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The right 'man' for the job?

The role of empathy in community librarianship

DIS Research Seminar Series 2006-07

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Presentation overview

- Project background: what, why and how
- Mid-project appraisal: headline summary of data collected 'so far'
- The next stages
- Contemporary research climate: still relevant?
- Any questions?



Funding and timescales

- Funded by Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC)
- Response to biannual 'open call'
- *KW Research Associate; Briony Train Principal Investigator* (contract holder)
- March 2006 – February 2008
- Looking at public libraries in England only



What is the research?

Overall aim of the project:

To investigate public library staff attitudes towards social inclusion policy and disadvantaged groups in society, testing the relationships between staffs own social, cultural and professional background and their capacity to make an effective, empathic contribution to social inclusion objectives.



What is the research?

Specific objectives:

- To investigate public library staff attitudes towards the social inclusion agenda according to a range of demographic variables
- To investigate the appropriateness of PL organizational structures and culture particularly with reference to the traditional professional/non-professional hierarchy, testing the theory that an inclusive organisation facilitates the delivery of an inclusive service
- To profile existing public library SI initiatives with a focus on staff recruitment, training and development



Key concepts and definitions

Community librarianship: operational element of public library services that specifies working with community groups and/or the delivery of targeted services, e.g. outreach services, branch library positions

Social exclusion: political term applied to groups who are less able to engage in social, economic, cultural and political life due to a combination of factors, poverty often the common denominator. Also described as 'marginalised' or 'disadvantaged' social groups, SE is really a multi-dimensional outcome of disadvantage



Key concepts and definitions

Social exclusion definition:

... a shorthand term for what can happen when people or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime environments, bad health and family breakdown.

Social Exclusion Unit, 1997



Key concepts and definitions

Empathy: psychological construct with various definitions, based on three accepted 'dimensions' of empathy. Firstly empathy is considered as a cognitive or intellectual process, involving an imagined understanding of others and perspective taking. Secondly, empathy is considered to be an intuitive response based on emotional reaction and vicarious understanding of another's situation. Thirdly, there are multi-dimensional definitions of empathy which combine or consider both cognitive and emotional elements.



Key concepts and definitions

Empathy definition:

Levenson and Ruef (1992) identified three different qualities of empathy: (a) *knowing* what another person is feeling. (b) *feeling* what another is feeling and (c) *responding compassionately* to another person's [distress].

- the most helpful in seeking to define and deconstruct the concept of empathy within a professional service context.



Why this project?

Making a valid contribution?

- Political pertinence – New Labour’s cohesive public policy approach to addressing social exclusion
- Public libraries and social impact research – gaps
- Staff as key stakeholders - overlooked
- Inspired and motivated by own experience of doing research with public library staff - observations



How are we doing it? *Research methods*

- Review of the literature
- National survey (quantitative)
- Focus groups and interviews (qualitative)
- Case studies x 10
- Research workshop
- Job vacancy profiling



Literature review – key themes

Theoretical context in following areas:

- Exclusion, inclusion and social policy
- Social inclusion in public services and the cultural sector
- The role of public libraries
- Professional empathy: definition, development and delivery



Mid-project appraisal

Where are we now?

- *Literature review and job profiling ongoing*
- *Several case studies profiled*
- *Survey done*
- *Focus groups (front-line staff) done*
- *Mid-interview stage (Senior Managers)*
- *Two papers in production (peer review)*



Survey : aims and objectives

Survey provides statistical 'snapshot' of:

- **Staff demographics in terms of ethnicity; age; gender; social background; educational attainment; professional status; length of time in service etc**

Quantitative measures of professional empathy exploring:

- **Staff attitudes towards the community role for the public library**
- **Staff attitudes towards socially excluded groups**
- **Staff attitudes towards professional roles and responsibilities in addressing exclusion.**

Background information on:

- **The (quantifiable) extent to which SE groups are being targeted within responding authorities**
- **Brief coverage (quantifiable) of the ways in which exclusion is being addressed**
- **Awareness of national social inclusion policy**



Survey methodology and sample

- Postal survey
- 1100 questionnaires sent out to stratified sample of 90 PLAs in total (within and across 9 English regions) in batches of 10, 15 and 20
- Regional allocation of questionnaires based on number of PLAs in each region; range of PLA 'types' selected
- Addressed to Head of Service/Library Manager for local distribution
- 453 completed questionnaires received: response rate of 41%



Survey demographic profile

Questions asked:

- Gender
- Age
- Ethnic group
- Highest educational qualification
- Secondary education experience: cultural diversity; denomination; educational performance
- Region
- Length of time in public library service
- Type of authority
- CILIP membership + category
- Current role



Survey demographic profile

Geographical representation & response rates:

East Midlands – 41%

East of England – 58%

London – 31%

North East – 58%

North West – 27%

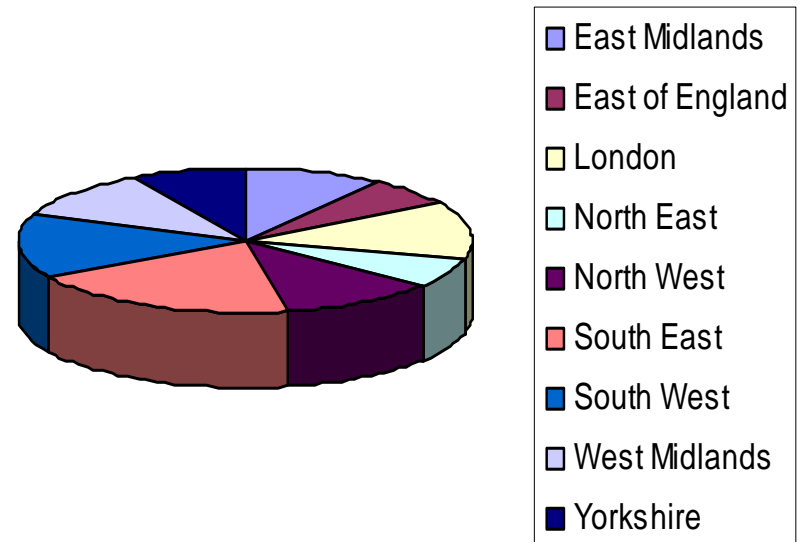
South East – 43%

South West – 64%

West Midlands – 48%

Yorkshire – 37%

Survey respondents per region

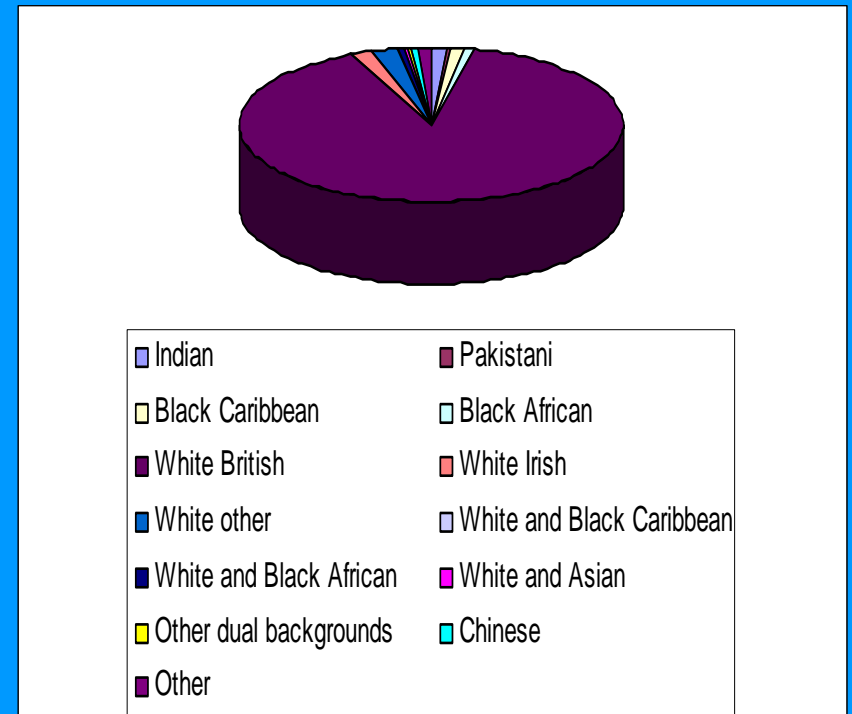




Survey demographic profile

Ethnic groups

Indian	6
Pakistani	1
Black Caribbean	6
Black African	3
White British (89%)	405
White Irish	9
White other	10
White and Black Caribbean	1
White and Black African	2
White and Asian	1
Other dual backgrounds	1
Chinese	3
Other	5





Survey demographic profile

Sample homogeneity

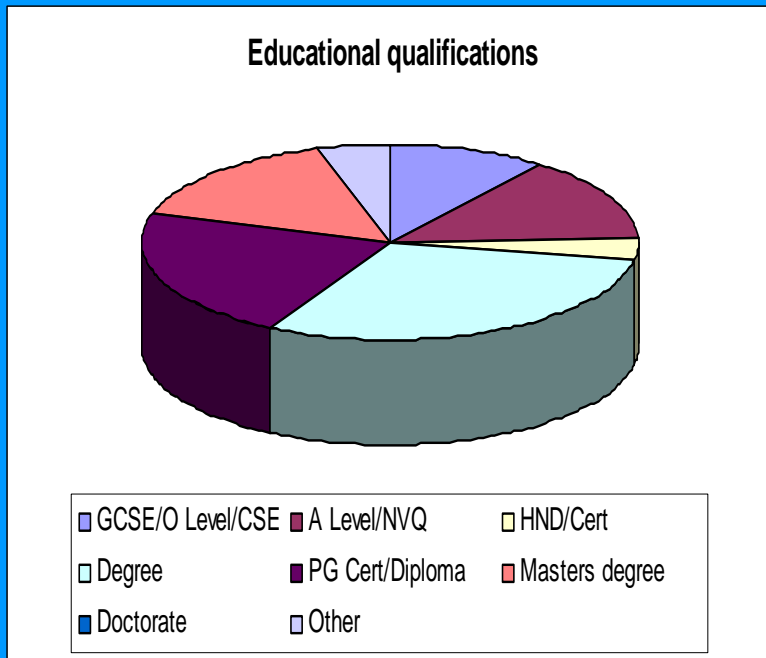
- White-British middle aged middle class female: not exactly challenging the stereotype!
- Gender: Male 92 (n) = 20%; Female 361 (n) = 80%
- Age 45+
- Secondary education experience: no respondents selected 'poor educational performance'; most frequent SEE 'culturally homogenous' + 'largely secular' + 'good'
- Length of time in service average 15-20 years



Survey demographic profile

Qualifications and professional identity

Predominantly HE qualifications:



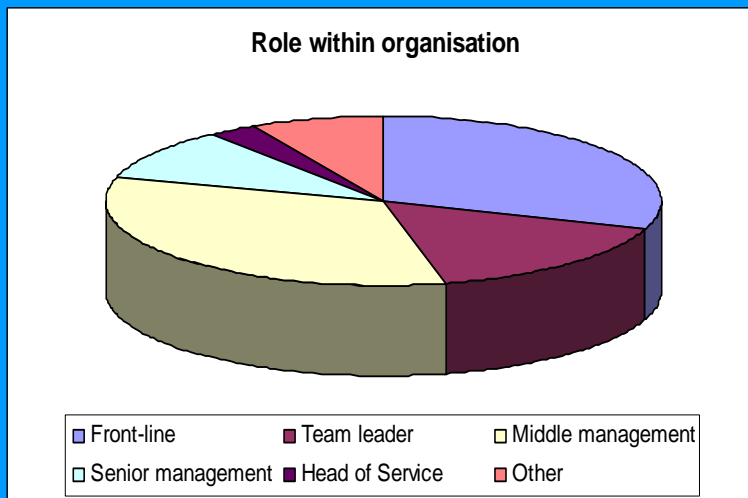
GCSE/O Level/CSE	46
A Level/NVQ	64
HND/Cert	16
Degree	137
PG Cert/Diploma	98
Masters degree	70
Doctorate (FL staff)	1
Other	21



Survey demographic profile

Qualifications and professional identity

- CILIP membership: 226 non-members; 227 members
- Predominantly front-line – middle management staff



Front-line	139
Team leader	71
Middle management	150
Senior management	45
Head of Service (4m; 9f)	13
Other	35



Developing the Professional Empathy measure

Six five-statement sections: five point scale; 'strongly disagree' (1), 'disagree' (2), 'undecided' (3), 'agree' (4), 'strongly agree' (5)

The six individual Professional Empathy sections:

- Genuine Empathy (GE)
- Sympathetic Tendency (ST)
- Simulated Empathy (SE)
- Social Identity (SI)
- Service Values (SV)
- Professional Ethics (PE)



What do the individual scales mean?

Designed to measure professional empathy from *individual, societal* and *professional* perspectives:

Individual Perspective

The GE and ST scales have been designed to measure respondents' capacity to both empathise and sympathise on an individual, interpersonal level. Genuine Empathy is explored in terms of the respondents' ability to empathise via personal experience and vicarious knowledge and understanding of another person's circumstances. The Sympathetic Tendency scale uses the concept of sympathy as a literal expression of concern or compassion under given circumstances, irrespective of one's own experience.



What do the individual scales mean?

Societal Perspective

The impacts of societal influences upon expressions of empathy are explored using the SE and SI scales. Simulated Empathy is explored as a *conscious* decision or action, i.e. to deliberately imagine oneself in another person's position. Societal influences upon such action include a perceived social obligation to show empathic concern, image projection and the interpersonal perceptions and reactions of others. Issues such as social and political consciousness are further explored using the Social Identity scale, including perceptions of community, equality and diversity.



What do the individual scales mean?

Professional Perspective

The SV and PE scales have been designed to explore the relationship between organisational values and objectives as perceived by respondents, and their own individual professional values, identity and ethics, i.e. providing a public service and being a Professional. This will help to gauge a sense of professional priorities amongst participants, and help to address the general research aims and objectives regarding the appropriateness and value of professional hierarchies in meeting social inclusion objectives.



Professional Empathy profile

Mean scores for demographic selection of sample

	GE	ST	SE	SI	SV	PE
Female	3.6	4.3	4.2	4.6	3.2	4
Male	3.8	3.9	4	4.5	3.3	4.4
Age 26-35	3.9	4.4	4.3	4.4	3.7	4.4
Age 46-55	3.2	4.2	4	4.5	3.1	3.9
White-British	3.7	4.2	4	4.5	3.3	4
All other	3.5	4	4.1	4.6	3.4	3.9
CILIP member	3.8	4	4.1	4.5	3.5	4.4
CILIP non-member	3.9	4.1	4.2	4.4	3.5	4
Front-line	3.6	4.4	4.3	4.6	3.1	3.9
Senior Manager	3.4	4.2	4.1	4.4	3.7	4.3



Professional Empathy profile

- Sympathetic Tendency (ST) scores and Simulated Empathy (SE) scores generally higher than Genuine Empathy (GE)
- Respondents put a negative spin on some GE statements e.g. *'I find it easier to understand another person's situation if I have experienced the same thing'*.
- Similarly high Social Identity (SI) scores suggest that the societal perspective on empathy is most relevant
- Professional Ethics (PE) scores relatively high despite low CILIP membership and predominant middle management roles
- Professional Ethics scores higher than Service Values – implications for SI policy?



Survey limitations

- Sample homogeneity: limits what can be said about the influence of social and cultural backgrounds
- Purely quantitative, so no explanation behind responses
- Issues with the Self Report method: tendency to select responses that 'look better'; political correctness.
Accepted limitation in social research
- Intended as snapshot data only, more detail acquired with qualitative fieldwork



Focus groups with front-line staff: aims and objectives

The qualitative approach has been/will be used to investigate in greater detail:

- The extent of staff participation (including willingness to become involved) in social inclusion policy implementation
- The effects of internal politics, including communication, training and 'professional inclusion' upon attitudes towards social inclusion policy, testing the theory that an inclusive organisation facilitates an inclusive service
- The impact of national Government social inclusion policy and agenda on current practice
- Which excluded groups staff feel that the library service particularly targets and how
- Which groups staff feel that the service particularly 'lets down' and how
- Future plans for social inclusion at a local level



Focus group sample and methods

- One FG planned in each English region (9 in total)
- Front-line staff invited to attend via postings on email discussion lists, regional organisations and service heads/managers
- 6 focus groups took place: 3 cancelled due to low participant numbers (volunteers telephone interviewed as alternative to FG)
- Total number of participants = 33
- Average FG duration 1 hour 20 minutes
- All recorded and fully transcribed
- Same semi-structured questions asked in each session



Focus groups: questions asked

Staff social inclusion awareness, participation & involvement

- Awareness of SI policy and drivers; involvement in design, delivery and evaluation of SI service; barriers and opposition

Organisational culture and its impact

- Staff profiles; staff homogeneity and issues for SI services; staff skills, recruitment and training; appropriateness of professional hierarchy

Excluded groups

- Groups currently targeted/overlooked; relationship between SI initiatives and mainstream services; issues encountered

Local interpretations of national policy

- Future plans; relevance to regional/national policy; sustainability of SI services



FG analysis: some emerging themes

- Low levels of SI policy awareness and engagement amongst front-line staff
- Widespread misinterpretation of social exclusion as political concept: the 'buzz word' challenge
- Issues with local government structures and approaches: ticking boxes and jumping hoops
- Issues surrounding change management and organisational culture
- Staff skills and role conflict



Low level awareness and engagement

- Front-line staff not 'expected' to be aware of policy and political drivers
 - “For me I think that management pretend, or like to think that front-line staff are aware, but in terms of detailed knowledge, I would say not so much in reality. Things are cascaded round, but whether they are taken in by staff to the extent of having detailed knowledge, I don't know, which begs the question, should they have detailed knowledge anyway? Do they need it?”
(Yorkshire)
 - “We're talking about front-line staff on low pay scales, should they be expected to know the ins and outs of absolutely everything... well pay them more”
(Yorkshire)
 - “I think most staff are aware of our need to promote services to the socially excluded – but they probably do not have any real knowledge of the policy behind it. We do not meet together enough to talk about it.” (South West)



Low level awareness and engagement

- Personal motivation and incentive: career ladder climbers; project involvement

“I’d call it a general acceptance rather than awareness, they know that policies and objectives are ‘out there’ but will be happy to accept guidance from above rather than get to grips with the actual policies. Some are a little more interested, but they are probably more interested in climbing the career ladder also... are a bit more driven themselves” (South East)

“I wouldn’t say all of them are no! But then I’m not sure that I would expect them to be, it’s the ability to deliver that is most important for front-line staff. It would also depend on how involved they are with particular projects or services, you are more likely to be more aware if you’re closely involved with a particular area than if you are say manning a counter in a branch library, particularly part time staff” (North West)



Low level awareness and engagement

- Lack of inclusion and consultation: front-line staff not generally included in design of SI services: involvement at delivery level
 - “Personally, very in each stage as that’s my role [Inclusion Officer], but this isn’t true of all front-line staff, only at the delivery stage in most cases perhaps” (North West)
 - “Yes we can make suggestions, but as far as ideas go, its not really up to us whether they progress or not” (East of England)
 - “I am as involved as someone at my level can be. I’m not in a position to make major decisions.” (South West)



Political misinterpretation and ‘buzz word’ culture

- Widespread confusion and blurring between social inclusion policy, community cohesion, racial equality, disability discrimination and other equality issues. Some understanding of SE in real terms:

“I sometimes think that more could be done to provide services for specific areas or communities. For instance we have a couple of estates that are quite deprived, and you know the people that live there never leave the estate and will therefore never use the library, even the local branch library which is mostly used by older regular readers. I think more could be done to take services out to those estates” (North West)



Ticking boxes and jumping hoops: local government syndrome

- Short termist tick box approaches encouraging low level cynicism and resentment amongst staff:

“It becomes so bureaucratic and that’s how you alienate people... there’s a lot of old school resentment to what people see to be an over-politicised tick box way of doing things... having stock but not getting it to the right people, throwing it away... it’s policy for policy’s sake” (Yorkshire)

“It can be a little depressing when big amounts of money, staff time, enthusiasm and energy are thrown at projects or ideas with a very short lifespan. More attention should be given to adapting the mainstream service, or more money allocated to mainstreaming projects that have been proven to be successful” (North West)



Ticking boxes and jumping hoops: local government syndrome

- Bureaucratic structures and insecurities causing barriers to front-line engagement; apathy amongst staff:
 - “... it’s because they don’t understand what the future holds, what will change next, it’s all so unpredictable. There’s constant restructures, job changes, lack of promotion but more and more individual responsibility. Are libraries even going to be here in 10 to 20 years? When people don’t know, they cling to what they’ve got and do know. It’s true that there is a lack of commitment, ideas and action from front-line staff, but on one hand people think ‘well what’s the point?’”
(Yorkshire)



Ticking boxes and jumping hoops: local government syndrome

- Outdated concepts and training packages

“We have a very mono-cultural [community] profile but every now and again somebody somewhere will say ‘what are we doing for ethnic minorities?’... so in the way that local government works we have to do something... but we haven’t got any ethnic minorities, so we might be prepared if any ever turn up but our training will be twenty years out of date!” (North East)

“In my authority the third generation communities... their greatest source of cultural influence is American hip-hop and gangster rap, which is much more relevant than having a meeting about onion bhajis... the chap who’s involved with delivering social inclusion [training]... he’s of a Pakistani background and he focuses mainly on that, he hasn’t updated for recent arrivals from eastern Europe and Africa... it’s no longer relevant” (Yorkshire)



Change management and organisational culture

- Low level resistance to cultural changes as opposed to SE groups in particular? e.g. People's Network, changes to joining/membership requirements; comfort zone issues for older staff

“A couple of years ago we had a change to the membership criteria, so you could join without producing any form of ID, and we had a lot of opposition to that! Some of the staff were not at all happy about that because they said ‘oh but we’ll be getting all the rough sleepers coming in and they’ll be stealing the books’ (West Midlands)

“Some of our older members of staff have been a little unsettled by the changing culture of the service in general, IT [internet access] is still a huge cross to bear for some of them, but I wouldn’t say that’s because of the people we may be targeting, it’s more about their own perceptions of what a library should be” (North West)

“And I think sometimes there is resistance, I can certainly think of some incidents with ethnic minority groups in certain parts of the county where front-line staff have said ‘we don’t have any of these people in our area so its nothing to do with us’” (East of England)



Staff skills and role conflict

- ‘Not our job’: problems associated with the development of SI Officer posts and challenges of working with disaffected young people:
 - “...the feeling is that library staff feel ‘oh god, not something else to do’ as part of their daily duty, so in relation to social inclusion policy, at the moment they say that’s my job [speakers: inclusion officer] but I’m trying to get across that it’s everybody’s job, which is difficult” (North East)
 - “Well I have a library outreach worker who works with me and we do a lot of partnership working and then involve other staff... it’s headed by myself and the outreach worker for the entire county, we plan and look at targeted groups... we deliver via library managers who would look at projects and decide what to do.” (London)
 - “There is a question to what extent is it our job? I mean yes, we’re working in a public service... but you’re not a youth worker, you’re not a social worker, so down which road do you go?” (North East)



Staff skills and role conflict

- Impact of volunteer work (WTYL; Youth Choice) and partnership working: successful examples of recruiting volunteers from specific community groups and working with other sectors such as youth workers:
 - “I was in a library in Scotland where they actually brought in a youth worker because of the troubles they had with young people and that helped the library staff to do their job but also to help with that problem... because she had those skills” (North East)



Staff skills and role conflict

- Community representation: can white middle aged middle class women be empathic?

“...in our defence I would say that pretty much all of the ladies that I have met and had the privilege to work with have been fantastically welcoming, open-minded, flexible... its easy to throw the charge against us that we’re all middle-aged middle class white women but I’m sorry I can’t help that... I do what I’m doing and I try to do it as well as I can” (East of England)

“In my own experience of... work with disadvantaged community groups, they are far more responsive to people whom they trust to be from their own world, with the same accent, the same colloquialisms, somebody they can relate to... Most of these projects are about building confidence, and there needs to be that element of trust. I’m not saying that the stereotypical white female middle class librarian wouldn’t be able to do my job as well as I can, but I think they would have to work at it a bit harder to get over that initial barrier” (North West)



Staff skills and role conflict

- Professional tension: maintenance of professional standards versus growing generic skills base

Skills quoted: communication skills; patience; awareness of who the socially excluded are; an open mind; confidence; outreach skills; commitment; creativity

“...we have to keep professional standards... I disagree with the move towards retail standards and the negative assumption that library work is easy... librarians are as qualified as doctors and such be recognised as such... as the remit of public libraries gets more and more challenging we need professional skills to deliver the best service” (South East)



Job vacancy profile: skills analysis

- CILIP Library + Information Gazette – community librarian/social inclusion related vacancies January '06 – January '08
- 28 listed so far
- 14 require qualified/chartered librarian applicants – 50/50 split



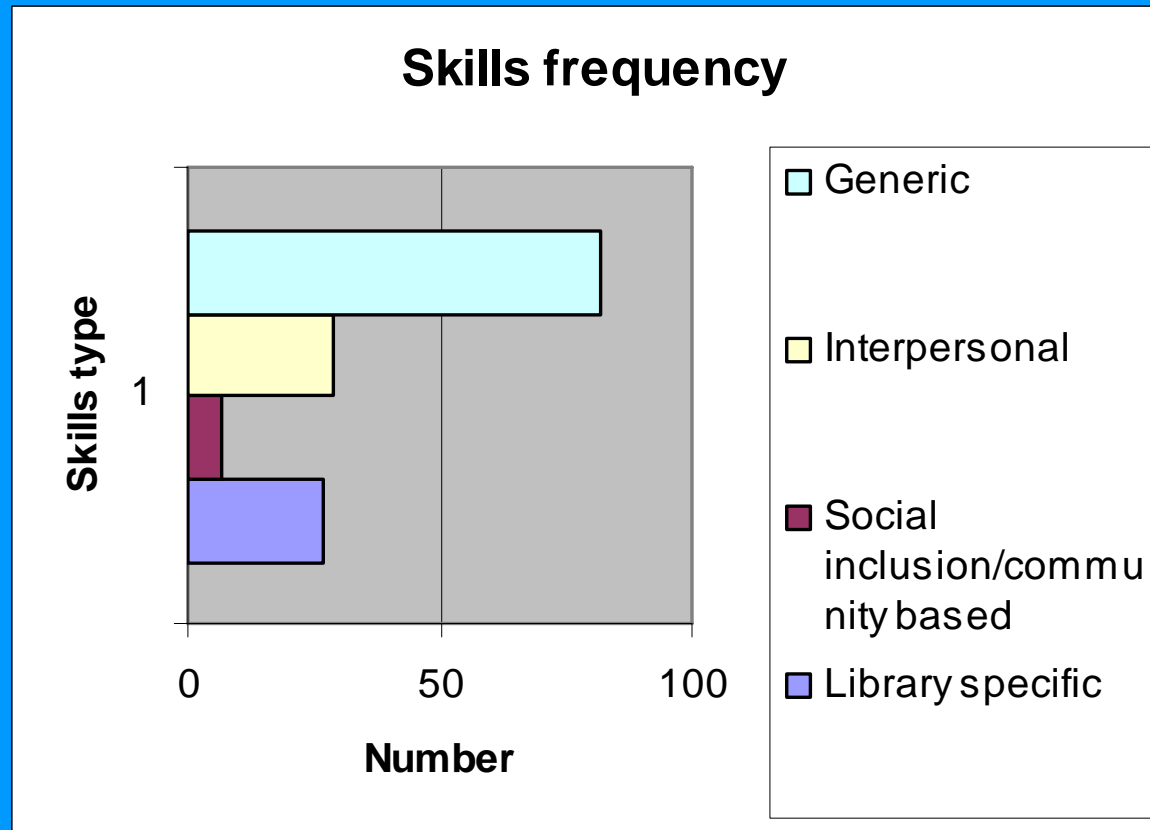
Job vacancy profile: skills analysis

Person specifications and required skills have been colour-coded according to the following categories:

- **Library specific:** Knowledge or experience explicitly/specifically linked to library work and the requisite skills
- **Social inclusion/community based:** Such as prior experience of working in a community setting, or of working with socially excluded groups
- **Interpersonal:** Such as communication skills, or behavioural skills linked to personality traits
- **Generic:** Generic skills and attributes that could be associated with a wide range of posts, e.g. time management or organisational skills, creativity etc



Job vacancies: skills breakdown





What next? Remaining stages of the project

- Interviews with Middle/Senior Managers x 10 – now!
- Case Study profiles and interviews x 10 – June '07
- Research Workshop – September '07
- Ongoing literature review and vacancy profiling
- Bringing it all together! Final report February '08



Contemporary climate – still relevant?

- Research itself revealing ongoing challenges for public library service!
- Still politically relevant: e.g. white paper on community cohesion and role of cultural services
- Comparison to other public sectors: lack of cultural diversity in local government; role strain, stress and long-term sick leave in social services



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Any questions...?

Thanks for listening!