

Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee

Inquiry into Library Closures

Submission on behalf of The Combined Regions Ltd

The Combined Regions Ltd (TCR) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee's call for submissions relating to the public library service.

1 Summary

- 1.1. TCR wishes to submit evidence to the Select Committee from the perspective of an organization which facilitates resource sharing between libraries across the UK.
- 1.2. Our view is that the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 is relevant today, as drafted, with the following caveats:
 - 1.2.1. Clarification regarding e-books and other digital services could be made as, for example, in the The Library Charges (England and Wales) Regulations 1991 <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/1991/2712/contents/made> which provides clarification as to what charges Public Libraries may, or may place upon their services.
 - 1.2.2. In seeking to define a "comprehensive and efficient" service, the Secretary of State should bear in mind the performance of the upper quartile libraries in coming to a conclusion as to whether a particular library service is deficient. Such a review should consider performance and investment over time as there is a lag in impact in respect of diminishing investment.
- 1.3. Closures of libraries need to be seen in the overall context of the service offered and the demographics of the communities served. Account should be taken of Equalities legislation, car ownership and public transport availability, especially in rural areas, as well as other social indicators e.g. the Deprivation Index.
- 1.4. Closures are seldom unrelated to other reductions in service. The public library service in the UK has diminished significantly in recent years with major reductions in the number of professional staff employed, reductions in materials budgets as well as closures and reductions in opening hours. Reductions in the bookfund are frequently frequently regressive in their impact and compounded by further reductions in subsequent years. This makes the provision of a comprehensive selection of materials unsustainable: library collections need to be *renewed* not simply complemented by the addition of an ever diminishing number of new publications.
- 1.5. It is important to retain the free public library service and that the service should be managed by senior professional library and information workers, complemented by a team of skilled librarians focused on raising standards of learning and literacy, through outreach work and in libraries.
- 1.6. The public should be involved in the planning and development of library buildings and services.
- 1.7. Public libraries should be accountable to local government, but collaboration can

add value to benefit service users.

1.8 There is still a need for national leadership at government level, as highlighted by the previous report from the Select Committee.

1.9 The Secretary of State's powers under the 1964 Act have proved to be effective (Derbyshire, ca 1990) and should be preserved. We regret that these powers have not been invoked in recent years, but note that in the absence of the Advisory Council on Libraries and of Specialist Advisers in the DCMS, the Secretary of State is deprived of sound professional advice in respect of his duties under the Act.

2 Background

2.1 TCR¹ is an organisation set up to enable co-operation between libraries across the British Isles, at both a strategic and an operational level. For more than fifteen years, TCR has been working with its partners to develop a national network for resource-sharing between libraries across Britain and Ireland. Apart from the British Library, each member organisation represents a region of England or one of the other nations of the British Isles. Current members are

The British Library

Libraries and Information East Midlands

The National Library of Scotland

North East England libraries

North West Libraries Interlending Partnership

Royal National Institute of Blind People

London Libraries(ALCL)

Society of Chief Librarians, West Midlands

South Western Regional Library Service

Yorkshire Libraries and Information

2.2 TCR develops co-operation between libraries to enable, promote and develop access to resources in all formats, for both library staff and customers. TCR works with OCLC on UnityUK™, a national union catalogue and interlending system with holdings from all regions of the British Isles. During 2012 a version of this catalogue will be launched to the public, making access to the holdings of virtually all public libraries available to the public through a single search.

When a book is borrowed from another library elsewhere in England, and in much of the UK, it is almost certain that UnityUK will have been used to locate that item and to facilitate its loan.

3 Evidence

3.1 The 1964 Public Libraries & Museums Act

3.1.1 Our view is that the Act is still relevant today having been updated through the Library Charges (England and Wales) Regulations. 1991.² The principles of the Act can and should apply to all public library services

1 <http://www.combinedregions.com/>

2 <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/1991/2712/contents/made>

including digital. It may be appropriate to issue guidance or new regulations in respect of some issues, but this does not suggest a need to revisit the fundamental legislative framework for the service.

- 3.1.2 We believe that the service should be a key strategic service within local government control and accountability. However, the application of common standards and strict guidelines regarding levels of charging would ensure that service users would not be subject to a postcode lottery regarding the quality of their service, and the amount they have to pay for elements of it.
- 3.1.3 We recognise that the reintroduction of standards to define “a comprehensive and efficient service” will not happen. However, we feel that the principles associated with the performance of the upper quartile of libraries provide a benchmark against which the Secretary of State may judge under-performing libraries. In 2009/2010, for example, Derbyshire, Devon and Dorset spent £2.75; £2.38; and £2.43 *per capita* respectively on library materials. The fact that Gloucestershire and Somerset spent only £0.81 and £0.90 respectively might have been considered an early warning of the subsequent court cases in those authorities. Furthermore, a retrospective examination of materials expenditure in those authorities might have indicated that their collections were unlikely to be “comprehensive”.
- 3.1.4 We do not believe that it is never appropriate to close a library, but due regard should be given to the demographics of the catchment area served, the standard of service, and revenue and capital spending *per capita* over time. Research is required on the impact of underfunding on library use and literacy, but anecdotally it is reported that a significant drop in bookfund will take up to three years before recording a serious impact on performance. At this point decisions may then be made about closure or reduction in opening hours, thereby perpetuating the spiral of decline in literacy, and community sustainability.
- 3.1.5 The simultaneous demise of School Library Services (e.g. Cambridgeshire, Hertfordshire, Kent etc) which will put further strain onto public libraries at a time when budget cuts will limit their response. Closure of libraries will effectively remove the options for many children to visit or benefit from a library in their locality and travel to alternative venues is not always practical, especially in rural areas.
- 3.1.6 We do not believe that libraries run by communities on a voluntary basis are sustainable, or that they can offer the standard of service available through the statutory framework. TCR's specific interest in this concept relates to the ability of a purposive reader/researcher being able to access material from elsewhere through the inter library loans network. It is unlikely that a proliferation of Community Libraries would be “trusted partners” in the network leading to a diminution of access to service for communities. Community management is unlikely to provide the level of assurance, either in terms of service quality or even basic reliable opening hours, that should be expected of a statutory service. Furthermore, it is unlikely that voluntary supported libraries would be sustainable in the most deprived wards where one might argue that, they are needed most, as are the qualified staff who commit to raising standards of literacy and promote learning.
- 3.1.7 The key elements of funding for the public library service are: staff; premises and materials. The first two are seldom easy targets for budget savings, especially when Members decline to either close libraries or to

reduce opening hours. The consequence has been a massive reduction in the sums available to purchase new materials, at a time when literacy levels are falling, and demand for media in new (digital) formats is increasing. At an operational level this means.

- 3.1.7.1. Purchase of fewer *titles*: thereby affecting the *range* of materials available. This is compounded by the need to replace existing titles (standard works etc) within a limited budget.
- 3.1.7.2. Purchase of fewer *copies*: thereby affecting the timely availability of copies held in stock, and impacting on the future availability of specific titles which would normally be retained for posterity e.g. when they are out of print, but still deemed to be of interest. Again, this is affected by the need to renew the book stock.
- 3.1.7.3. Purchase of fewer titles and copies of material in appropriate formats: citizens should be able to access the full range of public library materials despite their disability. Because of the relatively high price of audio books and of large print materials it is probable that these areas will be affected disproportionately. The UnityUK database incorporates material in alternative formats and TCR works closely with the Royal National Institute of the Blind National Library Service to ensure that access to the database and to appropriate materials in public libraries is extended to blind and partially sighted people. Such considerations, we believe, help to define "*comprehensive*".
- 3.1.8 We believe that it is important to preserve the principle of universal access and that this should apply both to format and to *free* access. The cost per household of the library service in all local authorities is very low in relation to the benefits which are well documented and indeed noted in the Select Committee's previous deliberations.
- 3.1.9 We consider it to be essential that the service is supported by a cadre of professionally trained staff. Successive Local Government reorganizations and internal structural reviews, have both combined to relegate the Public Library Service and its management to operational level in many authorities. In others, e.g. Derbyshire, a strategic approach recognizes the important role that Libraries can play in supporting and sustaining services and communities respectively. It is important that sufficient senior professional expertise is retained in the service to ensure its strategic development at a time when changes in technology, in particular, are creating new models for the service. This is particularly relevant for partnership working which sees library facilities used effectively for the promotion of other public and community services, and which ensures that public libraries make a significant contribution to wider agendas. This could not be delivered through a loose network of community-run libraries which lacked any capacity for strategic leadership.
- 3.1.10 In many countries the place of the public library in supporting communities is recognized to a greater extent than seems to be the case in the U.K. In Aarhus, Denmark, for example, a new MediaSpace³ will open in 2014 which will embrace all forms of media. It was recognized by the leadership of Aarhus libraries that the library should change with the community's aspirations and so the people of Aarhus were deeply involved in the specification of the requirement for a new building. Technology is bringing change, but it does not mean that the role of the library is redundant: on the

3 <http://www.urbanmediaspace.dk/en>

contrary it should be in the vanguard of community access to information.⁴

- 3.1.11 In many ways the trend for library services to collaborate to share services represents a return to the creation of strategic library authorities which were created in the 1974 Local Government reorganization. There are examples of collaboration which predate current initiatives, most notably the LibrariesWest Consortium⁵, where five library services have collaborated for fourteen years to share a single library management system, borrow and lend freely across boundaries, and to collaborate in procurement of materials and services. This has driven costs down and at the same time enhanced access to materials for all the communities in those authorities. This example demonstrates that co-operation across libraries in all sectors is an important ingredient for success in achieving better library services. It further demonstrates the dynamic nature of locally provided services.
- 3.1.12 Our view is that such progress that has been made in the development of public libraries in the UK has occurred in the absence of national leadership from government. Whilst organizations such as TCR, the Society of Chief Librarians, The Reading Agency and the National Acquisitions Group have made a significant impact, the DCMS and the MLA have not. Funding for co-ordinated national programmes has been either been misdirected (e.g. Buying Stock Better Libraries) or absent, by comparison for example with the Museums sector.
- 3.1.13 The demise of the Advisory Council for Libraries and the absence of senior professional advisers in the DCMS has contributed to a perception that the Secretary of State simply does not understand the needs of the sector. The leadership role has now passed to the Arts Council, and it is too early to judge its performance. However, we are concerned that few senior advisers are represented in the organization, and that the interests of libraries -which span many dimensions (Arts, business, information, culture, education and learning) -are likely to be subsumed by the Arts.

Robert N Froud OBE

Chair

The Combined Regions

4 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ohKEWtXk0F8&feature=share>

5 <http://www.librarieswest.org.uk/>