To what extent do community libraries address the concerns of the digital divide?

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Abstract

A recent development in the provision of public library services has been the growth of community libraries, libraries which are delivered by volunteers rather than paid staff aided by professionals. The development of such libraries raises a number of questions in terms of the traditional role of public libraries.

This exploratory study seeks to examine the potential impact this development has on the role public libraries have in addressing the concerns of the digital divide and seeks to establish to what extent community libraries have a role to play in addressing these concerns.

An inductive approach was taken in conducting this study, with conclusions drawn from the evidence collected. Initially, evidence was to be drawn from staff surveys despatched to the libraries chosen for this study. However, this approach was adapted as the process revealed a need to establish how community library services are delivered. Subsequently, candidates involved in the management of the libraries were interviewed regarding how their services are delivered as well as on the ICT support they provide.

The results demonstrate that whilst there is a focus on providing access for users, there is a disparity in the support provided. Both libraries do not provide training for volunteers on ICT and ICT literacy is not a pre-requisite for taking up a position at either library. Consequently, whilst they do provide access to ICT for their respective communities, it is not clear that either library provides sufficient support to address a lack of ICT skills amongst users.

On the basis of this study, it appears that there is a lack of support for users in both communities and there is the potential for the digital divide between, and within, these communities to widen. However, further research is required to assess the extent to which this is the case.

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Abbreviations

BBC British Broadcasting Corporation

DSO Direct Services Organisation

ECDL European Computer Driving Licence

ICT Information and communications technology

IT Information Technology

LA Respondent from Library A
LB Respondent from Library B

LMS Library Management System

NOF New Opportunities Fund

ONS Office for National Statistics

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Aims and objectives

The aim of this study is to act as an exploratory first step in understanding the role of community libraries within the context of the public library service, and their role in addressing the concerns of the digital divide.

The objectives of this study are to:

- Understand how community libraries are established.
- Establish how they are funded and managed.
- Determine the extent of staff training.
- Establish information and communications technology (ICT) availability.
- Explore what support is provided for the local community in terms of ICT.
- Determine to what extent the concerns of the digital divide are a concern of community libraries.
- Consider whether community libraries provide sufficient support in addressing the digital divide.

1.2 Background

Community libraries have become an increasingly popular option for local authorities seeking to maintain a public library service whilst responding to cuts to their budgets (Hill, 2010). As a result, it is important to consider the impact that such community libraries will have on the provision of library services to local communities. One aspect of the service that is particularly important is the role libraries play in addressing the concerns of the digital divide. With this in mind, this study aims to explore the impact that community libraries may have on addressing these concerns.

1.3 Structure

The study will first explore the literature available on the impact of the digital divide, how the term is defined for the purposes of this study, the role of the People's Network and the growth of community libraries. It will then consider the methodological approach taken before exploring and discussing the findings from the research. Finally, conclusions will be drawn based on the findings with recommendations for further study.

This paper uses the APA (American Psychological Association) style in citing references.

1.4 Limitations

The study only reflects service delivery at two established community libraries. Therefore it is limited to the extent that the findings cannot be extrapolated across all community libraries and therefore does not provide a comprehensive understanding of the nature of such libraries. As such, it provides an exploratory work that acts as a starting point for further study.

Chapter 2: Literature review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter explores existing literature regarding the digital divide, the impact a lack of access to the internet can have on sections of society, how public libraries sought to address these concerns and the growth of community libraries.

Searches were conducted on Library and Information Science Abstracts (LISA) using the terms "digital divide" and "public libraries" to obtain the latest articles on the topic. Once suitable articles had been retrieved, a paper trail strategy of citations from retrieved articles was applied to obtain further relevant articles. Furthermore, searches were conducted for the term "community libraries" and "volunteer libraries" however no materials were retrieved in relation to their introduction in the UK. Consequently, searches were conducted on Google to gather recent information about the introduction of community libraries in order to provide some background on the issue.

2.2 The Digital Divide

Since its appearance in the US Department of Commerce's National Telecommunications and Information Administration report, 'Falling Through the Net: Defining the Digital Divide' (NTIA, 1999), there has been ongoing debate around the nature of the digital divide and the impact it has on society. The increasing use of the phrase 'digital divide' appears to be a natural progression from the concerns regarding the gap between the so-called 'information rich' and the 'information poor'. As Schiller outlines:

'Access to information becomes a factor of wealth and income. The general public and the State itself are progressively excluded...The division inside the society between information 'haves' and 'have nots' deepens just as it does between nations, making the less-developed ones – which in the information age means the overwhelming majority, still more dependent on the few information generators, processors and transmitters.' (Schiller, as cited in Webster, 2006, p. 147)

In terms of the digital divide itself, Dewan and Riggins argue that not only is there a digital divide, but that there are also two distinct effects of this divide. They argue there are first order effects regarding inequality in terms of access to ICT and second order effects with respect to inequality in ICT skills amongst those that already have access (Dewan and

Riggins, 2005). Essentially, a digital divide does not solely exist between those that have access to ICT and those who do not. It also manifests itself in the skills that people possess in order to take full advantage of the access that they have. Consequently, there is a clear divide between those that can be described as 'information rich' and those that are 'information poor'.

2.3 Criticism of the term 'digital divide'

However, the concept itself is not without criticism. Gurstein (2003) argues that the 'narrow focus' on ICT, the internet and the phrase 'digital divide' has amounted to nothing more than a marketing campaign by internet service providers (ISPs). Stevenson (2009) has gone further and argued that framing the debate around the issue of access and perpetuating the belief that the digital divide is not a social problem but an individual one, merely provides a vehicle for arguing that the divide closes as more people purchase computers. Clearly there is some debate as to the nature of the problem, but there appears to be agreement that there is an issue that needs to be resolved in an age where the internet is becoming the dominant source of information.

Despite the debate regarding the nature of the digital divide, there is general agreement that there is an issue in terms of access. The most recent data from the UK indicates that there most certainly is a significant disparity in terms of information access. According to the most recent Internet Access Quarterly Update published by the Office of National Statistics (ONS), around eight million people in the UK have never accessed the internet (ONS, 2012). The data also revealed that 40% of 65-74 year olds had never accessed the internet, and 70% of the over 75s. In terms of the disabled, around 35% of those that fall within the scope of the Disability Discrimination Act have never accessed the internet. Furthermore, 8% of those on the lowest salary had never accessed the internet compared to less than 1% for the highest earners (see figure 1).

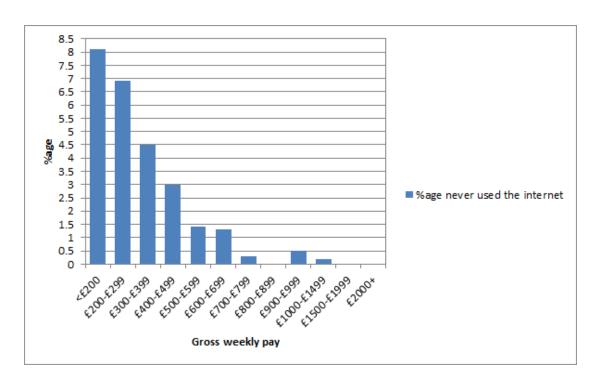


Figure 1 Internet users and non-users, by gross weekly pay, UK, 2011 Q4 (ONS, 2012)

Additionally, the 2011 Internet Access - Households and Individuals, 2011 revealed that 23% of households did not have an internet connection (ONS, 2011). In terms of the reasons why people did not have a household internet connection, 50% believed they did not need it, 21% said they lacked the skills ,19% declared that they couldn't afford the equipment and 13% claimed that access costs were too high (see figure 2). It then follows that 53% of households

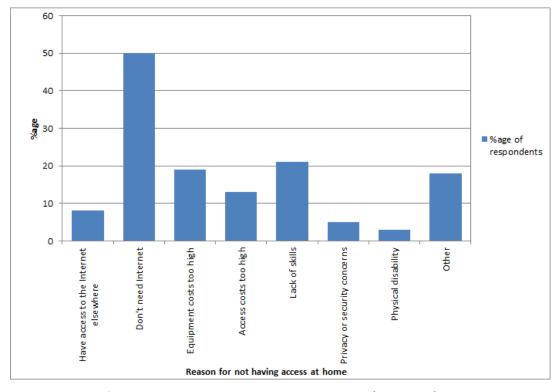


Figure 2 Reasons for not having Internet at home, 2010 and 2011 (ONS, 2011)

without internet are not connected due to either a lack of skills or due to the expense of connection. Both ONS reports certainly indicate a clear divide has developed and that the most vulnerable groups are least likely to have access to the internet.

2.4 Impact on the democratic process

Many have argued that the ability to access information on the internet is vital to ensure that the public are involved in the democratic process. The growth of ICT tools and services has enabled citizens to participate in the democratic process, but also to mobilise people to engage and help shape political issues (Shirazi et al, 2009). Furthermore, as government services such as benefits payments (BBC, 2011a) migrate to the internet, people require access to enable them to make use of these services. (Bertot et al, 2009). Consequently, as ICT has become more important, the lack of skills or access has resulted in a significant proportion of the population becoming excluded and disadvantaged (Schofield, McMenemy & Henderson, 2004).

Certainly, the lack of access appears to be reflected in engagement in the democratic process. A study by the Pew Internet and American Life Project in 2004 found that whereas high-speed internet users refer to around three news sources every day, slow speed users turn to around 2.7 whilst non-users access only 1.7 sources (Pew Internet and American Life Project as cited in Kim, Lee & Menon, 2009). As they concluded, individuals who are online obtain and process more points of views about key issues from sources than those that are offline. This is increasingly important as elections are being fought through the use of social media as well as more traditional mediums (Boucq, 2007). Such has been the supposed impact of the internet and social media on the democratic process, it has been argued that the internet has substantially influenced election results, such as the election of President Barack Obama in 2008 (Kiss, 2008). As a result, those without access to the internet could find themselves excluded from the political process, as an Electoral Commission report on 'Social exclusion and political engagement' in 2005 concluded that 'those experiencing social deprivation tend also to be among the most politically excluded within society' (The Electoral Commission, 2005).

A lack of access to the internet, when it is becoming increasingly central to the democratic process, could leave sections of society still further excluded.

2.5 The economic impact

As well as ensuring that the population have a stake in the democratic process, the provision of an internet connection can play a part in the economic wellbeing of the individual. For example, Goss and Phillips (2002) found that internet skills have a positive impact on wages. As Kinney observes, 'internet access can provide economic benefits, both indirectly, through development of marketable technology skills, and directly, through e-commerce' (Kinney, 2010).

A study conducted in the United States by Morton, Zettelmeyer and Silva-Russo (2003) explored the disparity between ethnic groups when purchasing cars. They found that African-American and Hispanic customers paid more than other 'offline' consumers. However, they found that online shopping actually reduced this disparity in cost and gave minorities a clear economic advantage. Furthermore, a study by Baye, Morgan and Sholten (2003) revealed that the use of online comparison information enabled consumers to save up to 20% on purchases. It would appear, therefore, that closing the digital divide can ensure such economic benefits are shared across society.

2.6 Healthcare advantages

However, there aren't just financial benefits to internet usage. A study by Fox and Fellows (2003) revealed that around half of American adults turned to the internet for information regarding healthcare. Those that were unable to access online health information were generally less educated and poorer than their connected peers. According to Fox and Fellows, the internet is a key resource for healthcare information and an educated healthcare consumer with access to the internet standards a better chance of receiving good treatment than those without. A further study (McInnes et al, 2010) demonstrated that US veterans who made use of the internet for healthcare information were likely to be more educated, wealthier and in better health than those that did not have access to the internet. Clearly there is evidence that there are healthcare benefits for those who are educated and have access to the internet.

2.7 Educational benefits

There also advantages educationally to internet access. Studies have revealed that children with access to home computers perform significantly better than those without computers in cognitive tests (Attewell, Suazo-Garcia and Battle, 2003). Data released by the ONS and commissioned by the then Department for Education and Skills found that there was a 'significant positive relationship between pupils' home use of ICT for educational purposes and improved attainment in certain areas' (ONS, 2010). A further study by Fairlie and London (as cited in Kinney, 2010) involving the distribution of free computers to students found that there were small positive effects on educational outcomes for those that received a computer. It would appear, therefore, that there are substantial benefits in terms of healthcare, education and economic welfare. And, further, it also appears that addressing digital inequality can lead to substantial benefits for the most disadvantaged in society.

2.8 The People's Network

Before the introduction of the People's Network, public libraries had not been successful in addressing social exclusion. Muddiman et al (2001) found that 'attempts to target services towards excluded people remain patchy, uneven and are often time limited'. Furthermore, they found that ICT was targeted at the socially-excluded in a minority of cases and that long term strategies in terms of access for the excluded to a range of services, including ICT, should be central to all their activities (Muddiman et al, 2001). In an effort to address the digital divide, the People's Network was rolled out to libraries across the UK. Launched in 2000, it had three primary agendas:

- universal access to the internet
- take-up of ICT among the digitally excluded and socially excluded
- lifelong learning (Big Lottery Fund, 2004).

In addition, the amount of investment was seen as 'an opportunity to jump-start the modernisation agenda'. This strategy was complemented in 2003 by the government's Framework for the Future published in 2003. This framework proposed 'a vision for public libraries where they support people in reading, learning, finding information, and connecting to government and other online services, free of charge' (The Big Lottery Fund, 2004).

To achieve this, and to support the desire to 'deliver a growing set of national digital services for the public, a programme of staff training was also developed to ensure that staff met an established standard of service (The Big Lottery Fund, 2004). As Brandt argued, training for librarians was essential as "public internet skills do not meet the expectations placed on individuals by the 'information society'" (Kinney, 2010). Furthermore, the development of the internet has meant changes to the role of the librarian, particularly as their role changes from custodians to facilitators (Kinney, 2010). As a consequence of these developments, there was a need for widespread training to ensure that the public received the level of support that they appeared to require.

In terms of the benefits of the People's Network, Sommerlad et al (2004) found that in focus groups with users, many positive aspects of the introduction of ICT were noted by the users themselves. For example, a majority noted that if the library did not provide access to ICT, it would be 'difficult or impossible' to do so (Sommerlad, 2004). It would appear that the introduction of ICT in public libraries as a result of the People's Network provided access to many of those who previously did not have the means to make use of the technology. Furthermore, the report found that users gained significant benefits as a result of 'interventions and interactions' with library staff (Sommerlad, 2004).

As well as provision, it is also important to ensure that use of ICT is free to the end user. Pateman (as cited in Goulding, 2006, p.184) warned in 2004 that around 10% of libraries were charging users for the use of ICT. This was particularly significant as Buckinghamshire libraries saw a decline in usage of 30% as a result of introducing a £1 charge for 30 minutes access (Goulding, 2006, p. 184). Clearly the introduction of charging could have a detrimental effect on the delivery of ICT.

However, the extent to which the People's Network has addressed some of the concerns of the digital divide is debatable. Pateman (Goulding, 2006, p. 184) claimed that it was not succeeding in reaching the more disadvantaged in society. Indeed, Loader and Keeble (2004) found that the use of ICT in public access sites by those that are most disadvantaged was 'generally low', despite efforts to widen access to ICT across the community. Additionally, they found that there was little evidence to suggest that initiatives had made 'significant

challenges to the social inequalities associated with ICT adoption' (Loader and Keeble, 2004).

2.9 Importance of skills

Cooper (as cited in Kinney, 2010) argues that simply providing access alone in the library is not enough, particularly when seeking to address both first and second order effects. As he argues, 'merely having access to a computer no more makes one expert in its use than having a access to a kitchen makes one a chef.' As the studies on healthcare, economic wellbeing and education demonstrate, a lack of skills plays an important role in the inability to access information on the internet. This certainly seems to manifest itself in the way people use search engines, an important tool in navigating the internet. For example, a recent study by the Australia Institute revealed that only 15% of respondents went beyond the first page of search results and that 37% of users were unaware that search engines display paid advertising (Fear & Denniss, 2011). Clearly addressing a lack of skills when utilising search engines is an important consideration when seeking to address both first and second order effects of the digital divide.

2.10 ICT training for public library staff

As well as providing the necessary equipment, it is important that staff receive adequate training to ensure that they are able to support users to a suitable standard. As a result of the People's Network, staff were trained to the same basic level of ICT competence based on the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL). As King, McMenemy and Poulter (2006) stated, 'ICT training was fundamental to the implementation of the People's Network'. Furthermore the standard of training provided had a substantial impact on the level of support that staff were able to provide.

To ensure sufficient support is provided, the New Opportunities Fund (NOF) financed The ICT Training Programme for Public Library Staff. The programme itself stipulated eight outcomes:

- Competence with ICT (including word processing, spreadsheets, internet and email)
- Understanding how ICT can support library work

- Health, safety and legal issues relating to ICT
- Using ICT to find information for users (including evaluating information)
- Using ICT to support reader development
- Using ICT to support users to ensure effective learning
- Effective management of ICT resources
- Knowing how to use ICT to improve efficiency.

(Library and Information Commission, as cited in Spacey, 2003).

Spacey (2003) conducted an evaluation of the NOF training programme, surveying a number of staff across the country. The evaluation found that, in terms of the effectiveness of the training, respondents generally rated 'on the job' training as 'good' whilst that provided by external courses was rated as 'very good' (Spacey, 2003). Spacey also found that managers felt that staff benefitted from 'being away from the workplace to learn where colleagues and library users could not interrupt training'. They also felt that staff members with low ICT skills would find self-directed learning 'problematic'. However, staff also felt that there had not been enough computers available for staff to practice on and, in one authority, laptops were purchased for staff to use so that they could overcome this difficulty.

Spacey identified that after the training the majority of respondents were positive about helping the public use the internet. Around 51.5% of respondents claimed they felt 'generally positive' about doing so, compared to 5.4% who felt generally negative and 2.6% who felt very negative (Spacey, 2003). Spacey concludes that the NOF training helped to familiarise staff with ICT and provide them with the skills for effective use of the internet, particularly those with little or no ICT skills. It is clear, therefore, that in order to minimise the impact of both first and second order effects of the digital divide, suitable staff training is an important factor.

2.11 Community libraries

The rise of community libraries has attracted a lot of commentary since the formation of the present government in 2010. Shortly after the election, KPMG released a paper entitled 'Payment for Success – How to shift power from Whitehall to public service customers' (KPMG, 2010). The document argued that:

"...where some councils have handed the library back to the community, they have often turned it into a much more vibrant community organisation and space. Giving councils total freedom on libraries could mean that they create huge social value from engaging a community in running its own library, backed up with some modern technology, whilst also saving large amounts of money on overskilled paid staff..." (KPMG, 2010)

In response to the report's advocacy of volunteer run libraries, Andrew Motion, chair of the Museums, Libraries and Archives council, 'attacked' the paper claiming that:

'Good libraries, like good anythings, need expert people working within them. Maybe there is a role for some aspect of volunteering but all the central stuff must be done by people who are qualified to do it ... I think it would be a catastrophe.' (Flood, 2010)

Volunteers have traditionally played a supportive role in delivering library services. In 2001, The Library Association published guidelines on the involvement of volunteers in the delivery of public library services. One of the guidelines stated that:

'The Library Association is totally opposed to the introduction of voluntary labour in an attempt to compensate for the reduction or withdrawal of services caused by redundancies, non-filling of vacant posts or inadequate staffing of establishments.' (The Library Association, 2001)

It was clear that whilst volunteer involvement in libraries was to be encouraged, there were clear guidelines set out by the professional body regarding their role in the delivery of the library service.

After the proposals regarding volunteer run libraries were made in the KPMG paper, a number of local authorities began to explore the possibility of community run libraries, particularly due to the cuts to their core central government funding (BBC, 2010). Amongst the authorities that have proposed volunteer libraries are Warwickshire, Oxfordshire, Isle of Wight and Surrey (BBC, 2011b; Wintour, 2011; Page, 2011a; Taylor, 2011). However, such plans are not without some opposition. For example, library campaigners in Surrey issued proceedings at the High Court ultimately leading to the issue of an order for a judicial review, which resulted in the plans being ruled as 'unlawful' on equality grounds (BBC, 2012a, 2012b)

Aside from some local opposition, a number of issues have been raised in relation to the growth of volunteer libraries. New Cross library in Lewisham, for example, had a substantial decline in usage after being taken on by local volunteers (Page, 2011b). Furthermore, concerns have been raised regarding the sustainability of this form of service delivery. In Dorset, for example, the local authority was unable to find volunteers willing to take on the running of Portland Underhill library and consequently the library was forced to close (BBC, 2012c). In Swindon, Walcot library's hours were cut due to a lack of volunteers (Morgan, 2010).

Clearly, whilst local authorities are keen on encouraging community run options for the deliver of library services, there are some concerns. If there are not the volunteers willing to take on the service, then it is clear that the library service will no longer be delivered to that community. And, where there are volunteers, there are concerns about the level of service that will be provided if the number of volunteers decline. Obviously this will have an impact on the local communities not just in terms of the digital divide and access to the internet, but also to library services in general.

However, the alternative to community libraries in many instances is removal of a library service altogether from the community. Proctor, Lee and Reilly (1998) found that library closures particularly had an impact on usage of library services by children, the elderly and the unemployed as they tend to experience greater difficulties in accessing an alternative. Additionally, they found that 44% of respondents said that their children had not used an alternative after their local one had closed (Proctor et al, 1998). As a result, it would appear that the provision of a community library is a suitable alternative to the permanent closure of a public library.

The introduction of volunteer run libraries raises a number of questions around sustainability and the impact this form of service delivery will have on the local community. This is particularly the case in terms of addressing the digital divide. As the literature has demonstrated, those without an internet connection are substantially disadvantaged and require not only a place to connect to the internet, but also a certain degree of support to compensate for the lack of appropriate skills. The potential difficulty for community libraries is underlined by a study on ICT access in developing nations by Gomez and Gould. They

concluded that, compared to other ICT venues, the public libraries had low public support. According to Gomez and Gould:

'Similarly, library staff tend to have the lowest capacity and training to meet the need of ICT users in public access venues: this is exacerbated by the fact that a high proportion of libraries do not offer ICT, and many of the libraries that do offer ICT do not necessarily have trained staff to help users with the ICT tools.' (Gomez & Gould, 2010)

Whilst their study focused on developing nations, it does suggest that there could be an impact on the perception of public libraries if the staff are not trained to a satisfactory standard. Furthermore, as Spacey found, staff training can have an impact on staff confidence with ICT and, therefore, on the level of support that is provided.

2.12 Summary

The literature review has demonstrated that whilst there is some debate regarding the nature of the digital divide it is accepted that such a divide exists. It also underlines that the divide cannot be characterised simply as a lack of access, but also relates to a lack of skills. Furthermore, the lack of access to ICT has an impact on a range of factors from educational attainment to economic wellbeing and addressing the digital divide could lead to positive benefits for those considered 'information poor'. It also appears that, due to the increased use of the internet as a key political tool, a failure to address this divide may lead to further isolation of the most deprived sections of society from the democratic process.

The literature also revealed the extent to which staff benefit from a suitable level of ICT training and the extent to which this can aid in providing support for library users. It is clear that a suitable degree of training provides staff with the confidence to assist users in making use of the ICT equipment and providing the support that they require.

Finally, the literature also demonstrated the background to the growth of community libraries. The development of such libraries has clearly become a controversial area and there appears to be a number of concerns in terms of delivering the service in this way. Certainly, one of the key issues has been sustainability of such a service (such as Portland Underhill library) and, in particular, recruiting and retaining a suitable number of volunteers.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodological approach taken in this study, difficulties that were encountered in this approach and how the data collected was analysed.

3.2 Research Approach

As there had been no previous research on the impact of community libraries within the UK, there was no material to act as a foundation for this particular study. Due to the main focus of the study being related to the level of ICT support that community library staff can provide for their local communities, previous studies on attitudes towards ICT by library staff informed the methodology. For example, studies on the effectiveness of ICT training for public library staff in the UK (King et al, 2006) and attitudes towards to IT and the provision of access to ICT in public libraries (Coxall, 2006) initially helped to inform the methodological approach to this research.

Due to the lack of previous research in this specific area, an inductive approach was taken into understanding the relationship between community libraries and the digital divide, with no hypothesis tested. Furthermore, as it is a preliminary exploration of this topic, a narrow, targeted approach to the study was preferable at this stage. It is also the case that as the current situation is very fluid in terms of the establishment, it was not possible to produce a comprehensive study of all such libraries due to the continually evolving situation.

As no hypothesis was being tested in conducting this study, the research was conducted without prejudice and with an open mind as to what conclusions would be drawn from the data.

3.3 Methods of data collection

Initially, the intention was to distribute surveys to the two community libraries chosen for the study, taking a quantitative approach. This was considered more practical and less time consuming than visiting each individual library and interviewing staff and attempting to conduct assessments on their computer skills. It was also considered that to get a better

understanding of the role of community libraries it would be preferable to study more than one library and, where possible, to study two distinct communities.

A self-completion survey was initially chosen as the preferred research method primarily as it is quicker and cheaper to administer than many other options. Furthermore, as Bryman (2008, pg. 217-218) notes, self-completion surveys reduce the impact of interviewer effects and are more convenient for respondents. Whilst there are issues around probing respondents or asking additional questions, as this is an exploratory study it was decided that such disadvantages would not have a major impact on the study as this is an exploratory study on the subject.

However, it became clear after distributing the surveys that there was a lack of clarity in terms of the way community libraries deliver their services. After discussion with the chair of one of the chosen libraries, where it was explained they demonstrated a lack of understanding regarding how they operate, it was decided to abandon the surveys and conduct interviews with contacts at each library to establish the background to the community libraries and discuss the delivery of the service in terms of ICT.

3.4 Questionnaire Survey

The aim of the survey was to obtain information on the experience of library staff in terms of ICT and the extent to which they are confident in providing support to those in the local community who require assistance with using computers. As a result, a paper based survey was chosen over an online version to ensure that those who were not confident in using ICT the ability to take part in the study. A study conducted online would likely result in those less likely to be comfortable in utilising ICT being absent from the findings. It was important to ensure that as many people as possible took part in the survey, particularly as self-completion questionnaires can suffer from low response rates (Bryman, 2008, p.219).

The survey itself contained a mixture of closed questions and multiple choice questions. The multiple choice questions were included to enable a degree of self-assessment on the respondent's ICT skills as well as to gauge their opinions on a range of issues related to the digital divide. It was hoped that by including the latter it would enable conclusions to be made about their understanding of the digital divide and therefore their understanding of the issues and the importance of libraries in attempting to bridge the divide. Closed questions

were utilised as it is easier for respondents to provide answers and for the data to be processed and compared. However, as Bryman notes (Bryman, 2008, p.235-236) there is a loss in spontaneity in this technique which can lead to interesting responses not being recorded in the survey. This was certainly a potential issue in terms of both the self-assessment and the opinion focused questions. However, the ability to compare responses posed a significant advantage in terms of processing the data.

The survey itself was tested on numerous colleagues to ensure suitability and address any confusion that some of the questions may have provided. As a result of this testing, a self-assessment section on ICT skills was added to the survey to enable some conclusions to be drawn about the level of support available to the local community. Furthermore, a section asking for respondents' views on various aspects of the digital divide was included to aid understanding of how central library staff viewed the concerns of the digital divide to the provision of the library service.

However, due to the feedback obtained from the chair of one of the libraries after sending out the survey, interviews with individuals associated with each of the libraries was considered a more appropriate approach.

3.5 Interviews

After learning that the surveys were not deemed appropriate, further contact was made to see if an alternative method of gathering the data would be suitable. After an exchange of emails with one of the respondents, an interview covering a range of aspects of community libraries was agreed with the candidate as a suitable alternative. As concerns were raised about the suitability of surveys focused purely on ICT skills, it was decided to use the interview as an opportunity to establish more background information on how community libraries are operated and how the service is delivered. Due to this discussion, the same research method was agreed with the respondent at the other community library conducted for this study.

Interviews were conducted over the telephone as this was the most efficient way of conducting the research after the change in the methodological approach. As a result, a qualitative approach was adopted as the research strategy, rather than the quantitative approach originally intended.

There are some disadvantages in conducting interviews over the telephone, for example the inability to observe body language and see how interviewees physically respond to questions (Bryman, 2008, p457). However, Sturges and Hanrahan concluded there were no noticeable differences between the responses given in that they were similar in terms of 'quantity, nature and depth of responses' (as cited in Bryman, 2008, p457). Consequently, it was felt that interviews conducted over the telephone, whilst not ideal, should not have a significant impact upon the quality of the data obtained.

Questions were prepared covering a range of aspects of the community library service, including questions designed to establish the background to the individual library, the individual financial situations, issues related to staffing and the level of ICT support provided. These questions were then tested on a colleague to ensure that they were clear and straightforward before confirming suitable times for interview with the relevant interviewees.

The interviews were established on the basis of anonymity of both the respondent and the library concerned. It was felt that this would provide for a more honest discussion, particularly as one of the libraries exists within a partnership framework with a local authority.

Furthermore, the interviews were conducted over speakerphone in a secure location to ensure confidentiality. The interviews were digitally recorded and subsequently transcribed and anonymised to enable data analysis. All the data gathered in this process was stored in a secure location on a computer to safeguard both the content and the interviewees.

3.6 Sample Size

Two community libraries were chosen as the subject for this study. At present there are very few community libraries but the current climate suggests that there will be significant growth in this area. Consequently, a narrow study focusing on two community libraries from different communities (one urban, one rural) would enable a comparison to be drawn to see how they compare in terms of delivering a library service and how they address the concerns of the digital divide. By surveying libraries from two very different environments it increases the likelihood of being able to draw conclusions about how the growth of community libraries would impact upon the concerns of the digital divide.

Whilst it would have been preferable to survey a greater number of community libraries, due to time constraints it was considered more practical to focus on two libraries serving contrasting communities. It was hoped that through doing this, it would be possible to get a sense of the possible impact of community libraries in differing communities. Furthermore, focusing on one particular library was considered too narrow and it would be difficult to draw firm conclusions to support further study. By considering two libraries from different communities it provides an opportunity to gain a superficial understanding of how different communities may be affected by the growth of community libraries.

3.7 Data Analysis

As the research became qualitative rather than quantitative, a thematic approach was applied to the transcribed interview data. Consequently, suitable coding was applied to the data to enable extraction of relevant themes for further analysis. The coded data was then transferred into a spreadsheet to sub-categorise for ease of analysis.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

As, in one case, an interviewee was involved in a partnership run community library with the local authority, a policy of anonymity was adopted. This was also applied to the interviewee at the other library involved in this research. As a result, the libraries are referred to throughout with codes to distinguish between them. Due to the change in methodology, agreement was made with both respondents in discussion via email regarding the interviews being conducted on the telephone. Furthermore, both consented to digital recording of the interviews and were informed that their responses would be anonymous. The subsequent computer files resulting from the transcription of the interviews and the digital recordings themselves were kept in a secure, password protected folder and will be destroyed on completion of the study.

3.9 Research Limitations

As the research was conducted over the telephone with both interviewees there were limitations in terms of the overall aims and objectives of the research. The original intention, using the survey, was to obtain data on general staff attitudes to the issues around the digital

divide. This would have provided better quality information on the level of support that is provided. However, as there were no existing studies on community libraries at the point of conducting this research, it was decided that it would be more profitable to gain a general overview of both libraries in the first instance.

3.10 Summary

Originally, the intention was to analyse data obtained from staff surveys sent to both the libraries that formed the sample for this study. However, after distributing the surveys it became clearly that one of the respondents did not believe that this was a suitable approach and it was decided that a different approach would need to be taken. As a result, telephone interviews were held with each of the libraries subject to this study. The interviews provided background data on each library as well as exploring a variety of aspects in relation to the digital divide, including provision of equipment, staff training and ICT support provided to library users. As a result of the change in approach, a different set of considerations were required to ensure confidentiality of the interviewees as well as the data obtained from the discussions.

Furthermore, as the approach was centred on interviews over the telephone with the two representatives, the study does have some limitations. It does not provide definitive conclusions regarding the level of support available or the extent to which staff are confident in providing support where required. Overall, the study cannot be used to draw conclusions about community libraries in general rather it is an exploratory first stage in examining the role of community libraries and provides a foundation for further study.

Chapter 4: Results

4.1 Introduction

To ensure anonymity, the two libraries sampled in this study have been referred to as Library A and Library B throughout. Furthermore, the two interviewees have been anonymised and referred to as LA and LB

4.2 Library A

4.2.1 Background

Library A was established as a community library towards the end of 2011. As a result of cuts to the library budget, the authority decided it was more efficient to close the library rather than spread cuts across the service. In response to the proposed closure, a local campaign was organised to save it from closure. According to LA the campaign was organised due to the nature of the locality, indicating there were:

"...very good reasons why this library is needed in the area it is in." (LA)

The respondent became involved in the local library campaign as a 'heavy user' of the library with young children. Their involvement in the campaign included writing to local councillors and organising community meetings. According to LA, the campaign itself garnered 'a huge amount of support' across the area, beyond the immediate locality.

The library is in a "very deprived" area, on the edge of a council state that is "notorious" across the locality, according to the respondent. Furthermore, the estate is primarily populated by first generation immigrants who 'often don't speak English' and their children. The library is also the "only kind of community building" on the estate. As a result:

"...even people who didn't use the library on a regular basis, or may not have even been aware that it existed before, sort of realised that it was something quite important in the area that it's in." (LA)

As a result of the campaign, the authority elected to abandon the closure plans in favour of retaining the library service with support from the local community. This allowed the council to meet their spending reduction targets whilst maintaining the provision of a library service in the area.

A formal community group was subsequently formed to take on the required community involvement in the running of the library. This group included a number of stakeholders including representatives from a local women's group, a charitable foundation run by a local school, representatives from two local schools and a member of the local 'anti-cuts' group. Each of these stakeholders are represented in the overall body organised to oversee the general running of Library A.

Furthermore, due to the perceived need of the local community, the library has adapted to become more of a children's library with a small adult section rather than catering for both adults and children. This also includes the provision of services such as a homework club which is run solely by volunteers.

4.2.2 Finance

After the local campaigners had successfully managed to save the library from closure, the community group and the council entered into a partnership to maintain the delivery of the service. Operated under a Direct Services Organisation (DSO), the council still effectively runs and owns the library but with the support of the community of volunteers to ensure it remains open. According to LA, without the support of the volunteers, "it wouldn't be possible to keep it open".

Under the DSO arrangement, the council provides approximately two-thirds of the funding for the library, whilst the volunteers are responsible for raising the remaining third. This ratio

also applies to the staffing with two-thirds of the hours being covered by council staff and the remaining third by volunteers.

In terms of finding the running costs, the community group are required to raise £70,000 per annum to ensure that the library remains operational. If the community group is unable to raise the necessary funds:

"...then the finance committee of the council will say, well, 'you're not breaking even' basically so it's not sustainable." (LA)

If they are unable to secure the funds, then the library will be forced to close. However:

"...because there have been various issues to do with the building and it being new and there being lots of uncertainty etc etc the council will almost certainly say 'don't worry about it this year'." (LA)

To resolve the situation in terms of funding, the community group intend on exploring a number of fundraising opportunities in order to sustain the library service. For example, they are looking into the possibility of applying for grants and have examined the possibility of obtaining charity status:

"...we found that the Charity Commission won't grant you charitable status if you're perceived to be doing what is a statutory requirement of the council." (LA)

However, the community library is not perceived to be fulfilling the statutory requirements of the local authority so they are unaffected by this aspect of fundraising.

There is also potential to raise funds by hiring out community room space within the library. However, whilst the 'responsibility for making money' lies with the community group, it is actually the council that sets the charges for the hiring of the room. This appears to present an issue for the community group:

"...we all kind of think the charges are too high but we have to live with them." (LA)

Before entering into the partnership model, the council undertook a series of works to allow for the addition of an extra room for hiring out to raise funds. The creation of this extra space within the building resulted in a smaller floor space in the library making the library "about a third smaller".

In terms of sustainability, LA believes it would get 'harder and harder' the less input provided by the local authority. The future of the library is further cast into doubt due to the potential for the local authority to privatise its library service. At present there is a lack of clarity in the council as to what privatisation would mean for Library A given its existing operating model. However, passing full control to the local community is also an issue as, if this were to happen, the service "wouldn't last very long". In terms of a broader commentary on the issue of funding, LA also argued that there was, in general, a need for 'proactive' state funding of libraries otherwise they will 'wither away'.

4.2.3 Staffing

In terms of staffing, Library A operates with a mixture of volunteers and librarians. According to LA:

"...you get people like me who are amateurs really essentially taking over roles from[...]people who are real professionals[...]so I think it is a real risk because then what you end up with is either something that's not being run very well." (LA)

Two librarians are based at the library alongside a library manager that works in a 'community outreach role', both roles are staffed by the local authority ensuring that there is some professional staff available to support. Approximately a dozen volunteers provide shift cover. Due to health and safety concerns, a minimum staffing level (including volunteers) is required to ensure that the library can open. If the library was insufficiently staffed with volunteers, it would result in a temporary closure of the library.

When describing the volunteers involved in the delivery of the service, LA characterised them as:

"...women who don't work, you know, stay at home mum types from surrounding areas...people who have spare time because they're retired and that sort of thing."

(LA)

Furthermore, the majority of the volunteers do not come from the local estate, but from further afield. LA also added:

"We know about using a library. We don't really know about running a library." (LA)

In terms of recruitment, the library is still operating with the original team of volunteers and there has not yet been a recruitment drive. Whilst they have no funding for recruiting volunteers at present, they are 'connected' to a local organisation which pairs volunteers with organisations that require them. The community group are keen to recruit more staff from the immediate area when they are in a position to do so. This would be particularly advantageous in terms of providing support for the local immigrant population. However, attempts to recruit volunteers are complicated by the reputation the estate has in the local area and subsequently some are uncomfortable with working at the library.

In terms of providing IT support, volunteers at Library A are not required to be computer literate before taking up a role at the library. In terms of whether this would be a future requirement, according to LA:

"I don't think it ever would be because actually we can get volunteers to do different tasks and it wouldn't necessarily be relevant to everybody anyway." [LA]

Whilst there is no requirement, they do have one volunteer at the library that LA describes as a "computer specialist". Plans are apparently under development to establish training sessions at the library with this particular volunteer taking the lead, but the plans have not yet come to fruition.

Before the service was transferred to the community group, a basic package of training was provided for volunteers which was "more of an induction into the whole way the thing would work rather than training specifically". No specific computer training is provided for new recruits, instead they are provided with training by librarians on "specific activities they are

going to do" such as "working behind the desk answering enquiries, answering the phone, doing a bit of shelf re-stacking."

LA also acknowledged that if the council was to cease its role in the partnership model altogether, leaving the delivery of the service purely down to the community group to deliver the service:

"...the library would probably have to close if that was the scenario. I don't think in our area you are going to get a situation where...things become completely community run. I just don't think we have the same level of interest and involvement from the right sorts of people." (LA)

Effectively without council support the library would no longer be able to function. Evidently, there would be issues for the community group in attracting suitable volunteers to help deliver the service, as well as the difficulties they would face in securing sufficient funding.

4.2.4 Technology

Library A provides "seven or eight" computer terminals for the local community within a dedicated computer suite. According to LA there were "more like ten or twelve" before the library took on the partnership model, but the council reduced the number of terminals available when the change in service took effect. Furthermore, the computer suite itself was not originally planned to be part of the partnership model:

"When the council's initial proposals came about you know saying to us there might be an option to keep the library open, they initially said we will lose the computer suite altogether and there was a big outcry about that." (LA)

However, due to the outcry from the local community, the authority left most of the computers in place, although, as previously noted, there was a reduction in the number available.

In terms of the equipment within the library, this is currently owned by the local authority and any upgrading of the equipment would be the responsibility of the authority rather than the volunteers. Furthermore, according to LA, it is unlikely for the authority to do so unless things became "critical" as it is not a "priority". However, it is understood that the council has existing contracts that would cover the need to upgrade the equipment or provide basic maintenance. If there was no longer support provided by the local authority, it is unclear how such maintenance would be managed.

4.2.5 IT support provided for the community

Before the local authority entered into the partnership model, a range of training was provided for library users:

"...real basics around how does Excel work, how does Word work, how does Powerpoint work, those sorts of things. And they used to do, is it ECDL?" (LA)

These courses were provided with "the expressed intention of bridging the digital divide". However, with the commencement of the partnership model, the training capability was moved to an alternative library within the authority. As a result, no training for the general public is currently provided at Library A.

According to LA, computer ownership is particularly low within the local community, "about 52% in the area, like a mile around the estate." This compares unfavourably with a national figure of around 77% of households with internet connectivity (ONS, 2011). Furthermore, the respondent claimed that "the computers are really well used, you know, from all ages."

Internet access is provided "completely free of charge" and this policy predates the partnership model that has been established in Library A. There are no plans to introduce charging for internet access, and such a decision would be the responsibility of the local authority. Despite this, if the community group found that they were not making enough money to run the library, they may consider looking at charging users to make use of the computer equipment. Although, according to LA, this option "would be pretty far down the list".

If an individual experienced difficulties in making use of the equipment, LA was unclear "how good or otherwise the current librarians and volunteers are if there is an issue" with using the computers in the library. A previous manager was "very, very good" and was able to "answer most people's questions" but they are no longer employed at the library. LA suggested that they "have a feeling it's not quite the same now" in terms of the support available to the local community, although there is normally "at least one person" who is able to assist.

There are also issues around who can access the computers within the library throughout the day, which seems to have emerged as the library has become more focus on delivering services for children. During the weekdays:

"...they've had to impose rules about who can use the computers when because they don't want children in there at the same time as adults that aren't related to the children...from 12 until four adults can use it but from 4 until six or seven it's children only and on Saturdays it's a bit of a mix." (LA)

Due to dividing access across the day between children and adults:

"...we are getting all sorts of complaints people who are wanting to go in and use the computers and can't because it's allocated to children's time as it were." (LA)

As a result of this division in access, there are times when people are queuing to make use of the computers, particularly children at the weekend although this is "not usually for long". This is exacerbated by the apparent lack of alternative facilities provided in the immediate vicinity of the estate:

"..there's definitely nothing in the estate itself, but there are things in the peripheral area." (LA)

Whilst there are internet cases beyond the immediate locality, the library offers the most convenient place for residents of the estate to make use of the computers and access the internet. It is also the only free point of access.

4.2.6 Digital Divide

In terms of the extent to which libraries have a role to play in addressing the concerns of the digital divide:

"Well, I think they are really important. I think, like I said, I'm not really sure what the alternative is if libraries aren't the main point." (LA)

LA also commented on the breadth of the digital divide in their local area, arguing that, despite the perception of young people as confident users of ICT, it is "not really the sort of experience" they see in the library. This is particularly exacerbated by the apparent literacy and numeracy issues amongst those in the community, particularly as it is predominantly a 'new' immigrant population.

LA also believes that both community and public libraries have a role to play in addressing a lack of skills and access:

"I think, again, to the extent that where else are people going to get that, build those skills, they are important[...]there's a lack of places for people to develop those sorts of skills once they are out of school." (LA)

However, LA acknowledged that there were limitations in this regard in terms of the amount of support the community library can provide:

"The problem we've got is the kind of formal learning, certainly anything council funded has sort of gone...we're limited to what we can do based on the skills set of the group of volunteers at the time." (LA)

Clearly without council funding and the required skills and expertise, the local community does not receive as much support from the community library in terms of formal learning as it had when the library service was delivered under the previous authority run model. As a result, they may need to rely on one of the other libraries in the district, which may not be suitable or easily accessible.

LA also highlighted the negative impact of the digital divide in terms of the economic benefits available to those that are connected:

"I think it's very important and I know there is some statistic...about the amount of money you can save if you look around for deals online as opposed to just take what you find in a shop." (LA)

It was also acknowledged that providing both access and support is important in terms of aiding an individual's employment status:

"...it's more of an issue for...adults who haven't had any training...and now they find themselves trying to fill out a job application...and they don't really know where to start." (LA)

As well as the economic advantages both access and skills provide, the educational benefits were also identified as being one of the key advantages in closing the gap between the information rich and the information poor:

"And if you are not able to access that on home or on a really basic level type up your essay, then you're going to miss out on basically an educational point as well." (LA)

This particularly a factor for children without access in the area as there are no alternative facilities conveniently located nearby and they experience issues in terms of both numeracy and literacy.

Furthermore, LA commented on the extent to which removal of both the computers and internet provision, as originally intended by the council, would have a negative impact:

"I think, yes. I mean I think it would." (LA)

Again, this appears to be in relation to the lack of facilities and access in the area. However, LA believes that this may also be down to convenience:

"...many of the adults could go to other libraries...it's more about convenience...in the sense that if you're 15 and you need to do your homework on a Saturday afternoon then it might be a bit of a problem getting to another library." (LA)

Clearly a lack of provision in this area could potentially have an impact on the local community in terms of education and employability and exacerbate the extent of the digital divide, both within the community itself and the divide between it and areas of the country with a higher proportion of connected households.

4.2.7 Summary

Library A resides within a deprived community with low household internet connectivity. As it is run in conjunction with the local authority, the community group that predominantly staff the library have little control over a variety of aspects, including how they raise funds. Due to the deprived nature of the area, and that there is a high proportion of first generation immigrants residing there with literacy and numeracy issues, there is a great need for providing support in accessing ICT. One could argue that this community is one which fits the description 'information poor'.

Whilst Library A does provide the access that people require, there is both a lack of skills to support the community and concerns about its long term survival in the area. Whilst there is support provided by some trained professionals, the volunteers themselves have limited computer literacy and it is unclear to what extent they would be able to provide the support that the community requires. Furthermore, it is clear that there is an understanding about the nature of the digital divide and the importance of addressing its concerns, particularly in terms of the local community.

4.3 Library B

4.3.1 Background Library B

Library B was established as a community library in 2008 after the local authority attempted to close down a number of libraries across the county. The campaign was established to save

a total of seven libraries across the authority but only three of the seven were ultimately reprieved.

As part of the agreement in allowing the local community to take over the running of the library, the community group were required to put together a business plan and present it to the local authority:

"We all had to put in business plans that showed we could actually run the library on a community basis without any cost to the council whatsoever." [LB]

This meant that the community group was required to propose a business plan that could demonstrate sufficient capability to fund, staff and run the library as well as pay the council the full costs of any service the group needed to utilise.

LB's involvement commenced when the action group was established to oppose the proposed closure. Initially, LB was responsible for the delivery of the sales, marketing and PR of the campaign group. After the campaign successfully prevented the closure, the founding chairman stood down and LB took over as chairman for the community library.

In terms of the transition from a traditional public library to a community library, there was initially some support from the council:

"...we actually took some money from them but it was very small. Because unlike some of these other community libraries that are setting up where they're basically co-operative ventures with the council we are completely independent." [LB]

Despite receiving this small grant, Library B is completely independent of the local authority. They have no meetings with the authority, they do not report back and they are not required to abide by policies established by the local authority.

In terms of the service that it provides, Library B is predominantly a lending library focusing on fiction. Approximately £20,000 has been invested in book stock making Library B the "envy of the much bigger county run library" to the extent that they "look like Waterstones" according to LB.

4.3.2 Financial

As noted above, in taking on the delivery of the library service from the local authority, the local campaign group were required to provide a business plan to demonstrate that they would be able to run the service without assistance from the authority. To ensure that they were able to fulfil their obligations, the campaign group took a number of measures to address the need for funding to maintain the library service.

In the first instance, the campaign group contacted both the parish and district councils to request start-up funding which they were successful in obtaining. Funding from the parish council amounts to £6,000 per year and has been sustained over the course of the five years since the library was taken over by the community. They also ran an appeal to the local population which raised £6,000 in funding. Furthermore, they contacted all the local businesses and organisations to secure financial support and, if this was not possible, other forms of support:

"...for example, the county council stripped the building of equipment when they left, they even took the books. And they even took the till. So we needed a new till. So we approached a local till company and said give us a till for nothing and they did." [LB]

Funding was also obtained from a number of local employers and some residents have agreed to provide regular donations via standing order. The personal donations provide around £2,500 in funding per year leading to a basic core of £5,000 per year. The community have also registered themselves as a charity and, under Charity Commission guidelines, hold £30,000 in reserve against future running costs.

LB acknowledges that there will be increased pressures on Library B's funding sources:

"...I mean the number of new charities formed in the last year or so has been absolutely enormous. And all of those are now fighting for the same funds." [LB]

If a funding issue emerged, the community group has a 'reserve policy' in place that would require an automatic wind-up of the facility if only 60% of the reserves remain. Coupled with this, the community group would also appeal to the public and existing donors providing a twelve month deadline for more funding or the facility would close.

A number of income generating schemes are operated by Library B. Approximately £50 per week is generated through the till, including charges for photocopying and printing. Money is only charged for use of materials that have a direct cost on the library. The library is also rented out to groups in the local community for a small fee and film nights have been provided at the library with the request of a small donation from attendees.

According to LB, the local authority has taken onboard how the community library operates and have changed their stance regarding communities taking over:

"What they're doing is they're now effectively saying to communities if you take it over we will provide all the support we possibly can including making sure you have the skills to run it and on top of that we'll give you a cash grant." [LB]

Whilst campaigners for Library B had to provide a business plan and take care of all financial aspects of the library, the council is now prepared to offer some funding to finance future library projects and provide a degree of staff training. As a result, the local authority is offering £20,000 as a start-up fund for those in the local community who wish to take on the running of the library. This appears to be on the basis of savings made from the salary budget.

LB argued that the model employed at Library B "just would not work in an underprivileged area" because "basically what you need is a population that is reasonably well to do". Without a pool of skilled, well educated volunteers LB argues that the service would not be able to meet the needs of the local community. LB also passed comment on the Localism Bill and suggested it was not meeting expectations:

"There were three planks to the localism stuff. One was devolution of responsibility, then it was devolution of knowledge then devolution of money...But what happened to the knowledge, what happened to the money?" [LB]

Clearly there is a feeling that there is a lack of knowledge and money being distributed to community libraries which then impacts on the level of service that is provided.

4.3.3 Staff

Library B has a ten person management team with a further forty volunteers working a flexible shift system to cover opening hours. A management team was required because, as it is independent from the local authority, there was a requirement to take on a range of administrative duties:

"...we have to do everything that a business does except for payroll as we haven't got anybody on payroll." [LB]

The management team also takes responsibility for legislation such as health and safety, data protection and diversity. Alongside the legislation, the management team is required to manage, induct and train the volunteers as well as act as secretary and treasurer. This appears to be the most difficult area of the recruitment process:

"So the most difficult thing if you ask me about trying to get manpower in is actually getting people who are appropriate to the management team...That's the real challenge." [LB]

However, recruiting volunteers in general is not an issue for Library B:

"...to get people who are going do the routine library type functioning type service is not difficult because actually it is quite an attractive job." [LB]

Volunteers that have been recruited to the library also hold a variety of community roles, including positions such as scout leaders and school governors.

Whilst they have a substantial number of volunteers delivering the service, Library B does not have any professional librarians. According to LB:

"...if you are looking for librarian expertise then you need a big well funded librarian run library." [LB]

Whilst Library B does not currently have any professional librarians supporting the delivery of the library service, a professional librarian did support the delivery of the service for the first six months after it had been transferred to the community group. As a result of this experience the community group have advised the local authority to place a professional librarian in the library:

"...in fact they're now putting in fully paid librarians for at least the first few months just to keep them on the straight and narrow and actually teach them the process. And if you do that it works." [LB]

In terms of training the staff, they are provided with basic training upon induction and are shown the basic operational matters. In terms of the computerised library management system:

"They are given a basic grounding, and I mean a very basic grounding, in how the library management system works and then what we do is our library volunteer manager basically pairs the people up with more experienced volunteers." [LB]

Due to the apparent complexity of the handbook used by the council to train staff on the library management system (LMS), the manual was simplified by a volunteer at library B which summarised all the basic functions of the LMS (Spydus) to be used by the staff as a reference guide. However, there is no programme of formal IT training at the library:

"...they don't have formal computer training what they do is learn on the job." [LB]

Essentially there is no computer based training provided other than very basic training on the LMS. Volunteers learn through experience and are partnered with an experienced member of staff initially to provide support. As LB acknowledges, there is a need to ensure experienced people are available to provide support and ensure volunteers don't "fall flat on their face".

In terms of the overall level of IT expertise at Library B, LB commented that:

"...a lot of our volunteers are not particularly at the leading edge of computing skills. I mean, they've been taught to use Spydus but if you ask them to use Word they probably wouldn't have a clue." [LB]

Certainly, the level of IT literacy amongst the volunteers appears to be fairly mixed:

"Some of our volunteers are quite computer literate others frankly are not at all." [LB]

However, they do appear to have staff that are skilled and highly computer literate. With one volunteer having about thirty years expertise "working in everything to do with IT".

4.3.4 Technology

Library B provides two public access computers for library users. Initially the library adopted the same charging practice as the local authority, charging users £1 per half-an-hour on a PC. However, they found that the computers were "hardly ever used" when that system was employed so they removed the charges for PC usage on the basis that:

"...we have to make the equipment available. In terms of what is it possible for us to do is to make free computing facilities available to the public." [LB]

Consequently, they found use of the computers increased significantly by remove the fee barrier for users.

As well as providing free access to the internet, Library B has also invested in free wi-fi at the library which means that it is the only wi-fi hotspot in the area. They also have intentions to build a dedicated computer suite and are in the process of putting aside funds to build an extension for such a suite. Furthermore, they are considering the possibility of lending out ereaders such as Kindles to library users.

4.3.5 IT support provided for the community

Users at Library B are generally left to their own devices in making use of the public access computers and it appears that they do not require much support:

"Our public generally don't generally need any help to operate them. The people who come in and want to work on a PC know what they're doing and, in fact, most of them have been using our machines for years." [LB]

In terms of the support provided by volunteers, if users require assistance LB states that:

"...we'll do our best to help, but don't expect a computer expert to come and help you." [LB]

This suggests a limited level of support within the library for users. However, the library does offer computing classes for beginners and 'improvers' at no charge. As they do not have a dedicated computer suite, these classes are run in the library during regular opening hours and by the more skilled volunteers.

In terms of children making use of the library computers, they appear to be confident in using them and often utilise the service after school to assist in completion of their homework. LB comments that:

"They all know exactly what they are doing. In fact they could probably teach our volunteers a trick or two." [LB]

Furthermore, there appears to be a particular focus at Library B on supporting the older users rather than the younger generation:

"...the younger generation are, you know, it doesn't occur to them to think of it as an issue they just do it. I mean why would it be an issue to them? Which is why we focus on older people..." [LB]

Despite this apparent focus, there is also an acknowledgement that some children in the local community do require support in making use of the ICT facilities:

"...the only ones that are going to have problems are those that haven't been to school. Admittedly there are some but not many." [LB]

This is potentially due to the relatively affluent area in which the library is located which may lead to the assumption that little support is required for the younger generation, particularly if connectivity is relatively high within the community

4.3.6 Digital divide

LB noted that libraries play an important role in addressing the concerns of the digital divide. It was acknowledged that not only is it important to provide access, it should also be free at the point of access. It was stressed that this was important as:

"...most of the people who use our computing facilities are people who will not have computing equipment at home." [LB]

Furthermore, it was suggested that they come from the socio-economic groups who cannot afford to own a computer. As a result, it was felt that it was important to offer access to computers for free to the local community because:

"...some of these people can't afford a pound for half an hour. Or, put it this way, they are not going to pay it." [LB]

As a result of this, it was considered 'important' to 'get them' into computing as 'that is the way the world works'.

However, this seems in contrast to earlier statements about the amount of support that library users required in making use of the computers. Despite suggesting that most users do not

require any assistance, it is also claimed that most of the people who use the computers do not have access at home, which would suggest they may require some support.

4.3.7 Summary

Library B is run entirely independently from the local authority. It is predominantly book orientated and much of the focus until now has been on stock development. It has a number of income revenue streams which ensure the delivery of the service, with plans in place should there be a significant decline in revenue. It also provides ICT equipment free of charge and has plans to increase the number of computers available to the local community. Furthermore, it offers a range of training sessions for those that require more support in utilising ICT.

However, computer literacy is not a requirement for those volunteering at the library and there are a number of volunteers who lack basic ICT skills. Furthermore, users are generally left to get on with using the computers and the assumption is that they require no assistance as they have plenty of experience using the equipment. Despite this, it is also conceded that many who use the computers do not have the equipment at home and would not be able to afford to use the equipment if a charge was applied for its use.

Chapter 5: Discussion

5.1 Introduction

This chapter brings together the findings in the previous chapter and relates them to the findings in the literature review and the aims and objectives.

5.2 Background

Both community libraries studied emerged as a result of local campaigns to maintain existing services. However, both libraries have taken on very different types of ownership model. Library A is operated in partnership with the local council, and is also partly staffed by librarians with a core of volunteer support. Library B operates completely independently of the local authority and is fully staffed by volunteers.

Alongside the issue of ownership and delivery of the service, the two libraries operate in very different environments. Library A resides in a "very deprived", "notorious" area with internet connectivity at around 52% of households, lower than the national average (77%). A significant minority of households (48%) therefore do not have access at all and are consequently subject to the first order effects regarding inequality of access that Dewan and Riggins highlighted (Dewan and Riggins, 2005).

Furthermore, it is not just in terms of access that a divide exists within the local community. LA underlines that many of the people who live on the estate are recent immigrants – a group that, as the literature review demonstrated, were particularly disadvantaged economically by a lack of access to the internet (Morton, Zettelmeyer, Risso, 2003). Due to the fact that they are recent immigrants, many adults within the community are unable to speak English and, consequently, children on the estate need support in basic literacy and numeracy. This subsequently has an impact on their ability to make use of ICT and, consequently, their ability to make full use of the internet. Without a certain degree of literacy, they will likely experience difficulties in taking full advantage of the resources available online, particularly when completing their school homework. As the literature review revealed, access to ICT does appear to have a link to academic achievement and those that are unable to do so effectively will likely suffer academically.

It is clear, therefore, that applying Dewan and Riggins' criteria, the community surrounding Library A are subject to both distinct effects of the digital divide. Many on the estate do not have the access available to others, and a proportion of the population on the estate do not possess the skills to take advantage of the access that is available to them in the local community library. The protests that emerged when the local community believed that the facility would be removed, suggests that the service is valued by the local community, particularly as the local authority eventually relented.

In contrast, Library B operates in a relatively affluent community. However, they do encounter a number of people who need to use the facilities in order to access the internet as they do not have the provision at home. For those that do require a degree of support and training, classes are offered on a beginner's and 'improver's' basis. These classes are provided without charge to ensure that anyone who requires the support is able to receive it, regardless of their financial status.

When the community group initially took control of the library, they maintained the authority's policy of charging for using the computer facilities. This barrier has now been removed and, as a result, they have found that the computers are used to a greater extent than they were before. Due to the popularity of the computer access within the library, the community group intends to expand provision by building a new computer suite, enabling more suitable training facilities.

Overall, whilst the two communities are very different in demographics, they both provide free access to the internet for the local community. This is particularly crucial for library A is it resides in a community that very much requires access given the low percentage of households that are connected to the internet. Given also that the community is one that would benefit significantly from the provision of access, the availability of computers connected to the internet is vital to enable the community to take advantage of the economic and educational benefits that it provides.

5.3 Financial

Both libraries have to obtain external funding to ensure the long term survival of the services they provide. However, this appears to be an easier task for Library B than for Library A. As Library A is in a relatively deprived area, it faces significant difficulties in obtaining the money it needs to survive. Whilst it appears that in the first year the council is prepared to overlook any shortfall in funding, the community group are required to raise £70,000 each subsequent year.

Library A's difficulties in raising funds is further hampered by its inability to have full control over the delivery of the overall service. The local authority still owns the building, including the equipment and fixtures within it. As a result, the community group are unable to set fees for the meeting room space they provide, which they believe are currently too high. Given the ability to set their own charges may help alleviate the problem, although it would raise further issues that the community group would need to resolve. There was also an acknowledgement that charges for the use of ICT may be a possible option to raise funds. However, as the literature review revealed, this has led to declines in usage previously where it has been introduced and may have a detrimental effect in addressing digital exclusion within the local community (Goulding, 2006).

Library A also relies on council support to ensure that the service can continue. It appears likely that the library would close if the authority were to expect the community to entirely fund the service without their support. As the literature review revealed in terms of Portland Underhill and Walcot library in Swindon, without the required support hours may be cut or the library may close altogether. This would leave the community without a source of free internet provision within the immediate area and would then mean that they would have to make use of the next nearest facilities. Whilst this might be possible for adults, it would be more difficult for children who need to access the library for their homework, particularly considering that children appear to queue for access to the internet. Furthermore, as was demonstrated by Proctor et al (1998), a library closure (even if an alternative is available) can result in a significant decline in children's use of the library. This is particularly a crucial

factor in a community where a proportion of the population are first generation immigrants and, consequently, the children require a large degree of support.

However, Library B appears to be in a more stable financial situation. It receives regular grants from local authorities and receives regular donations from the local population. It has also accrued a substantial reserve that would enable it to operate for a further three years without funding, providing suitable time to raise the required funds from the local community. It is also completely independent of the local authority so it is able to set its own charges and fees for the services it provides (including the renting out of community rooms).

Although both libraries have different financial arrangements, there would certainly be an impact on the local community if either facility was to close. For a significant proportion of the population local to Library A, the library is the only place that they can gain access to the internet and take advantage of the employment and education benefits that such access provides. Whilst the community around Library B is more affluent, there are still those who use the computers because they cannot afford to own the required equipment. In both cases, closure of the library would have an impact on the first order effects of the digital divide (access). However, it would appear that the impact would certainly be greater felt amongst the community using Library A.

5.4 Staff

In both Library A and Library B no staff training is provided on supporting the public in utilising the internet. Furthermore, in both cases, computer literacy is not a pre-requisite of volunteering at the library. Basic training is provided on general day to day duties in each library, but this is generally restricted to duties such as shelving and issuing and discharging books. Whilst there is no specific training, each library does have volunteers that are described as knowledgeable in terms of ICT.

In terms of Library B, there appears to be little in terms of support aside from the classes that are held for beginners. When using the computers, the general public are expected to 'get on with it' but if they come into difficulties they shouldn't expect a 'computer expert' to assist

them. Furthermore, there is a perception that the people who do use the computers in the library "know what they are doing" and have been using the machines "for years".

However, there was also an acknowledgement that a number of people utilising the computers at Library B do so as they do "not have computing equipment at home" because they either "can't afford it" or it's "not something that happens in their family". Consequently, it is difficult to judge whether or not they are actually confident in utilising the computers. Certainly it appears that at Library B they believe that they are as they appear to "know what they are doing".

Furthermore, there was a general acceptance that many of the volunteers do not have the skills to provide support for users in using computers or accessing the internet. As a result, it is unclear to what extent either library is able to address the second order concerns of the digital divide (lack of skills). As was noted by King et al (2006), ICT training was a crucial component of the implementation of the People's Network in providing a degree of computer based training to ensure suitable support for the general public. In the case of both libraries, a programme of ICT training is not built into the delivery of the service and there is no prerequisite for such training before volunteering at either library.

The ICT programme of training stipulated a number of outcomes, including competence and understanding of ICT, finding information for users and supporting users in effective learning. Amongst public library staff this degree of training was generally rated as 'good' and a majority felt confident in helping users access the internet. However, at both the libraries studied in this paper, no staff training has been provided and there are no expectations in terms of IT literacy for new recruits. As a result, it appears that both libraries are unable to provide the support required to address the second order effects of the digital divide, a lack of skills.

5.5 Digital Divide

There is, however, recognition at both libraries of the importance of addressing the concerns of the digital divide. This is particularly the case at Library A where it was acknowledged there are significant advantages provided through access in terms of a range of outcomes

including education and employment. This recognition is perhaps due to the nature of the community in which Library A resides. There was certainly specific recognition that access to the internet has certain financial benefits.

There is also recognition at Library A that despite the stereotype that all young people are able to access the internet and utilise it to its fullest extent, the situation is a little more complex. It would appear that issues in terms of skills cut across the whole of the local community, with difficulties experienced by children in completing their homework and adults applying for jobs. As a result, it is acknowledged that libraries play an important role in addressing both the lack of access and skills as there are a lack of places for these skills to be developed within the community.

Library B also recognises the important role of the library in addressing concerns in terms of the digital divide. It is committed to building a dedicated training room to ensure that the local community can receive the level of support and training they require. There is a belief that getting people connected is important, with a particular focus on the older generation. To that end they have made some 'breakthroughs' in terms of providing the skills required.

There was also, as with Library A, awareness that there is an opportunity to provide support to people in the local community to develop skills as well as ensure that the local community has access to the equipment and at no cost. However, unlike Library A, there is a belief that there is a big need for computing but predominantly focused on the older generation rather than the younger.

5.6 Summary

Overall it appears that in both cases the libraries address the first order effects of the digital divide but there is no clear evidence that they suitably address second order effects. Both libraries provide free internet access to their local communities, although there is a clear disparity between the two communities themselves in terms of their economic situations. Furthermore, both libraries either provide support in terms of classes or there is the intention to do so.

However, it is unclear to what extent they are able to address second order effects of the digital divide (skills). Neither library provides ICT training for staff and ICT literacy is not a pre-requisite for volunteers wishing to offer their services to the local library. As the literature review revealed, as well as providing access to computers, the People's Network also helped users gain significant benefits as a result of 'interventions and interactions' with suitably trained library staff (Somerland, 2004). It is unclear whether users would provide similar feedback in community libraries where staff have not received the same degree of training and support, particularly for disadvantaged sections of the community who lack the skills to utilise ICT to their advantage. Despite this, as Loader and Keeble (2004) suggested in their report, it is also not clear to what extent public libraries had addressed the extent to which the disadvantaged have been excluded ICT and, therefore, it is not possible to make a satisfactory comparison of the two forms of service delivery at this stage.

Furthermore, as well as addressing the digital divide within the communities in which they operate, there is also an issue in terms of the disparity within these two communities. Whereas Library B resides in a relative affluent area where the needs are perhaps not as great, Library A resides in an area where only slightly more than half of the population have access to the internet. As a result, it is arguable that a greater proportion of the community surrounding Library A require in utilising ICT than in Library B.

On the basis of the evidence presented here, it would appear that the community in Library A are certainly disadvantaged compared to the community in Library B. With the model of service delivery utilised and the financial pressures on Library A, there is potential for the divide between these two communities to grow. The fact that there is no standardisation in how the divide is addressed could potentially exacerbate the situation. However, it is also apparent that both communities need to address digital exclusion (although to varying degrees) and it is unclear on the basis of this research whether they are able to reduce the extent of the digital divide within their respective communities.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews the discussion of the findings and relates them back to the aims and objectives to reflect on whether they have been met. It also includes recommendations for future research.

6.2 Conclusion

The aim of this research was to identify the role of community libraries in addressing the digital divide and the extent to which they are positioned to address it. For the purposes of this study, the term digital divide encompasses both the first order effects caused by lack of access, and second order effects in terms of skills.

Community libraries have become increasingly common as local authorities seek to save money as a result of budgetary cuts. This raises a number of issues as the service in such libraries is delivered by volunteers rather than by paid, trained staff. As a result, it is important to consider what impact the growth of such services would have in terms of the People's Network and, consequently, the digital divide.

6.3 Literature review

The literature review revealed a number of key themes. Firstly, it highlighted the two effects that consolidate the digital divide: access and skills. The digital divide should not be characterised as a simple issues of access, skills are also a significant contributor to the depth of the divide between the information rich and information poor. Consequently, there is a need to address both the lack of access and lack of skills in order to address the impact of the digital divide.

The literature also revealed that there are significant advantages available to those with access to the internet and the ability to use it to its fullest extent. In terms of education, healthcare and economic welfare, there are substantial advantages available. As was demonstrated in the literature review, access to the internet improves attainment for school

pupils, enables individuals to benefit economically (both in terms of employment and their financial situation) and has a positive impact on engagement with the democratic process. As a result, those that do not have either the skills or the access are seriously disadvantaged in comparison.

Furthermore, the literature revealed the extent to which training staff had been successful in giving them confidence in supporting members of the public in using such resources.

Effective training of staff in the use of ICT provided significant benefits in terms of enabling staff to feel confident in addressing both first and second order effects of the digital divide.

6.4 Methodology

The findings presented in this paper were obtained through interviews with key contacts at each library by telephone. This was not an ideal method for obtaining information in which to draw significant conclusions about the nature of the relationship between the individual libraries and the digital divide.

The original intention was to survey all members of staff at each library to gain an understanding of their experiences in terms of both ICT and providing support for library users in utilising it. However, it emerged through the process that there was a lack of understanding of how community libraries operate and, as a result, the methodological approach was adjusted to take this into account. Instead of focusing solely on the level of ICT support provided, it became clear that there was a need to establish the way in which community libraries are operated and the relationship they have with their local communities.

Whilst the telephone interviews provided information on the nature of each community library, including staffing and the level of ICT support provided, it would have been beneficial to speak to individual members of staff at each of the libraries to gain a greater understanding of how they view their role in terms of ICT support and the extent to which they are able to provide support. As a result, it is difficult to make firm conclusions about the extent to which community libraries address both first and second order effects of the digital divide.

6.5 Overall conclusion

The research found that whilst both community libraries do address first order effects (access) in terms of the digital divide, they do not appear to do so in terms of second order effects (skills). At both libraries there appears to be a lack of ICT skills amongst volunteer staff and therefore an inability to provide suitable support for the local community. However, this affects each library to a very different degree.

Whilst there are those in the community surrounding Library B that requires support, there is clearly a greater need for those local to Library A. As a result, the shortage of skills available at Library A to address the needs of the local community means that while it can address the lack of access, it does not appear to be in a position to address the lack of skills. Library A is further compromised by a lack of clarity regarding the future for the library. Should the library close and the local community be unable to access similar facilities in the locality, there could be serious implications for many in terms of the digital divide, particularly for children (to which the library particularly caters) and the elderly.

As access to the internet can provide significant advantages in terms of education, healthcare and employment opportunities the lack of both access and skills support could be particularly detrimental to those living in the local community. Consequently, the community could find a greater divide in terms of both first and second order effects. Furthermore, a greater divide could emerge between the two communities subject to the study due to the significant difference in their respective library services combined with the substantial differences between the communities themselves.

6.6 Further research

This study is an exploratory first step in understanding the development of community libraries run by volunteers. The following recommendations are made for further study:

 Observe support available in community libraries, interview users and staff to determine the quality of support provided by the community library.

- Conduct a comparative study of community library users and public library users to note advantages and disadvantages of each service.
- Conduct further study on Library A to determine if change in service has impacted upon the local community academically, economically or in terms of democratic engagement.
- Investigate whether community libraries are succeeding in attracting the disadvantaged to utilise the service.

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