



Community Libraries Programme Evaluation

An overview of the baseline for community engagement in libraries

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A CIP catalogue record of this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-905867-24-0

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Executive summary

The research undertaken by Sector Projects and The Research Unit has established a baseline which the MLA and Big Lottery Fund will use to evaluate the programme in future years. This report distils the most useful findings in order to benefit library services in general and particularly those involved in the Community Libraries Programme.

The Big Lottery Fund Community Libraries Programme supports 58 local libraries in developing their capacity for community engagement. Sector Projects and The Research Unit were commissioned by the MLA to undertake a study of six case study authorities, including one 'control group' not funded by the Community Libraries Programme. The purpose of the research was to evaluate current levels and quality of community engagement, identify and disseminate examples of best practice, and assess the impact and effectiveness of the community engagement element of the Community Libraries Programme.

Overall conclusion

We found that the case study authorities are, despite capacity challenges, working hard to take advantage of what they recognise as a significant opportunity to transform not only the individual libraries receiving programme funding, but also their entire services. We feel that they are on the whole on course to achieve significant positive results.

Best practice

There are strong examples of innovation and best practice across the Authorities. The Community Libraries Programme is being used to support refurbishment or building development projects to great effect, for example through landmark multi-use buildings (Bristol and Newcastle), establishing community rooms (Slough, Nottingham and Bleak House in Sandwell) and through modernised town centre libraries (North Yorkshire and Smethwick in Sandwell).

Newcastle has the most developed vision, joined up working, a good focus on mainstream communications and well-established monitoring of community segmentation. North Yorkshire and Bristol are in the middle stages of comprehensive change programmes, with more of a focus on buildings and appearance than organisational transformation. Bristol also has a good focus on mainstream communications. Slough is adapting and extending a previously very successful model. Nottingham has placed a strong emphasis on engagement and development of community networks, including creation of a community engagement officer post. Sandwell has good awareness of community segmentation and is looking to develop volunteer buddies and an employability agenda.

Areas for improvement

We identified six key areas with potential to greatly increase the positive results for individuals and communities.

Vision and goals

Visions for community-focused library services are beginning to be developed and articulated by senior management, but are undeveloped across services. In many cases visions try to be 'all things for all people' and lack necessary focus. Organisational understanding and buy-in is inconsistent, especially with front-line staff. There is not enough urgency or momentum, cross-organisational sign-up, communication of the vision or empowering of staff to act upon that vision. There is a lack of shared vision across and within authorities on what community engagement means in practice. Libraries are focused on outreach and service use, but not on improvement of the library service as a tool for community development.

Community segmentation

Community segmentation is often based on traditional demographic and community groups, not predictive, behavioural or interest based sectors. As such, service offerings are products rather than service experiences. There is minimal measuring or tracking of use of libraries services by segment. In the evaluation interviews, there was no mention of organisational or community capacity building, or processes to measure medium or long-term outcomes.

Organisational transformation

While there is a recognition that the roles of staff will have to change significantly in organisations engaging the community in the design, delivery and management of library services, there is little evidence of real planning of new roles and behaviours, change processes, or engagement with staff to communicate and develop new approaches. The senior management who hold the vision are distant from front line staff who will have to deliver the vision.

Effective communications

Public perceptions of libraries are still outdated and negative, and while basic external communications are taking place and sending out positive messages, there is still a need to put in place the basics of marketing the service, including good signage, and communications within the library building and in the community about simple service information such as opening hours and services offered. Beyond this, there is some reliance on community groups to reach targeted communities and, as yet, little sophisticated targeting of

segments with exciting messages which demonstrate what the library has to offer.

Real social networks

The Community Libraries Programme offers the opportunity to develop libraries as places where people go to meet and network with others as well as simply a place for books or other services. Community engagement as a concept has developed, and many staff interviewed do explicitly differentiate engagement from consultation. But there is no unified vision of what community engagement is, and many still have a basic understanding, which sees it as about outreach and service use.

The development of understanding of community engagement and project processes varies significantly, mainly depending on whether there is an ongoing refurbishment or transformation programme in the library service and the level of cross-council and partner involvement. It is critical for library services to understand whether their ultimate goal is to improve the library service for the benefit of the community (internal focus), or use the library service as a tool for community development (external focus), or a clear combination of both. There was very little identification of a significant change in the relationship with the public being a desired or likely result of the programme.

Methods and metrics

While there was near unanimity in identifying 'busy, buzzy' libraries as the pre-eminent indicator of success, community engagement is not as yet informed by any real theory or methodology about what works to engage the community. The best examples are where case studies have seen community engagement done before, or are already closely networked with their local community. As a result of lack of clarity of vision and method, there are few metrics in place to measure impact, and no mechanisms to measure medium or long term outcomes other than service use. There was little recognition of the potential or need for building capacity in the library service and the community.

Recommendations

The evaluation has identified key recommendations to support library authorities in meeting project objectives:

- Visions should be collaboratively developed, focused and properly communicated.
- Community segmentation should increasingly focus on behavioural segments; delivery should focus on delivery of service experiences in addition to products.

- The potential impact of organisational transformation on staff must be recognised, and effective communication and engagement processes must be put in place to ensure ownership.
- External communications should be creative and carefully targeted, in addition to provision of generic service information.
- Community engagement plans should be more robust, with an emphasis on monitoring progress.

Context

Community Engagement is becoming an increasing priority for public service across the UK, and particularly in local government. Recent policy documents *An Action Plan for Community Empowerment: Building on success* (Communities and Local Government, October 2007) being quickly followed by *Unlocking the talent of our communities* (Communities and Local Government, March 2008) and a planned community empowerment white paper to be published in the summer match progress being made on the ground to involve the public in the design, delivery and management of services.

Framework for the Future said that "Libraries are public anchors for neighbourhoods and for communities. They provide a sense of stability. For the majority of the population, libraries are acknowledged as safe, welcoming neutral spaces open to all in the community. They attract users from across the social spectrum." But the report also recognised that for some the library may seem a distant or intimidating place. It concluded:

"All libraries need to work to establish programmes that will engage groups and individuals that are hard to reach by identifying them and establishing what are their particular needs and then by redesigning services when necessary so that there are no barriers to inclusion. Those libraries, which are already successful in this important work, frequently involve the communities themselves in the design and implementation of services."

The Big Lottery Fund's Community Libraries Programme provides up to £80million of investment for public libraries looking to develop and improve their services in genuine partnership with local communities.

The funding is largely for capital works, so the majority of the funding will focus on the improvement of library buildings and library spaces, in ways which are required to improve community engagement. The underlying aim of the whole programme is to fund libraries that provide more than traditional services, and are actively involved with the communities they serve. We want libraries to reach out to their local communities, and develop relationships that bring more benefits to them, particularly with disadvantaged and non-user groups. This theme of community engagement is paramount to the entire programme, [and the capital work involved must be required in order to improve community engagement].

The aims of the programme are to:

- invigorate libraries as centres of wider community learning and development and learning based activities;
- create, improve and develop library spaces that meet the needs of the whole community; and

- be innovative and promote good practice in the ways libraries are designed and run.

The Community Libraries Programme projects aim to create library spaces that are exciting and accessible to all. There is no prescriptive method to achieve this other than a requirement for projects to demonstrate how they will go beyond the 'traditional' library service. Planned activities include reading groups, writing groups, language classes, family learning activities, art and museum exhibitions, cultural activities such as drama, health activities such as wellbeing classes, information seminars about local volunteering, and other opportunities for community engagement.

The key to all of this is engagement with local communities and giving those communities a genuine role in decision making processes affecting their library. This will often mean new local management boards made up of members of the community, or community champions, making decisions that affect the way the library is run. This is reinforced by the mandatory outcome that ALL projects must achieve – that “Communities are actively engaged in the development, delivery and management of library services”.

The MLA works in partnership with the Big Lottery Fund to deliver the Community Libraries Programme. Two MLA based support officers undertook a range of duties based on helping library services engage with the Community Libraries Programme and aiding the Big Lottery Fund with the running of the programme. These duties included:

- providing advice and guidance to library services on Community Engagement;
- providing advice and guidance to library services on the Community Libraries programme generally;
- participating in events and workshops related to the Community Libraries Programme;
- promoting and disseminating good practice in Community Engagement;
- promoting and disseminating good practice on library design; and
- providing the Big Lottery Fund with contextual public domain library information.

The delivery of the Community Libraries Programme is also supported through MLA's partner organisations based in the English regions. The MLA Regional Agencies offer support by:

- referring enquiries to the two Community Libraries Programme Support Officers;
- helping to coordinate regional events and workshops; and
- providing expert regional advice on the sector.

The MLA has collated significant resources to assist libraries with successful community engagement, which are available on the MLA website www.mla.gov.uk.

Evaluating the Community Libraries Programme

Sector Projects and The Research Unit were commissioned by the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council to evaluate the impact of the community engagement aspect of the Big Lottery Fund Community Libraries Programme over a three year period.

The overall goals of the evaluation are:

- to understand the current nature, degree and quality of community engagement in the authorities studied;
- to assess the levels of organisational and/or cultural change experienced by public libraries as a result of the Community Libraries Programme; and
- to disseminate lessons learned.

In order to do this, we set out to identify:

- critical success factors for engagement that deliver service improvement;
- constraints faced in implementing community engagement strategies;
- nature and degree of cultural change within the authorities;
- impacts on individuals and communities of involvement in the programme;
- potential of libraries to act as catalysts for change; and
- degree to which the programme has supported capacity building within libraries and communities.

These findings should illustrate and support the success or otherwise of the Community Libraries Programme in achieving its stated goals, to:

- invigorate libraries as centres of wider community learning and development, and learning based activities;
- create, improve and develop library spaces that meet the needs of the whole community; and
- be innovative and promote good practice in the ways libraries are designed and run.

We conducted baseline analysis in the first year (late 2007) in the quickest period possible between the public announcement of funding decision and the Christmas and New Year holiday period. This was designed to ensure that a true baseline analysis was undertaken before plans were implemented and the situation changed.

This first year baseline analysis is being published in order to enable all library services to benefit from the examples of good practice already identified, and to provide some guidance on possible ways forward. Further research will evaluate the overall success of the programme.

Methodology

We used a combination of qualitative, quantitative and projective techniques. In order to help case study libraries to focus on the requirements of the Communities Libraries Programme, we sent a web based survey to all members of library staff involved in these projects.

This survey asked staff a range of questions including their awareness and expectations of the Communities Libraries Programme, and perceptions around current levels of engagement. This esurvey served several functions: it provided baseline trackable qualitative and quantitative data, it meant that the interviews could become focussed on key issues for respondents and meant that we were able to gain detailed views from more staff than we could interview on the site visits. The survey received over 70 responses across the six case study areas.

The next research phase involved site visits to the case study libraries. We conducted over 70 structured interviews with library staff, partners, members of the voluntary sector, and councillors using appreciative and projective interviewing techniques. In addition, we also conducted twelve focus groups with members of the public, fitting the public profile libraries were seeking to engage, (six recruited by the case study authorities and six recruited by ourselves), and focus groups with frontline library staff about the Communities Libraries Programme.

Case study authorities

The research approach was to conduct fieldwork with six case studies. The case studies were selected from outline information on successful bids made available by the Big Lottery Fund, and intended to give the widest possible representation of bids across a range of criteria:

- region
- county authorities
- urban, deprived areas
- rural areas
- multi site projects
- new building projects
- projects targeting older people
- joint services with other parts of local authorities or partner organisations
- a regeneration element
- targeting young people
- providing advice services
- community cohesion
- ethnic groups
- learning and skills
- health

- disabilities.

The case study authorities selected were:

- Bristol
- North Yorkshire
- Nottingham
- Sandwell and
- Slough.

In addition, one authority was selected as a 'counter example' case study, to provide a comparison with the case studies receiving Community Libraries Programme funds. Newcastle was selected on the basis that they have a good track record of community engagement, and are also engaged in capital investment in the city's libraries.

Continuing the evaluation

This baseline study represents a deliberately fast mobilisation of research following the release of news on successful bids, in order to achieve a genuine baseline – a view of the state of play in the case study authorities before significant project work had begun and before change began in thinking and activities.

These findings should therefore be understood in the context that library authorities had only a few days or weeks between the announcement of funding and our fieldwork. This report is therefore a true baseline, demonstrating community engagement to the level undertaken before the Community Libraries Programme was underway. It is therefore perhaps unsurprising in this context that some of our findings, for example around lack of buy in to the vision from some levels within the service, were evident. Nevertheless, bids were prepared much earlier in 2007, and this, along with the tight timescales of the programme means that these findings have relevance to the progress of the community libraries programme.

The MLA has decided that in years two and three of this evaluation, the research will be broadened to look in more detail at the analysis and segmentation of communities informing the vision and action plans, and in particular try to measure the real impacts on individuals and communities around employability, learning and economic and community development. Therefore the scope of this research will be widened and it is highly likely that the research methodology will change. How years two and three will be approached will be determined by further work currently being undertaken.

This note has been produced from the key findings of the baseline evaluation to provide guidance to libraries undertaking community engagement, whether as part of the Big Lottery Community Libraries Programme or not.

Establishing the baseline

This report is a baseline analysis showing the state of community engagement in library authorities before their Community Libraries Programme projects were fully up and running, and in comparison to Newcastle, a forward thinking authority which has been undertaking community engagement alongside its PFI Libraries programme for several years.

Summary of projects

Each of the case study areas we worked with demonstrated highly positive projects which in our opinion will deliver significant community benefits. We also identified a number of areas with potential to have even stronger positive impacts on individuals and communities.

Bristol

Bristol's Community Libraries Programme project aims to build a new type of community resource – a creative learning centre, describe as “a highly innovative flagship project which will bring together all aspects of Cultural Services for the first time and engage with local people in new and exciting ways”. The primary goal of the project is to engage the local community in the development, delivery and management of the new centre. It is envisaged that local people will volunteer at the centre and form part of the management structure.

The project aims identify and respond to the needs and aspirations of local people and in doing so, celebrate the diversity and heritage of the visitors to the library and learning centre. Adult education is identified as a key objective, and outreach programmes to black and minority ethnic communities are planned. Key partners identified as being crucial to these outreach programmes include the Novas Scarman Group and the Single Parents' Action Network.

The creative learning centre is to include a heritage zone, a children's zone, exhibition space for local artists, a community kitchen and a community zone. It is intended that the library is accessible and open as many hours a day as possible, and seven days a week. An important part of the learning centre approach is the provision of crèche facilities.

Our research noted that the vision for Bristol's project is particularly innovative, challenging and strong; a library provided in an innovative way in an area of town that is highly multi cultural and experiences high levels of deprivation. The project attempts to consider from first principles how deprived communities can be engaged in the arts, history, and reading in a way which can change lives.

Newcastle

The aim of the project is to create a new, landmark city library through a public/private partnership (PFI). This library will offer new and improved services to be devised through extensive consultation with the local community. The project was not part of the community libraries programme and was therefore not bound by the specified outcomes of the programme set by the Big Lottery. Community engagement can be approached freely and without guidance in this particular project.

The PFI programme for libraries transformation has been running for a significant period of time.

Young people in particular were involved in planning the library but public consultation also extended to local residents, current users, hard to reach groups and other key stakeholders. The aim of the project is to use the library building as a “neutral and safe public space for the community and to support the Council’s corporate priority areas including children’s services, educational achievement and social inclusion”.

We noted that Newcastle has a more developed vision, founded on the concept that an attractive city centre library will naturally become a regional destination. Frontline staff are well engaged and committed to the project, with an understanding of how their roles will change. While this is unsurprising given that Newcastle has been engaged in its transformation programme, and working hard on communicating the vision, for some time now, it does illustrate successful practice. Newcastle is also relatively strong on measuring and monitoring library engagement in a sophisticated way.

North Yorkshire

North Yorkshire aim to refurbish Harrogate library and make it an effective library that also delivers other services. Recent refurbishments of other libraries across the council have provided a strong template for transformation. The vision is that providing lots of public service reasons for visiting the venue, and increasing engagement with older people and intergenerational engagement, the library will become more popular and better used.

The existing building has been considered inadequate for some time and the project envisages a comprehensive redesign of the building, creating innovative spaces attractive to all sections of the community. The refurbishment will include a community space and a courtyard for outdoor space. The library service is closely linked to other parts of the council, and demonstrates strong project organisation. There is some resistance among frontline staff, and concerns that the focus will be on the delivery of other services rather than primarily library services.

A wide range of services are to be delivered by the refurbished library, including a One Stop Shop for council services, adult learning, health promotion and intergenerational work. A ‘centre of excellence’ is envisaged through close working with the local voluntary and community sectors and through extensive consultation with the local community to design and deliver these services. Targeting older people is intended to complement the council’s wider wellbeing agenda whilst reflecting expected demographic changes to the local community over the coming years.

We noted that North Yorkshire represents a very strong example of a library service well integrated across the wider council. The service also has a strong

track record of library refurbishments and image changes, which is reflected in a particularly well developed project management structure.

Nottingham

Nottingham's Community Libraries Programme project – Meadows Alive! – aims to support the transformation of an area of the city with multiple deprivation and in need of regeneration. The key beneficiaries of the project were highlighted as children and young people, BME communities, the unemployed and refugees and asylum seekers. The project aims to engage people through local community groups and volunteer action and is focused on the empowerment of citizens and community cohesion.

One of the stated aims of the project is to fulfil the library's potential to develop into a hub for service providers and community organisations locally. At the start of the project, the building was considered to be contributing to the poor perception of the services and activities provided; the use of space was inefficient. The project aims to transform the building itself, and involve the local community in the planning, equipping and management of the new library to have a wider effect across the community.

Nottingham provides a good example of a library service working within and seeking to build existing social networks in an area of multiple deprivation. The library service is well connected to community groups and to other public sector and voluntary organisations seeking to generate community engagement.

Sandwell

Sandwell's Community Libraries Programme aims to transform two libraries – Bleakhouse and Smethwick. Each library is to have family friendly facilities and café space, access for disabled people and accessible toilets. These amenities are to be created by an extension at Bleakhouse and a reconfiguration of staff areas at Smethwick.

New services as well as new facilities are to be created under the programme, including one to one surgeries by advice agencies, and performance space for local groups. The project aims to overcome language and access barriers through a network of volunteer 'buddies', and to tackle worklessness through a variety of means including training, work experience, and volunteering opportunities.

It is envisaged that by transforming the space and services offered by the two libraries, Sandwell will transform the way they involve local people in delivering services. The changes proposed in the original bid were made based on consultation and feedback from the groups using the libraries.

Sandwell demonstrate a well developed awareness of community segments, and sensible monitoring of library use by segment.

Slough

The key focus of Slough's Community Libraries Programme is to "revitalise" Cippenham Library by making it more family friendly. Parents, carers and children under five were highlighted as the key beneficiaries of the project, who would benefit from family learning activities, a toy library and mother and toddler sessions.

It was also envisaged that the newly extended library would create space for a redesigned Council 'One Stop Shop' providing benefits advice and access to other council services. The library would also be a forum for other local services, hosting adult health events such as healthy eating sessions and health visitor developmental checks.

Local people would play a key role in the development and delivery of the project to ensure that the needs and priorities of the local community were at the very heart of the project.

Slough's vision is based on the successful example of an existing community library within the borough at Britwell. The vision is clear and achievable, and the library service is well connected with other council services.

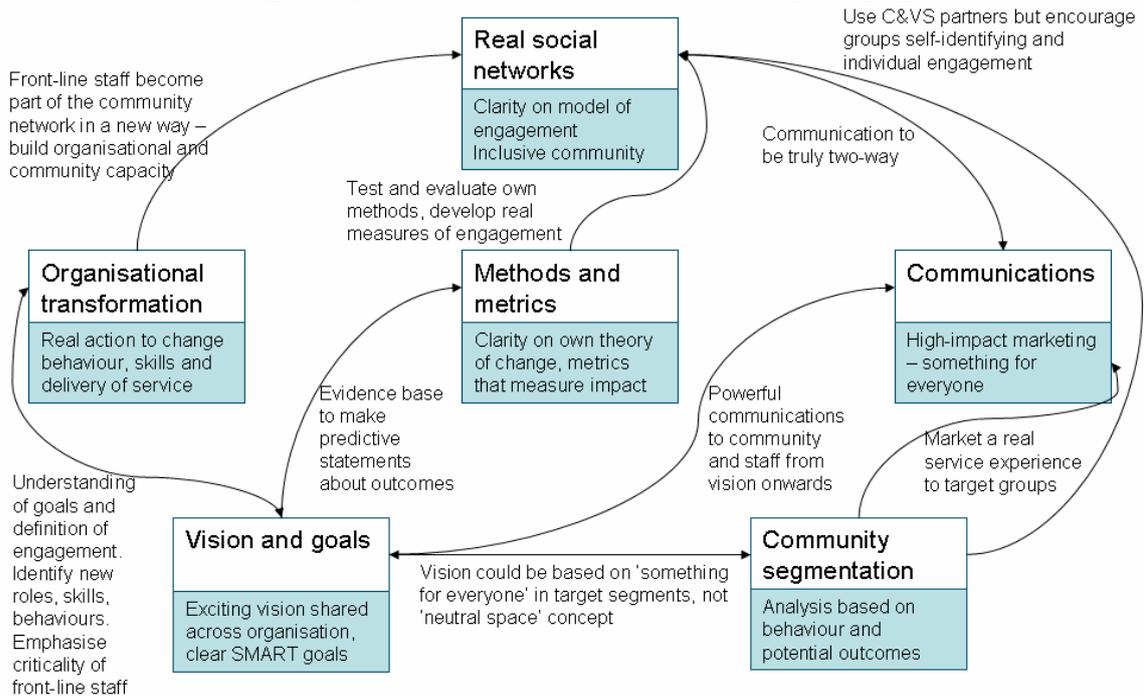
Recommendations

Through our discussions, with staff, partners and the public we identified six critical areas for building effective community engagement. These are:

- vision and goals – an exciting vision shared across organisation, with clear SMART goals;
- community segmentation – analysis of community segments based on needs, behaviour and the potential outcomes of community engagement for the segment;
- organisational transformation – concrete action within the service to change behaviour, skills and delivery of service;
- methods and metrics – having real clarity on the ‘theory of change’, knowing ‘how’ planned actions are expected to create desired outcomes, and metrics that measure impact;
- effective communications – high impact marketing that offers something for everyone; and
- real social networks – the library as a focus for social engagement, networking and capacity building – achievement of this requires real clarity on the model of engagement planned.

The first two of these (vision and goals, community segmentation) lay the foundations for a successful approach, the next three (organisational transformation, methods and metrics, and effective communications) are necessary steps in the approach, and the outcome of real social networks also creates a virtuous circle which reinforces success. These six critical areas are explained further in the text below.

Elements of change required for effective community engagement



In each area, we have identified existing strengths and areas for development arising from our research, which we set out below. It is worth noting that Newcastle has been engaged in its PFI project for a number of years. We were therefore not surprised to find more developed and embedded approaches in a number of these areas. However, despite not being bound to the Community Libraries Programme outcomes as the other authorities are, we did not find fundamental differences between Newcastle and the other case study areas in terms of focus, approach or opportunities to improve.

Vision and goals

In order to achieve success in community engagement – and in any change – a clear vision is a requirement. It should be strong and inspiring, with enough detail to allow individuals in the library service, the council and the general public to visualise ‘what life would be like’ once the vision has been achieved. It must be communicated widely across the organisation, indeed where possible it should be ‘owned’ by staff from frontline service staff through to the executive leadership. And it must be linked to the type of community challenges you have and the type of opportunities available for change. The vision does not have to be prescriptive in every detail, indeed in some areas it can be beneficial if it is deliberately ‘fuzzy’ and some areas are left to be defined by experience. But it must give enough detail for everyone involved to grasp what is trying to be achieved..

Different visions of success

Our research showed that different types of visions exist for different types of projects, depending on the demographics of the case study areas and the type of building to be created:

- Bristol and Newcastle are seeking to create true ‘landmark’ buildings with multiple uses.
- Slough, Nottingham, and the Bleak House Library in Sandwell seek to create a renovated library at the heart of the community with a community room.
- North Yorkshire and Smethwick Library in Sandwell are aiming for improved, relatively traditional town centre libraries with wider opportunities for engagement, volunteering and training.

We saw some strong visions, the hallmarks of which were that libraries could be welcoming spaces where different community groups could pursue their interests side by side and in harmony with each other. However, we did not see that visions had yet truly excited and engaged frontline staff and local communities. The main areas to focus on are clarity and detail of vision and a significant need to communicate the vision much more extensively.

Developing the vision for change

Vision is the foundation of change, but can come from a number of sources and be developed in different ways. First, there is replicating what has been done before. This generates a much stronger impact and awareness if the example to be replicated is within the authority, since while case studies and site visits elsewhere can be useful, they do not usually provide sufficient emotion to drive a whole transformation. While most authorities, particularly Sandwell, had drawn on the experience of other authorities, Slough had an in house example in mind, and so their understanding of the approach was much clearer. When developing a vision based on a previous example, it is important to be sure:

- that the previous approach is documented or understood in sufficient detail to really put it into practice; and
- that the approach has been tailored sufficiently to the current situation.

Alternative approaches to develop the vision include building from the bottom up. If effective community segmentation is developed, the desired outcomes are established, and the methods by they will be achieved and the transformation required identified, then the vision will have been developed. Newcastle comes closest to this approach in our case study authorities.

Explicit visioning exercises can be combined with either of the above activities. Bristol used a facilitated visioning exercise to develop their vision, which encouraged 'thinking outside the box'. In all cases, it is important that all stakeholders, including staff and the rest of the council, can see 'what's in it for me' in the vision – that outcomes are aligned to corporate policy priorities and provide a fulfilling, rewarding vision for staff.

Communicating the vision

As detailed below under communications, the vision is nothing if it is not communicated. Without vision, authorities will be unlikely to bring staff with them into new ways of working. The vision needs to make sense and be highly appealing to frontline staff, because as our esurvey showed, all respondents thought that they were critical for community engagement to work.

There must be sufficient detail to appeal to staff and the public alike. A 'busy, buzzy' library or libraries, the outcome almost universally identified as the major priority by staff in the authorities, will almost inevitably be at the core of any vision for community engagement. However, this is not enough – the vision should also say something about:

- how the libraries will become busy and attractive (with reference to actual segments of the community, not 'something for everyone');
- how the libraries getting busy and attractive will contribute to the community; and

- how the library will not only be at the heart of the community, but the community at the heart of the library.

Community engagement in the design, delivery and management of the service should be clearly tied to these issues, since the purpose of doing this is to make the libraries a more attractive and relevant resource and to build community capacity.

Key risks

A good vision should set the framework for organisational transformation, although it cannot be expected to set out all the details from the start. The key risks in relation to vision and goals from our research were identified as:

- seeing the 'library as a neutral space' or 'something for everyone', without a clear understanding of what the real selling proposition is. Whether it is free books or a space for community meetings, what is being offered and who it will appeal to needs to be clear and specific in the vision, not generic; and
- the vision not having been communicated or sold to the frontline staff who have to then deliver it.

Finally, there is a lack of fully shared agreement about what community engagement entails – a critical part of the vision. This includes a few respondents who still believe that community engagement is simply based on library use and issue numbers, rather than changing the relationship with libraries and empowering communities and individuals. While many have a more developed approach, the question remains unanswered: Are we trying to get people involved in libraries, or in their community?

Conclusion

Clearly, the question above is a rhetorical one – we are trying to get people involved in both their libraries and their communities. Understanding of community engagement has developed significantly from a perception that it was simply about community consultation. It now needs to continue to develop to achieve a shared understanding that engagement in designing, delivering, managing and using the library service can have direct links to building community capacity and coherence.

Our research identified a set of visions that were strong and attractive but that are, as yet, mostly lacking in detail. They are substantially 'owned' by chief librarians, with potential to add further detail to the vision, and to communicate the vision far more widely, particularly focusing on obtaining support from frontline staff. Newcastle has clearly developed their vision in some detail over time, and staff were able to identify elements of the vision with some clarity.

Community segmentation

At present, community segmentation is the area with the greatest potential for development. This is where a community engagement project becomes 'real' – related to and focused on real communities and their needs. Rather than trying to be all things for all people, segmentation helps a library to offer something for everyone, and helps all staff to know what the offers are, and why they appeal.

Currently, most of our case study authorities are at the first stage of segmentation, identifying key community groups (eg teens, different nationality or minority ethnic groups) which they want to appeal to. On a common sense basis, choosing segments can be as simply as looking in the library and seeing who isn't there. These approaches are necessary but not sufficient to use community segmentation effectively. To really get the benefits, segmentation has to be more sophisticated.

Developing community segmentation

Segments should be defined based on what they are interested in and how they will behave rather than simple sociodemographic groups. This requires really getting inside the minds of groups who have something in common, through direct engagement and service design exercises. The segments identified may be a subset of existing groups, eg teens who enjoy learning but feel alienated from school, or cut across traditional, sociodemographic ideas of community groups, eg those who are interested in spirituality and yoga could be a small segment, but one which cuts across barriers of race, age and gender. There is real potential to improve the effectiveness of community engagement in the Community Libraries Programme areas by developing community segmentation further.

Segmentation has to be based on overview and insight into who is in the community and what they are interested in. While case study authorities had a clear idea of their current user groups and some awareness of 'missing' groups in the library to whom they would like to appeal, they had not generally grouped segments around how they related to the library and how they would respond to different service offerings. Nor were the case studies able to show clear reasons for prioritising the few key segments to target initially. In general case study areas had either selected generic segments on a common sense basis, or were aiming to appeal to all parts of the community.

Using segmentation to design the service offering

The opportunity presented by the possibility of targeting specific segments is that more work can be done to understand their needs and behaviours, and libraries can then engage in 'service design' – shaping the full experience of using the library to appeal to these segments. The starting point for shaping the offering can be traditional, real, physical service offers such as library stock, events, training, and facilities like cafés, community rooms and

gardens. So we know, for example, that men like to read magazines and newspapers, and like to do so in an environment where others are around but not directly in their space – and so providing separate armchairs and magazines and newspapers can attract them. Similarly, young parents are attracted by crèche facilities and may be interested in training to enhance their career prospects.

But the experience that library users have can also be shaped by planning what people can do in the library according to place or time. Putting a selection of things to do in one place (space zoning) or at a certain time (time zoning), can create an environment that is welcoming and attractive to a particular community group. For example, if it has been identified that older people feel comfortable in the library when they see other older people, and stock that appeals to them, and they can use computers in a peaceful environment with some support, then certain times can be arranged when all these things are made available in one part of the library.

Many of our case studies are working towards the possibility of doing this, and the concepts of space zoning and time zoning were raised in each authority. Since this means shaping the whole experience of using the service rather than simply adding some offerings, there is clear potential to start to develop a view of the transformation requirements on staff and services. At the present stage of development, however, the case study authorities are focused mainly on making library services available in general, rather than shaping a service offer for different customer groups.

Targeting communications

There is also the opportunity for case study authorities to use segmentation approaches to enhance communications. Understanding a target segment can make it easier to identify which communications channels reach them, and influence them, whether this is press and media, community organisations or word of mouth. Communications and marketing can then be designed to appeal exactly to the group in terms they understand and saying something they are interested in, and measures can be designed to reflect the success of communications.

Community groups

All our case study authorities showed a strong approach to working with community and voluntary sector bodies. While good partnerships can move the process forward much quicker than authorities can achieve on their own, having identified community and voluntary sector partners is not a substitute for segmentation. Community bodies are likely to represent communities with a wide range of interests or segments, and are unlikely to have a deeply thought through understanding of the service libraries can offer. However they are clearly enriching the view of the case study authorities, and in some cases have provided some very developed thinking on how the various segments they represent can be supported to engage in the community further.

Improved measurement and monitoring

Good segmentation is a foundation of community engagement. It also strongly supports good measurement, since use of the library and impacts can be monitored by segment. This can begin with measuring footfall, issues and so on. But the natural progression is to measure changes in outcomes for individuals from the targeted segment, and community capacity and coherence. We found great potential for the case study authorities to improve their use of segment monitoring data (over and above the PLUS survey), illustrated by Newcastle and Sandwell gathering and using data in this way.

Conclusion

Segmentation is about knowing your customers. Community engagement requires that you get closer to your customer, and the current lack of developed customer segmentation is a clear message that this needs to be developed to achieve the levels of community engagement desired by the case study authorities.

Organisational transformation

The changes that will be necessary for community engagement to happen effectively have major implications for staff. They will also be critical to delivering changes in both the service itself – the products offered – and the service experience, or how the library ‘feels’ to customers. Therefore it is important to realise that really significant two way communication with staff, is critical to this process. Equally critical is building capacity for change within the organisation – identifying the skills and attributes that will be required of staff in the future, and working out how to equip staff with these.

All of our case study authorities showed strong awareness that frontline staff are the most critical part of the organisation for delivering community engagement, and an appreciation that frontline staff are already contributing more than any other ‘level’ of the organisation to direct engagement with the community. What was implicit in the feedback we were given, but not made explicit, is that capacity building within the library services remains a critical first step before the aspirations of the projects can be achieved.

Identifying new ways of working

Many authorities participating in the Community Libraries Programme have strong aspirations to ‘build a new model of the library service’ by using the project as a pathfinder. Across the board, there are strong concepts emerging of the library ‘without counters’, where the librarian is not a sorter, cataloguer and finder of books, but an information worker actively engaging with and prompting members of the public. There is a strong desire to change conventions and create new relationships with libraries by changing the way that frontline staff operate.

North Yorkshire and Bristol have already undergone significant changes in the way services in a number of libraries have been delivered, and others have done so on a smaller scale or have changes planned. However, apart from Newcastle, there are significant challenges still to be addressed in making explicit the need for real organisational transformation and reskilling of staff. Frontline staff are at present unclear about the kinds of new roles they will be expected to play in the future.

Engaging frontline staff in the vision

There are a number of key issues in terms of organisational transformation, which are perhaps unsurprising at this early stage in the programme, but represent opportunities to more deeply embed and plan the change. As noted above, the vision for change, while strong in all case study areas was only strongly evidenced at the top of the organisation, usually at chief librarian level. While all library service leaders were clearly aware that engaging frontline staff is critical to the success of their projects, only in Newcastle and Nottingham could it be said that frontline staff are able to clearly articulate the vision and feel positive about their responsibility for delivering it.

As well as owning the vision, the individual at chief librarian level tends to hold responsibility for delivery. This indicated the opportunity to build coalitions within the service and the council to share ownership of the vision and responsibility for implementing it more widely. If library service staff are excluded, this picture changes slightly, with some good examples of chief librarians building coalition and support across the senior level management of the authority.

Capacity of Chief Librarians

The pressure at chief librarian level to deliver is also increased because the main leaders who hold the vision are in almost every case 'acting down' to fill a management gap in one way or another. This may be because the former chief librarian has been promoted to a more senior position, but still has direct responsibility for the programme, or because of positions vacant in the management level directly below chief librarian. It also appears to be a product of the way in which the Communities Libraries Programme represents additional funding and additional responsibility on top of normal workloads, which combined with a number of time deadlines in the programme means that the senior level staff member is more likely to maintain personal responsibility to deliver to the next deadline or next project phase.

Developing the workforce

We also noted during the research that the role of library manager is potentially underdeveloped. In most cases the library manager is primarily a supervisory role, and those interviewed in this position were clearly not being asked to take any strategic control of the implementation of the project. This gap in middle management further increases the pressure on the leadership of the service.

Library service leaders in our case studies tended to identify that library staff are already good at 'outreach' and 'service development', but using these abilities is often not a key part of project plans, indicating either that an opportunity is being missed, or that library leaders do not genuinely believe that staff are doing a good job of face to face community engagement as yet.

Underlying this is the question of whether the current library staff are the people to lead the change. This needs to be addressed explicitly and realistically within each service – can traditional library staff with their own values and expectations achieve what is desired in reshaping the library service for community engagement? In many cases it will be possible, but sometimes it will be not be – and nothing is gained by seeking to ignore this fact. Library services also include large numbers of part time and job share staff. Clearly it is equally critical that these be as engaged as full time staff, but this adds to the logistical challenge.

Conclusion

There is a clear opportunity for our case study areas to put in place a real, concrete programme of managed staff development and change, and to build capacity at every level. Engaging all the staff in the whole process – developing the vision, segmentation, methods and measures – would appear to be a critical tool to help to achieve this. Case study authorities already have a strong appreciation of the criticality of frontline staff to project success and their current strengths and weaknesses in community engagement, so the basic requirement to take advantage of this opportunity is already in place.

At present, however, the person with the vision is too far away from delivery, frontline staff are not deeply engaged, and the ways in which the job and abilities of librarians need to change have not been developed.

Effective communications

Case study authorities were able to show strong evidence of local press coverage, predominantly positive, providing a strong flow of communications emphasising events at libraries to those who read the local press. They also had a strong focus on using community groups to convey messages, and were able to list a number of potential communication channels for their Community Libraries Programme project.

Yet the public do not have high levels of awareness of what is being done in the case study authorities, and often have an old fashioned view of libraries as dusty, smelly, cold, and unwelcoming. These images need to be tackled explicitly and expectations need to be undermined. Our research was conducted before project communication plans were in place and there is clearly an opportunity to develop this thinking and create more sophisticated and targeted communications approaches during the course of the projects.

Current perceptions

There appear to be opportunities in the case study areas to improve some of the foundations of good communications:

- In our research, members of the public (such as taxi drivers) had low levels of awareness of the existence and location of libraries, so basic steps such as improving the signage and impact of the buildings externally would be likely to bring real results.
- There was a similarly low level of public awareness of opening hours and what is on offer, indicating that further basic marketing of services. Using notice boards and other basic information sources in libraries, good use of council communications, and targeted partner organisations, would also increase awareness of what is available and how to access it.

- The public also commented on the need for a good positive appearance of libraries and a staff attitude that communicates what we want the library experience for the user to be like. On the first point, comments were around clutter and information overload in the library environment. On the second point, in the majority of case study areas, public focus groups noted that a small minority of staff members, through their personal behaviour in small ways (“she gave my son such a look he doesn’t want to come back”), are unfortunately communicating to some customers a feeling that they are not welcome in the library.

Target communications

It is critical to have a fully worked out communications and marketing strategy in place, identifying the communications routes or channels to be used, to reach the segments identified with the messages that need to reach to them. Using a good range of channels and regularly sending out positive messages is necessary, but not sufficient for effective communications. Libraries are a ‘good news story’ and lots of good local press coverage is clearly achievable, particularly in times of change and investment. The questions that need to be answered are: what do we want to achieve through our communications; who has to hear what to achieve this; and how can we get the messages to them?

Having a clear strategy about what the library services wants to say to whom can multiply the impact of this coverage, but unless the foundations of good communications are in place, this will go to waste. There will be particular communication challenges involved when multiple voices are shaping the direction of travel or when community expectations are raised but not yet fulfilled. Case study authorities are already aware of the risk of alienating existing user groups through changes involved in the project. Such groups are often highly vocal and well able to get their message across in the community.

What is good about libraries?

The basic message about why libraries are such a powerful asset to the community could still be better rehearsed, and more frequently repeated by our case study areas. Respondents in interviews clearly stated that libraries have something to offer everyone. However, despite this positive and strongly held belief, we did not hear further detailed insights into why the library is ‘a place for everyone’. It may be that this is something so fundamental to the motivation of those working in libraries that the reasons for holding these views are self evident and do not require repetition. However, bringing clarity and detail to this would be of great value.

We would hope that in subsequent evaluation, respondents are able to provide even more compelling and detailed explanations of why libraries are great and what they offer (from free, recycled books to the full range of services), and that this is translated into the communications strategy. Interestingly, the times when interview respondents went into this kind of detail were when talking about outreach to schoolchildren and to newly

arrived refugee or immigrant groups, presumably since it is expected that these groups may not know precisely what libraries provide.

Communicating in the context of the Community Libraries Programme

Case study authorities were capitalising very well on the opportunities provided by the success of their bids and the critical steps in the projects. Excellent examples of this included 'celebration' events with the public, used to continue the process of community engagement, in Nottingham and Sandwell, and positive press coverage in all authorities.

In times of change, expectations are often raised, something that the case study authorities were well aware of. As well as communicating good news about any investment in libraries, the vision must be communicated explicitly, in sufficient detail to allow individuals to really understand what will be offered to them. This is as important internally as it is externally. Internal communications are clearly an area where there is more potential to energise and engage frontline staff. We received some negative feedback from frontline staff in interviews and focus groups, complaining of lack of communication and engagement. In some cases, there was directly contradictory evidence in the form of plans and bids displayed in staff rooms and evidence that staff forums and events had been held very recently. It is therefore very tempting to say 'there will always be moans' and accept this. Yet if frontline staff and middle managers do not feel inspired to deliver the vision, real success or change cannot be achieved.

There appears to be a real risk in some case study areas of frontline staff directly resisting plans. This implies that either more effort needs to go into two way communication, or the vision or plans need to change. Failing this, serious consideration would have to be given to whether staff need to change in order to deliver service aspirations, which is clearly a last ditch choice with serious risks attached.

Conclusion

We did not find that library authorities have yet reached the stage of identifying how they will communicate that libraries are changing – that something new and different is on offer. Clearly some of this is straightforward, building on the foundations of good communication, and doing more to manage expectations and get the message out effectively. Case study authorities need to identify a strong communication plan building on good local press to develop marketing and publicity materials, outreach work, and using key partners to spread the word.

This communications campaign will also need to involve deliberate breaking of conventions and using surprise and shock to raise awareness in different customer segments. Proactive management of existing user groups is also required, as entrenched opinions and fear of alienation were noted in a number of case studies. More general 'word of mouth' engagement through

frontline staff is also critical. We would hope to see that communication plans currently being compiled address these areas, and use direct engagement with target community segments to identify the most effective way to communicate with them, and have a clear strategy in place with measures to test effectiveness.

There is also a communications challenge for the MLA here, to communicate the idea that libraries are changing, and describe community engagement as a policy in language the lay person will recognise and respond to, using real examples.

Real social networks

The development of real social networks is about making libraries places where people come to meet, not only to get books. Libraries can be places where like minded people can connect and community engagement can lead to community cohesion and the development of community capacity.

Social networking on the web is a growing phenomenon. The Communities Libraries Programme and community engagement in general provide libraries with the opportunity to establish themselves as 'real social networking sites'. They can be hubs for communities to organise themselves and interact based on common interests in a space which is appealing and which facilitates this interaction. A space which is simply neutral or nonthreatening, often the description which those interviewed gave, will not be sufficient to achieve this.

Creating real social networks requires some insight into the actions which can bring people together in this way. Our conclusion from our research is that library authorities still need to develop a theory or methodology of how engagement works – to identify what type of actions should produce community engagement results. Having a theory enables the approach to be tested and improved, whereas at present the approach is in many cases vague and unclear.

Developing an approach

Developing a clear methodology requires clear identification of the type of community engagement being targeted. The first step is to identify whether projects are aiming to build community coherence and capacity, simply to use community engagement to provide a better library, or to achieve both. At present, case study authorities rely more on the voluntary sector to provide engagement mechanisms rather than providing a demonstrable lead themselves in this area. While all the case studies demonstrated enthusiasm for community engagement, they were more comfortable talking about the requirements for engagement to create libraries that were heavily used and had a real buzz about them, and less comfortable talking about the impact this would have on communities and individuals. Community cohesion was mentioned as a desirable goal, and is being explicitly targeted by both Sandwell and Nottingham. In general, though, community cohesion was

considered more as a side effect of individuals from different community groups interacting in the library environment than as something being explicitly targeted.

First steps

At present, there is some engagement through volunteering and user/Friend groups, most of which fits the current user profile. According to our case study areas, libraries are not seen as social hubs – they are identified by staff and leaders as ‘neutral space’ or other positive but imprecise ideas. Clearly the creation of community engagement must not come at the price of creating groups which exclude other segments of the public. But working with community segments to identify what will create an environment that meets their requirements for social activity is a strong starting point. The actual process of asking community opinions about transforming the organisation, building, and library offering, which is what the Community Libraries Programme is doing, is also a good way to take the first steps. Good examples from our research include Nottingham using well developed community networks to improve their offering and identify what they can provide (a community room and facilities) which will meet the needs of the community as it builds capacity. Along with North Yorkshire, they have a community engagement officer in place. Sandwell are looking to develop volunteer buddies and the employability agenda.

Opportunity and risks

There is great opportunity in the projects we have seen to generate public excitement. This could be through doing exciting things that communicate that the library has changed, through focusing on bringing new people into the library through event programming, and by creating shared space between different groups. There are opportunities to develop a range of volunteering opportunities to widen involvement, and encourage people to share interests. All libraries we talked to either have a volunteering policy in place or are in discussions to set one up.

Potential risks in this area include engaging only existing users (which case study authorities are highly aware of), only engaging those already networking in voluntary and community sector organisations (something which could be addressed more explicitly), or that community facilities are perceived as ‘add ons’ to traditional library services. The latter will particularly be the case if new ways of working are not established and implemented by all staff.

Conclusion

We carried out our research before the case study areas had developed more detailed community engagement plans in addition to those outlined in their bids, and this process will help to clearly identify the community development goals of projects – linked to the needs of target groups – and how the library service can contribute to these. It will be necessary to build on existing plans for engagement in service design and delivery, and planned training, new

services, events, and cafés, to identify opportunities for skills development, community capacity building and the building of social links and networks, and how these can be measured.

Methods and metrics

At present, measuring is quite functional, not customer focused, and as set out above, case studies do not have a clear theory or method informing their approach. A theme running throughout our findings is that the case studies are taking very positive, constructive action, and have a reasonable expectation that positive outcomes will result. However, they have not yet developed real clarity over the link between the outcomes they would like to see and the actions they plan to take. Simply put, it is not sufficient to know what you want to achieve, and have a list of actions that you will undertake – if you don't know to your own satisfaction *how* the actions are supposed lead to the outcomes, you won't be able to measure success, or learn from mistakes.

Developing method and metrics

Case study authorities presented strong plans (and needed to do so in order to successfully gain funding), but did not demonstrate that they have a methodology in mind. Asking the question 'how will what we are planning lead to the outcomes we want?' can take you beyond making opportunities for community engagement available, publicising them and hoping for the best. This can help you to seek evidence about the likely results of the actions you plan, critical success factors that need to be in place, and possible alternative approaches – you can only fine tune project plans in the light of real evidence about what is likely to happen. Again, the ongoing process of developing more detailed plans over the course of the project, along with support available from the MLA, should strongly support this process.

In terms of measurement, a lack of clarity is passing down the chain. If you don't know what you want in terms of vision, customer segmentation and real social networks, how are you going to know what to measure to meet the outcomes you and the community are seeking?

At present, we found that the clearest ideas of method seem to come when tending to replicate previous examples (Slough, North Yorkshire). Comparisons and best practice along with toolkits are available (see under 'The Community Libraries Programme' above), but we did not find evidence of their being used to any significant extent. How success is measured also represents a significant opportunity to develop further, as the current focus of case study areas is primarily on outputs (take up of learning opportunities and volunteering, library use), not outcomes/impact (employability, community cohesion, economic development). There is an opportunity for library authorities and for the MLA to develop a clear, agreed and communicated approach to measuring success indicators.

Exciting offerings

Some specific product offerings and approaches clearly have growing popularity, and were evident in most if not all of the case study areas:

- gardens or other outdoor spaces integrated into libraries;
- kitchens or community cafés, often where individuals can make themselves a drink, warm baby food etc, or where community groups or volunteers can prepare and serve food;
- community rooms, where community groups can meet and hold activities; and
- removing the counters in libraries, and encouraging staff to circulate freely and assist customers around the library.

These provide the opportunity to challenge expectations and generate excitement. There are other clear, existing opportunities to develop and test clear ideas for method, some of which have been tried and are being tried, but which could be explored further:

- do exciting things to bring in people – challenge expectations and surprise the public by holding parties and cinema screening in libraries, for example, or open up the whole library to community group events;
- exhibit and interpret – use unusual library and archive stock, with interpretation to attract interest, or hold interactive exhibitions related to community groups;
- segment and offer something for everyone – as set out above, develop segmentation to the point where all frontline staff can easily identify what the library has to offer for each group, and this is communicated to each group
- zoning – also as above, identify particular parts of the library and particular times which can be designed to be highly attractive to particular groups;
- get them hooked – build on the addictive nature of libraries, particularly around book borrowing where every issue necessitates a return to the library which is an opportunity to borrow again;
- real social networks – develop the library as a space where people go to meet and interact with others; and
- communicate that the library has changed – never assume that expectations of libraries have moved on, but identify what has really changed and promote this heavily.

Conclusion

This is an area where the large scale and impact of the Community Libraries Programme can take advantage of previous work and knowledge as gathered by the MLA and other support agencies in order to develop a proven methodology which can benefit all library services, and local authorities and the public sector more widely.

Project opportunities and challenges

In transforming to improve community engagement, case study authorities identified a number of practical opportunities and challenges:

- The need to 'decant' staff from the library building to temporary premises while the building is restored can allow experimentation and engage communities. It presents a chance to move the library presence further into the community, to innovate at a small scale, and to test out ideas and interact with people in communities where the library has not previously been located. Newcastle and North Yorkshire provide examples of this.
- Joined up working across the council clearly provides positive input of skills and experience to the library service, as evidenced by Slough, Newcastle, and North Yorkshire.
- In order to win support from the rest of the council, delivering corporate agendas, and being seen as a successful service are the key goals to aim for.
- Time and budget planning is a challenge but there is significant support out there – case studies are using recognised project management approaches.
- Identify key external support sources – Community Libraries Programme Support Officers employed by the MLA (through Big Lottery funding) have clearly been welcomed as meeting a need, and a number of authorities have engaged external consultants for support in the process. Most authorities indicated active networking across the library field in order to exchange knowledge and best practice.

Significant issues identified by our case study areas included capacity to deliver change and sustainability of community engagement following on from the Community Libraries Programme, and so it is here that external support needs to be targeted.

Conclusion

Overall, our research indicated that the case study authorities are, despite capacity challenges, working hard to take advantage of what they recognise as a significant opportunity to transform not only the individual libraries receiving programme funding, but also their entire services. We feel that they are on the whole on course to achieve significant positive results, but that additional focus on the six key areas identified has the potential to greatly increase the positive results for individuals and communities.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all those who participated in research, particularly those in the case study authorities who helped to organise our fieldwork at such short notice, and made us very welcome when conducting the fieldwork.

We would also like to thank members of the project board for their support, engagement and input. They are:

- MLA – **Sarah Wilkie**, Framework for the Future Programme Manager (Senior Client, Chair)
- MLA – **Jo McCausland**, Community Libraries Programme Support Officer (Client)
- MLA – **Javier Stanziola**, Head of Research and Evidence (Quality Control)
- Big Lottery Fund – **Peter Bailey**, Evaluation & Research Analyst (Senior User)
- MLA Yorkshire – **Erica Ramsay** Regional Participation and Inclusion Adviser (Client)
- Department for Culture, Media and Sport – **Abigail Smith** Library Policy Adviser (User)
- Library sector – **Julie Spencer**, Head of Libraries, Bolton (User)

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