

## **Position Statement**

CLOA (Chief Cultural & Leisure Officers Association)

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## **Title of Position Statement**

Libraries

## **Purpose of the Statement**

To set out the association's position regarding key issues in this sector in order to influence and shape thinking in relation to policy development.

## **Context**

- Public library services are a statutory responsibility of local authorities. CLOA recognises that some library authorities fulfil the statutory duty for public library service provision through voluntary and charitable organisations, whose leaders are welcomed as CLOA members.
- The statutory requirements for library services are outdated. They do not reflect changes in behaviour, need and opportunity that have taken place since the legislation was drawn up in 1964.
- Activities taking place in libraries or offered by a library service are now very widely drawn, as much related to wider service provision (including cultural provision) as their historic remit.
- Increasingly they are integrated with other local government provision (eg family hubs, public health, business support) and library policy needs to be seen through the lens of the wider management of Council services, not set in a silo.
- The structures to support libraries and library staff and customers are fragmented. The separation of libraries teams within both DCMS and ACE means library policy and support at national level is not always integrated with policy and support for other related services
- Library staff teams form part of wider management structures in Councils, and library staff development and wellbeing is the responsibility of their employer. Library operational management is often at the third or fourth tier within Councils, with senior leaders having responsibility for a wider portfolio of services.

## **CLOA's Position**

CLOA's base position is the same as the National Alliance for Cultural Services calling for a new approach to:

- To ensure libraries are acknowledged at national level to be a responsibility of local government and an integral part of cultural policy within local authority structures, not treated as a stand-alone or silo'd function.
- Public library sector development should be sector-led, with local authority strategic needs reflected. Arts Council England-funded support of Libraries Connected brings valuable focus to libraries, but it does not reflect the wider Leisure and Culture agenda within which libraries operate and lacks connection with mainstream strategic local government agendas. The opportunity to strengthen the impact of libraries lies in ensuring closer integration with mainstream local government strategic thinking and by ensuring accountability for library service development sits with the local government sector.
- To argue for simplification of the funding landscape and moving towards a more coherent, long-term, strategic partnership investment settlement for place, integrating with locally agreed strategies.
- To remove duplication of effort across the system and create a single point of strategic discussion between DCMS and local authorities which ensures effective communication and coordination with MHCLG and other central government departments that have an interest in library provision as a vehicle to deliver outcomes (eg Health, Business, Education).
- To revisit the balance between revenue and capital funding; investment in new capital schemes should always include appropriate provision for revenue to ensure that the benefit of public funds invested can be activated.
- To work collaboratively with the cultural system stakeholders on the development of a national strategy for culture, and a new national cultural framework to deliver it, setting out clearly the subsidiarity of roles and responsibilities across the tiers and underpinned by cultural data that is relevant, useful and proportionate in the burden of collection and analysis.

## **Recommendations / Calls to Action**

- Libraries are local government services. This must be stressed front and centre and it should be clear that libraries should be integrated into wider delivery planning in Councils, and not considered to be a standalone

sector. The library strategy currently being developed by DCMS should reflect the modern role of library services as part of wider cultural provision in local places, linked to locally identified need, and integrated with delivery of related outcomes for health, economy and skills.

- New arrangements for library development proposed through the Hodge Review to be based on sector-led improvement. We are relaxed about the body that takes this on – ACE, British Library or something else to be created, but the key will be ensuring that local government strategic leaders are prominent in its governance, and driving the functions, so that they meet the needs of the sector in terms of workforce, research and development. The strategy should be explicit that library staff are part of the wider local government workforce and the responsibility for their welfare and professional development sits with their employer.
- There is a real need for more effective connection with MHCLG and Local Government bodies to consider how best to sustain and develop the role of libraries and a commitment that reflects this (such as by establishing a regular senior strategic meeting of the two departments, LGA and CLOA) would be helpful in trying to combine the policy leadership of DCMS with the funding and operational delivery responsibilities of local government.
- Library data should be considered within the wider approach to cultural data which is based on relevance, proportionality of burden and cost. To fail to do this creates additional burdens. If there is a need for additional and better quality data, then the collection of that needs to be resourced. Library data, as with other cultural data, should include nationally agreed standardised data, alongside locally relevant measures that respond to place-based priorities.
- Reading is a foundational preventative activity that underpins quality of life, supporting cognitive development, mental wellbeing, educational attainment and social connection from early childhood through later life. Strong reading habits are linked to improved health outcomes, reduced social isolation, and greater resilience as people age. Libraries are uniquely placed to deliver this preventative impact at scale, offering free and universal access to reading for pleasure, learning and information, alongside targeted support for early years literacy, children and young people, adults with low literacy, and older residents. As trusted, non-stigmatising community spaces with professional expertise, libraries

provide sustained access and encouragement to read across the life course in a way that no other public service is structured or mandated to do. DCMS should provide support for advocacy in relation to the benefits of reading, including with other central government departments charged with delivery of related outcomes.

- The statutory duty for library services is already delivered, and will increasingly continue to be delivered, through digital means—both in terms of the public-facing service offer and the underlying infrastructure required to run modern library services. This creates significant and ongoing costs, including investment in hardware and software renewal, digital platforms, cybersecurity, and sustained staff training and support. In the context of continuing constraints on local government resources, there is a strong case for clearer acknowledgement of these pressures. For example, the cost of e-stock remains disproportionately high, and DCMS should provide support in engaging with and influencing suppliers on this issue.
- Libraries play a critical role in delivering digital inclusion and are unique within local government in having a universal, place-based remit to support residents' access to the digital world. As free, trusted and open public services, libraries provide essential access to devices, connectivity, and digital support for people who are otherwise digitally excluded. They support not only basic access but also the skills, confidence and assisted digital help required to engage with public services, employment, education and civic life. As more statutory and commercial services move online, libraries have become central to ensuring that digital transformation does not widen existing inequalities, fulfilling a role that no other local government service is structurally positioned to deliver at the same scale or accessibility. DCMS should provide support to influence DSIT in respect of recognising and resourcing this provision.
- Ministry of Justice contracts for prison library services should always be on a full cost recovery basis
- Devolution means moving funds closer to communities and that this will help to ensure that local needs can be better served. We would like to see an end to small-scale and top-down schemes which are time-consuming and costly to compete for and which tend to favour those areas with the greatest capacity for bidding. In accordance with other cultural

services, our position is to end competitive funding schemes and move to devolved, place-based settlements that reflect locally determined priorities.

- Library staff safety is a rising concern. The tension between the increased risk of physical and verbal abuse of staff and resources and the commitment to providing a universal service in a neutral space is escalating. We now have staff in libraries with CCTV, panic buttons and body-worn cameras, and still see incidents of violence, intimidation and wanton damage to facilities and stock. We would like to see the library staff protected more effectively by legislation, reflected in the level of seriousness with which such incidents are treated by the police and courts.