

**North West Public Libraries Joint Commissioning
Research:**

**The future of Business Information Services and
Schools Library Services**

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1. Introduction

The following report presents findings related to the *Joint Commissioning Research* project recently undertaken by the *Centre for the Public Library and Information in Society* (CPLIS), University of Sheffield, as commissioned by *MLA North West*. The research sought to investigate the appropriateness of joint commissioning and collaborative approaches to service delivery with reference to the future of Business Information Services and Schools Library Services in the North West region.

Research aims and objectives

The central aim of the research project was to investigate key areas of public library services with the greatest potential future benefits, in terms of cost savings, greater customer focus and improved services, for joint commissioning between authorities in the North West. Business Information Services and Schools Library Services had been pre-identified by the project commissioners as the most appropriate services for the study.

Specific research objectives, as defined by the original *MLA North West* brief and specification, included:

- To map existing joint working arrangements in the North West regions public libraries, including relevant successes and limitations
- To provide evidence and analysis of joint commissioning schemes related to these services in other regions
- To discuss the implications of current and likely changing market conditions for these services
- To discuss the benefits and risks of possible joint commissioning projects
- To discuss the potential for links with existing academic library, museum and archive joint commissioning arrangements
- To provide potential models for managing and financing schemes
- To describe the impact on users and other stakeholders of proposed options

The research was undertaken between May and September 2005. The findings and proposals suggested in this report will be presented by the commissioners to the North West branch of the Society of Chief Librarians (SCL) with a view to taking the research forward and developing in practice the relevant services within the region's public libraries. Further dissemination of the research may be undertaken by CPLIS.

2. Methodology

Further to the original *MLA North West* brief and specification, a number of methods were employed by CPLIS when undertaking the project in order to meet the desired research aims and objectives:

Review of the literature

An extensive review of the literature was undertaken, including a critical review of academic texts, the professional press and organisational databases and publications, which has facilitated a national and theoretical context for the research in terms of the effective mapping and definition of joint commissioning schemes in other regions and other educational/cultural sectors; the implications of current and changing market conditions for Business Information and Schools Library Services; the benefits and risks of joint commissioning initiatives; the articulation of financial and management models in terms of formalised joint commissioning and collaboration.

Questionnaire-based survey

A questionnaire-based survey of all 22 North West public library authorities (PLAs) was undertaken, including:

- Blackpool
- Bury
- Bolton
- Blackburn with Darwen
- Cheshire
- Cumbria
- Halton
- Knowsley
- Lancashire
- Liverpool
- Manchester
- Oldham
- Rochdale
- Salford
- Sefton
- St Helens
- Stockport
- Tameside
- Trafford
- Warrington
- Wigan
- Wirral

The questionnaire was distributed, completed and returned electronically via e-mail. In the first instance the questionnaire was sent to all SCL contacts in the North West, and then circulated to relevant personnel within each of the

authorities. The aims and objectives of the survey specifically were to gather information on current joint commissioning and collaborative initiatives within and across the regions public library authorities, including current strategic joint commissioning activities; project-based partnerships; external partners; plans for future collaboration.

Qualitative fieldwork – focus groups and telephone interviews

Further to the analysis of survey data, qualitative fieldwork was undertaken to explore the appropriateness specifically of applying joint commissioning or collaborative solutions to the future development of Business Information and Schools Library Services. Focus groups were held involving key personnel from each of the services across the region. Two groups were held to discuss the future of Business Information Services with a total of 13 participants; one group was held to discuss the future of Schools Library Services with 7 participants. Each session lasted approximately 90 minutes, and was fully transcribed for the benefit of data analysis and the inclusion of verbatim quotations in the final report. In addition to the scheduled focus groups, telephone interviews were held with 2 key members of Schools Library Services staff. Focus groups and interviews were semi-structured following 3 key themes:

- Challenges faced by the respective service(s) from operational, organisational and regional perspectives
- Approaches to facing such challenges
- Models for action

Please see appendices 2 and 3 for the research instruments used during the project.

3. Review of the literature

3.1 Joint commissioning and collaboration in public services

For the benefit of the research, joint commissioning is defined, largely within a public service context, as follows:

The strategic joint commissioning of particular services involving the long-term policy-based shared responsibility between participating authorities and organisations at organisational and operational level

Public sector examples of strategic joint commissioning include those related to public information services within a local government context. The *Cheshire and Warrington Information Consortium* (2005) is one such example in the North West region, involving a partnership between public services including relevant Councils, police and fire services with the aim of modernising service delivery in terms of access to information. The Welsh Assembly has emphasised the need to work in partnership with other organisations in commissioning, planning and delivering all public services, as illustrated by The Carmarthenshire Partnership (2004): a joint commissioning team including Carmarthenshire County Council and the local health board with the central aim to improve user experience of and access to relevant services.

The Health and Social Care sectors make considerable use of joint commissioning and collaboration in the delivery of core services. Joint purchasing between health and social services emerged in response to the management demands of social care markets and community care reforms, and as a natural evolution of established joint finance initiatives in the 1990s (Cambridge, 2001). No single model or agreed definitions of joint commissioning exist within the sector(s), which provides flexibility for the rationale of joint purchasing according to service requirements, objectives and expectations. As such, Cambridge (2001) recommends careful evaluation of joint commissioning arrangements within the health care context to ascertain their relative effectiveness. Grimwood-Jones (2004) describes a number of collaborative approaches to (and models of) health information service delivery involving the public library service including a branded library-based health information service; the 'department store' franchise involving specific health information and resources; the 'medical prescription service' between identified general practices and libraries; the 'supermarket concession' involving health information service points in local supermarkets.

Libraries and joint commissioning

Examples of joint commissioning within library and information services (LIS) include regional purchasing consortia between neighbouring authorities and institutions. One such example is the *Consortium for United Stock Purchase* (CUSP) in the South West region (Danford, 2005). Currently consisting of 10 individual public library authorities, the consortium is coordinated by a Procurement Officer and a Development Implementation Group including

stock managers from each of the participating authorities. Benefits include cost savings and the streamlining of stock selection criteria. Disadvantages include the problems associated with standardising service (whereby stock is serviced in terms of labelling, jacketing etc by the supplier rather than individual libraries) for multiple authorities.

Other consortia approaches to public library service delivery beyond stock purchase include the *Open Galaxy* initiative pioneered by London Libraries Consortium which involves an innovative joint circulation and acquisitions system and catalogue (Francis, 2005). Perceived benefits for library staff include increased efficiency in standard library procedures, for example, the cataloguing process being made up to 30% faster, and support and maintenance costs being reduced by up to 40%. Benefits for library users include advanced remote access opportunities via the internet. *CoEast* (2002) is a consortium of 10 public library authorities in the East of England established to coordinate ICT solutions to public library service delivery across the region. The *Co East Content Group* is a subsidiary of the larger network established to assess the quality and value of existing subscriptions; evaluate potential new subscriptions; explore the possibilities of creating new region-specific content. Fuller (2005) describes a stock supply partnership based in Leeds whereby much of the requisite stock selection is delegated to the supplier, including electronic data interchange and complete shelf-ready supply.

The M25 Consortium of Academic Libraries (2004) represents an alternative model of collaboration in terms of reciprocal access agreements between participating services and organisations. The London-based project includes 52 member institutions and 150 member libraries, and aims to improve services to users via increased access, publicity, staff training and development, and member representation. Similar network-based organisations in other regions include the North West Academic Libraries Consortium (NOWAL, 2005), and SINTO (2005), a partnership of library and information services in South Yorkshire and North Derbyshire, which aims to improve the quality of information services in the respective areas through co-operation, staff training, planning and partnership.

Collaboration and partnership working within library and information services are also beneficial at micro level in terms of specific service delivery and project-based initiatives. Mackay (2001) discusses the importance of a collaborative and integrated approach in the provision of networked hybrid academic resources and services to learners in remote areas, including advanced interaction between staff and departments within the host institution, and partnerships with external providers such as public libraries. The *Time to Read* reader development project in the North West provides an example of extensive and sustainable cooperative approaches to project delivery between public library staff and other relevant organisations (Spencer and Mathieson, 2003). The project originally covered 18 library authorities in the North West and has been developed as a model for cross-authority working. Key factors include the appointment of a coordinator post for the project and the inclusion of other agency partners with relative expertise and skills, including

representatives from higher education, youth and social work sectors, and private sector partners with web design and technical expertise.

3.2 Business Information Services: national context

The market for public Business Information Services

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 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 (Day, 2002). As such, public library respondents to a survey of business information use in libraries conducted in 2003 raised the issue of 'strategic repositioning' as a forthcoming service priority, involving the reallocation of specialised Business Information Services in to other operational departments such as general information services or reference libraries (Foster and Foster, 2004). Factors influencing and affecting such strategic decisions include declining overall use, the inability to move quickly and efficiently from print to electronic services and inadequate IT infrastructures. Respondents referred to a possible survival route for specialised business information services involving cooperative links and development partnerships with local business development agencies.

Research undertaken by Wilson and Train (2005) investigating the value and impact of public Business Information Services in the Yorkshire region revealed significant attempts to align and promote such services according to the regional economic strategy (RES) of local government and the relevant regional development agency (RDA). This approach is evident within collaborative initiatives involving regeneration departments and objectives and high profile city-based information services such as Leeds and Sheffield. The *Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals* (CILIP, 1998) asserts that the free access to business resources provided by public libraries offers 'good value for money' as the resources promote economic regeneration and have the potential to enhance services provided by other local agencies such as Business Link, Chamber of Commerce and economic development units.

In reality public library services have controversial and inconsistent relationships with other business information providers such as Business Link. In a study of public libraries' association with Business Link, Hyde (1995) concluded that at the time there was a practically non-existent relationship between the two services, with only a couple of examples of formalised good practice available. Issues affecting the relationship included a lack of recognition and acknowledgement of the service provided by each other, and a lack of nationally defined criteria for working practices between the two. Wallace (2003) however describes a successful formal working relationship between Norfolk and Norwich Millennium Library and Business Link Norfolk Information Service (BLNIS), whereby BLNIS shares premises with the library

service. The partnership facilitates the effective sharing of resources, avoiding duplication and includes services such as mailing lists of local, national and international companies; financial status reports and company credit checks; company/peer group analysis by sector; local business news monitoring. The study of business information services in the Yorkshire region (Wilson and Train, 2005) concluded that working relationships between the respective public library services and Business Link services was “uniformly informal”, and that once more formal relationships between the two services had deteriorated due to changes in personnel and organisational structures.

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. 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).

Best practice in business information

The majority of best practice public Business Information Service examples in the professional literature relate to high profile regional and urban-centre services which have been professionally developed under strong identifiable brands. One such example is the *Business Insight* service provided by Birmingham City Council and based at Birmingham Central Library, which has the added market advantage of providing subscription services to other public library authorities who are reducing or realigning their own business information services. Assinder (2004) describes *Insight* as the ‘UK’s most comprehensive public business information service’. The subscription service has been developed further to extensive in-house market research concerning the decline and fall in business information provision in public libraries; the cost of subscription to business resources for other council departments (resulting in a ‘best value’ argument for targeting council departments with *Insight* services); an extensive existing knowledge base including sophisticated resources and specialised staff; a user-friendly pricing policy with 100% income return; standardised supplier contracts; ongoing negotiations with public and private sector partners.

Prosser (2003) describes the ‘hard-nosed business approach’ used in developing the *Insight* service as a key success factor, particularly in inadvertently attracting further funding, including the development of match-funded projects involving Business Link, Advantage West Midlands (Enterprise Agency), private enterprise, and Birmingham Council’s economic development department. The success of the initiative had attracted such agencies to volunteer their services and express an interest in partnership delivery.

Howell (2004) discusses the admirable efforts made at City Business Library, City of London, in establishing the service as a major business information force and continually attracting new users and clients. Strategies used in meeting these objectives include the visitation and profiling of other business libraries in the country and overseas, in order to establish gaps in the market and develop a best practice approach to service marketing and promotion; organised visits and tours of City Business Library itself for key user groups and clients; frequent surveying of user needs and expectations. As a result of this, staff at the library are continually seeking to update their service and create innovative approaches to service delivery, particularly value-added initiatives.

In response to the *Business Information Resources Survey 2005*, which reported a declining demand for public Business Information Services, Considine (2005) again discusses the relative success of City Business Library (CBL). The reported increase, as opposed to decline, in visitor and enquiry numbers to CBL is attributed in this article to its broad base of budget sources including income from a client-base including national and multinational companies, SMEs and business start ups for research services such as *Business Information Focus*, and the proactive skills of its staff in visiting other London libraries to promote its services, generate new business, and to audit and evaluate alternative business information sources. Such a proactive approach to positing the library as the leading business information provider in the city should be duly noted by other public library services when considering the performance of their respective business information services.

Other best practice examples of the promotion and branding of business information services can be found in the academic library sector, such as the information services unit at Manchester Business School (2005), which provides tailored research and consultancy on a corporate subscription basis, using the availability of 'expert staff' and the credibility of the academic organisation as crucial selling points. The forging of a regional identity and subsequent approach to service delivery is clearly a key theme for the redevelopment of Business Information Services. Hyde (1995) recommended the development of regional business collections in order to retain library involvement in regional business information provision; raise library profiles and equalise the national provision of public library business information.

3.3 Schools Library Services: national context

The market for Schools Library Services

The impact of changing market conditions upon Schools Library Services is extensively covered in the 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.

Best practice in Schools Library Services

It is worth noting that Schools Library Services do not feature heavily in the professional literature, and little, if anything is written about their impact and effectiveness on an individual level. The majority of writing within the school library sector refers to the impact of school libraries themselves on learning and educational achievement, and the professional skills and resources required to run a school library. Schools Library Services are sometimes mentioned in such articles, but with no great depth or analysis of their role. If greater communication and sharing of practice is needed in the Schools Library Services sector, as suggested above, then more needs to be done to encourage relevant staff to write for publication, and provide a forum for analysis and discussion in the field.

With respect to joint commissioning and provision of Schools Library Services, there are examples at county level of joint service delivery covering large areas such as Staffordshire (library based) and North Yorkshire (LEA based). Devon School Library Service (2005) operates under a county brand with School Library Centres in Barnstaple, Exeter and Torquay. The highly professional and advanced central website offers an explanation of services provided with downloadable promotional materials such as newsletters, and resource lists including book-related websites for primary and secondary schools; poetry websites; Devon learning and curriculum resources.

The Hampshire School Library Service (LEA controlled) operates from 6 School Library Service Centres within the county, and has reported an average of 98.5% buy back from relevant primary, secondary and special schools. This is the highest in the OFSTED statistical grouping of Schools Library Services with devolved or delegated funding (within the top 5 in the country), and the third most cost effective in the same OFSTED grouping. In a review of these services (Marley, 2001), two focus groups were held with key personnel from the primary school sector, all secondary school head teachers were surveyed by electronic mail and secondary school library managers received a written questionnaire. All feed back was extremely positive, with respondents reporting excellent value for money, and an appreciation of the professional services provided. The review has been used to support the recommendation that the service continues to be provided from within the local education authority.

In a review of school libraries and Schools Library Services in the South East of England, Saunders (2003) notes that 19 local authorities in the region are served by 10 Schools Library Services, including formal joint arrangements between Medway and Kent, Brighton, Hove and East Sussex, with the Berkshire service involving a partnership between 5 authorities. The report provides a summary of library provision to schools in the region, but no qualitative evidence of the impact and effectiveness of Schools Library Services. In a discussion of the development and launching of a flagship

school library and learning centre in the private education sector, Tilke (1995) extols the virtues of two LEA Schools Library Services in Leicestershire and Hertfordshire for their excellent stock base and the latter's visionary *Gateways* service offering online databases and search facilities.

Review of the literature
Summary of key points

- Within various public sector and service contexts, there is no single, definitive definition or model of joint commissioning: collaborative purchasing or service delivery can be adapted according to specific service requirements and objectives
- As such, evaluation of individual initiatives is essential to measure their effectiveness in meeting service objectives and impact upon service staff and users
- Individual examples of joint commissioning and collaboration within the public sector and library and information services include regional purchasing consortia; regional networks for the marketing and advocacy of services, staff training and development, and reciprocal access and borrowing; centralized services with strong regional brands and identity
- In response to changing and demanding market conditions, those authorities and services with strong 'proactive' organizational cultures are more likely to succeed and thrive than the more 'reactionary' organizations
- There is significant contemporary political momentum for both Business Information and Schools Library Services to proactively develop and sell their services in light of national and regional political agendas concerning economic strategy and development and learning objectives related to children's services accordingly
- Relatively little is written about Schools Library Services within the professional press: there is a particular lack of valuable case study evidence, including qualitative evidence and analysis, of impact and effectiveness in the sector. More should be done to encourage the written and published sharing of best practice amongst relevant staff

4. Current initiatives in the North West – PLA survey

The central aim of the PLA survey was to establish the extent of existing joint commissioning and collaboration within and between public libraries in the North West region. The survey sought specifically to gather information on current activity in the following key areas:

- Strategic joint commissioning
- Project-based partnerships
- External partners
- Plans for future collaboration

The survey did not focus deliberately upon Business Information Services and Schools Library Services at this stage in the research: it was felt by the research team that this may limit responses, and a more general exploration of joint commissioning and collaboration including its advantages and disadvantages, would be more appropriate. This has helped to create a picture of the culture of collaboration in the region, which can be used to inform proposed approaches to the development of Business Information and Schools Library Services. Please see appendix 2 for the questionnaire used in the survey.

A total of 10 completed questionnaires (46% response rate) have been returned and analysed, including the following authorities:

- Tameside
- St Helens
- Blackburn with Darwen
- Salford
- Manchester
- Halton
- Warrington
- Blackpool
- Stockport
- Wigan

The following discussion relates only to data provided by responding authorities, and is therefore not presented as a thorough representation of collaborative initiatives in the North West region. It does however provide a useful snapshot of projects and schemes relevant to the subject of joint commissioning and partnership-based approaches to service delivery. Returned questionnaires are summarised according to the relevant sub-sections of the survey.

4.1 Strategic Joint Commissioning (SJC)

Geographical consortia

The most significant example of collaboration with other regional and sub-regional library authorities for the efficient procurement of *general* library stock is the Greater Manchester Libraries Purchasing Consortium. The initiative involves the joint employment of a Contracts Manager (funded by all participating authorities and managed and referred to in the research by Stockport, which is the lead authority), who actively pursues ways of widening and deepening the collaboration. Other responding authorities who mentioned or included the consortium include Tameside and Manchester. The same respondents from the Greater Manchester region also cited a Reference Librarians Group involving the evaluation and purchase of online resources, and Greater Manchester Library Benchmarking and Marketing Groups, indicating a strong working partnership ethic between the relevant Greater Manchester authorities.

Similarly, St Helens also mentioned a consortium for stock purchase which is run in conjunction with four other Merseyside authorities, and was established in 2003. Sefton is the authority responsible for managing the tendering arrangements. The consortium is described as being 'in its early stages' with on-going monitoring and evaluation. Other consortia purchasing agreements include the example established between Warrington Borough Council, Halton Borough Council and Cheshire County Council following the formation of the two Borough Councils in 1998, and the AGMA Book Purchasing Consortium cited by the Blackpool respondent. The Cheshire example involves several contracts with a number of book suppliers with a Contract Manager post for the three participating authorities (allocated under the service level agreement). The AGMA consortium involves eleven other public library authorities in the North West (not named) along with Blackpool, and was established in October 2004. No evaluation of the AGMA project has been undertaken so far, but it was noted that there are significant financial benefits for smaller authorities such as Blackpool.

It is recommended that further consultation be undertaken with personnel involved with existing consortia purchasing agreements to gain a fuller understanding of the processes involved when establishing such a system, including problems encountered and what extent these have been overcome, specific advantages and disadvantages and project limitations. A systematic evaluation of the relevant consortia may also be valuable, including an assessment of input, output, outcomes and impact upon service delivery. Such consultation and evaluation would help to inform any decision making process relating to the appropriateness of consortium-based stock purchasing for Business Information and Schools Library Services specifically, if considered.

Health-related initiatives

The provision of health information provides an opportunity and platform for joint commissioning initiatives between public libraries and health sector services in the region. One such example is the *Patient Information Service* at Tameside General Hospital, which is provided by the library service in partnership with the Acute and Primary Care Trusts (PCTs) providing free health information, social care information, contacts for support groups, council support, benefits and other local information. The initiative has been recognised as an example of best practice by the Department of Health in improving the emotional experience of patients. One paid LIS chartered librarian works with hospital volunteers. A steering group including library and hospital officers oversee the development of the project. Established in 2002, costs are split 50/50 between the library service and local NHS Acute Trust, with accommodation provided free of charge by the hospital. Evaluation has been undertaken by means of user satisfaction surveys, which rate the quality of service very highly. The information service was created in discussion with the Acute Trust following a decline by over 50% in book loans with respect to the traditional library service, which indicates a proactive partnership response to a struggling service.

The *Health Matters Project* in Manchester was established to promote health through the Manchester Library Service with key strategic partners including three Manchester PCTs, Joint Health Unit, and NHS Agency. The initiative began in 2003 and is on going, with Macmillan Cancer Care to join with an additional project funding stream in November 2005. Staffed via Neighbourhood Renewal Fund (NRF) funding and run by Manchester Libraries, the project is designed to target the 'top ten' health conditions/priorities in the region with the broadest target audience. No evaluation has been undertaken to date. Salford Council (including libraries) is currently working in partnership with PCT under the *LIFT* initiative to build centres which offer a range of services including health information, GP surgeries, and library services. Other health information examples include *Books on Prescription* with PCT and a *Healthy Living Initiative* which is in the planning stages (both St Helens).

Business Information example

Manchester has provided an example of how such joint provision of services between regional providers within the health information sector can be emulated by Business Information Services. Manchester is currently exploring options with a range of partners including Business Link and Chamber Link, focussing at present on the regeneration framework for the south of the city, to provide business information points in libraries which 'guide' users to business start-up support services provided by such partners. This currently includes a pilot at Wythenshawe library to provide joint support for new micro-enterprises and start-ups. As with the *Health Matters* project, this illustrates how new approaches to service delivery can be aligned with broader regional agendas (regeneration; health promotion) to encourage alternative funding streams and more rigorous information service branding and identity.

Other examples

Other examples have been provided by respondents to illustrate how joint commissioning or collaborative approaches have been adopted to meet specific service objectives, including partnerships with other public library authorities, council services and external organisations. Tameside MBC are currently working in collaboration with Oldham Library Service for the procurement of Asian book stock, resources and training. Manchester has also provided details of working arrangements with the Open University to provide a city centre location for their MA support materials and services, including a pilot of 'breakfast briefings' for OU students and enquirers, and with the Consumer Advice Network to provide guidance and support to consumers through Manchester libraries. Halton Libraries are also 'buying in' to an Archives Service provided by Cheshire County Council, Cheshire and Chester Record Office (to both Halton and Warrington) for an agreed sum under a service level agreement since 1998.

It is worth noting the lack of information provided concerning joint commissioning and Schools Library Services given the general focus of the research. This could of course be explained by a lack of activity, or perhaps a lack of understanding in terms of the definition and function of joint commissioning (some North West Schools Library Services do 'provide' for neighbouring authorities for example, as discussed in the 'Future of Schools Library Services' section).

Advantages and disadvantages of strategic joint commissioning

The main advantages listed by respondents include those relating to funding and purchasing power, and the ability to draw upon skill, resources and expertise from more than one field. Disadvantages occur within the bureaucracy surrounding joint commissioning and collaboration, including policies and procedures, administration and support systems. This suggests that more attention to detail may be needed at the planning and implementation stages in terms of ownership, management and responsibility of administrative and support systems, and with reference to the definition of, and agreement to, policies and requisite guidelines. For a summary of given advantages and disadvantages of strategic joint commissioning, please see table 1.

4.2 Project-based partnerships (PBP)¹

Services to children and families

Many of the project-based partnerships listed by respondents involve services to children, young people and families. Many are linked to reader

¹ Project-based partnerships refer to fixed-term projects, usually joint or externally funded, which include partnership work between public library services and other authorities, organisations or agencies

development, or reading related, activities and initiatives. Halton 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 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 reinforce 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 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 LEA, PCT 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 Adswold 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 should 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. There may be some scope in terms of Schools Library Service branding and marketing to 'tap in' to the existing body of work, particularly concerning reader development activities, and to create a seamless service brand along the early years to young adulthood continuum.

Business and innovation

As with the business information example of strategic joint commissioning, business-related project-based partnerships are strongly linked with regional agendas surrounding regeneration, enterprise and economic growth, and include key regional economic stakeholders. The two examples listed below also illustrate how some authorities can work as satellite agencies for larger authority initiatives in achieving or contributing to regional economic objectives.

The *TIDE* project in Manchester provides holistic support for inventors and entrepreneurs, building on Manchester's reputation as a Patlib Patent Library, and adding business advice and 'route to market' support. The project targets clients who do not wish to 'start up' a business to market their product, but wish to sell on the product (an area currently not supported by other agencies such as Business Link). Funded by North West Brain Fund via the North West Development Agency until end of June 2005, further funding is being sought in partnership with other agencies such as City Council Economic Initiatives Unit and Business Link. The project is run by Manchester Libraries and Manchester Digital Development Agency, and key stakeholders include other invention/entrepreneurial support agencies in the region such as Ideas21, MITRE etc. The City Council Economic Initiatives Unit also has a stakeholder role as it is delivering to PSA2 targets.

Blackburn with Darwen Library and Information Services, working in partnership with the Innovation and Technology Service of the Borough's Regeneration Department, TechNet North West and Manchester Libraries launched the *Inventors Information Point* at Blackburn Central Library in 2004.

The project is supported by a collection of books, a search database, information leaflets and staff who can advise and refer clients. It links closely to the advice point, which is already provided on a weekly basis by Blackburn and District Enterprise Trust. The patents clinics, which are held bi-monthly, offer free and confidential advice on patents, designs, trademarks, copyright, business start ups, grants and funding. Key partners are Regeneration Department of Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council; TIDE (formerly TechNet North West, (see Manchester example above) which provided initial funding and set up Inventor's Point Service for Manchester Libraries, training and resources and subscription to two business information databases. Additional support provided by Manchester Libraries; Blackburn with Darwen Library and Information Service act as satellite centre providing the resource outside the main city of Manchester. Attendance figures for bi-monthly patents clinics are collected, though no formal evaluation has yet been undertaken.

Other examples of PBP

As mentioned in the research context (literature review) chapter, *Time to Read* (referred to by Stockport² within the PLA survey) is an innovative regional reader development initiative responsible for development of good practice, mutual support, training, events and publications. The project has a regional coordinator jointly funded by all 22 North West regional library authorities. Funding is also received from Arts Council England North West, who is represented on the steering committee along with Society of Chief Librarians and MLA North West. Halton Libraries provide an *Information Advice and Guidance (IAG) Service*, funded from August 2004 to July 2005, involving an IAG Outreach Worker who provides support for adults with learning and employment requirements. The project is funded by Merseyside IAG Partnership (and Learning and Skills Council) who also provide support and set targets. Monthly and annual monitoring and evaluation reports are submitted to IAG Partnership for scrutiny. Blackpool have listed a number of regeneration projects related to improvement of ICT and employment skills for residents of ERDF wards, working with Adult Learning, and Learning and Skills Council (LSC/ERDF funding). Over £10m external funding has been won by Manchester libraries over the last 5 years to fund collaborative ICT based learning projects, digitisation projects, health information points, Children's mobile library, Sure Start posts, and homework centres. Funding bodies include Learning and Skills Council, ESF, ERDF, PCTs, Sure Start, Children's Fund, McMillan Cancer Fund. Delivery partners include colleges, prison, adult education service, Sure Start, PCTs, health visitors, voluntary organisations and volunteers.

Advantages and disadvantages of project-based partnerships

The perceived advantages of project-based partnerships include an added momentum to succeed in valuable outreach objectives; increased efficiency in shared resources and expertise; improved outcomes for service users;

² Despite being a North West initiative, Stockport was the only responding authority to recognise or cite Time to Read as a working partnership

increased effectiveness in the local delivery of national initiatives. Disadvantages include the difficulty in establishing worthy and effective projects in to the mainstream core service beyond the given funded period and sustaining and maintaining communication between partners. This indicates a greater need for advocacy and representation at senior level when seeking to establish core services and initiatives, and a need for formalised, sustainable communication methods and systems. For a summary of given advantages and disadvantages of project-based partnerships, please see table 2.

4.3 External partners

Further to the original *MLA North West* brief, information on general partnerships with other cultural and educational sectors was also provided. This was intended to provide an illustration of the potential for collaboration between public libraries and other such organisations.

Warrington described *Routes to the past; More Routes to the Past 2004-05*, a cross-domain partnership with the Local Education Authority, Warrington Collegiate Institute, Priestley College and Warrington Library, Museum and Archives Service, funded through 'Neighbourhood Learning in Deprived Communities', and designed to target adult learners in disadvantaged parts of Warrington. A series of short courses has been designed to attract learners and develop access to, and use of, the considerable resources within museums libraries and archives. The project is to be developed during 2005-06.

Two examples were provided by Blackburn with Darwen, including ALLIS – regional partnership of all Lancashire Library and Information Services, including Access for All scheme enabling members to utilise each other's collections, and a joint initiative between the public library service, Blackburn College and all 6th form colleges, which inducts all new students to public library and college facilities. With the University of Salford, members of the local public library service can access materials in the University Library (reference only and some electronic materials). University members can fast track membership to Salford public libraries and access all services offered. In an example of public-private cultural partnerships, *The World of Glass* provide the facilities and curatorial management of St Helens Museum and Art Collection and are funded by the council to do so, with the council maintaining a monitoring role.

Please see table 3 for a full list of all given public library partners and their relevant working relationships where available.

4.4 Plans for Future Collaboration

Brief details were provided by some responding authorities regarding plans in place for future collaboration. in summary, Blackpool have indicated that

further health initiatives will be launched in October 2005 including health information points; Bibliotherapy scheme; NHS/Adult Learning programme of activities. St Helens are planning to undertake further activities with Adult and Community Learning Teams; the launch of Books on Prescription with the local health authority; the continuation of Families Learning Together and Right to Read; work with the Council for Voluntary Services on online electronic community information. Manchester has plans for a new 15m family history/archive/record office centre, co-locating with the University Race Archive, Manchester and Lancashire Family History Association and Manchester Archives. Due to open 2009 subject to HLF bid.

In the only particular reference to Schools Library Services, Wigan has indicated that discussions have already taken place about the joint commissioning of Schools Library Services, but only at the preliminary stages. Discussions are being held around the joint commissioning of bibliographical and book supply services in particular, indicating that the research as a whole may be particularly pertinent for this authority, and that further consultation may be appropriate.

Advantages and disadvantages of Strategic Joint Commissioning (SJC)

Advantages of SJC	Disadvantages of SJC
Increased funding opportunities associated with different partners e.g. PEAT funding	Compliance with more than one set of policies, priorities, guidelines etc and problems associated with this
More rigorous joint funding bids	Prolonged decision making process
Increased purchasing power – bigger discounts from suppliers	ICT and other systems not always fully compatible
Increased negotiation with suppliers	Potential disagreement between partners over how to develop and prioritise the service
Ability to draw on expertise from more than one field	More compromise needed
Networking	Less opportunity for individual PLA/tailored requirements
Access to partner skills, services and locations	Inflexibility
Representation of different stakeholder viewpoints, encouraging a better understanding of issues related to the service and its users	
Shared costs result in a much better service than could otherwise be provided by partners individually	
Small authority would struggle to provide a specialist service in terms of cost, facilities and staff expertise without SJC: Purchasing agreements provide significant financial benefits for smaller authorities	
Sharing of good practice	

Table 1

Advantages and disadvantages of Project-based Partnerships (PBP)

Advantages of PBP	Disadvantages of PBP
Access to different funding streams	Continuing and sustaining projects beyond funded period
Additional funding for valuable outreach work	Precariousness of funding
Access to more resources	Difficulty in mainstreaming the project
Increased efficiency	Slow decision making
Shared resources, effort and expertise working towards same outcomes and objectives	Differing objectives between partners
Joined-up government	Necessity to compromise on solutions
Increased awareness of partnership service provision	Sustaining/maintaining communication
Learning from each other	
Improved outcomes for service recipients	
Local delivery of national initiatives	
Greater opportunities for the public to access help with business and innovation ideas	
Partners can provide a means for the library service to reach audiences who might otherwise prove harder to reach	
Increased expertise in particular areas	

Table 2

Key partners in existing collaborative projects

Partner	Working relationship with public library service
Learning and Skills Council	Funding and support
Sure Start	Funding and Support
Primary Care Trust	Funding and support
National Health Service	Joint funding
Children's Fund	Funding
Age Concern	Shared resources
Connexions	Guidance services on library premises/shared resources
Citizens Advice Bureau	Services on library premises
Job Centre Plus	Contact points
Pension services	Services on library premises
LADSIRLAC	Resource provider – research information
Time to Read	Reader Development initiative
Partnership for Learning	Enabling Learn Direct link centres
Employment agency	Contact points
Family/Local History Society	Community learning activities
Learn Direct	Service on library premises
Museums/Heritage/Archives	Joint learning activities with children
Academic libraries	Discussions regarding access agreements

Table 3

**4.5 Current initiatives in the North West – PLA Survey
Summary**
Recurring themes & points for discussion

- There is clearly a strong culture of collaboration and project based working within the region, particularly with external partners. There is also some evidence of a desire to establish project-based partnerships in to the mainstream and as part of core library service, suggesting a commitment to such approaches to service delivery
- It is essential to acknowledge the important role of the creation of specific posts to oversee/manage joint commissioning objectives – this should be incorporated when discussing models and approaches to collaborative working
- Purchasing consortia that are already in place could be emulated with reference to Business Information Services, particularly electronic resources: for example, Greater Manchester Reference Librarians' purchase of online resources could be an example of how to evaluate and manage the joint purchase of electronic BIS. Further consultation with such groups is needed to fully understand the processes involved
- Purchasing consortia are constructed on a regional/geographical basis: this could be the most appropriate model for sub-regional practice
- Business Information Service examples relate to regeneration, business start up and innovation support which along with centralised regional partnership-based approach, echoes themes established in the literature/shared by other authorities. Advantages of collaborative approach to working are clearly enunciated with reference to regional economic strategy, shared expertise and key target groups, illustrating obvious benefits for regional stakeholders and potential partners
- Best practice in Health and Social Care initiatives – joint commissioning within health information/services is well documented within the literature. Can act as best practice models for other services in meeting regional objectives and strengthening the identity and brand of regional information provision
- Strong presence of public library service in early years education and subsequent significant working relationship with Sure Start and other children's agencies – opportunity to rebrand Schools Library Services and promote 'seamlessness' of services to children, given the lack of data concerning collaboration and partnerships with Schools Library Services specifically
- Similarly, strong evidence of key project-based practice in terms of community education both with children and adults, involving local

education providers – another possible opportunity for Schools Library Service collaboration and promotion

- Reciprocal access/borrowing amongst a range of regional LIS could be of interest to business information users and used to reinforce existing public Business Information Services
- Evidence of the important formalised role of service level agreements and evaluation studies – further analysis of such documents will be of benefit before decisions are made concerning collaborative approaches to Business Information and Schools Library Service delivery
- Some examples of collaboration were not recognised or acknowledged by responding authorities who actually participate in the scheme, e.g. Greater Manchester Consortium, Time to Read. Further consultation with relevant personnel may be appropriate to fully evaluate the processes involved, including advantages and disadvantages

5. The future of Business Information Services in the North West region

The following section relates to qualitative data gathered concerning the future of Business Information Services in the North West region. Two focus groups were held with key Business Information personnel during the qualitative fieldwork stages of the research: one at Manchester Central Library with 9 participants; another at Liverpool Central Library with 4 participants. The authorities represented include Knowsley, Lancashire, Cheshire, Liverpool, Blackburn with Darwen, Oldham, Bolton, Manchester, Stockport, Tameside and Wigan. Focus groups were semi-structured using the following key themes for discussion:

- Challenges faced by Business Information Services (from operational, organisational and regional perspectives)
- Approaches to meeting such challenges
- Models for action

5.1 Challenges faced by Business Information Services

Operational challenges

Respondents 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. Additional factors which compound this particular problem include the increased use of the internet amongst traditional business information users at home or in the workplace, and the drastic cuts in (less expensive) print collections in public libraries. Where business information services are charged for in public libraries (mailing lists etc), it was felt that such charges merely 'scratch the surface' of the true cost of the service, and create problems in terms of knowing how much and when to charge.

"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. There was some discussion over the culture of user expectations, and whether or not the demand (still) existed for specialised services: it was

decided the demand did still exist, but only in particular environments, such as commercial or industrial centres where user expectations would be much higher, and that this would not be pervasive throughout the region. 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 again 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... its 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 (reflective of the ‘strategic repositioning’ discussed within the literature review chapter) had caused inconsistency in terms of staff business information skills and expertise. The same 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 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”

Organisational challenges

Respondents were asked to identify challenges faced by Business Information Services within an organisational context, that being within the wider public library authority remit and perspective. 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, Peoples' Network etc. 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 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"

There are further difficulties associated with tailoring service standards to business information resources and their users. Business information service standards are also inadvertently affected by generic approaches to public library service delivery: examples cited include the increasing use of call centre methods in local government enquiry response services, which undermine the professionalism and expertise required for detailed information enquiries. It was felt that service standards for Business Information Services should relate directly to the needs and expectations of business communities and users rather than a 'one size fits all' generic information service model.

Regional challenges

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 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 Halton and Warrington Boroughs to Cheshire County Council, both strong industrial bases). 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. Respondents used the example of the link between business information and the knowledge economy currently being emphasised by the Greater Manchester authority, reinforcing statements made in the literature review.

“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”

5.2 Approaches to meeting such challenges

In response to the challenges raised and identified above, respondents considered approaches to meeting such challenges on an individual basis. Some discussion took place over 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 dealing with 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. The TIDE project in Manchester was cited as an example of best practice.

“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”

5.3 Models for action

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 and referred to within the literature review 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.

Participants in the business information groups also considered regional consortium approaches for the discounted purchase of electronic business information services. Obvious benefits would be the reduced costs, but it was felt that this approach didn't necessarily address the problem of limited staff skills and expertise in actually delivering these services. Problems associated with this approach include the restrictions applied to the standard contracts for

electronic licenses, and the potential for conflict with electronic business information suppliers if actually reducing subscriptions. Further problems associated with regional consortia include the higher cost for some partners if other authorities choose not to participate – as such, it was felt by some participants that the consortia approach is more suited to individual authorities rather than on an inter-authority basis.

5.4 Business Information Services summary

Challenges

On an operational basis, Business Information Services in the North West region are struggling in terms of under-use and a subsequent lack of cost-effectiveness. Business users are not easily identifiable and are often unaware of the resources available in public libraries. Staff resources are becoming increasingly limited in terms of business information skill and expertise, particularly as business information services and resources are amalgamated in to more general information and reference services. This creates further problems within an organisational context in terms of low prioritisation at senior management level, cuts in funding and deteriorating business information service identity and purpose. Additionally, funding and governance restructures at county and regional level have a negative impact upon business information service delivery and use, which is further compounded by inconsistent relationships with other departments, organisations and information providers in the region.

Possible solutions

Approaches to overcoming or meeting such challenges largely involve streamlining, professionalizing and proactively marketing Business Information Services. Principles of joint commissioning can be applied in terms of a regional or sub regional partnership agreement on the purchase, evaluation, distribution and delivery of business information services using a tiered approach within and across participating authorities. European Information Centres and Birmingham's business *Insight* service were cited as best practice examples of tiered and centralised approaches to information service delivery. Improved customer service was perceived to be the greatest benefit of such an approach. Strong communication and cooperation structures are essential at the planning stages and throughout the process as a whole, including all relevant personnel, senior decision makers, regional advocates, external partners and other information providers and key stakeholders.

Further research

An audit of services provided by other information providers and organisations is essential to avoid duplication of services and to help streamline and specialise any new approach to public Business Information Service delivery. Similarly, an evaluation of business information enquiries in the regions public

libraries will help to establish patterns of usage before any decisions are made concerning the reallocation of resources and services. Extensive profiling of, and consultation with, business communities in the region would also assist and inform any practical changes to existing business information provision. An assessment of the organisational culture of participating authorities would be beneficial in terms of deciding on the appropriateness of specific models for action. Consultation with CILIP and other professional bodies should also be undertaken, especially when considering formalised working partnerships with respect to the promotion and marketing of new initiatives.

6. The future of Schools Library Services in the North West region

The following section relates to qualitative data gathered concerning the future of Schools Library Services in the North West region. A focus group was held with key Schools Library Services personnel during the qualitative fieldwork stages of the research at Manchester Central Library with 7 participants. The authorities represented at this event include Blackburn with Darwen, Tameside, Stockport, Trafford, St Helens, Manchester and Bolton. In addition to the focus group, two telephone interviews were held with representatives from Knowsley and Cheshire services to schools. The focus group and interviews were semi-structured using the following key themes for discussion:

- Challenges faced by Schools Library Services (from operational, organisational and regional perspectives)
- Approaches to meeting such challenges
- Models for action

6.1 Challenges faced by Schools Library Services

Operational challenges

The most significant challenges facing Schools Library Services 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.

The need to encourage school buy-in is therefore a major challenge, and beset with difficulties in itself, which are discussed further under the *regional challenges* section. 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).

Organisational challenges

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. The other 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”

Regional challenges

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 (as reported in the literature review); 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”

6.2 Approaches to meeting such challenges

Respondents felt that approaches to meeting the challenges 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. 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 reader development initiatives could help to encourage the necessary cultural change and reinforce the role of Schools Library Services with respect to learning 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 improvements³. It was agreed that more commercial freedom is needed within this context.

³ Suggested reading: Creaser, C. (2001) Performance measurement and benchmarking for schools library services. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, Vol. 33, No. 3, pp. 126-132.

6.3 Models for action

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 expensive consultation.

A strong visual brand and identity is integral to the proposal, which similarly to Business Information Service suggestions, 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.

6.4 Schools Library Services summary

Challenges

Operational challenges faced by Schools Library Services in the North West region include problems associated with running a business within a public service context and organisation. These include a lack of business acumen and skills amongst relevant staff. Side-effects of this include, in some cases, poor buy-in from schools; over-stocking on a large scale; a reluctance to share best practice or shortcomings based on a need for self-preservation; other management or financial based implications involving service overheads and facilities. Organisational challenges include cultural tensions between public library and educational sectors; a perceived lack of recognition and low prioritisation within public library authorities; a lack of clarity concerning Schools Library Services' contribution towards the services to children agenda. On a regional level, political decisions concerning the funding and governance of schools have an adverse affect on the performance and survival of services to schools; there is a perceived lack of recognition, advocacy and inclusion

from and across the relevant educational structures; increasing competition from private sector providers.

Possible solutions

Approaches to meeting such challenges 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 under a strong professional brand relating to services to children and literacy development.

There is some evidence of joint commissioning *related* activity, or combined services, already in place in the regions Schools Library Services, for example, both of the research interviewees indicated that their services provide for other authorities (Cheshire provide for 400 schools across 3 authorities; Knowsley are currently liaising with Sefton following the closure of their Schools Library Service last year, and provide a service for 8 Liverpool schools and can accommodate a lot more if required). Joint commissioning however was not identified explicitly as a discernible answer to the problems faced by Schools Library Services. Such a service approach, which delivers to several authorities, is seen more as an inevitable consequence of service closures, derived from the perhaps unnecessary and underused provision within individual authorities.

Further research

An audit of all existing services to schools in the North West region 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.

7. Qualitative fieldwork

Summary of key points

The challenges faced by Business Information Services conform to those conventionally addressed by joint commissioning initiatives in terms of streamlining costly, underused resources, and the need to concentrate and share expertise

Doubts over the efficiency of purchasing consortia expressed by Business Information Services respondents could be investigated with existing regional consortia in the North West and other regions (for example *CoEast* and *CUSP* in the South West, as discussed within the literature review chapter)

The challenges faced by Schools Library Services are a little different and do not necessarily require a joint commissioning solution: approaches to improving these services revolve around regional networking, staff training, service promotion and the sharing of best practice, all of which are essentially communication issues

Joint commissioning in some respects is already in place in the region's School Library Services (e.g. existing services serving other authorities): perhaps this could be more formalised to improve service identity, promotion and business generation

Both Business Information and Schools Library Services in the North West report a need for much stronger and professionalized branding, publicity and advocacy within the region

Cooperative working with Business Link services and other organisations such as the RDA are desirable in order to facilitate the effective targeting of key target groups such as start up companies

Further research and evaluation needs to be undertaken before proposals can be formalised and implemented for both services, particularly in terms of service auditing and extended consultation with key stakeholders. Some preliminary consideration and exploration of organisational culture(s) would also be beneficial to both services

8. Research summary and recommendations

The following summary relates to the project as a whole with reference to research aims and objectives as specified by the original *MLA North West* brief and specification:

To map existing joint working arrangements in the North West regions public libraries, including relevant successes and limitations

The PLA survey has revealed a strong culture of collaboration in the North West region's public libraries, including some examples of strategic joint commissioning in terms of regional purchasing consortia and partnership-based approaches to key service delivery (such as health information). There is some evidence of joint coverage from Schools Library Services (in terms of neighbouring authorities without a service of their own), and discussion has already taken place relating to the future joint commissioning of these services between specific authorities. These are however implied rather than presented as evidence of joint commissioning by respondents, raising some issues as to the appropriateness of such a solution, particularly for Schools Library Services. There are examples of best practice approaches to the collaborative delivery of business information services in the Greater Manchester region. A summary of advantages and disadvantages to strategic joint commissioning and project-based partnerships is provided: it is recommended however that more consultation is undertaken with specific purchasing consortia and other relevant parties to discuss the complexities of the processes involved.

To provide evidence and analysis of joint commissioning schemes related to these services in other regions

The literature review has provided examples of regional partnerships and joint provision concerning each of the sectors, and within LIS in general. County models are most prolific within Schools Library Services, and are most effective within local education authority services with strong regional brands and promotional tools (such as advanced website facilities). There is evidence of successful initiatives to align public Business Information Services with regional economic strategies to reinforce the relevant services as key information providers and economic stakeholders. Successful, high profile centralised services are reliant upon efficient proactive staff activity in terms of market research and the effective marketing of services.

To discuss the implications of current and likely changing market conditions for these services

The implications of changing market conditions for each of the services under consideration are discussed extensively in the literature review and by participants during qualitative fieldwork and analysis. Market conditions for Schools Library Services are dictated by educational policy and delegated to budgets; Business Information Services have been affected by regional and

national political agenda and revised public library service priorities. There is an opportunity for both services to respond proactively and positively to market conditions by aligning their services to key regional objectives, for example, the positive marketing of Schools Library Services within the services to children and literacy development agenda, and the more visible association of public Business Information Services with themes of regional regeneration and enterprise.

To discuss the benefits and risks of possible joint commissioning projects

Summaries of given advantages and disadvantages to strategic joint commissioning and project-based partnerships are provided within the PLA survey chapter. The perceived advantages of models put forward by participants during the qualitative fieldwork stages of the research include improved customer service, cost effectiveness, service identity, staff skills and expertise. Disadvantages include the cost to some smaller authorities of a consortia purchase approach, the difficulties in maintaining communication channels and support between participating organisations and across organisational structures, and in maintaining standards when it comes to the quality of services and brand creation. Further research is recommended in terms of consultation with existing consortia, and with reference to existing organisational culture, user profiling, and the auditing of existing services.

To discuss the potential for links with existing academic library, museum and archive joint commissioning arrangements

There is some evidence within the literature review of the benefits of regional networks with other information providers and cultural organisations with respect to reciprocal access and borrowing, staff training and the marketing of services. This is presented as a particularly viable option for Business Information Services. There is scope for Schools Library Services to develop learning-related activities and programmes within the cultural sector (i.e. with museums and archive services) in accordance with the services to children agenda and literacy development. Further consultation is recommended with such organisations in the North West region.

To provide potential models for managing and financing schemes

A summary of models discussed in the report, including their appropriateness for Business Information and Schools Library Services, is attached as appendix 1. The research has revealed that models of collaboration and joint commissioning can be relatively fluid, and adapted to suit specific service criteria and objectives. As such, there is no single appropriate model for either of the services under consideration. Qualitative fieldwork has revealed, via a discussion of challenges faced by Business Information and Schools Library Services, that joint commissioning in general is a more appropriate solution for public Business Information Services, given the need to streamline expensive

and underused resources. Challenges faced by Schools Library Services are essentially communication, training and promotion issues, which are more suited to a solution offering greater network support, advocacy and representation, such as the regional 'trust' put forward as a suggested model by participants in the research.

To describe the impact on users and other stakeholders of proposed options

(Discussed under the 'benefits and risks' heading)

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Appendix 1 – Models of joint commissioning and collaboration

Proposed model	Key features		BIS suitability	SLS suitability
	Management	Funding		
Regional purchasing consortia	Local network; coordinator post; occasionally one lead authority; management of subscription service evaluation and contracts; supplier negotiation	Shared partner contributions; additional external funding in some cases	√	✗
Project partnerships	Specific fixed-term project delivery; steering group; delegated responsibilities; coordinator post	Shared partnership funding; external funding	√	√
Centralised high-profile subscription services	Central location; electronic services; remote access and delivery; buy-in from other organisations/authorities; centrally managed and coordinated	Central + subscription fees	√	√
Cross-sectoral schemes	External partners; specific service delivery with political/social local government objectives e.g. health information or family learning; steering group; specific post creation	Shared partnership funding; external funding	√	✗
Regional training/benchmarking groups	Local network; regional meetings/communication channels; lead authority; coordinator post secondment	Membership fee based; value added services (training; publications etc)	√	√
Reciprocal access and borrowing	Organisations from different sectors e.g. public & academic libraries, sharing resources; regional meetings communication channels; steering group; possible lead organisation	N/A	√	✗
Tiered services	Levels of service allocated per authority/service e.g. EICs; steering	Central funding; shared partner contributions	√	✗

	group/advisory board; central advocacy and support			
Cultural learning partnerships	Shared learning objectives/activities between regional cultural services e.g. libraries, museums, archives; steering group; lead organisation; regional agenda; coordinator post	External/central funding	x	√

Appendix 2 – PLA survey questionnaire



U N I V E R S I T Y O F S H E F F I E L D

DEPARTMENT OF INFORMATION STUDIES
CENTRE FOR THE PUBLIC LIBRARY & INFORMATION
IN SOCIETY

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North West Public Libraries Joint Commissioning Research Project
On behalf of MLA North West

The following questionnaire forms part of a research study being undertaken by the *Centre for the Public Library and Information in Society* (CPLIS) at the University of Sheffield on behalf of *MLA North West*⁴ investigating the range of, and potential for, collaborative working within public libraries in the North West region. The aims and objectives of the questionnaire are to profile *current* joint commissioning initiatives, partnership-based projects and plans for future collaboration across the full range of public library services in the region.

Please consider each question carefully and provide as much information as possible. All replies will be treated in the strictest confidence with assured respondent anonymity.

Questionnaires may be completed electronically and returned to **Kerry Wilson** at the following e-mail address: k.m.wilson@sheffield.ac.uk or printed out and returned by post to:

Kerry Wilson
Researcher
Department of Information Studies
University of Sheffield
211 Portobello Street
Sheffield
S1 4DP

If you have any queries regarding the questionnaire or the research project, please contact one of the research team (full contact details listed above).

Please return your completed questionnaire by **Friday 17th June 2005**

THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR YOUR TIME AND CO-OPERATION

⁴ MLA North West contact: Alan Boughey, Libraries Development Officer

Tel: 01925 625063

alan.boughey@mnanorthwest.org.uk

North West Public Libraries Joint Commissioning Research Project
PLA Questionnaire

Section 1: you and your authority

Please provide contact details for yourself and your authority (to be used in the strictest confidence for research purposes only):	
Your name:	
Job title:	
Service: (e.g. Business Information Services; Schools Library Services)	
Authority:	
Telephone:	
E-mail:	

Section 2: strategic joint commissioning

The following questions relate to the <i>strategic joint commissioning</i> of library services, for example, the long-term policy based shared responsibility between authorities and organisations for a particular service at organisational and operational level. Please use the comments box for any additional information you would like to provide.	
Are there currently any joint commissioning arrangements within your authority? Space is provided for one example: please use section six to describe additional arrangements if applicable.	Yes: (<input type="checkbox"/>) No: (<input type="checkbox"/>) If 'no', please go to section 3.
Please briefly describe the arrangement and service(s) involved, including staffing procedures, user target groups etc:	
Who are the key partners/organisational stakeholders and what are their roles and financial responsibilities?	
When was the joint system established?	
What are the perceived advantages to the joint commissioning arrangement?	
What are the disadvantages, if any?	
Have any evaluation exercises been undertaken? If 'yes', please provide a brief description:	
Comments:	

Section 3: project-based partnerships

Appendix 3 – Qualitative research instruments
The Future of Business Information Services
Research Workshops

Manchester Central Library
Thursday 11th August 2005, 2.00-4.00pm

Liverpool Central Library
Wednesday 17th August, 2.00-4.00pm

Brief

The research workshops will involve a focus group discussion concerning the future of public library Business Information Services in the North West region. The sessions will be facilitated by a researcher from the University of Sheffield, and will form part of a wider research project which has been commissioned by MLA North West.

Aims and Objectives

The aims and objectives of the research workshops are to gather opinion from professionals within the field on the future of Business Information Services within the region's public libraries, with a view to generating ideas and proposals for taking these services forward. There will be three strands to the discussion, including:

- Challenges faced by Business Information Services
- Approaches to meeting such challenges
- Models for action

Additional information

Discussions will be tape recorded and fully transcribed for research purposes only. All data will be treated in the strictest confidence with assured participant anonymity.

Two hours have been allocated for the focus groups: however, the sessions may end earlier dependant upon group numbers and subsequent levels of discussion.

Should you have any further enquiries, please do not hesitate to contact the research team or MLA North West representative:

Kerry Wilson – Researcher
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0114 222 6345

Alan Boughey – Libraries Development Officer
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The Future of Business Information Services

Research Workshop: Manchester Central Library, Thursday 11th August 2005, 2.00 – 4.00pm
 Liverpool Central Library, Wednesday 17th August 2005, 2.00-4.00pm

Participant notes:

	Challenges faced by Business Information Services	Approaches to meeting such challenges	Models for action
Operational <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding/budgets • Staffing • Stock • Overheads 			
Organisational <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Service priorities • Community profiles • Organisational culture • F4F • Restructuring 			
Regional <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Authority/council objectives • Other information providers • Regional profiles • Partnerships and governance 			

The Future of Schools Library Services

Research Workshop

Manchester Central Library
Thursday 11th August 2005, 10.00am-12.00pm

Brief

The research workshop will involve a focus group discussion concerning the future of Schools Library Services in the North West region. The session will be facilitated by a researcher from the University of Sheffield, and will form part of a wider research project which has been commissioned by MLA North West.

Aims and Objectives

The aims and objectives of the research workshop are to gather opinion from professionals within the field on the future of Schools Library Services within the region, with a view to generating ideas and proposals for taking these services forward. There will be three strands to the discussion, including:

- Challenges faced by Schools Library Services
- Approaches to meeting such challenges
- Models for action

Additional information

Discussions will be tape recorded and fully transcribed for research purposes only. All data will be treated in the strictest confidence with assured participant anonymity.

Two hours have been allocated for the focus group: however, the session may end earlier dependant upon group numbers and subsequent levels of discussion.

Should you have any further enquiries, please do not hesitate to contact the research team or MLA North West representative:

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01925 625063

The Future of Schools Library Services

Research Workshop: Manchester Central Library, Thursday 11th August 2005, 10.00am - 12.00pm

Participant notes:

	Challenges faced by Schools Library Services	Approaches to meeting such challenges	Models for action
Operational <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding/budgets • Staffing • Stock • Overheads 			
Organisational <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Service priorities • Community profiles • Organisational culture • F4F • Restructuring 			
Regional <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Authority/council objectives • Other information providers • Regional profiles • Partnerships and governance 			

The Future of Schools Library Services/Business Information Services
Research workshops
Focus Group questions

Challenges faced by SLS/BIS – 30 mins

Operational:

What challenges are faced by (SLS/BIS) on an operational, day to day basis (use prompts)?

Would you say these are relatively new, evolving challenges, or have they always existed?

Organisational:

If we expand this to look at the organisational context (that being your public library service as a whole) what perhaps bigger challenges do (SLS/BIS) face?

What is influencing those challenges?

Are (SLS/BIS) constantly attracting new users, or is the market/demand for those services unchanging?

Are (SLS/BIS) prioritised appropriately within your PLAs? (Top down? Front-line)

Regional:

What role do other organisations in the region play in challenging (SLS/BIS)?

Who are the key influences on the performance/survival of these services?

Approaches to meeting such challenges - 30 mins

How can the specific challenges we have identified be approached on an individual basis? (summarise list from operational, then organisational, then regional approach)

Identify any recurring themes: Is there an identifiable holistic approach to tackling the recurring challenges across the three areas?

Who needs to be on board? (for example staff, other bodies/agencies)

Do working partnerships play a key role?

Models for action – 30 mins

If we think about bringing these approaches together...

Is it possible to articulate and define actual models for action?

Is there a definitive single model/solution?

What are the anticipated outcomes of such models if put in place?

Do you see any problems in terms of an idealised solution/model and what would happen in reality? Are the solutions workable ultimately?

Any other comments/suggestions?

Appendix 4 – Project contacts

Research team:

Researcher	Project supervisor
Kerry Wilson Researcher	Briony Train Lecturer
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