

Extending our
Welcome:
Public Library
Opening Hours in
Ireland

November 2002

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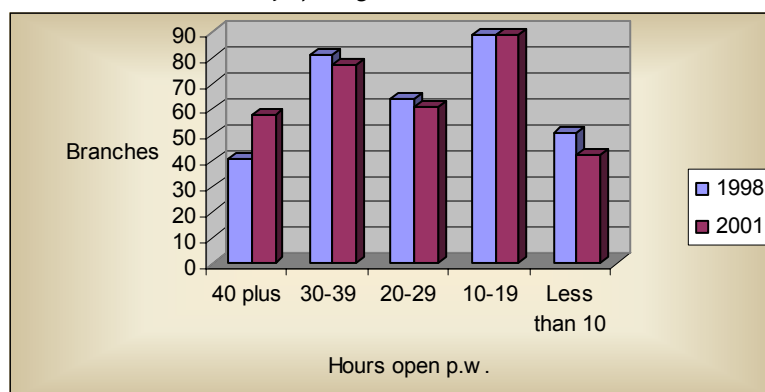
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SUMMARY

- ❖ This report contains an analysis of the data collected through two surveys of library authority opening hours, carried out by the Department of the Environment and Local Government in 1998 and 2001.
- ❖ The survey was designed to highlight the total hours of opening per week of each branch, and the extent of evening (after 6.00p.m.); weekend, and lunchtime opening.
- ❖ The trend in the pattern of opening hours is considered in the context of the roll-out of the *Branching Out* programme from 1999.
- ❖ Among the findings are the following:
 - Details of the opening hours of 327 branches were returned in 2001 (326 in 1998).
 - Overall opening hours have improved since 1998 by 6%.
 - The majority of libraries – 82.5%- are open in the evening after 6.00 p.m.
 - The majority of libraries – 71.5% - offer a weekend service.
 - Almost 40% of libraries offer a lunchtime service, an increase of 29% since 1998.
 - Twenty-two authorities (of the total thirty-two) have increased their total hours of opening since 1998.
 - Six library authorities increased their evening openings by a total of thirty-five evenings per week.
 - Twelve authorities increased their branch weekend opening hours, while seventeen remained the same. One authority has no libraries open on Saturdays.

- The lunchtime service opening has improved by the highest percentage, 29%, since 1998. Three authorities have no libraries open during lunch-hour.
- In general, new and grant-aided libraries are more likely to be open for longer periods and during lunchtimes, evenings and on Saturdays.
- In general, the services in most need of improvement are mobile library services and local studies services: further increases in lunchtime opening are also necessary to provide better access for the public.
- Higher staffing levels are required in some authorities/branches if a better service is to be provided for the public.

Chart 1: branches and weekly opening hours



- ❖ In light of the above, the report makes recommendations (see page 15) in relation to the continued improvement of opening hours and the service to the public.

An Chomhairle Leabharlanna wishes to acknowledge the progress made by library authorities in providing better and more appropriate opening hours since the launch of the *Branching Out* programme, and looks forward to continued improvements in this area.

The *Branching Out* Report:

The *Branching Out* report findings identified that significant improvements in the availability of library services could be achieved through enhanced opening hours, particularly in terms of lunch-time, weekend and evening opening. While recognising the increased costs involved, the report stresses the resultant improvement in the availability of library services. The report places these improvements in the availability of library services, in the wider context of public service. Due to changes in society in general, especially in work-practices, increased week-end, lunchtime and evening opening hours are vital if adequate public services are to be provided.

The *Branching Out* report notes that increased availability does not necessarily mean longer opening hours, but that the library be accessible to the public at the times they find most suitable. Generally these times are lunch-times, evenings and week-ends. Enhanced opening hours will necessitate enhanced flexibility from library staff and management, and therefore staff resources must be factored into the decision making process. *Branching Out* made a number of recommendations relating to opening hours:¹

¹ *Branching Out: a New Public Library Service*. Government of Ireland 1998. p. 48

- ❖ *Library Authorities should immediately commence work on developing a programme of enhanced opening hours. These should begin to be implemented during 1999.*
- ❖ *In particular ... libraries should develop greater flexibility in their opening hours.*
- ❖ *The report also recommends to the Minister that funding for capital projects should be linked to the local development measures for improving the service, such as better opening hours.*
- ❖ *In order to move as quickly as possible, it is recommended that each library authority should immediately begin to assess the need for adjusting opening hours and to investigate ways in which it might be achieved.*
- ❖ *Each library authority should also research the cost of implementing enhanced opening hours in their area. They should also commence a process of staff consultation and negotiation to ensure that agreement on better opening hours can be agreed as early as possible.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In 1998, prior to the publication of *Branching Out*, a new public library service, the Department of the Environment and Local Government carried out a survey, by way of a questionnaire issued to each library authority, of public library opening hours. In 2001, following a recommendation in *Branching Out* on the need for increased and better hours of opening, the Department undertook another survey. All library authorities completed the questionnaires for both years, and the data collected covered 326 branches in 1998 and 327 branches in 2001. The data indicate:

- ❖ The hours of opening in each branch per week in 1998 and 2001
- ❖ The days on which each library was open after 6.00 p.m.
- ❖ Whether each library was open on weekends
- ❖ Whether each library was open on any day at lunchtime (i.e. 1.00 p.m. to 2.00 p.m.)

2. CHANGES SINCE 1998 AT BRANCH LEVEL

An analysis of the data from both the 1998 and 2001 surveys shows that there has been an improvement in the availability of library services at branch level nationally, three years into the *Branching Out* programme. However, there is also scope for further improvements.

2.1 Total number of hours

Library authorities have extended the opening hours of public libraries since the roll out of the *Branching Out* programme in 1999. In 1998 libraries were open for a total of 7,761.5 hours, while in 2001 the public could avail of

library services for an extra 488 hours. This is an increase of 6.3% to a total of 8,249.5 hours.

Table 1

<i>Total number of hours open</i>	
<i>1998</i>	7,761.5
<i>2001</i>	8,249.5
<i>Increased hours</i>	488
<i>Increase %</i>	6.3

Twenty-two authorities increased the overall number of hours open to the public, nine made no change to the overall number of hours open, and one authority showed a reduction in overall hours due to a programme of renovation.

2.2 Evening Opening

In 1998 some 261 libraries, or 80%, were open at least one evening a week: by 2001 this number had increased to 270, or 82.5%, an increase of 3.45%. There was an increase of 30 in the total number of evening opening hours per week, from 503 per week in 1998 to 533 per week in 2001.

Table 2

<i>Evening opening hours</i>		
	No. libraries with evening hours	no. evening hours p.w.
<i>1998</i>	261	503
<i>2001</i>	270	533
<i>Increase</i>	3.45%	30 hours p.w.

Seven library authorities increased their number of branches with evening opening; twenty-three recorded no change, while two reduced their number of branches open in the evenings. All authorities provide evening opening in at least some of their branches.

2.3 Weekend opening

In 1998 208 branch libraries, or 63.8%, opened at weekends. Of these:

- ❖ four libraries opened on alternate Saturdays
- ❖ four opened on Saturdays and Sundays
- ❖ 3 opened on Sundays but not Saturdays

In 2001 234 branches, or 71.5%, opened at weekends, an increase of 8%.

Ninety-three libraries were not open at weekends in 2001.

Table 3

<i>Weekend opening</i>		
	No. branches with weekend opening	% branches with weekend opening
1998	208	63.8%
2001	234	71.5%
Increase	26 branches (8%)	

Twelve authorities increased their weekend opening hours, while seventeen recorded no change. There is one authority which does not open any of its branches at weekends.

2.4 Lunchtime opening

The largest improvements which County and City Libraries recorded were in lunchtime opening hours. Library users in 129 branches can now visit their

libraries through the lunch hour, as against only 100 branches in 1998. This is an increase of 29%.

Table 4

<i>Lunchtime opening</i>			
	No. branches with lunchtime opening	%	branches lunchtime opening
1998	100	30.7%	
2001	127	39.5%	
Increase	27 branches (29%)		

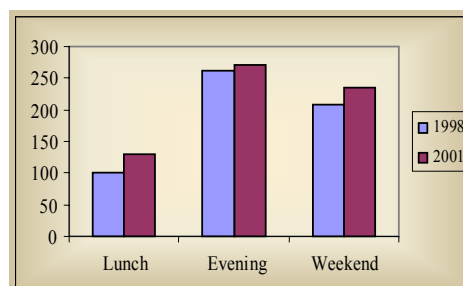
A total of 198 branch libraries were not open at lunchtime in 2001. Fifteen authorities returned an increase in their lunchtime opening hours, while seventeen showed no change. There are three library authorities which do not open any libraries during lunchtime.

2.5 Summary of changes since 1998

- ❖ Overall opening hours have increased since 1998 by 6%.
- ❖ The majority of libraries – 82.5%- are now open in the evening after 6.00 p.m.
- ❖ Most libraries – 71.5% - offer a weekend service, an increase of 8% since 1998
- ❖ Almost 40% of libraries offer a lunchtime service, an increase of 29% since 1998
- ❖ Twenty-two authorities (of the total thirty-two) have increased their total hours of opening

- ❖ Six library authorities increased their evening openings by a total of thirty-five evenings per week
- ❖ Twelve authorities increased their branches opening hours over the weekend while seventeen remained the same. There is only one authority where no libraries are open on Saturdays.
- ❖ In general, new and grant-aided libraries are more likely to be open for longer periods and during lunchtimes, evenings and on Saturdays.

Chart 2: Increase in number of branches,
With lunchtime, evening and weekend hours..



3. OTHER SERVICES TO THE PUBLIC

3. 1 Local Studies Services

There are extensive local studies services available in library authorities, based usually in the headquarters or in the central library. A number of these services were recorded separately in the opening hours surveys, while others were not recorded. If all were recorded as a separate service, the total

number of opening hours would be considerably higher. This would also allow for comparison when a service is relocated to a central library from a headquarters. The opening hours of local studies services should be recorded separately in future surveys.

3.2 Prison Library Services

Library services to prisons are provided on an agency basis by six authorities, but as only one authority originally listed such services, the data in question have not been considered in this report. This service needs to be recorded separately in future surveys.

3.3 Mobile Libraries

The picture as recorded in the returns for the mobiles is clearly inaccurate: only twenty-one mobile libraries are recorded but there are approximately thirty in service. Mobile libraries which have been grant-aided were not recorded by a number of authorities. Of those recorded, only one service provides a lunchtime opening, there is no service on Saturdays, and four authorities provide an evening service. Nineteen proposals for new and replacement mobiles have been examined by An Chomhairle since 1999. The hours of service from mobiles should improve when these vehicles are in service.

4. MANAGEMENT AND SERVICE CONSIDERATIONS

4.1 Determining opening hours

Local authorities need to take into account a range of factors when determining the structure of hours to be offered to the public. These include:

- ❖ Population density
- ❖ Location of schools
- ❖ Location of other public and commercial services
- ❖ Levels and patterns of user (and non-user) demand for library services
- ❖ The availability of life-long learning / cultural spaces and other services within the branch

The results of the recent Public Library User Survey (PLUS) will provide management with information about library users and their usage patterns of branch libraries. Library authorities need to take account of the PLUS results and of future research into non-users.

Recent developments of library buildings co-located with one-stop-shops, arts centres, and area offices have presented opportunities for conjoined, holistic and inclusive local authority information, heritage, library and cultural services. These levels of service can only be provided when local authorities extend their welcome to all users through libraries which are open when the public calls.

4.2 Staffing

As the majority (62%) of public library staff deal with the public, the availability of replacement staff for frontline activities is crucial to the continuity of the service. The demands being placed on the service require the continuous availability of capable, fully trained and well-educated staff. It is recommended that staffing levels be continually monitored so that an excellent standard of service is provided for all.

There are a number of national initiatives, involving public library staff, which are both time consuming and labour intensive, including:

- ❖ Training
- ❖ Special project work
- ❖ Internet usage
- ❖ Reader promotion
- ❖ Customer care actions
- ❖ School library promotion

Some of these initiatives will generate, in many branches, demand for better opening hours and this may be as true for a branch serving a small, medium or large catchment area, given the enhanced profile of the public library service in recent times. Provision for relief staff to be available during training periods, annual leave, sickness, study, and other leave is also needed. Library authorities must recognise the need for higher level staffing in a number of services if better opening hours are to be achieved.

A contributing factor in the slow progress in implementing the *Branching Out* recommendation on opening hours, as listed on page three, has been

protracted staff negotiations on increased numbers and grades, the outcome of which, it is hoped, will facilitate further improvement.

5. CONCLUSION

A number of authorities already have suitable and sufficient opening hours in branches, and in such cases improvements are not necessarily warranted. Local authorities have improved library opening hours since 1998, with increases in the absolute number of hours, and in lunchtime, evening, and weekend opening; as follows:

- ❖ The overall opening hours have improved since 1998 by 6%
- ❖ The majority of libraries (83%) are open in the evening after 6.00 p.m.
- ❖ Most libraries (72%) offer a weekend service
- ❖ By 2001, lunchtime opening had increased by 29% (since 1998)

Despite these improvements, there is a continuing need for authorities to review the suitability and sufficiency of hours in the light of:

- ❖ The opening hours surveys
- ❖ The views of library users, as captured in the Public Library User Survey (PLUS), 2002
- ❖ The results of future non-user surveys
- ❖ The annual statistical returns to An Chomhairle Leabharlanna

While this data needs to be placed in the context of local demands, it is clear that there is considerable ground for more relevant and better opening hours in a number of authorities.

- ❖ In general, the mobile library service and the local studies service, together with lunchtime opening, offer the most scope for improvement.
- ❖ Due to a range of existing plans in library authorities, staffing levels will be put in place and new libraries will come on stream, a better service will be available to the public in more branches

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

A number of important factors, which have implications for the continuing development of the library service, in terms of access and opening hours, have become evident. The following recommendations are proposed as a means of ensuring the continued enhancement of the service for the benefit of the users.

6.1 Local Authority Service Recommendations

- 6.1.1 Local Authorities need to pay close attention to the outcomes of the Public Library User Survey 2002 and to incorporate relevant findings into their plans for existing services.
- 6.1.2 As 62% of the public library staff deal directly with the public, the availability of replacement staff for frontline activities is crucial to the continuity of the service. In addition there should be recognition of the need for higher staffing levels in a number of both existing and developing services.
- 6.1.3 The demands being placed on the library service necessitate continuous availability of efficient, well-trained, service-oriented, local authority library staff.

- 6.1.4 Staffing levels should be continually monitored to provide an optimum service for all.

6.2 Sustainable Opening Hours

- 6.2.1 There has been an overall improvement in the hours of opening of public libraries within Ireland between 1998 and 2001. However, there is a need for individual authorities to evaluate the suitability and sufficiency of hours in the light of the needs of their users.
- 6.2.2 In order to establish and maintain a sustainable service, the evaluation must take into equal consideration:
- ❖ the results of user surveys, this survey and informal feedback
 - ❖ the local demographic, economic, social and cultural factors
 - ❖ the specific characteristics of the individual library service
- 6.2.3 On the basis of this survey and on the statistical returns to An Chomhairle Leabharlanna, the scope for more appropriate and better hours in a number of authorities to meet the needs of the general public, needs to be examined by library authorities.

6.3 Survey Procedures

- 6.3.1 A nationwide survey of library authorities' opening hours should be undertaken biennially.

- 6.3.2 The opening hours of Local studies services should be recorded separately in future surveys in order to accord the appropriate weight to this facility.
- 6.3.3 Library services to prisons, which are provided on an agency basis, should also be recorded separately by the relevant library authorities in future surveys.

6.4 Service Development

- 6.4.1 Library authorities should take the opportunities afforded by the recent trend towards the one-stop-shop, providing holistic local authority information, heritage, library and cultural services, to expand the user base and add value to each personal experience.
- 6.4.2 For this to happen it is vital that local authorities ensure that the library service is open when the public calls.