

Checking the Books

Executive Summary

The research had three objectives:

- 1) To investigate and identify the library's role in developing and promoting reading through:
 - a) Choice and selection of reading material
 - b) Direct intervention to give users the best possible reading experience
 - c) Promotional activities
 - d) Partnerships with literary and community organizations
- 2) To determine and demonstrate the contribution that library access to imaginative literature makes to:
 - a) The nation's mental and physical health
 - b) Self-expression and educational achievement
 - c) Personal creativity
 - d) Attitudes and values
 - e) The national economy through the development of cultural industries
- 3) To establish the kind of data required by policy makers as evidence of the value of reading.

The research combined a social audit process with "uses and gratifications" technique and reader response theory to evaluate the value and impact of public library book reading. The basic approach was to cross-check the views and perceptions of selected stakeholders. The key stakeholders for this study were:

- Elected members
- Library staff
- Arts and Cultural workers
- Groups of Library users and non-users.

The report evaluates the value and impact of public library book reading by examining the outcomes of this activity as perceived by these four key groups.

The research findings have been organised around the following key themes:

- i. The significance of anybody reading anything;
- ii. The role of the public library in the reading experience;
- iii. Fiction promotion and reader development activities;
- iv. Managerial issues affecting impact;
- v. Persuading policy makers of the value of reading.

The data show that reading imaginative literature is regarded as a special activity which serves to satisfy a wide variety of needs. In addition they help to dispel the stereotypical image of a reader as someone who is introverted and reluctant or unable to participate fully in society. There is persuasive evidence that, through reading, a person's life is transformed for the better. For those who regard themselves as readers, reading is not only deemed a special activity but a crucial one. The data suggest that reading identities are not fixed but change according to time and personal development. In addition, the non-readers included in the research process acknowledge the potential benefits for those who choose to spend their time reading.

The public library was revealed as making a unique contribution to the reading experience. Book lending is still perceived to be the major function of the public library, and libraries are seen as natural places for those who wish to develop as readers.

- The public library impacted on the reading experience by providing free access to reading material and a wide range of stock. These aspects of the service were shown as being imperative for establishing and maintaining the reading habit.
- Providing people with the opportunity to borrow rather than buy material was seen to add significantly to the reading experience in that it enabled individuals to exert greater personal control over their reading.

In addition, readers recognised that they received further personal benefits.

However, several factors were felt by some respondents to prevent the library from realizing its potential with regard to the reading experience. These included:

- Difficulties of physical access;
- the intimidating atmosphere of some services
- a lack of standard facilities.

It is suggested that libraries needed to be more pro-active in challenging society's perception of reading.

A crucial aspect of the public library's role was seen to be its work in reader development and fiction promotion. A recurring theme, which runs through all the data, is that users of the service are increasingly expecting library staff to act as intermediaries in the reading experience. Novice readers and more developed readers alike perceived this to be the case. Choosing a good read is a skill, which library staff should help to develop. In addition libraries need to develop their role as community centres.

A number of management and other related issues have been identified, that can affect the value and impact of public library book reading.

- Readers' needs are not perceived as a priority in all public library authorities
- Stock management and selection must be viewed as an interdependent process. The findings from the study suggest that action or inaction in any one area will affect other links in the chain and ultimately impact on the reader's reading experience.
- Stock selection and management needs to be governed by a clear locally determined philosophy, which is acted upon in practice.
- In most instances, evaluation is still reliant on the number of book issues. The value of qualitative techniques is becoming increasingly recognised but there is little evidence of their introduction. Non-users are being overlooked in many evaluation procedures.
- Reader Development policies are recognised as being of value within stock management and selection policies.

- ❑ The role of library staff needs to be determined. It was revealed that staff often lack confidence or have inappropriate skills for reader development and fiction promotion work.

The final aspect of the research determines the kind of evidence required by policy makers on the value and impact of public library book reading. The findings indicate that:

- ❑ Policy makers stress that they do not need convincing of the library's role and the value of reading
- ❑ Policy makers still largely interpret value and impact through the use of quantitative data, but it is becoming increasingly recognised that qualitative data should be used as evidence.

These findings are largely derived from qualitative, often anecdotal, evidence. This reflects our belief that qualitative data, rigorously gathered are valid evidence and should be treated as such by both politicians and policy makers. The data suggest that reading imaginative literature provided by the public library, enriches the lives of many people and has the potential to influence many more. The combined methodological approach used in this study has demonstrated the value and impact of reading, and has the potential to make the value of a basic public library service more visible to policy makers and professionals alike.