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## Partnerships between public libraries and other agencies in England for provision of adult learning

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### Abstract

This paper draws on a research study undertaken and research report provided for the Museums Libraries and Archives Council UK. The aim of the study was to review selectively adult learning provision inside and outside public libraries in England, to identify key strengths in public library services for adult learners and to produce definitions of, and a baseline level for, adult learning provision within public libraries in England. The sample library services in the study all worked with other organisations to provide adult learning services, and a wide range of partners has been established. The advantages of these partnerships go beyond provision and encompass sharing costs, facilities and marketing. Research carried out by the Adult Learning Inspectorate across LEAs/county councils and learning providers emphasised the need to establish strong and productive community partnerships. A wide range of courses and services is provided, some of which will have a broad appeal to all learner groups (e.g. basic ICT courses) and others, which are targeted to a particular community (e.g. English as a second language). There are courses that entice new learners (e.g. Bite-size 'tasters') and others, which continue to engage people in the learning process (e.g. Basic Skills Level courses). This diversity in provision brings diversity in partnerships. All library services sampled expressed the desire to provide an appropriate environment for learners – the right ambience, adequate facilities, etc. However, the poor condition of some library buildings and lack of appropriate facilities was reported by some respondents. It is necessary for partner organisations and other services to have access to library space to deliver adult learning services, thus encouraging adult learners into the library environment. The study found that public library staff are flexible in their approach to adult learning as they are innovative, willing to try new ideas, and offer a variety of courses and support services. Moreover public libraries demonstrate adaptability and gain benefit through working in partnership with other organisations.

## Introduction

This paper draws on a research study undertaken and research report provided for the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council UK (MLA) by a team from Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU) (Ashcroft et al, 2005). The aim of the research study was to review selectively adult learning provision inside and outside public libraries in England, and to identify key strengths in public library services for adult learners and to produce definitions of, and a baseline for, adult learning provision within public libraries in England.

## Partnerships for public libraries

The importance of partnerships between public libraries and other organisations is highlighted in a number of documents and research reports. *Framework for the Future* (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2003) defines the UK Government's ten year strategic vision for public libraries in England, and sets out current strengths and key areas for development for public libraries in supporting lifelong learning. It discusses the considerable benefits to be gained from public libraries working in partnership with other organisations. Partnerships might also be forged regionally, to help build links between libraries and formal adult learning service providers (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2003, p.13). However, the report calls for public libraries to be distinctive: "[public libraries] should not duplicate the efforts of other public and private sector providers but complement them through partnership working" (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2003, p.7). It also recognises that a key strength of public libraries is their position within local communities, and their sense of local connection (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2003, p.43).

McNicol et al (2002) report on a Re:source funded project into collaborative arrangements between libraries and education. They found that collaborative projects often did not have a 'sophisticated understanding' of different market segments in terms of the needs and aspirations of learners and potential learners, and services were not tailored to the needs of different user groups. The authors recommend that public libraries develop ways in which they might collaborate with partner institutions in order to understand user needs. They should also take advantage of opportunities to share successes and good practice.

The Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) previously had a section on lifelong learning on its website (CILIP, 2005), which now appears to be subsumed under Information Literacy. CILIP identified key issues regarding lifelong learning for library and information services to:

- establish links with education institutions and other relevant organisations in order to provide a seamless service for learners
- be learner-centred through encouraging participation, tailoring support according to individual needs, and taking advantage of opportunities provided by e-learning and electronic networks
- be quality assured, by devising self-assessment and action planning quality procedures.

The first key issue stresses the importance of links and provision of a seamless service.

## **Methodology**

A purposive select sample of 6 public library services in England was identified. The sample was selected to cover the following criteria: geographical location; type of library services (such as county, city, borough); Beacon and non-Beacon library services; and size of library service. The original sample selected by the LJMU team was amended following suggestions from the MLA Advisory Group. Appropriate contacts were identified in each of the public library services selected. An interview schedule was devised by the LJMU project team, drawing on issues from the MLA project brief and key factors from the literature review (see Appendix IV). The semi-structured interview schedule was designed to provide an opportunity for further probing where appropriate. Data on non-library provision was gathered primarily from a search of select non-library providers' websites and a review of the documentation acquired.

## **Definitions**

None of the library services sampled is working to a definition of adult learning. Some difficulties lie with the definition of an 'adult'. The age of an 'adult' can vary according to different purposes. For example, four library services define adults as over 16, as this age is set in line with funding requirements set by the Learning Skills Council. One library service defines adults as over 18, which is because the teenage library card runs from 11 to 18. Another library service defines adults as over 19 because learndirect courses start from the age of 19.

## **Types of adult learning provision**

A wide range of courses and services is provided, some of which will have a broad appeal to all learner groups (e.g. basic ICT courses) and others, which are targeted to a particular community (e.g. English as a second language). There are courses that entice new learners (e.g. Bite-size 'tasters') and others, which continue to engage people in the learning process (e.g. Basic Skills Level courses).

Respondents were particularly keen to highlight a variety of the adult learning services that they provide. Those highlighted during interviews were:

- short introductory courses and taster sessions on a variety of topics, eg First Steps
- ESOL courses (provided in partnership)
- Beatles courses
- Birmingham Pride
- tracing your family tree
- silver surfers
- University of the Third Age (partner organisation)
- writing a good CV
- job applications
- Open University help desk.

It is apparent from the range of courses on offer that some are designed with the particular community in mind, for example 'Birmingham Pride' and 'Beatles courses'.

These also provide ‘hooks’, which could entice new learners. Other courses are evident throughout the library services sampled, for example those related to job seeking, which are likely to generate appeal to a broader range of adult learners. Respondents from two services referred to a continuing demand for computer basic skills courses. (Ashcroft et al, 2005)

### **Partnership activities**

A range of partnership activities was identified from the sample library services’ documentation including:

- *Adult Education Service* - Informal learning opportunities and accredited courses provided at 6 on-line Learning Centres.
- *learndirect Centre* - Located within Birmingham Central Library.
- *Matthew Boulton College* – New Matthew Boulton Suite in Birmingham Central Library. Opened in September 2004, it delivers learning opportunities for business, health and skills for life.
- *The Learning Shop* - Located beside the entrance to Birmingham Central Library, The Learning Shop provides an Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) service and offers advice on preparing a CV, finding a job, enrolling on a suitable courses and contacting training advisers.
- *Move On project* - Developed in partnership with Orpington College and as part of the national Move On project.
- *What’s in Londons Libraries (WILL)* - a London-wide partnership for users to access and search all London libraries catalogues.
- *Londoners Need to Read* - a city-wide project researching the current and potential role of libraries, museums and archives in supporting learning for adults with basic skills needs.
- *LearnEast* - a development partnership to provide awareness, training and lifelong learning opportunities for hard-to-reach groups excluded from employment opportunities due to low skill needs, learning disabilities, or people from ethnic minorities and travellers.
- *Community Learning Access Points* - A partnership between two district councils and Cambridgeshire Library Services. These are located in community venues and looked after by a community volunteer and with support from a learning tutor provided by the library services’ e-learning network.
- *Accessing Lancashire Library and Information Services (ALLIS)* is a partnership between libraries in Lancashire to provide “Access for All” as part of the NWMLA’s INSPIRE project - users registered at any library can be referred to the resources and collections of other ALLIS libraries.
- *learndirect research project* - A pilot project undertaken with 84 libraries in Lancashire established a methodology for analysing the community surrounding a library and its resources to determine whether it would be appropriate as a learndirect learning centre, access point or pod.
- *People’s Centres* - Lancashire County Library and Information Service have established 16 People’s Centres within existing libraries, funded by the National Lottery New Opportunities Fund and Lancashire County Council.
- *Library and Knowledge Centre* - Currently in the planning stage, the Library and Knowledge Centre is a joint effort between Lancashire County Council and

Preston City Council to provide state-of-the-art information, learning, knowledge, community and business development facilities.

- *Drop-in Study Centres (DISCs)* – provide a range of adult learning services.
- *One Stop Shops* - enable council services and library facilities to be brought together under one umbrella, offering free Internet access, the ability to sign-up for computer courses, and advice on a range of customer services.
- *Libraries Together: Liverpool Learning Partnership* - any person with a library card has access rights to the 6 libraries within this partnership.
- *Library Access Sunderland Scheme (LASH)* - a cross-sectoral library collaboration. Anyone who lives, works, or studies in Sunderland may use the 21 public libraries, the 4 learning centres in the City's Further Education College and the 4 libraries in the university.
- *Peoplefirst* - Funded by Sunderland Council, Peoplefirst aims to improve accessibility to learning resources by bringing services together. Peoplefirst centres offer a range of basic skills courses, such as digital imaging, web design, family history and using the Internet. They also have a Study Support office and reader development/ICT activities, and a designated room where the City of Sunderland College runs ICT courses such as the ECDL and Computer Literacy and Information Technology (CLAIT). (Ashcroft et al, 2005)

As indicated in these partnership activities, links have already been developing between public library authorities and learndirect, with which other authorities may be encouraged to play a part. learndirect has set up a pilot project with Lancashire libraries, where a methodology was established to determine the learning needs of a population in preparation for a learning centre, access point or pod (Ufi, 2003). The project has provided some “rich” information concerning communities, including attitudes, learners’ travel distance to information and guidance points, space in libraries, and library staff skills. This initiative represents an example of a partnership where libraries can work with learning providers so that each library authority is modelled individually removing the misconception that “one size fits all” (Ufi, 2003). The active involvement of other public library authorities in this partnership can help to identify the learning needs of the population accurately and help to develop and provide the services necessary to meet those requirements.

Furthermore, learndirect has identified an issue in that prisoners may be ‘lost’ as they are transferred between prisons or released into society (Ufi, 2005). When moved between prisons the learner may be located at an institution that does not have a learndirect facility, or when released the prisoner may not feel there is support to continue education. Public library authorities, by building stronger links with learndirect, can provide a range of learning services (reference material, controlled e-access) within prisons so that the learner can continue with their course. Additionally, for those prisoners released the library can provide a supportive learning environment (through the many learning centres) to provide an access point for learners and referral onto further learning.

The Workers’ Educational Association (WEA) (<http://www.wea.org.uk/>) provides part-time courses for adults at a community level across the country. Findings from this research project show that some public libraries are working in partnership with the WEA to provide these courses. The WEA runs evening and weekend course with

Liverpool library services. In Lancashire libraries, the WEA run courses, mainly in literacy and reading.

As part of the *Get Parenting* initiative, the BBC is working in partnership with all 22 public library authorities in the North-West. Lancashire library service provides a number of informal courses and workshops to build self-esteem, confidence and acquire practical child support skills such as 'Breakfast to Bedtime' and 'Positive Parents' (BBC, 2005b). Similarly, Liverpool library service offers 'Parenting Workshops' and 'Share Plus' providing opportunities to access parental information and support (BBC, 2005c). Family learning is another way of attracting adult learners and promoting the skills for life agenda. One respondent discussed a course being run to support parents and build confidence – this is being offered in partnership with the BBC's *Get Parenting* initiative. (BBC, 2005a) Another respondent mentioned study support sessions offered for parents at a number of their libraries. Kirk, McMenemy & Poulter (2004) investigated provision and ongoing development of family learning services in UK public libraries and indicated a range of family learning activities – ICT, homework support, family history, literacy, numeracy, reader development, arts and crafts, with ICT being the most common type of learning activity. It was concluded that the results of their study were encouraging as family learning is still in the early stages of development, yet evidently widespread in UK library services.

NIACE is a non-governmental organisation that aims to 'Promote the study and general advancement of continuing education.' (NIACE, 2005) A NIACE response to a discussion paper on *Literacy and Social Inclusion: the policy challenge* from the National Literacy Trust supported by the Basic Skills Agency discussed the role that library services can play in promoting parental interest in reading and sharing books with children. It suggests that library services could be developed in partnership with the voluntary and community sector, to provide outreach, bridging and linking activities. This is currently an area that is, NIACE suggests, under-developed (NIACE, 2004).

Milner (2007) reports on four library projects set to demonstrate the social impact of connecting people to ICT and the larger potential for partnerships between libraries and UK online centres.

- The Cambridgeshire Library Learning Services ENGAGE project has a major focus on older people, but also plans to target carers and adults with mental health problems.
- The Leeds Library and Information Service project is targeting families in poverty and is linking the 50+ libraries across the city.
- The Suffolk Libraries' project is targeting two groups – older people and teenage parents, and is linking 15 local libraries.
- The Lincolnshire Rural Activities Centre is both a UK online centre and a registered charity. Its project is targeting both adults with mental health issues and older people, and is linking 11 rural libraries.

Each of these projects partners the delivery expertise and community links of the libraries involved with the UK online centre products, services and support. This reflects the vision of both MLA and UK online centres to help people realise their potential. It demonstrates that there are opportunities for libraries and UK online centres to work together both on a strategic and operational level – "joining forces to lobby stakeholders and sharing resources and good practice" (Milner, 2007, p.40).

Recently, Kearney (2008) reported on the agreement between John Wheatley Further Education College and Sports Glasgow to deliver library services to both students and members of the public in a custom-designed facility, the Bridge. The Bridge is an example of a fully integrated shared service model which includes joint use of building, co-location of services and a merged college/public library service. An improved service is being delivered to all users as a result of the partnership, including the availability of lifelong learning opportunities, such as ICT programmes including basic introductory courses, silver surfers, cyber tots, homework clubs, book discussion groups and reader development initiatives.

### **Library accommodation and facilities**

The House of Commons Culture, Media and Sport Committee (2005) report into public libraries calls for an action plan to provide substantial investment in public library buildings. This point was reinforced by respondents who voiced concerns regarding the position and condition of some libraries. Many libraries are not located in the best position within their communities, perhaps on account of new commercial developments being located away from town centres. Some libraries are too small, and the space issue has come to the fore with the introduction and popularity of the People's Network, with PCs taking space previously occupied by other materials. Insufficient seating room was reported. Some library buildings are in poor condition and lack appropriate facilities such as adequate toilets, car parking and refreshment services. One respondent commented on the desire to 'upgrade people's experience of libraries', and this can, in part, relate to the condition of the library building and the facilities available.

Respondents also reported on the use of library space by partner organisations. One service has a dedicated adult learning room within their city centre library that is used by partner organisations, such as The Lifelong Learning Service. The same service also runs a number of Drop In Study Centres (DISCs) which are located in libraries - or in the same building as libraries - and run in partnership with community colleges. Another service runs and staffs learning centres within a number of its libraries. An example was also given in which the local further education college has funded some refurbishment in a library and has a room within that library for delivering courses from the college.

Adult learning services are provided in a variety of locations. One respondent said that their adult learning services had, to date, been provided within the library. Locations mentioned by other respondents included learning centres within libraries, drop-in centres within or nearby libraries, library access points (these are PCs in cafes, post offices and public houses) and Electronic Village Halls (which are IT suites offering drop-in access facilitated by library staff). Adult learning is also provided via mobile library services. Distance learners are also supported.

However, the provision of an appropriate environment for adult learners raises many issues. The condition of buildings and adequacy of facilities together with staff who are trained to welcome and support learners and to contribute to a friendly ambience – and sufficient staff to provide services outside mainstream hours and to liaise with partners - can devolve to the basics of adequate funding. (Ashcroft et al, 2005)

## Partnership concerns

McNicol and Dalton (2003) explore how libraries might support the learning process. This can be through engaging learners and targeting different audiences, planning learning experiences and strategies, helping learners to explore resources, and assisting learners with reflecting on, evaluating and implementing their learning experience. The latter is seen as an important - and perhaps overlooked - part of the learning process. They also identify an interesting point regarding public libraries definition of success:

‘Success’ in a library situation depended on how a learner felt about a learning experience, regardless of whether they completed the course or went on to use their knowledge of skills for a particular purpose (McNicol and Dalton, 2003, p.26).

They suggest that this difference may lead to a ‘culture clash’ between libraries and other learning organisations, such as learndirect.

CILIP also identified a number of constraints that restrict the contribution of library and information services to lifelong learning. There needs to be advocacy for the role that libraries and library staff play in the learning process, as there is a lack of formal acknowledgement of this by institutions in the education sector. There is a lack of funding made available to encourage partnerships between libraries, or between libraries and other education providers. Funding may also be unavailable at the points where learners create demand.

In a study by McLoughlin and Morris (2004), a number of difficulties were found in sustaining and mainstreaming adult literacy provision. Public libraries may be overwhelmed with new initiatives. Appointing dedicated staff on short-term contracts risked potentially abandoning valuable work. A more sustainable approach was seen to be to allocate existing staff hours for adult literacy work. Partnerships can improve sustainability, but these need clear strategies that specify the role of all partners. Funding restrictions often inhibited success, with staff having limited time to give to the bidding process, and successful initiatives often not falling into given funding criteria.

Some findings from the MLA study echoed similar concerns. One respondent pointed out that adult learning services can be funded by partnerships and a range of funding sources, which is time consuming in terms of financial management. Concern was expressed that funding may make the learning process more bureaucratic, increasing the need to monitor and control adult learning services. Such intrusive procedures may be off-putting for some learners, which in turn could impede the development of these services.

One respondent commented that the library service had no spare capacity in terms of funding to develop adult learning services. It is important for libraries that they do not feel that they need large budgets to provide innovative adult learning services. Rather, they should be looking to innovate within their current financial capacity. However, positive approaches were also evident. For example, one respondent described a proactive approach to acquiring funding. A ‘Learning Services Manager’ has been appointed within the library service (funded by the library service) with the

remit to focus on their e-learning agenda. This manager has built a network of learning staff that is totally externally funded, so attracting more than £500K to date from a variety of sources. The library subsidises this learning initiative in terms of accommodation. (Ashcroft et al, 2005)

### **Partnerships and the need for advocacy**

NIACE's membership includes the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP). In providing information about its activities, NIACE states that it works in all fields of UK education and training (NIACE, 2005), although it does not specifically mention the key role that public libraries can play in promoting adult learners, particularly with regard to currently under-represented learners – a key area of NIACE's activity. Given this, it would seem that there may be a need for advocacy on the part of organisations such as CILIP to ensure that the key role of public libraries in providing adult learning services is highlighted through the work and documentation produced by NIACE.

McNicol et al (2002, p.11-12) comment that professional organisations also have a role to play in promoting the advantages of collaborative working to support learners and providing practical assistance; this may be through conferences, training and publications.

A report published by ALI in 2004 addressed the nature and effectiveness of the national response to overcoming the social, economic and educational barriers in providing adult and community learning (Adult Learning Inspectorate, 2004). ALI carried out inspections over a duration of two years across LEAs/county councils and learning providers. The findings emphasised the need to establish strong and productive partnerships that not only engage all groups in the community, but also provide a progressive learning pathway for the learner. In so doing, a number of strategies was identified that public libraries could explore when providing adult learner services in partnership with other organisations (in order to absorb some of the cost), including:

- quality of information
- location and timing of courses
- outreach services
- targeting specific groups
- progressive learning
- innovative strategies. (Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI)  
(<http://www.ali.gov.uk/>)

Broadcasters can play an active role in promoting the positive impact of public libraries. This can include an increased awareness of the adult learning services on offer in such institutions and help translate the message that public libraries are an open and comfortable environment for pursuing informal learning activities. Importantly, different age groups and genders can be specifically targeted at different times of the day and week through advertisements. In return, libraries can provide support services and events linked to broadcasters initiatives and act as referral points for viewers and listeners (Library Association, 2000). The links between public libraries and broadcasters need to be strengthened for this purpose.

## Evaluation

Evaluation may be carried out in order to meet external requirements. Two respondents mentioned that learndirect had robust evaluation procedures that they were obliged to follow. In some cases, evaluation of adult learning services is left to partner organisations, such as adult education departments. The use of evaluation and feedback mechanisms varied from service to service. Two services gathered feedback from its adult learners by using evaluation forms. One service said that while they used evaluation forms, the area of evaluation needs improving – particularly regarding informal learning. Two respondents said that they proactively gather feedback from their users, and in both cases, this is done as part of a council-wide ‘Have your say’ initiative. Two respondents said that they collected basic attendance figures from adult learning courses. (Ashcroft et al, 2005)

One respondent commented that involvement in a pilot for *Inspiring Learning for All* raised the importance of evaluation. MLA’s *Inspiring Learning For All* toolkit is designed to improve services within the sector, and measure the impact of services on people’s learning. The toolkit provides a detailed assessment framework that organisations within the sector can use to address these issues. This is built on the following four principles:

- People – Providing more effective learning opportunities
- Places – Creating inspiring and accessible learning environments
- Policies, plans, performances – Placing learning at the heart of the museum, archive or library
- Partnerships – Building creative learning partnerships (Museums, Libraries and Archives Council, 2004).

## Conclusions

Respondents from the MLA study discussed the benefits of working in partnership with other organisations to provide adult learning services, particularly reciprocal advantages. These benefits included joint advertising/marketing, sharing skills, sharing costs and sharing facilities. As well as signposting adult learners to partner organisations where appropriate, these partner organisations also signposted their users to libraries – a working reciprocal relationship. For example, asylum seekers may be signposted to libraries by organisations which are aware that libraries offer online facilities.

Whilst some good experiences and benefits of public libraries working in partnership with other agencies for the provision of adult learning were recounted, some concerns were also voiced, particularly funding issues – both in terms of staff and buildings/facilities – and the need for advocacy.

The sample library services in the MLA study all worked with other organisation to provide adult learning services, establishing a wide range of partners and offering a variety of courses and support services. These public library services demonstrate adaptability and gain benefit through working in partnership with other organisations.

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