

Library closures

Written evidence submitted by Voices for the Library (LIB 062)

Summary:

- Voices for the Library is a nation-wide campaign group promoting the value of public libraries and presenting the views of anyone who loves libraries.
- A comprehensive and efficient library service should be accessible, should be adequately resourced, should have a wide range of services and content, should have sufficiently skilled staff, and should be available to users at their point of need.
- The English public widely value libraries as a force for social good which should be provided free.
- Many planned library cuts and closures are incompatible with the requirements of the Public Libraries & Museums Act 1964: removing qualified and trained library staff will result in a failure to provide adequate services under the terms of the Act and in many cases, councils are making decisions to close libraries based on misleading statistics, an inadequate definition of 'comprehensive and efficient', and the outdated Act itself.
- There is strong evidence that communities value local public libraries and that closures would therefore have a negative impact in several ways: on children; on the physical, mental, and emotional health of communities; on lifelong learning; on community cohesion and inclusivity; and on local economies.
- The powers of intervention given to the Secretary of State are not deficient. The failure lies with the Secretary of State's lack of willingness to exercise these powers, coupled with lack of guidance from senior ministers and appropriate Government departments.

Introduction

1. Voices for the Library would like to submit the following evidence to the Department of Culture, Media and Sports Select Committee on public library closures in England. The evidence has been taken from our website (<http://voicesforthelibrary.org.uk>) and includes the testimony of library users from across the country.

What constitutes a comprehensive and efficient library service for the 21st century?

2. A comprehensive library service should be accessible to a wide range of people. As the High Court ruled in the case of Gloucestershire and Somerset county councils, before library closures are undertaken councils must "consider or address the findings of ... Equality Impact Assessments." The MLA's '[comprehensive and efficient checklist](#)' also places emphasis on considering the specific needs of adults and young people within the community particularly based on access and Equality Impact Assessments. Voices for the Library has published testimony from The All-Party Parliamentary Group for Education's '[Report of the Inquiry into Overcoming the Barriers to Literacy](#)', the [Six Steps to Library Services for Blind and Partially Sighted People](#) initiative, and from dozens of people with special accessibility issues. As part of the definition of 'comprehensive' as 'inclusive of; embracing' from the Oxford English Dictionary, comprehensive library services need to be accessible to anyone and everyone regardless of the user's income, socio-economic background, level of education, gender, race, age or any other myriad factors.

3. A comprehensive library should cover a particular geographic area. From [Alison Cullingford's post](#) on our website: "The reductions in library services are often deeper than the cuts to funding require, and hit areas that need services most, like remote rural areas and deprived areas in large cities." Alison goes on to articulate the need for local heritage services in public libraries which are tailored to the community in their assigned geographic area. Comprehensive libraries should offer tailored services which meet the needs of their particular community and should have the resources to cover their geographic area efficiently regardless of the area's size. The MLA checklist emphasises the need for proper consultation with users in the community before closures should be considered.

4. A comprehensive library should have a wide range of services and a large amount of content. A library needs to include every service that a user could reasonably request of a public library in the 21st Century. From a post on the ‘ [Report of the Inquiry into Overcoming the Barriers to Literacy](#) ’: "Both school and public libraries are important because they provide a broad range of reading materials, which improves literacy and this in turn improves educational achievement." A modern comprehensive library also requires a range of technology and staff able to assist with IT or technical services. If appropriate, these services include enabling ebook access for users. From our statement in response to the Publishers’ Association: "The delivery of remote ebook access has been a highly successful initiative, with many services seeing increased demand, including the return of those who had ceased using the library service."

5. An efficient library has the ability and the resources to provide all the services which are required of a comprehensive library effectively and without interruption. The [MLA checklist](#) stresses the need for buildings and facilities which are "fit for purpose in terms of access, condition etc."

6. An efficient library requires a sufficient quality and quantity of library staff. Part of the Oxford English Dictionary’s definition of ‘efficient’ is "Of persons: Adequately skilled." Efficient library staff need a high degree of professional and technical competence. From [author Philip Pullman](#) : "The librarian is not simply a checkout clerk whose simple task could be done by anyone and need not be paid for..." We have received dozens of statements from library users testifying to the importance of professionalism and competence in library staff. Efficient staff need to have interpersonal skills, professional discretion, trustworthiness, technical training particularly with regard to IT equipment and services. Please see our essay on ‘ [What librarians do](#) ’ for more information.

7. An efficient library needs sufficient staff to deal with the average volume of library users. These staff need to have the legal and practical abilities to work with the range of people expected to use a comprehensive service: staff who have been CRB-checked, who are trustworthy, who are responsible, and who are accountable. It is extremely difficult for volunteers to provide such a service: [Mr. Shepherd of Doncaster campaigners](#) has said "The issue of community libraries is an absolute misnomer. Some parts of the country are already trying this and it takes 50 to 60 volunteers plus management to run one."

8. A comprehensive and efficient library needs to be available to people at their point of need. This means being accessible when its users require it, with opening hours that meet the needs of working people and children’s groups. In [a response to the latest CIPFA statistics on library use](#) , Ian Clark wrote "Opening hours are also responsible for a decline in book issues. Library opening hours have been slashed in a number of authorities in a bid to save money.... A library is not going to be used more if it is open less."

9. The reintroduction of appropriate library standards would assist in ensuring that public library services were comprehensive and efficient.

The extent to which planned library closures are compatible with the requirements of the Libraries & Museums Act 1964 and the Charteris Report

9. [IPSOS MORI Research](#) found that the English public widely value public libraries as a force for good and one that should be provided free. A significant proportion (74%) of current users surveyed described libraries as "essential" or "very important" in their lives. 59% of non users also think libraries play an "important" or "essential" role in the community. A significant number of groups have formed to challenge councils' decisions to close libraries (see Appendix to this document). This demonstrates the

continuing need for statutory protection of library services, especially in the light of councils disregarding the views of constituents consulted on the issue of library cuts and closures.

Many of the current cuts to UK library services, including closures, are not compatible with the requirements of the Act. Francis Bennion, the barrister responsible for drafting the Public Libraries & Museums Act 1964, submitted [a post to our website](#) in which he stated:

"An Act of Parliament consists of express words and implications. Thus for example it is implied by the 1964 Act that library authorities will fulfil their duties properly, will provide suitable buildings that can accurately be called libraries, and will employ sufficient trained, experienced, paid staff, not relying unduly on volunteers. The official 2011 publication titled *Future libraries – Change, options and how to get there* does not appear to meet the requirements of the 1964 Act. It is primarily a charter, stuffed with jargon, for reducing costs. Yet any library authority which in 2012 and subsequently spends substantially less on its library service than it did in 2009 would be acting unlawfully. This is because all the 2009 expenditure would be assumed to have been necessary to comply with the 1964 Act."

It is evident from this statement that the spirit of the Act is not being upheld by local councils under pressure to implement cuts to services with little time to plan how to avoid breaching the Act. The standards and expectations outlined in the Charteris report do not appear to be adhered to by councils, the report stating "... the Inquiry has found the Council to be in breach of its statutory duties under the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964, because it failed to make an assessment of local needs in respect of its Library Services. It therefore cannot have acted reasonably in meeting such needs in the context of its statutory duties and available resources, as, in the absence of such assessment or demonstrable knowledge of local needs, it was incapable of identifying a reasonable option for meeting such needs both comprehensively and efficiently."

It seems as though, as with the 1964 Act, local authorities have little understanding of the Charteris. The local authorities in Gloucestershire and Somerset have failed to assess local needs before announcing closures. Other counties have carried out the bare minimum assessments, with Suffolk stating that an assessment would only be needed if a library were to close. It is apparent that the needs of children have not been adequately taken into account by Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council, who have conducted an Equalities Impact Assessment and found that certain groups will be at a disadvantage but solutions have not been put in place to mitigate this.

10. Planned library closures appear in many respects to be incompatible with the requirements of the Libraries & Museums Act 1964. The act of closing library branches is not the only aspect in which local authorities are contravening the Act: reducing resource budgets, the number of paid staff, reducing opening hours and failing to modernise when necessary are all detrimental to library services. [Promotional activities in libraries are being cut](#), which conflicts with the Act's requirement for councils to actively promote the use of the library service.

11. The [UNESCO Public Library Manifesto](#) states: "The librarian is an active intermediary between users and resources. Professional and continuing education of the librarian is indispensable to ensure adequate services." Nationally, library authorities are making large numbers of paid library staff redundant and removing them from

libraries which are to become volunteer run. To remove qualified and trained staff from communities through library closures is a failure to provide adequate services in both the eyes of the Manifesto and the 1964 Act.

12. Councils are making decisions to close library branches based on their popularity, measured by footfall statistics and the number of book issues. If councils wish to save library branches from closure by encouraging more visits and issues, they may therefore feel under pressure to provide more populist material, which is against the spirit of the universal public library service and may be in breach of the Act's requirement for libraries to stock 'comprehensive' resources. In a [guest post for Voices For The Library, Professor Bob Usherwood writes](#) :

"The public library if it is to survive and remain true to its public purpose will need to protect and promote good writing, be it fact or fiction, and the provision of trusted and accurate information. In providing information and imagination services it will need to make available to all "the best that has been thought and said". At a time when there is increasing concern about intergenerational fairness there is a danger that if public libraries only concentrate on the current and popular our children and grandchildren will be deprived of free access to their intellectual heritage."

13. Local authorities are finding it difficult to define what 'comprehensive and efficient' constitutes, even with the aid of the MLA's '[Comprehensive and Efficient Checklist](#)'. There is an urgent need to update the 1964 Act, to make it easier for councils to interpret the Act and ensure that a modern and relevant service is provided. [David McMenemy's article on the topic](#) is an excellent source of information about the key issues and needs. McMenemy states:

"We need an Act that considers the totality of services provided by the modern public library if the vital role they play is to be protected from cuts. Public libraries should certainly not be immune to cuts other services receive, however they should also not be the easy touch they are due to their propinquity and their perceived nonessential status by some."

He goes on to conclude:

"It is clear that in the current climate the term "comprehensive and efficient" is so meaningless as to be almost redundant. While it is obvious that an Act of Parliament cannot set in stone how library services are managed, it can at least offer some security to the general public if it is well framed. Certainly no central government wishes to determine to local authorities how they should spend their money, but equally the public need to be sure that their right to a high quality library service is not damaged by short term financial concerns."

14. In order to offer a comprehensive service fit for modern society, library services need to reflect users' changing and varied information needs, including [support for information literacy](#) , access for all members of society [including those with disabilities](#), access to [online reference services](#) , and [local history and heritage resources](#) . Trained and qualified library staff are needed to tackle the "poverty of trained librarians" as described by the [All Party Parliamentary Group for Education](#) .

The impact library closures have on local communities

15. The 1998 University of Sheffield report, '[Access to Public Libraries: the impact of opening hours reductions and closures, 1986-1997](#)' , highlighted the fact that "People valued the public library highly as an educational and community resource. The local library acts as an 'information junction' helping to bind the

community together and improving the general quality of life within it. The building-based local library was shown to have a value which is distinctive and irreplaceable by any alternative form of provision." This research notes that people do not use their next nearest library when a local one closes unless they already have a reason to visit the area. The closure of their local library means they no longer have access to the service.

16. Closure of libraries would have a significant impact upon children. In 2011 the National Literacy Trust report, [Public Libraries and Literacies](#) , stated that 52% of young people use Public Libraries. In ' [Young People's Reading & Writing](#) ' The Literacy Trust reported that children who do not have access to books or a desk at home are more likely to struggle with reading. 23% of children don't have access to a desk at home, and this figure increases in children who receive Free School Meals. [E-Learning Foundation](#) recently reported that [1 million children in the UK live in homes without computers and 2 million children do not have access to the Internet at home](#) . Libraries are places where children are able to overcome these barriers through free access to books, computers and the internet, and study areas providing desk space. Libraries also offer child specific services, such as [assistance with homework](#) . This highlights the benefits of keeping libraries open to avoid a negative impact upon the development of children. The University of Sheffield report ' [Access to Public Libraries: the impact of opening hours reductions and closures, 1986-1997](#) ' concludes that closure of libraries has a serious impact on children and their development. Parents, carers, teachers and library staff were concerned that library closures led to loss of support for children's education and literacy; loss of pre-school support; loss of opportunity to "gain independence and self-confidence in choosing own books"; loss of opportunity to improve social skills; fewer children's amenities; loss of a community focal point that assisted in interaction between children and adults; likelihood of future generations of adult non-users; and impeding access to a broader range of resources.

17. Library closures would have a negative impact on the physical, mental and emotional health of the local population. Recent research identified the ' [Value of therapeutic reading groups organized by public libraries](#) ' . These reading groups provide access to books and information as well as the social aspects of interacting with others. They have a positive impact on individual participants and the groups also have positive consequences for social inclusion and involvement in the local community and economic activity. Voices for the Library documented further evidence about the positive impact of the ' [Feel Better with a Book](#) ' project in Essex and [Irene's story](#) highlights how a librarian helped her children deal with their father's death by providing access to the right materials.

18. Library closures would have an impact on the lifelong learning agenda. An inquiry by the [National Institute of Adult Continuing Education](#) set out to highlight how museums, libraries and archives contributed to lifelong learning. It recognises the essential role that libraries played in supporting adults to continue to learn throughout their lives. "They provide opportunities for people to immerse themselves in deep learning experiences or to dip in and out of learning – both of these types of learning are equally valued and respected." In its report, [The Modernisation review of public libraries](#) , informal learning opportunities, including the opportunity to learn basic skills were acknowledged to attract a wide range of users. In 2006, the [BOOST scheme](#) in London trained library staff to provide basic skills in library venues within hard-to-reach communities. The scheme supported 361 people before being expanded across London. We have received stories showing that library users have used informal learning to improve their quality of life, including learning [English as a second language](#) , [computer skills](#) and [assisting users to learn a new language](#) .

19. Library closures would impact on community cohesion and inclusivity. In the East Midlands Development Agency report [Unlocking the potential of the creative and cultural sector: A Meta Review of the Evidence Base Final Report \(March 2010\)](#) it considered the notion that "shared cultural spaces, such as museums, libraries, and heritage sites serve to develop cohesive communities. Studies have been published to this end, with for example a recent report looking at the benefits to older people from learning in museums, libraries and archives as part of the wider Building a society for all Ages study. It recognised the benefits to older people of engaging with these facilities and set out four literacies for older people which museums libraries and archives can help to deliver – financial, technology, citizenship and health." In " [Libraries and the Social](#)

Capital," Anne Goulding discusses the concept of social capital in relation to libraries. "By providing information resources, libraries were able to contribute to a community high in social capital, characterised by trust, shared values, community involvement, volunteering, social networks and civil participation, which lead to lower crime, better health, educational achievement, and better child welfare".

20. Library closures would impact on the local economy. The ' [East of England Implementation Plan: Culture, Creativity and the Visitor Economy: Theme Advice \(April 2009\)](#) states that "public libraries are significant providers of information, advice and guidance to SMEs and sole traders at the earliest stages of business development." Further evidence to illustrate the positive impact and value that libraries have on the economy can be found in [Economic Contributions of Museums, Libraries and Archives in the South West](#), [Public Libraries in the Knowledge Economy](#), [Londons Culture Equation '06](#). In May 2009, The South East England Development Association published its report ' [Management and Leadership in the Creative Cultural Sector in South East England](#) ' and noted that 'Museums, Libraries and Archives ... has been estimated to generate £224 million per year in tourist revenue in the region, and so contributes seriously to the employment and economics of the region.'" Libraries are also continuing to increase employability, offering services such as writing CVs and online job search activities.

The effectiveness of the Secretary of State's powers of intervention under the Public Libraries & Museums Act 1964

21. We are not persuaded that the Secretary of State's powers under the Act are deficient. We believe that the problem is that successive Secretaries of State, in governments of all types, have been reluctant to use their powers, we suspect for party political reasons. Since the most recent General Election, and before, much of the debate in Parliament and local councils has been coloured by party interest. Thus, for Conservatives, cuts in provision in Conservative controlled councils are prudent management of resources, while those in Labour-controlled authorities are cultural vandalism, and vice versa.

22. Wherever ministerial responsibility for the public library service has sat, office holders have been distracted by the claims of other parts of their portfolios, which may be higher spenders or more glamorous. How can public libraries expect to have the attention they deserve when managed by departments that have to deal with, in the most recent administration, the Olympic Games and press regulation?

23. For us, therefore, the central issue is that the Secretary of State should be ready and prepared to use the powers the Act allows. This is a political question, and not one that can be resolved by tweaking the Act. It requires a new political perspective from office-holders in which they are prepared to take their responsibilities seriously, rather than as part of factional party interest.

24. Under the current Secretary of State, three letters ([19 August 2010](#) , [3 December 2010](#) and [24 February 2011](#)) were sent to all local councils from the Minister for Culture, Communications and Creative Industries to remind them of their statutory duties and to highlight the existence of the Future Libraries Programme. It was felt by the DCMS that this action indicated that The Secretary of State was fulfilling his duties to superintend libraries under the 1964 Act. However, the extent to which library users throughout the country feel The Secretary of State has not fulfilled his duties with any subsequent escalated action can be highlighted by the fact that [three local councils \(Brent, Gloucestershire and Somerset\) have recently had legal challenges regarding cuts to library services raised against them by library users](#) - two of which, Gloucestershire and Somerset, ruled against the councils cuts and service reductions. Many more groups of library users find themselves in situations similar to those in the above three local authorities, but are unable to progress down the legal challenge route for a variety of reasons. None of these library users should have been put in a position where they are acting as superintendent to their own library services, whilst the Secretary of State continues to monitor the situation. It is The Secretary of State's duty to take on this role, not library users.

26. Even though it is the duty of Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport to intervene in relevant situations under the Public Libraries & Museums Act 1964, we feel that responsibility for encouraging action should also be placed with senior ministers (Minister for Culture, Communications and Creative Industries) and appropriate Government bodies (DCMS & ACE), whose remit involves public libraries.

27. The fact that high profile organisations such as the Women's Institute and UNISON, who are not directly linked to public libraries, are championing public libraries under their own nationwide campaigns ([Women's Institute campaign](#) ; [UNISON campaign](#)), emphasises the concern that Central Government and its Minister in charge of superintending libraries are not fulfilling their responsibilities. The [Woman's Institute petition](#) aimed at the DCMS calls for "the Government to honour both its commitment to act as a champion of the library service, and its duty of oversight to ensure that a comprehensive and efficient library service is provided."

Appendix – List of library campaign groups in England

With regard to the effect that threatened closures have had on local communities, the following list of local campaign groups, which were formed from mid 2010 onwards, in response to library service cuts and closures in their local area, illustrates the depth of feeling local communities have about proposed plans for reductions in service. Many of these communities have fought hard for properly funded library services provided by their local authority. Further details of the action these campaigns have taken can be seen in the links attached. This is by no means a comprehensive list of library campaigns. Even though some of these campaigns may no longer be active, we feel it is still important to note that they were set up to campaign against closures.

- Barking & Dagenham - Save Robert Jeyes Library ([Facebook group](#) , [Twitter account](#))
- Barnet - Save Friern Barnet Library ([Website](#) , [Twitter account](#) , [Facebook group](#))
- Bolton - Save bolton Libraries ([Facebook group](#))
- Brent - Brent Save Our Six Libraries ([Website](#))
- Brent - Save Kensal Rise Library ([Website](#) , [Facebook group](#) , [Twitter account](#))
- Brent - Preston Library Campaign ([Website](#))
- Bury - Save Unsworth Library ([Facebook group](#) , [Twitter account](#))
- Cambridgeshire - Friends of Arbury Library ([Website](#))
- Croydon - Save Sanderstead Library ([Website](#))
- Croydon - Save Croydon Libraries ([Website](#) , [Twitter account](#))
- Croydon - Save Norbury Library ([Website](#))
- Croydon - Save Upper Norwood Library ([Twitter account](#))
- Doncaster - Save Doncaster Libraries ([Website](#) , [Twitter account](#))
- Ealing - Save Ealing's Libraries ([Facebook group](#) , [Website](#))
- Gloucestershire - Friends of Gloucestershire Libraries ([Website](#) , [Facebook group](#) , [Twitter account](#))
- Hertfordshire - I love my Herts Library ([Facebook group](#))
- Isle of Wight - Save Our Libraries on the Isle of Wight ([Website](#))
- Kent - Save Kent Libraries ([Facebook group](#) , [Twitter account](#))
- Lewisham - Save Sydenham Library ([Twitter account](#))
- Milton Keynes – Save Stony Stratford Library ([Facebook group](#) , [Twitter account](#))
- Milton Keynes - Woburn Sands Library ([Twitter account](#))
- Northamptonshire - Save St. James Library ([Facebook group](#))
- North Yorkshire - Save North Yorkshire Libraries ([Website](#))
- North Yorkshire - Friends of Easingwold Library ([Facebook group](#))
- North Yorkshire - Save Eastfield Library ([Facebook group](#))
- North Yorkshire - Save Bentham Library ([Website](#))
- North Yorkshire - Save Great Ayton Library ([Website](#))
- Oxfordshire - Save Oxfordshire's Libraries ([Facebook group](#))
- Oxfordshire – Save Benson Library ([Facebook group](#) , [Twitter account](#))

- Oxfordshire - Headington Library ([Website](#) , [Facebook](#))
- Oxfordshire - Save Sonning Common Library ([Twitter account](#) , [Website](#))
- Somerset - Save Somerset Libraries ([Facebook group](#))
- Somerset - Friends of Glastonbury Library ([Facebook group](#))
- Suffolk - Save Leiston Library ([Twitter account](#))
- Suffolk - Save Debenham Library ([Facebook group](#) , [Twitter account](#))
- Suffolk - Save Rosehill Library ([Twitter account](#) , [Facebook group](#) , [Website](#))
- Suffolk - Save Stradbroke Library ([Facebook group](#) , [Twitter account](#))
- Surrey - Byfleet Library Action Group ([Website](#))
- Surrey - Surrey Library Action Movement ([Website](#) , [Twitter account](#))
- Wandsworth - Save York Gardens Library ([Facebook group](#) , [Twitter account](#) , [Website](#))

The depth of library campaigners concerns for the future of their libraries can also be seen in the signatures and comments against [this open letter](#) (December 2011) to Culture Minister, Ed Vaizey.

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