



Community engagement in public libraries

A report on current practice and future developments

Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA)
CSV Consulting



Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA)
Victoria House
Southampton Row
London WC1B 4EA

© MLA April 2006

The Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) and the nine regional agencies work in partnership to provide strategic direction and leadership for museums, libraries and archives across England. Together we work to improve people's lives by building knowledge, supporting learning, inspiring creativity and celebrating identity.

CSV, a registered charity, is the UK's leading volunteering and training organisation. It creates opportunities for people to play an active part in their communities. CSV Consulting aims to raise standards and to encourage improvement in volunteer management. It works with organizations to develop or expand their volunteer involvement.

ISBN 1-903743-97-4

The views expressed in this report are those of the author(s) and may not reflect the opinions or policies of the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council or its staff. If you have any queries about the work of MLA, please telephone 020 7273 1444, or email info@mla.gov.uk.

Summary of key findings

Framework for the Future identifies that at the heart of modern libraries should be a mission to ‘*tackle social exclusion, build community identity, and develop citizenship*’ www.dcms.gov.uk

Framework for the Future refers to libraries being able to benefit communities the most if they can communicate and deliver a clear sense of mission; and that communities and partners should be involved in shaping and delivering it. This is the essence of community engagement.

Community engagement in public libraries means involving the community in decision making. It is about the community identifying needs and working in equal partnerships to address these. Libraries can take this opportunity to deliver on key targets and agendas; to widen participation contributing to community cohesion; or, to increase active citizenship and thereby to increase use of library services.

This report reflects on what was found out in the course of this research project, drawing upon evidence that was gained from contact with 96 public library services.

Whilst some library services are working closely with their communities, involving them in shaping and delivering services, many staff within the library sector have fears about working in this way. Further training and support is needed for the library sector to better understand and implement community engagement.

The report and accompanying toolkit do not advocate that libraries should be doing this alone. Strong partnerships with the community are needed to make community engagement a commonplace activity among public libraries.

The report recommendations (Section 5) encourage MLA and other agencies working with libraries to provide training and networking opportunities for staff, so as to improve their understanding of community engagement. Sharing of good practice is encouraged, both among library staff; and the community and voluntary sector (VCS) generally.

There is a need for libraries to monitor and evaluate their community engagement activities. It is suggested that the community should be at the heart of involvement in peer reviews.



‘Libraries have a key role in the communities they serve. They are a hugely used, valued and popular service. However, engagement with those communities is vital to ensuring that libraries reflect their needs and provide the services that are required. I am pleased to commend this toolkit as a practical and sensible guide to how libraries might get involved with their communities. I encourage them to redouble their efforts to reach non-users and translate their views into improved services.’
David Lammy, Minister for Culture, March 2006.

Table of contents

1	Introduction	1
1.1	The Steering Group and Project Manager.....	1
2	Community engagement in England’s public libraries	3
2.1	Understanding of community engagement.....	3
2.2	Involving people	4
2.3	Is it a good idea for libraries?	4
2.4	Why is community engagement good for the library service?	5
2.5	Delivering agendas.....	6
2.6	Developing premises and community engagement.....	6
2.7	Why planned pilot projects didn’t go ahead.....	6
3	Assessing community engagement.....	7
3.1	Future impact measures and peer/ community assessments	7
3.2	Public library impact measures.....	10
4	Conclusions.....	11
4.1	What works well	11
4.2	Empowering the community	11
4.3	Wide range of opportunities available	11
5	Recommendations	13
5.1	Building capacity	13
5.3	Communication and advocacy	14
5.4	Measuring the impact	15

Appendices

A: Steering group membership

B: Library services involved

C: Background to community engagement

D: Community engagement links to government and policy agendas

1 Introduction

CSV Consulting, part of national volunteering charity CSV, was commissioned to establish the extent to which work is taking place in public libraries in relation to community engagement. The project aimed to identify good practice; and to provide tools that library staff can use for developing this work further. A toolkit has been produced and can be accessed at www.mla.gov.uk.

This report highlights what was found. It makes recommendations to MLA, its Regional Agencies, and to library staff about how community engagement in public libraries could be further developed.

1.1 The Steering Group and Project Manager

The project benefited from a steering group of library professionals, with additional representation from Government Departments (Appendix A lists the steering group membership). A project manager was recruited and in post from June 2005 until March 2006. CSV Consulting (www.csv.org.uk) undertook this work and was represented on the steering group.

1.2 Contact with 96 library services and the regional agencies

CSV Consulting approached the Regional Agencies of the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council. The Regional Agencies and CILIP assisted the gathering of information about current activity in relation to community engagement. This helped to gain an overview of activity and of perceptions. SCL, or its relevant groups in each region, were made aware of the project and given the opportunity to contribute.

Ninety six public library services made contact with the project (for a list of these, see Appendix B). CSV Consulting would like to thank these library services for their time and input. The conclusions and recommendations of this report are informed by these contributions.

1.3 Pilot projects, workshops, and focus groups

Staff in libraries were given information about the project and were offered the opportunity to get involved. Some authorities explored the possibility of working on a pilot project and the learning from this heavily influenced the final report.

Workshops on community engagement were offered in all nine regions. Five of the regions took up the offer of this training, two of which worked through aspects of the toolkit and provided guidance on its further development. Focus groups were conducted with library staff to establish what they wanted by way of resource tools to support further work.

1.4 Involvement of individual library services

Work was done with some individual libraries. Due to the short time scale of the project, this had to be limited and, in most cases, it involved facilitating planning; or identifying opportunities for community engagement and brokering relationships between organisations.

1.5 How this work relates to the report

These activities all contributed to assessing the levels of understanding, current activity, learning needs, attitudes and opinions relating to community engagement in library services. This body of evidence informs the report and the recommendations made in Section 5.

1.6 The Big Lottery Fund

During the course of this work, it was identified that Lottery funding has been allocated for public libraries and that some element of community involvement work will be a requirement for accessing grants.

The Big Lottery Fund is looking to provide capital funding for public libraries. It is likely that there will be an emphasis on the active involvement of people in designing and delivering services. Outcomes could include strengthening and sustaining partnerships with the community; and the placement of the community at the heart of public library service development.

Further details are to be published in the summer of 2006. www.biglotteryfund.org.uk



Villagers in Fleckney (Leicestershire), admire a mosaic. This was a local history project, supported by the library, bringing together older people and children. Since then, the participants have created their own group for craft activities and successfully applied for funding to keep going.

2 Community engagement in England's public libraries

From the mapping of current practice, it emerged that community engagement is not commonplace in libraries in any region. Where community engagement is taking place, this appears to be down to an individual's passion and motivation for working more closely with the community. It has so far largely been a mechanism for delivering other agendas and targets.

2.1 Understanding of community engagement

From questionnaires, focus groups, and structured discussions with library staff, it was clear that the term 'community engagement' held different meanings for people. This is not surprising, as there are a variety of definitions and this is new terminology for libraries (although a few have been doing the work for years).

Where community engagement is taking place, what do we want to see?

- more people everywhere getting actively involved in their neighbourhoods*
- local people able to influence decisions about their own neighbourhoods and public services.*

Definition from: *Your Neighbourhood – Getting involved and having a say*, an introduction to the discussion document *Citizen Engagement and Public Services; Why Neighbourhoods Matter* (ODPM and Home Office publication).

The definition above, identified and used through this project, incorporates the thinking of MLA, as well as also being broadly that of other Government Departments. Whilst consultation is a valuable tool to library services, it was felt that engagement with communities should ideally go beyond consultation. Engagement involves local people in identifying areas for development and getting actively involved in delivering these improvements or additional services. (Appendix C includes definitions of relevant concepts.)

Photograph taken by young photographers group, Nlarge, in Bristol Public Libraries.



2.2 Involving people

Community engagement isn't solely about volunteering. However, that is an aspect of it. The term volunteer was frequently misinterpreted. Community engagement is about involving people from the community in decision making. The involvement is often on a voluntary basis. Libraries that have understood the advantages which volunteer involvement can bring (e.g. Kent) are able to involve under represented groups in this way, contributing to social inclusion and community cohesion. Responses to questionnaires and participation in regional events show that many library staff want to work further with volunteers. Library staff stated that they lacked the expertise and funding to do this effectively.

South East Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (SEMLAC) recently completed research into the workforce of museums, libraries and archives in the region. It included information about the volunteer workforce. This showed that the involvement of volunteers is significantly less in libraries than in museums.

2.3 Is it a good idea for libraries?

Some library staff have questions about new ways of working. Involving the community in decision making and in delivering services that meet the needs of communities isn't the easiest option. The advantages, however, can be worth the effort, as Elizabeth Binns of Bury Community Libraries explains:

'When we began the project we could never have imagined how it would develop, I don't think we could have even have planned it to happen either. The most important thing has been the bond that developed between the community and the library service. The library is now part of the community, really we are a family. Like all families we don't always agree on how we are going to do something but we know that we are working for the same aim – to make Topping Fold a great place to live and work. We are proud of what we have achieved and even prouder that we did it together.'



The Topping Fold Library and Community Centre (Bury).

2.4 Why is community engagement good for the library service?

Using community engagement as a model of delivery can:

- increase wider support among the community for the library service;
- provide services to the wider community that are not possible within existing resource constraints;
- increase the profile of the library across the authority as a department that can deliver on different agenda;
- increase library use;
- create advocates in the community;
- involve under represented groups;
- make the services offered more reflective of community needs;
- provide an opportunity for staff development;
- encourage new groups of people to consider entering the library and information profession;
- attract funding;
- gain input from under represented groups about service development;
- contribute to making the library a centre of the community;
- increase the extent to which the authority sees the library as a mechanism for communicating with communities.

The toolkit contains more information about the benefits to individuals and communities



Young people using a London Borough of Enfield Library.

2.5 Delivering agendas

Libraries are located in communities and are often the only Council presence in an area. They offer opportunities to support wide social policy agendas and to use their vantage point as a community resource.

The shared priorities can be delivered through community engagement initiatives. Reports such as *Youth Matters* and the *Russell Commission: a National Framework for Youth Action and Engagement* emphasise the role that statutory organisations have in involving young people in community activity. Libraries are referred to as an example of organisations that have the capacity to do this. Appendix D outlines some of the current government initiatives and policies that are relevant to libraries and community engagement.

2.6 Developing premises and community engagement

Building new libraries, or renovating existing buildings, offers an opportunity to start working with the community to see how new premises could best be used to suit the community.

Bury Council used moving into additional buildings as its opportunity for community libraries to start engaging with their communities. This work is well documented on the MLA Northwest website. It shows how libraries can work in partnership with communities to mutual advantage. The first of these projects kick-started the regeneration of the area and is now a well used community venue, where a broad range of people from the community use the facilities and have become involved in delivering projects for the benefit of that community.

Increasing community engagement can start at anytime. A new building isn't necessary. However the forthcoming introduction of the Big Lottery funding for improvements to library buildings presents a good opportunity to start engaging in new ways.

2.7 Why planned pilot projects didn't go ahead

Two of the proposed pilot projects for this work involved using new library building as an opportunity to engage with the community. They were not able to move forward within the short time period available for this project. Delays occurred due to issues with the buildings becoming a higher priority. Both projects (in Oldham and Leicestershire) had intended to involve people in considering how the community would use the space and attract new groups of under represented users. Work is instead set to progress on a revised time scale.

3 Assessing community engagement

Community engagement will look different in each library, because it reflects a specifically local community need.

The toolkit suggests that when identifying levels of community engagement, libraries consider 7 elements:

- The library as a space for community activity.
- Partnership working with the voluntary sector.
- Community involvement in relation to boards/ strategic decision making.
- Involvement of volunteers.
- Community involvement in one - off decision making.
- Community involvement in relation to projects.
- Partnership working with other public services towards community engagement.

Where community engagement is taking place, it is likely that all of these activities will be occurring. There is not a set process or cycle to go through. One aspect does not need to be completed before moving onto another.

When identifying the extent to which community engagement is taking place, it makes sense that these are the elements to consider. While qualitative recording and monitoring has its place and is important, looking for evidence of quality and impact is especially useful.

3.1 Future impact measures and peer/ community assessments

In developing future measures of performance, such as impact measures and peer/ community assessments, thinking should be done in advance about what the best ways of assessing them will be. The benefits to the wider community as well as to participants should be considered. Some suggestions are made below.

3.1.1 *The Library as a space for community activity.*

Hosting events and activities for people to come together does not necessarily of itself increase engagement between the library and the community (although it may help to do so). It can, however, increase the amount of interaction between groups of people. The 'Books Connect 2' project is an example of this. A full report on the project is available on the East Midlands, Museums, Libraries and Archives Council website (EMMLAC).

These quotes from residents of St Matthews in Leicester who took part in crafts activities as part of the Books Connect 2 project show how participation can make a difference.

'I already knew the people in my group but had never really spoken or spent time with them before. I lived for three years in St Matthews- see people in the street and never say hello, but now I am saying hello all the time.'

'It brings the community together, people show their different talents and I've met a lot of new people.'

Counting the number of organisations using library space does not of itself show the full extent to which these activities contribute to community cohesion. Evaluating the experience of participants is a more useful qualitative measure - and it gives a fuller picture of the level of engagement and contribution to community cohesion.

Partnership agreements and statements from partners would provide further sources of evidence. Similar methods could be used to evaluate events taking place in community venues that are organised by the library. Again, this isn't community engagement between the library and the community, but such events facilitated by the library can contribute to community cohesion.

3.1.2 Partnership working with the voluntary sector

This measure would need to focus on equitable partnerships rather than, or in addition to, the number of organisations the library is in contact with. Partnership agreements or statements from community partners would be one way to evidence this.

Evaluation of the work achieved by the partnership would provide a demonstration of the outcomes and outputs against the partnerships' original objectives.

3.1.3 Community involvement in decision making

Whether the involvement is in relation to boards and strategic decision making, one-off decisions, or in relation to projects, the mechanisms for evaluating them will all be similar.

The level of involvement that the community has in relation to decision making on a strategic and operational level would be evidenced through partnership agreements, terms of reference, or constitutions under which new groups are set up as separate entities.

Statements from participants in decision making processes, or information gathered from surveys, will show the extent of involvement. The group or project would ideally have specified aims and objectives and the progress of their work could be monitored against these. Participants in events organised by groups within a library building could be assessed in the same way as suggested above.



A volunteer working with children at Otford Library, Kent.

3.1.4 Involvement of volunteers

Counting up the number of volunteers involved in different tasks, or the number of hours that they contribute, does not, on its own, fully reflect who is involved and what it is that they are doing. It is, however, one way to show the numbers of people facilitated by the library who are involved as active citizens.

Finding out exactly who is involved could generate more usefully relevant data. For example, by breaking down the age profile of participants, this can be compared with the age profile of the area as a whole. This method of analysis could also be applied to minority groups. For example, by monitoring the number of people involved who have mental health issues in comparison with the total number of people using mental health services in the area.

The extent to which volunteers have an involvement in decision making is a way of measuring their level of community engagement.

Self assessment, or reflection statements from those involved, can be a means to show what people have learnt from participation; the degree of involvement that they have in decision making; and other individual benefits they have gained at a personal level. This information could be mapped against Generic Learning Outcomes (GLO's) www.inspiringlearningforall.gov.uk.

3.1.5 Partnership working with other public services towards community engagement

The contribution made by the library to shared Council priorities and to other relevant local initiatives should be made clear. Community engagement would need to be evidenced for this. Information could be sought through questionnaires; by interviewing participants; and by an evaluation of the project against its aims.

Users are shown how to use PCs at Wilburton, Cambridgeshire, Learning Access Point.



3.2 Public library impact measures

At the time of writing, MLA is piloting Generic Social Outcomes (GSO's). If these are considered to be successful measures, they could be applied when assessing the impact of community engagement.

Of the social outcomes proposed, that on 'strengthening public life' is the most relevant to this work. Using a public library contributes to meeting this indicator. Public life is strengthened through expressions of active citizenship. The library can contribute to strengthening public life by using models of community engagement.

4 Conclusions

The work done by CSV Consulting with library services and the MLA partnership informs the conclusions of this report (for more information about the methodology used, see section 1).

4.1 What works well

Community engagement is currently taking place in a few public libraries. The extent and quality of this engagement varies. Some case study examples are provided in the toolkit at Appendix B. Where community engagement is working well, it is due to the commitment and vision of the staff involved. Key ingredients for success identified by these staff have been:

- A willingness to try new ways of working.
- A positive approach to risk taking.
- Working in partnership with other public services, and the voluntary and community sector (VCS).
- Flexibility in working practices.
- Knowing / getting to know the community.
- Having champions in the community.
- Mutual trust and transparency.
- Demonstrating the fit with strategic plans and wider policy initiatives.
- Organisational support.

4.2 Empowering the community

One of the things that library staff encountered difficulty in understanding was that involving people extends beyond just consulting with them. The concept of empowering members of the community was new to many. Practitioners already involved in community engagement stressed that working with communities is not about avoiding risk, but about taking risk and managing it.

4.3 Wide range of opportunities available

Working with four library authorities to identify possible opportunities for engagement highlighted the extensive range of options available (see Appendix G of the toolkit for some of the ideas generated). The proposals that were made are linked directly to key agendas for public library services, such as the shared priorities and audience development work.

4.4 Involvement of the community in shaping projects

By involving the community in planning projects from the outset, libraries will deliver not only projects that meet a relevant community need, but projects that the community is actually interested in getting involved with. Occasionally, library staff questioned if they would have a role and, if so, what this role might be. Where their understanding is clearer, library staff felt that more support and training was needed for them to fulfil their role in community engagement.

4.5 How library staff felt about community engagement

Some library staff have yet to still be convinced that community engagement is appropriate for libraries. This was clear from regional training events, focus groups and

questionnaires. The increased provision of information, training and development opportunities will allow staff to find out more about the benefits that working in this way can bring.

Library staff are in a position to work with diverse groups of people in the community. They have a clear role to play in providing information and support to those involved. They can articulate what is being achieved to both the general public and more widely in the authorities in which they work; in the library sector; and across the museum, libraries and archives domain.

Understanding that involving the community is not about removing or losing staff roles is key to success.

4.6 Building staff support

Library managers embarking on pilot projects, or who are discussing pilot projects, were keen to build staff support for new ways of working early on in the planning process. This was one of the major concerns expressed by managers. The tool kit contains some information on how to secure staff support and on ways of constructively involving staff in the process. Implementing new ways of working and encouraging people to buy into these new ways of working requires strong leadership skills, something that is also being developed through Framework for the Future.

4.7 The pitfalls

There is a risk that community engagement, when done without a genuine desire to work in partnership with the community, can have a negative impact upon that community. People involved in community engagement, who feel that they are empowered and that their input is valued, will make excellent community advocates. If the community were to have a less positive experience, this could perhaps result in a decline in the quality of the relationships between the library and its community.

The best chances of success will be where staff have bought into this way of working; when they are willing to genuinely listen to the community; and they positively want to work with community members to achieve shared goals.



Photograph taken by young photographers group, Nlarge, at Bristol Public Libraries.

5 Recommendations

5.1 Building capacity

- 5.1.1 Libraries should be assisted by the MLA partnership (MLA and its Regional Agencies) to develop and extend opportunities for partnership working, especially with the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS). In doing so, organisations can gain from each other's expertise and relationships with the community.
- 5.1.2 Staff need to be supported by the MLA partnership and by local authorities to develop their understanding of concepts such as volunteering, community engagement, active citizenship, community cohesion and the policy context in which this fits.
- 5.1.3 The MLA partnership should consider facilitating networking groups, which offer staff the opportunity to organise training and to share best practice and experience. The feasibility of providing online forums for staff to share experiences of using the toolkit and working with communities could be considered by the MLA partnership. CILIP and SCL could consider offering to their members further support, networking and training in community engagement.
- 5.1.4 Public libraries and organisations that work with them should demonstrate their commitment to community engagement by encouraging staff to join employee volunteering schemes and take part in community activities. This would help increase understanding and reduce the barriers.
- 5.1.5 Links should be made to cross domain workforce development actions by the MLA partnership regionally and nationally. Involving the community in libraries contributes to diversifying the workforce, giving people the chance to find out more about working in libraries and the range of opportunities available. Regional Agencies should be encouraged to take a lead in developing and highlighting these new ways of working and of their associated benefits for healthy communities and for active citizenship.
- 5.1.6 Training course providers for library staff and library schools should be encouraged to include community engagement on their curriculum to ensure that the library staff of the future are skilled in this area. Students working in their communities on action research and service learning projects could support this.

5.2 Sharing good practice

- 5.2.1 The MLA should encourage local authorities that can demonstrate good practice in community engagement to consider organising visits to their projects from which other library services can learn.
- 5.2.2 In addition to visits (which could put undue pressure on the most high profile projects such as Bury), the MLA should consider commissioning short films downloadable from the internet, or made available on DVD. This would be an effective and cost efficient way of allowing others from across the sector to learn from their experiences.
- 5.2.3 Library staff would benefit greatly from sharing experiences with others outside of the sector to increase understanding, provide new ideas, and demonstrate what is achievable and how to put it into practice. CSV's Institute for Advanced Volunteer Management (IAVM) offers such opportunities. Library managers should encourage attendance at such events.

5.3 Communication and advocacy

- 5.3.1 A national conference, with a range of expertise from within and outside of the sector, would assist in raising the profile of community engagement. This could be organised by MLA in conjunction with the launch of the Big Lottery Fund for Community Libraries. Further opportunities to include community engagement on the agenda at key conferences should be maximised, such as PLA and the SCL seminar.
- 5.3.2 Libraries should consider participation by members of the community to be a contributor to their learning and skills development agendas, because those participating develop new skills and they learn from this experience. Generic Learning Outcomes could be used to evaluate these activities and the benefits from them clearly communicated.
- 5.3.3 For both communities and libraries undertaking community engagement, there has been little promotion of their work to date. This should be more widely encouraged by the MLA partnership. Staff should be supported to share successes, both with the sector and with communities.
- 5.3.4 More work needs to be done to convince Members, Chief Executives, other Senior Officers and library staff of the valuable role libraries can play in engaging actively with communities and fostering citizen involvement. Individual library services should do so at a local level. The MLA should be involved at regional and national levels by advocating to organisations such as the Local Government Association (LGA) and to the 'trade' press. Organisers of conferences for the sector should make provision on their agendas for such activities.

- 5.3.5 Better knowledge, information and encouragement are needed from, and for, Members to ensure that they give the political lead needed for action to take place. MLA should work with the LGA and provide guidance on how to do this.
- 5.3.6 Library services should develop their communications, e.g. websites, to engage with and involve the communities that they serve and attract new audiences. More information about community organisations should be available from library websites.

5.4 Measuring the impact

- 5.4.1 The peer review model currently under development by MLA could be used to specifically look at community engagement. MLA should consider including not only peers from other local authorities, but also members of the local community.
- 5.4.2 One aspect of the Generic Social Outcomes (GSO's) is strengthening public life. Libraries can identify the extent to which they contribute to this, through monitoring library use; by facilitating active citizenship; and by helping to build more cohesive communities. MLA should provide guidance to libraries about how to do this as a measure of assessing community engagement; and about using it as a useful advocacy tool for libraries.
- 5.4.3 MLA should undertake research to develop evidence of the impact of community engagement in library services, with a view to developing an impact measure to be tested in 2007/08. This could be done by commissioning a piece of qualitative research, to provide evidence of impact from the small number of local authorities that are currently demonstrating good practice.