

ONTARIO PUBLIC LIBRARY GUIDELINES: a developmental tool for small, medium and county libraries

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A. BACKGROUND

Origins

The origin of the Ontario Public Library Guidelines program is to be found in the Ontario Public Library Strategic Plan, "One Place to Look", published in 1990. Among the recommendations called for were:

- reasonable minimum conditions that must be met for a public library to function as an entry point to the province-wide information network;
- performance standards for public libraries;
- library boards to adopt a planning policy to overcome barriers to service;
- development and implementation of an accreditation system for Ontario public libraries.

Following publication of the OPL Strategic Plan, the Ontario public library community established the Ontario Public Libraries Strategic Directions Council (SDC) to implement the plan's recommendations. In a 1996 update to the Strategic Plan called, "A Call to Action", the SDC recommended seven strategies to focus local and provincial library planning and development. Strategy number 2 was the "Ontario Public Library Guidelines", which were described as:

"... qualitative and quantitative guidelines for library service, which will facilitate a consistent, comprehensive and effective level of service across Ontario. Focussing on the needs of small, medium and county libraries, the guidelines will help libraries demonstrate that they are providing excellent value."

To bring this about, SDC set up a "Guidelines Working Group", with broad representation from the public library community. The Working Group spent its first year examining guidelines and standards from other jurisdictions, and a second year developing a model for Ontario. Its final report was approved by SDC, published and distributed to all Ontario libraries in 1997.

Test Phase

Next, a "Guidelines Implementation Committee" was set up by SDC to plan and carry out formal testing of the Guidelines.

Two libraries were tested in Northern Ontario and three in Southern Ontario, including one multi-branch library.

The main purpose of testing was to ensure that the process was workable in a "real library" situation. In fact, the committee members were pleasantly surprised at how well the Guidelines did work and at how positive the experience turned out to be.

Guidelines Council

Upon completion of the testing, SDC established a permanent body, the Ontario Public Library Guidelines Monitoring and Accreditation Council. The "Guidelines Council" is composed of eight representatives appointed by their respective public library organisations and reports to SDC. It had its first meeting in January 1998, and meets monthly by teleconference.

The purpose of the Guidelines Council is threefold:

1. To monitor the continuing effectiveness of the Guidelines and make revisions as required;
2. To arrange for accreditation audits of those public libraries which so request;
3. To accredit public libraries that successfully meet the Guidelines.

The Guidelines Council worked in its first year to: develop tools (checklists, report forms, lists of materials required, background information for libraries and audit teams, database of potential auditors); to promote the program (through publication of articles in public library newsletters and through meetings with public library organisations); to acquire funding support; and to prepare recognition and promotional materials.

B. THE GUIDELINES

The purpose of the OPL Guidelines program is:

1. To provide through a "self-evaluation, planning tool" a process for raising the level of public library service across the province: this is done by individual libraries using the Guidelines to evaluate and improve their own operations; and
2. To recognise the achievement of libraries which have attained a level of excellence as defined by the Guidelines.

The Guidelines program is based on four main principles:

1. That the program is self-regulating (i.e. is public library owned and operated).
2. That participation is voluntary at all levels. (No library is obligated to use the Guidelines or seek accreditation. These are decisions to be made locally.)
3. That it is designed to fit easily into a library's regular planning process. (An initial look at the Guidelines should reveal areas where the library can change or improve. This can be incorporated into the library's annual plan.)
4. That it focuses on small, medium and county libraries. (Although large libraries - serving populations of 100,000 and over - were represented on the Guidelines Working Group and are welcome to use the Guidelines, as a group they do not see the Guidelines as pertaining to them.)

The Guidelines aim to provide a number of benefits to libraries which participate in the program. They should:

1. Facilitate analysis and evaluation of local library service;
2. Act as a comprehensive guide in the local library planning process;
3. Assist libraries that meet the Guidelines to demonstrate at the local level that they are using public money effectively and responsibly;
4. Assist libraries in making the case for adequate local support in order to meet and maintain the requirements of the Guidelines;
5. Strengthen small and remote libraries, enabling them to participate more fully in the public library community;
6. Help the Ontario library community to work towards providing clients with a consistent level of service across the province.

The Guidelines emphasise the importance of matching library service to local needs. There are few quantitative measures in the Guidelines themselves, although a number are included as aids to measurement in the appendices. The Guidelines do, on the other hand, place considerable emphasis on local planning and policy development.

Guidelines Checklist

The heart of the Guidelines program is the "Checklist", or list of actual guidelines. The checklist is divided into the following six sections (a few examples are included):

Section 1-GOVERNANCE AND ADMINISTRATION

Sample-1.1.6 Terms of reference - The board has established written terms of reference for its officers and committees (e.g. for the chair, CEO, secretary, treasurer, standing and ad hoc committees).

Sample-1.3.4 Planning document - The board has developed a formal planning document, which includes such items as: mission statement, service roles, goals and objectives, and action plans.

Section 2-ACCESSIBILITY

Sample-2.2.1 Open hours/public need - During the last three years the library has assessed the needs of the community as regards optimum open hours and has undertaken to match its open hours to local needs (e.g. is open evenings and weekends in addition to regular working hours).

Sample-2.7.1 Access for persons with physical disabilities - The library provides library materials on an organised and regular basis to residents of the community who are unable to travel to the library (e.g. the housebound, residents of institutions such as prisons and nursing homes).

Section 3-RESOURCES (Divided into five sub-sections)

-Human

Sample-3.1.1 Personnel policy - The library board has established and adopted written personnel management policies which address such issues as: responsibility for personnel issues; the hiring process; hours of work; salaries, wages and benefits; holidays, vacation and leave; performance evaluation; training and development; grievances; resignation and dismissal; retirement; and personnel records.

-Materials and Information

Sample-3.2.1 Needs of community - The library has a process in place for regularly assessing the content and size of the collection required to meet community needs.

-Access to Information

Sample-3.3.9 Acceptable Internet use policy - Where a library provides public access to the Internet, the library board has established and adopted written policy which addresses such issues as: why the library provides Internet access, Internet use guidelines, use by children, privacy and confidentiality, filtering software, staff assistance, training, use of e-mail.

-Facilities

Sample-3.4.3 Activities - As determined by local needs, the library space is arranged to provide room for activities such as: study (e.g. for tables and/or carrels in a quiet part of the library); informal reading (e.g. for comfortable chairs located near the periodicals collection); public use of equipment (e.g. listening and viewing centres and computing facilities); and community and cultural activities.

-Technology

Sample-3.5.1 Technological plan - The library has in place a plan for acquiring, servicing, upgrading and replacing its electronic equipment and software (e.g. local area network, Internet workstations, photocopiers, printers, circulation and catalogue software).

Section 4-SERVICES

Sample-4.2.2 Reference and Information Service/Policy - The library board has established and adopted policy governing the provision of reference and information service, which addresses such issues as: which members of the staff are responsible for providing reference and information service; how much assistance is provided; how telephone and fax requests are handled; which types of questions staff will not attempt to answer; how the reference collection is maintained and by whom; how unanswered questions are dealt with; when users are referred to other agencies; and what records and statistics are kept.

Section 5-COOPERATION AND PARTNERSHIPS

Sample-5.1.1 Collection accessible - The library has made all or part of its collection available for loan to other libraries through participation in a resource sharing network (e.g. in a union catalogue such as INFO or Syllabus; and/or in a local network of information providers such as schools, colleges and universities).

Section 6-MULTI-BRANCH LIBRARY SYSTEMS

Sample-6.6 Resource sharing - An effective system of sharing and exchanging materials among branches is in place, including a formal system of inter-branch loans.

Support

Considerable resources are available to help libraries meet Guidelines requirements. Many of these have been developed over the years by the Ontario Library Service, including: the Sourcebook for Small Public Libraries (a resource manual for small library administrators); the Excel training program (a correspondence program for small public library staff); the Trustee Development Program (resources for public library boards); and a number of manuals and workbooks on a variety of subjects. These resources contain a wide selection of needs assessment tools, planning tools, and sample policies and procedures that can be easily adapted for local library use.

In addition, the Ontario Library Service (OLS), as a public library support agency, is ready to assist wherever possible. At a library's request, an OLS representative will:

- explain the Guidelines program to the library staff and board;
- help determine which Guideline requirements the library meets and which it does not;
- help develop a plan to meet requirements not met;

- help develop policies, procedures and planning processes required by the Guidelines;
- help prepare for an accreditation audit.

C. USING THE GUIDELINES

The Guidelines process can be broken down into six major steps. Libraries are free to participate at whatever level they wish.

Step 1. Internal evaluation: Library analyses its own operation, using the Guidelines checklist. It may request assistance from the OLS or from a neighbouring library.

Step 2. Develop Plan: Using information gathered in Step 1, the library develops a plan to deal with those Guidelines the library does not yet meet and how and when it will meet them.

Step 3. Implementation: The Plan is carried out and updated as necessary.

Step 4. Peer Audit: When ready, the library may request a peer audit from the Guidelines Council.

Step 5. Accreditation: If recommended by the peer audit team, the library may submit the final peer audit report to Council and request accreditation.

Step 6. Re-accreditation: Accreditation is valid for five years. At the end of this period, a library may repeat the process in order to maintain its accredited status.

D. ACCREDITATION PROCESS

A library which is confident that it meets the requirements of the Guidelines, and which wishes to apply for accreditation, contacts a member of the Guidelines Council. The library specifies whether it is a single or multi-branch system and, if multi-branch, whether it wants accreditation for the system or for a particular branch.

The Guidelines Council assembles a peer audit team that is acceptable to both the Council and the library. The peer audit team and library arrange a mutually acceptable date and time to meet.

The Council sends the library a package, including: a copy of Guidelines checklist to be used by the audit team; background information on the program and related procedures; a list of documents to have on hand for examination by the auditors. Similar packages are sent to the peer audit team members.

Peer audit team

The peer audit team is appointed by the Guidelines Council and consists of a minimum of two members. One member must have a Master of Library Science degree. One member must represent the library's peer group (i.e. represent a library of similar size from the same geographical area). A typical audit team consists of one Ontario Library Service representative and the chief librarian of a peer library. As they become available, the Council will use accredited libraries as a source of auditors.

Auditors are eligible for reimbursement of related travel costs (mileage, meals, accommodation). If working on their own time, auditors are eligible for a \$50 honorarium.

Fees

The Guidelines Council levies a fee of \$125 for a peer audit. \$75 is charged for each additional day required.

The fees cover the cost of peer audit team expenses and materials.

Peer audit interview

A peer audit of a typical single branch library takes about three hours. (Multi-branch systems of course take longer.) An interview is arranged with the chief librarian, during which the peer audit team determines the degree of compliance with each item in the Guidelines checklist. The team will request to see policy and planning documents and will inspect the library facility.

Scoring

Each guideline counts for one point. To achieve accreditation, a minimum score of 80% is required in each of six sections of the Guidelines checklist, and an overall minimum score of 90%.

Where a library attains an overall score of less than 90%, but not less than 80%, it will have the option of developing a plan with the peer audit team to meet a sufficient number of Guidelines within an agreed-upon period of time (e.g. 6 months), thus avoiding the necessity of a complete re-audit.

Reporting

The peer audit team completes a final report which includes:

1. A consolidation of the working checklists used by individual auditors;
2. A summary of the Guidelines not met;
3. A summary of the score achieved;

4. A recommendation from the team as to whether in their opinion the library should or should not be accredited.

With permission of the audited library, the audit team forwards its report to the Guidelines Council. The report is copied and circulated to the Council members and put on the agenda of the Council's next meeting. Council may go back to the team for clarification of any aspect of the report.

Accreditation

If the Guidelines Council is in agreement with the team's recommendation to accredit, it passes a motion to formally accredit the library and a letter is sent to the library informing it of Council's decision.

The accredited library receives:

1. A certificate of accreditation, signed by the Chair of the Strategic Directions Council (SDC) and by the Ontario Minister of Citizenship, Culture and Recreation. The certificate is presented by the Minister at an awards ceremony;
2. A wall plaque and decal for the main entrance, so that the library's accredited status is apparent to everyone entering the library;
3. A local communication piece, to explain the significance of accreditation to the community.

To retain its accredited status, a library must re-apply at the end of a five-year period. As the Guidelines are revised every two years, a library which applies for re-accreditation after 5 years will be doing so under a new set of Guidelines.

E. REVISION OF THE GUIDELINES

The Guidelines Council reviews its policies and procedures on an on-going basis, often based on feedback from libraries and audit teams. The Guidelines are reviewed section by section at each meeting and recommendations are made for changes, deletions or additions. A revised edition of the Guidelines is published every two years.

F. CURRENT SITUATION

The Guidelines Council officially opened its doors to applications for accreditation in September 1998. The first four libraries to be accredited were presented with certificates at the Ontario Library Association annual conference held in January 1999. Currently (as of August 1999) seven additional libraries are actively seeking accreditation and another thirteen have expressed interest in undertaking the process.

The Guidelines Council is working on the first revised edition of the Guidelines and aims to publish it this fall.

G. GENERAL COMMENTS

Municipally based and funded, public library service in Ontario is very decentralized and becoming more so. Any movement on a province-wide level therefore requires broad consensus within the library community.

Previous to the publication of the Ontario Public Library Guidelines, province-wide standards had been discussed for decades in Ontario. Yet not until now has there been sufficiently wide acceptance of a particular model.

The Guidelines as they exist today are the product of consensus among representatives of the wide spectrum of public libraries in Ontario. The process of developing the guidelines was partly an exercise in diplomacy, a striving to achieve the necessary acceptance, both of the general direction of the program and of each individual guideline.

This need for consensus in a decentralized library community is one reason for the voluntary nature of the guidelines, as well as for the emphasis on trying to meet local needs rather than quantitative input or performance standards.

On the other hand, because it is voluntary rather than imposed, and because no great rewards or penalties are involved, the Guidelines program can be easy to ignore. This situation is exacerbated by an environment in which public libraries are operating with reduced staff, hours and budgets and consequently have little time and energy to take on extra projects.

On the whole, libraries must therefore be convinced to undertake the process and be reassured with promises of support and assistance. Indeed, considerable assistance is made available to libraries undertaking the process, particularly from the Ontario Library Service in the form of resource materials and the personal assistance of professional librarians.

As noted above, the actual peer audit experiences have turned out to be extremely positive, both from the points of view of the staff of the library being audited and the members of the peer audit team.

"We agreed to participate because, although we thought our library system was in pretty good shape, we wanted to see where we could yet improve. New eyes always see things differently, and it was good to have fellow librarians take a critical yet constructive look at our system. Many of the shortcomings that were identified were fixed afterwards without a lot of effort or expense, making our library service better for the public. This was a very worthwhile and useful exercise". *Margaret Rule, CEO of Middlesex County Library, an accredited library.*

An unexpected benefit of the program, the examination of a library's operation by its peers has resulted in exposure to new ways of doing things and the sharing of ideas among staff of different libraries.

"I never expected to learn as much as I did from serving on the audit team. I came away from the experience with a greater understanding of how different public libraries operate, not to mention many ideas for programming, collection displays and partnerships. The Guidelines project proves again that we can all learn from one another". *Lorene Sims, CEO of Lincoln Public Library, peer auditor.*

Still in its early stages, the Guidelines program shows considerable promise as a positive force for public library development in Ontario. While it is somewhat difficult to gauge the number of libraries that have used or are using the Guidelines for their own internal assessment and planning purposes, interest in the accreditation part of the program is easier to keep track of and appears to be growing. It is hoped that this momentum will continue to build over the coming years, and the program become an integral part of public library service in Ontario.