

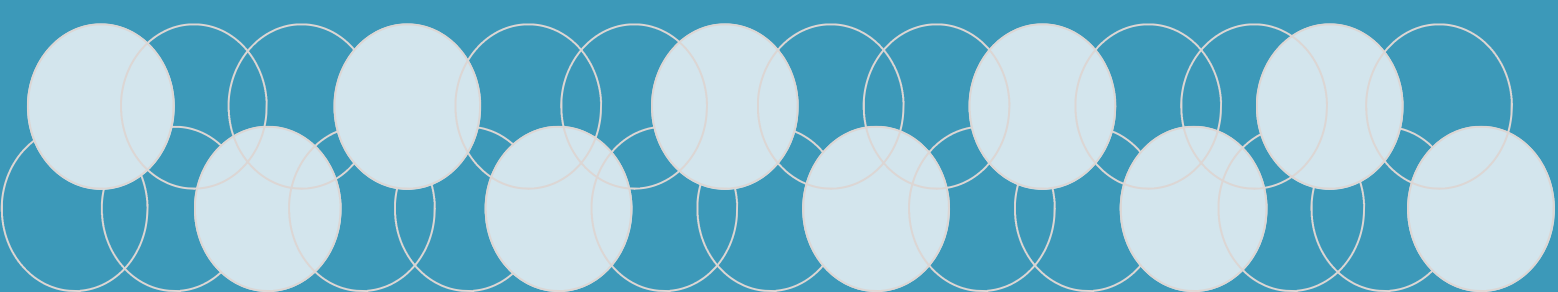


Scottish Library & Information Council



Highland Council self evaluation 2009

Public Library Quality Improvement Matrix (PLQIM)



Summary

Highland Council library staff used the Public Library Quality Improvement Matrix (PLQIM) to focus on the ways in which the library service meets readers' needs through its activities and resources and the ethos and values of the service.

From detailed discussions with staff, the public and other stakeholders; visits to libraries; and a review of the evidence, it is clear that the library staff are working hard to provide extended reading choices for the public. The number of issues is improving, the number of borrowers is rising and the percentage of the population who are active borrowers is showing a steady increase.

Good use has been made of national opportunities to improve stock and training, with support for both the Big Plus in Libraries initiative and the national Reader Development Network. Key strengths include Am Baile the bilingual web resource of Highland culture and the intergenerational reading group in the joint community and school library at Dingwall, which is an example of best practice enabled by the joint-use facilities. Promotion and display work is good and new initiatives such as the introduction of self-issue in 9 locations releases staff time to spend in reader development work or extends library opening hours.

There was evidence of consultation with stakeholders and a good relationship between frontline staff and their customers. Libraries provided a positive welcoming environment and have a range of initiatives which promote inclusion, equality and fairness. There is a range of staff training and job descriptions and person specifications are regularly reviewed.

Feedback from the visits clearly shows that whilst the services are highly valued by their users, there are a number of issues for the local authority to consider: lack of capacity in rural authorities for service development and the costs and logistical challenges of delivering services in very remote, rural parts of Scotland.

In both indicators, services had important strengths which are having a positive impact. The offer to readers is rich and varied, with the Opening the Treasure Chest initiative, reading groups, a Books on Prescription scheme, Well Read and family literacy initiative. The second quality indicator reviewed, ethos and values, has key strengths including developing and improving services for specific user groups. SLIC's main concern is the diminishing capacity within the management team to continue with this as the staffing is reduced.

As part of the Public Library Quality Improvement Matrix, staff have identified a number of areas for improvement and this will form the basis of an action plan on which to build better services.

Quality Indicator 3 Meeting readers' needs	
<i>Identification of reading interests</i>	Satisfactory
<i>Choice of activities and resources</i>	Good
<i>Opportunities to improve literacy and numeracy</i>	Good

Quality Indicator 5 Ethos and Values	
<i>Sense of identity and pride in the civic space</i>	Very good
<i>Reception and atmosphere</i>	Good
<i>Customer service</i>	Good

Levels

This report uses a six level scale, as follows:

- excellent – outstanding, sector leading
- very good – major strengths
- good – important strengths with areas for improvement
- satisfactory – strengths just outweigh weaknesses
- weak – important weaknesses
- unsatisfactory – major weaknesses

Introduction

Sited in all types of communities and with extensive mobile library service provision, libraries remain one of the free universal services for communities where the population can visit as individuals or in groups to pursue reading for pleasure, learning or hobbies. Libraries can support the business community, individual and community information needs and are inclusive of all age and social groups, nationalities, genders and religious beliefs. The delivery of high quality information and library services to individuals and communities helps people to develop their skills, realise their aspirations and contribute to the economic growth and well-being of the country. Libraries encourage the use of digital technologies by communities and individuals providing access to information, learning and culture.

The first public library legislation in Scotland was passed in 1853 and the base legislation is the 1887 Public Libraries Consolidation (Scotland) Act, so local authorities have a statutory duty to secure the provision of adequate library services for all persons resident in their area. Library services make a significant contribution to delivering the Scottish Government's five strategic priorities, as well as local council and community planning objectives.

Background

The Highland Council is the most northerly land-based council service in the UK. It covers a 25,000 sq km area- 1/3 of the landmass of Scotland but has a population of 211,300, only 4% of the Scottish total.

The library service has 40 community libraries and 9 mobiles, 21 secondary school libraries and the Library Support Unit. Since the last review, a part of the piloting of the Public Library Quality Improvement Matrix in 2006, the 8 decentralised area management structure to a two area arrangement. There have been reductions in staffing, including the central support for the schools library service.

The enormity of managing resources for a council area the size of Highland was apparent from a comment that there were two delivery vans to meet the needs of a land-mass the size of Belgium.

Process

Building on success: a public library quality improvement matrix self evaluation toolkit, prepared by the Scottish Library and Information Council (SLIC) provides the framework for the process. Highland Council Library Staff chose to look at Quality Indicator 3 Meeting readers' needs and Quality Indicator 5 Ethos and values. Staff worked together to identify and evaluate evidence about the impact and outcomes and their findings were presented to SLIC.

Working with the assistance of an external verifier, Alison Hunter, Principal Libraries Officer East Lothian Library Services, SLIC reviewed the evidence and carried out discussions with members of staff, a wide variety of partners, the public and the management team on 27th May 2009. Visits were made to Dingwall Library and the Badenoch Centre, a joint facility with a leisure centre, library and learning centre.

SLIC would also like to thank all those who participated. Time was spent talking to members of the public about the service they receive. These arrangements helped SLIC to come to a balanced view on the outcome of the self-evaluation.

Quality Indicator 3 Meeting readers' needs

Strengths

- Access to a wide range of reading-related activities
- Intergenerational reading group at Dingwall
- Partnership working with ABE and Highland Adult Literacies Partnership to support literacies learners

Identification of reading needs

The stock contract has recently been renegotiated. In 2007-08 supplier selection of the centrally-purchased stock of adult fiction was piloted and proved successful. This is being extended to the areas. The Area Libraries officers are allocated funding in proportion to their area's issue figures and number of active users. They then order online from their desktops. The Senior Librarian Stock Co-ordinator collates the orders and monitors the stock across the service and identifies gaps or balances provision between adult and children's materials. The potential for greater use to be made of the library management system to extract information about borrowing trend and reading interests to inform stock selection has been recognised. Although this creates work, there is already some evidence from services using the approach of its effectiveness. The Senior Librarian Stock Co-ordinator's post is currently vacant so it is a good initiative for the new post holder to take forward.

The Talis library management system manages stock transactions, as well as controlling the acquisition of materials. Approximately 10% of business is conducted through the online library catalogue, which allows customers to review the catalogue, place requests, manage their accounts and renew items. Issues have been falling in recent years but showed an increase in 2008-09. Visitor numbers continue to grow, as do virtual visitors. Active membership levels are steady.

The request service is free of charge and nearly 80,000 requests are processed on an annual basis. Requests can be made online or in community libraries, and suggestions for stock are also made by frontline staff. Over 2500 inter library loans are made each year. Items which cannot be supplied from stock are considered for purchase and other items are obtained on loan from the National Library of Scotland or the British Library.

There is a special focus on Scottish material and Gaelic and the programme of author visits includes Scottish authors. A local bookshop supplies a wide range of Scottish titles to meet readers' need.

Choice of activities and resources

A wide range of activities relating to reading are organised by the service for even the small communities. It is worth considering that two thirds of Highland's libraries are single-staffed and time for development work or the delivery of events is limited. Highland Libraries currently supports almost 100 adult reading groups and 15 for young people. Dingwall Library is an integrated service in a secondary school and they have experimented with an intergenerational reading group which is a most interesting development and public feedback is very positive. There is a Reading Group Forum for discussion and feedback. Currently reading groups have access to multiple copies of 108 titles.

There is a programme of events, including author visits, Book Festival participation in Inverness, Nairn and Ullapool and Readers' Days. The launch of the Read Mòr national reading promotion which supported the Highland 2007 Year of Culture took place at the Sutherland Readers' Day in North Highland College, Dornoch. SLIC's concern is the lack of specialist staff to co-ordinate the range of reading events for children, young people and adults. Recent reductions in staff posts will result in diminished capacity and there is a risk that the current good work simply falls away.

Highland Libraries staff have been active participants in the national Reader Development Network since its inception. This programme has provided considerable benefits in terms of specialised training and participation in national reading promotions. The quality of the display work is of a high

standard and reader development skills have been cascaded to other members of staff in local training events. It is important to continue to carry out cascade training to refresh skills, share new ideas and to ensure that new members of staff have appropriate skills.

The mobile library service is one of the key strengths of the service and accounts for around a quarter of library issues. The individual nature of the service results in a very high value being ascribed to it by users and to those who live in very remote rural settings; the mobile library is a vital social and community link. It's disappointing that the Council has reduced the mobile service as it will have a detrimental impact on those who feel they have very little else in terms of local public services.

Highland Libraries are active partners in Bookstart and their interest in developing the 'offer' to children led to the Scottish Government's Public Library Quality Improvement Fund project, Opening the Treasure Chest, in 2007. This builds on initiatives like the Summer Reading Challenge to give children up to 12 years old living anywhere in the Highlands access to a public library programme of reading for enjoyment, reading for information and developing use of the public library as a community resource. It delivers equality of access to Rhymetimes/Storytimes and primary school class visits to all Highland children. Through the Highland Virtual Learning Community, children and young people have access to many resources to stimulate and encourage reading. These have been put together by school library staff in Highland. The Highland Book Awards is another example of good promotion of reading.

A Scottish Arts Council funded Audience Development project is in progress. Library services often overlook engaging with non-users and lapsed users. This work is not yet complete but it will help to inform service provision, bring new audiences to libraries and improve the satisfaction rates of existing users. The results of this project will be of interest to the wider community

Provision for readers

Reading materials are available in a range of formats including large print, spoken word and Braille. Assistive technology is available on demand. There is a Well Read scheme, in partnership with NHS Highland, including a Books on Prescription services to support health improvement and independent living. Another special collection, *The Family Shelf*, is aimed at families and seeks to encourage good parenting.

Highland Libraries have excellent partnership working with the Highland Adult Literacies Partnership and ABE teams and good use has been made of national opportunities to improve stock and training, with support for the Big Plus in Libraries initiative. Staff took a leading role in developing and rolling-out training to raise literacies awareness across Scotland's public library staff in a SLIC/Learning Connections programme in 2005/7. Libraries support the needs of literacies learners through participation in the BBC RaW campaign and the Big Plus in Libraries. Good resources and close working with partners has brought value-added benefits to learners.

The area has attracted significant numbers of workers from new European member states, presenting new challenges particularly in terms of providing language material. A Scottish Government Public Library Quality Improvement Fund project from 2006/7 helped to release staff time through the installation of self-issue terminals to develop services and stock for Polish workers. Links with the Polish community are good and a Polish storytelling session was held recently for children aged 3-7 at Inverness Library.

Areas for improvement

- Continue to cascade reader development training to support users
- Staff co-ordination of events to ensure that the current good work continues
- Explore ways of reaching readers to increase input from the community, possibly using social networking
- Introduce more evidence based stock management approaches

Quality Indicator 5 Ethos and values

Strengths

- Am Baile the bilingual web resource of Highland culture
- Teamworking and contribution of individual members of staff
- Understanding of local communities' needs
- Partnership working
- Improvements in facilities through co-location and refurbishment

Sense of identity

Heritage and local culture are well promoted within the library and there are many examples of good initiatives. One of the ways in which the library service promotes a sense of identity is through the Am Baile initiative. Am Baile, the Highland history and culture digital resource, is based at the Library Support Unit. Originally funded by the New Opportunities Fund, the collection now has a range of funders and provides a valuable and growing resource for the Gaelic and English speaking community. Am Baile received a COSLA Award for Excellence as a mark of its quality. It is worth noting that Am Baile is the largest source of new Gaelic writing and recent work preserving the words and phrases of a local dialect, *The Cromarty Fisherfolk Dialect*, is important to Scotland's cultural heritage.

As part of the visit, verifiers had the opportunity to meet a range of partners. Some of the partners included representatives from ABE, Archives, Health Visitors, Service Points, the Neil Gunn Writing competition, Family First and Highland Council Community Learning and Leisure Senior Managers. Feedback was consistently positive. It is clear that library staff are working hard to engage with stakeholders. Multi-member wards and multi-faceted structures have led to a reduction in influence in local areas and it is important that the contribution of libraries is recognised. A weakening of political and local support will lead, inevitably to further cutbacks in service so the library service would benefit from an improved profile at the Ward Forum level.

Library profiles have been created for each library. These should show the impact and outcomes for communities as a result of activities. The governance structures are complex and there is a concern over the level of detail required for some of the self-evaluation/quality assurance frameworks. With staff posts contracting, opportunities should be sought to streamline processes but still record impact and outcomes, allowing external bodies to follow up for more detail if required.

Neil Gunn Writing Competition has been running for the last ten years and Highland Libraries have been involved in promoting the competition and supporting the organisation. Although there is written work on generic themes, many of the entries are closely connected with Highland and the way of life. Other ways of encouraging a sense of identity and place includes *High Societies*, an interactive website of community information and resources launched recently. As mentioned under Quality Indicator 3, Highland Libraries have already take steps to improve the range of materials available to new workers and their families, through close working with the Polish communities.

Reception and atmosphere

There is no doubt that some of the buildings have shortcomings which prevent them from being suitable for a modern library service but investment is beginning to improve interiors. Participation in the national readership development training programme has given staff access to retail techniques training and displays and library layouts are more attractive as a result. Although space can be very tight in some buildings, in others it is possible to allow Community Groups to have space for their own displays and the Gaelic Society's library is housed within Inverness library.

External signage is weak and there are not directional road signs, which would be helpful for tourists seeking to use library facilities for free internet access, local information or recreational reading. The interior signage is good and the leaflet developed to guide customers to information in the library *Where's that book?* is a useful tool for customers.

Dingwall Library is a large space, well divided into smaller areas which balance the needs of users from the Bookstart Rhymetime to the intergenerational reading group. There can be occasional problems with noise but overall this is a good solution for a small community and is in line with the shared services agenda. Highland Council have a number of shared use libraries and these are developed within the community planning context. The Badenoch Centre has a community on the first floor with an adjacent *LearnDirect* learning centre. There are leisure facilities on the ground floor and a self issue terminal and small collection of books is available for use by the public during the leisure centre's opening hours which are much longer than the library's. Self-issue terminals have been installed at nine facilities to extend library provision.

Staff are welcoming and follow the Highland Library Guidelines. There is a welcome pack for new users and feedback from customers was positive. Comfortable seating has been included where possible but there is some way to go to achieve the relaxed buzz of the high street bookshops. The provision of tea/coffee facilities would, for example, be welcomed. In some libraries staff have to achieve a difficult balance between providing access to a wide range of reading materials and leaving enough room in for the public to browse and study in comfort.

There is good publicity material through the local media and the Highland Libraries website has updates of library and information events on a regular basis. Not only does it promote specific events but it also builds towards a general message about the welcoming and engaging nature of the library for all sectors of the community, whatever their abilities or interests.

Customer Service

Highland Council uses a Core Competency Framework and staff complete Personal Development Plans for review. Customer service is good and there is a focus on good customer care skills from induction training onwards. Highland Libraries staff attend one day *Caring for Internal and External Customers and Learning Leadership Through Customers* courses. However, this customer care training needs to be rolled out to the wider staff, including relief staff and Customer Care Standards implemented. Rolling out customer care training has implications for travel and subsistence budgets, which can be very significant in large rural areas, but a well-trained workforce is important in frontline services.

Continuing professional development is encouraged and senior staff are involved in activities run by the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals, including mentoring of new professionals through the professional awards programmes. Three members of staff, John Dempster, Carol Hart and Joyce Watson have recently completed the Education, Culture and Sport, Support for Leadership qualification.

Many of the customers are regular users and their reading and information interests well-known to staff. Whilst there is generally a good relationship between frontline staff and customers, the 2007 Customer Survey found that 84% library users describing staff as 'very helpful', indicating that there is still some work to be done. The changes in staffing, some through retirement, has meant that there is an additional pressure on staff to sustain service quality at existing levels. This has resulted in good teamworking and individual members of staff

Areas for improvement

- Raise profile of libraries with political stakeholders
- Roll-out Customer Care Course to all staff
- Develop training for handling challenging behavior
- Continue to improve public facilities and refresh buildings internal and external appearances

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