.

29. Library authorities need to survey and review the needs of the communities they serve,

focusing particularly on the needs of the people who do not currently use libraries but might be attracted to do so and might disproportionately benefit from the services on offer. They should be considered as a means of developing and implementing the local authority community strategy.

Delivering Change

30. *Framework for the Future* is seeking to develop new ways for central government, local and library authorities jointly to identify the national priorities for public libraries. DCMS will ensure that this approach is compatible with local accountability for services that are tailored to the needs of distinctive localities.

31. Delivery of this new strategic framework will require:

    ■ Greater recognition by central and local government of the role of the public library service as a delivery agent across a range of local government services and objectives. To achieve this library services should focus on the key areas identified in this framework and develop national services available in every library but which are adaptable to local needs and circumstances. As part of its response to the Local Government White Paper, DCMS and Resource will work with local authorities to identify good practice and encourage continuous improvement

    ■ A strong central capacity to speak for the library community within and outside government. Resource is the strategic body empowered to advise government and the library sector on the long-term

development of museums, archives and libraries. DCMS has outlined a new strengthened remit for Resource in support of the public library service. The Advisory Council on Libraries is to be reconstituted with new membership and will work with DCMS and Resource in delivering this new vision

■ A strengthened regional capacity to support library authorities. Resource is in the process of creating cross-sector regional agencies in each of the nine English regions. Resource is considering how best to use this structure and the Beacon authorities to drive improvement

■ Simpler and streamlined arrangements for the planning and delivery of public library services, which match the spirit of the Government's new partnership with local government

■ A new relationship with the business community. Libraries are excellent partners for businesses that recognise the importance of corporate social responsibility. As part of their new remit, working with other experts in the field, Resource will look at ways to support public libraries so that they connect with the business community.

32. DCMS will lead action in all these areas with the help of a small task force consisting of key stakeholders.

Imagine a place through which every newborn baby is given a package as a birthright, which gives them access, for life, to an endless supply of books, music and films as well as the World Wide Web. Tens of millions of books, videos and CDs at your fingertips, readily available for life.

Imagine a place you can walk into, without anyone asking you a question, sit down at a computer, find and order almost any book ever published, which you can take home for free.

This is not a shop but it offers people as much choice as a department store, to find just the course, information, film or music that they want. This place is a treasure trove of information: staff are on hand to make it easy for you to discover your family history or uncover the story of the house you live in, for example.

Here you can get advice about careers or look for job opportunities online. You can pay your bills and fill in government forms with the help of staff.

This is not a college but it's a place where you can ask to learn any skill you like, in almost any way you like, from joining a picture-framing group to enrolling on an online course to learn to write complex software programmes.

And if you cannot get to these places, because you are housebound, staff or volunteers will come to you, to bring you books, films, newspapers, tapes, even free laptops, you've asked for.

And much of this is free at the point of delivery.

There are places like this all over the country: public libraries.

All of the above are examples drawn from what libraries are doing right now.

1 Introduction

1.1 Our public libraries were built on a central ideal: to make available shared resources that could be used by all members of the community to stimulate imagination and inquiry, through literature and reference, for culture and commerce. Libraries offer a public service: they are open to all and should benefit most those who are least able to afford private provision. Libraries work by giving people enormous choice over how they can use the shared resources for their own ends. Libraries, like parks, are shared spaces in which people can choose from any number of activities. It is that combination of community and choice, public provision for private pleasure, which makes libraries so special.

1.2 Libraries are such a part of our way of life that it is easy to take them for granted. More people go to libraries than cinemas. Visits to libraries outnumber visits to professional football grounds. The public library system is a huge asset handed down by generations of social reformers. If we did not have libraries we would be investing huge sums to create them afresh. In the twenty-first century libraries have great potential to play an even more critical role, helping to create a culture of continuous learning and enabling everyone to access, navigate and enjoy the wealth of material available on the internet. That potential is symbolised by inspiring new libraries in Peckham and Bournemouth, March and Norwich and exciting developments planned in Birmingham and Cambridge. It is apparent in the services offered by the Beacon library authorities and other innovatory services up and down the country.

1.3 *Framework for the Future* should help local and library authorities agree on shared priorities with central government and their local communities. This is not a blueprint with detailed targets for how libraries should achieve these goals. The aim is to provide the library service as a whole with a shared sense of purpose. That should allow libraries to make more of their combined efforts in promoting learning, literacy and access to information technology and combating social exclusion.

1.4 These goals will take time to achieve through a process of evolutionary change. This may require library authorities to look critically at how they use their existing resources and arrive at decisions locally about the balance of priorities. Over time we expect them to attract new sources of funding into the library service as others appreciate the part that libraries have to play in delivering their agendas.

1.5 The framework should strengthen libraries by guiding them to find local solutions for national policy priorities. It encourages libraries to use their distinctive strengths and capabilities to tackle significant social issues such as adult literacy, access to information technology and combating social exclusion.

1.6 That renewed sense of mission will require a new relationship between the local governance of libraries, regional partnerships to share good practice and national initiatives through which libraries can combine to make a greater impact on national life.

1.7 *Framework for the Future* concentrates on libraries' roles in developing reading and learning, digital skills and services, community cohesion and civic values. It should help:

- Guide local authorities in integrating libraries into their corporate strategies

- Clarify the distinctive contribution which libraries can make to delivering broader government objectives and targets on education, modernisation and social inclusion

- Focus professional bodies concerned with staff development and training

- Make it easier for libraries to collaborate regionally

- Help forge mutually beneficial links between public libraries and the formal learning sector

- Help forge partnerships with national agencies with goals that libraries share.

1.8 This framework is the Government's vision for how libraries should develop as supported by Resource (The Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries). It was developed through extensive consultation with library authorities, professional and advisory bodies, including the Advisory Council on Libraries (ACL), the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP), and the Society of Chief Librarians (SCL) and other key stakeholder organisations, as well as libraries' partners in national and local government.

1.9 Libraries will prosper most and benefit the communities they serve if they can communicate and deliver a clear sense of mission. This framework is designed to help libraries to work with their current and future funders, partners and users to agree on that mission and then organise to deliver it.

Libraries are such a part of our way of life that it is easy to take them for granted. More people go to libraries than cinemas. Visits to libraries outnumber visits to professional football grounds.

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2   The Position of Libraries

Bournemouth's new Central Library is based in a bold, light, open modern building. It is already starting to change the town.

There are fifty personal computers dotted around the building. In the foyer is a new café. An express area is designed for people to browse and choose from the most popular material, which includes videos, DVDs, CDs, as well as books. Teenagers gather in an area that they helped to design. The building is light but quiet and so an excellent place for learning. A large proportion of the people coming into the library use it for study in the broadest sense of the word, rather than to take out books. Since the opening visitor numbers have more than doubled. Book issues have risen by about 10%. The computers are used for about 2,500 hours a week.

The South East England Regional Development Agency is studying plans to create a pedestrian piazza outside the library, which could be used for cultural events. That in turn is attracting local businesses. Investment in public space is creating the backdrop for economic growth.

The new library building has been funded through a Private Finance Initiative scheme.

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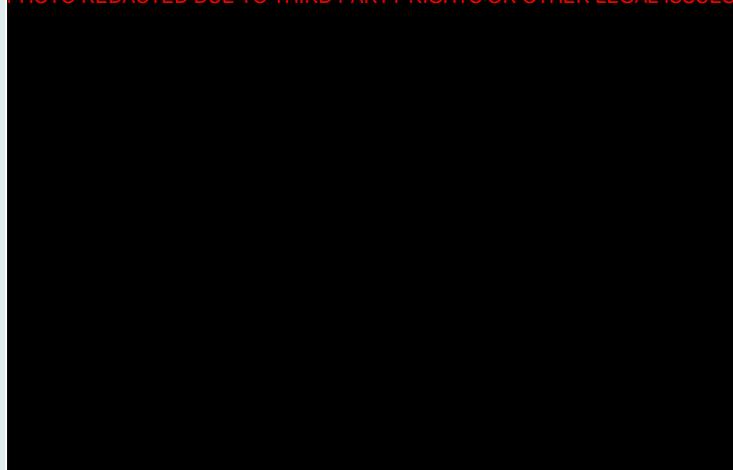
Historic strengths, future potential

2.1   There are four key strengths of libraries. They can be understood as the four "S"s.

2.2   First, libraries create, both within and without, **spaces** in which communities can flourish. There are some 3,500 public libraries in England including mobiles and those which open part time. In addition to this there are close to 17,000 service points including those in community centres, sheltered accommodation, playgroups, leisure centres and youth groups. Libraries are used for meetings, performances, displays, readings and debates. Indeed increasingly, good libraries are designed with that in mind. Well run libraries help create a sense of community. They are open to all, offer safe, welcoming space and support active citizenship. The recent Beacon Council programme on *Libraries as a Community Resource* highlighted this.

The Dyke House Community Library and Resource Centre was set up in Hartlepool twelve years ago on an estate with high unemployment, crime and many single parent families. The library now provides books including talking books, videos and CDs, as well as a home for a variety of community activities and courses and free advice on employment issues. The library in the Liverpool 8 Community Law Centre serves both users and lawyers and provides much needed quiet study space. Merton libraries run special projects for refugees and asylum seekers.

2.3 Second, public libraries hold enormous **stocks** of materials for people to draw upon. In 2001 they issued 430 million items. The book stock is central to what public libraries offer. Libraries must have a rich and varied range of stock if they are to meet the needs of their users and attract new people. Libraries hold current titles and those which are out of print. They enable the reader to read around the subject. And if a book is not held it can be borrowed through inter-library loan. In recent years the stock in libraries has been expanded to include DVDs, videos, CDs, computer games and software. The National Lottery funded £120 million investment in The People's Network has created an infrastructure of computers and communications, which is akin to creating millions of metres of new shelving, providing access to such a wealth of material held in other libraries as well as the World Wide Web. From the end of December 2002 almost all public libraries in England qualify as UK online centres offering internet and e-mail access and other online services for all.

2.4 Third, libraries increasingly provide added-value **services**, which extend well beyond the loan of books. That is one reason why public libraries are not just publicly funded versions of bookshops. They take on roles bookshops never would.

2.5 Libraries have always been community centres of learning. Many deliver courses in conjunction with Colleges of Further Education or run homework clubs. Increasingly they are accredited as **learndirect** centres offering access to equipment, the full range of **learndirect** courses and staff trained in learner support skills. DCMS, DfES, Resource and learndirect/Ufi are currently developing a programme of online services including taster sessions to help people diagnose their ICT training needs and then receive the training they need. But just as important, libraries allow people to learn informally or at their own pace, without having to study for a qualification. Library services run a wide

range of programmes designed to encourage reading especially among pre-school children, such as Bookstart, where libraries work with health visitors to provide parents and babies with packs of reading materials. Libraries provide services for local businesses, prisons and young offenders institutions, schools developing reading programmes and social services departments working with young people in care or old people who are housebound. Libraries are not just buildings. They are increasingly vital service centres for a host of information-related needs.

2.6 Finally, all these roles depend on library **staff**. Libraries employ a committed workforce that is animated by public service values; to help citizens gain access to information and skills as well as the pleasures of reading. Library staff increasingly need to draw on a wide range of skills: offering learner support for homework clubs or to people inexperienced in use of ICT; drawing on their knowledge of the book stock to advise and using information retrieval skills across all subject areas. The more that libraries deliver through added-value services, partnerships and outreach into the community, the more success will depend on the outlook, skills and attitudes of the library workforce.

2.7 The most impressive improvements in libraries have come when managers have brought staff with them in a process of change, by helping to equip staff with skills to deliver a clear vision for improving services. New buildings, good stock, open spaces for the community matter, but without good leadership and staff commitment they will amount to little.

Potential

2.8 Libraries have a huge opportunity to play an even more central role in future.

2.9 We live in a society in which knowledge, skills and information are becoming more important to our lives, economically, socially and as citizens. Jobs in manufacturing and services increasingly demand higher skills, the ability to use computers and the capacity for continual on the job learning. Communities of interest are often formed around hobbies, courses and shared tastes in literature, and learning interests, such as local history. The ability to make sense of and use the welter of information available to us from the media and the internet is vital to our ability to make choices and exercise our democratic rights as citizens.

2.10 However, access to and the ability to use information and knowledge are not equally distributed. About seven million adults in England are judged to be functionally illiterate. Affluent families are far more likely to be able to give their children access to books, computers and the internet than poorer families. If we do not guard against it, the economic returns from knowledge and skills will go disproportionately to those groups and places that are already rich in both.

2.11 In future, libraries will have a critical role in helping promote greater equality of access to and capability in using information, engaging in learning and acquiring knowledge. They will act as gateways to knowledge held in other institutions, such as universities and colleges, museums and archives as cultural and learning resources become more widely accessible. That will place new emphasis on the skills of librarians in understanding user needs and navigating through the resources to satisfy those needs.

2.12 Libraries' capacity to take on this wider role will be enhanced by digital technologies. Libraries already provide people with basic access to the internet. In future, their role could be expanded with services to host websites for local community groups online, to facilitate community online discussions, to publish local authors and poets and to guide people to a vast array of material available across the internet. Libraries could become local mediators, helping people develop their information literacy skills, facilitators, aggregators and publishers of online content. Through local libraries, users could gain access to rich databases of ideas, advice, as well as music, photographs and videos.

2.13 As the hardware of The People's Network is put in place, libraries, jointly and individually, will need to address how that infrastructure should be used, to maximise participation and spread the ability to use it creatively.

Innovation

2.14 There is much to celebrate. At the national level, investment in The People's Network of computers and internet connections, supported through the Lottery by the New Opportunities Fund, is attracting new users and has helped to give librarians new skills to develop new services, often in partnership with educationalists and training providers.

2.15 New buildings such as the libraries in Peckham, Bournemouth and Norwich, as well as ambitious plans in Birmingham and Cambridge have caught the public imagination through the way they contribute to revitalised civic spaces. Renewal plans such as Tower Hamlets' Idea Stores and Hampshire's Discovery Centres are exciting huge interest among partner organisations and other council departments.

We live in a society in which knowledge, skills and information are becoming more important to our lives, economically, socially and as citizens.

The **Norfolk & Norwich Millennium Library** is largely open plan with books for loan and for reference stored together for ease of access. Study spaces and computers are spread throughout the building. There are dedicated areas for children, local history and business information, as well as a special express service in the lobby to allow people to browse and borrow popular items through a self-service check out. This area, which is open until 10.30pm each night, allows people to choose from an array of classic and best-selling paperbacks, arranged in bookshop style displays as well as use computers for e-mail and short enquiries. Staff were encouraged to play a role in redesigning the library and new training programmes for customer care and information technology were introduced. Staff now work in largely self-directed and self-managing teams taking responsibility for different aspects of the service.

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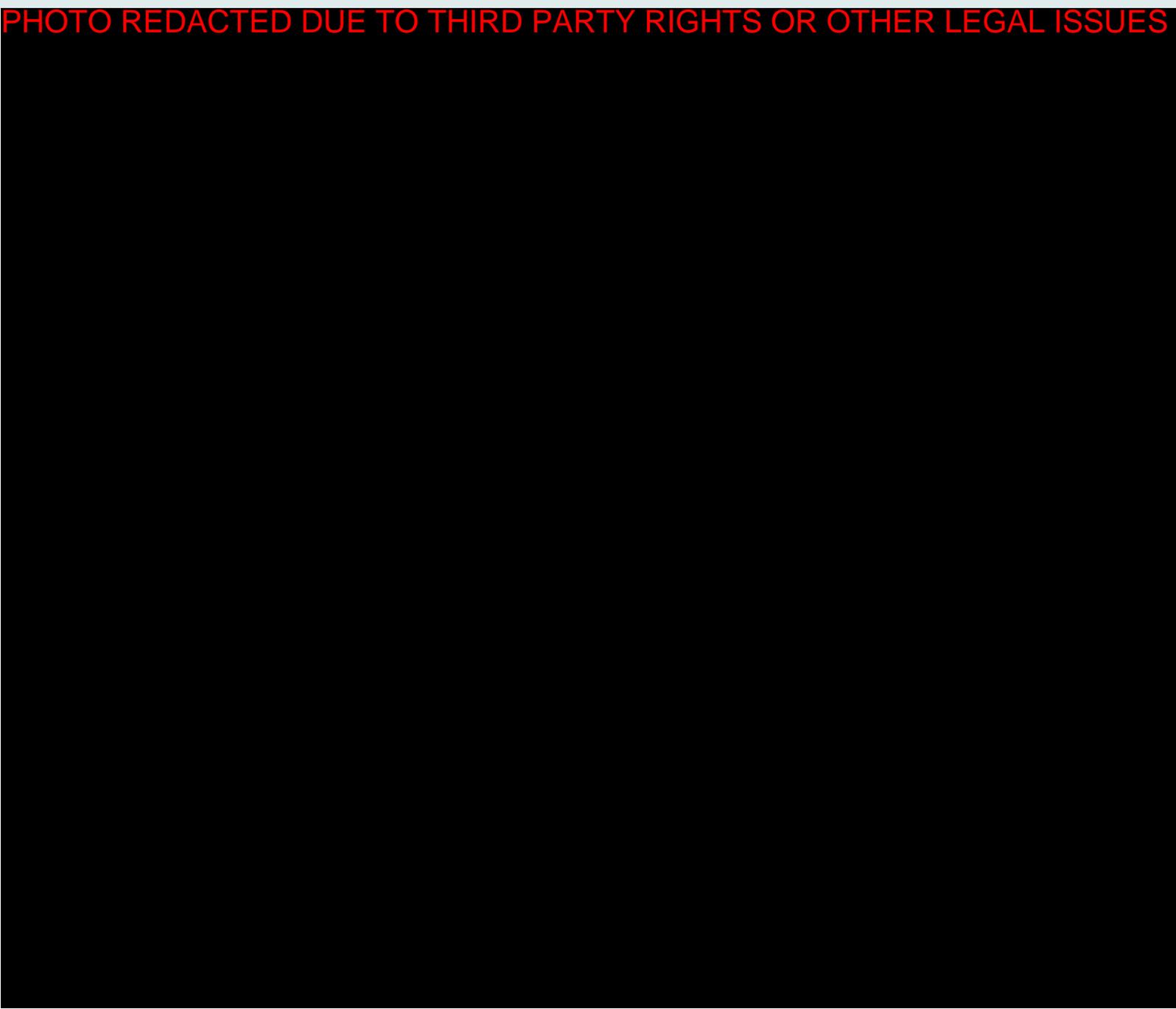
2.16 The framework of Annual Library Plans and Public Library Standards has evolved to drive more coherent strategies for improvement. Charitable bodies such as The Reading Agency, private organisations like Opening the Book, foundations such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Paul Hamlyn Foundation and Wolfson Foundation and bodies such as CILIP and the SCL are also making vital contributions to promote new thinking about library services.

2.17 The Beacon Council programme, *Libraries as a Community Resource*, has raised the profile of the public library service and helped disseminate good practice. However too much of that innovation is patchy, uneven and short lived. Central and local government must work together to find better ways for more libraries to improve significantly their services. To do that we have to understand and address the constraints that often hold libraries back.

Constraints and challenges

2.18 Despite its strengths and resilience, the public library system faces a number of challenges that must be addressed if it is to realise its potential to the full in the decade to come.

2.19 One problem is fragmentation. There is a danger of drift and stagnation in a highly fragmented system, in which 149 library authorities run more than 3,000 public libraries. This makes opportunities for libraries to contribute to developing and delivering national policy a particular challenge. Potential funders from the private sector and other prospective partners make the same point.

2.20 Fragmentation could become more of a disadvantage as digital technologies play a larger role. Information technology systems need common standards and protocols. Libraries will need to acquire rights to digital content such as music and film archives. There will be many occasions when these agreements are best negotiated nationally.

2.21 Fragmentation makes learning difficult. There are wide disparities between the performances of different library authorities, not all of which can be attributed to funding differences. However the mechanisms for identifying, distilling and disseminating good practice are weak compared with some other public services. Libraries need more effective machinery for identifying and correcting failure and finding and spreading good ideas. Without that, innovations will be trapped in pockets.

2.22 Library leaders have complained of a lack of national advocacy for libraries both within policy making and externally to the population at large. As a result libraries run the risk of being taken for granted or overlooked. The contrast with sports and the arts is instructive. More people go to libraries than attend professional football matches. More people visit libraries than go to the theatre. Yet the sports and the arts have national role models and advocates who make a high profile case for their field being seen as a vital part of national life. Libraries lack such advocates.

2.23 At a local level, libraries are often submerged within much larger departments within local authorities. Many of the most innovative local authorities, including the Beacon library authorities, recognise the role that libraries can play within their corporate strategies. Libraries have responded to that. However in many other authorities, the potential of library services is not being tapped.

2.24 While policy for public libraries rests with the DCMS, core funding for libraries is provided to local authorities as part of their unhypothecated block grant allocation from ODPM. This means that there are no specific allocations to libraries. Other important funding comes from the Department for Education and Skills. Central government is also providing local authorities with an additional £675 million in 2001-2006, to ensure that all local authority services, including libraries, are electronically enabled by 2005.

2.25 Libraries face mounting competition on several fronts. The Audit Commission Report *Building Better Library Services*, published in May 2002, notes that since 1992/93 visits to libraries have fallen by 17% and loans of books by almost one quarter. Twenty-three per cent fewer people are using libraries for borrowing than was the case three years ago. Book issues, which are but one measure of library performance, have fallen by about 25% since 1992/93. Over the same period consumer books sales have risen by 25% in real terms as publishers and retailers have responded to the end of the Net Book Agreement with more aggressive pricing strategies, longer opening hours and new retail formats. The Audit Commission report, which is drawn from the first thirty-six Best Value inspections including library services, also notes a tendency for libraries to focus on current users rather than non-users. At the same time there has been a decline in the proportion of library users aged under 55. Concentration on current users is reflected in the book stock which, the report found, had greater appeal amongst older readers and in opening hours where non-users consistently called for more weekend and late evening opening.

Building Better Library Services – Audit Commission, May 2002

Library services need to direct their resources at delivering the services that local people want, in particular:

- Providing the books and information services that people want and need

- Maximising accessibility by opening at times that suit local people, making better use of joint-use facilities, and using the internet to provide access to their services to people at home

- Making services easy and pleasant to use – in particular looking at what attracts people to bookshops

- Building awareness among non-users of the services they have on offer.

2.26 Libraries also face more intense competition in recruiting and retaining the staff they need. Librarians' skills have become more valuable in businesses that thrive on information processing and retrieval. As a result library school graduates are going into the private sector. At more senior levels, there has been very little turnover in the library workforce. There has been only a modest infusion of young people and new skills. With the exception of the Lottery funded ICT training programme for library staff, investment in continuous development is limited. A generation of leaders recruited into the library profession thirty or more years ago is due to retire within the next few years. Developing a new generation of library leaders fully trained in business management and marketing skills is thus an urgent priority.