



Developing Services for New generations of Users - Public Library Policy in Finland

Barbro Wigell-Ryynänen
Ministry of Education and Culture
Helsinki, Finland

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Abstract:

The Finnish public library network is extensive, 836 libraries and 153 mobile libraries serve a population of 5,3 million. There is an average of 18 loans per capita and year. In 2011, there were 53 million library visits and 57 million visits on library web sites.

Citizen's right to services of quality regardless of domicile or financial standing is emphasized in legislation and national strategies. The public library policies are mentioned in the Government Platforms, they are referred to in diverse national programs and they provide a foundation for proposing regulations and government funding.

The Finnish Library Policy 2015 accentuates public library services as a basic service along with comprehensive education. The objective is to ensure access to knowledge and cultural sources in the networking information, civic and learning society.

Equal rights are key words in national Finnish public library policy as well as in the Constitution. The first Library Act came into force in 1929. Citizen's right to services of quality regardless of domicile or financial standing was emphasized, as well as library services free of charge. Amendments of the Act have been signals of societal change and new paradigm.

The Library Act of 1961 indicated the emerging welfare state. State subsidies were allocated for constructing new library buildings and for acquisition of mobile libraries. A network of provincial libraries was established.

When the current Act came into force in 1999 the Knowledge Society was already well on its way. Public libraries had been developing virtual services since 1995, with substantial support from the Ministry of Education and Culture. The new Act strongly linked public libraries to the Knowledge Society:

"The objectives of public library work are to promote equal opportunities among citizens for personal cultivation, for literary and cultural pursuits, for continuous development of knowledge, personal skills and civic skills, for internationalization and for lifelong learning.

Library activities shall also aim at promoting the development of virtual and interactive network services and their educational and cultural contents."

A Library Policy Committee was appointed by the Ministry of Education and Culture. The commission was to identify challenges for public libraries in the civil Information Society and to suggest concrete solutions to these challenges. The Library Policy Programme was published in 2001, stating that as certain assignments had been given to public libraries with the new Library Act there should be corresponding resources for performing these services. Measures should be taken to gear up library funding, personnel resources and technological capacity. Recommendations were given out for material acquisition, number of personnel and Internet terminals per capita, indicating a service level that should be possible to achieve for all municipalities.

Library and information services are obligatory services in the municipality along with comprehensive education, health and rescue services. Services are evaluated annually by the State Provincial Offices.

Municipalities maintain public libraries, but state subsidies cover about 35 % of total expenditure. Additionally, substantial state grants are allocated annually for local and regional projects, for developing contents and user-friendly services on the web, for in-service training and for updating of systems and services. The provincial state administration administers grants for constructing or renovating of library buildings and acquisition of mobile libraries as well as the grants for service development.

Library Strategy 2010 -Policy for access to knowledge and culture was issued in 2003 as one of the first European library strategies. The strategy outlined the responsibilities of local authorities respectively those of the state. Municipalities are responsible for services being in accordance with the Library Act; for recruiting adequately educated staff, for offering pleasant and functioning facilities and continually renewed material and equipment. The state is responsible for adequate legislation and regulations, for state funding and sufficient grants for developing and improving

services. The importance of a skilled staff and the specific role of libraries in the Knowledge Society were highlighted:

"A first prerequisite for developing information provision for all is that skilled staff be available; then, an up-to-date standardised technological infrastructure must be in place for all types of libraries. After that, the emphasis falls on developing web-services that correspond to the citizens' need for information."

The Strategy pointed out the need for centrally produced and state funded web services to level out local and regional differences in skills and resources. The Central library for public libraries, Helsinki City Library, maintains *libraries.fi*, homepage of Finnish public libraries with information about all public libraries as well as a statistical database, with Ask-a-librarian and sites for children and young people. Additionally, services are bought from the National Library. FinElib, the National Electronic Library, furnishes public libraries with material in electronic format by handling the license negotiations.

The Library Development Program from 2006 was an answer to a national program for developing the regions. Finland has the seventh biggest area of the European states with a population of only 5, 3 million. About 70 % of surface is forest and wilderness, there are about 188 000 lakes. Although most Finns live an urban life, the summer house, preferably with a sauna by the lake, is a must.

There have been major changes in rural areas, smaller farms are not profitable any more, farmers have had to considerate alternative livelihoods, like organic farming or farm tourism. On the other hand, urban dwellers want to escape the hectic city life and spend more time in their summer houses. Technology makes it possible to work and study from a distance - also an environmental issue.

The provincial areas' developing industries, diversifying agriculture and tourism, and the new lifestyles require high quality library and information services also in rural areas. Distance working and learning is part of the future. Local librarians have to be specialists in their own field. Users expect professional library services everywhere.

All Finnish library policies have been referred to in the Government Platforms (after parliamentary election every 4th year political parties start to negotiate a common Government Platform).

Policies bring visibility to library services in diverse national programs and provide a foundation for proposing regulations and government financing. National policies support regional equality and local library administration. All the Policies and Programs of the Ministry of Education and Culture have been prepared in dialogue with the actors in the field.

Finnish Public Libraries are widely used and the network of services is extensive. State grants for the construction of new library buildings have resulted in beautiful and functional facilities. There are 836 libraries and 153 mobile libraries.

There is an average of 18 loans per inhabitant and year. In 2011, there were 53 million visits in the physical libraries and 57 million visits on library web sites.



Entresse Library, Espoo Photo Jorma Waldén

The *Finnish Library Policy 2015* is based on current trends, on the need to respond to new service expectations. The way people look for information, learn, read and write, have changed, and will continue to change, as well as the way citizens use their libraries.

Visions of the library landscape of 2035 were compiled in connection with preparing the Policy. Library professionals highlighted the importance of pleasant library premises, competence of staff and individual service (face-to-face and on the web) also in the future, in spite of profound changes due to globalization and new technology.

The Policy, issued in 2009, states that libraries implement the cultural rights as guaranteed in the Constitution:

"...guarantee for everyone equal opportunity to receive other educational services in accordance with their ability and special needs, as well as the opportunity to develop themselves without being prevented by economic hardship." (Constitution of Finland 1999/731)

New lifestyles and new thinking influence the development of services.

"As the Internet and digital services have become common, libraries have been clearly placed in a position where, for the first time, they have to compete with other actors. They are also competing for people's time. To succeed, libraries must produce the type of added value to their services that others are not able to offer."

Google's mission – "to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful", might seem alarmingly familiar to librarians, but libraries serve the individual here and now, in the current phase of life, in dialogue with the patron, face-to-face or online.

Future success must be earned. The users are the experts on what kind of library services they need. Residents decide whether they use virtual library services or visit the physical library or replace them with other services.

"The strength of the libraries includes being up to date and offering an extensive range of services."

Pleasant facilities and long opening hours offer a place to meet that supports community, participation and the building of a multicultural frame of mind.

Libraries are urged to make every effort to realize equal access to knowledge by bridging the digital information gap between citizens.

"In upcoming years, the societal mission of public libraries as a central part of the development of a learning civic society (...) will be identified and decided upon. In practice, libraries will incorporate skills in knowledge management and media literacy into learning."

Qualification requirements in the Library Decree have been tightened, 70 % of staff must have a degree in the field, and a minimum of 45 % must have a university or polytechnic degree. All library directors must have a higher university degree.

The national *Quality Recommendation for public libraries* (2011) presents *descriptions* of quality in administration, services and activities, with a view to the whole structure and the results. By 'quality' the recommendation refers to excellence, relevance, a focus on the user, ability to change and economic efficiency. The quality management *guidelines* describe procedures, processes and systems the library should use to ensure quality.

"Libraries answer to future challenges by focusing on expertise and emphasizing quality."

www.minedu.fi trilingual homepage of the Ministry of Education and Culture (choose English, choose libraries). Legislation and strategies, state funding

www.libraries.fi public libraries, statistical database, a variety of services