Marketing Library Services to Children and Young People: the role of Schools Library Services

Introduction

The following paper discusses findings of a research project recently undertaken by the *Centre for the Public Library and Information in Society* (CPLIS) at the University of Sheffield. The project, commissioned by *MLA North West*, explored the future development of Schools Library Services in the North West region, with particular reference to the appropriateness and suitability of joint commissioning, or collaborative approaches to the management and delivery of such services.

The research (completed in November 2005) involved a review of the literature to examine the impact of changing market conditions and subsequent approaches to Schools Library Service delivery in other regions; a questionnaire-based survey of all public library authorities in the North West which sought to establish existing joint commissioning schemes, collaborative and partnership-based approaches to service delivery within and across the region; qualitative fieldwork including focus groups and telephone interviews with key Schools Library Service staff from the North West, during which participants discussed the challenges currently faced by Schools Library Services, approaches to meeting such challenges, and collective 'models for action'.

The research has revealed that the challenges currently faced by Schools Library Services include issues surrounding service identity, perception, awareness, prioritisation and marketing; staff training and the identification and promotion of best practice; cultural tensions between public libraries, schools and education authorities. Approaches to meeting such challenges, as put forward by research respondents, include a collaborative and proactive regional branding and promotion of Schools Library Services, involving a network of relevant staff, professional bodies and organisations and key regional stakeholders. A regional trust was put forward as a model for such an approach. Staff training and service representation and advocacy would also be key roles for the suggested body, using a strong professional brand relating to the wider services to children and literacy development remit.

Challenges faced by Schools Library Services: identity, promotion and survival

The impact of changing market conditions upon Schools Library Services is reasonably covered in the professional literature further to the 1988 Education Act and subsequent reforms to school funding and budget control. The Local Management of Schools (LMS) introduced by the act, whereby schools were

given independent financial control (taking financial control of schools away from the Local Education Authority), has been described as the transformation of schools in to business enterprises, with 'the manager of each department within that business expected to capitalize on assets while minimizing expenses' (Feltham, 1994). Coupled with the introduction of the National Curriculum, this has involved an extensive operational, organizational and philosophical overhaul in terms of Schools Library Service role, resources and services in a bid to maintain significance and value to schools and more importantly their budget-holders (Dickins, 1995).

The biggest challenge facing Schools Library Services in times of educational financial stringency is their status as *non*-statutory services. The delegation of budgets directly to schools has left limited funding for centralized services: where cuts have been made, Schools Library Services are susceptible the most to closure due to their non-statutory status (Feltham, 1994). A brief expenditure survey of school library services in 1997/98 (Library Association, 1997) reported repeated cuts and the closure of four regional services. Where services have survived, their main objective has become to provide whatever services possible while maintaining a favourable balance sheet, rather than to provide the best service at 'whatever cost' (Feltham, 1994). As such, professional librarians working within Schools Library Services have themselves had to learn and develop business and entrepreneurial skills. Dickins (1995) describes the capacity for Schools Library Services to function as businesses within local government as 'debatable', due to constraints such as budget cuts and an inability to compete freely on the open market. Further to LMS and the subsequent 'marketisation' of central services, Schools Library Services encountered significant change to their role and function including delegated and devolved funding and management, for example, partial funding between LEA and other council departments, or full delegated funding to other departments including the public library service.

In a reassessment of the impact of political policy and changing market conditions upon Schools Library Services, Eyre (2000) concludes that New Labour policies further to the 1997 general election have proven to be 'mere extensions' of preceding legislation. In a study of the effects of LMS upon Schools Library Services in England and Wales, Eyre (2000) observes that the existing organizational culture of an authority has a bearing upon their reaction and receptivity to changing situations. Those services at the forefront of change belonged to proactive organizational cultures, had established good relationships with other council departments and consumers, and had implemented structures to facilitate change to a much greater extent than the more 'reactionary' authorities.

Extensive staff training and sharing of expertise are also essential for the ability of a service or organization to adapt to change. Feltham (1994) recommends greater communication and sharing of expertise between schools, further and

higher education, special libraries and public libraries for Schools Library Services to thrive and succeed, as they would 'benefit enormously from the marketing expertise of their colleagues in other, traditionally more competitive, fields who have had to restructure and streamline their services to survive'. This is especially pertinent, as McNicol (2003) highlights the recommendations made in recent educational and cultural agenda reports, such as *Empowering the Learning Community* (LIC) and *Start with the Child* (CILIP), concerning the vital need for schools and public libraries to work together to achieve national learning objectives.

Participants in the qualitative stages of the North West study were asked to identify and discuss challenges faced by Schools Library Services from operational, organisational and regional perspectives. The most significant challenges facing Schools Library Services in the North West on an operational basis relate to running the service as a business within a public sector remit and culture, with "survival" in general quoted as the greatest challenge of all! It was noted by respondents that Schools Library Services staff are trained as librarians, and that it is often difficult for them to acquire the business acumen and skills required for the efficient and effective running of such a service, which is very different to other public library services. Other problems lie within the business process itself, including the service's reliance upon profit margins (i.e. only having available to spend the income generated from schools buying in to their services), and the fact that any income generated is protected by the governing authority – the services themselves are not able to 'carry over' income from one financial year to another and are therefore not able to develop the service based on their own earnings.

"Librarians are trained as librarians, not accountants… it can be difficult to balance our service oriented style with hard-edged business skills, or even to develop them at all"

"The greatest difficulty is in running a service… what should primarily be a service for the greater good… as a business. It doesn't sit well in the public library domain, particularly when the same [public library] restrictions apply over how the money is spent and controlled"

The need for self-preservation has also encouraged an air of protectionism amongst Schools Library Service staff in terms of a reluctance to share best practice and benchmark services. The sector is quite competitive, and as such, individual services don't like to share success strategies, or expose shortcomings, because of the threat of losing business, or in the extreme case, closure of services. Side effects of the lack of business acumen and communication within the sector include over-stocking on a large scale, staff cuts and redeployment, and poor take-up of services from relevant schools. It was felt that there is sometimes a lack of clarity over what is really on offer to schools, and often a mismatch over what is required by schools and available from suppliers. Stock selection in general can be problematic, including other supplier issues regarding minimum order quantities, returns policies, limited stock availability etc.

"It sounds terrible but we don't particularly want to share the secrets of our success… this could threaten our stronghold… if neighbouring Schools Library Services begin to thrive they may take our business"

"We just don't know what's happening elsewhere with Schools Library Services… if other services are experiencing the same supply issues etc… nothing is ever written or communicated… it's a very closed shop"

Other operational challenges include limited resources such as physical space for stock supply and distribution, low staff numbers and other increasing costs associated with service overheads (van hire, fuel costs etc).

From an organisational perspective, cultural differences between the public library service and the local education authorities and educational systems present challenges for Schools Library Services in terms of identity and status. This is especially significant in cases where staff are employed by different sectors. Public library services were perceived to be more 'people oriented' than education services, causing professional tension between the two. There are significant cultural differences between services run by public library authorities and those run by education authorities - the latter is considered to have more creative freedom in terms of the proactive generation of business and approaching schools. The greatest organisational challenge is that Schools Library Services are *not* statutory, and are therefore vulnerable to closure and low prioritisation.

"We exist on a wing and a prayer simply because we are not statutory services, and ultimately dispensable if need be"

"There is a real tension between the training and experience you have as a librarian and the nature of education…we are people's people… they are not. Schools have become very managerial and difficult to penetrate"

"Our service in some ways has been allowed to thrive under education authority control… there is more commercial freedom to seek out business and push the service I think"

Within the public library service specifically, it was felt that Schools Library Services are often misrepresented, with little understanding and mixed perceptions generally of their role and function at all levels. This can cause some suspicion or resentment of the services role as profit-making organisations. One interviewee reported a lack of recognition and understanding from their particular authority, including a lack of support from library administration during periods of low staffing due to sickness absence. There is also a lack of support in terms of stock procurement and processing: whereas public libraries have central ordering and bibliographic service units, Schools Library Services have to do everything in-house, which is especially arduous when staff numbers are at a bare minimum.

"There is a lot of suspicion and ignorance surrounding PLA perceptions of what we do. People [PLA staff] don't want to know or get involved"

Public library procedures also create difficulties for Schools Library Services. There is pressure generally to provide evidence of impact and accountability in terms of public library standards, but it is difficult to define impact and performance measures when all Schools Library Services are different in terms of their management and provision. Respondents noted that highly formalised public library structures are not necessarily convenient for or conducive to business-oriented services: for example, service level agreements can dictate 3 year waiting periods for extra staff. Operational issues such as over-stocking relate back to complicated organisational strategies (e.g. restricted loans for schools).

"Service level agreements do not help us to run as a business… they are too restrictive… we need our own standards of service but these are incredibly difficult to define when the service as a whole is so inconsistent"

There was some debate over the role, identity and recognition of Schools Library Services within the public libraries' services to children and young people remit and agenda. Some respondents felt that services to schools were often overlooked by popular project-based initiatives (and the relevant staff) within this remit, and that Schools Library Services seem to have significantly less kudos and credibility than other high-profile projects targeted towards children. One interviewee in particular felt a disassociation with the children's services agenda, pointing out that their Schools Library Service had had a relatively insignificant input in to a recent public library staff away day based on young people's services. Another interviewee however explained that their authority has developed an integrated children's strategy inclusive of Schools Library Services, whereby their specific post is split 50/50 between services to schools and children (for example, another responsibility includes the Bookstart project). This approach needs more definition however, as there is some uncertainty as to the prioritisation of the Schools Library Service, and it was felt that more time is needed to focus upon the development of this service.

"People [library staff] are very attracted to the feel-good children's reading projects and so on, but not to Schools Library Services… it needs to be made more worthwhile and the benefits to children's learning made more visible"

In terms of regional challenges, the relationship between Schools Library Services and education authorities and schools themselves present many issues, particularly in terms of attracting business and actually supplying services to schools. At the most senior level, respondents noted a lack of support and recognition from politicians and local government, differing support from and between education authorities, and a lack of senior support within public library authorities. Within the respective education authorities, strategic decision-making has impacted upon service provision: delegated and limited budgets to schools

have questioned the importance of library services within schools; changes to OFSTED inspection of schools have reduced the notice period within which schools had the opportunity to improve their libraries prior to the inspection taking place: the closure and amalgamation of schools also reduces take-up of Schools Library Services. Access to key client groups such as newly qualified teachers (NQTs) is also limited – one interviewee pointed out that their service had not been invited to a 2-day training event for 200 NQTs in the area, although this was put down to poor communication due to busy workloads rather than a deliberate exclusion.

> "It is only going to get worse now that the notice period for OFSTED inspections has been so drastically reduced… we could rely on OFSTED panic buying before, now they don't have the time to prepare"

> "Devolved budgets are a nightmare… its difficult to know who is in charge of spending… you are constantly chasing around trying to find the right person to speak to"

On a national, professional level, it was also felt by respondents that whereas there is professional support and representation for school librarians, Schools Library Services are under-represented by CILIP and are not championed appropriately by professional organisations. One interviewee commented that more could be done within library schools and relevant HEIs to promote services to schools and train library and information graduates in this field.

Respondents also spoke of challenges within and from schools themselves, in terms of attitudes and misconceptions of teachers and head teachers alike. The contemporary managerial culture of schools threatens to undermine the valuable educational role of school libraries, as head teachers are keener to spend limited budgets on desirable community resources such as sports facilities and ICT suites. Respondents also reported a certain naivety amongst teachers about the value and appropriateness of certain resources, and a lack of understanding on their availability and expense incurred. This encourages a 'make do and mend' attitude within schools towards their library services. Teachers are also becoming increasingly attracted to private sector competitors in terms of school library service provision, who it was felt offer more attractive "aesthetically pleasing" services, particularly in terms of their premises and work environment. This presents another significant regional challenge in itself, particularly when considering the previously identified lack of business acumen amongst public library services to schools.

> "Some teachers don't have a clue… they think the service is free and then change their minds or walk away when they realise otherwise!"

> "Sometimes there are clashes between teachers and heads… teachers can be really enthusiastic about what we offer, only to be told by their respective heads that they can't have it"

> "We need to look and learn in terms of what [private sector provider] are doing… the way they present themselves… the way they approach schools… they are obviously doing something right"

The national children's agenda

The child has featured prominently in policymaking and strategic documentation for social, educational and cultural sectors in recent years. Examples stress issues surrounding equality, social inclusion, educational attainment, lifelong learning and cohesive approaches to the delivery of all services to children in meeting these objectives. *Every Child Matters* (DfES, 2004) recommends a cohesive yet personalised approach in giving every child the opportunity to fulfil his or her potential, including supportive networks within all cultural services. Museums, Libraries and Archives have responded in terms of expressing a commitment to the provision of a 'safe and welcoming environment to support formal and informal learning' (*Fulfilling their Potential*: MLA, 2004). The national strategic plan for public libraries includes the objective to 'enable and encourage children to become enthusiastic readers and learners through a programme of learning opportunities which support their formal education' (*Framework for the Future*: MLA, 2003).

Start with the Child (CILIP, 2002) is an extensive consultation document produced by the professional association for librarians in the UK considering the changing library needs of children and young people; the extent to which such needs are being met by existing public, school, further education and Schools Library Services; the relationship between libraries, reading, literacy and learning; recommendations for improvements in library services for children and young people. The report concludes that the potential for libraries to make a major contribution to learning 'has not been sufficiently recognised', and recommends the prioritisation of early years provision; an 'urgent need' for greater and more professional marketing of services; greater staff training and networking opportunities; increased cross-sector and community partnerships in the development of innovative and creative approaches to service delivery.

Contemporary political and social circumstances have encouraged such a renewed focus and emphasis upon children's literacy, learning and associated development for educational and cultural sectors. The 2004 'Social Trends' (National Statistics Office, 2004) report stated that children aged under 16 constituted 20% of the total population of the UK in 2002. Demographic studies illustrate the changing nature of family structures and domestic lifestyles: the proportion of children living in lone-parent families increased from 7% in 1972 to 23% in 2003 (ref?). The Aslib Review of the Public Library Service in England and Wales (date?) predicted that the twenty-first century would be a time when 'more than one out of every four children is born to an unmarried woman; more than two out of every three children under the age of six has a mother who is employed outside the home; fewer than three out of every ten adolescents will have lived in a continuously intact family through all 18 years of their youth'. The renewed focus for educational and cultural sectors stresses the child's need for supportive learning networks and cultures beyond the previously conceived

traditional and conventional school and home environments, particularly given the changing nature and contemporary definitions of family structures, lifestyle and associated childhood experiences. Other societal influences upon the renewed emphasis upon children's reading and literacy include the growth in multimedia entertainment and it's dominance of children's leisure activities, hobbies and pastimes.

This renewed focus has been reinforced in schools since September 1998 by the National Literacy Strategy, involving a structured and prescribed approach to the teaching of reading and writing in primary schools (ref) in the form of the 'Literacy Hour'. Pupils are encouraged to read together, extend their vocabulary and understand phonetics, grammar, punctuation and spelling. National Literacy Strategy impact studies (ref) have shown that literacy standards have risen, but the number of children reading for pleasure has fallen significantly: for example, the reading standard of 10 year old boys has risen, but the number of boys in this age group who claim to enjoy reading has halved (CIPFA, ?). A school library advocacy document produced by the relevant professional organisations (ref) promotes the role of the school librarian in supporting National Literacy Strategies; introducing texts to pupils and teachers; increasing pupils' enjoyment of reading; encouraging wider reading and stimulating creativity, critical thinking and writing skills.

The formalised national curriculum emphasis upon literacy and reading has been extended and reinterpreted by public libraries in terms of increased reader development initiatives and projects aimed at the child, and the subsequent promotion of reading as a valuable and fun activity. National examples include the Bookstart initiative, which is targeted towards young parents and carers with babies/toddlers, with the aim of encouraging family use of public libraries and to familiarise the child from a young age with books and reading (ref). Another national example includes the public libraries' Summer Reading campaigns. Targeted towards school age children, the relevant summer reading projects aim to encourage the use of public libraries during the school break and to promote the pleasure of reading (ref). Regional examples of reader development projects for children include the *Book Pushers* programme in Derbyshire (ref) whereby teenagers promote the books they have read and enjoyed to other teenagers and librarians via readings and presentations. Free copies of relevant titles are provided by *Puffin Books*, and although the project is currently aimed at school children only, there are plans to extend the programme to school leavers who can act as mentors. *4ureaders.net* is a website created in East Ayrshire in Scotland (ref) by 11-18 year olds, and aimed at the same age group. The *Girls with Attitude* section targets older girls with a chat room, relevant web pages and links, music and film reviews.

Services to children in the North West

Survey respondents within the North West study were asked to provide examples of existing joint commissioning schemes, collaborations and project-based partnerships within their respective public library services. This has helped to illustrate a culture of collaboration within the region's public libraries, and therefore their capacity to develop existing schemes and experiences, and apply the principles learnt to the future development of Schools Library Services, if considered appropriate.

Many of the project-based partnerships listed by respondents involved services to children, young people and families and were linked to reader development, or reading related activities and initiatives, providing evidence of regional best practice within the services to children and young people remit. Halton Borough Council for example included their *Fun with Books: Family Reading Development Service* initiative which, funded by Sure Start, provides an outreach worker and resources to support reading development for the under fours and their families in the community, run by the library service and Sure Start agencies. One 18.5 hour (FTE) Family Reading Development Officer has been appointed for each of the five Sure Start areas in the borough. Evaluation of the project is undertaken quarterly and annually. Another project funded by Sure Start is *Starting with Stories* in Warrington. Trained library staff deliver story telling to local preschools and nurseries at a dedicated library. Preschool staff then reinforces the books/stories with art and craft work in their own environments, which is then displayed in the participating library. Library staff are trained by Children's Services staff and the project began in 2004. Evaluation sheets are completed after each story time with planning meetings held on a six-month basis.

Sure Start also funds the *Bookstart* projects in Wigan and Salford both of which are delivered by the library service (to be funded by national Bookstart Scheme in Wigan from April 2005 – March 2008). Evaluation of the project is undertaken (in Salford) on behalf of Sure Start by the Institute for Public Health Research and Policy, University of Salford. Steering Group members in Wigan include Local Education Authority, Primary Care Trust and Sure Start representatives along with library staff. The *Story Bus* project in Stockport is another Sure Start initiative being delivered by Library and Information Services in the single regeneration budget areas of Adswood and Bridgehall from 2003 to 2006 (evaluated on an annual basis).

The *Homeless Families Play and Learning project* in Tameside involves the provision of a deposit collection and an information/book pack for each child at the Homeless Persons Unit (HPU) and also involves a programme of activities and events designed to improve the reading and information handling skills of the children at the library and HPU. Project partners including Library Link, Children's Support and Play Workers work in partnership with health visitor and other agencies to encourage use of existing services and to improve the social skills and health of the children. The project began in April 2003 and will run until March 2008, with initial 12 month funding provided by the Children's Fund

followed by continuation bid funding. The library service provides leadership and expertise on book collection, pack provision, activities and events. Libraries Young Peoples Services Coordinator (YPSC) writes required reports and funding bids and supervises project workers. New Charter Housing trust provide the accommodation for the project, administer the funding, employ the staff and provide day to day management via the manager at HPU. Quarterly evaluation reports are written for the Children's Fund outlining indicators of success/improvements in the quality of the life of children/family members; evidence of involvement of children and families in developing the project; evidence of meeting project targets linked to the five outcomes from Every Child Matters. Evaluation forms are completed by children, parents and carers. Other evidence includes statistical data and case studies, which will be used to support the value of mainstreaming the project as part of children's services for children and young people in temporary accommodation.

St Helens provided brief details of a number of learning projects targeted towards children and young people involving a number of different partners. *Families Learning Together* is a project based in ten schools and four libraries designed to encourage best practice in family learning (March 2001 to March 2006); *Right to Read* involves work with looked after children and their carers to encourage reading and to provide resources and activities (August 2004 to June 2006); homework support at four libraries and community venues. Key partners in the delivery of these projects include Adult Learning, Healthy Living, Sure Start, Social Services, Youth Offending Team, School Improvement, Schools, Colleges, and Community Centres. Funding streams have been provided by Neighbourhood Renewal, Paul Hamlyn Foundation and Learning Partnership.

Given the relatively large scale of partnership-based work and funding within library services to children, some discussion could therefore evolve concerning the identity of Schools Library Services within the services to children and young people remit, particularly when considering alternative sources of funding and organisational structures, such as joint commissioning and collaborative approaches to service delivery. There may be some scope in terms of Schools Library Service branding and marketing to 'tap in' to the existing body of work in the North West region, particularly concerning reader development activities, and to create a seamless service brand along the early years to young adulthood continuum in line with the literacy agenda.

The future of Schools Library Services in the North West

Respondents felt that approaches to meeting the challenges they had previously identified essentially revolve around the need to raise the profile of Schools Library Services in the North West region. From an ideological perspective, it was felt that a clearly defined children's agenda, with a recognisable role for Schools Library Services, is needed. This could involve more visible links with

other services to children and the relative agencies, including Early Years education and Sure Start (already identified as high profile partners in the delivery of services to children on a project-based level). Respondents noted a need for a cultural change in schools with respect to the levels of importance placed on traditional learning resources and activities. It was suggested that books are perceived as non-essential items further to the growth of ICT in schools, and respondents felt that the "middle class professional pre-occupation" with ICT and multimedia amongst families and in schools was very damaging. More work and association with comparatively high profile reader development initiatives could help to encourage the necessary cultural change and reinforce the role of Schools Library Services with respect to learning, literacy and educational attainment.

In support of raising the profile of Schools Library Services in the North West greater levels of cooperation and advocacy are needed from public library authority and education authority directors, and professional bodies and organisations. More research in to the current use and viability of services to schools in the region is also needed, involving all key stakeholders including schools and other providers of services to children and educational resources. In order to increase the visibility of services to schools, suggestions included having Schools Library Services staff based in branch libraries in order to increase service representation and access, and the introduction of special events targeted at NQTs involving teacher training agencies and HEIs in the region. The *Literature Matters* MLA project was quoted by one interviewee as an existing example of how this can be achieved, which reinforces the benefits of aligning Schools Library Services to work being undertaken in public libraries concerning children's literature and reading.

In order to facilitate improved promotion, advocacy and ultimately use of the region's Schools Library Services, a highly sophisticated and professional marketing strategy is needed. Suggestions included specialized multimedia information packs; open days and road shows; interactive websites including standardised on-line ordering systems. Schools Library Services staff need to become much more adept in terms of business skills and acumen in order to resolve the tension between business operation and service delivery. Extensive staff training and opportunities for networking and professional development are needed in this area. The development of specific service standards and performance indicators for Schools Library Services is crucial in the under-pinning and development of sustainable improvements. It was agreed that more commercial freedom is needed within this context.

The idea of a regional 'trust' was put forward as an appropriate mechanism for bringing together these individual approaches and requirements. This would involve a formalised system for cross-authority and cross-domain awareness raising, staff training and subsequent benchmarking of services: it was noted that for this to be achieved, the sharing of best practice would need to be taken much

more seriously within the sector. The identification and prioritisation of core Schools Library Services business including resources, advice and guidance etc would be required before the services can be promoted efficiently and effectively. For a trust to be successful, local knowledge would be essential as the North West was identified as a complex region with very different authorities. It was noted that schools expect a local service, and that a 'trust' approach may be appropriate on a sub-regional level including neighbouring authorities. It was observed that any such approach would need investment 'on a huge scale' and would require extensive consultation.

A strong visual brand and identity is integral to the proposal, which would need extensive internal and external (including public and private sector) collaboration. Such an approach would help to integrate business and marketing expertise with public library educational ethos and credibility. It was suggested that a uniform, team-based brand relating to services to children could be developed under a 'literacy development umbrella', which would strengthen and formalise links between Schools Library Services staff and those involved with other services targeting the child.

All suggestions and proposals generated by the North West research project are still very much at a discussion and development stage. The CPLIS team have recommended further research in this area, including a full audit of all existing services to schools in the North West region which would help to further establish issues facing such services on a regional level, and subsequently guide and inform decisions made and actions taken regarding the future development of those services. A consultation exercise with schools and educational departments would also be valuable to establish *user* (both actual and potential) perceptions of, and needs from, Schools Library Services. A viability study concerning the appropriateness of aligning services to schools with other initiatives targeted towards the child would be beneficial, particularly with reference to reading and literacy development. Qualitative research with personnel involved in such projects and initiatives would help to validate issues raised within this project. As such, the authors would welcome discussion and feedback concerning the constituent roles of all library services to children in meeting the national agenda, and how a 'seamless' identity and brand of such services can be created, promoted and sustained, if at all.

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