

Health Education England

Response to an open consultation on *Libraries Deliver: Ambition for Public Libraries in England 2016 – 2021.*

As leaders of the strategic development and quality assurance of NHS library, information and knowledge services, Health Education England (HEE) is pleased to contribute to the consultation exercise on the future of public library services in England.

HEE published *Knowledge for Healthcare* as a development framework for NHS LKS in 2014. Ensuring provision of information to patients and the public lies at the heart of our vision of service development:-

NHS bodies, their staff, learners, patients and the public use the right knowledge and evidence, at the right time, in the right place, enabling high quality decision-making, learning, research and innovation to achieve excellent healthcare and health improvement.¹

Partnership working is at the core of our strategic approach. Nationally we are pleased to be collaborating with the Society of Chief Librarians, Public Health England and the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP). Across the country local services are cooperating with their colleagues in local authorities.

Please find below our comments on the draft document.

Broadly speaking we welcome the shared Ambition for Public Libraries in England proposed by the Libraries Taskforce. We note the wide range of bodies that have been involved in its development, the ambitious view that it takes and the emphasis it places on public libraries as central to the development of communities, underpinning reading and literacy; health and wellbeing; economic growth; culture and creativity and learning.

We particularly welcome the recognition that public libraries are a “cradle to grave service”; that they are vital to both the physical and mental health of the public and that public libraries support the development of digital literacy.

We have a number of observations and suggestions for the Taskforce to consider and we will welcome the opportunity of discussing these with you:

- Librarians – not libraries: The document speaks of “what libraries can achieve” and what “libraries deliver”. Whilst we all understand what is being said here, we think it is important to emphasise that “libraries” in themselves, do not *do* anything. It is well-trained, experienced and qualified library staff that design, deliver and evaluate the library service.
 - The document often refers to “skilled, friendly people”. Great front-line customer care matters. It is important that all staff, employees and volunteers alike, are well trained.
 - However, there is little recognition in the document of the central importance of the expertise of staff qualified in library and information studies. It is professional, qualified librarians who weave the golden thread to which Sieghart and the Panel refer in the *Independent Library report for England*. It is they who direct and shape the library service as “the supplier of an infrastructure for life and learning” that “underpins every community” and enables the transmission of information. We recommend that this critical success factor is emphasised in order to realise your vision
 - The draft Ambition document rightly identifies the wide range of skills required to deliver your vision and the need to “develop the workforce”. Workforce planning and development is a key work-stream for the NHS as we implement Knowledge for Healthcare and we will be pleased to look at opportunities for collaboration to achieve this.

- Digital literacy: We suggest that while the Taskforce has recognised how important this is for a “strong sustainable and democratic society” in the 21st century, there is not enough emphasis on the skills the public need to evaluate digital information and resources in order to make life-style decisions. This is important when it comes to the millions of health-related pages available on the Internet. We recommend that the Taskforce strengthens section 7 on digital literacy to include the explicit mention of digital health literacy “...the ability to seek, find, understand and appraise health information from electronic sources and apply the knowledge gained to addressing or solving a health problem.” [European Union (2014) *European Citizens’ Digital Health Literacy* p.2]

- Collaborative working to achieve health and wellbeing: In section 8 “Purpose 3: Health and wellbeing” we believe the Taskforce has provided an excellent framework for showing how public libraries can underpin and improve the health of the nation. The role of qualified and well-trained librarians able to identify, signpost and evaluate health information is crucial here. You refer to “partnerships” as an “integral part of ...health”. We support this and highlight the strong partnerships that are developing between NHS librarians and their public library counterparts at both national and local level. We are already working closely, to support public

librarians to deliver information directly to patients and the public. There is a myriad of straightforward, practical ways in which this can be achieved:

- by signposting to reliable resources to support self-care, self-management and shared decision making
 - by introducing people to simple criteria around how to evaluate public and patient information.
 - by working with colleagues in the NHS to Make Every Contact Count, and with Patient Advice and Liaison Services, to support the health and care workforce to ensure that patients, carers and families can access the health information they need.
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- Evidence-based planning: this is referred to in a number of instances in the document with an emphasis on “data-driven community-informed mapping exercises”. We believe this does not go nearly far enough. The evidence base for the impact and optimum design of library services, and best practice by librarians, is limited. We need to see this invigorated through cross-sectoral investment in both qualitative and quantitative research to inform decision-making about public investment and choices about service delivery models to meet the needs of communities.

We are delighted to welcome this report. We share your ambition to secure the future of public libraries by delivering new ways of working, service excellence and a public library service in England that the public uses to enable a democratic, healthy and prosperous society.

HEE would be happy to be proactive in supporting the implementation of your *Ambition for Public Libraries in England* in an appropriate way, and to meet to discuss this further.

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Reference

1. *Knowledge for Healthcare*, Health Education England, Dec 2014.
<https://hee.nhs.uk/our-work/research-learning-innovation/library-knowledge-services>