Measuring performance within the bidding culture

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Abstract

This paper examines how aspects of performance measurement and competitive funding are affecting English public library provision, as regards the extent to which such assessment serves as a barrier to participation in the competitive bidding arena. The consequent impact of such project monitoring mechanisms on service provision, staff and users also will be discussed. The research project and methodological context from which this paper arose will be detailed.

Introduction

In the United Kingdom, from 1979 through to 1997 under the Conservative government public services were reduced, externalised, starved of resources and put out to 'competitive tender' in a crusade to reduce public expenditure (Hendry, 2000:272). One increasingly important option available to managers was to look outside conventional sources of funding and to bid for money to develop their services. Resource allocation by competition has become a reality of contemporary public policy (Foley, 1999:806), and this has resulted in public sector services actively vying with each other in order to secure additional capital and revenue monies. Competitive bidding has become a characteristic of contemporary public service managerialism under the current Labour government.

Local authority archive, library and museum services have not been insulated from these developments. UK public libraries in particular have been hard hit by the erosion of traditional forms of funding and over the last decade in particular competitive bidding for additional funds has become a mainstay of many libraries' activities. What may be termed a culture of bidding has developed, with a host of funding opportunities for public libraries, diverse in both range and purpose. Some of the main initiatives are listed chronologically in Figure One.

Figure 1. The bidding culture: major competitive bidding initiatives for UK libraries

Year of Introduction	Funding
1994	Single Regeneration Budget
1994	Arts Council of England
1994	European IST Framework programme
1995	National Lottery Heritage Fund
1997	DCMS/ Wolfson Public Libraries Challenge Fund
1998	New Opportunities Fund
1999	British Library Co-operation and Partnership Programme
1999	Culture 2000 – European Union

Within this diverse and highly competitive arena some organisations have been active and successful in bidding for such funds and thus their services and communities have benefited financially. Others have not been so successful and some have found it difficult to enter this competitive arena. The advantages of allocating funds in response to competitive bids, rather than by traditional methodologies revolving around statistical indicators of "need", were deemed to include less bureaucracy, cost savings, better value for money, more innovative, enterprising and imaginative proposals, sharper strategies, greater flexibility, more local choice and enhanced responsiveness as well as greater policy integration through partnership. Critics, on the other hand, pointed to finite and diminishing resource bases, the substitution of core by opportunistic funding, the large financial and human costs of bidding, fragmentation and the distorting allocative and distributional effects of sexy bids, glossy submissions and slick presentations succeeding at the expense of genuine indicators of local need.

Beginning before but accelerating with increasing zeal alongside the emergence of the bidding culture is another trend indicative of the new UK local government agenda, that of the development of a climate of performance measurement within public libraries. There has admittedly been a long tradition of UK pub-

lic libraries using quantitative measures for assessing their performance, but as Favret notes:

> In common with other local authority sectors, public libraries have responded to the new public management agenda by undertaking a number of new quality initiatives. (Favret, 2000:342)

A wide range of compulsory performance indicators has been introduced across the local government and the wider public sector. This has naturally included public library authorities, as the following timeline reveals:

Figure 2: Performance measures in libraries timeline

Year of Introduction	Funding
1961	Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) Public Library Statistics
1964	The Public Libraries and Museums Act
1998	DCMS Annual Library Plans
1999	Best Value
2000	Consultation on Public Library Standards
2001	Public Library Standards

Such performance measures have the aim of ensuring that UK public library authorities meet their main statutory duties, as set out in the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 to 'provide a comprehensive and efficient library service for all persons desiring to make use thereof'. In line with this emergent performance culture all competitive funds have adopted an output driven approach; the requirement of project evaluation being driven by value-for money (Fordham et al., 1999:133). This emphasis on performance indicators and highly visible outputs fits snugly into New Labour's new local government agenda (Parker, Harrop, Ray and Coulson, 2001:18) with its stresses on:

- Hands-on professional management;

- Explicit standards and measures of performance;

- Focus on results and outputs rather than procedures;

- Moves to greater competition, contracts and tenders; and

- A general shift to private sector styles of management. (Favret, 2000:341)

It can then be argued that the rise of performance measurement and competitive bidding in libraries both arose as part of the same paradigm shift in UK public sector management. Public library services are devel-

oping rapidly and in the present funding and performance climate library managers - by necessity - have to adjust their strategies in order to facilitate continuous development and must learn to 'play the game'. As one commentator contended:

> Never has there been such a test of the entrepreneurial skills of the local librarian (Manley, 1998:191)

In addition to bidding for funds; implementing and sustaining externally funded projects; undertaking best value audits; preparing annual library plans; meeting DCMS's library standards; developing partnerships (with a wide range of public, private and community-based interested parties, on local, regional and national stages) library managers must not forget that they also have to meet the needs of those using the service on a day-to-day basis both efficiently and effectively.

This paper will examine how aspects of performance measurement and competitive funding are affecting English public library provision, as regards both the extent to which such assessment serves as a barrier to participation in the competitive bidding arena, and also the consequent impact of such project monitoring mechanisms on service provision, staff and users. First however, it is useful to briefly consider the research project and methodological context from which this paper arose.

The research project

In early 2000 Resource, the UK Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries funded the Information Management Research Institute at the University of Northumbria in Newcastle to investigate the effects of competitive funding on the development of public libraries, registered museums and archives in England. More particularly the objectives were to:

- Document the extent and scale of competitive bidding;

- Identify successful bidding strategies and to investigate the effects on service provision;

- Identify and report on apparent good practice, and to identify barriers to effective change;

- Investigate unsuccessful bids and to assess the organisational and management implications for services, staff and stakeholders;

- Investigate non-bidders to assess the effects, if any, on service provision; and,

- Investigate alternative sources of funding and to examine any possible partnerships within this wider context.

METHODOLOGY

A major postal questionnaire survey of all local authority archives, public libraries and registered museums in England provided a comprehensive audit of the inci-

dence and significance of competitive bidding for these services. A total of 1,511 questionnaires went to:

• 145 English archive authorities (with a 49% response rate)

• 1,220 registered museums (with a 20% response rate)

• 148 library authorities (with a 41% response rate)

63 in-depth interviews were conducted with representatives of over 30 archive, library and museum services in twelve case study local authorities nationwide as well as an additional 28 with representative regional bodies and a further three with funding bodies. These interviews allowed the exploration of services within a broader context, thereby identifying aspects of organisational, corporate and cultural significance in addition to the service-specific focus of the questionnaire survey. A full account of methodology and methods may be found in the final report from the research, which has been accepted by Resource (Parker, Harrop, Ray and Coulson, 2001).

Extent and scale of bidding in UK public libraries

The overwhelming majority of libraries are actively engaged in bidding for external funds with 97% having submitted bids for at least one or two major projects (i.e. £10,000 or more) during the three year study period 1997-2000. Whilst acknowledging that respondents may be better able to provide details of current or recent projects more readily than those from earlier years, Figure 3 demonstrates there has been a marked rise in bidding activity. Over the three-year period investigated there was a rise of 197 percent.

Figure 3: The Rise of Competitive Bidding, 1997-2000
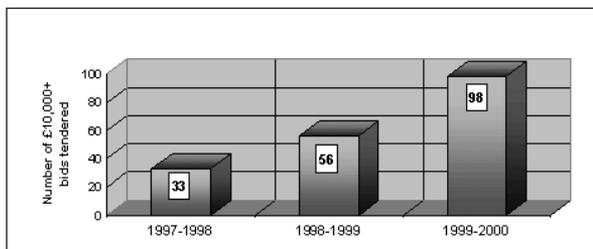
(Source: Bidding Culture questionnaire survey, 2000)

This rise may be attributed to more experience, expertise and confidence in bidding as well as necessity – it being the only way to develop and maintain services. The parlous state of existing core provision of services has led to a great number of library services becoming increasingly reliant on external funding sources. Bidding has simply become essential with traditional sources of funding being constrained and it is now accepted in the library domain as the main means of securing additional revenue:

This represents the only opportunity for growth in the service. (Interviewee)

Interestingly competitive funding appears to be increasingly necessary in order to meet libraries' performance measurement targets:

It all comes down to continuous improvement of service delivery. We have to be in a bidding culture. (Interviewee)

Frankly, we need to bid in order to fulfil some of our service objectives, for example the creation of learning centres using DfEE and NOF money. (Interviewee)

Successful bidding helps demonstrate to the local authority the cost effectiveness of the public library. (Interviewee)

One of the greatest concerns for librarians when considering whether or not to bid for funding is the fact that the process is a gamble with very scarce resources. They gamble with staff time and motivation against the possibility of investment. The research has shown that while a large proportion of bidders who suffered rejection claim to pursue alternative funding only 40% were successful. However, many thought that the process was still beneficial as the following interviewee suggests:

Bidding has certainly become a way of life within the service over the past 5 years and to some extent has overcome the feeling of isolation that library services have experienced in the past. Partnerships with external agencies have been extremely rewarding and the profile of the library service has been raised considerably. Our service has benefited by carefully thought out bidding strategies. (Interviewee)

Bidding cultures, performance cultures: challenges facing modern UK public libraries

The research findings have revealed that a diverse range of factors exist that may influence or dictate the extent to which different services are able to and/or willing to participate in the competitive bidding arena. Strategic issues include having the available resources, in terms of both finance and staff time; staff expertise; existing support mechanisms; partnership working; regionalism and cross-sectoral working. Libraries and any externally funded schemes are also subject to performance measurement from two directions, the funding body and local and central government. Accountability procedures required by the grant giver (performance targets; evaluation; financial accounts/returns) both at the bid writing stage and throughout the project were seen by a large number of respondents as either wholly prohibitive or overly onerous. In addition performance indicators required

by the parent local authority and central government (Best Value; Annual Library Plans; Public Library Standards) were seen as shaping participation in the bidding culture.

The increasing convergence of these two forms of performance measurement appears to influence both success and participation within the bidding culture. The UK government has introduced a wide range of performance indicators for public libraries, a mainstay of the new political agenda of reinforcing and reinvigorating local democracy through consultation with and the involvement of service users and the wider community (Liddle, 1999:206). As commentators have observed however such performance measurement has a less benevolent aspect:

It is also a mechanism through which central government's objectives and policies will be delivered by local government. (Liddle, 1999:207)

Benchmarking for example necessitates the comparing of an organisation and its processes and protocols with those of other similar bodies in order to establish strengths, weaknesses and areas of good practice. Indeed such appraisal helps form the backbone of the new UK 'Best Value' scheme, to which all local authority services in England, including libraries, museums and archives, must subscribe. Whereas Best Value drives libraries to compare with each other for mutual benefit, the competitive bidding process demands libraries to compete with each other for the benefit of some rather than all.

The notion of public library local authorities competitively challenging each other is ridiculous. The public library service is built on co-operation and should not have competition between them as you then get disparities and this is where collaboration falls down. (Interviewee)

The emergence of a bidding culture through competitive funds can be seen as another strand of this trend towards central governance. External competitive funds are often seen as a means of enforcing central governance by proxy, leading services to concentrate on developing services in certain directions in line with government agendas. As with the new Public Library Standards, fund eligibility criteria focus on familiar buzzwords such as 'social inclusion', 'lifelong learning' and 'access for all'. Some public librarian respondents to the research commented that the focus of these funding opportunities often did not address the areas of real need in the service, such as structural repair or renovation, staffing or book funds.

In addition to those formal performance measurement processes overseen by government, the administrators of the competitive funds all have their own project performance indicators in place. Most funders – in their guidelines or award criteria – stress that project applications must detail performance indica-

tors and measures for evaluating the project after the funding stops. For example the *DCMS/Wolfson Public Libraries Challenge Fund 2001-2002 Overview* reminds potential applicants that there is a two stage assessment process, first ensuring that planned projects meet the requirements of the programme and secondly;

A more detailed appraisal by independent assessors. This involves qualitative appraisal of proposed projects, considering factors such as evidence of need, target audience, the approach and proposed timetable, *value for money, impact* and *sustainability*. (DCMS, 2000:2)

The Heritage Lottery Fund demands similar project management measures to be in place of proposed schemes:

We will also look at:

- Whether there is a need or demand (or both) for your project;

- Whether your project is well thought out (including *a realistic view of its longer-term role*) and will involve work of high quality;

- How you plan to *measure your project during and after completion*;

- How you will *measure your project's success in meeting its aims*; and,

- Whether your project costs are sound and will *provide good value for money* overall. (Heritage Lottery Fund, 2001).

While project monitoring and evaluation were perceived by some interviewees as particularly bureaucratic and time consuming, others felt that this process was a necessary step in the funding process:

In all these bidding processes it says something to the effect of show evidence of need, to me it's a bit like asking an alligator to show evidence that it's hungry. (Interviewee)

A lot of people moaned and groaned about the onerous reporting mechanisms as well, and I just took the line that if you accept the money you have got to accept the strings that go with it and if you don't want to play by the rules you shouldn't be bidding for it. (Interviewee)

I find that bids I've been involved in tend to be very bureaucratic and there is a lot of paperwork. But then again you have to have monitoring in place, that's the whole point of people being given this money, to make sure that it's spent properly. (Interviewee)

Demonstrating need and having a good or innovative idea is not enough. The language used in the criteria

is that of quality management and performance measurement, and a stress is placed on the longer term impact of funds – how will externally funded projects be sustained after the funding ends? Successful bidders noted that the key to success is good project management, being clearly aware of the need for sustainability at all stages of the project, and understanding at the outset which monitoring mechanisms are involved. This is crucial because, as one library indicated:

It is not only actually having the bid and going through the bid and putting the bid together, it is actually implementing that once it is successful – one of the dangers is that you have the successful bid and then you can't sustain what you started. That would have such a negative effect on the users and staff who are delivering those services that we wouldn't want to put ourselves in that position. (Interviewee)

Sustaining projects after the source well of funding has dried up is believed by many respondents to be *the most* important sustainability issue, and as the fund criteria highlight, funding bodies themselves place great emphasis on this aspect. No one wants to see good schemes wither on the vine. The necessity of fitting the objectives of any bid into those of the service strategy or annual plans was stressed as the key to longer-term sustainability:

You have no sustainability if a bid simply stands on its own; it's never going to survive. For us every bid is strategic and has to tie in to our key strategic aims. So very little actually stands alone. (Interviewee)

Sustainability is a problem – how do we do this and generate more money? Service objectives are critical, projects are not detached from the core library business but if they are relatively remote from these objectives then they tend to stay as a project 'external' to the service and when the money dries up so does the project. (Interviewee)

It's the time involved in putting the bids together, it's the time involved in project managing those, because there are no additional resources for that, and then it's the sustainability and additional revenue, during and when the capital funding runs out. (Interviewee)

For some, the onus of performance indicators intrinsic to competitive funding initiatives served as a barrier to participating in the bidding culture at all:

The biggest problem is that if we were successful in bidding we would be scared witless because we wouldn't be able to deliver it, we certainly couldn't sustain it. (Interviewee)

In the Audit Commission's latest consultation document 'Delivering Improvement Together, Strategy Consultation 2001' it is acknowledged that the wide range of performance indicators demanded of public sector services is in itself causing another problem:

Many people in public services are concerned about 'initiative overload'. We recognise the need to be more supportive in helping to bring about change in the face of growing shortages of managerial capacity and skills. We need to provide timely and relevant information, including commentaries and reports, so that the public can better understand and judge their services and see more clearly how their money is being spent. (Audit Commission, 2001)

This 'initiative overload' also extends to the arena of competitive bidding, with library managers increasingly finding the constant necessity to tender bids and keep up to date with a wide range of funds and sometimes poorly publicised calls for proposals taxing:

We are starting to find it really difficult to juggle all these different balls, Best Value, Standards, bidding and so on. We simply don't have the capacity or energy to do all these things properly. (Interviewee)

It was widely recognised by the research that successful bidding has indeed yielded real benefits to libraries, to the quality and accessibility of their products and services and to their various users, communities and stakeholders. In addition it was also observed from some quarters that the culture of bidding with the attendant formalised attention to performance and success had helped crystallise thinking and sharpen strategies for organisations. Nevertheless, given the findings of the research there is an underlying concern detected that a two-tier system of cultural provision in England may be arising.

As a result of different capacities for undertaking bidding activity, there is a discernible trend towards an upper stratum of well-resourced large organisations able to participate and benefit from competitive bidding, and a sub-stratum of impoverished, increasingly unsustainable smaller library services. As a result of funding criteria ineligibility, unfamiliarity with process and protocol and the drain of resources that bidding activity represents some organisations and some communities are losing out, creating a country of cultural and information 'have' and 'have nots'.

In qualitative responses to both the survey and interviews the ability to secure both the necessary resources (financial or otherwise), maintain the enthusiasm necessary to undertake bidding activity and, significantly, meet project targets were raised as issues. For some library managers in smaller services the resource implications were simply too great. For such beleaguered libraries there may be light on the horizon; in Resource's recently published action plan for public libraries *Building on Success* under the heading of 'service planning, development and quality assur-

ance' the budgetary implications of the plethora of measures is recognised:

> It cannot be said that this babel of measures and activity has as yet produced any significant improvement in the overall level of service delivery across the country…Many public library managers have expressed concern at the lack of co-ordination and the overhead involved in meeting the demands of surveys, plans and statistical returns. (Resource, 2001:13)

Resource is in favour of the new performance measurement culture within UK libraries, but stresses in its action plan that expenditure is required:

> Welcome and overdue as these developments are in ensuring local authorities meet their statutory duties; they also raise issues of investment and sustainability. Major investment is needed, not only to redress the effect of the expenditure cuts of the 1980s and 1990s, but also to ensure that important new initiatives are adequately resourced and sustained. (Executive summary, Resource 2001)

It is imperative that Resource, local and central government, and the funding bodies themselves fully appreciate and cater for resource and training needs of these services in terms of understanding and implementing projects. Our research has shown emphatically that with the necessary skills smaller services can undertake highly successful projects that contribute greatly to the cultural life of their communities.

There is an inherent challenge in introducing performance measurement into the bidding culture, of attempting to measure the success of such schemes. It has been demonstrably proven that it is possible to introduce indicators to gauge how well externally funded ventures meet milestones and deadlines, standards that quantify improvements in ICT provision, or even – although much more complex – the rise or decline of library use per thousand local authority constituents in the wake of funded schemes or projects.

It is far harder to measure the effect of many schemes on the actual experience of the users who surely must be the focal point of benefit from these externally funded schemes. Most of the competitive initiatives open to British public libraries reflect in their focus wider government agendas, emphasising – quite rightly – social inclusion, access, and lifelong learning. Outside of formal education, along with museums and archives public libraries should, and increasingly are, epicentres of such activity. Significantly, they are being recognised as such focal points at local, regional and central government levels, not least through the introduction of the aforementioned funding streams. Once these projects are underway however, how does one measure the *impact* such schemes are having on the user, if any at all. The existing performance indicators operate only until the allotted funding stops.

Winkworth (2001, p.6) recognises that to suggest that one simple set of performance indicators exist that quantify the merits of a library service is an 'optimistic illusion'. Perhaps as Revill observes experience has a part to play. To some extent the impacts of externally funded projects are realisable simply through experience:

> Some things we know at an individual level through our own professional experience and history. (Revill, 2000, p. 9)

The extent to which this is satisfactory however is negotiable. Central government is moving towards much more tangible, quantifiable measurement of the impact of both service provisions, including those externally funded schemes. Funders what to see proof that their money has been spent effectively. The Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions' consultation on *Best Value and Audit Commission Performance Indicators for 2001/2002* recognises that:

> In developing indicators, we should move progressively towards measures of outcome, rather than measuring inputs and outputs. It is more important to measure the impact that best value has on people's lives, than it is to gather data that is easy to collect. (DETR, 2000)

Attempts to find impact measures are then underway, yet it has been noted that it is extremely difficult for libraries to find functional, operable assessment tools in this area because:

> Libraries usually function as an input to an input, with few unique, solely attributable outcomes (Winkworth, 2001: 9).

The emphasis on quantitative outputs which features as part of the assessment process of most funds, both UK and European, renders some projects unworkable (Ward, 1997:79). Benefits that are perhaps less tangible, such as the development of new sustainable strategic partnerships or the improvement of users' knowledge or cultural experience may not be included in the bid as an outcome, or may be harder to measure (Parker, Harrop, Ray and Coulson, 2001:18). Research interviewees were conscious of this problem, one library respondent running a scheme involving local ethnic minorities observing:

> It is going to be very difficult - long term - to assess and judge how successful it has been because the sort of people we are targeting may not be traceable. They may be children who move out of the area or asylum seekers living in the area short term. We are not going to be able to go back in 2 or 3 years and see if their literacy levels or their education levels have changed, which is a shame. (Interviewee)

The effective measurement of the impact on users of many competitively funded library developments in areas such as social inclusion and learning demands longitudinal study and measurement, tracking customers over time in order to reliably quantify the effects of the library service. Such methodology however is currently very often alien to the spheres of UK central and local governance.

Conclusion

In conclusion the requirement for performance measurement is one of the defining characteristics of the current bidding culture in UK public libraries. Competitively funded opportunities have enabled widespread service improvement, notably in the areas of information technology provision and social inclusion. For many libraries the bidding culture has facilitated interesting, innovative and worthwhile projects and schemes that have helped services successfully achieve and excel their statutory duty to provide a 'comprehensive and efficient' service.

There are however problems, and not least of these is the impediment to effective participation sometimes caused by performance measurement requirements, both from central government concerning the library service as a whole, and from funding bodies monitoring the successful implementation of externally funded schemes. Whilst the necessity of performance indicators and efficient project management were widely accepted, for some the resource implications of such activity are too costly; the burden of meeting all the different goals of Annual Library Plans, Library Standards and fund targets overly onerous. All this with worrying implications on the level of service provision for users. In something of a catch 22 situation at the same time respondents noted that they are increasingly having to bid for external funding in order to meet the demands of performance measurement. The introduction of recent performance measurements such as the Best Value regime would appear to suggest that the need for libraries to engage in effective bidding is not likely to disappear. More than ever therefore there is a need for libraries, in concert with other appropriate partners, to think through their approaches to bidding and the consequential organisational, performance measurement and management demands.

Resource at least acknowledges that the present raft of performance indicators needs to be homogenised, in order to ease the workload of library managers attempting to juggle all of these bureaucratic balls:

Resource recognises the complex pattern of planning and evaluation instruments that are used within museums, archives and libraries and is working to find the means of producing more convergence in the information that is gathered. (Resource, 2001:13)

In their action plan they also appear committed to investigating means of producing impact assessment for whole sector and specifically library sector. Funders too are in the process of streamlining their operations, notably the Heritage Lottery Fund and the New Opportunities Fund. The problems of performance management in the bidding culture, if not wholly addressed, have at least been acknowledged.

To hark back to the overarching theme of the conference, in the UK for public libraries a culture of bidding and performance measurement is the emerging reality. The main task still to be satisfactorily tackled is the discovery of meaningful, operable measures of the impact and actual effects of competitively funded projects and schemes.

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