

Culture, Media and Sport Committee

Select Committee Announcement

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COUNCIL PLANS FOR LIBRARIES RISK FAILURE TO COMPLY WITH LEGAL OBLIGATIONS

Councils need more support and information to fulfil duty to provide a “comprehensive and efficient” service

IN a report released today, Tuesday 6th November 2012, the Commons Culture, Media and Sport Committee says that some local authorities, under considerable pressure to quickly find cost savings, have drawn up plans without taking proper account of local needs for library services and the variety of options available to provide them, and are therefore in danger of failing in their statutory duty to provide a ‘comprehensive and efficient’ library service. Other councils, however, have found innovative and cost-effective ways of continuing to supply—and in some cases improve—their library service.

In the Committee’s view, re-introducing the Public Library Service Standards is not an effective response to this problem, as these standards concentrated simply on what was measurable rather than giving a rounded indication of the quality of service or its responsiveness to changing customer needs and demands. Instead, the Committee recommends the Government, with the help of the Arts Council and Local Government association, to spread guidance encouraging a broader and more permissive interpretation of the ‘comprehensive and efficient’ requirement. Councils appear to be unaware of the available guidance on this central statutory requirement, and lack sufficient information about the requirements emerging from multiple judicial reviews of library service provision.

The Committee says:

- Providing a comprehensive and efficient service does not necessarily require keeping open all existing library branches—particularly if retaining buildings results in a token presence with shorter opening hours and fewer professional staff to lead key tasks such as supporting reading skills among children;
- Libraries are often hubs of local communities. While the provision of books and electronic access to information remain core tasks, libraries are often used for a far wider range of activities that benefit communities. Co-ordination with other service providers—especially in the areas of education and health—provides opportunities to enhance this. There are many examples of imaginative sharing of buildings and resources;
- In the Minister’s view, the wholesale transfer of library branches to volunteer groups is unlikely to meet the statutory criterion of providing a ‘comprehensive and efficient’ library service; but volunteer-run libraries can be valuable additions to the service;
- Councils which have transferred the running of libraries to community volunteers must continue to give them the necessary support to maintain the service, otherwise they may be viewed as “closures by stealth”;
- There is scope for far more co-ordination and co-operation between authorities in providing library services. The tri-borough example in London is well-known, but a number of other models and examples of best practice exist.

The Committee recommends a new approach to use of the Secretary of State's existing powers - without requiring a change of legislation - with a modern approach to the supervisory duty that would emphasise developing the service, promoting best practice and supporting the service through intervention at a national level in areas where there are potential efficiencies of scale.

John Whittingdale MP, Chair of the Committee, said:

“It is obvious from widespread recent campaigns and evidence to this inquiry how strongly attached many people feel to public libraries, which are a vital and much-loved service. However, library services are about much more than buildings, and the most important issue is finding creative ways to preserve—and, if possible, enhance— library service. Reductions in opening hours and the loss of professional staff may damage the service more than the closure of particular buildings, even though of course premises are key to accessible, comprehensive provision.

“Although the current crisis may appear to bode ill for the future of public libraries, it also presents an opportunity for a thorough reassessment of their role and of the way they are organised. During this inquiry we saw many examples of innovative thinking about what libraries can offer to the local population, and a number of models of how those services might be provided.

“At the moment councils appear to be somewhat in the dark about what is expected of them and are making decisions which are being overturned by judicial review. This is an expensive, undemocratic and generally unsatisfactory way of making policy. Councils need to be given the support and advice they need to consult locally and develop a service that meets the needs of the local community and complies with their obligations.

“The Minister has committed to producing a report on the cumulative effect of the cuts in local authority provision by the end of 2014. Enthusiasm over the scope for volunteers and for new models of provision is fine, but given the importance of library services a systematic look at the impact of funding cuts and re-organisation is needed. We look forward to receiving that report and being able to make an assessment of the durability of these changes over time.”

FURTHER INFORMATION:

Committee Membership is as follows:

Mr John Whittingdale (Chair) (Con) (Maldon)

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Lab) (Exeter)

Angie Bray (Con) (Ealing Central and Acton)

Conor Burns (Con) (Bournemouth West)

Tracey Crouch (Con)(Chatham and Aylesford)

Philip Davies (Con) (Shipley)

Paul Farrelly (Lab) (Newcastle-under-Lyme)

Steve Rotheram (Lab) (Liverpool, Walton)

Mr Adrian Sanders (Lib Dem) (Torbay)

Jim Sheridan (Lab) (Paisley and Renfrewshire North)

Mr Gerry Sutcliffe (Lab) (Bradford South)

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