

Education and Training Inspectorate



Report of a Survey of

Good Practice within Public Libraries in relation to those for whom English is not a First Language and those who Lack Basic Skills

Inspected: February–March 2008

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1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The five Education and Library Boards (ELBs) within Northern Ireland (NI) have had responsibility for delivering a universal public library service for over 30 years. Since the resumption of devolved government in NI in 2000, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) has had responsibility for the library service and currently funds the public library service which is administered by the five ELBs.

2. METHODOLOGY

- 2.1 As part of its ongoing commitment to the development of the library service, as highlighted in *Delivering Tomorrow's Libraries*¹ DCAL requested the Education and Training Inspectorate (the Inspectorate) to carry out a survey of the contribution made by the library service to supporting the development of literacy, including information and communication technology (ICT), for those lacking basic skills, and the support offered to those in NI for whom English is a second language.

The aims of the survey were to:

-  identify good practice across the five ELBs in their provision for two of the four groups identified in *Delivering Tomorrow's Libraries*, namely: literacy support for those lacking basic skills and non-English speakers, those for whom English is a second language;
-  provide external quality assurance of the internal quality assurance strategies and indicators used by libraries staff to evaluate the contribution of the library provision; and
-  support DCAL in the dissemination of good practice identified.

- 2.2 Between February and March 2008, the Inspectorate held discussions with the Chief Librarians and senior staff who have responsibility for the library service in each of the five ELBs. Following these initial discussions, and contact with library staff at local level, a range of activities was identified, in consultation with key staff. From these activities, the inspection team selected a sample for visits, observation and evaluation. The majority of activities selected presented opportunities to observe good practice within the service itself and two further visits were made to a partnership organisation, at the suggestion of one ELB, in order to observe the progression possibilities for essential skills learners.

1. *Delivering Tomorrow's Libraries*, 2006, DCAL.

3. PARTICIPATION AND OUTCOMES

- 3.1 The Delivering Tomorrow's Libraries document highlighted the important and changing role that libraries have in society, particularly the ways in which that role is becoming more multi-faceted through the service's contribution to providing a community space, a centre for community and general learning, a location for cultural events, a meeting place for newcomers and an access point for the Internet services.
- 3.2 At the outset of the survey, meetings were held with each of the Chief Librarians to discuss the overall provision and the strategic planning within the service; the self-evaluation and quality assurance processes were also explained. The meetings with the Chief Librarians confirmed that, although the core business of the libraries is still based on books, and on information provision, libraries are responding to change and to customer need in new ways, that reflect the electronic age. The service across the five ELBs demonstrates that libraries are ICT rich environments and because of their concern with the uses of information, access and participation, they are beginning to play an even greater role in countering social exclusion, providing welcoming formal and informal learning settings, promoting integration and developing productive, multi-agency partnerships with other key stakeholders.
- 3.3 During the survey, the Inspectorate visited a sample of 16 sessions provided for the two target groups across the five ELBs. Of the 16 activity sessions, seven were based on ICT literacy development and support, four were based on support for those for whom English is not a first language and included within this language support for mothers and children, four provided support for essential skills learners and one provided the possibility of the development of oracy skills through storytelling.
- 3.4 All of the libraries visited exemplified aspects of good practice in relation to those for whom English is not a first language in terms of access to a variety of ICT services. The survey also revealed that the library service provided a sound introduction to ICT skills for those in the second target group who lacked this basic skill. However, at the time of the survey, few of the libraries had gathered specific statistical data to record participation and outcomes among the two target groups. At this point it is difficult to assess accurately how many of the two target groups use the service to fulfil a short-term need and how many go on to become regular library users.
- 3.5 Senior staff within the library service and staff who interact most often with the public in each library setting acknowledge that the increasingly multi-cultural

climate and the learning needs of people in society have changed significantly in recent years. Across all ELBs, both management and front-line services, staff report a significant growth in the use of the service by those for whom English is not a first language. The most obvious manifestation of this has been the increase in use of ICT including e-mail services, on-line newspapers and job search related activities. However, the gathering of quantitative data has proved difficult for the service. Structured sessions of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), visited in two of the five ELB areas exemplified clearly the strong capacity of the service to provide a welcoming, safe social space in which participants could progress their language skills and find support for productive social interactions. In one of the structured sessions, an ESOL tutor, accessed through the local college, delivered a taught session on language and library staff supported the tutor, helped with resources and provided further information on areas of general and local interest to the learners.

- 3.6 The libraries across the ELBs also act as a gateway to a positive involvement in literacy development for those who lack basic skills in ICT. The range of provision, including structured support in the form of learning sessions, have proved both successful and popular across the service. The sessions include information technology (IT) for Parents, ICT for beginners and for improvers and digital photography sessions, some of which are delivered through partnerships with external providers. These classes have proved both successful and popular across the service. Evidence from the sessions visited strongly suggests that participants enjoy themselves and are enriched and inspired by the experience, that they use the services to develop their skills, knowledge and understanding and that they feel respected and supported in their learning. Computer usage in the service across all of the ELBs is high and good use is made of the service, through the ICT literacy provision, particularly by the over-60 year old age group. In this way, in addition to promoting learning and participation, the service does excellent work in combating social isolation and potential inactivity. The improved confidence and the increased range of skills among this group are evidenced by the fact that many participants highlight their pleasure in learning and return for subsequent learning sessions or to continue to use the ICT facilities.
- 3.7 Those who lack basic skills in literacy and numeracy remain the most difficult target group for the libraries to access. While the majority of ELBs have recently sought to actively develop meaningful partnerships between libraries and other stakeholders, such as the essential skills tutors in the local college, and one ELB in particular had arranged through the local college, a special evening for learners of essential skills, there is little evidence to suggest that there has been an increase in the numbers of reluctant readers with essential skills needs

currently accessing the service. Libraries have, however, worked hard on raising staff awareness of the problems for literacy and essential skills students both independently, and through their work with the Education and Guidance Service for Adults (EGSA). In some ELBs, induction sessions have been specially tailored for existing essential skills tutors and learners in order to introduce them to the library staff and to the library services, and promotional material has been made available to highlight the potential support possibilities of the service. More could be done however, through links with the essential skills tutor education programme, to induct beginning literacy tutors into the range of library services and their value for literacy and essential skills students. Meaningful data gathering, in relation to usage has also proved problematic because of issues of confidentiality in relation to this group.

- 3.8 The range of activities surveyed demonstrates the flexibility in the face of change of the library service and its staff. The diversity of services offered demonstrates the strong capacity of the service to respond positively to change and to build effective and productive relationships with key stakeholders in order to facilitate continuous improvement within the service.
- 3.9 The response of library service staff in relation to the changing needs of the users of the service is extremely positive. Flexibility, adaptability, enthusiasm and positive engagement with change are key attributes which were demonstrated by library staff during the survey.

4. QUALITY OF THE PROVISION

Planning

- 4.1 The libraries within the ELBs are required to produce their annual business plans which cover the full range of their services. While there is some reference within the general work of the libraries in relation to the survey target groups, the planning for these groups is mostly characterised by planning in relation to stock. Across all five ELBs, there has been an improvement in stock in terms of its currency, accuracy, authority, interest and relevance for those for whom English is not the first language. There is evidence too, that libraries have invested in updating of their "easy read" stock and their audio-book stock in order to attract reluctant readers and those with underdeveloped reading skills.
- 4.2 At the time of the survey, while there was evidence to suggest that the libraries had planned well to increase access to ICT for all their users, there was limited evidence to suggest specific proactive planning or target-setting in relation to the two target groups across the majority of the ELBs. Nevertheless,

the willingness and flexibility of the service, and its capacity to address a wide variety of users' needs, has been evidenced positively by its rapid and enthusiastic response, particularly to the needs of those for whom English is not a first language. While practice has been generally good in relation to this target group, the library staff's support, encouragement and assistance in two of the five ELB areas, have been excellent. In the case of the best practice observed, the branch manager had substantial local awareness of his target population, kept his own local records and with high levels of self-motivation, used this local information to plan for and to address need. In a second example of good practice, the local branch manager and her staff worked closely, and in partnership with a qualified ESOL tutor, who provided a structured ESOL session in the local library. The branch manager attended meetings of the local community forum and was on hand to signpost ESOL learners to other services as required.

- 4.3 The ethos of the library service has traditionally been one of inclusion and in all of the libraries visited, across the five ELBs, there was good evidence of planning to create a welcoming, information rich environment, supported by an ICT infrastructure, to create a setting which appeals to the target groups.
- 4.4 The overall quality of the provision, in relation to those for whom English is not a first language, and in relation to the development and support of ICT literacy, ranges from excellent to good, and it is mostly good. Where it is excellent, it is characterised by very high levels of staff enthusiasm and engagement with library users through the provision of informal information, and also through structured, well-planned and well-delivered learning sessions. There were many good examples of learning support resources prepared by library staff, and tailored to the needs of the specific learning groups. These resources were welcomed and appreciated by users. The provision in the libraries setting addresses individual learning needs very effectively. Libraries staff provide very good opportunities for consultation with their end users and work very hard to broaden and to extend the range of learning opportunities.
- 4.5 While the level of stock provision for those who struggle with the basic skill of literacy has improved across the service, the level of stock borrowing and the wider engagement with this target group is, at best, patchy. There is some evidence of the potential of the service to attract this target group through partnership arrangements with other providers, such as local colleges, but opportunities for collaborative planning with other key stakeholders are not fully exploited. Libraries have considerable scope to contribute to initiatives aimed at addressing problems and issues connected with low levels of literacy skills. A majority of libraries visited across the ELBs commented that they had

participated in a full range of activities connected with the entirety of the BBC RAW campaign. Within one ELB, however, the opening of a health and well-being centre, will provide a centralised service which has the potential to bring together a number of key stakeholders in a partnership based on a multi-agency approach in which the library service can play a key role. Within another ELB, the appointment of a learning development officer, with specific responsibility for the delivery of some essential skills ICT provision, and the signposting of literacy and numeracy learners to another organisation, for progression purposes, has been effective.

Links With The Wider Community

- 4.6 In general, the library service has established productive links with a number of groups in the wider community. In a majority of ELB areas, there are useful links with community education fora with a view to improving services for those for whom English is not a first language. Links with the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) have also been established and helpful multilingual materials on general services and issues relating to road safety are available in a number of libraries.
- 4.7 A useful joint action plan was drawn up by staff from two of the ELBs, on behalf of the five ELBs, to identify ways in which Northern Ireland libraries can improve their service for migrant workers. This plan identifies, among other things, the need to create targeted marketing and promotional activities aimed at those for whom English is not a first language. It also highlights the need to establish further partnerships with a number of external agencies including the Northern Ireland Centre for Ethnic Minorities (NICEM). The plan was subsequently adopted by all five ELBs.
- 4.8 Productive links have also been established in a number of ELBs between the library and local health care professionals. In a minority of ELBs, a baby clinic is held on library premises and this provides a good opportunity to allow young mothers an opportunity to familiarise themselves with the range of library services. In another, a new multi-agency centre will open in 2008 and the library service will play an important role through the support and promotion of literacy development and valuable early learning initiatives.
- 4.9 The links with the hardest to reach and most reluctant readers are still at the early stage of development. In some areas these links have previously been stronger but reductions in available European Lottery funding have, in turn, reduced provision.

- 4.10 Although the survey revealed little current evidence of libraries' links with local business and industry, libraries are well placed to develop those links in order to target more proactively and to plan and develop further learning opportunities for those members of the workforce for whom English is not a first language and for those who have essential skills needs.
- 4.11 The libraries provide a welcoming environment and a supportive ethos for their users. The staff who worked with the target groups, are very customer-focused and many went beyond the remit of their duties to ensure a quality service. In the case of ICT literacy a number of staff across the ELB areas has upskilled in order to support users while others worked effectively alongside specialist staff from external partnership agencies, to respond to users' needs and questions. Discussions with library staff in the course of the survey indicated that staff had undertaken appropriate staff development and were aware of relevant policies in relation to child protection and vulnerable adults.
- 4.12 The public library service has over time, built up considerable experience in providing an increased range of vital services to a very broad range of users. With the increasing importance on information, learning, health, and inclusion matters in society the libraries are in a good position to strengthen further their contribution. A positive equality of opportunity agenda is evident across the five ELBs.

5. QUALITY OF LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

- 5.1 The quality of leadership and management across the five ELBs is mostly strong. Where it is strongest at strategic and operational levels, there are clear linkages between the traditional work of libraries and the management of the more recently emerging remit to meet the needs of a broader spectrum of user-groups. In the best practices there are effective strategic and operational partnerships with external stakeholders and a high level of awareness of relevant government policy. However, in the majority of cases, apart from proactive planning in relation to stock acquisition, the libraries response to those lacking basic skills and to those for whom English is not a first language, has been largely reactive. There remains a need, at strategic level, to manage planning in relation to the survey target groups in a more proactive manner. In order to do so, the strategic management needs to be underpinned by more effective data collection and analysis which can, in turn, better inform internal quality assurance processes. While some work has already begun on these areas much still remains to be done.

- 5.2 The motivation of the staff surveyed at all levels is very high as are the levels of professional practice and the willingness to embrace change. However, in order for the library service to meet and address systematically the changes that are taking place in society, the gathering of data needs to be improved and used to inform a more rigorous needs analysis approach and better strategic planning. A review of staff development needs will also be necessary.
- 5.3 Evidence from the survey demonstrates that creative and innovative work is being carried out at a local level. In one ELB, the recognition of the need for the service to engage in the writing of bids to secure external project funding, has proved to be a useful form of staff development. Equally, in another ELB, the participation of library staff in a European Exchange programme, funded by the British Council, has increased staff awareness and widened their experience base of library practices in other countries. However, more could be done to embed these activities within the wider planning and self-evaluation, to disseminate key lessons learned and good practice both within and throughout the service.
- 5.4 The self-evaluation process is at an early stage within the library service. Much of the evidence base is anecdotal. Although a good start has been made in one ELB to the self-evaluation process, much remains to be done overall. The traditional data gathering methods used by the service do not offer the range of information required in order for the service to focus specifically on the benefits to individually identified user groups or to carry out effective needs analysis to address new and emerging needs. The service would benefit from a collaborative approach to agreeing and implementing performance measurement indicators in line with the strategic direction of the service and the aims of government in NI.
- 5.5 There is a need to expand the range of performance indicators in order to plan to further enhance the range and quality of the service while taking a strategic cognisance of the work of other learning organisations at international, national, regional and local levels.

6. QUALITY OF THE STAFFING

- 6.1 The libraries staff involved in the survey are well qualified in terms of their traditional library duties. A minority of staff, across the majority of ELBs have undertaken additional qualifications in ICT, for example, in order to better assist service users. In two of the ELBs, staff have drawn upon their additional skills, for example in digital photography, to work alongside tutors from external partnership agencies and have expanded and enhanced the individualised learning opportunities for ICT service users.

- 6.2 In one ELB, where a staff member holds additional qualifications, for example in essential skills, that staff member is employed in a teaching capacity and can signpost learners successfully to other organisations outside the service where they can further progress their learning.
- 6.3 In a few ELBs, a staff audit has begun in order to allow staff the opportunity to identify their additional skills and to employ these skills, where possible within the service. This is a useful practice and one that could be rolled out across the five ELBs.
- 6.4 The library service recognises that the changing cultural profile in NI may in turn require greater degrees of multi-lingual capabilities on the part of staff.
- 6.5 Given the expanding needs and requirements of the target groups, the survey indicates that these needs are best served where staff can bring a range of qualifications to bear. The traditional qualification for librarians would benefit from review in the light of the demands of the current user groups.

7. CONCLUSION

- 7.1 This survey has identified and highlighted the significant contribution that the library service makes to addressing the needs of those who lack basic skills, including the basic skills of ICT and those for whom English is not a first language. The survey acknowledges the wide range of other activities and support that libraries offer, of which libraries' work with the survey target groups is a part.
- 7.2 While the core business of the library service remains largely constant, current library users demonstrate a wide and changing range of needs to which the service is responding. However, there is generally a need to review the overall service in relation to its focus, in terms of the wider aims of government within NI and its potential for greater positive impact across a range of government initiatives. In order to optimise the libraries contribution to NI's society, and to the development of learning within it, there is a need for libraries to improve partnerships with a wider range of non-library organisations. There is also a need to fully embed within the service the culture and processes of self-evaluation so that in better evaluating its own strengths and areas for development, it can anticipate and respond to the needs of other organisations, to new emerging user-groups and to individuals within them.

8. SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS

8.1 Strengths of the service in relation to the target groups

8.1.1 The main strengths are:

-  the improvement in stock in terms of its currency, accuracy, authority, interest and relevance for those for whom English is not a first language;
-  the appropriate and effective emphasis on the development of ICT literacy for those who lack this essential skill in both target groups, and the good opportunities afforded for learning and for combating social exclusion;
-  the support afforded by libraries' staff to those for whom English is not a first language, through access to a range of ICT services and the facilitation of structured ESOL learning sessions in some cases;
-  the development of productive links with other organisations and agencies, for which the service provides a neutral venue and acts as a repository for information to support those for whom English is not a first language;
-  the effective leadership and management within current strategy at all levels across the service and the flexibility of staff in embracing change; and
-  the effective, welcoming and neutral social space afforded by the library setting for both target groups.

8.1.2 The main areas for improvement are:

-  the need for a more developed system of needs analysis and user analysis based on data gathering and management, in relation to the range of target groups;
-  a firmer strategic direction for the service;
-  the need to agree and implement a suitable range of qualitative performance indicators, in line with the strategic direction of the service and to use these to forward plan; and
-  the need to carry out an effective staff skills audit linked to a programme of staff development to meet the changing needs of library staff.

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