

# evaluation report



**Developing a vision for libraries' work with readers: consultation  
with the public libraries sector.**

**Final report to the Steering Group**

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# **Developing a vision for libraries' work with readers: consultation with the public libraries sector.**

## **Final report to the Steering Group**

### **1. Introduction**

Following the publication of "*Framework for the future*" in early 2003, the Museums Libraries & Archives Council (MLA) developed an Action plan to deliver the framework objectives. As part of an over-arching strategy to position public libraries to ensure that they deliver key national, regional and local priorities, at the end of 2003 MLA funded a piece of work to help develop a national vision for public libraries' work with readers.

During 2003, the Society of Chief Librarians (SCL), in partnership with the Reading Agency, set up a Steering group to lead on the development of this vision. A national conference on Reader Development was held in Westminster in July 2003 at which the process of articulating the vision was initiated. The Steering Group followed this up at a session with Chief librarians and other interested parties at the Public Library Authorities' Conference at Torquay in September 2003 during which the vision was refined. Following further discussion in late 2003, a series of consultation meetings was planned with the public libraries sector to debate the vision document, with a view to arriving at a national consensus about why libraries undertake reader development work and what is important and special about libraries' work with readers.

Concurrently with this work, The Reading Agency was helping develop other aspects of the Framework objectives centring around books and reading. Parallel work strands were established to develop a national Reading Groups Strategy and a national Partnerships strategy to deliver the vision. The programme for the consultation meetings was planned so that as well as discussing the vision document, the Reading Agency might obtain the views of the sector to feed into these other strategies.

### **2. The consultation process and its purpose**

During the period February - April 2004, a series of regional consultation meetings was held on Developing the Vision for Libraries work with Readers. Nine meetings were held in the English Regions. A total of 117 of the 149 English authorities was represented at these meetings (c78%). One meeting in Northern Ireland was attended by representatives of all five Education and Library boards (100%) and a further meeting in Wales attracted representatives of 19 of the 22 Welsh authorities (86%). Scottish library authorities were offered an opportunity to take part in the consultation process, but unfortunately declined to take part at that stage.

Most authorities at the meetings were represented by more than one delegate. Delegates included Chief Librarians, Assistant Chiefs, workers with Adult and Children's Reading Development, Stock librarians and general library managers with an interest in reader development. A few meetings were attended by interested non-library individuals, such as representatives of the local Arts Council or the

Verbal Arts Centre or by staff with a regional brief such as Regional Co-ordinators. In total around 390 individuals, including around 70 Chief Librarians, attended the meetings.

Librarians and library authorities were also offered an opportunity to respond individually to a series of questions designed to focus their thinking about the consultation issues (Appendix 1). Ten individuals responded in this way; these were mostly from authorities which had also attended the open sessions.

### **3. Methodology**

The outline programme for the consultation sessions is in Appendix 2. The meetings themselves focussed on four main areas:

- the vision document itself and whether it adequately represented the views of the public library sector;
- the readiness of the sector for a national Reading offer and what such an offer might be
- the role of Reading Groups in the Reader development vision and what might constitute a national Reading Group offer from the public library sector
- the role and value of partnerships in delivering Reader development and how best effective and beneficial national partnerships might be established and sustained.

Most consultation meetings lasted between 2 and 3 hours and were planned to be as interactive and participative as possible. Delegates were asked to work in a number of different formats - on their own as individuals, as part of a larger group and in whole group debate and discussion. While each of the consultation sessions was different, at every session delegates participated enthusiastically and a wide range of views was obtained. While individual views differed, some general trends emerged from all sessions. These are described in more detail below.

### **4. The vision document**

#### *4.1. Process*

To enable an informed discussion of the proposed national vision, delegates were circulated with copies of the "*Vision - work in progress*" document in advance of the meetings, together with the consultation questions which were designed to focus thinking on some specific issues and thereby obtain the most value from the session itself.

During the session, participants split into smaller groups to discuss their aims in doing Reader development work and to identify what they felt was most special and important about the work libraries do with readers. Each group produced a poster encapsulating their views and these were displayed around the room for all participants to see. A whole group debate then took place on the vision document itself, focussing upon the issues which Groups had been discussing and designed to obtain wider consensus about the aims, purposes and benefits of libraries work with readers. During this debate, participants offered their views on the various sections of the document: the importance of reading, the aims and purposes of Reader development work in libraries and why it is so important to the general public and to policy makers.

The vision document offered a choice of three possible alternative vision statements for libraries' work with readers and each of these was discussed by the whole group before delegates voted individually for their preferred statement.

The final part of the debate on the document looked at strategies for achieving the vision and identified any important strategies which the Steering Group might have overlooked.

#### 4.2. Outcomes

A digest of views shared by many participants is in Appendix 3. The concept of the document: a couple of short snappy statements and a longer rationale for why libraries do this work, found general acceptance at all sessions. The remainder of the content was broadly accepted, although many delegates felt that there were significant omissions and a large amount of additional material was proposed.

There was a feeling from many sessions that the term "*Reader development*" is not well understood outside the profession and that a more accessible term may be needed. A strong feeling was also expressed that the whole concept of "Reader Development" is patronising to users and an alternative term such as "Reading development" was preferred. A similar comment was also made about Readers' Groups, again the term "Reading Groups" was much preferred

Of the three alternative vision statements proposed, Statement 3 received the most votes, followed closely by Statement 1. In each case, however, numerous proposals were made to shorten the statement and amend the wording to make it more direct and user-friendly. Statement 2 received few votes, while a sizeable minority did not like any of the statements. Several delegates suggested that a marketing consultant should be employed to write the statement on libraries' behalf.

Delegates suggested some additional content for the definitions of Reading section, but it was the two sections on the aims of Reader development work and why public libraries work with readers is so important that generated the most comments and suggestions for additions.

Some key additional themes that delegates felt should feature in these sections were:

- the importance of reading for pleasure and enjoyment
- The range and depth of library stock and the fact that it is quality assured
- The fact that libraries have no commercial agenda
- Libraries' role in actively celebrating diversity
- Accessibility: libraries have a presence in every community
- Importance of library staff knowledge and expertise

Additional aims highlighted fell into two categories: people aims and planning aims. Key people aims were felt to be:

- To combat illiteracy in society
- To celebrate diversity
- To celebrate reading as a social act rather than a lone activity
- To improve individual well-being and quality of life

While amongst planning aims were:

- To encourage library use/ raise book issues
- To transform the library image and raise the profile of the library service
- To establish libraries' role in reading with other agencies and professionals

The section on the importance to policy makers of libraries work with reading was felt to need more concrete examples to evidence the claims being made.

Additional strategies suggested for delivering the vision related to communications, staff recruitment, financial resources and the measurement and evaluation of outcomes.

The full list of proposed amendments is in Appendix 3. At a meeting of the steering Group on 15<sup>th</sup> April 2004, these proposed amendments were discussed and accepted and the vision document was amended accordingly.

## 5. National offers

### 5.1. Process

After general discussion of the concept of a "*national offer*" as suggested in F4F, participants split into groups to discuss whether the sector as a whole was prepared for this concept and if so, what form a national reading offer from libraries might take. In the course of these discussions, groups also considered the role and purpose of Reading groups and what a national Reading group offer might look like, and how ICT might best be used to deliver a national offer.

### 5.2. Outcomes

There was a general consensus that the public library sector is ready for the concept of a national reading offer, and a number of suggestions was made as to the best way of delivering such a offer.

It was felt that the offer must be consistent, deliverable, relevant, comfortable and easy to use and that it must also be general, amorphous and easily adapted for local conditions. There was no consensus about whether the offer should be available at all libraries everywhere, or should only be available at some libraries in every authority. Several participants suggested that the national offer might be advertised as being available "*at all participating libraries*" or "*at all good libraries*". On this same issue, some participants suggested that to avoid an identified minimum offer becoming the standard, a continuum of reader development offers should be available - a kind of sliding scale, with a minimum that no authority should fall below, but various aspirational levels beyond this, so that authorities might see where they were on the scale and plan to improve at a pace suitable to local circumstances

A wide range of suggestions was made as to what the national offer might be, but three themes commanded a much higher level of support than any others. These were:

1. Quality library **stock** available from every library: emphasising the range and depth, the variety of languages and formats, guaranteed access to new books and best-sellers and above all the fact that borrowing all this material is free (49 mentions)

2. The availability in every library of committed, friendly **staff** who are knowledgeable about books and reading (44 mentions)
3. A commitment to deliver regular professional reading **promotions**, which might include national promotions, Readers days, high quality displays, events and author visits (44 mentions)

Amongst other widely supported suggestions for a national reading offer were:

- **Information** about books & reading, such as booklists and readers guides (26 mentions)
- The library **request service**, including the availability of Inter-library loans. (15 mentions) Many participants suggested that a national agreement might be brokered for free requests from every library.
- The **Summer Reading challenge** or other reading challenges for adults and children (15 mentions)
- **Opportunities for readers to interact with each other**: this included book noticeboards and reader reviews and recommendations (15 mentions).

*(NB this issue was also raised in discussions about ICT, where it received a considerable amount of additional support)*

- Libraries as **welcoming buildings**, well-arranged for browsing and with space to read and be read to (13 mentions)
- Services for **emergent readers** and people with poor basic skills - this included provision of stock, dedicated staff and specific promotions (11 mentions)

Other proposed offers receiving a number of mentions were:

- Bookstart in every library
- Storytimes in every library
- Outreach services from every library
- Other services specifically tailored for children.

There were also a number of suggestions which received more limited support.

A full list of the proposed national offers, together with comments from the group sessions, is in Appendix 4.

Suggestions for ensuring that the national offer would be deliverable by every library included:

*Stock:*

- A national assessment tool to evaluate the quality and range of stock in each library
- Agreement that every library would have a "quick choice" collection of new books and best-sellers

*Staff:*

- Nationally available staff training in reading development - this might include a "Reading development driving licence"
- A commitment from each authority to appoint as a minimum one officer with responsibility for Reading development
- Acceptance and application of national customer care standards

- Amendment of library staff job descriptions so that Reading development becomes part of everyone's "*day job*"

#### *Promotions*

- A national marketing strategy , with publicity from the media
- National generic publicity, building on what already exists
- Regular targeted mailings from The Reading Agency outlining up to date and immediate book and reading promotion activity

#### *5.3. ICT national offers: outcomes*

A range of suggestions was put forward for a national reading offer based on ICT, the most popular of which was that every library should provide and signpost **access to national reading sites** such as whichbook.net. (11 mentions)

There was a good deal of support for the development of a new **national Reading website for adults** along the lines of the children's "*Stories from the web*"; it was suggested that such a national website might have a local "*front-end*" so that it could be tailored by each authority. While the suggestion for a new national reading site received only 8 specific mentions , this suggestion is linked closely with others to make **readers reviews and recommendations** available online (8 mentions) and the establishment of **online reading groups** and chatrooms (8 mentions)

Other suggestions receiving more limited support were:

- Universal commitment to participate in national online promotions (5 mentions)
- The availability in every library of "*Stories from the web*" for children (3 mentions)
- Signposting to author sites; availability of free Internet access; availability of dedicated ICT for children, and provision of e-books (2 mentions each)

The full list of suggestions for ICT related national offers is in Appendix 4.

The output from the Reading Groups discussion is summarised in the following section.

## **6. Reading groups**

A separate report on the process and outcomes of the consultation on Reading Groups has been compiled for use in developing the National Strategy for Reading Groups. The main conclusions and recommendations of this report are listed below:

### *6.1 Conclusions*

- Reading groups are perceived to be an important part of reader development but not core nor central to it
- There is a widespread desire within the public library sector for Reading groups to be widely inclusive and if necessary to be specifically targeted at "hard to reach " groups
- In spite of this desire, library authorities are likely to vary in their attitude to direct intervention and running of Reading Groups by library staff, with few consultees expressing enthusiasm for this role
- There are widespread concerns about the availability of staff time and financial resources to maintain existing Reading Groups and to develop further Reading Groups

- The most widely supported national offer from libraries for Reading groups was around the provision of information, advice and support (staff, materials, premises) and of assistance to individuals wishing to set up Reading groups. Almost all libraries consulted felt able to commit to this minimum offer.
- Some strategic support for this offer by such activities as the development of a national training package, the establishment of a national database of Reading Groups, or the provision of a nationally available information and advice pack for libraries to use with Reading Groups would be broadly welcomed.
- There is some support for regional developments such as the setting up of regional collections of circulating materials for groups, regional meetings of Reading Groups and the sharing of good practice around a region. Regional developments appear to be most effective where there is a structure and/or staffing to support them, such as a regional co-ordinator.

## *6.2. Recommendations*

1. The recommended minimum national reading offer for Reading Groups should be the provision of advice, information and support to reading groups from libraries
2. The Steering group should consider how best to support the development of regional structures to underpin the Reading group movement and to promulgate good practice between library authorities.
3. An appropriate national body should be commissioned to develop national support materials, training and activities for libraries operating Reading Groups.
4. Advocacy and marketing strategies for Reading Groups in libraries need to address the financial and resourcing issues which may otherwise hinder development.

## **7. Partnerships**

### *7.1 Process*

An exercise was devised to determine the degree of participation in existing partnerships within each region, to find out which had been most successful and why, and to identify any local or regional partnerships which might have national potential if scaled up. The object was to contribute to a national partnerships mapping exercise and to identify the most fruitful partnerships for further development. Using Post-it notes, individual participants were asked to identify and comment upon partnerships in which they had been involved. Reasons for the success or otherwise of partnerships were then discussed as part of a whole group debate.

### *7.2 Outcomes*

Lists of partnerships were compiled for each region, with notes of the numbers of participants and any reasons identified for the success or failure of partnerships from the library's point of view. These lists were fed into the emerging partnerships strategy and form part of the final report emerging from that strategy.

### *7.3 Conclusions*

Key conclusions from the partnerships section were that:

- Regional developments are particularly vibrant and must be an important component of any national partnership and offer

- The success or otherwise of national partnerships can be dependent upon connections with regional and local structures , e.g. national BBC initiatives may be let down by lack of interest by regional or local BBC stations
- Specific initiatives work well when properly planned far enough in advance, when library staff receive training and feel involved in the development and when the quality of materials and support is good. The Orange prize was frequently quoted as a good example of such support.
- There is a consensus within the public library sector that benefits are to be obtained from further development with national media partners, publishers and the book trade
- Partnership developments are multifarious at every level, but there is little coherence between regions and authorities except in those relating to children's and young people's services, such as the Summer Reading Challenge and Bookstart
- Public libraries have a strong commitment to the social inclusion agenda and place particular value on sectoral partnerships aimed at addressing social inequalities.

## 8. Future directions for Reading Development

During Group discussions, consultees were asked to consider how the Reading agenda in libraries might develop in the future. Many of the suggestions received were about developing staff confidence and making more staff time available; there were also significant concerns about how bookfunds might be increased to cope with the growing demand that was being fostered.

The most significant development areas identified were:

The availability , take-up and extension of **national offers and initiatives**. Specific ideas mentioned in this section were an adult reader development model along the lines of "Their Reading Futures"; a nationally supported reading model for young people of 11-12, mirroring the successful "Bookstart" programme and developments aimed at excluded groups such as Visually Impaired people.

**Widening the partnership base** both locally and strategically. Specific partnerships mentioned for development were with the book trade, with adult education , health and voluntary groups, with commerce and developing the Big Read partnership further.

Increased use of **new technology** to increase reading opportunities was another frequent suggestion; this included the provision of e-books, use of customer smart cards for marketing and promoting stock and using ICT to generate bespoke booklists on demand.

The further development of **national marketing , promotion and advocacy** to take the message to funders and stakeholders received frequent endorsement, as did the development of **national evaluation tools and standards** to assess reader development activities and the **extension of book groups** to reach all ages, types and cultures, including marginalised and excluded groups.

Other suggestions emerging from discussion groups included:

- Extension of Readers and Writers days in libraries, including Readers and Writers in residence;
- Strategies to involve emerging readers, co-operate with local colleges and to embed reading development in Basic skills programmes;
- Bringing adult and children's Reading development strategies closer together

- Establishing staff reading groups and valuing staff reading
- Increased availability of nationally produced promotional material
- Programmes of building improvements so that the exteriors of libraries match what's inside
- Customer participation in stock selection
- The establishment of a National Reading Council
- The development of differentiated reading offers and
- Production of a needs analysis tool so that libraries can be sure they are providing what the market really needs.

## **9. Advocacy targets**

Discussion groups acknowledged that the value of libraries work with readers is frequently not understood outside the profession and identified the need for a national advocacy campaign to address this issue. Groups considered the question of the targets for this campaign and listed key targets for advocacy. Top of this list as targets for such a campaign were:

- Non-library users
- Library staff and managers
- Other local authority departments

These were followed closely by national and local politicians.

A full list of identified advocacy targets is in Appendix 5

## **10. Concerns and issues**

Discussions and individual exercises at the consultation sessions identified a number of issues and concerns which found common voice at all sessions. Chief amongst these was the availability of adequate funding and staff time to support and sustain the Reader Development initiative. Deep concerns were expressed by all those delivering reader development activities and programmes that the entire Reader development movement would prove to be a passing fad, or "flavour of the month" from policy makers and politicians, and that once this bandwagon moved on, library staff would be left high and dry attempting to meet a demand they had themselves created without adequate funding or support.

Additional concerns were expressed about current staff skills and confidence to engage with readers and to extend reading development to different groups and cultures where there was felt to be most need. Many delegates felt that traditional library staff lacked confidence to take on a more proactive role with readers and there were many suggestions for national training programmes for existing staff and for attention to recruitment practices to attract new staff from a wider range of backgrounds and with different interests and skills.

Perhaps the third most frequently expressed concern was the fear that the vibrant local and regional reading development scene might be overtaken or stifled if there were too great an emphasis on national consistency. Whilst recognising that national promotions and branding are highly desirable to improve the profile and penetration of the public library service, staff feared that local flavour and value might be lost and that local needs might not be adequately addressed within a national programme.

Appendix 6 contains a full list of the fears and hopes expressed at the consultation sessions by the public library sector for the future of Reader development in libraries.

## **11. Conclusions**

### *a. The consultation process*

1. The consultation process planned by the Steering Group was extremely successful in engaging the public library sector.
2. Whilst it seems unlikely that a detailed national consensus can be obtained on all the consultation issues, strong national trends emerged which point to a broad consensus on key issues, which should enable a national vision and a countrywide national offer to achieve widespread acceptance

### *b. The vision document*

The concept of the vision document and its content was broadly accepted by the sector, and a number of additions was suggested. These have already been discussed and incorporated into a revised document by the steering group. The vision statement itself clearly requires further work in order to gain majority acceptance.

### *c. National offers*

The public library sector is ready for the concept of a national offer and has expressed its desire that this should centre around the three themes of stock, staff and promotion

### *d. Reading Groups*

The sector believes that reading groups have a part to play in reading development but are not central to it. Libraries are keen to see Reading groups actively taking on the inclusion agenda. Proposals for a national offer for reading groups centre on the provision of information, support and training for existing and new Reading Groups and their leaders

### *e. Partnerships*

Public libraries acknowledge the importance of partnerships in taking forward the reading development agenda. They are keen to see further national partnerships developed, providing that these deliver real benefits for libraries and their users and that they do not stifle the development of local and regional partnerships.

### *f. Future developments*

In addition to the development of further national promotions, national offers and partnerships, Public libraries are keen to see a national marketing and advocacy programme for the sector, the increased use of new technology in widening reading experiences and the development of national evaluation tools for reading development.

### *g. Targets for advocacy*

Prime targets for a national advocacy strategy were identified as non-users of libraries, library staff, other departments of their parent authorities and local and national politicians .

## **12. Recommendations**

Recommendations from the consultation process on issues relating to reading groups or partnerships are covered in separate reports and are not duplicated here.

#### *General*

1. The Steering Group should consider replacing the terms Reader Development and Readers' Group with the terms Reading Development and Reading Group.

#### *The vision document*

2. Further consultation on the revised vision document should take place with national stakeholders prior to its presentation at the SCL conference in May. National stakeholders should include sponsoring departments and branches of CILIP in the three Home Nations.

#### *The vision statement*

3. The two remaining vision statements should be amended as proposed and further consultation should take place to decide which one should go forward to a marketing consultant for a final polish.

#### *National offers*

4. While further discussion will be necessary to agree which of the suggested national offers will be taken forward and developed, the steering group should accept the suggestion of a continuum of reader development offers, with a minimum standard and a range of aspirational levels being available.

#### *Workforce issues*

5. A national training programme for Reader/Reading Development should be developed and made available to all library authorities at an economic cost
6. The issue of recruiting staff for reading development from a wider range of backgrounds should be publicised to SCL

#### *Finance*

7. To be effective in the longer term, Reader/Reading development initiatives need to be sustainable with mainstream targeted funding and dedicated staff. Current staff concerns about the long term availability of finance and support are genuine and need to be addressed.

#### *Advocacy*

7. The national advocacy programme currently being developed by MLA should be targeted not just at politicians and opinion formers. Materials need to be adaptable so that they can be used at local level to make the case for reading development to non-users of libraries, to library staff themselves and to other departments of local authorities.

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21.4.04

## **Appendices**

- Appendix 1 Pre-meeting consultation questions
- Appendix 2 Outline programmes for the sessions
- Appendix 3 Digest of suggested amendments to the vision
- Appendix 4 Proposed national offers
- Appendix 5 National advocacy targets
- Appendix 6. Hopes and fears of the sector for the future of reading development