Libraries briefing and further questions

I am very concerned about what is happening to libraries across the country . The Library Campaign thinks we're in a process of losing up to 1,000 libraries and last month I visited Lincolnshire, which has been hit particularly severely by library cuts.

Below I have set out the current situation faced by local libraries, as well as a case study of what is happening in Lincolnshire. As we continue to develop our policies and move into our manifesto writing phase, it is vital that Labour has a proactive approach to a modern library sector, where the Conservative-led government has so badly failed.

I have posed a series of questions and would be grateful to hear from you by **30 June** if you have any thoughts (emails to bonnie.burke@parliament.uk).

Yours

Helen Goodman

Helen Goodman MP
Shadow Minister for Culture, the Creative Industries and Communications

General picture

- Labour supports our local libraries in the face of devastating local government cuts ; believes they should remain free and that there should not be a quality postcode lottery

- Labour recognises the hard work of library professionals. Local volunteers make a valuable contribution, but their work must be supported by a core of library professionals

- Local libraries are not only vital repositories of knowledge, but are central to our communities. They are places where the unemployed can go to find job information, where children without computers can do their homework, and where social events for young and old take place

<u>Questions for further thought</u>

The areas for further thought can be broken down into four sections: role, governance, staff, and resource.

1. **<u>Role</u>**

Digital exclusion

To survive, libraries must continue to offer relevant experiences to the public. While part of this offer will be the traditional lending of books, there is an exciting opportunity to use libraries to promote digital inclusion.

Being digitally literate is increasingly important in modern Britain, both in the job market and in being able to take advantage of the social and economic benefits of being online. The Government is in the process of moving its services to 'digital by default'. Yet 11 million people lack basic online skills, of which 7 million have never even used the internet. Digital exclusion is a problem for young and old alike, but is concentrated in the most deprived social groups. I believe libraries can stay relevant in the modern world by acting as centres for a digital inclusion programme.

- **Do you have any examples of good practice where libraries have taught digital skills?**
- **What are your thoughts on using libraries as centres through which we can tackle digital exclusion?**

Joint services

In a similar vein, another way of making libraries both efficient and relevant is to co-locate council services within the same buildings. For example, the local library might also act as a benefits advice centre or distribute health information. Such co-location can create an accessible hub of essential services and work as a centre of the community. Where co-location takes place, staff must of course be provided with appropriate resources, skills and training. By contrast, what we **do not** want is for libraries to be given additional responsibilities without any additional training or resources.

- **Do you have any examples of good practice in co-location? What services might be co-located?**

2. **<u>Governance</u>**

The legal framework

As the DCMS website states: "The Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 gives local authorities the duty to provide services and gives the Culture Secretary the duty to oversee the services they provide."

Yet this framework seems thin and underused, with no clear definition of the "comprehensive and efficient" services that library authorities are bound to deliver and the Secretary of State to oversee. I am minded to update the legal framework**.**

- **Is this something with which you agree, and what would you like an amended framework to look like?**

Leadership

With the abolition of the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council in 2012, Arts Council England took on their responsibilities, including the support and development of public libraries. A recent parliamentary question showed that ACE had a budget of £685,000 and 5.5 FTE staff undertaking library responsibilities in 2013/14. We have received mixed feedback from stakeholders about the work ACE is undertaking.

- **Is Arts Council England the right body to carry out this work? Have your local libraries had support from ACE and in what capacity?**

Library campaigners have often told us there is a lack of leadership on library issues. As discussed above, DCMS is currently consulting on the abolition of the Advisory Council on Libraries. One possibility would be to have a small public body, separate from any funding role, that is a national centre of excellence which can give professional leadership and advice; advise the Secretary of State; and monitor standards across the country. This body could co-ordinate with appropriate partners such as the Department for Culture, Media and Sport; the Local Government Association; the Society of Chief Librarians; the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals; and the British Library.

- **Do you feel there needs to be an independent professional leadership body? What form would this take?**
- **What do you feel is the role of the British Library in supporting public libraries?**
- **The Welsh Government recently released an updated public library standards document. What are your views on the document and do you believe adopting a library standards framework is desirable in England?**

3. **Staff**

Core of professionals

As outlined above, although small, remote individual libraries may well wish to make use of volunteers to open a few hours a week, I believe it is unfair and unworkable to use volunteers to wholly replace highly qualified library staff. I am therefore advocating that every local library service must maintain at least a core of professional staff. I believe we also need to be specific and vocal about the need for *fully qualified* librarians, alongside other trained library staff.

- **What are your views on this?**

Where volunteers are working in libraries, their role needs to be properly specified and appropriate (i.e. they must not be asked to undertake work they are not trained for or work that should properly be done by trained staff).

- **What do you think the right specification for volunteers might be? Should there be a code/codes of practice for unpaid work?**

Staff involvement

Libraries sit within a wide range of public services offered by local government. I am aware that many library staff would value the opportunity to have more input into how the service as a whole is run.

- **How can library workers be given a say in the running of the service?**

4. **Resource**

Back-office functions

One way to reduce library running costs is to share back-office functions between library authorities. Sharing administrative or IT costs between library authorities can minimise unnecessary duplications of work and create economies of scale.

Local library authorities should be encouraged to work together to make these efficiencies.

- **What functions do you think could be shared? What potential savings could there be?**
- **Do you have any examples of good practice?**

Background information

A recent DCMS study found that:

> "A significant association was… found between frequent library use and reported wellbeing. Using libraries frequently was valued at **£1,359** per person per year for library users, or **£113** per person per month."

However, local authorities are struggling in a climate of harsh cuts: a **40%** cut in local government funding over this Parliament, or **£20bn by 2015/16**. In the face of these cuts, local authorities are making difficult decisions, often resulting in library closures, cuts to opening hours and staff, or transfer of libraries to the control of volunteer groups.

In 2012, the Coalition government closed the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council and, controversially, transferred its function to Arts Council England.

Neither DCMS, nor Arts Council England, collect data on library closures or transfer to voluntary groups, but rely on statistics collated by CIPFA (Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy). This makes the scale of the losses difficult to capture.

The Libraries Campaign estimates that over **600** libraries will have been closed or turned into volunteer libraries over three years to the end of 2013. The Library Campaign predicts at least **1,000** libraries could be lost by 2016.

Government's position

The government have been [promoting](#) volunteer-run library models in a bid to cut costs.

Volunteers make an enormous contribution to libraries and to community life as whole. However, volunteers must not be left in the lurch without professional support as local authorities try to cut costs. Volunteer groups often take on their library in a struggle to stop it closing. The only advice available to them is through the volunteers at Little Chalfont Community Library, who receive a small sum from the Cabinet Office.

Not only is it an unfair burden to expect volunteers to run whole libraries, but there are serious issues which volunteers are not equipped to deal with, including:

- Health and safety
- Child protection
- Data protection (as Catherine Bennett points [out](#), the GP-library collaboration project *Books on Prescription* sees libraries lending self-help books on a range of mental health problems. Are volunteers being given confidentiality training?)

Worryingly, a recent survey of library staff by Unison showed that a quarter of respondents whose library hosted volunteers did not know if the volunteers had been CRB-checked, and a further quarter said that they had not been checked.[1]

I am by no means suggesting that, for example, a remote village library can't be opened by volunteers three afternoons a week. However, all local library authorities should have a core of professional staff. Any volunteering must be supported by a backbone of professional librarians, rather than simply used as a replacement.

Case study: Lincolnshire

Lincolnshire is an example of where library services are particularly under siege. The county council's plans will result in:

- £2m budget cut
- 29 out of 44 libraries losing funding, closing unless they become volunteer run
- 170 jobs lost
- Library opening hours reduced
- Over 100 mobile library service stops cut
- School library budgets cut to zero

Both Ed Vaizey and Maria Miller have been written to by local campaigners. The campaign's petition has been signed by 25,000 people. I have now written to Sajid Javid, the new Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, to press him for action.

In late March 2014, an application for a full judicial review of the planned cuts was approved by the High Court. The four grounds are:

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[1] Unison, 'The Public Library Service Under Attack', (2013)

- That the consultation was held after a decision had already been taken and was therefore unlawful
- That the council failed to abide by the Equality Act as it failed to ensure harm caused by the decision would be prevented
- That the council did not properly consider a bid by not-for-profit Greenwich Leisure Limited to run the services
- That if the cuts are executed, they will breach the statutory requirement for a "comprehensive and efficient" service

A date for the review has yet to be set.

More information on the campaign to the Lincolnshire libraries can be found here.

Reviews currently being undertaken by DCMS

DCMS is currently conducting a review and a consultation, as detailed below. Library campaigners have continually told us that they need action to preserve and promote a modern library system and strong leadership, rather than endless reviews.

A. Public libraries: what do you think? consultation

A consultation has just closed (8 February – 21 March 2014) which called for thoughts on the public library system.

The Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the Department for Communities and Local Government has jointly commissioned William Sieghart to produce an independent report considering the current structure and role of public libraries, including community libraries, in England as well as identifying any opportunities for future delivery.

William is supported by an Advisory Panel. Interested parties are invited to submit evidence to help inform their considerations, on the following areas.

1. What are the core principles of a public library service into the future?
2. Is the current delivery of the public library service the most comprehensive and efficient?
3. What is the role of community libraries in the delivery of a library offer?

B. Proposed Abolition of the Advisory Council on Libraries consultation

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The Advisory Council on Libraries (ACL) was established by the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964. The 1964 Act sets out at Section 2 that it is the duty of the Council "to advise the Secretary of State upon such matters connected with the provision or use of library facilities whether under this Act or otherwise as it thinks fit and upon any questions referred to it by him". That is its sole statutory function.

The Secretary of State issued a ministerial written statement in July 2010 announcing the intention to abolish the ACL and those public bodies proposed for abolition, which includes the ACL, were listed in Schedule 1 of the Public Bodies Act 2011. The legal power by which the Government proposes to abolish the ACL comes from section 1 of the 2011 Act and the Government's preferred option is to use these powers to implement the proposals outlined in the consultation and to abolish the ACL. Other options considered include transferring the ACL's advisory function to another body, and retaining the ACL and appointing new members.

The abolition of the ACL will hardly be considered an efficiency given that the consultation notes:

"ACL has no budget, premises, assets, liabilities, contracts or employees. Costs associated with ACL activity (members' expenses and hospitality charges for meetings) are chargeable to the DCMS (approximately £2,500 pa)."

The paper argues the DCMS will not have to do the admin associated with the existence of the ACL.