

## Public sector co-operation

on the

## island of Ireland: **PUBLIC LIBRARIES**

September 2008

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## **Public sector co-operation on the island of library: Public libraries**

We live in an information society in which the creation, distribution, diffusion, use, integration and manipulation of information is a significant economic, political, and cultural activity<sup>1</sup>. The public library service is the largest information infrastructure on the island of Ireland. Determining library usage is notoriously difficult and particularly so on an all-island basis given the different methodological considerations. Looking purely at visit counts there were 14.3 million visitors to the 353 branches in the South during 2007. A standard has been set in Northern Ireland to have 45% of the total population as users of the 111 branches in the North by 2008.

Library services on the island originated together and continue to work together informed by a now thirty year old North-South body. This briefing paper strives to highlight the unique sustained public sector co-operation that occurs in the library sector which could be adopted to great effect by other public sector organisations on the island.

Public libraries have been established for over a century, providing lending and information services to library users. The significant investments by government and local authorities in recent years has halted the decline in book borrowing and public libraries now play an increasing supportive role in a range of Government priorities, including promoting literacy and lifelong learning, computer literacy, provision of study space and homework clubs, promoting and celebrating culture and addressing social inclusion as learning environments which are open to all and free at point of use.

In a world where information increasingly is a commodity with an economic price tag, the championing of the right of access to information as a democratic imperative and as a community capital is explicitly expressed and protected by the public library service.

### **A CULTURE OF CO-OPERATION**

As far back as 1849 government officials saw the provision of public libraries in Ireland as a means to a peaceful society. In 1849 a Select Committee of the UK House of Commons on

public libraries was appointed to find the 'best means of extending the establishment of libraries freely open to the public especially in large towns in Britain and Ireland'<sup>2</sup>. The committee became aware that the provision of public libraries in Ireland would be a help in the education of the population. The committee like all branches of government, knowing the importance of having a peaceful population, stated that:

*"The social habits which such institutions would engender, the approximation of persons of different parties and of different creeds which they would promote, as stated by Irish witnesses [is considered] to be of great importance to the manners, and repose of the nation."*

The Public Libraries and Museums Act (1850) was extended to Ireland in 1853 and a special act for Ireland was passed in 1855. This was the principal act under which public libraries were established in Ireland. Following this a Scottish immigrant, Andrew Carnegie who made his money in the steel industry in the States, established himself as a philanthropist and built 66 libraries in Ireland between 1897 and 1913.

### **Current policy and delivery**

The current delivery of public library service differs North and South of the border. In the South public library services are provided by library authorities, typically the local county council or corporation and for many people this is the only direct contact they have with their local authorities. These Library Authorities operate independently and some policies and practices vary from authority to authority. An Chomhairle Leabharlanna advises the Department and the Library Authorities on public library development and co-operation. In June 2008, Mr. John Gormley T.D., Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government and Mr. Michael Kitt T.D., Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, launched *Branching Out – Future Directions*<sup>3</sup>, the new policy document which will drive the development of the public library service in Ireland over the next five years until 2012. This document builds on the *Branching Out* report which set out an eight-year programme (1999-2007) of development for the public library service and it specifically recommends continuing North/ South co-operation. By the end of 2007, central government funding had allocated €106.7m in funding for infrastructure (buildings and transport). This increase in central government funding was matched by

library authorities, whose current estimated spending in 2008 is projected as €130m, 150% more than the estimated amount spent in 1998.

Figure 1. Former 19<sup>th</sup> Century Presbyterian Church in Buncrana, Co. Donegal which has been refurbished and extended to accommodate the public library.



In Northern Ireland the public library services has been delivered by five Education and Library Boards since 1973. The total annual library budget in NI is approximately £34m with an additional £36m (over 10 years) being invested in the People's Network, which provides public access to computers, including the Internet in all libraries across NI. In 2006 the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) published the first Policy Framework for the Public Library Service - entitled *Delivering Tomorrow's Libraries* <sup>4</sup>- which suggested guiding principles and priorities for the future development of a cost effective and citizen centred public library service. Following the 2007 Review of Public Administration, a decision was made to unify the library service across Northern Ireland and establish a separate body to manage and deliver the service. In September 2008 the NI Libraries Bill created a non-departmental public body to deliver the library service which will be answerable to the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure. Full responsibility for the public library service will transfer from the Education and Library Boards to the Library Authority on 1 April 2009.

Speaking in the Assembly the NI Culture Minister, Edwin Poots, pointed out the uniqueness of the new arrangements in the UK and Ireland.

### **COLICO North-South body**

All-island working is an innate feature of library services on the island. COLICO (Committee on Library Co-operation in Ireland)<sup>5</sup> is a North-South body whose function is to optimize the collective value of the combined resources of Irish libraries for their users. The committee was established in 1977, and since 1994 has been the formal advisory body on library co-operation to the main Library Councils in both jurisdictions, An Chomhairle Leabharlanna, Ireland and the Library and Information Services Council (LISC), Northern Ireland. COLICO also provides liaison between Irish libraries and the British Library, which is represented in the committee. COLICO monitors and encourages co-operative projects on the island of Ireland and works towards providing and enhancing shared resources for library staff and users. Libraries co-operate with COLICO by providing data on their document supply and inter-library loans traffic which are included in the statistics published in the COLICO Annual Report. The committee meets 3 times a year, alternating the venue between Dublin and Belfast. Business meetings are preceded by presentations on co-operative projects and current developments in libraries in Ireland and the UK. The COLICO secretariat maintains a database of training courses and placement positions for library staff throughout the island and a disaster planning and directory. The professional library associations North and South of the border hold a joint annual conference rather than separate ones. An Chomhairle Leabharlanna manages the Secretariat for the committee and publishes the COLICO Annual Report.

### **PUBLIC SECTOR CO-OPERATION DRIVEN BY NORTH-SOUTH BODY**

There are excellent examples of sustained public sector co-operation in the library sector, managed by COLICO.

#### **The Irish Joint Fiction Reserve**

The *Irish Joint Fiction Reserve* is an all-island scheme, managed by COLICO, which retains and promotes inter-library access to a collection of out-of-print fiction built up by libraries since

1965. This collection of 76,000 items is not kept in a central location but is distributed among 24 participating libraries throughout the island. Each participating library is expected to hold and retain books by writers whose surnames begin with a pre assigned letter of the alphabet. For example, all books by authors whose surname begins with A are held by the Western Education and Library Board in Omagh while all books by authors whose surname begins with Z are held in Laois County Library.

### **The Newsplan Project**

COLICO has also promoted newer all-island initiatives such as the *Newsplan* project which locates Irish newspaper holdings, assesses their conditions to determine priorities for their preservation, and to make non-paper substitutes (microfilm or digital) available for library users. Newspapers, older newspapers in particular, are frequently sought and heavily used by researchers as well as members of the general public. By their very nature, newspapers are not produced for long-term preservation; the paper used for newsprint is fragile, and repeated use means that newspaper holdings in many libraries are in very poor condition. Because there are extensive holdings of Irish newspapers in libraries in Britain, especially in The British Library, *Newsplan* covers both Ireland and Britain. Co-operation across both islands which began in 1986 ensures that remedial treatment is applied first to those newspapers which most need it, that there is no unnecessary duplication of effort, and that expertise is shared. The database of all Irish newspapers published since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, north and south, can be searched from the National Library of Ireland website ([www.nli.ie](http://www.nli.ie)).

### **Cross-sectoral pathways for learning**

Co-operation is not confined to promoting and preserving the past. COLICO are also working together to explore and develop better ways of working into the future. Libraries in both parts of the island are addressing the challenges of providing cross-sectoral pathways for learning to users of public, academic, national and specialised libraries to promote wider participation in the knowledge economy. In 2005 COLICO noted the success of cross-sectoral library service provision which was developed by INSPIRE in England and agreed to explore the potential for transferring the programme into an Irish context. INSPIRE (Information Sharing Partners in Resources for Education) is a managed access and referral programme

designed to widen access to library collections to UK users. Approximately 500 institutions are currently taking part in the UK INSPIRE scheme, mostly public, academic and third level, and health libraries for an overall of 3,400 information service points.

Building on the success of a 2006 North-South Conference on cross-sectoral service provision, COLICO established a Pathways to Learning Implementation Team and agreed to establish two projects, one on a regional basis in Cork where all participating institutions will offer free reciprocal access to their hard-copy resources and the other on a thematic basis exploring the possibility of a North-South scheme for accessing music collections.

In February 2008 an INSPIRE programme developed by the Library and Information Services Council, Northern Ireland (LISC NI) was launched for Northern Ireland and the border counties. The new library passport scheme allows users to access the resources of over 20 library organisations across 150 sites in Northern Ireland and the border counties. Libraries that have joined the scheme include Queen's University, the University of Ulster, all public libraries and the Linen Hall Library as well as government department libraries, some further education college libraries and libraries with special resources such as genealogy, law and health. Speaking at the launch in Belfast City Library Aileen McGinley, Permanent Secretary at the Department for Employment and Learning, and Irene Knox, Chief Executive Designate with the new Northern Ireland Library Authority congratulated LISC NI on extending the reach of the initiative across the border.

#### **PUBLIC SECTOR CO-OPERATION AT LOCAL LEVEL**

Co-operation is not exclusively driven by the North-South body. There are also exemplar cross-border projects which operate at a local level along the border, typically in the North-West or on the Eastern border region. Below I have given some examples which highlight the mould-breaking pragmatic co-operation which has created a dynamic peace-building and social inclusion role for libraries, applied best practice from the USA, and established a public service which spans across the border.

### **Books across the border**

In November 1998 Irish President Mary McAleese formally launched the Books Across the Border cross-community project which was run as a partnership by the public libraries in Newry and Dundalk. The EU-funded project involved families in Counties Down and Louth in shared learning programmes focusing on Irish fiction. The first phase was aimed at primary and secondary schoolchildren and the second phase was aimed at older teenagers and adults. Visiting authors included Colin Bateman, Glen Patterson, Robert McLiam Wilson, Alice Taylor and Deirdre Purcell. The four-year project helped to forge valuable links between groups of people of all ages, many of who would not have been regular library users, and most of whom might never have met had it not been for the involvement of the library. The success of the project was a major factor in Newry Library coming a close second in the UK National 'Libraries Change Lives' Awards in 2000.

### **Inspiring Readers project**

The Western Education and Library Board, the public library authority for five local councils areas in the west of Northern Ireland- Limavady, Derry, Strabane, Omagh and Fermanagh, and the Donegal County Council the public library authority for the most northerly county in the Republic of Ireland, co-operated to deliver a highly successful cross-border project, the Inspiring Readers project<sup>6</sup>. This cross-border partnership capitalised on their local presence, and the imaginative space provided by books and reading, to move from their traditional role as a neutral space to a more dynamic role, in which the promotion of reading supports inclusion and diversity. The project which was funded (£231,539) under the EU Peace programme from June 2004 to December 2006 sat strategically within the business frameworks in each library authority.

The large-scale reader development project, under the direction of Anne Peoples, Assistant Chief Librarian (Adult and Headquarters) in the WELB, hosted 200 events including reminiscence sessions, storytelling, online author events, celebration festivals and school based programmes. The Children's Reading Festival in October 2005 ran for a month, with the participation of 6,000 children and adults in a packed programme celebrating reading and storytelling. A number of targeted programmes were developed within the overall project:

- One Book – community reading project for all ages;
- Celebrating Our Differences – a family reading initiative involving different community and ethnic groups, including travellers and new migrants;
- Aliens – addressing issues of isolation and difference with primary school children;
- Reading Our Histories – shared history reading groups for adults;
- Start with the Child – addressing contentious issues in the early years; and
- Their Past Your Future – reminiscence and shared history with cross border and intergenerational groups.

The Verbal Arts Centre, an educational charity based in Northern Ireland which promotes the language arts and, through them, celebrates commonality and diversity provided training for 38 library staff from both sides of the border. Nine new adult reading groups, seven teenage reading groups and seven children's reading groups were established. A prisoners' reading group was also established and supported in HMP Magilligan.

The concept of a mass reading programme, which was popular in the USA and growing in popularity in the UK, was introduced to the island under the One Book initiative. It used Theresa Breslin's novel of conflict and division in Glasgow, *Divided City*, to address issues like sectarianism and racism. The book was chosen by library staff using the expert input of the Community Relations Council who advised on choosing a book which very directly dealt with issues in a modern context rather than the more traditional (and widely read) suggestions like 'To kill a Mocking Bird.' The funding enabled the author Theresa Breslin to visit libraries and schools on both sides of the border where she led and stimulated discussion on the issues and themes. A Schools Pack was developed by library staff and schools were encouraged to team up, on a cross-border and cross-community basis, and to meet to discuss the book. In some cases schools worked with local writers and facilitators to create drama pieces. One Irish speaking school from the Donegal Gaeltacht met regularly with a youth football club from a mainly Protestant area in the North. In a society where education is generally not integrated, it was seen to offer a rare opportunity for children to safely debate sensitive issues. In total 1,198 people in the cross-border catchment borrowed (and read) the book.

### **Cross-border mobile libraries**

A second highly acclaimed joint project between the library service of the Western Education and Library Board (WELB) and the Library Service of Donegal County Council is the Cross Border Mobile Library service, a new cross-border library, education and information service jointly covering the counties of Derry, Tyrone and Donegal. Under the management of Trisha Ward, Assistant Chief Librarian (Youth and Schools) in the WELB, the mobile library service began working in late 2004 serving the North-West border region and involved the purchase of a mobile vehicle with associated book stock. The library was fitted out with public computers and a space to host exhibits as well as being designed to be inclusive linguistically with Irish, Ulster-Scots and English signs and the ability to use Irish and British sign language. Homework clubs and mother/ toddler groups are supported by the service. The service was funded by the EU Peace Programme (€465,702) from June 2003 until June 2006, since when it has been mainstreamed into Donegal County Council and Western Education & Library Board services. This is the first Cross Border Mobile Library in the country and one of a very small number of mainstream public services which operate on a cross-border basis.

### **WHY HAS PUBLIC SECTOR CO-OPERATION IN LIBRARIES BEEN SO SUCCESSFUL?**

On both sides of the border the public library service has changed with the needs of society, it has changed with local government reform and it is changing with developments in information technology. It continues to do so within a North-South context. Sean Philips, the head librarian of University College Dublin has previously outlined the main reasons why interaction takes place on an all-island basis. Firstly, the development of public libraries occurred at a time when Ireland was part of the United Kingdom, and much present-day practice reflects this shared past. Secondly, the development of the mass media and of global communications means that libraries on the island and their users exist in a cultural environment which is shared, to a large extent, with much of the English speaking world. For instance, while the last 25 years or so have seen the growth of a vibrant indigenous publishing industry, its output is relatively small. By far the greater proportion of publications bought or read on the island originate outside it, both reflecting and reinforcing a shared community of interest. Thirdly, there is the simple fact of geographical proximity. Fourthly, librarianship is a profession which is both highly service-orientated and intensely pragmatic - co-operation

and interaction are involved because they benefit the service to users, and because problems which are shared are more readily resolved. Concepts which have only recently become established in the political vocabulary – north-south and east-west liaison, and so forth – have long been an accepted and mutually beneficial aspect of library services. Lastly, libraries resemble other institutions of society in reflecting the political, cultural and social environments in which they operate. It should therefore come as no surprise to discover that Ireland's membership of the EU provided a further impetus for expanding the library network of shared advantage and collaborative enterprise.

Reflecting on the co-operation documented in this paper it begs the question of why co-operation which is able to flourish so successfully in the library sector is not replicated in other public sector areas.

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<sup>1</sup> *Implementing the Information Society in Ireland: An Action Plan* published by the Department of An Taoiseach in January 1999.

<sup>2</sup> Report from the UK Select Committee on Public Libraries; together with the proceedings of the committee, minutes of evidence, and appendix, ordered, by the House of Commons, to be printed, 23 July 1849, p.viii

<sup>3</sup> *Branching Out – Future Directions* policy report published by the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government Ireland in June 2008.

<sup>4</sup> *Delivering Tomorrow's Libraries* policy report published by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure Northern Ireland in July 2006.

<sup>5</sup> For further details on COLICO including publications and annual reports see [www.librarycouncil.ie/colico](http://www.librarycouncil.ie/colico)

<sup>6</sup> A Peoples and T Ward. *Inspiring Readers: a cross-border reader development project*. New World Library, Vol 108, No. 5/6, 2007, pp.218-228.