

# RISING TO THE CHALLENGE

*Re-Envisioning Public Libraries*



THE ASPEN INSTITUTE  
*Communications and Society Program*

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Expanding access to education, learning opportunities and social connections for all is one of the great challenges of our time. It is a challenge made more urgent by the rapid transition from old industrial and service-based economic models to a new economy in which knowledge and creativity are the drivers of productivity and economic growth, and information, technology and learning are central to economic performance and prosperity.

It is not only the economy but all of society that is being reshaped by these trends. Amid these changes, there are divides in wealth, digital inclusion and participation that threaten to widen if we as a nation do not commit to new thinking and aggressive action to provide these opportunities for all.

This is a time of great opportunity for communities, institutions and individuals who are willing to champion new thinking and nurture new relationships. It is a time of particular opportunity for public libraries with their unique stature as trusted community hubs and repositories of knowledge and information.

## THE PUBLIC LIBRARY IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Libraries are essential to success and progress in the digital age.

The process of re-envisioning public libraries to maximize their impact reflects:

- Principles that have always been at the center of the public library's mission—equity, access, opportunity, openness and participation
- The library's capacity to drive opportunity and success in today's knowledge-based society
- An emerging model of networked libraries that promotes economies of scale and broadens the library's resource reach while preserving its local presence
- The library's fundamental people, place and platform assets

The Dialogue's perspective on the 21st-century library builds on the public library's proven track record in strengthening communities and calls for libraries to be centers of learning, creativity and innovation in the digital age. No longer a nice-to-have amenity, the public library is a key partner in sustaining the educational, economic and civic health of the community during a time of dramatic change. Public libraries inspire learning and empower people of all ages. They promote a better trained and educated workforce. They ensure equitable access and provide important civic space for advancing democracy and the common good. Public libraries are engines of development within their communities.

## PUBLIC LIBRARIES AT THE CENTER OF THE DIGITAL AGE

Public libraries are poised to play a leading role in helping individuals and communities adapt to this changing world. Many libraries already are linking individuals to information and learning opportunities, driving development and innovation, and serving as community connectors. With nearly 9,000 public library systems and 17,000 library branches and outlets across the country, there is already a significant physical presence and infrastructure to leverage for long-term success.

Enabling all libraries to fulfill their new roles will require library leaders, policy makers and community stakeholders to re-envision the public library and take advantage of the opportunities it offers.

## PEOPLE, PLACE AND PLATFORM

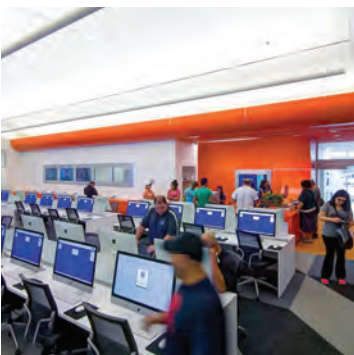
The emerging value proposition of the public library is built around three key assets—people, place and platform:



- **PEOPLE.** The public library is a hub of civic engagement, fostering new relationships and strengthening the human capital of the community. Librarians are actively engaged in the community. They connect individuals to a vast array of local and national resources and serve as neutral conveners to foster civic health. They facilitate learning and creation for children and adults alike.



- **PLACE.** The public library is a welcoming space for a wide range of purposes—reading, communicating, learning, playing, meeting and getting business done. Its design recognizes that people are not merely consumers of content but creators and citizens as well. Its physical presence provides an anchor for economic development and neighborhood revitalization, and helps to strengthen social bonds and community identity. The library is also a virtual space where individuals can gain access to information, resources and all the rich experiences the library offers. In the creative design of its physical and virtual spaces the public library defines what makes a great public space.



- **PLATFORM.** The public library is user-centered. It provides opportunities for individuals and the community to gain access to a variety of tools and resources with which to discover and create new knowledge. The platform enables the curation and sharing of the community’s knowledge and innovation. A great library platform is a “third place” —an interactive entity that can facilitate many people operating individually and in groups—and supports the learning and civic needs of the community.

## STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

The Dialogue concludes that the long-term health of libraries is essential to the long-term health of the communities they serve and identified four strategic opportunities for action to guide the continuing transformation.

### 1. ALIGNING LIBRARY SERVICES IN SUPPORT OF COMMUNITY GOALS

Public libraries that align their people, place and platform assets and create services that prioritize and support local community goals will find the greatest opportunities for success in the years ahead. Managers of local governments report that it is often difficult to prioritize libraries over other community services such as museums or parks and recreation departments that also serve a distinctly public mission. What libraries need is to be more intentional in the ways that they deploy resources in the community, and more deeply embedded in addressing the critical challenges facing the community. This will require a level of flexibility and adaptability to change as community needs change. It will also require collaboration among libraries, policy makers and community partners to redefine the role of libraries as institutions that inspire learning, drive development, grow social capital and create opportunities.

### 2. PROVIDING ACCESS TO CONTENT IN ALL FORMATS

As the public library shifts from a repository for materials to a platform for learning and participation, its ability to provide access to vast amounts of content in all formats is vital. Libraries face two immediate major challenges in providing access to content in all forms:

- Being able to procure and share e-books and other digital content on the same basis as physical versions
- Having affordable, universal broadband technologies that deliver and help create content

Dealing with both challenges have been high priorities for public libraries throughout the country. The challenges have been particularly acute for small libraries, those in rural communities and in some urban areas where limited budgets make access to e-books and upgrades to high-speed broadband difficult despite high community need for and interest in both. Ensuring access to e-books, other e-content and more-than-adequate high-speed broadband is a big concern going forward because it impacts the public library's ability to fulfill one of its core missions—to procure and share the leading ideas of the day and enable everyone to participate in the world's conversations.

### 3. ENSURING THE LONG-TERM SUSTAINABILITY OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES

Perhaps the greatest challenge facing public libraries today is to transform their service model to meet the demands of the knowledge society while securing a sustainable funding base for the future. With limited and sometimes volatile funding, however, such transformations will be uneven and incomplete. In addition, the highly local nature of public library funding and governance structures may interfere with both rapid and broad-scale progress—the kind of scale needed to compete and thrive in a world of global networks. Challenges that shape the discussion about long-term public library sustainability given their vital role in the digital era include:

- Identifying reliable sources of revenue for daily operations as well as long-term planning and investment
- Exploring alternative governance structures and business models that maximize efficient and sustainable library operations and customer service
- Becoming more skilled at measuring outcomes rather than counting activities
- Balancing the local and national library value proposition to consider economies of scale in a networked world without compromising local control

### 4. CULTIVATING LEADERSHIP

Leadership is needed across the community—from elected officials, government leaders, business and civic leaders and libraries themselves—to build communities and public libraries that thrive and succeed together. Vision is a critical component of leadership. Every community needs a vision and a strategic plan for how to work with the public library to directly align the library and its work with the community's educational, economic and other key goals. It must have input from all stakeholder groups in the community. Key steps in building community leadership to support the public library include improving communications with community leaders, developing community champions, strengthening intersections with diverse communities and communities of color, reaching out to and engaging with young-professional organizations and demonstrating the collective impact of partners working together.