

Providing the Skills

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A report on training courses for
public library staff

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July 2005



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1. Introduction

In 2001 the *Branching Out*¹ Steering Committee recommended that An Chomhairle Leabharlanna take on a training role for public library staff. An Chomhairle is supported in this role through the Standing Committee on Public Library Staff Training and Development.² This report details progress on the provision, including the design and delivery of training courses on library-related topics.

2. Why is there a need for library related training?

2.1 The Public Library Context

Public library services are provided by thirty-two library authorities, operating a network of 351 branch libraries and thirty mobile libraries. The service is one of the most popular of local authority services, with two-thirds of the population being, or having been, a member of their local library.³

¹ Department of the Environment & Local Government, *Branching Out: a new public library service* (Dublin, 1998). The *Branching Out* Steering Group was established by the Department to oversee the implementation of the report's recommendations.

² See appendix 1 for a list of the members of the Standing Committee.

³ An Chomhairle Leabharlanna, *A Public Space for All* (results of a TNS mrbi market survey) (Dublin, 2004), 1.



The service is recognised by Government as being ‘amongst the top value for money investments in recent years’.⁴

The 1,700 staff employed in the thirty-two authorities respond to more than 12 million visits to branch libraries every year. Staff issue 13 million items each year, and are involved in the selection, purchase, and delivery of almost 1 million additional books, CDs, and other material, annually. In addition to delivering services through the branch network, staff also provide services to 450,000 school pupils and their teachers, to hospitals, day care centres, and prisons, and through block loans to specialised groups and communities. Public access to the Internet is facilitated by 1,400 internet PCs, and a diverse programme of exhibitions, readings, promotional activities and outreach programmes are provided in libraries in every library authority.

Information technology is a key aspect of public library services, and staff have responded to the challenges of this fast-changing area by engaging in a range of initiatives, including the www.askaboutireland.ie and the national digitisation strategy.

⁴ Remarks by Minister Martin Cullen, T.D., at the launch of *A Public Space for All*, 24th March, 2004.



The popularity and reach of the public library has also been recognised in recent years by a wide range of agencies, such as RTÉ, the Equality Authority, the Irish Financial Services Regulatory Authority, and the Abbey Theatre, all of whom have engaged in co-operative projects with library services. In commending library staff on the success of the reasonable accommodation training programme, Niall Crowley, Chief Executive of the Equality Authority, remarked ‘Public libraries play so many valuable roles in local communities around the country – they are sources of knowledge, information, entertainment and networking. Their service to people with disabilities has a key contribution to make to their inclusion in the wider community.’⁵

The library service is, collectively, the largest established cultural, information, educational and recreational infrastructure in Ireland providing a wide choice of services to the community and the individual. It is also a combined strategic asset which is provided by the local authorities to residents, employees and visitors in their communities throughout their lives and which is widely valued and supported. It is a service of choice, the quality, longevity and popularity of which reflects well on the local authority provider.

⁵ Neill Crowley, ‘Library Access’, *Equality News* (Autumn 2003), 19-20.
An Chomhairle Leabharlanna : Providing the Skills, p.3



2.2 The Importance of Staff Training and Development

Staff training and development has long been seen as central to public service modernisation. *Better Local Government*, published in 1996, noted that ‘there is a need for a structured programme of training and development for local authority staffs at all levels and in all disciplines’.⁶ In *Sustaining Progress*, the social partners agreed that ‘Enhancing performance is equally dependent on the knowledge, skills and other competencies of staff being developed to the levels needed to undertake their jobs to best effect and to enable them to realise their potential, enjoy greater job satisfaction and advance their careers. The parties are committed to continued training and development for all staff.’⁷

The crucial role of staff training for public libraries was recognised in the *Branching Out* report, which made a number of recommendations relating to training and development, including that ‘Library authorities should recognise the long term commitment of their staff in a concrete way and

⁶ Department of the Environment & Local Government, *Better Local Government: a programme for change* (Dublin, 1996), 6.21.

⁷ Department of the Taoiseach, *Sustaining Progress: social partnership agreement 2003-2005* (Dublin, 2003), 91.



devote the investment in human resources needed to take the library service into the new century.’⁸

This view was echoed by the *Branching Out* Staff Training & Development Committee in its *Building Capability* report: ‘We believe that one of the keys to realising the potential of public libraries in delivering an excellent service as outlined in *Branching Out* is through nurturing the talent and building upon the capability of our most important resource, which is our staff.’⁹

⁸ *Branching Out*, 50.

⁹ An Chomhairle Leabharlanna, *Building Capability: formulating the staff training and development agenda for public library staff* (Dublin, 2000), 1.



3. Courses organised

Since August 2001 An Chomhairle has delivered a programme of twenty-six training days dealing with the following topics:

- Reader development (nine courses)
- Children's Literature (six courses)
- Local Studies (five courses)
- Promoting events (two courses)
- Customer Care (two courses)
- Internet skills
- Mobile library services

Course selection was based on an initial training needs survey of four library authorities, on ongoing consultation with county and city librarians, and with the advice of the Standing Committee.

Courses selected have primarily been in library-specific areas, as generic staff training, in customer care for example, is generally provided by the local authorities.

The prices charged for training courses are dictated by the fees for trainers and the costs of room hire and catering. In setting the prices An Chomhairle seeks to recoup the actual costs of organising the courses.



The number of training days that can be organised is limited by the extent to which they can be supported by library authorities. An Chomhairle recognises that as the majority of public library staff work directly with the public, authorities may find it difficult to release such staff for training without causing an unacceptable disruption to the service. An Chomhairle also recognises that library staff are involved in many programmed and time-intensive activities, such as Children's Book Festival, and that release of staff for training purposes cannot be provided at times that would clash with these.

Nevertheless, library authorities require staff with appropriate competencies and skills in order to provide the public with a meaningful, relevant and timely service. In order to maintain and develop these competencies and skills, account must be taken of the training requirements of staff in frontline posts, together with those in technical, administrative and support posts. **The necessity of closing branches to release staff in certain circumstances should be factored in to local decision-making on staff training and development.** As stated in the *Branching Out* report, 'Any minor and short-term disruption to the level of service delivered to the



public will be more than compensated by the results of an effective staff development programme.’¹⁰

¹⁰ *Branching Out*, 50.



4. Participation in courses

Local authorities reserved 521 places on the courses: this represents 81.4% of the total places available. 502 places were taken by public library staff, with 19 places being taken by staff from other sectors. The 502 places were taken by 320 individual employees and 64% of participants attended at least two courses.

All 32 library authorities booked training places, although the level of bookings varied considerably. The highest number of places booked was 57, while the lowest number taken was 3. Chart 1 shows that 44% of library authorities booked between 11-20 places; 25% booked between 6-10 places; 22% took more than 20 places, while 9% booked 5 places or less.

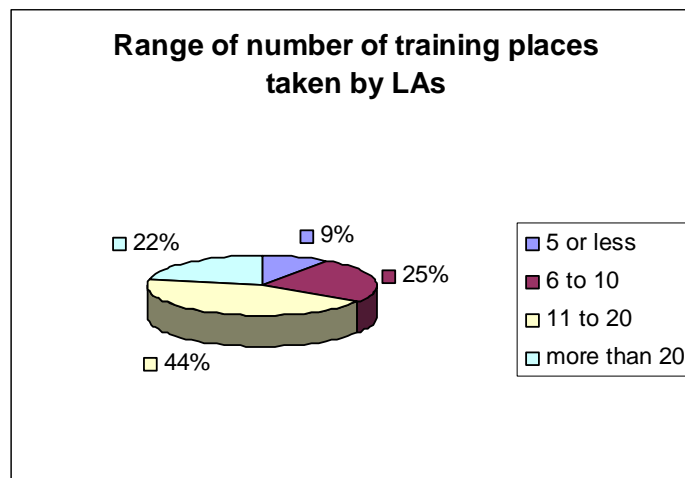
The disparity of take-up among library authorities is further illustrated by the fact that 16 authorities (or 50%) were responsible for almost three-quarters of the places taken (74%). 34% of library authorities have availed of 10 or less places over the past four years. Anecdotal evidence suggests that difficulty in releasing staff, as well as the costs involved (in particular subsistence) are factors in the low take-up by some authorities. Research into this is needed.

Although the majority of courses have been held in Dublin, we have, since 2003, run courses in Limerick and Galway. The Dublin-based courses were



better attended, with 89% of places being taken: 59% of places in other locations were filled.

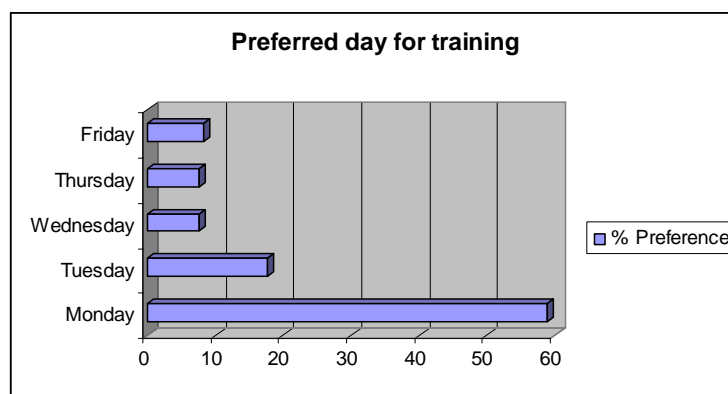
Chart 1: number of places taken by library authorities



An analysis of the feedback forms from course participants shows that Monday is the preferred day for training, with almost 60% of participants expressing that preference. We endeavour, therefore, to arrange training for Mondays, where possible.



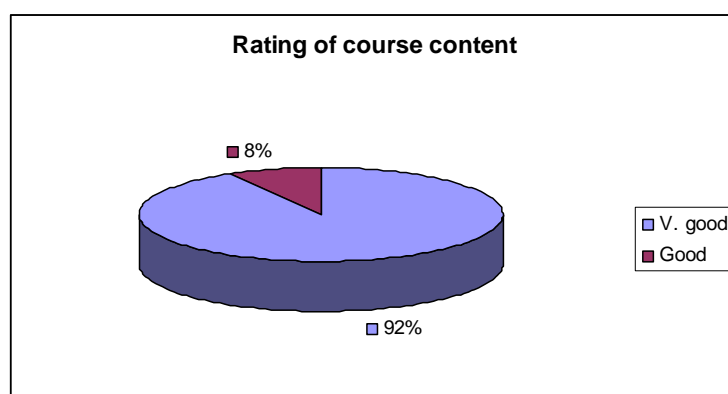
Chart 2: preferred day for training



5. Course Content

Course participants are asked to rate the standard of the course content and the relevance of the course to their work. Chart 3 shows that overall course content was rated 'very good' by 92% of attendees, with 8% rating it 'good'. All but two courses achieved a 'very good' rating of at least 90%. No participant rated any course content as less than 'good'.

Chart 3: rating of course content

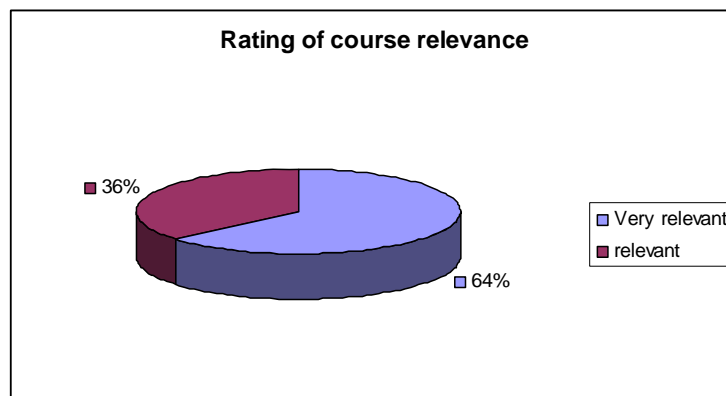




As shown in chart 4, 64% of participants rated overall course content as ‘very relevant’, with 36% rating it ‘relevant’. All but five courses achieved a ‘very relevant’ rating of over 60%. No participant rated any course as less than ‘relevant’.

Course participants are asked to indicate on the feedback sheet any topics which they would like to see addressed in the training programme. There is no significant demand for training in areas other than those already being addressed.

Chart 4: relevance of courses





6. Other training provided by An Chomhairle

In addition to the courses provided under the auspices of the Standing Committee on Public Library Staff Training and Development, An Chomhairle provides training to public library staff in relation to specific projects. The Cultural Heritage Project began in 2002 with the objectives of developing a level of expertise in digitisation in library authorities and showcasing the collections of local studies material held. Within a number of authorities the digitisation of holdings was already underway, in the majority it was a new undertaking.

In order to enable library staff to become familiar with and achieve a level of proficiency in the procedures involved, An Chomhairle and the project technical partners provided digitisation workshops throughout the project lifespan and the consequent *National Digitisation Strategy* programme which commenced in 2004. Six workshops have been held to date, with over 110 staff in total attending. The workshops have provided an overview of digitisation, theoretical and practical knowledge on the methods involved in the creation of digital content, practical information on the creation of Internet content and have included guidelines on effective project management. Additional training requirements have also emerged, leading to the preparation and or trialling of additional modules such as writing for the web, marketing and promotion.

In support of the workshops, one-to-one training, and training for smaller groups, has also been provided throughout the course of the digitisation



programme, with a further thirty-five library authority staff in attendance over the course of these. Training for these groups has focused largely on the practical aspects of content creation.



7. Conclusions and Recommendations

7.1 Conclusions

An Chomhairle has provided training with a total attendance of 666 public library staff since 2001.

Twenty-six training days were delivered under the Public Library Staff Training programme since 2001, with the majority of courses dealing with library-specific areas. In selecting future courses, An Chomhairle will continue to liaise with the county and city librarians and local authority training officers, and consult with the Standing Committee on Library Staff Training and Development.

The courses designed and delivered to date have attracted attendances of 521, with 81.4% of available places being taken. Although all thirty-two library authorities have availed of this training, there are wide disparities in the participation rates.

Course content was rated as 'very good' by 92% of participants, while 64% rated it as 'very relevant' to their work.

In addition, 145 staff received training in digitisation techniques as part of the *National Digitisation Strategy*, in 2004.



7.2 Recommendations

1. In order to optimise the benefits of *Branching Out* to local authorities, An Chomhairle recommends that local authorities prioritise the release of staff for training and staff development.
2. The Standing Committee on Public Library Staff Training and Development, in association with the county and city librarians, should ascertain the reasons for the relatively low take-up of training places by some authorities and examine options to facilitate optimal access to future programmes.
3. An Chomhairle should continue to liaise with county and city librarians and local authority training officers in relation to future courses.



8. Appendices

8.1 Appendix 1 – Standing Committee on Public Library Staff Training & Development

Membership as at July 2005:

- John Conway, Training & Development Officer, Local Government Management Services Board, nominated by the Board;
- Margaret Flood, Academic and National Library Training Co-operative (ANLTC), nominated by the ANLTC;
- Pat Lonergan, Assistant Librarian, Kildare County Library, nominated by the Library Association of Ireland;
- Norma McDermott, Director, An Chomhairle Leabharlanna, Convenor;
- Betty Moriarty, Assistant Principal Officer, Department of the Environment & Local Government, nominated by the Department;
- Ned O'Connor, County Manager, South Tipperary County Council, nominated by the County and City Managers' Association;
- Orlagh O'Sullivan, Assistant Principal Officer, Department of the Environment & Local Government, nominated by the Department;
- Donal Tinney, County Librarian, Sligo County Library, nominated by IMPACT;
- Brendan Teeling, Assistant Director, An Chomhairle Leabharlanna, Secretary;
- Austin Vaughan, County Librarian, Mayo County Library, nominated by the Library Association of Ireland.



8.2 Appendix 2 – List of courses organised

Course	Date	Venue
Children's Literature (1)	01/06/2004	Dublin
	14/06/2004	Limerick
	18/04/2005	Dublin
	30/05/2005	Galway
Children's Literature (2)	18/10/2004	Dublin
	01/11/2004	Limerick
Customer Care 1	06/06/2002	Dublin
Customer Care 2	20/06/2002	Dublin
Net Navigator	10/04/2003	Dublin
IFLA Mobile Libraries Course	30/04/2004	Dublin
Local Studies Seminar	25/03/2002	Dublin
People in Local History	14/03/2005	Dublin
	04/04/2005	Galway
Places in Local History	09/05/2005	Dublin
	16/05/2005	Galway
Promote that Event	02/06/2005	Dublin
	14/06/2005	Limerick
Managing Spaces and People	23/06/2003	Dublin
Marketing and Reader Development	01/09/2003	Dublin
Putting Reader's First (1)	29/08/2001	Dublin
	31/08/2001	Dublin
	13/05/2002	Dublin
Putting Reader's First (2)	14/05/2005	Dublin
The Reader-friendly Library	12/05/2003	Dublin
	20/10/2003	Limerick
Readers on the Web	06/10/2003	Dublin