



CMS Select Committee Inquiry into Library Closures, January 2012

Arts Council England Response

Summary

1. Arts Council England assumed many of the responsibilities for museums and libraries formerly held by the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council on 1 October 2011, and is now the development agency for the library sector. On 09 November 2011 we launched the [Libraries Development Initiative](#). The overarching aim of this initiative is to create vibrant, sustainable 21st century library services within the context of our ten year framework [Achieving great art for everyone](#). We have developed our core functions – advocacy, development and investment, to support libraries to deliver efficient, fit for purpose 21st century services. [Culture, knowledge and understanding: great museums and libraries for everyone](#) sets out how we will ensure our framework is relevant to museums and libraries.
2. We begin our submission with Arts Council vision for public libraries and then consider the four questions posed by the Committee. We address what constitutes “comprehensive and efficient library service for the 21st century” at paragraphs 14 to 25. We do not address directly the impact of library closures in specific communities, but at paragraphs 23 - 28, we discuss how libraries are changing to meet societal change and new demands from communities. We do not intend to offer a view on the third and fourth questions, the extent to which library closures are compatible with the 1964 Act and the effectiveness of the Secretary of State’s powers of intervention. Arts Council England is the development agency for libraries and does not have a monitoring or inspectorate role under the act. This is properly a matter for the Secretary of State. It is clear that it is for the Department for Culture, Media and Sport to define what constitutes a “comprehensive and efficient service”. Decisions about library provision and how local government provides this are best made by local authorities according to local need. We end our submission with a framework for our work with libraries 2012-13.
3. Public libraries are a statutory service, provided and funded by local authorities. Arts Council England is not responsible for their core funding and so to help public libraries develop in the 21st century, the partnership between local government and Arts Council England is key. Our

extended cultural remit will enable us to work with local authorities and a unified arts and cultural sector to deliver an integrated cultural strategy which supports local communities.

4. Libraries are more than a book lending service. Our vision for public libraries in the 21st century sees them providing access to information, learning and cultural content in shared and trusted spaces, inspiring and empowering people to lead active lives, enriched through cultural experience.
5. There are places where library buildings are important as local hubs, including some rural communities. The effective access to library services for local communities is of paramount importance, and not all of these services must be delivered in buildings. Where it is not possible to maintain high quality library services in existing facilities, closure is not the only option, alternative means of delivery such as co-location should be considered. It is important to recognise that the national picture is not solely one of library closures. In 2012 there are 39 new library builds or major refurbishments planned to open.
6. It is for DCMS to define what constitutes an efficient and comprehensive library service. Libraries are local services and how local authorities meet their responsibilities under the 1964 Act is their decision. However Arts Council England will support local authorities through its investment and development roles, to understand a range of approaches which meet the needs of their local communities.
7. We will use our role in library development to encourage approaches which explore and develop the core role of library services: access to books and reading, support for learning, information, rich cultural content, support of expert staff and provision of civic space.
8. How these roles are fulfilled by libraries will continue to change in response to the needs of communities and economic, political, societal and technological change. The public sector landscape has changed radically driven by the financial climate and the Localism agenda. New approaches to service delivery are becoming more common and include outsourcing, transfer of ownership to community groups, commissioning and digital services. The sustainability of some of these models has yet to be established. Our investment in the Library Development Initiative

is central to our work in understanding the composition of a comprehensive and efficient library service in the future.

9. In 2012-13 we will conduct a debate to inspire and challenge the vision of what such a service could look like. Current debate about the role and function of public libraries often focuses on short term issues of funding and management. We intend to use our new role to stimulate discussion on the contribution public libraries make to a society much changed since the 1964 Public Libraries and Museums Act.

Arts Council England's vision for libraries

10. Libraries are not simply about providing access to books and reading. The Arts Council's vision for public libraries is that they provide access to information, learning and cultural content in shared and trusted spaces. Moreover that they inspire and empower people to lead active lives, enriched through cultural experience. Our Library Development Initiative will both develop this vision and draw attention to best practice from around the country. This builds on the Future Libraries Programme developed by the Local Government Association and the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council.
11. The integration of some of the MLA's responsibilities with the Arts Council has created new opportunities to explore the impact of the arts and culture working together within local authorities. We see our libraries role as part of a single cultural offer and an opportunity for a single conversation with local authorities about key issues including commissioning, asset sharing, reaching marginalised communities and more efficient use of resources providing better outcomes for individuals and communities. Issues of management, funding and the use of facilities, while important, should not distract from a concentration on the ease of access to excellent library services however.

Our role

12. The Arts Council is to advocate, develop, and invest in the arts. We believe these roles are also relevant to our new role for libraries in the following ways:
 - We will **advocate for and champion** libraries' roles and the public value they provide. This will include the contribution they make to positive outcomes in learning, the development of employment and

skills, improving health and well being, and forging stronger community ties. Throughout 2012-2013 we will conduct a libraries debate across government, the library sector and wide range of stakeholders, creating the space and conditions to think radically and long term on the purpose, value and potential of future public library services.

- While we will not provide or core fund library services, we will play a significant role **developing** the libraries sector in order to sustain the long term public value of libraries. In discussion with the libraries sector, we will draw an accurate picture of the challenges and opportunities and use this information to inform our support for new ways of collaborating and improving efficiency to help library services thrive, not just survive. We will capture and disseminate examples of good practice. Our new responsibilities enable us to hold single conversations with local authorities about all their arts and culture provision which should lead to greater impact and value for their communities.
- Where appropriate, libraries will be eligible for Arts Council strategic **investment** funding. Partnering with arts organisations, libraries will be able to apply to project and strategic funding programmes including Grants for the arts, digital, touring and Arts Council's general strategic fund.

13. Arts Council England is not responsible for providing core funding for libraries, this statutory responsibility remains with local authorities. However, we will provide the Secretary of State with a national overview of the public library sector, including current and future challenges and opportunities. This information will support the Secretary of State in exercising his statutory duty under the 1964 Libraries Act. Monitoring of the 1964 Act is the responsibility of DCMS.

What constitutes an efficient and comprehensive library service?

14. As the development agency for libraries we will build a shared sense of the value of libraries. We will show how library services can contribute to outcomes across local and national government as part the cultural landscape and fund some projects which develop new ways of working towards those outcomes.

15. There are a multiplicity of ways in which a modern library service can contribute to public value including information provision, support for informal and formal lifelong learning, access to books supporting literacy and provision of rich cultural content.
16. Libraries provide free access to knowledge and information necessary for individuals to participate in and contribute effectively to society. Library staff support people in navigating varied information sources and developing their skills in handling information. As an example, Arts Council England is currently working with the Society for Chief Librarians, Directgov and other national partners on a series of eight pilot projects to develop tools to help people effectively navigate the range of national online information sources, specifically in the areas of health, finance, careers, employment and business information.
17. Libraries support learning for all, offering community based learning environments not necessarily linked to formal learning. They offer choice about what, where and when people choose to learn including online. Their staff help people re-engage with learning and skills development, and many offer support in job searching and CV writing. For example, Rutland library authority's Access to Work programme is a lifeline for rural communities some distance from Job Centres. Support to develop digital skills is offered by 91% of libraries.
18. Obviously, books are a major part of the core cultural offer from libraries. Most endeavour to ensure their reading offer remains engaging, exciting and relevant to their local communities. Activities include reader groups, author talks and co-production opportunities which extend the reach and engagement with books. The Reading Agency programme 'Headspace' encourages young people to volunteer in their libraries, choose books, and develop library space for young people. Library staff are skilled at supporting people to make their reading choices and nurturing the habit of reading. London City Read is library-led collaboration with, among others, museums, publishers visual artists, and spoken word performers promoting reading and literature locally and pan-London, and supported by Grants for the Arts. During April 2012 Londoners will be encouraged to read and share their thoughts and feelings on a single title – Charles Dickens' Oliver Twist through events ranging from talks and readings to hip hop Dickens workshops, many of which will be taking place at their local library.

19. Many libraries combine books with other cultural content to improve public experience and opportunities to engage with arts and culture locally. Art exhibitions, literature events, poetry slams, craft and music workshops in libraries are now commonplace. The 'Get it Loud in Libraries' initiative holds quality rock and pop music gigs in libraries. In recognition of this work, Stewart Parsons, the founder, was recognised as one of the 18 innovators from across the world as part of the International Network of Emerging Library Innovators supported by the Gates Foundation.

20. The public value of libraries lies within the services that they offer and therefore how and where those services are delivered will be an important consideration in maximising their impact. Although libraries are hubs for information and services that are important for communities, not all such services must be building based. However for some communities the library building may be the only public space available and therefore has value as a hub for other services. Such co-location can provide opportunities to reach disadvantaged communities. For example Lower Kersal Library in Salford is combined with leisure facilities in one of the most deprived areas of the city. Co-location and introduction of self issue has meant extended opening hours for the library and a rise in visitor figures. Similarly The Hub in South Normanton Derbyshire is the centre for community life in the town offering library, adult education, social care and police services to a deprived community in Derbyshire.

21. Plans for library closures should be considered locally dependent on need and provision in the surrounding community. The picture of the library sector in England should not be characterised purely as one of closure however. Through our overview of libraries in England, we are aware of 39 new libraries which will be opened or refurbished in the coming year including Hertford Library and Egremont Library in Cumbria.

22. The Arts Council is interested in opportunities for libraries to forge links with artists, potentially using their spaces for display or performance. Increasingly, new library builds such as Canada Water and the Library of Birmingham have dedicated space for theatre, music and dance.

23. In a digital age, public libraries will become physical and virtual public spaces for gathering and retrieving knowledge around the clock. 'The People's Network' in 2000 which established public access to IT in the majority of public libraries, revolutionised the pattern and demographics of public library use. In the future, it is likely that libraries will focus less on the pure provision of public access to IT and more on digital services and resources. Some library users might access library services remotely at any time, while other library users will bring their own laptops or smartphones into their local library to access online resources. Libraries will become a place for connectivity – a creative hub. Manchester City Libraries City Living Room will provide spaces in the central library building for social interaction, study and work that will encourage users to interact, share and create knowledge.
24. All of the above is underpinned by trained library staff and their proven ability to adapt to challenges set by their local agendas. They have to be flexible and creative in their approach to the wide variety of services libraries provide which will include services to housebound people, children and young people, support for informal learning, activities for older people. The role of professional library staff as mediators and active facilitators supporting literacy and digital fluency is key to supporting people to actively engage and participate in their communities. Trained librarians are skilled handlers of information and a key role for library staff is to guide people to make critical, intelligent judgements on information in from a variety of sources in a range of media. Digital technologies have changed how we communicate and access information, but that is why public libraries and library staff remain relevant. They do not just provide access to the internet and bridge the digital divide, they help people to find and to identify and interpret reliable online information sources.
25. What constitutes a comprehensive and efficient library service is best defined locally, but there are occasions when national co-ordination of library services and a national public library network, secures economies of scale through partnership working across local authority boundaries. Examples include the Reference Online initiative which to date has secured £7 million efficiency savings through a joint procurement process for online reference resources. The Arts Council is currently working with the Society for Chief Librarians to join library catalogues

into a single catalogue so members of the public can access the huge range of library resources throughout England from one website.

Local communities and how libraries are changing

26. Libraries must continually respond to the changing needs of local communities brought about by societal, economic, technological and demographic shifts. Increasingly, library services are delivered in partnership. This might comprise libraries working with other services across a local authority such as health, learning, skills development and employment, working with third sector partners such as Age Concern or literacy charities. Some libraries authorities are working with commercial partners. The Society for Chief Librarians and The Reading Agency are working with 40 UK publishers to promote reading and library membership as part of a drive to stimulate a healthy reading nation.

27. In response to the financial climate and changes to public service delivery, libraries are developing a more entrepreneurial approach to delivering services. This includes building their capacity to secure contracts and commissions as an alternative to grant funding. The "whole place" approach to commissioning currently being piloted by the Department for Communities and Local Government will be watched keenly by library authorities, as will entrepreneurial approaches to income generation. Northamptonshire Library Service is actively encouraging financial donations from the public to contribute to the running of library services.

28. As well as library services, the library workforce is also changing with many local authorities recruiting volunteers. We believe volunteers can play a valuable role in complementing professional librarians but they cannot and should not be a substitute. Volunteers can lead to local community empowerment and a local voice in library service delivery. Professional expertise in customer service, commercial partnerships and tendering procedures is likely to be more necessary in the 21st century rather than less.

What we will do

29. The Library Development Initiative is central to understanding Arts Council role as a library development agency. Successful libraries development projects will explore how embedding arts and culture in libraries can improve people's experiences; bring benefits to the library service; and develop cultural provision in local areas. We will draw on existing strengths such as approaches to health and well being; learning opportunities for adults and children; and developing reading offers for local communities. We also want this initiative to encourage innovation and creative thinking in new approaches to delivering library services.
30. Successful LDI projects will be announced in February 2012. Applicants must demonstrate their ideas around one of the themes we consider essential to efficient future library services. These are:
- New ways libraries can work with arts and cultural organisations, with the aim of improving a community's experience and opportunities for engaging with arts and culture locally.
 - Wider community outcomes. How libraries can expand their role in the local delivery of areas such as learning, skills and employability, and health. Particularly through multi-disciplinary partnerships with, for example, other local authority departments, community groups, job centres and arts and cultural organisations.
 - The challenge for libraries to ensure their books and reading offer remains relevant and exciting. This is especially important in the changing context of more active library user involvement, and the different ways people are beginning to access reading material.
 - Commercial partnerships and how libraries can respond to increasing economic challenges in an innovative way, exploring diverse funding streams and the benefits of a resilient mixed economy.

Findings will be disseminated to the sector and used to help stimulate wider take-up of good practice and thinking about library services

31. The Arts Council is considering how libraries can respond to changing community needs and wider changes in society. Our libraries debate over the course of 2012-13 will draw on lessons from our arts debate in



2006-07. We will develop an inspiring and challenging vision for the purpose, value and potential of modern public library services, through a programme of research and debate on what libraries ought and need to be in the light of future trends and a deep understanding of the public value of libraries. The aim is not to define a “comprehensive and efficient service”, nor to analyse the strengths and weaknesses of existing library services. Rather we aim to build a shared sense of the purpose, value and potential of libraries to support the Arts Council and the library sector in developing and advocating for a 21st century library service.

32. We believe this public debate will demonstrate our commitment to our new responsibility, our role as a development agency for libraries and our vision for its future. It will help move the debate beyond short term funding cuts to think radically and long term, creating the space and conditions which can encourage fresh thinking and promote positive change in the libraries sector. We would like to see it open up cross government dialogue on the contribution of libraries to cultural, social and economic outcomes. We hope discussion will also encourage active engagement of the sector and a wide range of stakeholders to reflect the breadth of professional and public interest.

Conclusion

33. Libraries have a reach into communities that few other services possess. They support information as well as language literacy and address the digital divide. We believe the effective access to these services for local communities is of paramount importance, however or whenever this access occurs. For the Arts Council, our advocacy role for libraries is an unprecedented opportunity to support our mission to achieve great art for everyone.