
Report

Laser Foundation. *Libraries Impact Project*. PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP, July 2005. Available at: <http://www.bl.uk/about/cooperation/pdf/laserfinal6.pdf>

This report was commissioned by the Laser Foundation and carried out by PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP 'in response to the perceived urgent need for the public library sector to be able to demonstrate to local and national government the scale of its contribution to the interests of society'. The general aim was to define and measure in a reproducible way the full impact that libraries have in influencing and supporting their local communities and to ensure that robust data would be available to confirm evidence of impact. The Steering Group managing the project worked closely with those working on the Department of Culture, Media and Sport Impact Measures and has produced indicators which are complementary but separate from the DCMS measures. The indicators are intended to assist local authorities in developing their impact measures and understanding how they might be best used. Seven public library authorities, mostly notable for their sophisticated approach to performance measurement, participated in the study.

The report looked at shared priorities between central and local government and identified four particular priority areas: children, education, health and older people. The report argues that libraries make a clear and measurable contribution to wider policy priorities at both local and national levels. Perhaps, rather obviously, the report emphasises the need to look beyond book borrowing measures. The pilot authorities who contributed both quantitative and qualitative data highlighted a significant contribution to the development of adult skills and child literacy in the education and children shared priority area. The data demonstrated a clear contribution to government objectives on patient and public involvement in health and for older people, the data shows an impact on a range of themes around quality of

life and general well-being as well as national policy priorities on strengthening independent living. The report identified a number of benefits to developing approaches to impact measures:

- Focusing attention on the need to show evidence of how libraries engage with a range of policy areas
- Demonstrating the value of conducting focused research with customers
- Providing powerful data and information to advocate the role of work and libraries
- Linking with cultural change by encouraging a culture of focused evidence gathering by staff
- Supporting planning and service improvement by proving data that can be used to reflect service performance and to make informed decisions about future priorities

These benefits are, for the most part, already well understood. The measures actually chosen are strongly based on existing library activities. For example, for education two measures have been developed:

- The impact on adults by the collection of quantitative data showing the numbers or percentage covered and qualitative data linked to, for example the impact on confidence and qualifications
- The impact of libraries on pupils attending summer reading schemes or homework clubs /study support based in libraries by collection and analysis of quantitative data showing the numbers or percentage of participants and qualitative data showing the impact of participants.

Examples of quantitative data to be collected are given and questions listed which support qualitative data collection. Somewhat oddly the report recommends the use of questionnaires to support qualitative data collection. Examples of qualitative data collection are given, focusing primarily on 'change experiences'.

The report's main recommendation is that a national template of impact measurement should be drawn up, based on the project findings. The

report concludes with appendices giving a wealth of detail on methodologies and practical examples which those anxious to pursue work in this area will find invaluable.

What is most notable about this report is its explicit acceptance of government social targets in devising its measures. Nor is it unique in this. Countries as varied as Greece, Portugal and Australia are adopting similar strategies in devising performance indicators. There are two issues here. Should libraries accept government social agendas in devising performance measures, given that governments and their social priorities will change over time and, secondly will this encourage public libraries to evolve into social service agencies rather than cultural or educational ones?

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