

Proposed changes to the library service

Response to consultation feedback regarding Quantitative Analysis

Much of the consultation feedback focused on the suitability of the Quantitative Analysis of Service Requirements to assess the library needs in Oxfordshire. In this response, we maintain that the methodology followed was a robust and reasoned attempt to compare the potential of different library sites to form the basis of the core service.

This paper outlines the council's chosen methodology, discusses alternative methodologies and their inherent weaknesses, and responds to criticisms of the original analysis.

Page references in this paper relate to the Quantitative Analysis of Service Requirements document which can be found on the County Council's website at:

<http://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/cms/sites/default/files/folders/documents/leisureandculture/libraries/consultation/DataPaper26May.pdf>

Summary of Chosen Methodology

The council set out to determine the levels of local need across the county from a 'zero base'. This simply means that the analysis would not be based on historical patterns but would measure libraries against a set of objective, forward-facing criteria – as if there were no current network.

The council determined that, all else being equal, the most appropriate areas for library sites would be:

- a) where the highest numbers of people already either live, work, or study (where people *are*)
- b) where people regularly shop for convenience goods and where public transport access is high (where people regularly *go*).

This suggested five key criteria to determine local need :

- Need due to population density
- Need due to students/pupils
- Need as a result of employment
- Need due to shoppers
- Availability of public transport

We measured each criterion within half a mile of each library site then translated the scores into a 100 point relative index. As a sense check on

these rankings, they were compared against alternative ways of ranking, including using a 1 mile radius. We also compared them against the ranking derived from current library usage. We then supplemented the five key criteria with a series of ward level indicators, giving a more detailed breakdown of the particular needs of each library area (see pages 23-25 and library profiles).

We then placed libraries into broad groups on the basis of their scores and different configurations of these groups were considered in shaping the proposal.

The distinct library groups in the proposal were therefore determined on the basis of the number of people living, working, studying, and shopping within a half mile of the site, and the density of public transport in the area around the library.

Alternative approaches considered

Usage – Comparing libraries by their current usage levels was the most commonly suggested alternative criteria. However, differences in usage are a reflection of a number of factors, including local demand, the quality of facilities, levels of book stock and opening hours. All of these factors look at historical data and are not a reliable way to look at the most appropriate locations for the future core service from a ‘zero-base’.

It was our intention that the analysis would be undertaken on the basis of ‘need’ rather than ‘demand’, as this would more closely align with our statutory duty to provide a comprehensive, accessible service to the greatest number of current users, lapsed users, and people who currently do not use a library. An assessment based on usage would align more closely with current ‘demand’ than ‘need’.

Unit cost – One further suggestion was to rank the value of libraries on the basis of unit costs (cost per issue, cost per visit). The problems with this approach are similar to the current usage approach since it is based on facts such as the rental value of the site, the level of book stock, the number of visitors/issues. The presence of historical anomalies across the network prevents a zero-based comparison of the merits of each area by these criteria.

Catchments - A number of submissions suggested that any criteria of need should be measured within the ‘catchment’ area of each library.

There are a number of problems with this approach. Catchment areas derived from the locations of current users overlap significantly, making it impossible to reliably determine the limit of any library’s catchment. Furthermore if users were travelling a significant distance to access a library, they could, with relatively little inconvenience, use an alternative library within a similar range, assuming that the library was in a convenient and accessible location.

Defining catchment areas by geographical proximity to other libraries results in a different set of problems. Libraries in isolated locations would have larger catchments than those in better connected places, irrespective of the convenience for the majority of people in accessing either location.

If derived from the home addresses of all current users, the catchment area of Oxford Central library would extend well beyond the boundaries of Oxfordshire. If derived from proximity to other libraries, its catchment would cover a small fraction of the city. Neither method would reliably reflect the potential of the location to be accessed conveniently by a large number of potential users.

Using either method to derive current 'catchment areas' presents the further problem that we can not necessarily anticipate the geographical patterns of usage that would emerge around a future comprehensive service based on need.

Council response to areas of criticism

The criticisms made of the assessment process can be broadly divided in the following key areas:

1. Chosen criteria
2. Half mile catchments
3. One size fits all methodology
4. Urban/rural
5. Use of data
6. Transparency
7. Equality groups
8. Growth/future needs

These are discussed in turn in the pages that follow.

1. Chosen criteria

Feedback

There was some criticism that the report uses a set of criteria (live, work, study, shop, transport) which do not have a proven link to library use.

Response

The council has statutory duty to meet the library needs of all persons living, working and studying within the local authority. The council felt that the most appropriate way to meet this duty was to consider the libraries in the network by a set of objective criteria which could include any individual, whether a current user, non-user, lapsed-user, or future user.

The criteria of live, work, study and shop were therefore chosen for their universality, rather than any explicit link with usage. Very few people do not either regularly work, shop or study at some point in their general routine, and most of us have a fixed address. The final criterion of transport was included to ensure that sites were in areas accessible to high numbers of people who may not currently visit the area regularly. We determined that a high score on these criteria in the area around a library would equate to a site with high potential to meet universal needs.

The fact that the rankings of locations on our chosen criteria do closely align with current usage levels (with a few exceptions - page 19) suggests that the approach is at least a reasonable one.

2. Half mile 'catchments'

Feedback

A number of responses felt that the half mile radius was too small to include the whole population of library users.

Response

As stated in the paper (page 9), we are aware of this but do not consider it a limitation:

"The measure does not show all people who *might*, or currently *do*, use a library but allows for fair comparisons between the relative potential of library sites, whether they currently cater for a broad or narrow catchment of people."

As mentioned above (Alternative approaches considered), a deliberate decision was taken not to calculate catchment areas based on the usage of individual libraries since this would not allow us to look at the service from a zero-base.

Half a mile was chosen since it represented a reasonable walking distance for an able bodied person. Over a greater distance, the patterns of travel that users might take becomes much more complex and are therefore difficult to model reliably.

The impact of calculating the rankings based on a 1 mile radius was also considered, but had a relatively minor impact on the final rankings (page 20).

3. One size fits all methodology

Feedback

It was suggested that in assessing all libraries on the same criteria, the chosen methodology was not comparing 'like with like' – smaller libraries should be assessed by different criteria to large ones, due to the different functions they play within a community.

Response

As outlined above, the method was developed to assess how best to meet the library needs of the county as a whole. It would be contrary to the spirit of consistency if preferential weighting were given to village libraries.

Although assessing all libraries by the same criteria was felt to be the fairest way to make comparisons, we acknowledge that different libraries are used in different ways and by different groups of people. The increased involvement of friends groups will ensure that the one-size fits all approach to assessing library sites will not translate to a one size fits all approach to service delivery.

4. Urban/Rural

Feedback

A number of responses suggested that the proposal treated rural libraries unfairly.

It was also suggested that the decision to measure only people within a half-mile/mile radius further disadvantages rural areas since rural library users often travel further than this to access a library.

Response

The analysis took as a starting point those areas where there were greater concentrations of population based on their 'live, work, study, shop' activity. In using these criteria there is no predetermination of the outcome of locations, simply a consideration that these criteria would enable the authority to consider how it could comprehensively and efficiently deliver its library service.

This does not equate to bias in the analysis. Data has been interpreted, analysed and presented consistently for all sites, irrespective of their location.

It should also be noted that the proposal acknowledges the important role played by smaller libraries as a focal point for their local community. Through the development of community and community-plus libraries these locations will continue to provide a valuable community space in areas assessed as meeting lower levels of need.

Looking at the point of origin of library users we can see that libraries in large population centres draw users from a much wider area than libraries in more sparsely populated areas. It would therefore be unfair and illogical to use a larger catchment area for smaller libraries since this reflects neither the realities of current usage, nor the aspiration to locate core libraries in the most accessible and convenient areas of the county for the majority of the population.

If the radius was expanded as suggested, to 5 or 10 miles for all libraries, it would only accentuate the differences in density between rural and urban areas.

5. Use of data

Feedback

A further criticism was that insufficient information was given on the limitations of the data, in particular the lack of 'confidence intervals' in the analysis.

Response

The data in this analysis is not used statistically to infer whole population behaviour from a sample. Rather, populations are compared and ranked. It is not appropriate to apply 'confidence intervals' to data used in this way. The shopping data methodology is the only exception to this.

As mentioned in the Frequently Asked Questions, there is potential for sampling error in the shopping dataset given that it is derived from survey samples. However, any sampling error in the shopping data would likely be randomly distributed rather than predisposed towards any particular outcome.

Due to the potential for sampling error, we tested the impact of removing the shopping data from the analysis. This had a minimal impact on the final rankings of libraries (see page 22).

6. Transparency

Feedback

It has been suggested that the council has shared insufficient information for users to make an informed decision on the proposals.

Response

Attempts were made to make the report accessible and it was deliberately not written in an 'academic' style. In response to feedback however, full referencing was provided in the Frequently Asked Questions, which were posted on the County Council's website.

Regarding the desire to examine the underlying data, much of the data was purchased under commercial licence and the council is not permitted to share it in an unaggregated format. Every effort was made to share sufficient information with interested parties.

7. Equality groups

Feedback

A number of respondents felt that insufficient attention has been paid to the needs of people with particular library needs, namely children, the elderly and the disabled.

Response

In addition to the criteria of live, work, study, shop and transport, the report considered the proportions of particular targeted groups in the area around each library, drawing attention to the specific needs of each community. This information was summarised in the published library profiles.

Libraries ranking in the top 20% of wards across a range of indicators were identified (pages 23-25). It was on the basis of significant levels of deprivation, rather than on the number of people who live, work, study and shop in the area, that Berinsfield was included in the core offer (page 41).

A detailed Service and Community Impact Assessment, assessing the impact of the proposal on all equality groups is attached as an annex to the cabinet report.

8. Growth/future need

Feedback

Some respondents questioned whether the methodology, and the datasets used, took sufficient account of population growth and the changing population of the county and the impact of this on future patterns of needs.

Response

The council used the most up to date data available to assess the number of people living, working, studying and shopping in Oxfordshire. Furthermore, the positions of libraries were tested against predicted future growth using the council's own population predictions, which are based on proposed housing expansion and migration patterns (see pages 25, 49).

The fact that the majority of libraries in areas likely to experience high growth were in groups 1 and 2 suggests that the proposed core network is currently well positioned to meet future needs.

Two community plus libraries (Faringdon and Grove) were identified as being in areas likely to experience proportionately high growth.

Given that local circumstances will change over time, it is recommended that the Quantitative Analysis of Service Requirements is reviewed in four years,

or earlier if deemed appropriate, to ensure that the service meets the needs of the changing population (e.g. housing growth).