

# Assessing what libraries mean to users.

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I want to start this morning with the question that Frank Webster posed a few minutes ago. 'What is the point of public libraries?'

The curious (and wonderful) thing about public libraries is that even people who don't use them are still convinced they *have* a point.

When I was a library manager with Sheffield Libraries several times libraries I managed were threatened with closure. And it wasn't uncommon to get a petition of 5000 or more signatures to keep open a library with only 500 regular users.

So there's something about libraries that makes people think they are worth keeping. But what is it? And how do we know if it's something important enough to spend large amounts of public money on them?

I hope in the next 20 minutes to do two things.

First I want to talk briefly about ways we've been assessing what libraries mean to users at Sheffield University. And, secondly, I want to let you see some of the results of our most recent research. I hope it will give you some food for thought about what public libraries mean to users.

For my last eight years as a senior public library manager I was a heavy user of library statistics and I learnt one thing very quickly. Statistics are far better at describing things than they are at explaining things. For instance they may tell you that your library is issuing fewer books than the library down the road, or that it's dearer to run, BUT THEY DON'T EXPLAIN WHY. They don't give you reasons.

Far too many library authorities today are in thrall to league tables of statistics. And, for me, taking decisions to change or cut services on the basis of statistics is rather like a doctor treating a patient's symptoms without bothering to identify the disease.

But, unfortunately, rows of figures and bar charts are what the politicians, at the moment, treat as convincing evidence of failure or success.

What we have to do - and its a difficult challenge - is to get policy makers to recognise that statistics only tell them part of the story. Yes, statistics are excellent at describing things, but they can't describe the **value** of things. They can't describe the **significance** of things. And by themselves they cannot begin to suggest **reasons for things**.

Reducing a public library to columns of figures is rather like trying to describe a human body by listing the chemicals that make it up.

The Research Report **New Measures for the New Library**, which we published last year, (Linley and Usherwood 1998) proposes a radical new approach to measuring value of libraries. It uses a method called the social audit technique, which has been used before in other disciplines but never applied to libraries. It's an approach which assesses the **benefits** of a service rather than simply trying to measure its **outputs** - the **quantity** of service you get for your money. It relies on evidence provided by all the different stakeholders in the service to make a judgement about success or failure.

The Social Audit approach asks first 'what is the local authority trying to achieve through its libraries? Does it want them, for instance to help alleviate poverty, regenerate a community, improve literacy, reduce depressive illness or simply keep as many people as possible entertained. It isn't that much of a radical idea to suggest that you can't decide how well you are doing unless you know what it is you are setting out to do in the first place. The next step is then to measure how well the library is doing **against those objectives**.

If your library has more copies of Kafka than Katherine Cookson then is that something to be proud of or not? If your library is expensive to run, is that something to be corrected or not? The answer is, you can't say unless you know what it is you are setting out to achieve in the first place.

The Social Audit approach also recognises that if you are comparing services you are never comparing like with like. All sorts of differences will affect the comparison. Your library's priorities may be different from another's. Your users may be different. Your loan period may be different. Even your geography may be different. All of these can affect results.

Our second approach to assessing the value of public libraries has been to look at the actual behaviour of library users. That's because we believe that finding out what library users **do** and why they do it is

a better indicator of what's important to them than just asking what they think about the service. People may tell you one thing but do another.

I'll give you an example. A few years ago a brand new library opened in Sheffield. And as a result, a smaller, very inadequate library a mile away was scheduled for closure. Well there were petitions, there were public meetings, and 90% of the users said they couldn't afford to travel to the new library. So we put in four new mobile stops. Six months later we had to close them because almost no-one was using them. People were travelling to the new library a mile away. So what people tell you doesn't always give you reliable answers either.

Most recently our research has been looking at what actually happens when people can't get to their local library service any more, either because it's been closed or because its opening hours have been cut (Proctor, Lee and Reilly 1999)

We identified three authorities intending to close libraries. And we found another, the London Borough of Ealing, intending to make significant cuts its opening hours. We surveyed users before the cuts, and again nine months after the cuts. Our idea was to find out how important libraries were to them. What had they done to find an alternative service? And what were they missing most about the service they had lost?

I want to let you see some of our findings. My talk this morning really isn't intended to be about library closures, but the people affected by closures, I think, have something important to tell us about what the public library means to its users.

### **THE IMPACT OF CLOSURES ON LIBRARY USE**

**Between 9% and 30% of adult users** were no longer using a public library.

**Between 18% and 66% of young children** were no longer using a public library

**People unable to get to a *local* library** use the public library less:

- Inconvenience
- Fear of not getting books back on time
- Books too heavy to carry with shopping.

**Comment** Library authorities are fooling themselves if they think that they can replace the loss of a local library. There will always be casualties, and they will be some of the most vulnerable people in the community - those who are least mobile - the poor, the young and the very elderly.

### **THE IMPACT OF CUTS IN OPENING HOURS ON LIBRARY USE**

**Up to 4% of users stopped using the service.** (cuts of up to 29% inc. Friday a pension day).

**Almost all remaining users stayed loyal** to their own library. People who initially went elsewhere drifted back.

### **Most people used the library less**

Loss of spontaneous use

Inconvenient hours

Fear of fines

**Comment:** People will try their very hardest to keep using their local library because the local library gives them something quite distinctive - something a library further away cannot give them. Our research showed what this is:

In the short time I have, I am going to miss out the obvious lists things people missed like access to reading matter and information. I think we can take that as read. But there were other things that are not quite as easy for statistics to show:

## **WHAT LIBRARIES MEAN TO USERS**

### **Social/Community value**

“Pleasant, helpful staff...meeting friends...”

“Grandmas came with under-fives...There was a really nice community feel to the library...Everyone got on.

The elderly...mothers and young children...it was the only place you could meet and sit down”

“It was a meeting place for local people”

“We are not at home in our new library [outside the community]...local events aren’t advertised and we haven’t got to know the librarians...”

“now there’s no focal point for village information”

“Close affinity of people in a small community who were anxious to help [each other]

**Comment.** This research endorses a finding of the Social Audit research - that is, the importance of the local library as a focal point for a specific community. It strengthens the community, it helps to hold it together, it gives it pride and worth, and it has the potential to be the information hub of the community.

### **Quality of Life**

“An excuse to get out of the house”

“Having a place to meet, relax and sit down”

“It helped me from becoming depressed”

“Something different to do on a dreary day”

“Reading keeps my mind active...it’s limited now”

“Social loss, information for living alone”

“It was a lifeline...no friends or relatives”

“I still get a kick out of it...I’ve learnt so much from the library...”

“Keeping in touch”

“They made you feel important...they knew your name and looked out for books...”

“Real personal service...we loved to discuss authors”

**Comment:** The comments above perhaps help to explain why people visited their local library so frequently and why they showed such intense loyalty to it. 52% to 67% of our respondents visited their library weekly or more often. In previous research it was even higher. (Usherwood, Proctor, and Sobczyk 1996) You may feel it’s over the top to call a visit to the library a life-saving experience, but for many lonely and depressed people it is. The problem seems to be that this experience is very much related to having a library in your own community.

Let’s move on now to look at what the public library can mean for children.

**We got our evidence here from both parents and teachers. We interviewed teachers in six schools affected by library closures and sent questionnaires out through primary school children to over 1000 parents.**

#### **HERE ARE SOME OF THE FINDINGS:**

##### **Parents and teachers missed**

**Parent = (P) Teacher = (T)**

##### **The social value of library visits.**

“...they could make relations with safe adults...without me hovering” (P)

“For the smaller ones it was...a social event really” (T)

“The staff knew the names of the children” (T)

“[It] made them more aware of other people in the community... gave them more respect for the elderly...” (T)

“Borrowing books involved them in local amenities” (P)

“[We met]...other parents and children...it’s not a social event now”

“Libraries teach them how to interact with older people and other children...”

### **OHP The Library’s Educational value**

“The breadth and variety of reading material” (T)

“No point of reference for schoolwork now” (P)

“They won’t get into the reading habit...” (P)

“it enables them to have a wider scope for their reading” (T)

“they will not get introduced to...information skills...” (T)

“Walking to the library taught her road safety” (P)

### **Independence and Choice**

“[in] Waterstones it’s too stressful. ...he can’t have half a dozen books spread around him like he would do in a library...if he bends something by accident I’ll have to buy it. (P)

“Finding a book...borrowing it...remembering to take it back...taking care of it because it belongs to the library...these were the skills we were trying to build in.” (T)

“Libraries teach you how to choose, how to learn...” (P)

“it taught him independence...he misses choosing his own books” (P)

“They lose that experience of ‘I will choose for myself’. They could decide on whatever they liked and that was important” (T)

“[they] could previously go to the library on their own. Now they can’t (P)

### **The Involvement of Parents**

Parents went to the local library with their children

Class visits overcame lack of parental support

### **Summary of Research Findings**

- The local library encourages a sense of community. It gives its users a sense of worth and a feeling of belonging.
- The local library has a therapeutic role, keeping minds active and helping to reduce boredom, loneliness and depression
- The local library is the information ‘hub’ of the community. Users are active in making it a ‘multi-directional’ information junction.

- The local library is an irreplaceable resource for children. Schools cannot replace what is lost when a library closes
- For young children the local library visit encourages independence, a sense of responsibility, an ability to make choices, constructive relationships with adults, and social self-confidence.

### **Conclusion**

This seminar is about the future of public libraries. I believe our research suggests that there is something quite distinctive about a local building based service that, for very many people, can't be replaced by any other form of provision.

The words 'computer' and 'information technology' didn't figure very large in my presentation this morning. Frank, in his talk, if I interpret him correctly, told public libraries to beware of computer salesmen bearing gifts. That's a good piece of advice, but I do believe that the future of public libraries is inextricably tied up with enhancing public access to information technology. But we mustn't throw out the baby with the bath water.

Yes we need to build the New Library Network that the Government are prepared to help fund, but the future of public libraries is also about keeping the present network relevant, open and accessible.

### **NB:**

I'll tell you a true story. A Director of Libraries I knew once had a very very large pile of manure delivered to his home. It was tipped out right onto his front drive. It was 1½ metres high, and 4 metres in diameter. If he'd had the right measuring instruments he could also have determined its exact temperature, weight, consistency and even what the horses had had for breakfast.

But none of those instruments could have told him why the pile of manure was there. Or whether it was a good thing or a bad thing to have. His wife might have ordered it for their large garden. A good thing. On the other hand a colleague with a grievance might have ordered it out of malice. A BAD thing. It was the latter.

So, in different ways over the last five years at Sheffield University we have invested a lot of time and expertise in trying to assess what public libraries mean to users. I've included details of different reports and studies in the handout.

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**Sheffield University Department of Information Studies.**  
**The Centre for the Public Library and Information in Society**

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