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Raising the standards - current issues and developments in public libraries in England & Wales

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Intro:

Good morning. I'm delighted to be here, representing the Public Libraries Group of the UK and I'd like to thank the Public Libraries Section of IFLA for giving me the opportunity to talk to you this morning.

My background is 20 years of experience in public library management at all levels, most recently as Head of Libraries, Arts & Archives in Bath & North East Somerset. However, I am currently seconded to the Audit Commission for England & Wales for 3 years as an inspector. My job is to inspect local authority services. Inspection ensures that they are providing good value and that they are continuously improving the service they deliver to the public. I carry out a range of inspections but, of course, specialise in libraries.

This morning I'm going to give you a very brief overview of the main issues facing our public libraries at present and how these are being tackled at a national strategic level. I will also look at how these national strategies are affecting services on the ground.

I will concentrate specifically on England and Wales. The issues facing libraries in Scotland and Northern Ireland are similar but the strategic framework is different and I know Martin Wade will be touching on the situation in Scotland in his presentation.

The Challenges (1)



Let's look first at the challenges which have been facing public libraries in the UK over the last few years. In 1997 and 2002, the Audit Commission carried out studies of public libraries. Both studies found that people generally have a high opinion of their libraries. They also identified that some aspects of the service such as provision of audio visual materials and IT services are on the rise. However, they also found that there are some very serious issues facing public libraries.

This chart really sums the whole thing up. Since 1995, expenditure on libraries per 1000 population has risen by 10.5%. In the same period, visits to libraries per 1,000 population have decreased by 17%. This has resulted in a massive increase in cost per visit. In terms of overall totals, this amounts to a rise of 87% cost per visit over the figure in 1995.

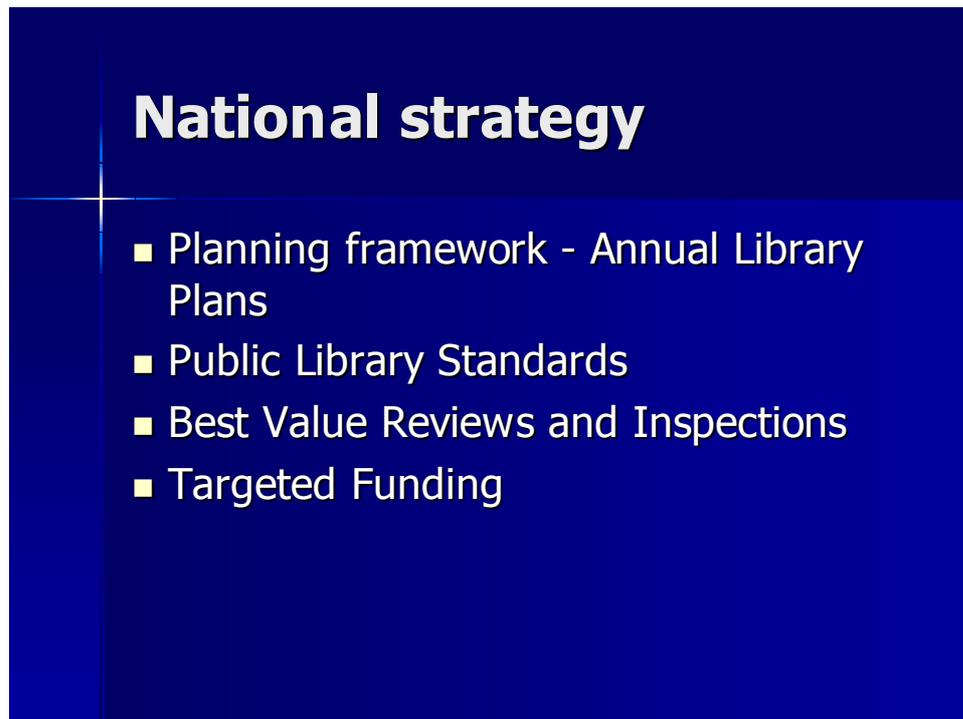
The Challenges (2)

- ### The Challenges
- Reduced opening hours
 - Loans fallen by 25%
 - Expenditure on materials declining
 - Over 50% buildings in poor location or condition

The studies also found some other key challenges.

- Opening hours have decreased – 9% fewer libraries than 10 years ago are open for 30 hours or more
- Loans have fallen by almost 25% in the last 10 years. As audio visual loans have risen, the decline in book loans is even higher.
- Expenditure on materials has decreased by a third in the last 10 years
- And over half the libraries in England & Wales are in buildings which are either in a poor location, in poor condition, or both.

National Strategy



National strategy

- Planning framework - Annual Library Plans
- Public Library Standards
- Best Value Reviews and Inspections
- Targeted Funding

Clearly, this picture has been emerging for some time and steps have been taken nationally to address these challenges. The national strategy has four key strands.

- A standardised planning framework, the cornerstone of which is an annual plan required from every library authority
- A set of national performance standards which apply to all library services.
- The government's Best Value regime. This applies not just to libraries but to all local government services. Every service has to be thoroughly reviewed. This review is then followed out by an inspection carried out by the Audit Commission
- And a number of national funding streams, aimed at improving specific areas of service.

We'll look briefly at each of these in turn.

Annual Library Plans

Annual Library Plans

- Introduced 1998
- Reviews performance of previous year
- 3 year strategy
- 1 year action plan
- Includes social inclusion plans
- Independent assessment

- Annual Library Plans were introduced in England in 1998 and in Wales this year.
- The plan, which must be submitted to central government in September of each year, reviews the performance of the library service during the previous year and identifies strengths and areas of weakness.
- It sets out a medium, three year plan for development
- This is followed by a more detailed action plan for the next year.
- The plan is required to show exactly how the service is addressing issues of social inclusion and access for all, based on national policy and guidance.
- All plans, once submitted, are independently assessed and the results made public.

The requirement for the plans has, of course, placed a burden of extra work on senior library managers. However, the production of the plan is now an accepted part of the annual schedule and there is greater understanding of what is required, reducing the burden. Without doubt, the production of plans has raised the standard of strategic planning skills amongst senior public library managers and encouraged wider and more visionary thinking about the future.

Public Library Standards

Public Library Standards

- Introduced 2001
- 19 standards
- Access, use, stock, user satisfaction
- 3 years to comply
- Progress reported in Annual Library Plan
- Intervention for non-compliance

- The Public Library Standards were introduced following extensive consultation last year.
- There are a total of 19 main standards, with sub sections.
- These cover key areas of service delivery, including access – opening hours, website use – usage, the quality and quantity of stock, user satisfaction, staff training etc.
- Every library authority has three years to meet the standards
- Progress is reported each year in the Annual Library Plan, along with targets for meeting the standards within the required timescale.
- Where a local authority is seen to be failing to comply with the standards, the Secretary of State for Culture, Media & Sport has the power to intervene. However, the manner of such intervention is, as yet, unclear, and there are no explicit guidelines on the point at which it would be invoked – for example, how many standards have to be met to avoid intervention.

Best Value & Inspection

Best Value & Inspection

- Duty of continuous improvement
- All services reviewed against 4 Cs
 - Challenge
 - Comparison
 - Consultation
 - Competition
- Inspection - current service and prospects for improvement
- Spreading best practice

- As I said earlier, Best Value applies not only to libraries but to all local government services. It places a duty on all local authorities to continuously improve the services they provide to the public.
- All services have to be reviewed against 4 C's – Challenge, Comparison, Consultation and Competition.

The reason for providing the service and the manner in which this is done, must be rigorously challenged. The performance of the local authority must be compared to that of others. The authority has to provide evidence that services are developed in full consultation with local people. And the review must establish what is the most competitive method of delivering the service

- Following reviews, the Audit Commission inspects services. Inspectors make judgements about the quality of the current service and the prospects of improvement over the next five years.

- To date, a total of 46 inspection reports on library services have been published. This is enabling us not only to build up a picture of the challenges facing libraries, but to identify and promote good practice, so that creative solutions to addressing these issues can be shared.

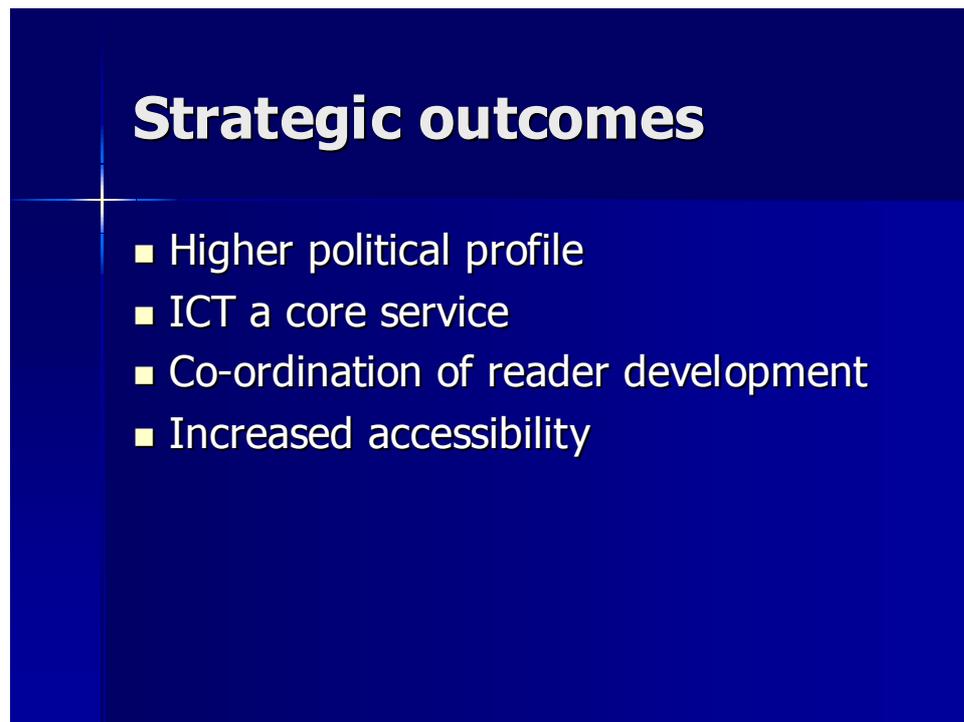
Targeted Funding

Targeted Funding

- New Opportunities Fund
 - People's Network
 - ICT Training
 - Digitisation
- Wolfson Fund
 - ICT
 - Reader development
 - Local history

The fourth strand to the national strategy is the introduction of funding streams for specific purposes. There have been two key sources:

- The New Opportunities Fund, with money raised from the National Lottery, has provided money to every library service for three purposes. Firstly to build a solid ICT infrastructure, called the People's Network, connecting all libraries to the Internet and providing a range of ICT services to the public. Secondly to train librarians to use new technology for the benefit of the public. And thirdly to make printed resources widely available by digitising them.
- The Wolfson Fund, administered by the government Department for Culture, Media & Sport, was a challenge fund, for which authorities competed. It also focused on three key areas. In the early days, it funded pathfinding ICT projects, such as learning centres. The focus then shifted to materials, in particular projects designed to increase reading and raise awareness of books, and also projects which brought together local history materials.



Strategic outcomes

- Higher political profile
- ICT a core service
- Co-ordination of reader development
- Increased accessibility

So what have been the outcomes of this nationwide strategic activity? Well, there have been many, but 4 key ones:

- A higher political profile for libraries
- A shift in emphasis which has seen ICT become a core part of the service instead of an add-on
- The co-ordination and improvement of reading development and promotion
- And greater access to libraries for everyone.

We'll have a brief look at each of these, and particularly at what has been the effect on the public.

Political Profile



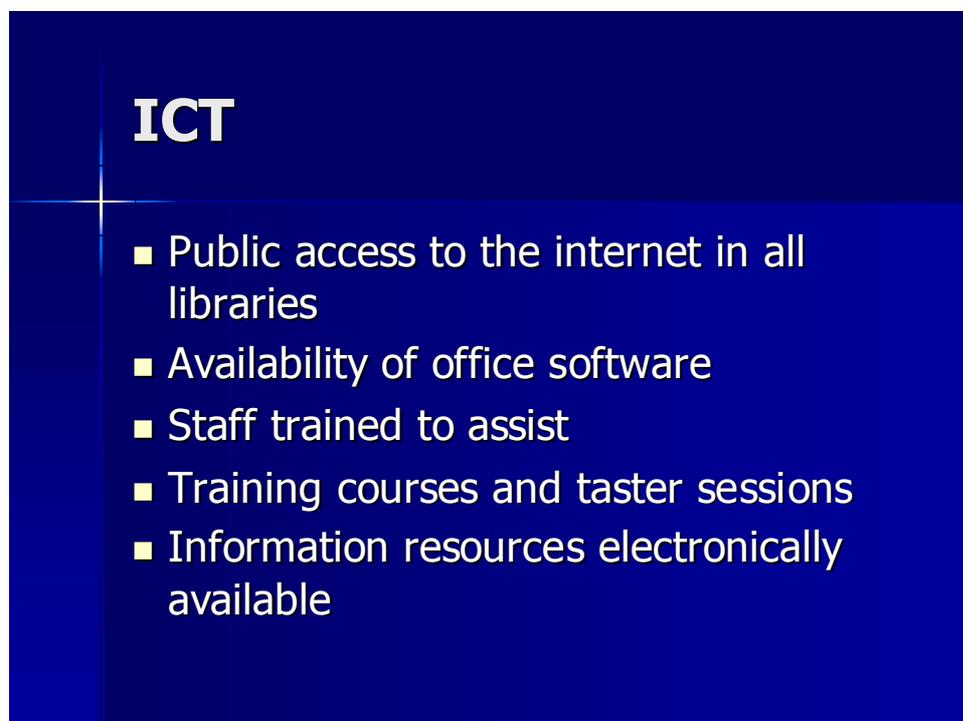
Political profile

- New national focus
 - E-government
 - Social inclusion
 - Lifelong learning
- Higher on local agenda
 - Annual Plan approved by Councils
 - Standards requiring review of resources

The political profile of libraries has been raised at two levels.

- Nationally, there is a new focus on libraries. There is greater recognition of their overall value and an acknowledgement of the wider role that they can play in key government agendas. In particular, libraries are seen as being central to three aims: the delivery of e-government services; the plans to tackle diversity and improve social equity; the promotion of lifelong learning as a means of aiding economic regeneration.
- On a local basis, politicians are now much more aware of library services. This is in part because the Annual Library Plan needs to be approved by Councils and so Councillors have to actually examine the performance and plans for libraries each year. In addition, the requirement to meet Public Library Standards within three years means that local councillors are having to take a much more active role in looking at resources and how these can be increased or diverted to, for example, increase opening hours to meet standards.

ICT



ICT

- Public access to the internet in all libraries
- Availability of office software
- Staff trained to assist
- Training courses and taster sessions
- Information resources electronically available

In terms of ICT, there has been a huge repositioning of libraries, with a massive increase in the range and accessibility services available to the public.

- By next Spring, all libraries in England and Wales will have public access to the Internet. Use of the internet for information purposes is largely free of charge.
- They will be able to offer a range of services, including access to office software, in even the smallest of libraries.
- The library workforce is being trained to European Computer Driving Licence standard, so that staff can not only use the new technology themselves, but help members of the public to use it
- The means that libraries now commonly offer training courses and taster sessions for the public, either themselves or in partnership with local colleges and other agencies.
- And a wide range of previously inaccessible resources, particularly in the field of local history, are now available in libraries and also remotely, in homes and schools, through the web.

Reader Development



Reader development

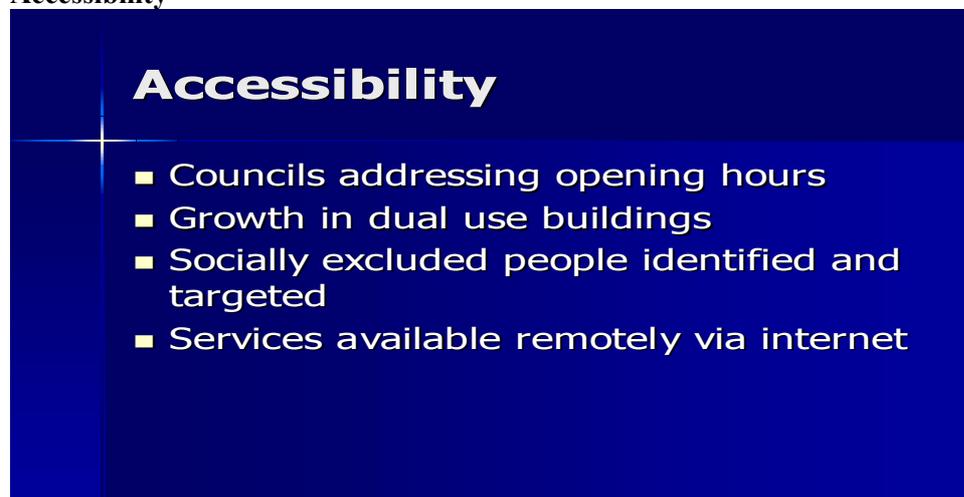
- Nationally co-ordinated promotions and campaigns
- Co-operation with arts sector
- Growth in reading groups
- Staff trained to run activities and programmes

Libraries have always been good at promoting reading and literature to the public. Previously, however, this tended to be done on a piecemeal basis, depending on the energy and enthusiasm of local librarians.

- Now we have highly professional, nationally co-ordinated promotions and campaigns, targeting different age groups and types of reader and introducing people to a huge range of fiction and non-fiction.
- We have much greater co-operation with the arts sector, with joint projects, access to funding and a better recognition of the role libraries play in the arts through literature development.
- Many, many libraries now run reading groups, aimed, again at different age groups and reader types – children, families, teenagers and retired people – and these are highly successful.
- And, through a range of opportunities and one major national project, Branching Out, we have staff who are properly trained to run not just these groups, but a wide range of reading activities, events and programmes.

Reader development is no longer seen as an extra, something to be done if librarians have time, but as key to the promotion of libraries and reading to a wider audience.

Accessibility



Accessibility

- Councils addressing opening hours
- Growth in dual use buildings
- Socially excluded people identified and targeted
- Services available remotely via internet

The final outcome I mentioned is that access to libraries is improving.

- Councils are now starting to address the problem of poor opening hours in order to meet the Public Library Standards and these are being extended, with Sunday opening being introduced in many authorities.
- Authorities are looking increasingly at siting libraries in buildings which are shared with other community facilities, such as health centres, advice bureaux and leisure centres. This increases the number of people who come to the building, thus exposing people to libraries who would not normally use them. It also allows some sharing of staff, which is being used as a means of extending opening hours.
- The Annual Library Plan, as I said earlier, requires services to show how they are addressing social exclusion and diversity, in line with national policy. This means that more work is taking place to identify and target people who are traditionally low users of libraries.
- And more authorities are giving access to their catalogues and the ability to reserve and renew materials over the Internet, so that services are becoming more widely available outside library buildings.

The next steps



The next steps

- National strategic framework
 - New planning cycle
 - Review of standards
 - Dedicated inspections
 - Emphasis on community space

So, this is how in England & Wales we are tackling the major issues facing library services. We are continuing to refine our strategy.

- In October, a National Strategic Framework for Public Libraries will be launched by the government. We don't yet know exactly what this will hold, but it is likely to result in some changes to our planning process, now that we have improved our ability to strategically plan development. It will include a review of the Public Library Standards, taking into account what we have learned so far and making these much more outcome based. It may introduce a dedicated inspection service for libraries, linked to the planning process. And it will place more emphasis on the role of libraries as community spaces, thus, hopefully, putting a focus on the need to improve our buildings.

It's too soon yet to say how successful we are being in terms of usage. However, if we look back at our expenditure and usage chart, we can see that the picture is starting to look just a little better. The decline in the number of visitors to libraries has slowed down in the last year.

Certainly, the strategic measures taken to address these challenges have brought about major changes in the services available to the public. So perhaps we can be cautiously optimistic that we are moving in the right direction. Perhaps we can look forward to reversing the trend and raising the standards further in the next few years.

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