Exploring the impact and value of UK public libraries through the analysis of longitudinal focus group data

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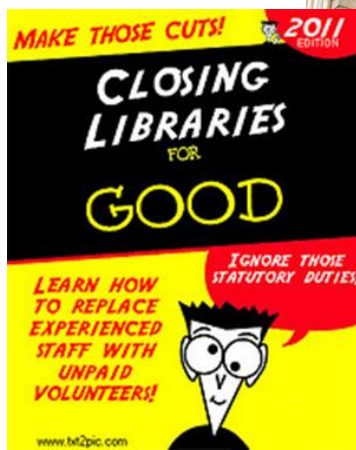
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Overview

- Brief background to the research project
- Literature review & Research questions
- Method
- Pilot study
- Fieldwork – engaging the public
- Focus Group findings
- Initial discussion and analysis
- Next steps

Background to the research project

- Why public libraries?
  - Social function of libraries
  - Political agendas / lobbying against cuts
  - Citizenship agenda

- Wider context
  - Information / Knowledge economies
  - Information Society
  - Exchange theory
  - Social capital

Literature review themes

- Role and value of public libraries

- Impact of public libraries

- Performance measurement and evaluation of public libraries

- Exchange theory

- Social capital and public libraries

- Information Society models

- Public libraries in the Information Society

- To what extent is an individual's position advantaged or disadvantaged as a result of using public libraries?

- What is the impact of using a public library service on individual and community citizenship

Image credit: University of Glasgow, Research & Knowledge Exchange

- "I didn't cry when I was homeless. The tears came later. I needed to care for my son and the library provided me an enchanted world to share with him. We arrived every day as the doors opened. My eager boy discovered dinosaurs, befriended librarians, and developed an on-going love of books. I devoured stories of others who face challenges. We shared story time and played on the lawn. Though homeless, the library helped me to mother my son by allowing me to give when I had nothing to spend"

(Dowd, F. S. (1996) Homeless children in public libraries: a national survey of large systems. *Journal of Youth Services in Libraries*, 9 (2), 155-66.)
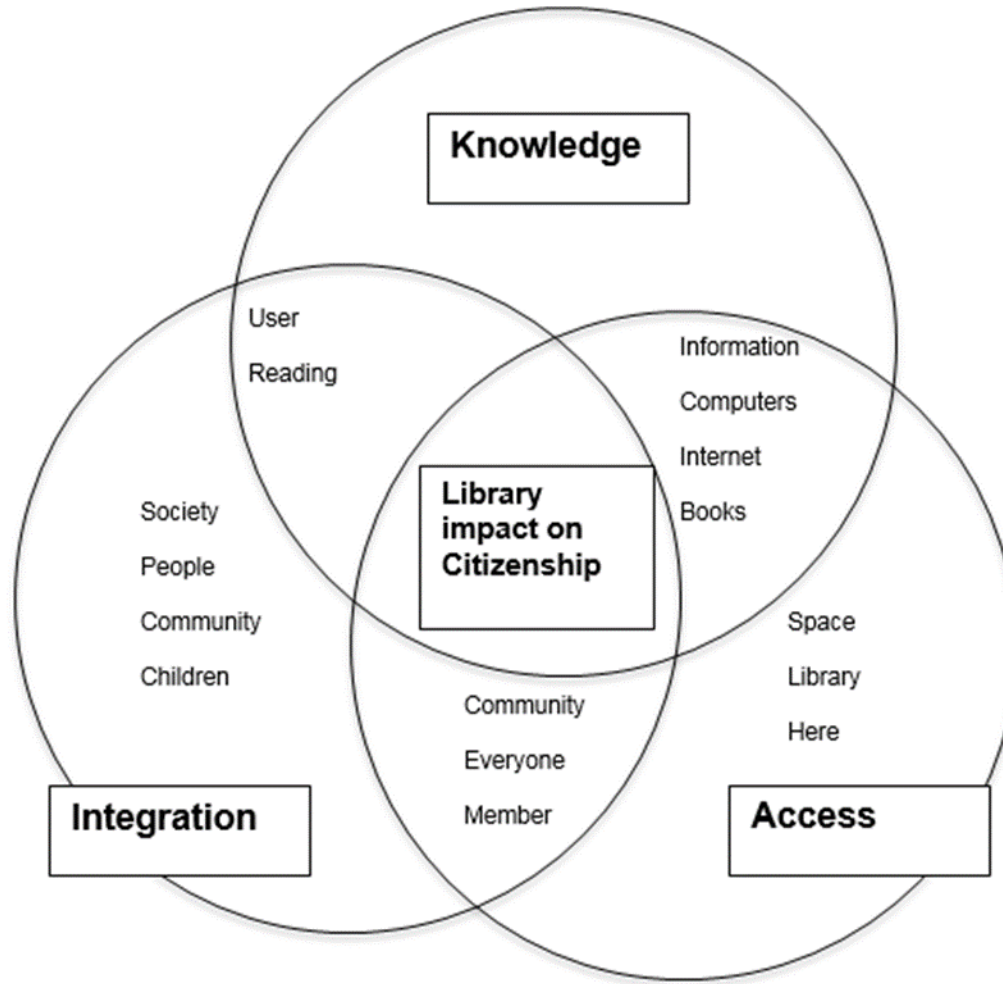
Pilot focus group

"*When I come in, I have a dead positive vibe, when I walk through the doors straight away, 'cos I know that I only need to spend fifteen minutes in here, and I'll have lost myself in a book…. You don't care what's going on!*"

"*I could be quite dramatic and say that reading saved my life!*"

Pilot discussion – Values framework

Method

– Commit to a focus group methodology
  - Longitudinal cohort approach to focus groups
  - Revisit annually over three years
– Scope of project
  - Representative of UK library users
  - Approach UK local library authorities
  - Ensure that City/town councils, County councils and Metropolitan Borough Councils all represented.
– Benefits of longitudinal approach
  - Familiarity of group (common experiences)
  - Willingness to share and discuss
  - Deep and reflective discussion

Empirical research 2014 - 2017

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Focus group participants

Transcribing and Coding

- access (physical)
- access (IT and e-resources)
- books and monographs
- citizenship and participation
- community cohesion
- integration
- knowledge capital
- knowledge and information sharing
- people and library users
- social capital
- space
- transactional capital
- Information Society

Findings - themes

Empowered citizens – Knowledge and information

"…handling all those really old manuscripts and books,….it's knowledge, just a body of knowledge. And knowledge is power I believe. Knowledge is power!"

"I essentially feel empowered. I have all that information, knowledge and creative stuff at my finger tips"

- Educational role
  - Access to resources
  - Access to space
  - Access to expertise

- The library is a place where knowledge is created and shared

- The library is a place to 'find out', 'enquire' and 'inform'

Print monographs

- *"My favourite thing about the public library is that you can just grab any book that you like and you can just sit as long as you like and read it. And if you really like it you can get another one! Books!"*

- *"I cannot overstate how much libraries have meant to me, and indirectly to other people. I have African heritage and the place where my family comes from there are no libraries so there is no free thought. They have an oral culture, but they don't have a literary culture. Although people are clever, they are well educated, but they don't think. They don't think outside the box. When you read a book you think, you think to yourself 'well what do I think about that?' There people are more 'well this is what you're meant to think' and for me it's connected to freedom, not just personal freedom but community freedom and how we move on!"*

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Print monographs

Community cohesion and integration

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"The library is a place of great safety and security."

"It's inclusive. It makes you feel part of the group. I think that society consists of groups doesn't it? But I see the library more as a coherent group and it's very inclusive of people from different backgrounds, different ethnic backgrounds and cultures."

"When you're on the streets no one cares about you. It's like every man for himself. When you come in here you can just communicate with anyone, you can discuss things with people. There's loads of things that you can do."
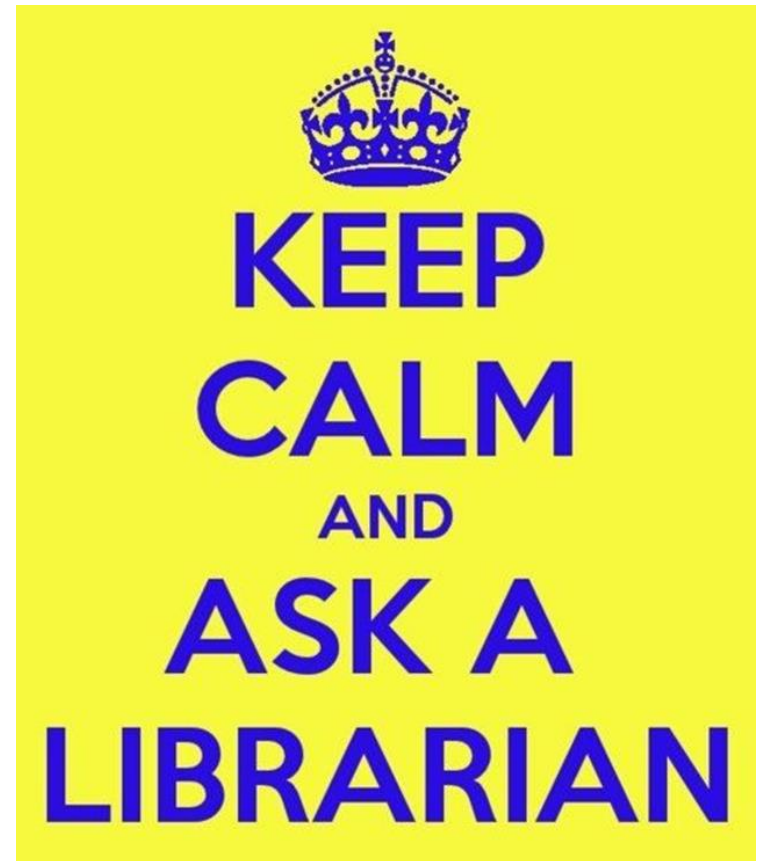
"You're never too old to go to a library. You see really old people reading newspapers and you see really young people on the computers or like reading a book or studying or researching. A library is place where you see every generation and you end up socialising with every kind of person"

"It is the one place where everyone is equal"

Inclusion through professional support

- *"The staff are great. They will always show you how to do stuff. You don't need to book on a course to set an email account up for example. They'll just show you. The job centre doesn't have computers now, yet you are meant to do all your job searching online. You can now only access this in the library. So having the staff available to help is so important."*

- *"I learnt how to use computers in the library. They showed me how to get online and how to search. I would never have had access to all of that before"*
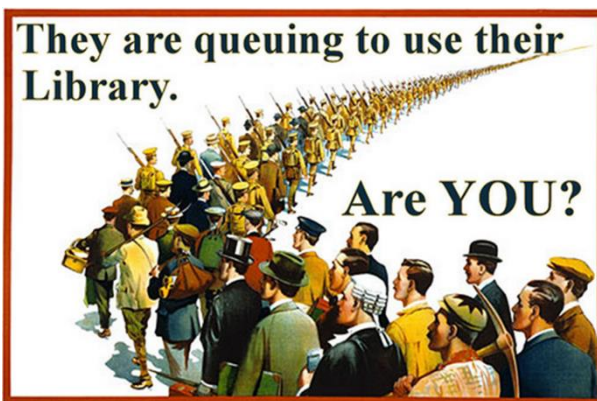

KEEP CALM AND ASK A LIBRARIAN

Community ownership of libraries

- *"If you close all the libraries you would be closing the door on opportunity an education. You don't just learn in the classroom, you also learn in the library. You don't just learn from teachers, you learn yourself, so if we close our libraries you are closing down opportunities for people who might not have a computer at home or can't afford a printer. It's taking your right to have an education away from you! We would be closing down opportunities for people"*

- *"I think libraries make a very strong ideological statement like we've already said, as well as access to knowledge and access to imagination. It's one of the few areas we've got that tries to level the playing field and we have that here in Lincoln to an extent. And that's very important I think"*

Bringing it all together: Information, Community and Support

- *"I feel secure and not so much empowered, because I'm not disempowered, but connected, connected to individuals but also to the wider world. What you can get from knowledge so it's a sense of connection. I lead a very solitary life in lots of ways so I need to have that sense of connection with others and obviously to the wider world"*

- *"I think that it was the first place I went to because there were people there and helpful people and I needed a lot of help and they were welcoming as well. It made me feel part of the community"*

Next Steps

Thank you for listening

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•Questions?