

CILIP Briefing

The Public Libraries and Museums Act (1964)

The Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 governs public library services in England and Wales. It is the law that makes public libraries a statutory service. It requires local authorities to provide a “*comprehensive and efficient*” public library service.

Local authorities must:

- Provide a comprehensive and efficient library service for all people that would like to use it.
- Promote the service (section 7 920 (b))
- Lend books and other printed material free of charge for those who live, work or study in the area (section 8 (3)(b))

What such a “*comprehensive and efficient*” service might look like is set out in section 7 (2 (a), (b) and (c)

“A library authority¹ shall in particular have regard to the desirability” of:

- Having books and other printed matter and other materials in sufficient number, range and quality to meet the general requirements and any special requirements of adults and children. They should either keep these items themselves or have arrangements with other library authorities to obtain them.
- Encouraging adults and children to make full use of the library service, providing advice about using the service and making resources available so people can use them.

The Government or more specifically, the Secretary of State for Culture oversees a local authority’s role in complying with the Act. The Secretary of State has a duty to:

¹ **Library authorities and areas [Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964]**

(2) The functions of a library authority as such shall be exercisable within an area (in this Act referred to as a “library area”) consisting of the administrative area of the authority, or in the case of a joint board established under section 5 below, consisting of the areas which, if the authorities constituting the board were library authorities, would form their library areas, and may also be exercised elsewhere than within its library area if the authority thinks fit.

(3) In Wales, county councils and county borough councils shall, subject to section 5 below, be library authorities for the purposes of this Act.

- Superintend, and promote the improvement of, the public library service provided by local authorities in England and Wales (section 1.1)

In undertaking this duty the Secretary of State may:

- Inspect library premises or require public library authorities to provide information in regard to his duty of superintendence and promotion of the public library service (section 1.2)
- Use default powers to order an investigation into a public library service, issue an order of improvement or an order transferring the public library service concerned to the Secretary of State (section 10)

The statutory duties are important because:

- It means local authorities in England and Wales have a legal obligation to provide a public library service
- They allow local authorities to be monitored and inspected by the Secretary of State
- Without them it would be very difficult to hold local authorities to account
- Without them, local people will be much less likely to receive a quality service.

The provisions of the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 need to be interpreted in the light of the Human Rights Act 1998 and the Public Sector Equality Duty within the Equality Act 2010.²

Legislation

- [The Public Libraries & Museums Act \(1964\)](#)

² See the separate briefings on the Public Libraries and the Equality Act 2010 and Public Libraries and the Human Rights Act 1998