

# Fortune Favours the Brave: Challenges within the Opportunities for All<sup>4</sup>

Fionnuala Hanrahan



## Abstract

Effective collaboration and advocacy are two dominating challenges for public librarians delivering *Opportunities for All* (Ireland 2013), the third national development strategy for public libraries in the Republic of Ireland. Of course, effective collaboration and advocacy are standard requirements within every programme delivery, along with technical competencies, communications, marketing and resources management. It is the current climate and the political context that pushes these two skills into prominence now.

Keywords: *Public Library Strategy, Ireland; Public Library Development, Ireland*



<sup>4</sup> *Opportunities for All: the public library as a catalyst for economic, social and cultural development: a strategy for public libraries, 2013 – 2017.* Dublin: Stationery Office, 2013 (Hereafter referred to as *Opportunities for All*).



Throughout 2012 and 2013, chief public librarians engaged in the review and research process that produced the current Strategy document. Building on the achievement of the two previous plans (Ireland 1998, 2008) *Opportunities for All* restates fundamental values such as free access to information as a right for all citizens and residents. Seven programming streams are identified:

### The “What” challenges

1. Physical Space and Service Provision – to provide a high quality public library network, delivering universal free access to a consistent service nationally, and leadership in local authority community engagement by 2017
2. Learning Skills and Enterprise – to provide opportunities for individuals to develop as literate, informed, articulate and confident citizens, and to support local economic initiatives and developments
3. Culture and Community – to foster literary appreciation, provide a cultural space for people and communities, and provide economic stimulus through learning, creativity and access to reliable and authoritative information
4. The Virtual Library – to achieve the most effective and cost-efficient technological solutions for library systems, and maximise the opportunities offered by digital media in extending the accessibility of library services

### The “How” challenges

5. Workforce Development – to further develop a responsive, user-focused public service that is part of community and national life, and to ensure that staff are equipped with the skills of the modern library, information and knowledge professional
6. Cooperation, Partnership and Promotion – to deliver enhanced services through cooperation and partnerships with government departments, agencies and national bodies, EU and international research and development initiatives, and to raise the profile of the library service
7. Research and Innovation – to keep libraries at the forefront of best practice, inform existing and emerging programmes for effective future planning, and ensure programmes achieve economic and social return on investment.

These programmes sit within three development themes – economic, social and cultural – the first two echoing the direction within the more general, local government *Putting People First* (Ireland 2012) strategy.

As well as addressing government recovery plans, critically the library strategy reflects underlying principles long promoted by the public library sector. These include the need for a national service delivered locally, combined with the achievement of local ownership and involvement, while sufficiently coherent to support marketing at national as well as local levels. These also include the need for a comprehensive information offer, on which the promotion and branding elements of marketing can be built.

Adequate scale to deliver diverse services competently including to subcategories of users and nurturing local responsiveness within that scale is at the heart of the Strategy. Scale is being achieved in a variety of ways.

1. The government policy document, *Managing the delivery of effective library services* (2014), determines 100,000 as a minimum population target for public library service delivery. On that basis, eleven library services are combining into five, adopting a shared services management model outlined in the report. At the other end of the scale, with a total population of 500,000+, the combination of Cork city and county offers balance, and a partner in scale for Dublin city. Four other public library services, Limerick city and county and Waterford city and county libraries united as part of total local authority amalgamations in Summer 2014.
2. A single library management system – Sierra Library Services from Innovative Interfaces Global Limited – is being installed in all public library services countrywide by 2016.<sup>5</sup>

---

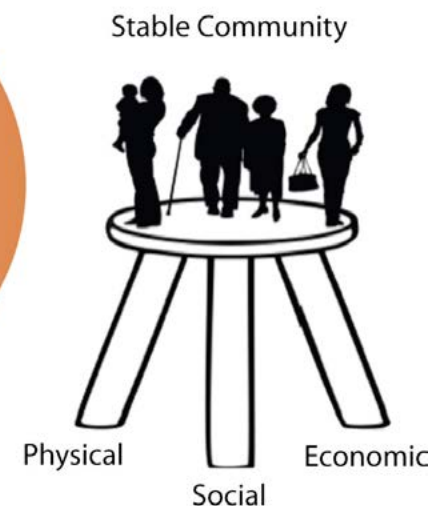
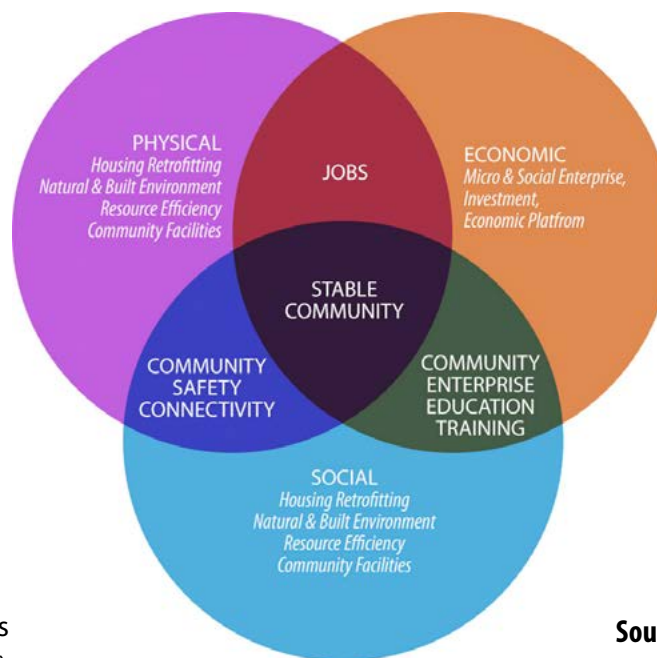
5 <http://www.iii.com/products/sierra> As part of project management, a website for the Irish project is at <http://lmsireland.ie> with access by invitation/agreement. Dublin City Council, Fingal County Council, South Dublin County Council, Dun Laoghaire/Rathdown County Council, Kildare County Council and Wexford County Council Library Services are contributing to Phase 1, thereby ensuring the first migration exercise involves at least one site for all current library management systems.

3. Minimum offers for core services are to be provided by all public library organisations. These offers are being determined by senior library managers engaged in a range of working groups. Examples include:

- a. A Literacy Working Group, which includes *The Right to Read Campaign* (DOELG 2014), has reviewed responses to a ground-clearing survey on current provision in that area. It is identifying three offers which can be branded and offered countrywide.
- b. A Business, Enterprise and Employment Working Group has also undertaken ground-clearing research, and initial development is proposed via a series of pilot sites and exercises.
- c. The minimum offer from public library services to primary schools has been agreed and is due for announcement soon (Spring 2015). Work on the offer to other schools is ongoing.

As well as quantification, research overall reveals the diversity of projects and programmes offered by public library services across the country. Achievement of a common offer is an essential pre-requisite to national promotion. A challenge for all, in addition to innovation, is to scale up best practice, to mainstream where suitable and, most importantly, to ensure sustainability.

Sustainability is supported by the overall management structure for the Strategy, which has a strong focus on inter-agency co-operation (see Appendix A). Chief Librarians on Library Working Groups also serve on overarching National Working Groups. Each of these national groups is chaired by the Chief Executive of a local authority. Relevant government departments, agencies and state bodies as well as expert and representative organisations participate on the National Working Groups. They offer broad-ranging context for the public library contributions to their areas of responsibility. Involvement helps potential partners grow in understanding of the capacity of public libraries to support their objectives. Participating librarians can



Source: Libraries Development, LGMA

develop the library proposal, educate and advocate more effectively in an environment where the minimum library offer is identifiable and where library service developments from that baseline are measured and demonstrably cost effective. The National Working Groups in turn feed into the Libraries Development Committee, which reports to the trinity of County and City Management Association<sup>6</sup>, the Local Government Management Agency<sup>7</sup> and the Department of the Environment, Community & Local Government<sup>8</sup>, all of which participate on the Libraries Development Committee.

This management structure for the Strategy and the location of Libraries Development within the Local Government Management Agency positions the Strategy and public libraries more centrally within local government than was the case for the two previous national public library development plans which had been directed by the Department and managed by the statutory

6 <http://www.lgcsb.ie/en/CCMA>

7 [www.lgma.ie](http://www.lgma.ie)

8 [www.environ.ie/en](http://www.environ.ie/en)

body, An Chomhairle Leabharlanna<sup>9</sup>. It could be argued that the current local authority focus is at the expense of contribution from other library sectors; they are represented now on a National Advisory Forum. Certainly the cross-library-sector-cooperation promise of *Joining Forces* (Ireland 2000) has not been realised. However, from the public library perspective that promise pre-required visibility as a unified sector nationally with common scaled platforms that would allow the combined public library network engage as an equal partner with for example, the National Library of Ireland and the university or technical colleges sectors. While initiatives like the Ask about Ireland portal and the inter-library-lending **Borrowbooks**<sup>10</sup> are well used and show potential, for an integrated national library service it is projects like the single public library management system that will create the opportunities for all library sectors, working together to combine and create added-value information resources and services for citizens. As one example, the use of the same Library Management System by Trinity College Dublin, University College Dublin and the Institute of Technology Libraries as well as by the public library sector can pave the way for universal access via a shared library membership card, echoing the current Danish model. The next strategy could be very exciting!

Staying in the present however, the management structure for the *Opportunities for All* strategy involves six of the thirty-one Chief Executives of local authorities directly in library business at national level. It mainstreams the service within local government concerns, as a frequent, on-going item for development via the County and City Management Association. This attention offers a broader and more strategic perspective for the Strategy, a better informed and more involved body and hopefully a more committed senior management that can improve integration for library services within local government activity.

---

9 An Chomhairle Leabharlanna: The Library Council was abolished in 2012. [http://www.viron.ie/en/LocalGovernment/LocalGovernmentAdministration/News/MainBody,28056,en.html](http://www.environ.ie/en/LocalGovernment/LocalGovernmentAdministration/News/MainBody,28056,en.html)

10 [www.askaboutireland.ie](http://www.askaboutireland.ie)

Recent changes in local government offer growth opportunities for the public library service. The new municipal and borough structures within Councils can give higher visibility for individual libraries as well as the total service in terms of their contribution to culture and community development locally, beyond the acknowledged lending and educational activities. Local authorities have been restructuring following reduction in their range of responsibilities and following reduction in access to other national or regional public services that are also affected by the national austerity and reform agendas. Some local authorities have responsibility for local government services on a countrywide basis. Shared services with service level agreements, both internally and externally, are increasingly common. Local Authority corporate prioritisation on employment and economic development, customer care, communications, reduction in social exclusion, are areas where libraries can contribute. Libraries can be key players also within the emerging Community and Development Committees and their Plans.

Opportunities, however exciting, require resources to be realised. Overall Ireland's public library service has been impoverished from recent national austerity measures. Recovery for public services can be expected to be slow for some time to come. That usage of public libraries has been sustained is a credit to library management and staff commitment as well as a possible indicator of the nature of the recession and the wide range of sectors on which it impacted. However, membership needs nurturing to grow – the nature and range of library usage needs to be measured and communicated so that cost-benefit cases are convincing. Librarians appreciate that while some people are life-long users, others dip in and out of services as their life experiences require. Major transitions impact on usage. Life events such as new employment or unemployment, moving home or emerging health conditions, can highlight information need for periods. Fundamental issues such as access to transport, literacy and e-literacy, levels of engagement in society will also have an impact. The relevance and therefore use of the local library as a support for personal and social development depends on the quality of the service – staff expertise and information resources as well as access.

The Strategy seeks, as a minimum, a modest €3.77 stock-spend per person per annum by 2017; currently most library services operate below that target. Although the stock spend represents a small part of the overall cost of service, provision of suitable information resources is at the heart of library services. At community library level, suitable resources is the link between the individual or organisation representative and staff; it provides the basis for the offers that library staff make – loans, cultural programmes, access to e-resources and learning opportunities around research and evaluation of information sources. The information offer is vital, a credibility issue. To invest in buildings and staff while failing to invest generously in the information offer which sustains usage does not make sense. It is an illogical management strategy which needs to be challenged positively.

Free membership for all, universal membership and optimum opening hours are other elements in the Strategy with delivery dates of 2017. A new capital programme for library buildings is scheduled for 2016.

Given variations in scale and capacity across parent local authorities, the aim to achieve parity country-wide for library services and to offer a credible common minimum offer across all core services as a starting point is ambitious. Local authorities will have to prioritise investment in their library services. Naturally, librarians are determined that their most developed services locally, indicative of local priorities of need, are not reduced to deliver the minimum as an optimum. The offer must be realistic but ambitious. Advocacy for the necessary resources is essential.

The September 2014 report *Managing delivery of effective services* offers guidelines for workforce planning and library management structures. Four hundred and ninety four management posts are identified as necessary for public library service delivery country-wide; individual services submitted their total requirement across all grades to central government earlier this year. Services are categorised into four bands, with scaling based on population. To accommodate both dispersed and more centralised delivery models, guidelines address the management complement for individual branches

serving immediate populations and for the service-wide population overall, another scaling exercise. Also, an initial Regional Resources Team of five Senior Executive Librarians is being established to support delivery of the Strategy and collaboration at regional and national levels.

Paralleling measurement of current services delivery, the Strategy promises Benchmarks from central government in areas such as usage, opening hours, collections, information technology, community activities and alternative service delivery models. Publication is imminent. New national service indicators of

1. Visits and
2. Library service cost (to include its percentage of local authority corporate management costs) have been identified for application countrywide.

The two elements of manpower planning and of benchmarking are essential to progress. However controversial the manpower planning and management structuring may be, with its perceived *winners* and *losers*, it offers certainty after a period of stagnation and staff reductions. It can be the basis for a way forward to improvement. Opportunities for professional development and promotion can be created. Benchmarking provides another evidence tool that librarians can use ongoing. Benchmarks can assist creation of progressive five year development plans<sup>11</sup> due in 2015. With both managements' and councillors' support, benchmarks can help lever additional resources for service growth. While the requirement for leadership within the library service and for senior management support without may be most obvious in the eleven authorities embarking on shared services delivery models, it is necessary everywhere. Excluding the known unknowns of national recovery, success or failure of the Strategy depends on the quality of support that must be offered by the Chief Executive, senior managements and Councils. In turn, librarians cannot expect support unless the cases made are evidence-based and persuasive from a cost-benefit as well as a community-gain perspective.

---

<sup>11</sup> New Guidelines are due in Spring 2015.



National development priorities for social and economic progress are addressed by the *Opportunities for All* Strategy as far as the purposes of the public library movement can contribute. Public library roles in the Strategy integrate also with local government's repositioning as the lead organisation supplying stability, connectivity and direction to more specialist agencies as well as creating an environment supporting enterprise and active citizenship.

For the public library network, service priorities were determined in the development phase of the Strategy and are agreed. Necessary compromise on areas of differing practice for agreements on common procedures to achieve the single Library Management System will deliver a major prize – with benefits of universal membership, emerging national collections policies, resource sharing and creation of new information products and services. Determination of core services and expression of consistent offers to the public, across those core services, requires reorganisation of existing resources. Additional resources will be required in many cases; development shared across several or all public library organisations can be shown to reduce costs as well as provide visibility for the consistently high quality programmes and initiatives. At present, both are examples of effective collaboration in action.

A clear understanding of environment and development priorities in which the public library operates is a first requirement for relevance and credibility as a player in national recovery. Public librarians at community, organisation and national levels interact with a diverse range of activists across many sectors. Advocacy is an everyday, ongoing activity. Within the Strategy structure, the advocacy opportunity for librarians involved in working groups is obvious. The advocacy requirement for chief librarians developing services at organisation level is evident also. Most powerful is the advocacy contribution of staff interacting daily with the public, where the impact of library action is most evident and where development requirement is identified.

Collaboration is so much more than co-operation. Shared goals are achieved by working together with a strong communal determination to realise an identical objective. Gain in the areas of greater resourcing, acknowledgement

and reward in the face of competition for finite resources, are features of effective collaborations. Through collaboration, and a new leadership model, public librarians have been pivotal in the creation of an ambitious but realistic strategy for development over the next three years, which will aid national recovery. Now public librarians can deliver this strategy.

*Fionnuala Hanrahan. BA, DipLib, MLIS, MCLIP, FLAI is County Librarian, Wexford County Council, and a member of Libraries Development Committee, Local Government Management Agency. Within the Strategy management structure, she participates in the Working Group on National Shared Services and in the Opportunities for All National Working Group.*

## References

- Ireland, 1998. *Branching Out: A new public library service*. Dublin: Stationery Office. <http://www.environ.ie/en/Publications/LocalGovernment/PublicLibraries/FileDownload,539,en.pdf>
- Ireland, 2008. *Branching Out: Future Directions*. Dublin: Stationery Office. <http://www.environ.ie/en/Publications/LocalGovernment/PublicLibraries/FileDownload,17652,en.pdf>
- Ireland, 2014. *Managing the delivery of effective library services*. Dublin: Department of the Environment, Community & Local Government.
- Ireland, 2013. *Opportunities for All: the public library as a catalyst for economic, social and cultural development: a strategy for public libraries, 2013 – 2017*. Dublin: Stationery Office. Available at: <http://www.environ.ie/en/Publications/LocalGovernment/PublicLibraries/FileDownload,34861,en.pdf>
- An Chomhairle Leabharlanna/The Library Council, *Joining Forces: delivering libraries and information services in the information age*. Dublin. An Chomhairle Leabharlanna/The Library Council, 2000.
- Ireland, 2012. *Putting People First: action programme for effective local government*. Dublin: Stationery Office. <http://www.environ.ie/en/Publications/LocalGovernment/Administration/FileDownload,31309,en.pdf>
- Ireland, Department of the Environment, Community & Local Government, 2014. *Right to Read Campaign: supporting literacy in the local authority*. Dublin. <http://www.askaboutireland.ie/aai-files/assets/libraries/an-chomhairle-leabharlanna/libraries/public-libraries/publications/Right-to-Read-Campaign.pdf>