



Realising Potential: The Public Library Service and Cultural Inclusion



An Chomhairle Leabharlanna's

submission to the NESF

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1. Foreword

An Chomhairle Leabharlanna welcomes the interest of the NESF in developing the cultural inclusion agenda and in particular the concern with broadening access to cultural services which the public library service shares.

Public libraries throughout their 150 years of service and in recent times have become increasingly agents of cultural inclusion. Their purpose is to provide access to the world of the imagination; to the cultural memory of communities and society at large and to sources of information and knowledge. The service is both personal and collective and is perceived as local, in that people universally refer to ‘my’ or ‘our’ library or mobile.

The public library service remit in fostering cultural inclusion is twofold. Firstly, they provide direct access to cultural processes, products and services, primarily, and not simply, books. Secondly, in providing users with access to these cultural resources, public library personnel help to equip their users with the tools and confidence to enjoy and participate in culture in its broadest sense, to pursue ‘to dwell in possibility’,¹ as Emily Dickinson would have it, as well as making sense of the world as it is.

In considering the essence of the public library contribution to cultural inclusion, An Chomhairle noted the Project Team’s suggestion that cultural exclusion has three dimensions: the ‘consumption’ of culture; the production

¹ Emily Dickinson, ‘I dwell in possibility’, in H. Johnson (ed.), *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* (Harvard, 1951).



of cultural goods, and decision making. We believe that public libraries contribute to cultural inclusion in all three dimensions.

As discussed below (section 2.3), reading is one of the most enduring, popular, habitual, enjoyable and enriching means of enjoying culture. The commonplace nature of reading in a generally literate society might lead us to overlook its importance as a cultural experience. Reading has a value for the individual reader, and also benefits communities, society, and the collective cultural life of the nation through the contributions of ‘well-read’ individuals.

Public libraries also provide access to and help to create other forms and expressions of culture and this aspect of their role is also discussed.

By contributing to cultural development, both personal and collective, public libraries help their clienteles to enrich their lives while enabling people to imagine, to react, to respond and, most importantly, to make choices, using the creative impulse. Public libraries have the potential to be more culturally inclusive in the future through supporting the learning agenda, the elimination of disadvantage, and through celebrating diversity.

A culturally inclusive library service provides, through its staff, stock, buildings and facilities, the necessary conditions to welcome all users. Library services are inclusive when they respond and attend to the sensibilities of their users, when they discern and are thoughtful about their users’ requirements, and alert to developing further engagement as and when appropriate.



In the cultural domains, creating the conditions to open up sympathies, insights and understanding, through the content of libraries, through the talents and skills of the staff, through synergies with cultural players for the benefit of the individual and the community, is at the heart of the public library philosophy.

The submission describes how public libraries contribute to cultural inclusion, addresses the three areas prioritised by the NESF, and makes recommendations for furthering this agenda. An accompanying document provides facts and figures about the public library service in 2006.

This submission does not seek to be comprehensive, given that individual library authorities, as well as the Library Association of Ireland, are also making submissions.



2. Public Libraries and Cultural Inclusion: the role of the public library

In the words of the *UNESCO Public Library Manifesto*, ‘The public library, the local gateway to knowledge, provides a basic condition for lifelong learning, independent decision-making and cultural development of the individual and social groups’.²

The *Branching Out* report described the public library ‘not as a building or an institution, but as a resource to be used by people’.³ The report identified three pillars upon which the service rests:⁴

- it is a resource for Information and Learning
- it is a resource for Culture and the Imagination
- it is a resource for Children and Young people

These three pillars encompass a wide range of services and activities, which will be discussed below.

2.1 Access for All

In the planning and delivery of its many activities and services, the public library has at its heart a commitment to providing both a literal and a virtual ‘space for all’. In describing this commitment, the Public Library Manifesto states: ‘the services of the public library are provided on the basis of equality

² International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) and UNESCO, *Public Library Manifesto* (1994: see <<http://www.ifla.org/VII/s8/unesco/eng.htm>>).

³ Department of the Environment and Local Government, *Branching Out: a New Public Library Service* (Dublin, 1998), 16.

⁴ Ibid.



of access for all, regardless of age, race, sex, religion, nationality, language or social status'.⁵

The services of local authority public libraries are open to everyone in a very real sense. Firstly, there are no entry requirements at all: anyone may come in the doors of the library. Secondly, a visitor does not need to have any 'reason' to enter the library: those who wish to come in to do nothing are as welcome as those who come in with something to do. Thirdly, the financial costs for using the library are either non-existent or very low. Fourthly, through the range of services and the depth and breadth of the collections, libraries endeavour to provide something for everyone.

2.2 Books and Reading

2.2.1 Book lending

Although the services provided by public libraries have been developed and extended over the years, the lending of books continues to be the core activity. In 2003 (latest figures available) public libraries loaned some 12 million books.⁶ The Public Library User Survey (PLUS) in 2002 showed that 71% of those who visited the library did so to use the book lending service and at least 83% found a book to borrow.⁷

⁵ *Public Library Manifesto*.

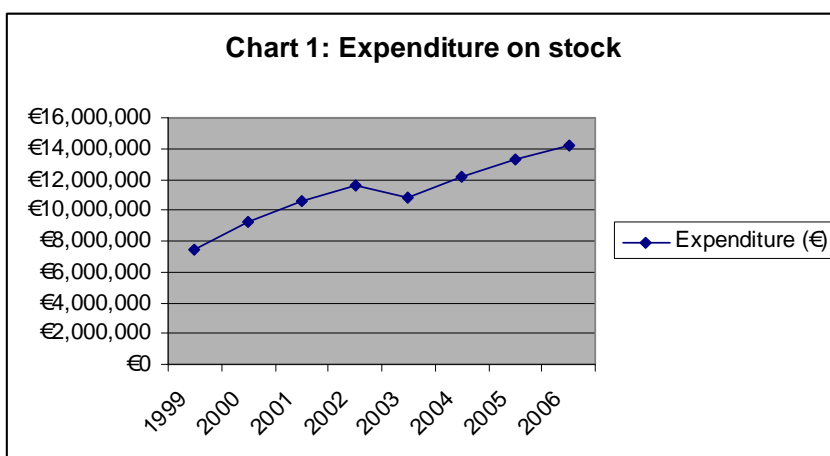
⁶ An Chomhairle Leabharlanna, *Public Library Authority Statistics: Actuals, 2003* (Dublin, 2006), 1.

⁷ An Chomhairle Leabharlanna, *Public Library User Survey 2002* (Dublin, 2003), 9.



2.2.2 Expenditure on Books

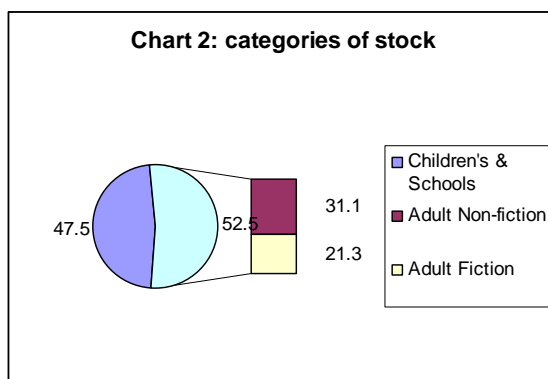
In 2006 library authorities expect to spend €14 million on stock, €3.68 per capita.⁸ This is an increase of 6.3% over 2005, and of 111% over 1998.



Over 1 million items are added to stock each year and public libraries collectively hold a stock of 13 million.⁹ The proportion of adult's to children's books held in 2003 is set out in chart 2:

⁸ An Chomhairle Leabharlanna, *Public Library Authority Estimates of Expenditure, 2006* (Dublin, 2006).

⁹ An Chomhairle Leabharlanna, *Actuals, 2003*, 6.



2.2.3 The Popularity and Value of Reading

As shown by the number of books loaned, reading is a very popular activity. Research in the UK shows that 65% of adults read books.¹⁰ Although similar data for Ireland are not available, a recent study shows that ‘over half of young Irish people (12-18 years) read in their free time every or most days’.¹¹ (It would be useful to have more data on general reading habits and An Chomhairle recommends that such data be collected: see recommendation nine.)

Reading is such a commonplace activity, that its real value can be overlooked. In the words of one philosopher:

Reading is one of the essentials – essentials, note: not merely one of the appurtenances or amenities – of the good life. For it is not just the familiar pleasures that come from responsive reading that matter,

¹⁰ Office for National Statistics, *Social Trends*, 35 (London, 2005), 175.

¹¹ National Children’s Office, *Young People’s Views about Opportunities, Barriers and Supports to Recreation and Leisure* (Dublin, 2005), 6.



but the effects of these on how we live our lives, and what kinds of communities we accordingly create.¹²

Recent research has attempted to describe the benefits of reading to the individual. The Arts Council in the UK commissioned a report on reading and health in 2003¹³. Among the findings were that:

- Reading is a creative act that uses the imagination to bring the text alive. It makes readers feel good and can be relaxing and relieve stress.
- Readers are independent learners. Reading enables readers to find things out and to develop literacy and interpretative and expressive skills.
- Reading can help develop a greater understanding of self and others by providing access to different perspectives and situations. It can therefore be therapeutic, providing the opportunity for readers to explore personal issues and experiences in their own time, at their own pace and through the experiences of others.
- Reading is empowering. It supports mental balance, self-esteem and informed decision-making.
- Reading often brings people together to talk about what they are reading and to explore related issues and viewpoints.

An Chomhairle endorses these findings from anecdotal reports from county and city librarians. An Chomhairle recommends that the social and cultural impact of the public library be investigated in the light of these findings.

¹² A. C. Grayling, *The Heart of Things: applying Philosophy to the 21st Century* (London, 2006), 21.

¹³ Hicks, Debbie, *Reading and Health Mapping Research Project* (2003), 22-3.



2.2.4 Making Reading more Accessible

The managers and staff of public libraries have traditionally sought to promote books and reading. The level and focus of such activity has increased greatly in recent years. A particular area of growth has been the development of reading groups. Although exact figures are not available, all library authorities support reading groups in at least some branch libraries, with some supporting groups in all their branches.¹⁴ The reading group ‘movement’ has also taken off in both the UK and North America. Research in the UK¹⁵ has identified that reading groups:

- Broaden and widen people’s reading.
- Support an enjoyable and more satisfying reading experience for all readers.
- Support learning.
- Empower the individual and support skills development.
- Give members a sense of belonging and inclusion.
- Bring communities together.
- Provide a lifeline in difficult life circumstances.

A study of reading groups in Ireland¹⁶ shows that they promote the reading of quality literature, in particular contemporary fiction, and encourage the reading of a wide range of material.

¹⁴ Dublin City Public Libraries, for example, has seventy-nine reading groups.

¹⁵ The Reading Agency, *A National Public Library Development Programme for Reading Groups* (London, 2003), 2.

¹⁶ Eithne Massey, *Survey of Reading Patterns in Irish Readers’ Groups* (Unpublished, 2003), 5.



Public library staff also engage in other programmes to promote reading, in particular arranging visits and readings by authors, and mounting book promotion displays and exhibitions. The Dublin City, Fingal and South Dublin services organise regular ‘readers’ days’, which have proved very popular with library users. Dublin City staff have run an annual readers’ day since 2001 and have had to limit the number of tickets due to overwhelming demand.

Reading promotion work is generally organised at local level, An Chomhairle Leabharlanna has co-ordinated two national programmes under the banner READISCOVER. These week-long programmes, in 2005 and 2006, have involved national and local radio advertising, and high-quality promotional materials. Events under the READISCOVER programme, including author visits and book promotions, have been held in libraries throughout the country, with 129 events taking place in 2005, and 100 in 2006.¹⁷

In promoting the role of libraries as cultural agents, national support means that the sum of these events is greater than the parts. The visibility of the activities in media campaigns services to place a value on, and generate increased demand for, reader support.

2.2.5 Promoting Reading among Children

A long-standing national event is Children’s Book Festival, which takes place each October. Libraries participate in the festival by organising author visits, competitions and book promotions. There are several hundred events

¹⁷ See <<http://www.library.ie/readiscover>>.



in libraries each year during the festival, attracting large attendances from children and young people.¹⁸ In addition to Children's Book Festival, public libraries deliver a programme of events for children and young people throughout the year. These can range from regular class visits to Children's summer reading schemes. Some services have extended the idea of reading groups to children and young people: Fingal County Council, for example, supports reading groups for 8-12 year-olds and for teenagers.

The public library service also supports reading for children in a more formal setting, through the Primary Schools Library Service. This service is provided with some funding from the Department of Education and Science: the funding for 2005 (latest figure available) was €4.50 per pupil.¹⁹ The delivery of the service varies from authority to authority, but typically involves visits to schools by librarians with mobile libraries and library vans, and the provision of materials on block loan to teachers for classroom use.

2.2.6 The Depth and Range of Collections

The combined holdings of the thirty-two library services represent a significant collection of cultural resources. In developing their collections, librarians aim to encompass as wide a range of material as is possible. Thus, library book collections include subject areas such as philosophy and psychology; religion; social sciences; languages; science and mathematics; technology; health; arts and recreation; literature, and history and geography. Among these varied topics a user can find both basic introductions and

¹⁸ See, for example,
<<http://www.clarelibrary.ie/eolas/library/services/childrens/cbf/cbf2005.htm>

¹⁹ Source: An Chomhairle's Research and Information Section.



academic text books; books aimed at the general reader, and those aimed at people with specialised interests.

A key advantage of library collections over bookshops, is that they include books which are out-of-print; are difficult to find, or are not commercially attractive. The provision of a growing range of materials in foreign languages is a new development, and is proving very popular with library users.

The value of a library's collection lies not just in the individual books, but in the connected and related corpus of knowledge that the collections, and the expertise of library staff, present. A reader may start off with a particular book on a particular topic, but be led by the collection to read any number of different books, on a potentially unlimited range of topics. This service, when supported by a knowledgeable and local library workforce, helps to create a sense of community in the library.

2.2.7 A National and International Network

Library users have unlimited access to the collections of their local library. Furthermore, through the inter-library loans system, a user also has access to the collections of all thirty-two library services and to the collections of libraries world-wide, including The British Library. Recent technological developments mean that these collections can be more easily accessed. The Borrowbooks service²⁰, launched in February 2006, allows a user search the catalogues of all thirty-two library services, and that of the National Library

²⁰ See <<http://www.borrowbooks.ie/>>.



of Ireland, simultaneously over the Internet. Users can reserve items for collection at their local branch, mobile, or library service point.

2.3 A World of Culture

2.3.1 Supporting Readers

Over the past ten years the worldwide web has developed into a significant cultural resource, a resource whose significance is increasing all the time. To take one example, readers interested in a particular author can now go online and read a vast amount of information about that author. In most cases the author will have his or her own website, in other cases a site developed and maintained by fans will perform the same or a complementary function. Message boards and newsgroups enable readers connect with other readers to exchange opinions and recommendations. Online library catalogues and sites such as Amazon allow browsers identify a large number of items likely to be of interest.

Public libraries are engaging in such services, providing lists of recommended sites and using their own sites to recommend books and provide background information about authors and their works. All of this can enhance the reader's enjoyment of a book, and bring other books to his or her attention.

The International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award,²¹ managed by Dublin City Libraries, alerts readers to books from around the world, in English or translated into English, which they might not otherwise have encountered.

²¹ See <<http://www.impacdublinaward.ie>>.



Books are nominated for the Award by 150 libraries throughout the world, and its progress is keenly followed by library staff and readers.

The World Wide Web is also a resource for other cultural information. All art forms and areas of cultural expression are featured on the web, providing ready access to vast amounts of information and images.

The web also presents a challenge to those seeking information. A search on Google for 'Ireland 1916', for example, yielded 4,290,000 results. Public library services are helping users make better use of the worldwide web through a variety of means, including the provision of classes and guidelines for people who are unfamiliar with the web. To this end An Chomhairle Leabharlanna produced a guide to using the Internet which was distributed to libraries and individuals throughout the country. Wexford County Library has taken this a step further by providing a course in e-Literacy which available free of charge on its website.²²

Library services are also providing access to subscription services, the costs of which are prohibitive for the individual user. The services on offer include cultural resources such as Encyclopaedia Britannica; the Grove dictionaries of Art and Music, and online collections of newspapers and magazines in a variety of languages.

2.3.2 Bringing Collections to the Web

In addition to enabling access to online resources, public libraries have been instrumental in digitizing material from their own collections, thus making

²² See <<http://www.wexford.ie/Library/researchSkills/index.htm>>.



them both easier to access (and use) and more widely available. Valuable material is thus preserved, yet made accessible.

Many library services have concentrated on digitizing materials from their local studies collections, examples being the work of Clare, Cork City, and Waterford County. Interest in these collections, both in Ireland and abroad, is increasing.

In order to support public libraries in this work, An Chomhairle Leabharlanna has co-ordinated a Cultural Heritage Project, with funding from the Information Society Fund. Under the project training and support has been provided to library authorities in digitizing materials and preparing them for the web. The work is showcased on the www.askaboutireland.ie website. The site features a wide range of themed collections of documents and images, from public libraries and national institutions such as The National Museum. The site allows users access materials which would otherwise be available only within the library itself, and also simplifies access to the content.

2.3.3 Changing Libraries Programme

Building on the investment in library automation in the last six years, An Chomhairle is co-ordinating a project to bring together a number of new and recently developed online resources to provide the public with free access to a comprehensive collection of information not available elsewhere and to facilitate this access with the introduction of fast broadband to all public libraries. The *Changing Libraries* programme complements the local authority collections.



Changing Libraries will:

- Establish a sound infrastructure through the enabling of broadband to all 351 public library branches.
- Develop and provide for the public, a comprehensive online local studies, genealogy, reference and general interest service through partnership with public and private bodies. The service will include the provision of access to nationally important resources such as:
 - Historical Maps, in agreement with Ordnance Survey Ireland;
 - The Irish Times Archive, in partnership with The Irish Times and the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government;
 - The 1901 and 1911 census, in partnership with The National Archives;
 - Tithe Applotment Books, in partnership with The National Archives;
 - Griffith's Valuation, in agreement with The National Library of Ireland;
 - Ask About Ireland - further enhancement of the resources of the website involving the addition of a number of topics containing significant amounts of new and varied content from the local studies collections of the public libraries.
- Enable the national marketing and promotion of a uniform, progressive service, aimed at satisfying users' requirements.



2.3.4 Providing Access to the Internet

The Internet and the World Wide Web have the capacity to transform people's enjoyment of culture, providing them with richer and more varied experiences. This, of course, depends on individuals having access to the Internet in the first place.

45% of households in Ireland have access to the Internet, meaning that a majority of people do not have easy access to the world wide web.²³ Public libraries have responded to this by providing Internet access in branch libraries. This initiative was given an impetus by funding from the Information Society Fund under the *Branching Out* programme. There are now over 1,400 Internet access PCs available in almost 100% of public libraries.²⁴ In 2004 a total of 1.6 million sessions of Internet access were provided throughout the country.

Internet access is a crucial service which facilitates people who may have no other means of access to enjoy the benefits of the Internet and the World Wide Web. The service has been a particular success with our immigrant populations.

2.4 Local Studies

Collecting and making available resources for the history and culture of communities and places is one of the key roles of the public library. All

²³ Central Statistics Office, *Information Society and Telecommunications, 2005* (2006), 27.

²⁴ Local Government Management Services Board, *Service Indicators in Local Authorities 2004* (Dublin, 2005), 180. Twenty-six library authorities provide Internet access in all branches: the average figure is 95%.



thirty-two library authorities have local studies collections and provide a dedicated local studies service.

As described in *Branching Out*, public ‘libraries, particularly in their local studies collections have developed significant holdings of important heritage value’.²⁵ Local studies collections include many different types of materials, including: manuscripts of local interest; church records; estate records; administrative records (e.g. records of the Poor Law Union); collections of local (and national) newspapers and journals; trade and street directories; photographs and other visual materials; maps, and ephemera (e.g. brochures and hand bills).

Public libraries not only collect original source materials, but also seek to acquire copies of materials held in national and other repositories, making it easier for users to access these materials. Examples of these are the Primary Valuation (Griffiths’); the Tithe Applotment Books, and the Census returns.

There is no doubt that the existence of excellent local studies collections, and the invaluable support and expert advice offered by local studies librarians, has contributed greatly to the growth in local history publications. Public libraries also collect these local publications, ensuring that knowledge gained about a locality is widely shared, enabling successive researchers build upon previous work (as happens in all academic disciplines).

The socio-economic development of Ireland in recent decades has led to huge changes in the make-up of even the most rural communities. There are

²⁵ *Branching Out*, 98.



now large numbers of people living in areas with which they have no personal or family connections. In addition, housing and other developments have changed both the infrastructural and cultural landscapes of many communities, leading to changes in how local people interact with their own localities.

In such an environment, local studies, as a means of fostering a sense of place and belonging, crucial to the well-being of individuals and communities alike, is more important than ever.

Local history provides insights on how life in Ireland in the past evolved in a variety of settings, both urban and rural. Local history research therefore allows glimpses into the diverse, interacting worlds that are the basis of the Irish historical experience. They allow an awareness of the regional diversity of Irish society in the past.²⁶

Public library local studies collections are fundamental to the pursuit and enjoyment of local studies.

2.5 A Cultural Space

In addition to providing direct access to culture through their collections and services, public libraries also provide venues for cultural events. As the *Arts and the Magic of the Word* report stated:

The public library system is seen as an exceptionally appropriate host for community arts activities. For national arts institutions

²⁶ Jacinta Prunty, Raymond Gillespie, and Maeve Mulryan-Moloney, *The Local History Project: Co-operating North and South* (Armagh, 2001), 9.



which are concerned with the engagement and empowerment of communities, libraries are ideal partners in programmes which deal with information and imagination, as well as for many non-literary arts.²⁷

All library authorities have a programme of events at authority and branch level. Events can include art exhibitions; book launches; lectures and workshops. In many communities, the public library is the only available venue for cultural events. A vibrant creative scene requires not only venues for the product of creative endeavour, but also a venue and support for the creative process itself. Public libraries provide such venues and supports for community-based cultural groups. All recent library buildings have included a dedicated flexible space, suitable for hosting exhibitions and other events, and for hosting meetings. It is not only the provision of the space that is important: in the words of *Arts and the Magic of the Word*, ‘the position of trust enjoyed by libraries provides a reassuring and unthreatening environment’.²⁸

As quoted above, the report also identified the public library as an ideal partner for national institutions to reach local audiences. There are many examples of such partnerships. One of the most recent has been the co-operation between An Chomhairle and The Abbey Theatre which saw The Abbey celebrate its centenary with events in libraries in every county. Readings, workshops, lectures, archive box sessions, drama and exhibitions were well received and helped The Abbey reach communities throughout the

²⁷ An Chomhairle Leabharlanna and the Arts Council, *Arts and the Magic of the Word: Executive Summary* (Dublin, 1998), 8.

²⁸ *Arts and the Magic of the Word*, 8.



country as part of its centenary programme. The Abbey is building on this work, and this year is mounting performances in several public libraries in the Dublin region.

2.6 Lifelong Learning

The *Branching Out* report described the public library's role in lifelong learning, stating:

The library supports adult learners and education generally. In particular it supports action for adult literacy, supports adult independent learning, and supports persons undertaking distance education in practical ways by providing information, course materials, and study space.²⁹

The public library's strengths as supporters of lifelong learning have been identified in a recent UK report as follow:³⁰

- Public libraries provide an open learning environment for all adult learners.
- Public libraries provide both formal and informal learning opportunities for adult learners.
- Public library staff have expertise in providing resources and identifying/signposting further sources of information/help, e.g. to other learning providers.

²⁹ *Branching Out*, 19.

³⁰ Museums, Libraries and Archives Council, *Provision for Adult Learners in England* (London, 2005), 9-10.



- Public library staff are flexible in their approach to adult learning. They are willing to try new ideas, and offer a variety of courses and support services to both learners and tutors.
- Public libraries demonstrate adaptability by working in partnership with other organisations.

These strengths were also identified by the *Branching Out* review, both by the project team and in the submissions received. There is a tendency, when discussing lifelong learning, to focus on lifelong education, which involves some kind of formal relationship between the learner and a educational provider. Public libraries support people in education, in particular those in distance education. The public library also supports the very many independent learners, people who are pursuing an interest in a particular area, without necessarily wishing to enrol in a formal class. Many people engaged in independent learning will continue to formal education, but many prefer to pursue their learning in a less formal or structured way. These learners are supported to a great extent by the public library service.

Third level education libraries hold valuable collections of interest to independent and distance learners. There is scope for the public library to work with third level institutions to provide pathways to learning, to facilitate greater access to third level collections. An Chomhairle is organising a conference in the Autumn to pursue this aim.

The value of learning in terms of cultural inclusion is clear: educated people (in the broadest sense of the word) are more likely to engage in cultural activities, whether as consumers or creators.



3. Barriers to Participation

There are barriers to participation in public libraries, some of which can be addressed by library authorities themselves, others which require action at national level.

3.1 Location and Suitability

Through its network of 351 branches the public library service is the largest cultural services provider in Ireland. The improvements in infrastructure in recent years have enabled many more people access modern library services. There are communities around the country which do not have easy access to a modern public library. There is a particular difficulty in providing library services in smaller towns and villages.

There is a growing trend for buildings which jointly house other cultural services, such as museums, arts, and heritage centres, as well as joint public services (e.g. local authority one-stop-shops; courts services). Such developments should be encouraged as they maximise value, usage, and foot fall.

The unsuitability of some buildings is also a barrier. Due to the long history of the service, many library buildings are not as accessible to people with disabilities as they might be. This challenge is being addressed by library authorities under the National Disability Strategy.

3.2 Opening hours

The lack of sufficient and suitable opening hours in some branches constitutes a serious barrier to use of the public library.



There was an overall increase of 20% (from 7,761 to 9,344 per week) in the opening hours of branch between 1998 and 2004 (latest figures available).³¹

- The number of libraries open during lunch time increased from 100, or 31% of the total, to 162 or 46%.
- The number of libraries offering a service at the weekend increased from 208 (64%) to 262 (75%).
- 295 or 84% of the libraries are open at least one night per week. This represents an increase of 34 libraries, from 261 or 80% of the 1998 total.
- The combined evening and weekend hours of opening account for 2,403 or a quarter of the total branch library schedules.
- 17% of the branch library schedules cater for usage after 5.00 p.m.
- 12% of the hourly schedules cater for services after 6.00 p.m.

These improvements have enabled more people to use the library at times which suit them. Further improvements in opening are required in order to serve people during their free time.

With the opening of new branches there will be further increases in opening hours, including lunchtimes, evenings and weekends. In order to achieve increases above this, increased levels of staff will be required. (See following section.)

³¹ An Chomhairle Leabharlanna, *Changing the Schedules: a Survey of Public Library Opening Hours 2004* (Dublin, 2005), 1.



3.3 Staffing levels and competencies

3.3.1 Staffing levels

Although staffing levels have increased in recent years, the lack of staff in some branches has serious implications for access. The necessary improvement in opening hours is dependent in large measure on the availability of extra staff. Lack of staff also restricts the amount of time librarians can work away from the library desk, and so restricts the amount of programming and development work that can be undertaken.

The Department of Finance cap on staff numbers is a key obstacle to providing extra staff as local authorities are required to provide the necessary extra posts from within their existing complement, to provide support for cultural inclusion.

3.3.2 Staff competencies

All research shows that public library staff provide an excellent service to the public. 96 % of respondents to the PLUS rated staff knowledge and expertise as ‘very good’ (73%) or ‘good’ (23%).³²

Branching Out identified the need for library staff to have knowledge of cultural resources in order to be able to provide quality information to their users. This need is being addressed through training provided both locally and nationally, through the Standing Committee on Public Library Staff Training and Development.

³² An Chomhairle Leabharlanna, *PLUS 2002*, 13.



3.4 Marketing of Services – reaching the ‘hard to reach’

Although the library’s profile in the community is high, research has shown that many people who do not use libraries are unaware of the full range of services on offer. 50% of non-users are unaware of the Internet service, for example.³³

The PLUS showed that library users represent a cross-section of society at large.³⁴ However, the lack of awareness of the full range of services suggests that there are people who would use the public library if they knew that there was something there of interest to them.

In addition, there is also the possibility that those who are most in need of the service may be less likely to feel comfortable accessing a public service. Those with literacy difficulties or those with a poor experience of education may also be reluctant to visit a library. These people are by definition ‘hard to reach’.

Public libraries provide a wide range of services, answering the needs of a wide range of people, of all ages, culture and educational background. This makes effective marketing difficult. It is likely that better marketing, focussed on specific target groups, in particular those who are ‘hard to reach’, and based on defined needs, would encourage such groups to use the public library.

³³ An Chomhairle Leabharlanna, *A Public Space for All: use and non-use of Public Libraries* (Dublin, 2004), 1.

³⁴ An Chomhairle Leabharlanna, *PLUS 2002*, 7.



It is necessary to have outreach programmes in familiar locations where the potential clients do not feel that class, education, or income are barriers.

An Chomhairle considers that the capital fund for social and community facilities recently announced by the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, could be used to address social cohesion in the cultural domain.³⁵

3.5 Geographical and social isolation

As might be expected, there is a direct correlation between library usage and the distance from a library that a person lives.³⁶ This challenge is particularly acute in areas where public transport links to the library are poor. The lack of or non-existent public transport is a particular barrier for those who do not have access to private transport.

Mobile services can go some way to overcoming these barriers, and a research project in Donegal is piloting new and innovative approaches to reaching isolated communities.³⁷ Taobh Tíre has the potential to realise the ambition of a wider engagement in such communities. It could also be tested to develop satellite services for large conurbations.

Homeless people often use public libraries, particularly in cities, as a place to be in during the day. However, it is clear that many homeless people who could benefit from the public library do not currently do so. An Chomhairle

³⁵ Circular Letter LG11-06, 10th April 2006.

³⁶ An Chomhairle Leabharlanna, *PLUS 2002*, 8.

³⁷ Donegal County Council, *Taobh Tíre: a Better Library Service for Rural Areas* (2005).



is co-ordinating a new partnership between public library services and TRUST,³⁸ to promote awareness of homelessness. The first step in this initiative is the dissemination of information through the public library network. This will be followed by training sessions for public library staff. We are also exploring a number of outreach initiatives with TRUST and library authorities around the country.

Immigrant communities face particular barriers in accessing library services, both in terms of language and lack of familiarity with the service. Public libraries have been tackling these barriers by providing materials in different languages, producing promotional materials in different languages, and marketing their services to immigrant groups. A forthcoming report on multi-cultural services will make recommendations in this area.

3.6 Levels of literacy

The building block that is competent literacy is necessary for the enjoyment of reading.

People with a low level of literacy may not ‘need’ a library service, although the library could provide them with non-book services. Libraries can also support people in overcoming their literacy difficulties, through providing space for literacy tuition and resources for learners and tutors. Public libraries also have a significant role to play in supporting the newly literate.

The significance of the ready availability of books in the development of literacy in children has been identified in several studies.³⁹ Public libraries

³⁸ See <<http://www.trust-ireland.ie>>.

³⁹ See, for example: Department of Education and Science, *Succeeding in Reading?* (Dublin, 2006), chapter 10.



could play a greater role in targeting services at children at risk of low levels of literacy.

A new family literacy project is being established by the Department of Education and Science involving the Office of the Minister for Children; NALA; the Irish Vocational Education Association; the home/school/community liaison service and other agencies. An Chomhairle will represent the public library sector in this project.

The development of the primary schools library service through a partnership between the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government; the Department of Education and Science, and library authorities was recommended in *Branching Out*.⁴⁰ This development has not taken place. The lack of development in the service is a barrier to improving literacy levels among children.

The success of a well funded school library service in raising literacy standards has been shown in the Junior Certificate School Programme Library Demonstration Project.⁴¹ This project is now being extended under the DEIS programme to a total of fifty schools. There is potential for co-operation between the new school libraries and the local public library service to support young people in making the best use of both library services.

⁴⁰ *Branching Out*, 92.

⁴¹ Junior Certificate School Programme Support Service. *Room for Reading: the Junior Certificate School Programme Library Demonstration Project* (Dublin, 2005).



The need for materials in a growing number of languages presents a challenge to all library authorities. The financial implications of the demand present a challenge in maximising the value of book funds.

3.7 Disabilities

People with disabilities face a number of barriers in using public library services, one being the problem of inaccessible buildings (see 3.1.1).

People with disabilities also face barriers in their use of library materials and services. In many cases the barriers ‘arise from society's attitudes, practices and responses to their needs, rather than from any impairment people with disabilities may have’.⁴²

Library authorities are working to overcome these barriers. An Chomhairle Leabharlanna, in association with The Equality Authority, has co-ordinated a project to provide training in providing reasonable accommodation for people with disabilities to library staff. Training has been provided to thirteen library authorities to date. A further nine authorities will receive training and support in 2006. This project is funded under the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government's National Disability Strategy, and has proved very popular with the library staff.

3.8 Marketing and Research

A lack of detailed data about those who use and those who do not use public libraries is a barrier to delivering effective cultural services. The difficulties

⁴² An Chomhairle Leabharlanna and The Equality Authority, *Library Access* (Dublin, 2004), 5.



of marketing a multi-faceted library service have already been mentioned. Public libraries need to gather better evidence about the effectiveness of their services.

Research into the impact of library services is also needed, as this will highlight those areas where more work needs to be done, and provide evidence for the further development of the service.

It bears repeating that the lack of staff inhibits library services in carrying out the supporting aspects of the service, such as marketing and research.

3.9 Sustainable Partnerships

Both *Branching Out* and the *Arts and the Magic of the Word* report identified the need for library services to engage in partnerships with other agencies. This is particularly so within culture and the arts, as much important cultural product is produced at national level. Although some progress has been made in this area (see, for example, the Abbey Theatre initiative above) the lack of sustained and structured partnership arrangements is a barrier which must be tackled.

The failure to build an effective partnership with the Department of Education and Science remains a barrier to the effective delivery of services to primary school teachers, pupils and their families, in particular.



4. The effectiveness of current policies to promote access for everybody

4.1 Branching Out

The effectiveness of the *Branching Out* programme in delivering what the public requested, that is better infrastructure, better staffing, better opening hours, better stock and better ICT, has been set out above. These aims underpin the development of a knowledge economy and support the development of a socially inclusive society.

The focus on better stock has led to increased spending on materials, providing a better range of stock for the library user, and the expansion and development of reader development activities. Increased spending on books has enabled library staff develop reader development programmes. These have been very effective in engaging readers, and in encouraging readers to read more widely.

There has been increased spending on materials in languages other than English and Irish. The demand for such materials will continue to grow as the numbers of immigrants from other cultures increases.⁴³

The focus on better buildings has led to seventy-two projects proposed by local authorities being approved, and forty-five new buildings will have opened by the end of 2006. These buildings have spaces for cultural programmes and activities as well as providing the general range of library

⁴³ Central Statistics Office, *Population and Labour Force Projections, 2006-2036* (Dublin, 2004), 19.



services. Some buildings house joint services such as museums, arts, and heritage centres, thus creating a synergy with other cultural services.

The focus on opening hours has resulted in more opportunities for people to use their library, with a 20% increase in the number of hours libraries are open to the public each week.

The focus on ICT has meant that public libraries have both used information technology to improve their services, and provided access to information technology for library users.

The overall result of these developments has been to broaden access to the cultural services of the public library, by enabling more people to use the library; by broadening the range of cultural resources and facilities on offer, and by simplifying access to these resources.

One of the key factors in the success of *Branching Out* has been the involvement of all of the stakeholders in the agreed implementation process. These are local authority elected members, county and city managers, county and city librarians, the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, the Department of Education and Science, the Local Government Computer Services Board, the Information Society Commission, and An Chomhairle.

4.2 Other National Policies

Within the framework of the *Branching Out* programme, public library services have been responding to various national policy agendas. Library



services contribute to each of the four strategic objectives set out in *The National Development Plan, 2000-2006*,⁴⁴ but are particularly involved in the fourth objective, fostering social inclusion. However, future National Development Plans should make specific acknowledgment of how libraries can contribute.

The supporting role of the public library service in combating social exclusion needs also to be explicitly acknowledged in other national policies and initiatives, such as the National Anti-Poverty Strategy. An Chomhairle is committed to working with the Combat Poverty Agency and the Local Government Anti-Poverty Learning Network to promote the delivery of socially-inclusive library services.

The Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government's National Disability Strategy provides opportunities for local authorities to improve access to public library buildings. An access audit of public library buildings is in hand under the strategy. It must be recognised that considerable financial support is likely to be needed if older library buildings are to be made fully accessible.

An Chomhairle contributed to NALA's National Adult Literacy and Numeracy Implementation Plan. The plan acknowledges the role of public libraries in supporting literacy tuition and the newly literate.

There is clear evidence from research that the availability of reading material is the key factor in children attaining good literacy levels. The public library

⁴⁴ National Development Plan website:
<http://www.ndp.ie/newndp/displayer?page=main_tmp_92371>.



can play a significant supporting role in providing a wide range of professionally selected reading material for children and their families. This role must be recognised by the Department of Education and Science (DES). An Chomhairle therefore welcomes the new initiative on family literacy from the DES and looks forward to contributing to its work.

Public libraries provide an open learning environment for all adult learners, support adult independent learning, and support people undertaking distance education. These roles were not sufficiently recognised when the National Adult Learning Council (NALC) was established in 2002. When NALC begins its work, public libraries' real and potential contribution in support of lifelong learning, not simply as conduits and venues, must be considered.

The role of libraries in lifelong learning was recognised by the Taskforce on Lifelong Learning in its report in 2002.⁴⁵ This report also focused on the public library's information role, rather than on its role in directly supporting adult learners.

An Chomhairle welcomes the publication of the Arts Council's Partnership for the Arts and looks forward to co-operating with the Council in the furtherance of its aims. We see potential for co-operation in various areas of the Arts Council strategy (not simply literature), based on our previous co-operation, in *Arts and the Magic of the Word* and on a pilot project in reader development, and on the commitment of both Councils to broaden access to culture.

⁴⁵ Ireland. *Report of the Taskforce on Lifelong Learning* (Dublin, 2002), 35.



5. How effective policies can be developed and made more effective – Recommendations

1. An Chomhairle recommends that the National Economic and Social Forum acknowledge the contribution of the local authority public library service as an agent of cultural inclusion and supports the further development of its potential through its future work.
2. An Chomhairle welcomes the commitment of the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government to *Branching Out 2*, and recommends that the focus on the development of public library infrastructure and the improvements in opening hours be continued, in line with the requirements of library users, and having regard to cultural inclusion.
3. An Chomhairle recommends that local authorities and the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government examine, in partnership with the Department of Finance, public library staffing levels with a view to extra staff being provided where needed to promote cultural inclusion.
4. An Chomhairle recommends that local authorities and the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government examine services to isolated communities and to large conurbations, where there is no existing library service, with a view to mainstreaming the findings of Taobh Tíre models as developed by Donegal County Council.
5. An Chomhairle recommends that library authorities give priority to how their services can be marketed to disadvantaged communities and to those who do not use libraries. Successful initiatives in



providing services to multi-cultural communities, should be continued and further developed.

6. An Chomhairle recommends that the forthcoming *Branching Out Phase Two* programme include a per capita target for local authority spending on stock. This target should be index-linked.
7. An Chomhairle recommends that library authorities develop ICT services further to extend availability and simplify access to cultural services and collections.
8. An Chomhairle recommends that library authorities build on their successful initiatives in the area of reader development. The Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government's support for the national Readiscover programme should be continued.
9. An Chomhairle recommends that data on reading habits, the value of reading, and usage and non-usage of libraries should be collected and is committed to working with the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, library authorities, and other relevant agencies to collect and collate such data.
10. An Chomhairle recommends that the social impact of public library services be examined and is committed to working with the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, library authorities, academic institutions and other relevant agencies in this regard.



11. An Chomhairle recommends that the Department of Education and Science acknowledge the role that public libraries can play in promoting literacy and lifelong education and is committed to working in partnership with library authorities, the DES, the Office of the Minister for Children, and other agencies, on joint initiatives in this regard.
12. An Chomhairle recommends that library authorities continue to develop partnerships with government departments, and statutory and voluntary agencies with shared objectives, and is committed to supporting such partnerships at national level.