



67th IFLA Council and General Conference

August 16-25, 2001

Code Number: 152-136-E
Division Number: III
Professional Group: Public Libraries
Joint Meeting with: -
Meeting Number: 136
Simultaneous Interpretation: Yes

The IFLA/UNESCO Public Library Guidelines

Philip Gill

Guidelines Project Coordinator, Coventry, UK

At the last three IFLA conferences I have given a paper on the revision of IFLA's Guidelines for Public Libraries. On each occasion I have given a progress report and asked for comments on the draft we had prepared. These were lively meetings and an important part of the consultation process. The comments we received were very useful to us in finalising the revised document. Today my task is a rather different one for I am happy to announce that the Guidelines are complete and have been published by K.G.Saur as an official IFLA publication. Importantly the Guidelines have for the first time been endorsed by UNESCO, who have also generously provided funds for them to be translated into the UNESCO languages.

This morning, therefore, I want to give you the details of the publication and an outline of its contents. There will be an official launch of the new version of the Guidelines on Wednesday morning at 9.00 and you can order the revised version at either the K.G.Saur stand.

This publication is part of a continuum in IFLA's policy making on public libraries. This started with the first version of the IFLA Public Library Manifesto in 1949, continued with the second Manifesto in 1972, the "Standards for Public Libraries" published in 1973, the "Guidelines for Public Libraries" published in 1986 and most recently the third version of the Manifesto published in 1994.

The Manifesto is an important statement of principle but Committee of the Public Library Section realised there was a demand for a more detailed document and that the dramatic changes in the information world had rendered the 1986 Guidelines obsolete. In drafting a document, which we hoped would have world-wide relevance, at a time of unprecedented change in ways of storing, accessing and using information we faced a number of challenges. Perhaps the most significant could be summarised as follows:

Is it possible to produce guidelines and standards for public libraries that will have relevance world-wide?

What is the role of the public library in this age of rapid and dramatic development in information and communications technology?

Does the public library have a future or is it a 19th Century institution which has no future in the 21st century?

There was a clear message from the outset that librarians were hoping for some international standards that they could use in developing their public libraries. In some areas, notably building standards, this is very difficult but we have given examples of standards used in different countries. We have proposed some standards in staffing levels and collection development that we think will be useful to librarians in many societies. As well as standards we have included brief summaries of initiatives and services to illustrate the text. This is a feature of the guidelines and we have included 79 examples from 44 different countries. We do not say these are the most outstanding examples of public library provision but they are an indication of the way public libraries in different countries have responded to the challenges they face. We hope these examples will give both ideas and encouragement to those who use these guidelines.

It is no exaggeration to say that the last few years have seen the most rapid and dramatic developments in information and communications technology in history. The public library is radically affected by these developments. Even in the three years of the project the changes have accelerated and there is little sign of any reduction in the speed of change.

There were those who said that we should promote the adoption of information technology as the basis for all future development with the implication that we should not support the development of print-based services. The developments in ICT, particularly the Internet give public libraries many exciting opportunities which many have taken eagerly and in a creative way.

There is another story. The United Nations Human Development Report 1999 while stating that the Internet was the fastest growing information tool also revealed that South Asia with 23.5% of the world's population had less than 0.1% of the world's Internet users. A quarter of the countries of the world have less than 1 telephone per one hundred people. The risk of a growing gap between the information rich and the information poor has never been greater. This gap is not just between countries but also between groups and individuals within countries. The UN Report says "determined efforts are needed to bring developing countries and poor people everywhere into the global conversation"

This presents public libraries with an exciting opportunity to help bring everyone into the global conversation. To do so should the public library nail its colours firmly to the technological mast and accept that print-based and other services should no longer have a high priority?

We took the view that to fulfil the principle of access for all libraries must continue to provide information in a variety of ways, for example through print and the oral tradition. While becoming the gateway to the electronic information world they should not close the other doors through which knowledge and information are provided. This presents public libraries with a major challenge and their success in meeting it will determine the future of public libraries.

This begins to answer the question: does the public library have a future. Working on this project has made me realise how, though we live in a world dominated by market forces, public libraries throughout the world at different stages of development and with varying levels of resources are continuing to grow in response to public demand. As long as public libraries meet the needs of the public and act as an agency for change they will continue to develop. They must also meet high standards of service as they are in competition with other agencies for people's time and specifically with other information providers for public interest and support. If they lose that public support they run the risk of becoming irrelevant and

losing their place in the social fabric. We believe these guidelines will help public librarians to achieve these goals

I will show you the structure of the new guidelines and go very quickly through the approach we have adopted. For more detail I suggest you get a copy of the guidelines themselves.

We have highlighted what we see as the three key roles of the public library. Different societies give these different levels of priority. It is very important that priorities are agreed and maintained to ensure the most effective use of resources.

Education
Information
Personal Development

Support for formal and informal education has been a key function of public libraries since their inception. For many countries it is the primary role of the public library service.

The acquisition of reliable information is vitally important enabling people to enjoy fulfilling lives and be fully participating citizens. There are now many ways in which people can access information so public libraries have proved by their performance that they are one of the key agencies. They require policies, plans and services to enable them to provide high quality information services.

Public libraries have always played an important role in providing opportunities for personal development. They provide a range of ideas, opinions and creative experience not available anywhere else. Many people, famous and otherwise have said how their lives have been changed by the use of public libraries. The provision of books and other materials including access via information technology, paid for by the community and for the use of the community, brings the world's knowledge and literature to everyone. This is an amazing achievement and makes the public library a unique institution.

Librarians have always been concerned with the quality of the information they provide and organising access to it. In this changing information world this remains a core function. The librarian is now the knowledge navigator presenting new and exciting challenges in this information age.

To fulfil its functions the public library should be supported by legislation and adequate and sustained funding. They should be well governed and administered. It is very important that they represent all ranges of human experience, free from the risk of censorship. Librarians and their governing bodies must uphold these basic human rights and resist pressure from individuals and groups to limit the material available in the library.

Public libraries must aim to meet the needs of their users. The guidelines stress the importance of community needs analysis, user involvement and the judgment and experience of the librarian as the key factors in determining the shape of the public library.

A fundamental principle of the public library is that it should be available to all and not just to the able-bodied, literate adults able to visit the library. The public library must be service-focused, developing services that meet user's needs and delivering them where they will be most effective. Library services must go beyond the walls of the library and the development of information technology provides many new ways of accessing services from the home or the workplace. We have heard of many imaginative ways in which the service is provided.

A high standard of customer care should be an integral part of all policies and procedures. User education is increasingly important with the advent of information technology. No public library, however large and well-funded can meet all the needs of its users from its own resources. Public libraries should be part of networks and resource-sharing schemes to enable them to meet the public's demands.

Libraries are made up of collections of information and cultural materials in a range of formats. We have proposed standards for collection development while recognising that these will have to be adjusted to meet local circumstances. The key criterion must be the relevance and currency of the collection not its size. Organising access to materials in the library and beyond is an important part of collection development.

Staff are a crucial part of any library service. We have included what we see as the main duties of the librarian though no list can be exhaustive. Library staff must maintain high ethical standards if they are to retain the confidence of users. Effective staff training is vital at a time of such major changes in library and information services.

The quality of management is an important element in the provision of a successful library service. Library managers must develop skill to enable them to provide effective leadership and build good working relationships with their governing body, the staff and the public they serve.

Public libraries will not realise their full potential if they are not actively promoted in the community. Librarians should develop marketing and promotion plans and be able to work with the media and in the community. We should not forget that satisfied users are the best advocates for the public library.

This is a very brief outline of the major statements within these guidelines. I hope you will obtain a copy to enable you to examine in more detail the conclusions that the working party have reached after a lengthy consultation process and see how the guidelines relate to your own situation.

What happens next? As I have explained the guidelines will be translated into the UNESCO and IFLA languages. We have already received a number of requests to translate the guidelines into other languages, and the translation work has already started in some countries. The Public Library Manifesto is now available in over twenty languages and it is my hope that these new guidelines will be available in at least as many languages. If, therefore you want to organise translation into your own native language contact IFLA Headquarters who I am sure will be happy to give you permission to do so.

With the participation of public librarians throughout the world we have spent three years drafting and refining these guidelines and standards. Our hope is that you will make use of these guidelines in meeting the great challenges and opportunities that public library services now face. You now have an additional weapon in the battle to provide exciting and relevant public library services. We wish you every success in achieving that important goal.

Philip Gill