

Measuring the Value of Public Libraries:

The fallacy of footfall and issues as measures of the value of Public Libraries

Summary Report

“Everything that can be counted does not necessarily count; everything that counts cannot necessarily be counted.” (Albert Einstein 1879-1955)

Report of a workshop held at Cloth Hall Court, Leeds Metropolitan University on 28 March 2011

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CPLIS (<http://cplis.shef.ac.uk/>) was established in 1996 as a focus for public library research. It provides advice, information, training and consultancy to a wide range of clients on policies affecting the public library sector. Projects have included the then Department of National Heritage's Public Library Review, both the Library Association and subsequent joint LA / DCMS standards for public libraries, and the Public Library Workforce Study. A key part of the CPLIS mission is to transfer research into policy and practice and promoting the importance of research data and information to evidence-based policy making.

ISBN: 978-0-903522-42-7

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1. Introduction

This is a summary report of a workshop held in Leeds on 28th March 2011. The primary aim of the workshop was to provide a forum where experts, policy makers, stakeholders and practitioners could discuss the ways in which public libraries can better communicate their intrinsic value and worth, at a time of government financial restraint. The basic premise is that public library services need to identify effective means of communicating their value to society. The findings presented in this report are based on analysis of the thoughts and experiences of the people who attended the workshop. It is anticipated the findings will serve as a catalyst for further work in the area.

2. Context

Public services in the United Kingdom are facing huge budgetary pressures as the Treasury aims to reduce the UK's national spending by £81 billion by 2014/15, resulting in an estimated loss of 490,000 public sector jobs (HM Treasury, 2010). Along with other local services, public libraries have to fight to maintain services (CILIP, 2011). The British government has also undertaken to cut statutory burdens by reviewing 1,294 statutory duties, which include the 1964 Public Libraries and Museums Act (Great Britain, 1964). At stake is the statutory requirement for local councils to provide “*comprehensive and efficient library services*”. In March 2010, just prior to the general election, the then Labour Minister for Culture, Margaret Hodge, published a policy review entitled “The Modernisation Review of Public Libraries.” In her introduction she declared that:

Public libraries are a democratic entitlement for every individual, for every community and for the whole nation...I believe the public library service is a unique institution, that “guards against the tyrannies of ignorance and conformity, and its existence indicates the extent to which a democratic society values knowledge, truth, justice, books, and culture”. For many people, libraries are a haven of hope, a gateway to knowledge and learning, and an opportunity to access information and to participate as a citizen. (Department for Culture Media and Sport, 2010)

An examination of submissions made by a number of public library authorities to the policy review consultation reveals that many rely on simple metrics such as counting book issues and footfall as a way of quantifying and justifying services. These approaches are not uncommon and can be viewed as an easy-to-understand measure of the impact and value for money of any given library service, at the same time ignoring wider measures of “true benefit” or “real value” (Bawden et al., 2009).

Effective methods of measuring the benefits and value of library services have received growing attention from academics over recent years (Aabø, 2005; Crawford, 2006; Markless & Streatfield, 2006; Matthews, 2007). CILIP considered the notion of impact for a themed issue of Library and Information Update, which contained an insightful article by Stanziola (2010). Rooney-Browne (2011) has very recently published an extensive and much-needed literature review specifically from a public library perspective on the subject. This summarises the findings of a report commissioned by the Library and Information Research Group of CILIP (LIRG) to produce a comprehensive review of existing quantitative and qualitative evaluation methodologies for demonstrating the value of public libraries in the UK.

In 2009 the DCMS commissioned BOP Consulting to undertake a study examining ways in which public libraries capture data that measures the impact of their services (Department for Culture Media and Sport, 2009). Bawden et al. (2009) use a small case study of two British public libraries in order to help examine evaluation of services. They argue that there has been a recent trend of attempting to standardise evaluation into three general approaches, namely: assessment of monetary value, assessment of impact and assessment of the nature of benefit provided (Bawden et al., 2009, p. 63). In the United States, Imholz

and Arns (2007) assessed library evaluation, noting the growing sophistication of evaluation methods. These ranged from the simple to the complex, and included different forms of economic algorithms as well as forecasting. Importantly, they identified a greater need for developing better methods of assessments which take into account the social benefits provided by public libraries.

Although now fifteen years old, Proctor, Usherwood, & Sobczyk's (1996) research is of particular note as it details the impact of temporary closures of public libraries in Sheffield in the aftermath of library strike action. The report contains a number of important conclusions, summarised particularly by the following:

The research revealed that for the vast majority of library users the public library is a service of inestimable value, enhancing quality of life, and, for many people, fulfilling an essential need that no other pursuit or activity satisfies. (Proctor et al., 1996, p. 38)

3. Methodology

The methodology used for the workshop was based upon a group Delphi. As a research method, it can be traced back to the 1960s, where it was initially used as a forecasting technique. One of the strengths of the Delphi technique lies in its ability to encourage groups of people to share information and to refine their thinking or judgements (Dalkey, 1969).

Twenty-two people were invited to the workshop, with a total of fifteen attending on the day. Delegates were initially invited because they had specific expertise or experience which it was felt could help add to the wider discussion. Two weeks before the workshop a questionnaire was emailed to each delegate. The questionnaire comprised twelve questions, each one designed to help the delegate think through some of the key areas which needed to be discussed. A copy of the workshop questionnaire is in Appendix 1. The aim of the questionnaire was to provide a flexible framework which would be used as a basis for later discussion.

The workshop itself was comprised of four presentations in the morning; this was followed by two group work sessions in the afternoon. The four presentations, each lasting thirty minutes, were designed to present the group with perspectives of different stakeholders. The four presentations were given by:

- Biddy Fisher: Immediate Past President, CILIP
- Steve Murray: Head of Research and Evidence, Museums, Libraries, and Archives Council
- Dr. Adam Cooper: Head of Research, Department for Culture Media and Sport, and Programme Manager for CASE
- Carolynn Rankin: Researcher and Senior Lecturer, Leeds Metropolitan University

Following on from the presentations, delegates were arranged into two facilitated group workshops using Group Delphi methodology. This provided delegates with the opportunity to discuss the issues as they saw them, using the questionnaire as a framework. A full group Delphi discussion followed on from the small discussions. This, too, was guided both by the questionnaire and by feedback given by each facilitator from the previous session. Concluding thoughts and future developments followed on from the full-group discussion.

The delegates' individual questionnaires were collected along with the small group facilitators' notes and any notes resulting from the wider full discussion. These were then written up and entered into QSR's NVivo 8 qualitative analysis software to aid the research process. Once the data had been entered into NVivo a coding process using constant

comparison (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was used to search for emerging themes relating to the discussion. These themes are presented below.

4. Findings

This section comprises of an analysis of all of the information captured throughout the workshop. As previously stated, the data were coded and several themes emerged. These themes formed the basis of the following results. In all, five main areas presented themselves, these being:

- Value and Benefits of Services
- Communication
- Research
- The role of CILIP
- Next steps

4.1 Value and Benefits of Services

There were significant contributions examining the notions of both value and impact. This was not surprising because these terms formed the early line of questioning during the workshop and the personal questionnaires. It is important to understand how the delegates understood these terms as it has already been reported that both of these concepts have received attention from academics. Typical replies from the workshop data made reference to the perceived social benefits of library services, an area reminiscent of the recent DCMS (2009) report. The broad themes emerging from the workshop included:

4.1.1 Value added

In this section, delegates wanted to express the value that services added to the wider community. This was illustrated by the following comment:

[Libraries provide] Things you can't get elsewhere (Delegate)

There was also an emphasis on the idea that value relates to more than simple value for money measures. This was illustrated by the following:

value – isn't about large numbers of people and getting lots of value for money; it's about preventative issues e.g. 4 million visually impaired people nationally, a smaller group in local community – how can you measure value of people being able to support themselves? (Delegate)

4.1.2 Personal and Societal values

There was significant anecdotal evidence outlining how individual libraries had helped and supported individuals and communities, and indeed research by Proctor et al. (1996) would seem to support this view. Examples include valued services such as children's reading sessions or support for job seekers. The general agreement was that public libraries play a crucial part in the fabric of many communities and also in the lives of many people. These personal and societal benefits were seen in the context of both the individual and also the wider community. Typical replies for this section included views such as:

[The library] provides a social space for the community. (Delegate)

In terms of understanding the personal and societal value libraries provide to the individual and the wider community, the data could be centred on issues relating to:

- Social benefit: the benefit the user derives from the services on whatever level

- Economic benefit: the dividend received by individuals finding work or being supported and equipped with skills through services; and
- Educational benefit: support provided by libraries to children and adults through access to books and learning.

4.1.3 Measuring value

There was agreement that libraries are traditionally good at presenting data about activities and processes but less good at gathering qualitative data and evidence of personal or social impact. Reasons for this were lack of expertise, of time and of resources. Another important and possibly overriding reason was the type and level of data requested by the government or local councils, which needs to be concise and in a specific format. This may be in the form of inputs (elements required for producing the service) or outputs (services being delivered). Performance indicators may also be a means of measuring performance by combining two or more performance measures to produce a meaningful indicator.

Workshop participants identified a range of potentially useful ways of measuring the value of public library services; these are summarised in the following table³:

Measuring economic value	
Cost of Time and Effort	challenges the perception that the public library is a “free” service, measuring time and effort by users
Contingent Valuation (CV)	measures the value of both use and non-use
Cost Benefit Analysis (CBA)	enables quantifiable values such as cost and purchase price to be applied to library use
Consumer Surplus	measures the value that consumers place on the consumption of goods or services in excess of what they pay for them
Input & Output Models (IOMs)	provides a method for evaluating indirect benefits
Library Use Valuation Calculator	has been used by a number of American Libraries and some in the UK as a way for libraries to let patrons calculate how much their use of the library means to them
Measuring social and cultural value – using Qualitative Research Methods	
Generic Social Outcomes (GSO) and Generic Learning Outcomes (GLO)	outcomes/impact – the impact of the outputs on individual users and communities (e.g. improved self-esteem, pleasure from reading, enhanced aspirations and better life chances)

³ This list was generated from responses at the workshop and is not intended to be comprehensive. Further discussion is provided by Rooney-Browne (2011).

Anecdotal Evidence	the ability to capture anecdotal/sound-bite/narrative evidence and powerful storytelling
Mixed Methods Research	where the researcher draws inferences using both qualitative and quantitative approaches or methods
The Public Library Quality Improvement Matrix (PLQIM)	a quality assurance tool developed by the Scottish Library and Information Council (SLIC) for public libraries in Scotland.

It was recognised that many library authorities do collect some or all of these types of data; however, it is often piecemeal and inconsistent. In addition to local collection of statistics, there is a range of supplementary sources of useful research such as those offered through the DCMS and the CASE⁴ programme, the Library and Information Science Research Coalition⁵, and the annual statistics compiled by LISU⁶ at Loughborough University.

4.1.4 Summary

Librarians often recognise what is needed and what needs to be done. However, librarians work within complex multi-professional and politically led organisations, where libraries are just one of a number of services. The following were identified as areas that librarians could focus on for future development:

- Examine new ways of measuring library services;
- Adopt alternative techniques for communicating with library services; and
- Make better use of existing research.

4.2 Communication

The need to be able to communicate effectively with decision makers has already been highlighted in section 4.1. There was a suggestion that librarians need to be better at communicating the value and benefits of library services to a wide range of decision makers, stakeholders, and non-users. There was a general feeling that librarians were not always very good at promoting themselves and “*shouting about their success stories*” (Delegate). From the analysis of the workshop data, delegates identified four target groups:

- Power people
- Stakeholders (users)
- Library staff
- Non-users

4.2.1 Power people

In terms of communication, by far the largest amount of data made reference to engaging “power people”, i.e. the decision makers in the local authority and/or government as opposed to users or other “stakeholders” who are not explicit decision makers. The group were aware of the complex nature of communication between

⁴ http://www.culture.gov.uk/what_we_do/research_and_statistics/5698.aspx

⁵ <http://lisresearch.org/>

⁶ <http://www.lboro.ac.uk/departments/ls/lisu>

government and local authorities, raising the question of who has the actual power at a local level:

...not only do we need to communicate with ministerial level and the treasury, but also [with] local politicians as the DCMS doesn't have any money...library managers find it very frustrating when councillors aren't interested because it's not on their agenda.

There were suggestions that libraries need to utilise their own political power to try and get onto the agenda of local politicians, an example of which can be seen in in Doncaster⁷ where library services have been threatened.

4.2.2 Stakeholders (advocates and users)

As a term, 'stakeholders' has not been defined in detail, however a working definition used in this report will understand stakeholders as people who are advocates or users of library services. When mobilised, libraries do carry a degree of political capital that can be exploited. Library users (local stakeholders) were also seen as an important resource; these people use and value library services and so it was seen as important to communicate with them and obtain their support. As one delegate noted:

We need to share with stakeholders and incorporate the challenge from an early stage (Delegate).

Stakeholders can directly influence local decision makers such as local councillors. There was recognition that in many areas, libraries possess a degree of political capital and can offer politicians the type of personal anecdotal sound-bites they often use to make a point; this has been the focus of a recent MLA (2010) report. This sort of political capital has recently been seen when library closures have faced widely publicised opposition from grassroots organisations such as Voices for the Library⁸.

4.2.3 Library staff

A number of delegates supported the view that better communication was required between both local library staff and also among library staff nationally. Communication could take the form of dissemination of information, and a sharing of experience, expertise and good practice across all library authorities. There was a suggestion that this was something the Society of Chief Librarians should take and facilitate.

4.2.4 Non-users

There was a recognition that more should be done to try and engage non-users. It was argued that there should be a concerted effort to develop services around community needs, for example, family-friendly opening hours and better localised targeting of services. It is interesting to note the work of the MLA in a recent report aimed at professionals entitled "What do the public want from libraries" (MLA, 2010). There was also a concern that many non-users did not have a full understanding of what the library service did and so were not necessarily supportive of it; it is therefore important to try and rectify this.

4.2.5 Summary

This section briefly examined the need for libraries to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences. It was generally felt that libraries need to better tailor their

⁷ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/aug/18/doncasters-library-closures-catastrophe>

⁸ <http://www.voicesforthelibrary.org.uk/wordpress>

message and effectively reach out and listen to each stakeholder in order to help maintain and develop the right services.

4.3 Research

... the body of professional knowledge needs to be expanded to accommodate a range of other areas/disciplines. (Delegate)

In sections 2 and 4.1 above, there has been brief mention of the call by delegates for more academic research into public librarianship. Some delegates made specific reference to the need for public librarians to develop a culture of evidence-based librarianship in a similar way to health, law, and academic librarians. However, there does not appear to be the same type of culture in public librarianship. Part of the problem may lie in the perceived lack of access to academic resources, as many public librarians don't tend to have daily access to (or interaction with) databases and journals in the same ways that other groups of librarians do. It should be noted, however, that CILIP provides all of its members with access to databases (LISA) and journals through companies such as Emerald, ProQuest and Sage.

In terms of the wider literature, there is a growing body of research specifically examining ways of measuring the value and impact of library services. Some of this has briefly been mentioned in section 2, and is also the basis of work done by Christine Rooney-Browne (2009, 2011; Rooney-Browne & McMenemy, 2010). In addition to library and information science (LIS)-specific research there is a large body of work examining value, impact and communication within different disciplines such as behavioural economics. One notable UK example is a report published by DCMS, examining ways of measuring the value of culture (O'Brien, 2010).

There was a strong consensus that there is a need for more specifically British research into public libraries and especially with regard to the effects of library closures, professional de-skilling and use of volunteers, as well as developing new methods of measuring and communicating the value and benefits of public libraries. Proctor et al.'s (1996) British Library Research Report was cited by some delegates as a possible template for future research.

4.3.1 Summary

In this section we have recognised that there is an existing body of relevant research which is either public-library-specific, LIS-based, or inter-disciplinary. There is also a consensus by delegates on the need for new research examining a wide range of associated issues. There was also a feeling among some delegates that CILIP could lead this process through promotion of the services they already offer. This will be picked up in section 4.4.5.

4.4 The role of CILIP

Delegates were specifically asked to comment on how they personally viewed CILIP's role in supporting public libraries. The following themes emerged from these questions.

4.4.1 Define libraries' identity

...I think many stakeholders find it difficult to explain libraries insofar as an intrinsic value of a civilised society. (Delegate)

The discussions revealed that public libraries undertake and provide a huge range of roles and services within different communities. This means that it is not easy to define what a public library service should be focusing on. There appeared to be no single approach or offer. Concern was expressed that the core products of the library service, namely fiction and non-fiction lending, are perceived by some as increasingly irrelevant in an ever-connected information society; libraries are thus facing similar challenges to bookshops and CD retailers as their traditional core service is changed by the digital revolution.

Going right back to fundamentals – is there an agreed outcome on what libraries produce? (taken from the group work session)

4.4.2 Voice of the profession

There was a general suggestion among some delegates that they would like to see CILIP taking a vocal leadership role against issues affecting the profession such as library cuts, de-skilling and the use of volunteers in libraries. Certainly, for some of the delegates there was a perception that CILIP has not always been vocal enough, especially when it came to addressing these important issues. Specific concerns were expressed about professional de-skilling and the replacement of chartered librarians with non-qualified library staff.

4.4.3 Information and advice (leadership)

...we need advocacy from CILIP; we need an unambiguous set of priorities (Delegate)

...[CILIP's role] to protect and promote the quality, diversity and integrity of the public library service; to increase the awareness of the importance of public libraries to a democratic society. (Delegate)

As the professional body, it was felt by a number of delegates that CILIP should also actively act as a point of information and actively offer advice to the different library authorities. It was also suggested that CILIP take a greater role in identifying and disseminating good practice by defining and setting the wider agenda. There was also a feeling that CILIP could be more active in supporting local groups. There was also a suggestion for a closer liaison between CILIP and the Society of Chief Librarians.

4.4.4 Supporting Research

...[CILIP can] support research into the public library service and protect the independence of researchers. (Delegate)

The issue of research has been mainly dealt with in section 4.3. The consensus was that CILIP should be actively seen both supporting and commissioning research in a number of areas specific to public libraries. It has previously been noted that CILIP provides its all members with access to a suite of electronic journals, although it is not known how well this resource is used by public librarians. Nevertheless, there seems to be a valid argument for seeing more original research published in CILIP Update as a journal read by most members, in addition to the work published in journals such as the Public Library Journal.

4.5 Summary and Conclusions and Next Steps

This report has focused on the themes which arose from the discussion at the workshop. As part of the analysis there were a number of issues which require some additional discussion.

4.5.1 Voice of the professional

Through the data analysis, it became apparent that the voice of library staff working in the public sector did not always seem to be heard. As one delegate noted, arguably in a tongue-in-cheek manner, "it is difficult to speak against your master". This statement does raise an interesting point – that senior librarians could benefit from the effective advocacy from user-led organisations such as Voices for the Library, and on a more contentious note a more vocal CILIP, as they argue and make the case locally for public library services.

4.5.2 Social value of libraries

The social value of libraries is an important aspect of provision. There was an acknowledgment that certain groups of the population tended to use the services, such as in areas of deprivation and the over-60s. This raises the wider question of how libraries communicate with and try to gain the support of people who are non-users. Another question relates to the perception expressed by some delegates that decision makers tend not to be library users, or as one delegate identified:

...middle class politicians who have never needed a public library. (Delegate)

4.6 Next Steps

Library leaders have to take stock of what is being said and make their own path, balancing evidence, insight, experience and instinct. (MLA, 2010, p. 30)

There are a number of key issues which require further reflection and investigation. We now need to take on the responsibility for addressing thorough strategic interventions. Carolyn Rankin in her presentation challenged the delegates to make sure that they were not "*stuck in an echo-chamber*", developing a theme she had previously expounded in CILIP's Library and Information Update (Rankin, 2010). Another speaker asked the question "*Was he listening to a guild of blacksmiths in the 19th century?*" These can be uncomfortable questions, but in a changing inter-connected world, they are ones which will require reflection. If librarians do not address these questions, they will certainly be raised by those in power and authority, especially in this current financial climate. Looking at the analysis, we are still seeking conclusions relating to questions such as:

- How do we argue effectively for libraries?
- In a bureaucracy orientated towards easily digestible statistics, how do we learn to present meaningful data that convey the message in the language of the Treasury or Council Finance Department?
- How do we go about communicating the message effectively?
- How do we effectively capture the user voice?
- How do we raise the profile of the Evidence-Based Librarianship agenda?
- How do we raise awareness of existing resources?

- What are the next steps?

Areas identified for further development include:

- More research into the social effect of public library closures.
- A wider discussion about the future direction of public library services.
- A greater focus on developing evidence-based librarianship for public librarians.
- CILIP to develop a more vocal leadership role.
- A closer working relationship between CILIP and the Society of Chief Librarians.

In order to move forward from what might be considered predictable outcomes from this stage of the project, we also suggest developing a community who take forward ideas, new approaches, and identify opportunities together. The team at **Leeds Metropolitan University** are keen to develop the following, which could respond to some of the findings of this report:

- Creation of a sustainable network of professionals, practitioners, government bodies and academics who can work together to develop, share, disseminate, and innovate in new or best practice in measuring the value and impact of public libraries.
- Development of strategic partnerships between colleagues that ensure that new or best practice is widely available and known by decision makers.
- The creation of a hub or information resource for discussion and dissemination to support colleagues in evidencing how the value and impact of public libraries can best be measured. If you are interested in this proposal, please contact Eddie Halpin e.halpin@leedsmet.ac.uk as part of the first stage of setting this option up.
- Strategic research funding proposals that research, develop, and bring to practice effective measures of value and impact of public libraries, and also influence and inform policy and decision making.

5. Developing Strategic Interventions

Thanks are extended to the invited workshop delegates and other contributors for their input to the discussions. In disseminating this document we are now inviting your comments and observations on the workshop report, and in particular suggestions for developing feasible strategic interventions to progress the next steps; a small number of responses were contributed up to the end of September 2011 and these have been reviewed, analysed, and incorporated where appropriate.

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Appendix 1: Questions for Group Delphi – Individual responses

1. What do we mean or understand by the term “value”?
 - Is our understanding of the term/concept the same as stakeholders’?
 - Is it a valid measure?
 - Are there alternative forms of value?
 - Is it necessary to view “value” or alternative measures in terms of economic/monetary value?

2. What do we mean/understand by the term “impact”?
 - How do we define impact?
 - How do we view impact in monetary form (do we have to)?

3. What techniques, approaches, or skills have been used successfully in other LIS sectors and/or internationally?

4. What techniques, approaches, skills are required to fully develop a true picture of the value and impact of public libraries in different communities throughout the UK?

5. What are our stakeholders’ perceptions/views of public library services and their potential? What is their view of value and how do they describe impact?

6. What measurement would most effectively provide good evidence to local Authority Councillors/Officers, Government Departments, and Government?
 - a. What would allow DCMS to better measure impact and value?
 - b. What evidence do other public-based services use that are effective?

7. What evidence do we need to gather/collate to support public libraries?
 - Are there any other measures we could adopt and use successfully?
 - How do we translate evidence in appropriate forms for advocacy or measurement?

8. What trends in service provision and user expectations are shaping how the public library service in the UK might look in 5 years’ time?
 - How do we identify and view/measure success?
 - What will be the skills of professional librarians?

9. In the context of public library service what is the role for CILIP during the next five years?
 - What do you see as CILIP’s main priorities and aims?

10. What is the social value and impact of libraries?
11. Following on from today, what are our next steps? How do we proceed from this meeting?
12. How do we ensure that we don't present a group-think/narrow librarians' perspective on this process?

Appendix 2: List of Attendees

Liz Brewster, University of Sheffield
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Professor A Bryant, Director of Research, Faculty of Arts, Technology, & Environment,
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Laura Swaffield, Reporter, CILIP Update and Gazette
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