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Business Information Service delivery within a regional context: the role of public libraries

Introduction

The following paper discusses two research projects recently undertaken by the *Centre for the Public Library and Information in Society* (CPLIS) at the University of Sheffield. Both projects examined Business Information Services provided by public libraries from a regional perspective.

The first project, *Libraries are Good for Business*, involved a pilot value and impact study of public Business Information Services in Yorkshire, and was undertaken on behalf of the *Yorkshire Museums Libraries and Archives Council* (YMLAC). The project sought to investigate the contribution made by public libraries within the context of the economic life of the Yorkshire region and its Regional Economic Strategy, and to evaluate the impact and value of the services provided to the relevant business communities.

The second project, *North West Public Libraries Joint Commissioning Research*, discussed the future of public Business Information Services in the North West in terms of developing a regional approach to service delivery. The project, undertaken on behalf of *MLA North West*, sought to investigate the appropriateness of joint commissioning and collaborative approaches to service delivery under a regional brand in the North West region.

Both projects are discussed and briefly summarised within this paper in terms of the relevant regional economic and political influence upon public Business Information Service identity, purpose, advocacy and delivery.

Challenges faced by public Business Information Services

Public Business Information Services are coming under increasing scrutiny in terms of their viability, value and purpose due to a number of both internal and external factors. Changing market conditions in terms of the distribution of and access to business information have impacted upon the provision of business information services in public libraries. Relevant external factors include the growth in use of the internet for personal enquiries; the acquisition of in-house business information resources for traditional business community users; the advent of alternative business information providers within communities and regions (Day, 2002). [\[need to clarify where talking about the NW and where about Yorkshire – and where general\]](#)

[\[Should this have a separate subheading – ‘challenges faced by public Business Information Services in the North West’?\]](#) Participants in the North West study identified a number of challenges facing Business Information Services on an

operational, day-to-day basis. The main problems relate to the high cost of specialised business information resources and the relatively low usage of such resources by public library users. The cost of subscription services, such as electronic business information resources and databases, is particularly controversial, as respondents felt it was difficult to justify the expense involved when usage is comparatively low.

“The main problem is that these [subscription] services that cost so much are so rarely used... it’s difficult to know how to rectify that other than cancel the subscription completely”

“It’s very hard to prove value for money to the purse string holders”

It was felt by respondents that more could be done in terms of business community profiling and user analysis to evaluate the demand for business information services, particularly the more sophisticated resources. The lack of rigorous business community profiling was seen as a major weakness, and it was felt that a more detailed understanding and categorisation of business information users is needed (i.e. consumers, job seekers, SMEs, students etc) in order to define and market the most appropriate information sources effectively. A general lack of awareness amongst users, both actual and potential, of the volume of business information available through public libraries is perceived as another challenge, which raises questions about the effective marketing of such services.

“People just don’t know that these services are here... unless of course they have used them before”

“There needs to be a lot of work done in terms of taking these services out, or selling them to, the right people... we need to find out who they are first, and distinguish business users from other users of business-related resources... services that are not necessarily business information are all being lumped together... it’s hard to target specific users”

With respect to the delivery of Business Information Services, a number of issues were raised concerning staff training and the requisite skills and expertise. It was felt that the incorporation of Business Information Services (where applicable) within general reference and information departments had caused inconsistency in terms of staff business information skills and expertise. The same [was also felt to be true?] is also true in terms of differing levels of staff expertise at branch and ‘main’ library levels. The problem is particularly significant when applied to electronic business information resources: it was felt by respondents that some branch library staff are only able to perform basic searches, and that the staff resources needed for high-level enquiries are often unavailable. Staff ability to memorise resources in terms of their navigation [develop advanced searching skills for certain resources?] is hindered by the low volume of enquiries and subsequent low usage. This problem is not limited to branch libraries, and also occurs where general pools of staff have replaced once specialised services, [as one respondent noted, “We cannot make everybody an expert on everything”. It was observed that staff are trained on a basic operational level, and specialised

services are further restricted by general staff cuts, particularly reductions in qualified staff.

“We now have pools of staff that know a little about everything, but not a lot about something in particular”

“I dread to think how these enquiries are dealt with on a Sunday when there are no professional staff around to ask or refer to”

“It’s difficult for staff to develop expertise with these resources as they use them so little... enquiries are very few and far between... by the time the next one comes along, staff have forgotten what to do”

Respondents were also asked to identify challenges faced by Business Information Services within an organisational context, that being within the wider public library authority remit and perspective, which identified further significant *internal* challenges to business information services. It was suggested that business information is undergoing somewhat of an identity crisis in terms of wider public library service aims, objectives and priorities. Respondents felt that business information does not have a discernible role in *Framework for the Future*, and as such, is perhaps being sidelined in favour of more politically pertinent initiatives such as cross-departmental project work and the Peoples’ Network. As such, there is little acknowledgement and direction of Business Information Services at senior, county level. Budget allocation for business information resources can also be inconsistent and sometimes inadequate between and across authorities, which emphasises the difficulty in justifying subscription to such expensive services. Other identity issues arise from the merging of business resources ~~in~~ to general information and reference services, and in terms of the lack of a recognisable physical space for such resources.

“As business information has become part of the reference library, it is something I deal with along with 1001 other things... there is no direction from county managers with respect to business information”

“We have had to dedicate the majority of our free physical space to People’s Network [ICT equipment]... it takes a precedent over everything else because of *Framework* and other policy priorities”

Looking beyond the public library service context, there are also several challenges presented to Business Information Services from a regional perspective, including other information providers and organisations. Respondents recognised the competition to public business information services provided by high profile information providers such as Business Link and academic libraries. It was agreed that it was perhaps a negative assumption that such organisations should be seen as competitors, as there are positive working relationships between public libraries and these two services. However, the extent, quality and productivity of such working relationships are variable between authorities and sub-regions and are thus difficult to define and evaluate. Difficult relationships with other local government departments also presented

problems: one example included a decline in [the](#) use of public library business information services by Trading Standards, possibly through the acquisition of their own resources or use of another provider. The lack of awareness regarding the quantity, quality and use of business information provided by other organisations was considered to be a major weakness that needed to be addressed in order to avoid duplication of particularly expensive services.

“We just don't know what other people are doing in terms of business information provision... it could be that we are wasting our time completely”

“You would think that students are a key market for business information but there are two high profile academic libraries nearby... we can't really compete”

The political agenda at regional and county level also presents challenges and affects the delivery and viability of Business Information Services. Respondents reported significant funding cuts of up to 50% for business information caused by changes in funding structures at county level. County realignment can also affect Business Information Service demand and usage (e.g. the loss of strong industrial bases upon becoming unitary councils). The contemporary local and national government political focus can also have an impact upon business information prioritisation. It was observed that business information is placed higher on the agenda 'when times are bad', illustrating again the important relationship between business information and economic policy and strategy.

“Business information seems to be high on the agenda when times are bad and when the economy is in a state of flux... in the eighties and early nineties business information was promoted heavily because of the political push on enterprise... now it is taking a back seat to welfare and educational policies”

Regional Economic Strategy and business information

In terms of responding to political agendas and economic objectives, despite the concerns expressed by respondents in the North West, many observers point to the opportunist potential provided by the current economic climate for public libraries. Day (2002) recognises that political devolution and increased 'regionalism' in the UK can benefit the public library service, in encouraging greater participation and a valid contribution to the information dimension of regional development agencies' research, strategic plans and objectives.

The Department for Trade and Industry (DTI, 2002) has determined a strategy for regional improvement including greater collaboration between private and public sectors under the strategic supervision of regional development agencies. The role of Regional Economic Strategy is defined as 'a shared vision for the development of the region's economy, to improve economic performance and enhance the region's competitiveness', which is owned by the whole region and draws on the resources of all major partners (DTI, 2004) The contribution made by public libraries as a public information provider could and should be integral to

this mission, especially when considering the role of business information in regional improvement and economic regeneration. This echoes national economic policy concerning the emphasis on enterprise and the relevant skills, and the importance of efficient and effective business information services and systems. The Green Paper: Entrepreneurship in Europe (European Commission, 2003) advocates supportive and informative framework conditions for successful high-growth businesses and increased business start-ups. From a more generic business and employment perspective, the White paper 21st Century Skills (DFES, 2003) outlined a strategy for improved business support services underpinned by a philosophy of information, advice and guidance.

Business information therefore plays a key, underpinning role at national and regional policy level with respect to encouraging enterprise, business start up and growth, and learning and skills development. Day (2002) observes that public library business information services should look for opportunities for linking to other areas of the service not explicitly linked or associated with the business library, such as lifelong learning and careers information, which are relevant resources for businesses interested in development and training opportunities for their staff. This in turn can help to develop the productivity and growth of regional businesses. The regional development agency Yorkshire Forward stresses the important role of public-private sector co-operation and collaboration within [its] their own Regional Economic Strategy. There is an obvious role for public libraries within several priority actions, both from information-based and generic perspectives, including; investment in enterprise and high quality public and private support services focused on the needs of high growth businesses; connecting 10,000 young people from deprived communities ~~in~~ to jobs and education through stronger links between local businesses and educational institutions; restoring civic pride and economic dynamism in town centres; using public-private partnerships to transform city centres.

The professional body, the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals, asserts that the free access to business resources provided by public libraries offers 'good value for money' as the resources promote economic regeneration and the potential to enhance services provided by other local agencies such as Business Link, chambers of commerce and economic development units (CILIP, 1998). From a theoretical viewpoint, information professionals within the public sector need to be aware of principles surrounding contemporary economic evolution and regeneration, in order to take forward the opportunities offered by the knowledge economy and form closer ties between the public library, regional agencies and the business community in the future (Rikowski, 2000).

Public Business Information Services and economic strategy in the Yorkshire region

The *Libraries are Good for Business* project has provided evidence of positive attempts to align public Business Information Services to regional economic strategy and make a valid contribution to regeneration and enterprise-related objectives in the Yorkshire region. Key regeneration examples include those undertaken by city centre-based services in larger metropolitan areas such as [Leeds and Sheffield \[reverse the order – as you take Sheffield first and Leeds second?\]](#). Following an authority restructure, Sheffield library services now belong within the regeneration remit, and library service targets have been re-aligned to complement 'Sheffield First' targets. For the library service specifically, this includes outreach work in New Deal areas including Burngreave, Crystal Peaks and Stocksbridge, whereby information services will be developed in to business advisory sessions within these areas. Other regeneration-linked activities in Sheffield include participation in enterprise events, which raises the profile of the library service and conforms to regional development agency objectives in terms of encouraging and supporting business start up in the region.

One of the main objectives stated in the Leeds Library and Information Service Position Statement is 'supporting businesses to enhance economic prosperity, innovation and sustainable employment' under a community and Neighbourhood Renewal strategic umbrella. Specific planned projects include business start up seminars and Patent advice sessions run in partnership with Business Link and learning sessions aimed at local businesses (setting up a website, book-keeping, employment law). Economic regeneration has also been prioritised via the development of a specialised job-seeking service, which utilises specialised business information resources in preparing clients for effective job applications and interviews. A similar service is provided by Bradford Central Library Information Services department (using business information resources) involving job search sessions that are run in partnership with community development and adult education services.

Such examples demonstrate how regional partnerships can be formed including public libraries that contribute to and support strategic economic objectives and activities. In terms of the support offered to start up and growth [\[should 'start up' and 'growth' be in inverted commas?\]](#) businesses, this illustrates the role of public libraries in generating and sustaining regional economic capital. Specialised job seeking services illustrate how public Business Information Services can be developed to act as catalysts for change and promote economic and *social* regeneration within the relevant regions. A pilot survey of Business Information Service users in five case study authorities in the Yorkshire study has provided further evidence of the support given to start up and growth businesses. From a sample of 23 business information users 47.8% of enquiries made were described as 'market research', with a further 26% of enquiries made being described as 'business start up' queries. 56.5% of enquiries made had a 'successful' outcome (meaning that all information needed had been acquired), with a further 39% of enquiries being 'partly successful' (some of the information needed had been acquired). The most predominant employment status amongst

business information users surveyed was 'self employed', with 'retail' and 'higher education' being the most frequently cited sectors, suggesting links with graduate business start up and existing SMEs seeking to develop their businesses. 69.6% of the business information service user sample strongly agreed that public libraries are important sources of business information. [Am wary of using percentages alone for such low numbers – ok if talking about a large number of enquiries, but not for a percentage of 23: I would also give the whole number].

The Yorkshire study also involved a survey of all 15 public library authorities in the region, which sought to investigate the range of business information services provided, expenditure levels and business information priorities and future objectives within each authority. Important issues involving the need for increased marketing, publicity, cost effectiveness and improved staff training were highlighted by respondents when discussing future priorities and objectives. This echoes concerns raised by respondents in the North West study when discussing challenges currently faced by business information departments in their own region.

Regional approaches to public Business Information Service delivery in the North West

In response to the operational, organisational and regional challenges faced by public Business Information Services (identified above), participants in the North West project considered approaches to meeting such challenges on an individual basis, which were then brought together in an attempt to articulate a regional 'model for action'.

Respondents discussed the need to overcome the issues surrounding the low usage of expensive resources and the lack of staff knowledge and expertise in the provision of such resources. Some decision needs to be made over the range of services required by individual authorities and their libraries: it was suggested that those enquiries made by non-business users such as job searchers and consumers could be answered locally, with more sophisticated, complex business enquiries being referred on to a centralised, remote access service responding to telephone and e-mail enquiries. This will involve a redefinition on a regional or sub regional level about the way services are delivered through remote access in terms of 'helping people to help themselves' and take full advantage of expensive electronic information resources. Structurally this would require a concentration of expertise rather than resources, as staff are essential to the delivery of a professional service.

"We need to use what expertise we have to help people help themselves... remote access is the key"

“People can access these resources themselves at home or wherever... but are they making the most of them? Professional guidance should be our forte”

It was agreed in philosophical terms that the necessary approaches are not essentially concerned with reducing services, but with redefining and improving the delivery of what is already available in a bid to increase usage. As such, the proactive and professional marketing and promotion of Business Information Services is essential, requiring a strong and dynamic brand, particularly if a regional model is created. It was agreed that other local government departments or external agencies may be needed to help achieve this objective, but that the public library service ethos should be maintained, especially in publicising the fact that services are free or inexpensive when charged for. In terms of strategic marketing and target audiences, the themes of enterprise and regeneration were raised once more as key influences, for example Business Link start up and lift off companies are considered to be key audiences for rebranded professionalized services.

“There needs to be some external professional input in terms of creating the brand and marketing the service... we're lucky if we have an A4 word document laminated”

“We need to make sure the brand is identifiable... the two golden arches of business information”

“There is already work being done with key target groups... start ups, inventors... that we need to capitalise on and extend”

Logistically, from both operational and organisational perspectives, several steps would need to be taken to improve the provision of Business Information Services. To aid the effective marketing of such services, performance measures and service standards would need to be in place to ensure credibility amongst users and budget-holders alike. A clear mission statement is required in terms of the role of business information in helping the public library service to meet its own regional and national objectives (particularly with reference to *Framework for the Future*). This would help to raise the profile of the services in question, but providers need to ensure that services can be delivered to the standards specified. Agreement and compliance needs to be formalised in terms of budget allocation and management if changes to service delivery are to be made. This would need to include an agreed regional pricing policy in terms of service charges where applicable, especially with reference to value-added services which provide a degree of quality ‘by proxy’. Informal partnerships such as successful examples of work with Business Link and other key stakeholders should be formalised in some way (for example the formation of a steering group).

“We need to make sure that what is being promised can be delivered, and that tailored standards are put in to place”

“If anything is done there needs to be cooperation across the board... its all about communication and cohesion. Getting agreement may be difficult”

Each of the methods and requirements described above can be formalised in terms of a *tiered* approach to business information service delivery on a regional or sub-regional scale, based on an identification of core services for participating authorities and libraries. The assumption is that the more sophisticated expensive resources will be managed and delivered at a central point, requiring a concentration of expertise at this higher level, and involving a remote enquiry service under a strong, identifiable regional brand. Branding must create identifiable levels of service. European Information Centres (EICs) were used as an example of such tiered services, with different levels of resources depending on the host library or institution. Enquiries are dealt with on a referral basis if they can't be answered at the first port of call for the user, meaning that levels of service are not necessarily diminished at branch or front-line level.

It was noted that this would be a very ambitious approach, and would need sophisticated levels of cooperation at senior and authority levels, and professional assistance in the creation and promotion of the requisite brand. It was agreed that county systems, or sub-regional systems with neighbouring authorities may facilitate a more efficient and manageable approach. The business *Insight* service provided by Birmingham Libraries was discussed by participants as a best practice model. Some participants aired caution in seeking to emulate the Birmingham model, as part of the success of the *Insight* service is due to the entrepreneurial skills of the project team and leaders, and the culture of enterprise and business acumen inherent in Birmingham City Council. As such, some consideration needs to be made in terms of the organisational culture of public library authorities and local government in the North West, and their subsequent capacity to take ideas forward, before action is taken.

The principle benefits of such a tiered approach to service delivery were perceived to be improved customer service and a more efficient and cost-effective use of traditionally under-used and expensive resources. Strong marketing, including the targeting of key customers and user groups, and rigorous staff training are essential to the success of such an approach. Staff for example at enquiry level must feel integral to the service and take ownership of enquiries where referral has been needed. The only problems associated with such an approach were applied to the planning and implementation stages in terms of the levels of cooperation needed at senior levels: this may necessitate a forum for discussion and advocacy to guide the process (e.g. permanent management and coordination posts; a sustainable steering group or advisory board including all key stakeholders and regional advocacy from an organisation such as *MLA North West*). There also needs to be a strategy for cooperation with other information providers, particularly with the provision and delegation of specific information services in order to avoid duplication and repetition.

All proposals are still very much in the discussion stages amongst commissioners of the North West project: further research has been

recommended by the authors including a full audit of all existing business information provision in the region; extensive consultation with all key stakeholders and relevant professional bodies; user (both actual and potential) and business community profiling; some assessment or evaluation of existing organisational culture.

Summary

The two projects undertaken for the relevant regional Museum Library and Archive Councils have raised interesting discussion points concerning regional approaches to public Business Information Service identity, purpose, advocacy and delivery.

Authority restructures have helped to align public libraries with regeneration strategies and objectives in the Yorkshire region, which in turn has [have] helped to clarify and develop the role of business information in supporting such objectives. As such, Business Information Services are gaining a visible identity and credibility. The North West study has highlighted a contemporary identity crisis for public Business Information Services, which may be overcome by the development of a strong and professionalized regional brand, following an extensive reappraisal and streamlining of services provided. Both regions have stressed the need for a more professional approach to service marketing and publicity.

Where Business Information Services are clearly aligned with wider political and economic regional objectives, a greater sense of purpose is given to service priorities in terms of the development and delivery of available resources (for example, the job search initiatives reported in the Yorkshire study). Both projects have shown how political agendas can affect the purpose and role of specific services, and the ways in which such agendas are interpreted at regional level by public library services. Some respondents feel that Business Information Services have taken a 'back seat' further to *Framework for the Future* and its learning-related recommendations and objectives. Respondents in both projects however recognise the need to align Business Information Services to regional economic strategy and policy in a bid to reassert the purpose and role of such services.

Both projects represent a need for greater advocacy of public Business Information Services at senior, regional level. The reasons for commissioning both of the research projects include the need for a clearly defined supportive role for the relevant regional councils with respect to Business Information Services in terms of developing the services provided and promoting them effectively to other key regional stakeholders. When discussing the future development of such services in the North West, respondents articulated a need

for more rigorous, clearly defined advocacy and support at senior, governing levels when creating a regional approach to service delivery.

In terms of public Business Information Service delivery, both projects have revealed examples of regional impact. Public library services in the Yorkshire region have adapted the delivery of their respective Business Information Services according to regional regeneration objectives: this is illustrated by increased outreach projects, working partnerships and the development of new specialised services incorporating traditional business information resources. The North West project looked at the *future* development of public Business Information Services under a restructured regional brand, which is perceived as a viable option for overcoming existing challenges faced by such services from operational, organisational and regional perspectives. Each element of regional impact in terms of identity, purpose and advocacy will affect and inform service delivery, and are becoming increasingly significant to the value, effectiveness and ultimately survival of public Business Information Services.

Project details

The *Libraries are Good for Business* project was completed in March 2005 and involved a number of research methods including review of the literature, questionnaire-based survey, and qualitative fieldwork including observation, staff interviews and user exit surveys. The report concludes 'stage 1' of a wider project being undertaken by YMLAC. The next stages will involve the development of regional performance measures for public Business Information Services in the Yorkshire region, which will ultimately be used as evidence for promotion and advocacy of the services to the relevant regional development agency.

The *North West Public Libraries Joint Commissioning Research* project was completed in November 2005 and also involved varied research methods including review of the literature, survey, focus groups and telephone interviews. The report is being used as a scoping study to inform discussion concerning the future development of Business Information Studies, as well as Schools Library Services, in the North West region.

For more details on the two projects (and full reports where available) please see the CPLIS website:

Centre for the Public Library and Information in Society
<http://cplis.shef.ac.uk>

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