



World Library and Information Congress: 70th IFLA General Conference and Council

22-27 August 2004
Buenos Aires, Argentina

Programme: <http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla70/prog04.htm>

Code Number: 120-E
Meeting: 131. Public Libraries with Statistics & Evaluation
Simultaneous: -
Interpretation:

Recent developments in the application of statistics, standards and performance indicators in public libraries in England

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ABSTRACT

This paper makes a case for the use of performance indicators in public libraries and argues that they are required by various stakeholders and at various levels of aggregation. Library managers should have regard to the substantial body of work accomplished already to provide them with effective tools for performance management. The paper draws attention to recent work in the UK on public library plans and public library standards and to recent work on impact assessment in the UK and elsewhere. It goes on to draw attention to relevant EU-funded recent work by the projects LIBECON, CALIMERA, PULMAN and LEARNEAST, including a statistical framework for benchmarking public libraries internationally.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is written from the perspective of a former library manager who has always used statistics to benchmark the performance of libraries firstly within a local system of libraries, then nationally and now internationally. As a profession we owe it to ourselves, to our users and to other stakeholders, including taxpayers and politicians, to develop and use the best tools we can. Elsewhere I have made the following case for statistics and performance indicators:¹

“The key questions driving the agenda for the measurement of the performance of libraries internationally are:

¹ <http://www.pulmanweb.org/DGMs/section2/PerformanceMeasures.htm> Pulman Good Practice Guideline on Performance Measures and Evaluative Tools. [This contains also a brief bibliography of key readings]. Available in many languages!

What are public libraries for?

- *Who controls the public library agenda? Is it a national, regional or local matter?*
- *Should public libraries be a broad service, catering for the whole community, or do they need to sharpen their marketing to demonstrate their value to and impact on specific client groups?*
- *Modernisation brings in issues concerning the Internet and electronic information and links the public library agenda to such issues as e-government, social inclusion, freedom of information, employment, education and economic well-being.*

What is a good public library and how much should it cost?

- *If a good public library now is different from the previous concept of a good public library, then new measures are called for. The development of Internet-based services makes this inevitable.*
- *If there is increased competition for public funds, so public libraries need arguments to win their share or to defend what they already spend. Sometimes the argument is purely political. Usually it is evidence-based, which is where performance indicators come in."*

Our profession can point to a long and honourable tradition of work in these areas. There exist international standards in this field, namely ISO 2789 International Library Statistics [2003] and ISO 11620 [Library Performance Indicators] both of which are under revision. ISO 2789 has its origins in pioneering work by IFLA and UNESCO. Similar tools do not exist for archives or museums, which makes international statistical comparisons in those domains impossible.

There is a very significant literature on public library performance but disproportionately it originates from the USA and the UK and is not translated. Even when language is not a barrier, many librarians ignore these issues, to the ultimate detriment of their service, their readers and their taxpayers. We should pay attention to our colleagues' efforts and not think we have to invent the wheel. It is often much cheaper to translate good work than to duplicate the original research.

Our work in this area should always have regard to the library's objectives and to the needs of the various stakeholder groups which include:

- Government, whose policy it may be to collect performance data as it is in the UK;
- policy makers and funders want to know whether public libraries are effective in reaching their objectives;
- library managers want to make the best possible use of the resources allocated to them;
- the public, both as customer and supporter, who want to know that the library will be there when they want to use it;
- advocates of public libraries;
- researchers acting on behalf of any or none of these groups.

The issue can be addressed at three levels: local, national/regional and international. Even public librarians themselves look at these areas from a number of perspectives.

Perhaps there are 4 typical groupings:

- **The librarian in charge of a one branch system**, which is not uncommon in some countries, will want to benchmark their own performance over time. Probably will want to compare performance with external peers. Will want to choose comparable peers. For example, a small rural library will learn little from comparing itself to a large urban system. For the first task, the librarian only needs to have clear and consistent definitions for data collection. For the second, another level of standardisation is needed, because the peer libraries have to use the same definitions to make comparison possible.
- **The librarian in charge of a multi-branch system** will want to do the same as in the one branch system, namely compare the performance of his or her whole system with external peers, but in addition will want to compare his or her own libraries with each other. To compare branches with each other, they need to be grouped into **families** according to relevant characteristics, for example mobile libraries, large central libraries, small rural libraries because although the same definitions will apply to all, the same targets or standards will not.
- The next level up, is **people with policy responsibility for libraries at state or national level**. They want to make comparisons between all systems in their jurisdiction. The level of detail [indicators] they require depends on their policy interests. This level implies standardised methodology for the selected indicators for the entire jurisdiction.
- **The final level is policymakers, researchers and librarians who want to make international comparisons between countries.**

As you progress through this hierarchy from the single branch to international comparisons, so the range of relevant statistics diminishes. Some measures which are significant at branch level are not relevant at higher levels. Some crucial local data is not susceptible to aggregation. This hierarchy of needs and interests also affects the presentation of the data. At branch or system level, you need monthly data where appropriate. Presenting it monthly with a moving average superimposed gives timely and clear indication of trends. External comparisons are usually only possible annually.

But statistics, standards and performance indicators are not universally popular with public librarians and are far from universally applied. The following arguments are used, sometimes with good reason.

- **Objection:** Data comes too late. I don't need a history lesson!
Response: Disseminate data in a timely fashion. At local level this is under your own control. At state or national level lobby for the responsible agency to be adequately resourced and to use modern collection and dissemination methods. See Informata's Bibliostat [<http://www.informata.com>] for a good practice example.
- **Objection:** The data I get are not in a convenient form for me to use.
Response: At local level you can change this. You can also influence what happens at state and national level.
- **Objection:** The data I get don't answer my questions.
Response: There are two possible solutions. Often statistical or performance data only points to areas requiring further investigation and does not provide a complete answer or action plan. This is normal. Sometimes the right data is not being collected. For example, at present many people want data on outcomes [impact] or electronic services. Getting this data is difficult presently but there is work in progress in a number of places. Sometimes, to get behind the data, you need to undertake process benchmarking.
- **Objection:** I can't afford the overhead cost of collecting the data.
Response : A lot of data can be collected automatically but significant effort is required to put the right systems in place. Managers should certainly review their activity in this area from time to time having regard to the needs of all stakeholders, local and national.

In the PULMAN Guidelines I recognise that there are indeed real problems which this conference can help to address.

“There are a number of problems in this field:

- *To have maximum impact standards need to be understood and applied at national level.*
- *The cost of data collection and analysis is higher than some libraries feel they can afford.*
- *The topics are considered “difficult” and are not widely understood.*
- ***Good practice is slow to travel and catch on [between countries and e.g. from the academic library to the public library sector].***
- *Measuring activity in networked environments is particularly difficult, yet this will be absolutely key to future use of both statistics and performance measures.*
- *Structures for dealing with these issues can be weak at national level. At international level they are very weak. “*

RECENT UK DEVELOPMENTS

The UK circumstances

In the UK, as elsewhere, local authorities have a statutory responsibility to provide public library services. The average size of library authorities is large by international standards. The population per administrative unit is nearly 290000, comparing with c.30000 in the USA, 17000 in the [old] European Union and less than 3400 for the new Accession Countries to the EU². The government department responsible for public [and national] library policy in England is the Department of Culture Media and Sport [DCMS³] which works very closely with the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council⁴ (MLA, formerly known as Resource) as the national development agency working for and on behalf of museums, libraries and archives and advising government on policy and priorities for the sector. MLA's roles are to provide strategic leadership, to act as a powerful advocate, to develop capacity and to promote innovation and change. Institute of Public Finance [IPF]⁵ is a consultancy which compiles and publishes statistics on all local government services, including public libraries and acts as the agent of DCMS relating to public library standards and plans.

Standards and plans

Currently significant changes are underway in this area. In the UK, local authorities receive about 85% of their running costs from central government grants and their services are overseen, influenced and monitored by Central Government to a larger extent than is normal in many countries. In the case of public libraries, the first main sectoral monitoring instrument was Annual Library Plans [ALPs]⁶ which library authorities first had to submit in 1998. To allow comparison and evaluation, all library authorities had to submit plans in a standard format. In the beginning, this was widely welcomed by the profession because the DCMS could ask councils to submit better plans in some cases. Plans were scored as follows:

- *“0 – the approach to the plan was inadequate. The authority should be recommended to resubmit the Plan*
- *1 – the approach to the Plan was poor*
- *2 – the approach to the Plan was satisfactory*

² Source www.libecon.org

³ http://www.culture.gov.uk/libraries_and_communities/default.htm

⁴ <http://www.resource.gov.uk/>

⁵ <http://www.ipf.co.uk/statistics/>

⁶ <http://www.libplans.ws/> This website is managed by IPF for DCMS and provides outlines, guidance and the actual plans submitted.

- 3 – *the approach to the Plan was good.*”

But from the outset there were reservations about the fact that **plans** were scored, not **achievements or services**. Poorly performing authorities could submit good plans and vice versa. Equally, the process was perceived as time-consuming and bureaucratic. Over time the process was modified twice. In 2001 to a single, rather than a 2 part plan, and from 2003 ALPs became “Position Statements” and the best authorities were exempted from providing them.

Readers interested in the technicalities of how the plans were scored will find details on <http://www.libplans.ws/>

Plans have probably been a success from the point of view of libraries in that they have focussed political attention on public library services and led to local improvements. They are losing ground because there is a perception in the UK that monitoring of local authority performance has gone too far and that service specific methods are the methods to sacrifice rather than other generic programmes such as the inspection regime operated by the Audit Commission.⁷ Obviously nobody would argue that it is good for public libraries not to have a plan.

The next stage of development, provoked by criticism of the planning process, was to create Public Library Standards against which to measure actual service performance. In 2001 “Comprehensive, Modern and Efficient Public Libraries – Standards and Assessment” was published⁸. These standards were the first of their kind in England and did not replace anything which previously existed. The approach was taken from the outset that performance against them needed to be monitored so the focus was statistical, using the existing data collected and published by IPF. Mainly the data came from the annual Public Library Statistics, but one or two standards were calibrated on the PLUS Survey, a voluntary standardised questionnaire instrument aimed at public library users.⁹ The PLUS survey instrument is capable of adaptation and translation for use in other countries and allows user satisfaction rates to be compared between library authorities. Nevertheless, for political reasons, one or two standards were included but for which no comparative data was available.

DCMS aimed for a situation where **all** libraries progressed into the top quartile. At the same time, no additional central funding was made available for public libraries except for money for The Peoples Network, described below. There was criticism from the profession when the standards were published that because they were SMART [specific, measurable, achievable, results oriented, time-bound], they only measured what **could** be measured and not what **should** be measured. It was pointed out that electronic services were poorly represented and that impact measures were completely absent. In defence, it can be pointed out that no programme of research to develop new measures was undertaken as part of the work of formulating the standards.

So have the Standards had any effect? Standards can have bad effects by introducing perverse incentives. For example, if you set a standard for spending on building but not for stock or staff, you may end up with empty buildings and no customers. Another perverse effect can be that high spending authorities slacken their efforts. The DCMS Standards do not seem to have produced known perverse effects. Because no extra money was allocated, standard 1, for example [percentage of population living within a certain distance from a fixed library] is proving difficult to meet. Even with money available, new buildings are not erected in a day.

Examples of how managers might make decisions based on the standards might be as follows:

My library is very low on the standard for opening hours and very high on the standard for book acquisitions; I will spend less on books and more on staff to open the libraries;

⁷ <http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/>

⁸ http://www.culture.gov.uk/PDF/libraries_pls_assess.pdf The whole text can be found here.

⁹ <http://www.ipf.co.uk/plus/default.htm>

My library is slow to supply requested books; I will review my systems [and compare with others] to see how to improve performance; if necessary I will divert resources from an area which will not compromise my performance on other crucial standards.

I have not seen any independent assessment published. However, a self- assessment can be found, backed by statistical evidence, in Public Library Position Statements 2003 [Report on the assessment of the statements, Hilary Hammond, Institute of Public Finance]. In this report¹⁰ we find the following:

“There is no doubt that the introduction of public library standards has encouraged library authorities to improve the quality of their services. Between March 2002 and March 2003 the median number of standards that authorities have met increased from 13 out of 26 to 16 out of 26. Authorities also intend to continue to improve their services, with the median number of standards authorities intend to meet by March 2004 being 22 out of 26.”

Revision of the standards.

In May 2004, DCMS announced a Public Library Service Standards Consultation¹¹ by issuing consultation papers to the English Library Authorities and other stakeholders on proposed new Public Library Standards. DCMS describes the [new] proposed standards as “essentially a streamlined version of the existing set but with some modifications.” There is no space to go into further detail here except to say that it is proposed to drop some standards, merge others and recalibrate others in the light of current outcomes. All the detailed proposals for change together with the arguments supporting them can be found in documents available on the DCMS website.

DCMS intend to supplement the proposed service standards with impact measures designed to highlight the contribution that library authorities make to the communities they serve and to wider corporate objectives. These measures are in the process of development and are described below.

In its consultation letter, DCMS says the following about the purpose of standards in England:

“We recognise, because authorities tell us, the value of the public library standards as an advocacy tool and we hope that the new service standards, to be supplemented later by impact measures will continue to be helpful. However, in the context of the local government modernisation agenda the standards are intended to encourage improvement in the performance and penetration of library services. The Government’s general approach is to seek improvement that is “stretching” but achievable and we are trying to create revised standards in this vein.”

The DCMS Standards arose out of the politics of the place and time and are not suitable for wholesale adoption anywhere else. Naturally, some of the standards would be suitable for use elsewhere but there are many other models available on the web which could be taken into account when devising standards for other jurisdictions. A good aspect of the DCMS standards, is that they focus on the user’s perspective. Pressure, for example, to include a standard for the number of librarians to be employed, was not successful.

Whilst the self-assessment carried out on behalf of DCMS is encouraging, there are other voices which rightly point out that visits and loans in UK public libraries are still falling sharply.

¹⁰ Available at

<http://www.culture.gov.uk/NR/rdonlyres/edzklyp5wf2kwzuxgvlyuahawdx3bcyqf4uprxkfd64bgw sjumyksdpakak5qt5yn6tynrvrgkd5ruybwsa3o7ul35b/publiclibrarypoststatement.pdf>

¹¹ http://www.culture.gov.uk/global/consultations/2004+current+consultations/public_library_service_cons.htm?properties=2004+current+consultations%2C%2Fglobal%2Fconsultations%2F2004+current+consultations%2F%2C&month=

See, for example, Who's in Charge, published April 2004 which alleges management failings and insufficient investment in books and buildings.¹²

Work on impact measurement and new performance indicators

Whilst the work described above was going on, Resource was introducing The Peoples Network [PN]¹³, a project which has connected all public libraries to the Internet. Lottery-funded by the New Opportunities Fund and managed by MLA, more than 4000 library centres have been created through the initiative. New money available through this programme was £100m for IT infrastructure and £20m for staff training. To put this in proportion, total spending on UK public libraries is about £800m per year [c.1500m USD, about 30 USD/head]. This is the most important UK public library initiative of recent years.

Whilst the DCMS standards did have at least one relevant standard¹⁴, MLA thought that additional indicators were needed to cover this new development and commissioned work to evaluate the impact of the Network. Currently two documents are available, Evaluation of the People's Network and ICT Training for Public Library Staff Programme - [Interim Report](#) for the New Opportunities Fund and The evaluation of public library online services: measuring impact by Peter Brophy¹⁵. The key public policies being addressed through PN were lifelong learning and social inclusion. So evidence was needed to show that learning had occurred and that ICT access and training had attracted citizens from socially excluded groups into libraries.

Below we quote claims made for the PN on the MLA website. Some of them are old-style "output" measures, others are new output ratios [68.5 million hours] and some are outcomes [8000 jobs, 25000 people new courses etc]. This work is ambitious and promising.

- *"There are more than 4000 public libraries across the UK offering free or low cost broadband internet access and other services.*
- *Over 30,000 computer terminals with broadband internet access provide over 68.5 million hours worth of internet use very year across the UK.*
- *There are 3,500 public libraries in England offering more than 20,000 computer terminals.*
- *Many libraries provide extra support facilities (also known as assistive technology) so that people who find conventional computer facilities difficult to use enjoy and benefit from these services.*
- *More than 40,000 public library staff are trained to use computers and support people in their online learning and information needs.*
- *27% of People's Network users had never used the internet before. In the first few months of the service 25,000 people had started a new course or gained a qualification online.*
- *Already, 8,000 users have found new jobs thanks to the People's Network.*
- *52,500 people have used the service for activities supporting their local community"*

¹² <http://www.libri.org.uk/>

¹³ <http://www.peoplesnetwork.gov.uk/>

¹⁴ **PLS 6.** Total number of electronic workstations available to users per thousand population. 'Electronic work station' means a computer terminal with access to an on-line catalogue and/or the Internet.

¹⁵ <http://www.peoplesnetwork.gov.uk/impact/impact-issue-paper.pdf> The evaluation of public library online services: measuring impact by Peter Brophy

Impact measurement is a key topic at present of wide interest in a number of countries¹⁶. A convenient summary can be found in Peter Brophy's work [referenced 13 above]. Basically, impact measures try to answer the question "What difference did the library make?" Difference to what? In 2003 DCMS published a policy document called Framework for the Future: Libraries, Learning and Information in the Next Decade¹⁷. It outlined the [British] Government's long-term strategic vision for the role of public libraries. The areas in which the government wants public libraries to make a difference ["at the heart of libraries' modern mission"] are:

- *"The promotion of reading and informal learning*
- *Access to digital skills and services including e-government*
- *Measures to tackle social exclusion, build community identity and develop.* "

What may be surprising to many colleagues outside the UK is the absence of any mention of books or culture or cultural heritage. It is essential to understand these UK policy drivers and the extent to which they are influencing UK practice.

Because of this policy focus, other important work is also underway on the topic of learning and libraries. MLA has recently published Inspiring Learning for All: A Vision for Access and Learning in Museums, Archives and Libraries¹⁸. *Inspiring Learning for All* is supported by a *Learning Outcomes Toolkit* which will help museums, archives and libraries to research and understand what people have learnt from engaging with the experiences, activities and resources that they provide.

OTHER SIGNIFICANT RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

Libecon

Colleagues interested in international statistical benchmarking [at country, not library, level] should revisit the LIBECON site¹⁹. **LIBECON** is a study funded by the Directorate General for the Information Society of the European Commission within the 5th Framework Programme for Research.

LIBECON is a continuously updated database of statistics about library activities and associated costs in the context of their national economies. Data collected in past surveys has been added to the database, and visitors to this site can review past trends as well as compare national statistics from about 40 countries, including Japan and the USA. Latest data on the database at present relates to the year 2001. The statistics are now available in a very user friendly form and provided your country has supplied data, you can easily make international comparisons.

A commentary on the data is about to be published on the website. The public library commentary attempts for the first time to rank countries' public library services using available statistical data and come up with a top ten from the 40 or so countries in the database. The following indicators are used to make the ranking.

- Percentage of the population in membership. If the library is useless, nobody will use it, so the converse is good [if a lot of people use it, there is probably something good about it]. It also puts a premium on the user perspective and not on "librarianly" considerations.
- Visits per head. Comments similar to the above. Also tends to imply an adequate branch network. If the libraries are not there or never open or very run down they will not be much visited.

¹⁶ For a bibliography of links on impact measurement see <http://www.peoplesnetwork.gov.uk/impact/links.asp>

¹⁷ http://www.culture.gov.uk/global/publications/archive_2003/framework_future.htm

¹⁸ <http://www.resource.gov.uk/action/learnacc/00insplearn.asp#1>

¹⁹ <http://www.libecon.org/>

- Workstations connected to the Internet. Not many countries report this. Those that do had a good chance of getting into the table. The only “modern” indicator, but currently useful and meaningful.
- Book additions per head. All library users [and librarians] would agree that it is essential to replace the stock as rapidly as necessary.
- Audio-visual additions per head. Same as above except that modern media should be embraced by all good libraries.
- Loans per head of population. Implies eager readers and good stock and well placed accessible service points. Probably also implies good overall management and good marketing.
- Library staff per head of population. High figure not good if there are no outputs [loans etc]. But you will not get good services without sufficient staff of good quality.
- Loans per head of staff. A kind of cost effectiveness measure.

There is no real international consensus on what makes the best library service but if we have to make a judgement based on the internationally comparable and available **statistical** indicators then I think those in the above list are very mainstream, consistent with ISO11620 and in no way perverse or eccentric.

Possible contenders for inclusion in the list, but which are omitted include:

- Population per library because it is not straightforward to interpret in that it is affected by settlement patterns and transport patterns.
- Square metres of space because the data is not yet available.
- Stock per head because often high stock figures simply indicate too much worn out or otherwise useless stock.

Unfortunately there is no internationally available statistic on information services and nothing on children’s services either but arguably a library service cannot score highly on some of the other indicators [visits, loans per head] if these specialist services are poor. There is only one “modern” indicator [Internet]. We have no measures of impact but I do not regard this as a weakness for this purpose. There is no proxy measure for library automation and possibly a couple of countries in the top 10 are suspect in this respect.

I believe the measures included are not controversial. They are important to both users and professionals. Whilst in an ideal world additional indicators would be taken into account, we must make do with what we have and what we have is pretty good.

From this process which is more fully explained on the LIBECON website we get the following rankings which obviously includes only countries for which we have data:

Proposed ranking	
1	Finland
2	Denmark
3	Estonia
4	UK
5	Iceland
6=	Norway
6=	Slovenia
6=	Sweden
9	Lithuania
10=	Ireland
10=	Japan
10=	Netherlands

Observers of the public library scene will not be surprised by most of these names, but Slovenia, Lithuania and Japan are unexpected and deserve more attention. Clearly they are doing quite a few things right.

Projects funded by the European Union: Pulman, Calimera and Learneast

PULMAN²⁰ was a [European] public library network funded by the EU's Fifth Framework Programme for Research [FP5]. Its successor project is CALIMERA²¹, funded under FP6.

The PULMAN contributions to our topic include the following:

- The PULMAN guidelines [for public libraries], intended to lead public libraries into the modern era. They are intended to assist policy makers and practitioners alike in thinking about the policies and strategies which their services are intended to support and how best they can achieve them. They indicate what types of service can be considered and identify key issues which need to be examined in their development and delivery. Finally, they provide a large number of examples of, and links to, initiatives from across the whole of Europe, which may help to illustrate what is already being done and what can be done. The Guidelines are available in many languages and include a **guideline on statistics and performance indicators**.
- The Oeiras Manifesto [advocating the policy framework needed for modern public libraries] and a report [based on self assessment] evaluating where all the PULMAN countries are on the road to modern policy and practice in the light of the Oeiras criteria [Monitoring PULMAN's Oeiras Manifesto Action Plan].

CALIMERA is a successor project to PULMAN and includes many of the same partners but also extends its reach to local museums and archives. Included in its workprogramme and of relevance to our topic are the following tasks on **impact** to be completed within one year:

- To review the current situation in measuring the impact on users of services delivered at local level by cultural institutions (public libraries, museums and archives), including the measurement of digital services and benchmarking of the impact of specific inputs (e.g. lower cost digitisation).
- To organise an impact measurement seminar with invited experts from Europe and elsewhere to discuss and validate these conclusions.

LEARNEAST²² is a UK public library project funded by the EQUAL programme of the European Social Fund. It specifically aims to demonstrate that by targeting lifelong learning towards disadvantaged groups, public libraries can have an impact on their employment prospects. Before it ends in October 2004, the project will publish a toolkit on its website. This year [2004] there is a second call for EQUAL projects and more Public libraries are likely to become involved.

Outcome evaluation toolkit

My brief requested a UK perspective, which I have extended a little to cover recent European work, but in conclusion I would like to draw attention to an excellent US site for public librarians at local level who want practical help to engage with the outcomes or impact agenda, namely the University of Michigan's excellent free resource, *Putting Outcome Evaluation in Context: A Toolkit*.²³ Like Peter Brophy's work cited earlier this is an excellent introduction to the topic but in addition this toolkit will take you step-by-step through the process of conducting outcome-based evaluation in a practical way and includes a number of evaluation instruments. In my opinion, something similar is needed in every language.

²⁰ <http://www.pulmanweb.org/>

²¹ <http://www.calimera.org/default.aspx>

²² <http://www.learneast.com/>

²³ <http://www.si.umich.edu/libhelp/toolkit/preparing1.html>