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Engaging with community engagement: public libraries and citizen involvement

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore the concept of community engagement within a public library context

Design/methodology/approach – The paper analyses selected literature discussing the concept of community engagement, focusing particularly on that considering community engagement activities in public libraries. Key issues are illustrated using examples from the literature and data from an interview-based study of public library practitioners and policy makers.

Findings – The evidence suggests that the public library is being positioned as a key community resource. Community engagement in public libraries includes: making the library space available for community activities; working in partnership with the voluntary and community sector as well as with other public services; involving volunteers in the delivery of library services; activities to support community involvement in various levels of decision making. The paper concludes that library services have been quite effective at involving local people in the simpler forms of community engagement, such as surveying their opinions and consulting them on a range of issues, but they could do more to support the development of community capacity building. Activities focusing on work with reading and books could provide a useful way forward.

Originality/value – The paper provides empirical evidence of the views of key stakeholders towards community engagement activities in public libraries and should be of use to policy makers, practitioners, researchers and students of the public library sector.

Keywords Public libraries, Community relations, Partnership, Library buildings, Readers, United Kingdom

Paper type Research paper

Background
Modernising local government

The New Labour Government swept to power in 1997 determined to "modernise" local government by overhauling what it perceived as outdated and cumbersome political management arrangements, structures and ways of working. The new government was determined that local authorities or councils should be more open, efficient and accountable, that service standards should be raised through a challenging performance management framework and the dissemination of good practice, and that links between local councils and local people should be strengthened. The 1999 Local Government Act introduced an extensive reform programme including the Best Value regime of accountability, community planning, e-government, new political management structures and strategic partnerships (*Local Government Act*, 1999) and

the 2006 White Paper, *Strong and Prosperous Communities* (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2006), set out a range of priorities for the future of local government including proposals to strengthen local leadership, enhance the role of frontline councillors, cut back the plethora of national targets, streamline inspection and broaden the scope of local area agreements.

As a statutory local government service, public libraries have inevitably felt the effects of New Labour's modernising agenda and in many cases have found it beneficial. For example, although Best Value has been criticised as a burden, restricting managers' freedom to direct the service in the way they consider appropriate (Rouse, 2001), public library managers in one study suggested that it was a powerful instrument for change, giving services a structured framework within which progress can be clearly monitored and measured (Goulding, 2006). Similarly, despite uncertainty about some aspects of the 2006 White Paper (the new local performance framework, for example), proposals designed to devolve power to communities and give local people a greater say over local pubic services have been welcomed by the public library sector. The Society of Chief Librarians, for example, explains that the White Paper puts citizens and communities at the heart of policy and that "such an approach should present no fears for the public library community" (Society of Chief Librarians, 2007, para. 2). The theme of community engagement emerging from the White Paper has therefore been embraced by public librarians keen to demonstrate their contribution to the Government's agenda of creating safer and stronger communities.

Community engagement
Community engagement has been defined in many different ways since it entered common usage but for our purposes it can be explained thus:

> Community engagement encompasses a variety of approaches whereby public service bodies empower citizens to consider and express their views on how their particular needs are best met. These may range from encouraging people to have a say on setting the priorities for community safet... to sharing decision-making with them in relation to defined services (Rogers and Robinson, 2004).

Strong and Prosperous Communities set out a number of proposals designed to encourage community engagement by giving local people more say in the running of local services through a duty on local councils to "inform, consult, involve and devolve to local citizens and communities, where appropriate" (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2006, p. 26). There appear to be two motives behind the drive for better engagement between councils and citizens. One is to try to overcome citizens' growing sense of disconnection, cynicism and distrust of government and the other is to encourage community involvement in policy development and service delivery in the anticipation that this will deliver better public services (Brown and Keast, 2003). The aims are thus to extend and improve the democratic validity of local councils and revitalize local active citizenship (Woodward, 2000).

This approach is considered to have many benefits. I&DeA[1] states that "Community engagement has been identified as a significant factor in building local trust in a council" (I&DeA, 2008), suggesting that citizen satisfaction is improved by community engagement and that councils gain a better understanding of the needs and views of local communities. Community engagement should, therefore, enhance democratic accountability, improve community well-being and result in fairer and

more effective decision making (Somerville and Haines, 2008). The challenge for councils is to develop mechanisms and ways of working which enable people to become more actively involved in their neighbourhoods, making it possible for them to influence decisions about their local areas and the development and delivery of local public services. To achieve this councils should:

- keep people well-informed about services and policies;
- listen and respond to people's views and concerns through consultation;
- engage people in decisions about changes to services and policies;
- improve the accessibility and accountability of the council to local people; and
- build trust (Nottinghamshire County Council, n.d.).

Nottinghamshire County Council presents citizen engagement and participation on a continuum (see Figure 1). At one end of the spectrum, the local council informs citizens of decisions, activities and developments. At the other extreme, empowerment means giving local people the power to make decisions about their local areas and public services. In between, the council may consult by seeking citizens' views, involve them in an advisory capacity or collaborate with them in reaching a decision on issues which affect them and their neighbourhoods (Nottinghamshire County Council, no date). Somerville and Haines (2008) suggest that many local councils are interested in neighbourhood management and willing to improve community engagement, particularly if this will improve service delivery. They remain sceptical, however, of the commitment of many local authorities to devolve real power fully to communities, thus ensuing a genuinely equal partnership rather than one dominated by the local authority.

It could be argued that public libraries have long had a community focus but recently the role that public libraries play in enabling community involvement, cohesion and capacity building has been emphasized by public library managers and policy makers. The next section of this paper will explore the development of this community focus and analyse how public libraries might approach community engagement.

Public libraries engaging with communities
Discourses around the term and concept of "community" have been widespread in recent years within the public library sector in the UK, the themes of community development and transformation being increasingly prominent in statements from the

| Inform | Consult | Involve | Collaborate | Empower |
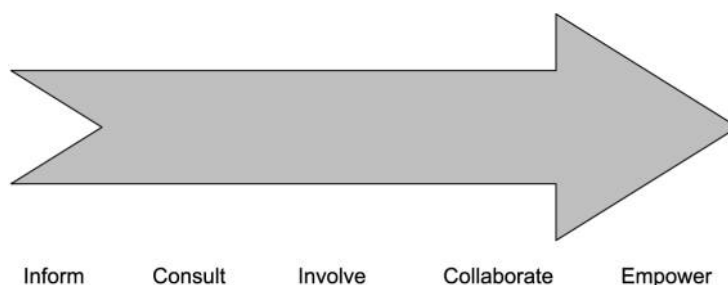
Source: Nottinghamshire County Council (n.d.)

Figure 1.
The public participation spectrum

government bodies and departments responsible for public libraries[2]. *Framework for the Future*, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport's (DCMS) long term strategy for public libraries in England published in 2003 (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2003), established 'community and civic values' as one of its three key themes and the marketing programme accompanying the strategy centred around a message of public libraries being at the 'heart of the community'. This, it was felt, exemplified a range of key ideas relating to the public library:

- a place that feels good and that makes people proud;
- an idea that is grounded in our lives;
- focusing on people and where they live;
- based on the relationships that staff build and the services that are developed; and
- a unique space[3].

In 2001, the Government's Beacon Council Scheme, which was established in 1999 to reward those local authorities considered to be demonstrating best practice, turned its attention to public libraries. One of the themes of round three of the Beacon Scheme was Libraries as a Community Resource[4], aiming to identify those authorities which recognized the key role that public libraries could play in improving the quality of daily life of communities by fostering community development, promoting community identity and developing social inclusion. More recently, £80 million worth of funding has been made available through the Community Libraries Programme to enable libraries to enter into partnerships with their local communities and give local people the opportunity to become actively engaged in shaping public library services[5]. Focusing essentially on upgrading public library buildings, the programme aims to fund improvements in consultation with the local community, making libraries exciting and accessible community spaces.

There is, therefore, apparently plenty of activity related to community engagement taking place within public libraries in the UK supported by funding for initiatives which strengthen the relationship between libraries and their communities. Success has been mixed, however. A mapping of community engagement practice in England's public libraries suggested that it was not commonplace (CSV Consulting, 2006a), while an evaluation of five of the 58 services that won grants under the Community Libraries Programme, concluded that positive results were being achieved but there was a lack of a shared vision within library services of what community engagement means in practice and little evidence of behaviour change or new approaches from frontline staff (Taylor and Pask, 2008).

The lack of clarity and vision around community engagement led to the development of a toolkit designed to help public libraries involve their local communities in service delivery and development (CSV Consulting, 2006b). The toolkit highlighted seven aspects of community engagement which it was suggested libraries focus on to identify what they are currently doing and plan future activities. The seven aspects are:

(1) the library as a space for community activities;
(2) partnership working with voluntary and community sector;

(3) partnership working with other public services towards community engagement;

(4) involvement of volunteers;

(5) community involvement in one off decision making;

(6) community involvement in relation to projects; and

(7) community involvement in relation to boards/strategic decision making.

These seven aspects will be used as a framework to structure the remaining discussion which will explore the opportunities and challenges of community engagement for public libraries, using examples from the literature and interview data from a study on public library discourses funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) (Goulding, 2006). A total of 50 interviews or group discussion sessions with 61 people (policy makers, strategists, senior public library practitioners and others with specific interests relevant to this study) were undertaken as part of this research in May and June 2004. Interviews were either undertaken face-to-face (the majority) or by telephone. Both types were recorded, fully transcribed and analysed using ATLAS.ti.

The library as a space for community activities

The CSV toolkit states that making space available for local groups to meet or arrange events is not community engagement in itself but it could be a mechanism for increasing contribution to the wider community and lay the foundation for partnership working (CSV Consulting, 2006b). A report by ERS (Experian Research Services) on the development of the evidence base of public libraries' engagement with communities concluded that a large number and wide range of types of organisations and groups used libraries as publicly accessible spaces (ERS, 2008) and during the interviews for the AHRC research the potential for the public library to become a focus for community activity was a prominent theme. The much celebrated neutrality of the public library space was considered by participants to be a very positive attribute which enabled people from a wide range of backgrounds to feel comfortable entering and participating in events or meetings in the public library space. An increase in organized library-led activities such as reading groups, family and local history courses, homework help clubs and children's programmes, as well as the increased incidence of community groups using the library as a meeting place for a range of activities from slimming clubs to adult education classes, means that libraries are used by a wide cross-section of the local population. Group activities taking place in the library often draw their membership from across the local community and can build bonds between individuals as well as help give people a say in how their communities are run through community meetings, MPs' surgeries and local consultation discussions (MLA, 2005).

Misgivings about the impact some of these developments may have had on libraries' more long-standing users were raised in interviews, however, focusing on whether the transformation of the library into a "meeting place, performance space and group learning site was compatible with the traditional need for quiet reflection and solitary study" (Building Centre Trust, 2000). One head of service noted:

When we began to provide certain kinds of activities in libraries, some of our residents did not approve of the noise and bustle that they created, e.g. events such as book sales, craft

fairs, exercise classes. But at the end of the day people came round to these ideas and they accepted them. I think you do have to take a bit of risk.

In trying to develop new uses for the public library space in an attempt to build acceptance of the role of the library as a key community space, it seems that there is a danger that more established users may be driven away, restricting the library's community engagement capacity.

The point made in the CSV toolkit about the simple provision of space not being enough to engage communities fully was picked up by one head of service who suggested in interview that libraries are too passive and neutral, a quality that has traditionally been viewed as one of their key strengths and one that was certainly celebrated by many interview participants. He argued, though, that staff need to be more interventionist and act as advocates for communities although he doubted whether many had the appropriate skills. Nevertheless, many claims have been made for the ability of the public library to underpin community development and building by supporting a range of group or community experiences and many of those interviewed emphasized their role as a community resource, one head of service saying:

> We've always been a meeting place for people and the heart of our traditional use is the older person, often retired, visiting the library on a certain day, once a week. [This] is part of their social life and they will meet other friends. And that is something that we have to take into account in our new library development, we've got to ensure we have meeting space. In some places we have refreshments, making sure there are places that they can meet and feel comfortable.

As noted above, though, just providing space for individuals or community groups to meet is essentially a passive form of community engagement work (Library and Information Services Council (Wales), 2003). The challenge for local services like public libraries is to provide structures and processes which take naturally occurring interactions and transform them into community engagement opportunities because, although public libraries are based in communities, the extent to which they are community-based has been questioned (Harris, 1998).

Partnership working with the voluntary and community sector

Partnership working is a vital aspect of the Government's modernising agenda for local authorities which, if successful, should lead to actions and initiatives advancing the economic, social and environmental well-being of the community. An increasingly important aspect of the drive for partnership within local authorities is that which relates to partnerships with the voluntary and community sector (VCS), sometimes referred to as the third sector. Since coming to office in 1997, the New Labour Government has launched a number of initiatives to facilitate the growth and transformation of the third sector, and partnership between voluntary sector organisations and the state to improve and deliver public services has been an important theme. In 1998, the Government published the Compact, a framework to guide relations between Government and the voluntary and community sector in England (Home Office, 1998, paras. 5 and 6). The Compact sets out the philosophy that "voluntary and community activity is fundamental to the development of a democratic, socially inclusive society" and explains how third sector organisations enable individuals to contribute to public life and develop their communities. Their contribution in this respect lies in their ability to "act as pathfinders for the

involvement of users in the design and delivery of services" and as "advocates for those who otherwise have no voice". The CSV Consulting study suggests that local VCS groups represent communities with a wide range of interests and they can provide a valuable insight into how the people they represent can be supported to engage in the community further (CSV Consulting, 2006a).

At its simplest level, partnership with the third sector can just involve 'hosting' activities: making space available for local community groups. As described above, as libraries have sought to embed themselves within the community; they have often become a focus for many diverse community activities, one head of service interviewed noting:

> We have not been precious in terms of what we have used our libraries for. If we think that there is a synergy and a partnership to be had with individuals in the community or other sectors, we have really built upon that opportunity.

Evidence of community and voluntary groups using the public library space is widespread, as is that of the library publicising services available to the community and promoting the library itself as a place to find information about local groups (see, for example, CSV Consulting, 2006b). Examples of more complex partnership work in public libraries are less common, however. Blake *et al.* (2007, p. 26) concluded that their research into the role of London's public libraries in meeting the information needs of the third sector found "little evidence of a close engagement between libraries and the VCS". They also suggested that one of the main VCS needs related to ICT support and public libraries could certainly play a role here. *New Library: The People's Network* (Library and Information Commission, 1997) envisaged a future in which IT facilities made available through the UK Public Library Network would enable people to interact with all manner of voluntary organisations and interest groups, enabling individuals to become better informed and promote their views in the interests of wider community development. Local people can also be encouraged to become involved in the creation of content which can expand their skills, encourage neighbourhood activity and produce resources which are both useful and a source of pride to those responsible for them and the whole community. Although many digitisation and content creation projects have taken place in public libraries around the country, the official evaluation of the People's Network reported that few involved local people, especially those from socially excluded groups (Sommerlad *et al.*, 2004) and it seem that this opportunity to create local ownership and build community engagement through partnerships with local VCS groups is being missed.

Partnership working with other public services

Although public library services have always worked with others, both inside and outside the local council, the modernising government agenda has facilitated closer working relationships with other agencies and services. These have often had the effect of involving public libraries in a range of programmes and activities central to the local authority's community strategy. One interview participant talked of how partnerships could raise the profile of the library service, within the authority and beyond, and the benefits this has for the community:

> Partnership working does give librarians the opportunity to work across a whole range of sectors that may otherwise be difficult to access and this raises the profile for professional

librarians and raises the status of the borough. A lot of the people we try and work with are constantly restructuring and this has been particularly evident with the primary care trust but we have achieved a sound partnership with their health visitors in the distribution of *Bookstart* packs and this has had a very positive impact in the community.

Libraries need to convince policy makers and colleagues within the local authority as well as external organizations and other potential partners, that they can help them deliver on a whole range of cross-cutting issues, although this was not always easy according to one participant who seemed to question how far libraries could participate in community regeneration activities:

We have a lot of partnerships, we have worked hard at partnerships, but I would say there are a lot of government initiatives that have come out, like the Pathfinders, and Neighbourhood Renewal, which it's not easy for libraries to link in with. We are not community development officers. So we do work with partners but there is a limit to what we can do. If the service has a low profile within the authority it is difficult to get involved in things like Local Strategic Partnerships. We do, but a lot of the time we are picking up crumbs from the table because it's all about the priorities being different.

One way in which libraries have worked with other local authority services successfully is through the provision of one-stop shops for council information and advice. In fact, *Strong and Prosperous Communities* (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2006) gives the example of Gateshead Council and its refurbishment of Gateshead Library to incorporate area housing offices as a good example of an innovative way of responding to local people's needs. The Government is certainly keen, therefore, to see the development of one-stop shops for local government services and information to engage groups and individuals perceived as hard to reach (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2003). One head of service interviewed articulated the practical, financial and the strategic policy aspects of this kind of co-location of a range of local council services. Stressing the challenge of securing funds to invest in capital projects he commented:

I think the years are gone, or should be going, where we are just thinking of library replacements. I think there should be a vision built around cross-cutting service delivery…built around information, advice and access.

The interviews confirmed that public libraries are increasingly sharing premises with a range of other services, including other local government services such as housing or social services, and there are undoubtedly sound financial, strategic and community engagement advantages to this policy. It could be argued that, once again, the one-stop shop approach is very much towards the inform end of the spectrum shown in Figure 1, however, and quite a passive type of community engagement. On the other hand, the basis of informed participation in the democratic process is information and the evidence suggests that through the provision of innovative and integrated community information and advice services, some libraries are making a useful contribution in this respect

Involvement of volunteers

The use of volunteers in public libraries has been an issue of some controversy amid professional concern that they should not be used to compensate for the reduction or withdrawal of public library services caused by redundancies or the failure to fill

vacant posts. In fact, volunteers have been used extensively and to good effect in the past by public libraries for outreach services, e.g. services for the housebound, where they can help provide access to professionally run library services, although their use for other public library activities has been quite limited. Research in 2000 into the use of volunteers by English public libraries found that use was increasing in both scale and diversity (Cookman *et al.*, 2000), however, and professional opposition appears to have diminished as services recognise that volunteers can mobilise support for the library among hard to reach groups as they often have links within the community. Larsen *et al.* (2004) note that volunteers can be particularly helpful within refugee communities, helping services make connections with groups of immigrants, assisting with language barriers and facilitating understanding and knowledge sharing about different communities. Volunteers have also been found to be capable of opening and sustaining a dialogue with individuals and groups within the community and thus encouraging their contribution and participation. An overview of key lessons of the Welcome to Your Library Programme[6] gave the example of boys from a rather exclusive local school offering their IT skills as volunteers in the local library to people who wanted to have ICT taster sessions (ALM London, 2004[7]). Amongst those who took up that offer were people who were attending the local *Asylum Welcome*[8] project and this initiated a dialogue between these two groups of local people who otherwise probably would not have met and almost certainly would not have spent time talking together.

Community involvement in one-off decision making and in relation to projects

These two aspects have been merged as in the ERS (Experian Research Services) report because, as the report states, projects are often one-off activities (ERS, 2008). Examples of this aspect of community engagement work in public libraries tend to focus around the consultation of users (often specific groups of users such as young people or people from ethnic minorities) in decisions relating to the design or redesign of library buildings or specific areas within them. User or public consultation has long been a feature of public library service management although the effectiveness of some of the more conventional methods used has been questioned (see, for example, Morris and Barron, 1998). Probably as a result of criticisms of techniques relied upon in the past, and as a response to government demands for wider and deeper engagement, library services have been experimenting with more innovative ways of gathering users' views and opinions often as a basis for making decisions related to library space. Bolton Libraries, for example, conducted an arts-based consultation exercise in 2005 to inform their planning for a new library (Keane, 2006). Using five local artists to engage with different community groups, activities focused on encouraging local people to visually express their ideas for the new library using a range of art forms including photography, craft materials and silk painting. As noted above, the Community Libraries Programme funded by the Big Lottery Fund is investing £80 million in public libraries, largely for capital works, and community engagement is a key requirement of the funding. Applicants for the funding had to demonstrate that they had engaged with local people to understand truly the needs of the local area and, if successful, show that they had community engagement plans in place to ensure that

the new facilities would be designed and shaped by the local community, and embraced and managed by them in the future (Noblett, 2008).

Heads of service participating in the AHRC study often focused on the process and result of community consultation on library space, one saying:

> The customers wanted things like the prayer room, we call it meditation space. Now that came out directly as a result of customer consultation. And [they wanted] a crèche. I think we are really relevant for our communities (Anon).

Similarly, a local councillor interviewed described the impact of consultation about library refurbishments on local communities' feeling about their libraries:

> They've all been done very much in consultation with the local communities, the Friends groups, local councillors and they've all been taken through the plans, they've all had the opportunity to input into it, their ideas have been taken on board when they can be and they've come out the other end with ownership of it. I've been to all the re-openings and I'm quite struck with the ownership and pride that the library users have in their library and in their contribution to how it looks.

This kind of consultation can certainly be beneficial for both the library and its users, but it could be argued that this is essentially *user* consultation as opposed to *community* consultation or engagement, and public libraries have been criticized in the past for consulting only those who already use their services, through the Cipfa Plus (*Public Library User Survey*), for example. An easy option, this, according to Pateman (2004), reinforces the status quo as users tend to ask for more of what is already provided which clearly does not meet the needs of the 40 per cent of people who do not use public libraries in the UK. In interview, many heads of service admitted that libraries probably had been in a comfort zone, using the results of user satisfaction questionnaires (which are generally very positive) to convince themselves and others that they were providing the services that people wanted. One head of service said:

> It's the classic thing that we've been very internally focused, catering to the audience we've always had, concentrating on books because that's the professional thing, as opposed to being outwardly focused on what we could and should be doing and looking at people who are not coming into libraries.

Interview participants often agreed that consultation had to go beyond surveying users of the service and many services are now trying to engage non-users and lapsed users by involving them in strategic decision making processes.

Community involvement in relation to boards/strategic decision making

To overcome a perceived public sector weakness on the needs and concerns of users, community involvement is championed through consultation and communication with the aims of improving service delivery and enhancing the democratic legitimacy of local government (Audit Commission, 2003). As noted above, though, there have been concerns expressed about the nature and effectiveness of the consultation taking place in public libraries and commentators and interview participants seem to agree that it is only through engaging with communities that their real, as opposed to perceived, needs will be established, as one interviewee emphasised:

> There needs to be a much stronger dialogue with local communities about what local library services could be. The key driver should be the Community Strategy and to make that work

we have to get better. . .at engaging with local people about what they really feel about library
services, not just superficial stuff like [Cipfa] Plus but really proper market research.

To try to make contact with and connect with those hard to reach groups who do not
use public libraries and are often the most excluded, some library services are
developing new methods and mechanisms for consultation and involvement. Although
in 2002 the Audit Commission noted that half of the Best Value reviews of public
library services concluded that consultation with users and non-users was inadequate
(Audit Commission, 2002), public libraries in some areas are making considerable
efforts to engage excluded groups, leading to what Harris and Dudley (2005, p. 31) call
a "consultation culture". Communication with library users can help staff to engage
more closely with users' needs and increase users' confidence of the service, and study
participants explained how a variety of forms of user consultation was bringing a
wider range of people into the library and reaching socially excluded groups. One
participant explained how the library service had established a youth library forum to
establish the needs of the young people of the borough, resulting in youth spaces in
libraries and an increase in support from this demographic as a consequence. Another
outlined the work of a senior librarian who was working with homeless people,
"talking to them about how they perceive libraries, how they would like to see
libraries". In these ways, public libraries aim to establish the needs of those who do not
use public libraries and develop programmes to encourage their use of facilities and
services and the interviews suggested that many library authorities were trying to find
ways of engaging local communities in service development. One participant
explained:

We have now, I think it's two youth juries where we bring the kids in, we talk to them about
the services that are being provided, what do they want to see, they help with a little bit of the
selection of the stock, the magazines, things like that. We also engage with specific groups
within the community. We have a very strong link, for example, with [the borough's]
Dyslexia Association and, again, we have a lot of feedback and work with them very closely
in making sure that the provision is right and the young kids there have actually been
involved in buying collections which have proved very popular in all libraries.

User and non-user consultation was an item high up the agenda of many interview
participants, therefore, although one participant still felt that current initiatives to
engage communities in the planning and delivery of services did not go far enough:

Users have no control really about how library services are delivered, even though they have
the biggest say and biggest stake. They still have no real control about what goes on the
shelves, opening hours, stock selection, they're not involved in selecting performance
indicators or success criteria or impact or outcome measures. They don't even know what
they are, they're not even reported on. They are passive recipients of an archaic service, is
how I will sum it up.

Conclusion

Documentary, policy and empirical evidence indicates that, increasingly, the public
library is being positioned not just as a place to borrow or read books or even to access
digital material, but, as a key community resource and facility which can act as a venue
for community events and as an access point connecting individuals with one another,
connecting people with their local communities, and connecting communities with

wider society. The results of the interviews for the AHRC-funded study suggest that those participating recognized the need to engage users in consultation and act on the information gathered in order to engage their interest in the service. There was a general acceptance that public libraries had been too user-focused in the past and although this seems like an odd criticism to make in these days of customer-facing services, the argument is that by attending to the needs of those who use the library most, those who do not use them or use them infrequently have been neglected. Libraries now need to capitalise upon the opportunities that the community role offers them to connect with "hard to reach groups" and encourage their community participation. For many people, involvement in community self-help and mutual support activity will be the form that much community engagement takes place rather than through formal decision making bodies and processes; "people engaging with each other to bring about changes that enhance local life" (Smith, 2004, online resource). Public libraries are encouraging these kinds of connections, as described above, but perhaps could do more to guide and support the development of linkages, networks and capacity for communication, self-help and mutual support, as Harris and Dudley (2005) suggest.

One encouraging area of potential for community engagement not discussed above nor really mentioned in the interviews is work around books and reading. A conference organised jointly by The Reading Agency and the Local Government Association in November 2007concluded that libraries could use the power of their everyday work with readers to reach out and involve local people in decision making about the future of local public services (Hyde and Mahal, 2008). Library-led readers' group and other reader development activities were highlighted as examples of popular grass-roots activities that could be built on to encourage feedback, consultation and shared decision-making. Study participants were certainly enthusiastic about reader development work in public libraries and were committed to maintaining and extending it so that public libraries cease to be mere suppliers of reading material and turn their attention to helping people engage with a wide range of literature. There was a sense that the role of facilitating enjoyment and engagement with books and reading had been lost to some extent, or perhaps had never been a priority for older users, but that now public libraries had developed a range of initiatives to assist people with their reading choices and help them benefit from the creativity associated with reading. This approach was also considered important to raise the profile of the public library service, provide a firm infrastructure for public-sector involvement and investment and facilitate partnership working. As well as encouraging use and reaching out to new audiences, therefore, reader development work could help public libraries serve the community better and, by doing so, find an effective way of engaging with local people.

Notes

1. The improvement and development agency for local government.

2. The legislative and regulatory framework governing public libraries in the UK was complicated by devolution in 1998. Wales has the same public library legislation as England but overall responsibility for the service lies with the Welsh Assembly. Scotland and Northern Ireland have their own public library legislation and overall responsibility lies with the Scottish Government and Northern Ireland Assembly respectively. Similarly, the work of

local public libraries in England is supported by the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA), the development agency for museums, libraries and archives, advising government on policy and priorities for the sector. There is no equivalent body for the other three home countries although for Wales, CyMAL (Museums, Archives and Libraries Wales) was established in 2004. This is in a different position from the English MLA, however, as it is part of the Welsh Assembly; it is not a separate agency but a policy division of the Assembly, developing policy and giving policy advice directly to Ministers. In Scotland and Northern Ireland there are no cross-domain bodies similar to either the English or Welsh models although both the SLIC (Scottish Library and Information Council)4 and LISC(NI) (Library and Information Services Council Northern Ireland)5 advise their respective governments on library and information issues and act as a focus for activity in the domain.

3. The presentation to the 2004 Public Library Authorities Conference setting out the background and rationale for the "heart of the community" message can be found at URL: www.mla.gov.uk/programmes/framework/framework_programmes/marketing (accessed 4 September 2008)

4. A report by David Hayes Associates giving the background to the theme and evaluating outcomes is available at: www.local.communities.gov.uk/research/beacyr3/library/index. htm (accessed 4 September 2008)

5. For more information see: www.biglotteryfund.org.uk/prog_community_libraries. htm?regioncode = -uk&progStatus = open&status = theProg&title = Community%20 Libraries (accessed 4 September 2008).

6. For more information about the Welcome to Your Library Programme which aims to connect public libraries with refugees and asylum seekers see: www.welcometoyourlibrary.org.uk/ (accessed 4 September 2008).

7. ALM London is the strategic development agency for archives, libraries and museums in the capital, and is core funded by the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA).

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