Joining Forces

Developing Policy for Libraries in Ireland

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The purpose of this paper is to outline the processes that we have put in place at the Library Council in Ireland to provide a framework for a national policy on library and information services. To put this in context, a brief description on the role of the Library Council and on the Irish library structure may be helpful.

Background

The Library Council advises the Minister for the Environment and Local Government on public library issues. The Minister is responsible for all local authorities and their services, including public libraries. The Council also advises the local authorities on the improvement of their services and receives the major part of its funding from these authorities. We also have the national role for library co-operation in Ireland. These are two of the reasons why we have taken the lead in policy formulation, encouraged by our colleagues in all library and information sectors.

In 1996 Ireland had a population of 3.6 million and an area of 70284 square kilometres, which gives a population density of 50 inhabitants per square kilometre. We have 2,000 libraries and information services operating with a staff of over 3,000 in the public, private and voluntary sectors.

By far the largest is the public library sector, employing 1300 staff in 322 branch libraries and 28 mobile libraries. Public Libraries will spend IR£48.6 million (62.3 mecus) on their services in 1999. The number of items in stock is 12 million and at least one million people use their services annually. There are 32 library authorities most of which have automated their services. There are over 1,000 personal computers available for public use in our public library buildings and this is proving to be our most popular new service.

Preparing the Ground

The primary policy makers for libraries in Ireland are the three government departments of
- Education and Science,
- Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht (the Irish language speaking regions) and the Islands and
- Environment and Local Government.

Of course, the Department of Public Enterprise, which has the brief for the national communications infrastructure, has a crucial role in the promotion of the information society and the integration of networks. This makes the Department a key player in delivering our services.

We have a wide range of professional bodies, support agencies and representative groupings which influence and filter policies through to individual sectors. They are crucial to library developments in Ireland and needed to be included in our planning for this ambitious project. We started the project by consulting with them on how to move forward from a proposal by the Irish National Focal Point for the EU Telematics

Programme on such a project to a reality where agreement on a policy framework could be achieved. [1]

The outcome for our consultative process was that all these Government departments and sectoral interests welcomed the initiative. They were prepared to take an active part in the project. Even more important than the moral support offered by these major players, was their financial support.

Our parent department, the Department of the Environment and Local Government, recognised the Library Council as an appropriate body to prepare the document in 1997 and we set ourselves the task of realising it in August of that year.

One of the primary motivations behind the policy was a recognition that opportunities might be lost without co-ordination, since libraries in Ireland, like those in Catalunya, are run by a wide variety of organisations, both in the public and private sectors. A further common challenge was that libraries and information agencies operate under the direction of a number of government departments. These government departments would only achieve optimum results in terms of library and information provision when they collaborated in the collective interest.

We expected that a national policy would enable libraries:
- to make a unified case to government for investment;
- to lead library and information services staff to necessary change;
- to persuade users and potential users to exploit our services;
- to foster an appreciation of what libraries can and would achieve with the co-operation of other stakeholders.

Legislation

A range of laws affect libraries in Ireland:
- Public Libraries Act 1947;
- Local Government Act 1994;
- Heritage Act 1995;
- The Cultural Institutions' Act 1997;
- Universities' Act 1997;
- Freedom of Information Act 1997.

The Copyright Bill, 1999 is currently before Government and the usual complex context surrounds libraries. . We are also bound by EU Directives, as in your country. Our legal context is therefore constantly changing.

The Information Society

The growth of the Information Society is built around information and communications technology, as in other countries. The strength and growth of the Irish economy has brought with it some notable skills shortages in our field, as in others. We need to attract and retain a talented workforce. The values of lifelong learning and social inclusion are major elements of the government's agenda. We needed to ensure that our

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[1] Further details on the background to this project are available on our web site http://ireland.iol.ie/~libcounc

library and information services are visible, relevant and contributing to the policy and legal framework and in line with the agenda of the Irish government. There are excellent opportunities for increased funding of libraries if projects are firmly based on developing an inclusive information society in Ireland.

Structure

Recognising the importance of consultation, the Library Council agreed with the Department of the Environment & Local Government on the structure of the project. We agreed a timescale of two years. We employed a project team comprising four library researchers. The team reported to the Council's Assistant Director and was given high level direction by two advisory groups: a working party which met monthly with the research team; and a consultative council which met four times during the life of the project.[2]

Timescale

- Project began in August 1997;
- Deadline for submissions from the public was May 1998, following national press advertisements in February 1998 inviting views on the development of a national policy for our library and information services in Ireland;
- Survey report of all services that libraries provide was completed in August 1998;
- Consultation took place in November 1998, with over 100 experts, policy makers and key influencers on policy developments as they relate to libraries;
- Delivery of policy document to the Library Council was June 1999;
- Library Council made a decision on the contents of the document and future steps in September 1999;
- The decision to proceed to presentation to the Minister for the Environment and Local Government was agreed by the Library Council in September 1999;
- Presentation to Cabinet for ratification as national policy by the Minister for the Environment and Local Government or alternative actions will be the next step.

Working Party

The Library Council established a Working Party consisting of representatives of eight key sectors: university, national and public libraries (3), Department of Environment and Local Government, the Information Society Commission, Telecom Éireann (now renamed Eircom, the national telecommunications utility), the European Commission office in Ireland and the Library Council.

Our project team, assisted by the working party needed to take into account several relevant initiatives:

Public Library Services Review Group Report(1987);

EU Telematics programme developments (1990-8) including library applications;

COLICO (the all-Ireland committee on library co-operation, managed by the Library Council) report *Resource sharing in Irish libraries*, Brenda White (1996);

Euro-Focus on Libraries (the Irish National Focal Point) proposal for policy formulation and implementation (1995-96).

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[2] The representation on both groups is given in Appendix 1.

In a wider context, we also considered:

the setting up of the Information Society Commission (1997) by the Prime Minister's Department and its increasingly important role during the lifetime of the project;

the publication of *Education 2000* by the Department of Education and Science (Irish report on adult literacy) (1997);

IT 2000 (1997-2000), an initiative which would develop schools information technology (IT) infrastructure and train teachers in its usage;

the Government's Green Paper on Adult Education (1998);[3]

Implementing the Information Society in Ireland: an action plan (1999);[4]

Branching Out (1998)[5], the public library policy programme for 1999-2006 launched by the Minister for the Environment with a projected budget of IR£93.5million (120 mecus).

This latter initiative has now finished its first year of operation. The Minister has provided IR£8.6million (11 mecus) to increase IT penetration, provide new buildings and transport and upgrade the stock in public libraries, as a first step. A steering group to oversee the eight-year plan is in place, supported by the Department.

Project Terms of Reference

- To make recommendations on a national policy for the overall planning, co-ordination and development of library and related information services resources and systems;

- To recommend mechanisms for the implementation, monitoring and review of the national policy;

- To identify appropriate developments and strategies in and outside Ireland which will affect national policy and recommend appropriate action;

- In view of rapid development in the environment in which libraries operate to identify and prioritise targets on a phased basis, within defined timescales.

Methodology

Firstly the project team at the Library Council set out the preferred methods of operation. In conjunction with the working party, it would identify stakeholders, tease out the issues, formulate a vision and then make the case, including recommendations for future development. Benchmarking was thought to be important for the future, as was promotion of the role of libraries and information services for the benefit of Irish society. We received 125 submissions: 98 came from libraries, state agencies, the voluntary sector, local authorities and cultural bodies. The remaining 27 came from individuals. Everyone agreed on the benefits that could be expected from the policy. Principally the desired outcome was clarity of vision, which would encourage and promote strategic alliances and cooperation between libraries and other sectors for:

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[3] A White Paper is due for release on adult education shortly.

[4] This plan was prepared by a high level group of civil servants representing the key Government departments.

[5] The report is available at http://www.environ.ie/press/publib.html

- Investment
- Research
- Training and
- Marketing.

The emphasis would be on providing solutions to Irish issues. A major part of our operation was a series of over 100 consultations amongst stakeholders, including the completion of some detailed questionnaires in order to develop strategies. Stakeholders were identified in a wide variety of organisations and groups: the state and its agencies, library and information services providers and staff, funding bodies, the business sector, research agencies, and European agencies and interest groups. Equally important were the non-statutory sectors, representative organisations, users and potential users of library and information services (LIS), commercial information services, communications services, cultural and heritage services, and education and training bodies for the LIS sector. The voluntary sector is a significant information provider in Ireland. We needed to have a clear picture of the linkages and status of their services as well as their potential for co-operation.

Emerging Issues

Our working party advised the project team continually throughout the twenty-two months of the project. They agreed that the issues that emerged as having high priority from both the submissions and the consultations could be summarised as follows:

Access and service delivery

- Services: their depth and breadth
- widening participation to all / social inclusion mechanisms
- legal issues
- information resources and how they should be funded
- opening hours and availability of services

Structures and organisations

- organisational structure of LIS as one cohesive unit
- buildings and their functions
- staffing issues
- technology applications

Progress and development

- Marketing our services
- Research and development of library and information services
- Co-operation, collaboration and partnerships into the public and private sectors
- co-ordination to optimise the benefits

Our project team consolidated these issues and considered them in the light of existing policies, where appropriate, teasing out the details during the consultation process and filtered the results back through the working party. In turn, the agreed documents, which formed the basis of the national policy framework, were put before the consultative council at the landmark stages of the project. In addition the staff at the Library Council generally gave feedback and support on various aspects of the project. We had the added

advantage of having a library service and research collection based in the Council at our disposal.

Recommendations

The main policy recommendations which emerged from these processes deal with the following eight areas:

Networking
- automation of public library service in order to provide wider participation;
- Inter-connected grid for all libraries in Ireland;

Training and development
- Programme of Continuing Professional Development to be formulated and implemented;

Marketing
- National marketing drive to be developed on all library and information services with targeted markets to be exploited and reviewed;
- National analysis of user needs has to be undertaken in all sectors;

Research
- We need to encourage a culture of research for LIS in Ireland;

Social inclusion
- Library and information services should actively support social inclusion mechanisms at national, regional and local levels;

Information resources
- The general public requires access to information in electronic form. It makes good sense to co-ordinate access to these services in order to avoid unnecessary duplication in what we offer;

Co-operation/collaboration
- Local and regional emphasis on access and in joining forces in a sensitive way to provide seamless services while recognising the challenges presented in so doing
    - through co-operation
    - through cross sectoral collaboration with cultural, educational, health, economic and research bodies to reach concerted arrangements and to provide integrated planning and programming of services for the benefit of all

Co-ordination of development
A number of mechanisms were put forward to the Working Party and the Consultative Council:
- Interim Standing Committee/Task Force should be established to bring forward the reports findings and take account of the responses to the report;

- Round Table should be established with appropriate representation from all sectors;
- Policy Co-ordination Council to be placed on a well developed footing;
- Policy Co-ordination Committees addressing the various issues;
- Co-operative model with organisations accepting joint responsibilities;
- Regional Policy Co-ordination Councils following up recommendations within their individual jurisdictions.

Conclusion

The final outcome of this central deliberation was to propose an interim solution. The report has been completed on time. The final report was submitted to the Library Council in June 1999. On approval in September it was submitted to the Minister of the Environment and Local Government. We hope he will bring it to Cabinet for agreement. We expect it will signpost areas for further policy development. The Library Council will not be found wanting in preparing a strategy for implementing the policy if so invited.

These are exciting times indeed!

Appendix 1

Consultative Council:

Department of the Environment and Local Government (Chairperson)
The Library Council
Euro-focus on Libraries Committee, national node for the Telematics programmes of DGXIII in the European Commission
Enterprise Ireland, state agency for indigenous industrial development
National Library of Ireland
COLICO
Council of Institute of Technology Librarians
Library Association of Ireland
Department of Library and Information Studies, University College Dublin
Trinity College Dublin
CONUL, Consortium of National and University Libraries
Department of Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and the Islands
Department of Public Enterprise
Higher Education Authority
Department of Education and Science
Telecom Éireann
Local Government Computer Services Board.

Working Party

University Librarian (Chairperson)
Library Council
Department of the Environment and Local Government
National Library of Ireland
County Librarian
Information Society Commission
Commission of the European Communities (Irish office)