

*We need to justify space in an insecure environment from water and fire for old and difficult to replace, but not rare, books and papers. How well used is the facility?*

The stack at Goldlay Gardens is the only reserve collection of any significant size in the library service and consists of material which, while no longer popular enough to be on open shelves in libraries, is still in some demand. The collection has been weeded considerably in recent years, and currently totals around 45,000 volumes. It generated 21,244 loans in the past 12 months. As a guide to the utility of the collection, it would have cost £116,842 to borrow these items on interlibrary loan at the Inter-Regional Unit Cost Scheme rate.

*We need to justify the retention of the House of Commons debates which may be sourced elsewhere. How well are they used?*

At the time of the visit to Goldlay Gardens (March 2010), the digitisation of the Lords and Commons Debates was not quite complete. It is now, and work is also proceeding on Committee debates; consequently, the disposal of print copies is now being investigated. The library service's holdings of all official publications will be adjusted in light of the continuing digitisation process.

*The facility provided for the Performing Arts should be challenged to justify the service being provided by the library service?*

The Performing Arts service lends sets of plays and music scores to groups and individuals. It brings together two services which were previously housed separately (Drama at Witham, Music at Colchester) and currently issues around 60,000 items per year, a figure which has been growing each year since the services moved to Goldlay Gardens over 5 years ago.

The service was provided free of charge until the mid 1990s, when a fee for each 4 week loan was introduced. Income from the service last year totalled £13,800; expenditure on stock was £11,000.

Although commercial hire services are available, the fees charged are often similarly commercial, and so out of the reach of most amateur groups and choirs.

*We should consider greater use of computer and automated (off the shelf) systems to streamline the facility that is provided to the libraries.*

Automated systems are in place for all of this work, and the library service has an award (E4Libraries Accreditation in 2009 and 2010) for its use of technology in this area. This includes the request service, which deals with over 700,000 reservations per year. 95% of these are managed automatically by the ELAN library management system with no staff intervention and no paper records: as a result, over 64% (nearly 450,000) are supplied to customers within 7 days.

However, the remaining 5% – items which have to be sourced from libraries outside the county - currently have to be managed via a different computer system, which is overdue for replacement. Consequently, a paper back-up system is in place to ensure that the service can still function if the automated system goes down at any time.

This separate system was due to be replaced some time ago by a new module of ELAN (thus enabling all requests to be dealt with in the same way), but it has been delayed. It is now due to be implemented in the next couple of months.

*If this facility in its entirety or part, is proved to be financially viable then a business case should be made to relocate whatever remains to a more appropriate site at/or adjacent to a highway network suitable for a logistics business.*

A business case has been made for relocation, but it has been difficult to find a site that meets both logistical and financial requirements. The suitability of a county council-owned site at New Dukes Way is being assessed by EPF (although it is currently occupied), and some capital funding will be required for whatever solution is proposed.

*A challenge should take place to ascertain if a partner organisation could provide part or the whole of the service.*

The market for provision of this service was tested as part of the tender for book supply in 2002; however, only one company responded, and the proposed charge was £350,000 more than existing costs – it was also combined with its least attractive offer for book supply (£116,000 less purchasing power than the winning bid).

No further market testing has been done since 2002 because central government had planned to reorganise the UK public library supply chain by 2008. However, this project has now been abandoned; as a result, an invitation to provide this service will be included again in the new tender for library book supply due to be completed in December 2010.

(For information: Essex provides this service for Southend and Thurrock councils, earning an income of approximately £200,000 per annum; there is also a possibility that Essex could extend this area of business as part of the proposed SPINE project, whose aim is to share services between 7 library services across the East of England.)