

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

TASK GROUP REPORT NO. 1

LIBRARY SERVICE

DECEMBER 1999

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

REPORT OF THE LIBRARY TASK GROUP

1. THE BRIEF

“To undertake a review of the Library Service to establish whether its budget is used in the most efficient and effective manner”.

2. GENERAL INTRODUCTION

- 2.1. At its meeting on 28th June 1999 the Scrutiny Committee established the Task Group with a membership of five plus Councillor Cornwell (Chairman of Scrutiny) ex officio. Councillor Style resigned on 3rd October.
- 2.2. The Task Group held its first meeting on 19th July and subsequently met on seven occasions and made two all-day visits.
- 2.3. We have adhered scrupulously to our terms of reference although it became obvious at the outset that the current budget was inadequate to deliver the service which the Council was aiming to provide.
- 2.4. The statistical basis for many of our findings and recommendations is to be found in recent reports to the Leisure Services Committee, particularly the Annual Library Plan 1999. Although our report contains some figures also contained in the Plan we have not, in general, repeated all the information contained therein. As the Plan is, in effect, an Annex to this Report, Members may wish to consider the two conjointly.

3. METHODOLOGY

In addition our report is based on four sources of evidence, viz:

- 3.1. Documentation. The Chief Librarian supplied us with twenty one booklets and documents which are listed in **Appendix A**; reference copies are available in the Members' Room.
- 3.2. Visits. We decided that as a group we would spend one whole day visiting all the Borough's Libraries and another in a comparable London Borough. On advice from the Chief Librarian we went to Bromley where we met the Committee Chairman, all the relevant senior officers and toured the Central Library and a Branch Library. In addition Councillor Lee visited Isleworth Library (Hounslow), Councillor Mollett Tolworth (Kingston) and Councillor Samuel Putney (Wandsworth). Reports of these visits have been placed in the Members' Room.

- 3.3. We invited to appear as witnesses Jane Battye (Chief Librarian), Councillor Anne Summers (Chairman, Leisure Services Committee), Ron Salmons (Friends of Richmond upon Thames Public Libraries) and Jane Stauch (Library and Resources Manager, Richmond upon Thames College). Richmond Adult and Community College submitted written evidence. We invited the three political parties in the two constituencies to submit written evidence and received one reply. Summaries of all the evidence appear as **Appendix B**.
- 3.4. On the basis of professional advice we designed and issued a questionnaire in each of our libraries. During one week in October 903 questionnaires were completed and the actual returns matched expectations with the exception that East Sheen, Ham and Kew were underrepresented. 35% of the responses were completed by Saturday library users: overall 61% were female and 50% not working. The results must therefore be treated with some caution. It is interesting to note that the “traditional” library function - the lending of books - was seen as the fundamental purpose of the libraries. Library users tend to visit a library near their home with 52% walking and 26% travelling by car.

The questionnaire and responses appear as **Appendix C**.

4. THE CONTEXT

- 4.1. Libraries are valued parts of the local community and are seen as playing a significant role in community life. This is a particularly relevant factor in a Borough which contains a number of communities with a clear sense of identity.
- 4.2. In years of financial constraint Libraries are often seen as a soft target. Over the past ten years libraries throughout the country have been under threat and frequent cuts imposed. This has also been the experience in Richmond upon Thames.
- 4.3. The provision of public libraries is a statutory requirement under the Public Libraries and Museums Act (1964). Section 7 defines the duty as an obligation to provide a “comprehensive and efficient library service”. This has been defined neither by statute nor case law. The Department for Culture, Media and Sport is expected to set out minimum standards shortly for implementation next year. The expectation is that the level of stock will be included but not the number of libraries. These standards will be the criteria against which Annual Library Plans are judged. The Department is likely to take a sympathetic view where Councils close libraries in order to provide a more rational service. This has been the experience in Camden and Lambeth. However the DCMS is unlikely to accept reductions simply to reduce library expenditure or if it regards the service as already underfunded.

- 4.4. In recent years Governments and the Audit Commission have seen libraries as spearheading the advance of Information Technology. Libraries face the major challenge of integrating IT with their traditional role of providing and lending books. Published reports on the “new library network” call for libraries to provide information technology related in particular to three areas: citizenship (eg information about - and interaction with - Government, councils and public bodies); education and skills; the dissemination of ‘culture’.

5. FINDINGS

- 5.1. We were impressed by the dedication, commitment and professionalism of the staff. They have responded positively during a period of financial constraint and exemplify the best traditions of public service. Of the many excellent examples of staff initiatives we mention just one: the programme of lectures and events which are proving so popular in Ham Library. It is regrettable that staff reductions mean that senior professional staff spend so much of their time fire-fighting: their skills could best be employed in planning and leading the service.
- 5.2. Our findings on buildings were informed by our visits. Richmond upon Thames has 7.2 libraries per 100,000 population against the national average of 5.8 - a difference of 24%. This is particularly remarkable in a Borough with a small geographical area. It is the principal reason why Richmond compares well with the national average in terms of gross expenditure on libraries but delivers a below-average service in many respects. The location of libraries is based on our inheritance rather than a service designed to cater for the current distribution of population. A recent report to Committee states: “There is no budget provision for internal or external re-decoration. No re-decoration work has been carried out for three and a half years”. In some libraries there is already evidence of the need for major repair work (eg the window frames at Heathfield): in others existing furniture is at, or past, the end of its useful life. Lighting could often be improved. Whereas the provision for children is of a consistently high quality, the environment of most libraries has a distinctly old-fashioned feel at a time when consumer expectations have changed.
- 5.3. Current resources are patently inadequate not only for the current service but also for the delivery of modern developments and for a response to modern demands. This year the book fund has been cut by 10% and staff reductions have led to unplanned occasional closures of branches: reference has already been made to the lack of a re-decoration budget. We do not have an adequate budget for the major advances for IT which are planned nationally: there is no new money for the Sunday openings which are proving popular in many parts of the country or the self-service loan and return of books which impressed us in Bromley.

Citizens Charter Indicators show that book issues per head of population have fallen from 9.48 in 1994-5 to 8.1: visits per head from 9.1 in 1994-5 to 8.15: amount spent on books and materials from £2.25 in 1996-7 to £1.82 and net expenditure per head from £17.85 in 1994-5 to £16.81. The 1999 Plan sets at £115,000 the cost of restoring the present cuts (see pg 26 of the Plan); £157,000 for the costed expansion plans (on pages 27 – 32) together with other, as yet uncoded, proposals.

- 5.4. We are aware that some residents feel that the loan of books should remain the core activity of a library. However we believe that IT can play a significant role in the cultural mission of the service and in the provision of information.
- 5.5. Any service which is experiencing financial constraint needs clear and rigorous objectives, a clear definition of priorities. It is our view that successive Leisure Services Committees have failed to provide genuine strategic leadership.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS.

6.1 The Libraries

- 6.1.1. There are too many small libraries. We cannot continue to maintain the branch structure as it is at present. It is essential to devise an overall location policy to ensure that libraries are sited in buildings suitable for their modern purpose (including adequate space for IT) whilst ensuring that no resident lives more than a certain distance from a library. Closures cannot be ruled out: a closure programme which affects two libraries but sites a new, better library with longer opening hours mid-way between the two is a possible solution. One of its advantages would be to improve the service in those - often newer - parts of the Borough where there is currently no library provision. Such a consolidation of branches has the potential to deliver a better service.

RECOMMENDATION 1: That the Leisure Services Committee prepare and adopt a medium-term strategy for the location of libraries in the Borough not fettered by the underlying assumption that it is necessary to keep open every existing library .

- 6.1.2. At the same time we must attempt to raise significant revenue in the branches. We should combine library provision with other services. This could even be part of a one-stop shop approach for local services. On a more modest scale, libraries can be centres (appropriately reimbursed) for parking and visitor permits or aspects of social services. Combined library/community centres are an attractive proposition. Organisations such as the CAB could rent accommodation - because there is space available for other services in several libraries. We noted that in Kingston the local TEC helped to fund the provision of

a new branch library with a major IT training facility. Even post office counters could be accommodated in some libraries. The new Richmond Housing Partnership will need sites for rent collection: the libraries could provide this service. Once the principle is accepted, the possibilities are endless.

RECOMMENDATION 2: That the Leisure Services Committee explore all possible means of combining Library provision with other services.

6.2. The buildings.

6.2.1. It is common at times of financial constraint that re-decoration, maintenance and furniture budgets are particularly severely cut. That is understandably seen as preferable to service reductions. Inevitably this stores up intractable problems for the future which must now be addressed.

RECOMMENDATION 3: That the Leisure Services Committee make provision for planned re-decoration in every annual budget.

6.2.2. Changes in the style of bookshops lead inevitably to changes in public expectation of libraries. Until recently public libraries with their design emphasis on right-angles and their Dewey-based approach to stock display were the norm. That is no longer true. A lower density and greater emphasis on layout and presentation are clearly popular elsewhere. We also have to provide appropriate space for IT. We were particularly impressed by the attractive layout, inviting atmosphere, customer-friendly displays and excellent signage in a Bromley branch library. The ability to deliver these changes on a very modest budget was impressive. The improvements which we advocate are cheap to deliver.

RECOMMENDATION 4: That the Leisure Services Committee prepare and implement a programme for improving the environment of the libraries.

6.3. Hours of opening.

This a source of complaint by many residents. We believe that current opening hours do not wholly match the modern pattern of life. Professional officers prepared for Committee an interesting paper "Options for Change" comprising five options which could be introduced on a "Break Even" basis. We were surprised that no action had been taken on this paper and include as **Appendix D** our preferred option (Option 2) which includes Sunday opening in Richmond and Saturday lunchtime opening at the two branches where closure is particularly subject to criticism. In the medium term we believe that Sunday opening will prove to be popular at more libraries and that the opportunity should then be taken to host events (not necessarily run by the Library service) on those afternoons

RECOMMENDATION 5: That the Leisure Services Committee adopt Option 2 forthwith as a first step and that provision be made to extend Sunday opening in future years.

- 6.4. We gave due consideration to mobile libraries. They introduce flexibility into the service and can, where used, ensure that even small communities have on-site access to libraries. However we do not believe that mobile libraries are necessary or desirable in Richmond upon Thames at this time.
- 6.5. We received appropriate documentation concerning the management of the book stock and are generally satisfied with present policy. Greater circulation around the branches is particularly important when the stock as a whole is under pressure.
- 6.6. We compared our fines with other authorities and with one exception do not propose any changes. We understand why the Committee decided not to impose fines on children and youths. However we believe that with the youngest children the fines are paid by adults who could thereby be encouraged to visit the libraries more frequently. Older children are usually in receipt of sufficient pocket money to pay a fine of a few pence, which would help to instil into them a sense of responsibility.

RECOMMENDATION 6: That the Leisure Services Committee introduce modest fines for children forthwith except for children in families on income support.

- 6.7. We spent a long time discussing other forms of income generation: loans of videos are obviously successful and despite past experience CD-ROMs could be considered again with the growth of personal computer use. There is already some modest income from sales and expansion eg into selling greetings cards and distance-learning packages is a possibility. Some libraries provide refreshment areas but we did not give this serious consideration. However we do believe that that every effort should be made to increase revenue. (We deal with IT in the next paragraph). For example, the issue slip attached to every book with information concerning opening hours, renewals etc should be totally re-designed. As well as setting out more clearly the various methods of book renewal, these slips should carry advertising. We believe that serious efforts should be made to market our libraries and that the Committee should avail itself of the expertise that already exists in the Council.

RECOMMENDATION 7: That the Leisure Services Committee seek urgent advice from the Council's Marketing experts both to increase very considerably the revenue of the Library Service and to attract more residents into the libraries.

- 6.8. In Library Services throughout the country there are mixed views on whether IT should be provided free of charge. Some see it as a natural extension of the traditional reference and information services of libraries; others view it largely as recreational and, particularly when used to e-mail friends and relatives abroad, a potential - and fair - source of revenue. We are clear in our own minds that access to the catalogue, to council services and other public services should be free and that there should be in each library at least one PC so dedicated: the technology exists to provide this. But other uses of IT should be charged for: it provides very considerable revenue for Bromley. We would require free access for certain target groups. We can deliver this by an extension of current practice whereby retired readers have cards which ensure that they pay a lower rate for reservations: identified target groups eg the unemployed, those on income support, students and pensioners should still be able to use the IT free. We acknowledge that within a few years many more people will have access to e-mail and the Internet at home and that the worthwhile revenue potential will not extend beyond the next five years. Nevertheless we should impose charges now. We considered a wide range of charges before reaching our conclusion.

RECOMMENDATION 8: That on the basis of the foregoing paragraph access to e-mail and the Internet should be charged at the rate of about £1 per 15 minutes or part thereof.

- 6.9. We see no need to change any aspect of the staffing structure in the service. However we are totally convinced by the arguments for volunteers. We accept that professionals in any service have understandable reservations about volunteers and we believe that any scheme must be sensitive to their feelings. However we learnt that in some cases the second member of staff was present partly for security reasons - an appropriate role for a volunteer. Moreover the service accepted a radical change when branch libraries were run by administrators rather than professionals. In this situation the introduction of volunteers does not present insuperable obstacles. Within our own Borough both Kew Gardens and Ham House successfully make use of volunteers. We could learn from their experience. Once our own staff had received appropriate training themselves we believe that they would find the selection, induction and management of volunteers a worthwhile and fulfilling task.

RECOMMENDATION 9: That the Library Service recruits volunteers to provide appropriate assistance in our libraries.

- 6.10 We wish to encourage links with other services. With the current emphasis on life-long learning this will principally be with Education. We have made contact with both the F.E. Colleges (cf. **Appendix B**) but understand that their resources do not permit them to throw open their libraries to Borough residents. We hope that there will continue to be liaison between all librarians in the Borough. Similarly schools do not have the resources to turn school libraries into community libraries. We believe that it might now be timely to review the School Library Service as a whole especially as its viability must be in doubt if a large number of schools opts out. In addition, where this is practical, libraries can perform a useful role as homework centres. We believe that whereas we must not take an instrumental approach libraries can and do make a significant contribution to lifelong learning.

RECOMMENDATION 10: That the Library Service keeps under review its links with other services, especially Education.

7. TRUSTS.

On our visit to Bromley we noted with interest that the Council was actively pursuing the possibility of delivering its library, and perhaps other leisure, services through a Trust. There was considerable enthusiasm for this approach which, we were told, was also on the agenda for other London Boroughs. Bromley hopes to save up to £1m per year. The first Borough to adopt this approach wholeheartedly was Hounslow which created a Trust for all its Leisure services in 1998. As the flagship Borough, Hounslow is now sharing its expertise in this field with other Councils. Where non-statutory services are involved the mechanism is a Service Level Agreement: with statutory provision such as libraries a binding legal contract is required. We are attracted by this approach although we recognise that it is no panacea and may involve risks. Our own experience of a Music Trust in Richmond has been successful. This possibility was presented to us at too late a stage in our deliberations for us to give it the detailed consideration which it deserves. However we recognise the financial and other attractions which it could hold. It must be a real possibility for Richmond upon Thames.

RECOMMENDATION 11: That the Leisure Services Committee give immediate consideration to the possibility of delivering Library Services through a Trust.

It is our view that the Leisure Services Committee now needs to provide genuine strategic leadership on the basis of all the foregoing recommendations.

**BARRY LANGFORD PENNY LEE TONY MOLLETT GEOFFREY SAMUEL
(Chairman)**