Research Activities in Public Libraries-Findings From Fieldwork: Facts and Methods

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Abstract

Reports current research activities in public library services drawing from a series of interviews with 20 chief librarians. Findings reinforce earlier perceptions and findings about public library research activities. Of particular concern is the fact that research activity and method is largely confined to 'simpler' issues of operational service development and does not extend to 'harder' research addressing the social and economic impact of the service. To assess trustworthiness and make best use of the data the interview transcripts are analysed using three techniques: initial data analysis by coding down, dilemma analysis, and intensive analysis carried out using the constant comparative method. Concludes that the restricted research capacity within the public library sector may endanger the realisation of its strategic potential.

The occasion

The research described in this paper is part of a PhD thesis entitled "Research Activities In Public Libraries", begun in November 1995 and due for completion mid-1999. The thesis focuses on the relationship between public libraries and research conducted in such library services by professional library staff, often described as practitioner-researchers.

Introduction

As local government moves from an administrative model of service provision to a business or networked model of activities in support of strategic policy objectives more attention will need to be given to 'deep' research in order to address the social and economic issues which are the priorities of local and central government today. As part of the work undertaken for a PhD thesis the practice of research in one statutory area of service, the public library service, has been examined in order to enrich our understanding of the relationship between research, as carried out by practitioner-researchers, and policy and strategy in local government. Recent reports on the public library scene illustrate how the historical situation of fragmented, localised, low-key research activity[1] is being replaced by a more coherent and driven approach with co-ordination, direction and funding at national level[2]. However, other studies[3,4,5] have shown that research skills and methodologies remain undeveloped in the public library service as a whole. On the whole this examination of current research practice reinforces earlier perceptions and findings about public library research activities as reported in the professional literature[6]. However attempts are made to analyse the problems in more depth and move forward on the important issues. Of particular concern is the fact that research activity and method is largely confined to 'simpler' issues of operational service development and does not extend to 'harder' research addressing the social and economic impact of the service, or the impact on individual's lives.

This article serves two purposes. Firstly, it reports current research activities in public library services drawing from a series of interviews which took place between May - July 1997 with chief librarians or their equivalents in a sample of 20 local authorities in the West Midlands and North-East regions of England. To preserve anonymity the actual library services are not listed, however a break down by type of authority is given below. It is worth noting that the sample covered a wide variety of library services ranging

from those with a regular programme of research activities, those able to allocate staff and funding to in-house research activities either on an ad hoc or temporary basis, to those who did the best they could with few or no resources.

	West Midlands	North East
Metropolitan	5 (out of a possible 7)	5 (out of a possible 5)
County	3 (out of a possible 4)	2 (out of a possible 3)
'New Unitary'	0 (out of a possible 1)	5 (out of a possible 5)

Secondly, it illustrates and compares the findings derived from different types of analyses in an attempt to begin to tackle some of the thorny issues which have become intractably bound up with the perception and reality of public library research activity in recent years. In order to make best use of the available data, and ensure trustworthiness[7] of the findings, the transcripts of the interviews were analysed using three techniques, initial data analysis, dilemma analysis, and intensive analysis carried out using the constant comparative method.

Initial data analysis

Initial data analysis was carried out following the procedures described by Gordon and Langmaid[8], and Fielding[9]. In brief, the transcripts were coded down to produce a matrix reviewing each library manager's comments across nine categories derived from the interview schedule, namely first impressions, value, activities, ideas, methods, impact, management, funding, and local authority context. The results are synthesised in the discussion below to give an overview of the findings. This is inevitably superficial as the summary is derived from, and structured to follow, the interview schedule. Nevertheless, the initial data analysis serves a purpose in that it reduces the data to a manageable length, in a structured and systematic way, and allows the 20 interviews to be viewed as one whole. This is, however, the point at which many researchers come to a halt in the process of analysis.

First impressions of research activity in public libraries

Each interview started with an open question whereby the library manager was asked to give his or her first impressions on being asked to talk about research activities in the public library service. Interestingly first impressions did not necessarily correlate with actual involvement in research activities. While only one manager could be described as 'unfriendly' to the idea of research the over-riding impression was that most library managers did not perceive themselves to be involved in research.

A number of explanations were put forward. For example, that research was something that was academic and was not related to their day-to-day work. Instead managers saw themselves as being involved in activities such as consultation, information-gathering, marketing, and business-planning. One library manager stressed the view that 'research is not the main function of the public library service'. Where there was research activity it was often described in terms of being pragmatic, small-scale, wide-ranging, low-level. Often library managers felt that it was simply part of their day-to-day activities as managers, and, above all, research was an activity that assisted the decision-making process.

The value placed on research Respondents were asked if there was value placed on research within the library service, and, if appropriate, prompted to say how this related to the authority as a whole. In all cases the value was readily accepted within the library service although it was sometimes hard for library managers to

demonstrate this value. In some library services the value was apparent in a wider management approach that valued, for example, customers or consultation. In other situations, the approach was more pragmatic, one where you had to 'know your business' in order to compete for resources. Some managers spoke about the influence of the new in establishing values, be it a new Chief Librarian or a new Chief Executive, or even working within a new unitary authority. The value placed on, and the level of, research activity in library services does not reflect, or relate to, that of the local authority as a whole.

Research activities The research activities that were carried out were many and varied but on the whole they reflected current operational concerns rather than broader strategic considerations. Although there is a considerable body of research taking place it is not recognised and managed as such, and it is rarely written up in a form which might be transferable to other library services.

Research ideas During the course of the interviews library managers were asked to talk about where ideas for research came from, specifically how topics for research were identified and whether there was any forum for discussing/generating ideas. Management teams were the main source of ideas but these would often draw from other staff too, and some managers were keen to encourage all staff to think more creatively.

There were other driving forces behind research activities. Some library managers described how ideas came from above, be it Committee, council policies or government. Many library services drew from their customer orientation, particularly those who had adopted 'the Charter approach', some from colleagues in other departments. Only one library service had a specific research group in Libraries, even so this library service also drew from a whole range of sources for ideas. Another research-rich library service demonstrated the advantage of being involved, with other departments, with the local community, and with the public library profession. Ideas tended to be practical, arising from day-to-day problems, staff suggestions and circumstances.

Research methods Comments on research methods were limited. Where methods were described there was a predictable reliance on desk research, surveys, unobtrusive testing, focus groups, and the classic pragmatist's methodology of 'trial and error'. CIPFA's PLUS was mentioned by four respondents and welcomed by all but one; others had used it to inform their own survey instruments. There was a welcome acknowledgement of the value of a nationally developed tool kit and some recognition of the importance of professional networking and sharing good practice via benchmarking.

Most library managers appeared wary of discussing methodology, readily admitting they were not experts, though some were aware of the potential pitfalls in sampling. On the whole they tried to conduct research as simply as possible. Only one had guidelines from a central policy division about how to prepare for consulting citizens. Most had varying access to experts within the wider Department of the local authority. Consultants were used, or had been used, where there was no expertise in-house, although it was recognised that they also provided objectivity. Many public library research efforts which were discussed were well-meaning, enthusiastic but often amateur. Most initiatives, with the exception of those driven by PLUS or annual survey work, are fragmented in terms of methodology rather than structured and co-ordinated.

Impact As the examples of research activities showed most research was undertaken, often reactively, as part of a short-term service development. Thus the purpose of research activity is usually to inform the management process or the committee decision-making process. Because of this research does impact on service development, for example, changes in opening hours and stock selection, however it seems to have little impact on broader policy considerations. Having said that, there is some confusion about the link between service and policy within the library service. Respondents were clearly aware of the need to get the message across to Committee to protect the service. Even though service development may be research-

driven in some individual authorities, because the research is not acknowledged as such, but is subsumed in a management paper or a committee report, there is little evidence of transferability or a build-up of knowledge, that could influence policy. Indeed, one gains an impression that for research to be tolerated in the public library arena it has to be concerned with the practicalities of service development; there is no place for 'pure' research that could be concerned with policy issues. As some library managers pointed out policy is influenced by many factors of which research is only one, and hence there is a feeling that it is better to concentrate research efforts where results can be put to good use immediately. Having said that, some managers were aware that their research activities did demonstrate how the library service was contributing to wider council policies even if it was not instrumental in defining those policies.

Managing research If there was little time to do research then there was even less time for training. Managers and their staff rarely, if ever, had training in research methods other than that gained as part of a degree course. Once again the approach is ad hoc, small-scale and informal. For example, staff carried out projects during part-time academic courses, or exploited external expertise by means of informal channels, for example, the colleague's husband who is an economist, students who write in. Library services rely on experience gained over the years, enthusiasm on the job, and whatever expertise is available at the time. There were two exceptional instances where there was a sense of research being managed within a strategic framework of service objectives, but the outstanding impression is one of practitioners working in isolation: as such there is no generation of a research culture.

Funding Costs, in terms of time and money, have to be absorbed rather than being set aside for research activity. Only one manager had a research budget (£13,000). Two others felt their own budgets were flexible enough to enable research activity. Many library managers were hampered in applying for funding by a lack of knowledge, confidence, expertise or time. There was also ambivalence about the value of bidding

for research funding where criteria do not match and where service development may be skewed and inhibited due to the perceived rigour of the bidding process. Many managers had not even applied to the British Library for their 'small grants'. Curiously some appeared to be more au fait with local authority bids for European Union and Lottery funding, presumably because someone else actually wrote the bid.

Local authority context Most local authorities appear to have some corporate research expertise, be it a policy or research unit within the Chief Executive's Department, a service development team within the wider Directorate, or expertise in bidding for external funds within, say, the Economic Development Unit. Some library managers have close working relationships with these units but others show a sense of remoteness or lack of awareness.

A key purpose of research is the need to provide evidence to support recommendations made to Committee, particularly in considering service reductions such as library closures or reduced hours required in order to manage budget cuts. More positively, business planning, the need to target resources effectively, the ethos of customer consultation, 'working in partnership', and the 'Charter approach' are also seen as stimuli to research.

On the whole there seems to be little involvement by the library services, at the level in the hierarchy of the library managers interviewed, in research and development in the corporate and strategic domains. A number of managers mentioned anti-poverty strategies in a vague way but not always with evidence of library service involvement. Where library services did contribute to council strategies there is little sense that the library services were directly involved in any research and policy development activity underpinning corporate planning in relation to issues such as lifelong learning, economic regeneration, social inclusion, community safety and youth employment - all areas which are high on the new government's agenda and where libraries have a role to play.

Dilemma analysis

Scanning the matrix obtained by the initial data analysis revealed 'tensions', for example in the form of the great differences in the approach to 'research management' taken by the different authorities and also inconsistencies in what individual library managers were saying. This presence of a number of minority views, and the apparent lack of definite answers, made the data amenable to 'dilemma analysis' in order to look at these tensions in more depth. The technique of dilemma analysis is described by Winter[10] and Altrichter et al[11].

During the course of the interviews most library managers described situations, sometimes unknowingly, where there was a tension in terms of dilemmas that require professional decision-making. A list of dilemmas was drawn up by simply re-reading the interview transcripts and noting inconsistencies, tentativeness or indecision. Dilemmas can be expressed in the form "on the one hand ... but, on the other hand ... ", for example:

> On the one hand I regard having a research post as a high priority given the nature of the change going on in local authorities and within public libraries but, on the other hand, the difficulty of course has been the funding, and maintaining funding against a background of other budget cuts.

This approach is not without its problems. While it is not difficult to find dilemmas there is a tendency to pick upon points which resonate with one's own experience. Having identified a dilemma there is no generalised explanation of how to deal with it; Altrichter offers three pragmatic approaches[12].

Is the dilemma solvable? Many dilemmas express contradictory and unavoidable aspects of situations that cannot be resolved by any course of action. An example is the contradiction between 'on the one hand we can do research but, on the other hand, it may still be rejected by Committee of elected members if there are other more pressing considerations.' The dilemma is not solvable as the research is inevitably only one part of the Committee-decision-making process. In contrast, the dilemma 'on the one hand we do research to aid day-to-day management and influence policy but, on the other hand, when it's served its immediate purpose it tends to get lost in committee papers or internal documents' is solvable if someone is, for example, prepared to make an effort in exploiting completed research reports.

Is the dilemma related to the complexity of the situation which makes it difficult to see what is happening? Many dilemmas result from having to act in situations where many factors are unclear and causes and effects are only partly understood. An example is the indecisiveness between 'on the one hand research might tell you something new, but, on the other hand, it might not.' A library manager whose primary aim is to improve service delivery may not have sufficient knowledge about underlying policies and what causes them. In addition s/he may know little about the consequences of various actions intended to improve methods (for example, asking the right questions, using a mix of methods, etc.)

Is the dilemma emotionally stressful? Stress often results from believing that you have to take some course of action which goes against your instinctive judgement. An example is the tension between 'on the one hand we want to do research which supports our own aims, but, on the other hand we don't want to be confrontational as far as the money is concerned.' Here, a library manager is concerned about the risk of alienating either library staff or funders by getting involved, or not getting involved, in research projects,

Of a sample of 34 dilemmas, eight could be judged unsolvable, 20 as complex and six as emotional. Incidentally the transcripts recording interviews with library managers who had limited experience, or little positive experience, of research activity, revealed themselves to be a good source of dilemmas. Even if a dilemma is judged to be 'unsolvable' we can still look for an acceptable way of coping with it. Just talking about a dilemma may give rise to ideas for solutions. Most dilemmas can be resolved to

some extent. Another useful outcome may be accepting the dilemma as the norm: this may reduce any resultant frustration. Working on dilemmas may be important in valuing minority views, reducing stress and enabling a more stimulating and productive discussion by ascribing equal value to perspectives.

Intensive analysis

Intensive analysis was carried out using the constant comparative method[13]. The factual contents of the categories of data, which were derived from coding up from the transcripts, are discussed in a forthcoming article in <u>Library Management</u>. One difference between the intensive analysis and the initial analysis is in the richness of the description and depth of findings. The categories used for analysis match library managers own words so it is possible to review some of the apparent anomalies in the initial data analysis. Three examples are given to illustrate this point.

Example 1: Research activities

Firstly consider these findings from the intensive analysis about the phrase research activities and what it conjures up in the minds of public library managers:

> Research was a "grand term" to some library managers: "It sounds a bit academic and highbrow for what we actually do ... we gather management information and interpret it." To others it lacked clarity: "really it's separating out those of our activities that we can distinguish as research" because "we do quite a bit of analysing data and information gathering usually in response to specific situations that arise." Others felt that while they did do research it wasn't research in the academic sense. It was difficult to unpack out what was meant by 'academic research'; such activity appeared to be specific and complex, compared to 'real life research' which :"... isn't very academic, it's applied ... " For many library managers the activities that made up research were part of day-to-day management: "I see it as gathering information to assist in decision-making processes..." Some library managers

explained their definition of research in terms of aspects of management and marketing such as targeting services, monitoring and consultation.

Research then was "practical, focused" and very much an 'on-the-job' activity: "most of our research is reacting to situations and is done pragmatically to aid management and policy in the department." This library manager explained further:

> This is really the way what might be called 'research' sometimes happens. You have a need to do something, you don't particularly research it, but you put up a model that you think is going to work, and if it doesn't you have to try and do something else ...

> One library manager queried the terminology saying "... research is a useful shorthand term but it doesn't convey to the practitioner ... very much at all" and went on to suggest an alternative term: "needs identification". Another library manager was adamant about an aspect of the library service's work: "I wouldn't call it research, we're gathering the data that will provide a proper analysis of the situation ..." Another stressed that the library service did 'development work', not research. Other library managers revisited their definitions during the interview, for example:
> I think, having the conversation that we have had, what is coming through is understanding the terminology. We obviously have got a fair amount of experience of consulting with people. I suppose my mind had settled around the idea that research equals the scientific approach to undertaking consultation but from what we are talking about we are not too far away.

So, whilst very few library managers thought of themselves as practitioner-researchers there can be no doubt, given the degree to which research activity is combined with day-to-day work, that many senior library staff could fall into such a category, or as one redefined it "...library managers who have to do it all." It is important to understand that this situation has evolved, it has not been planned, it has not arisen through choice, or with adequate support and training:

> In the past we were more able to, say, second staff to special projects but now the staffing budget is so tight that that is just not as possible.

What we tend to do is to expect the higher paid staff to take on the research function ... It's put into their job description now when we are setting up posts. It may not be described as research as such, probably policy development.

Example 2: The purpose of public library research

As a second example, the contradiction between what library managers think about research ("it's very academic and not for me") and the value they place on research ("very high") can be explained by exploring the key purpose of research in the public library service, that is, as a political tool, providing accountability. Consider these findings from the intensive analysis:

> Research activities were carried out for several reasons but an overarching purpose was that of accountability, be it to customers, politicians, funders. Time and time again library managers pointed out how research provided political accountability: "I think the more information you have got the more power you have got in terms of justifying the library service." Research findings were "incredibly useful politically". One manager said "we are looking for research ... that provides information that can be used as a political tool ... " Yet another valued research "for producing committee reports, it helps with getting the message across when there are threats of budget cuts ..." Library managers described how research verified actions by being able to get away from the "anecdotal" and "challenge a lot of givens", giving them "genuine findings" to take to the politicians instead of working "very much on hunches", and to be able to demonstrate the mass they are working with:

> When councillors have said 'the last thing we want to do is shut a library' ... that's not because they're swayed by my eloquent prose but because they're aware that that information has come from our research [with] their voters..

As well as providing useful results managers noted the value of **raising the library service's profile** in that "... there is a certain amount of kudos in doing it." Involvement in larger bids, even if unsuccessful, often paved the way for smaller successful bids and raised the stature of the library service within the local authority:

Other consequences of the work we've done is that we're now leading the production of the council's Intranet and we're on the council's information strategy group. A few years ago that wouldn't have been the case ...

The Gateway to Information project certainly raised our profile and we are very keen to maintain control of it ... and actually make other officers better aware of the kind of services we provide. We're pushing the fact that we are not just about romances for little old ladies, we are actually about providing information ... it makes us less expendable in the budget cuts ...

A defining feature of research in the public library context is that much of it is conducted to *inform Committee decision-making*. The influence of the elected members is all-encompassing. Political circumstances varied between local authorities as did members' interest in library services. There is an expectation that research should be present in committee reports but some managers felt that whilst members expected to be informed they were not necessarily research-oriented:

> Research is not a word that I use with elected members ... I would always use the word development ... elected members of the authority would not regard research as something that we could afford to do ... For me, research is an element of service development, but the connotation for most elected members would be that it's something that academics do.

The degree to which research findings were used by the members was also questioned. Some managers spoke of members' stubbornness in refusing to accept valid research findings, and their regional rather than national views. One manager noted the difficulty of reconciling focus group findings and members views:

> ... elected members are voted in to represent local people ... whatever focus group you put together lacks authority to speak for the public at large.

Another manager felt that any impact that research could have was inevitably limited because "at the end of the day, many decisions, particularly in relation to budget, are political

decisions and whilst we can advise and prepare the facts they aren't always taken on board." One consequence of this is that one needs a strategy in using research findings to influence policy decisions, thus, "it tends to be not one killing blow, but it's making a lot of opportunities to drip-feed the information to them."

Example 3: The impact of public library research

The findings above begin to reveal the conceptual and practical framework within which public library research activities take place. In the light of this analysis it becomes more understandable why identifying whether research had been used for developing policy and/or for developing service was not always straightforward. The managers themselves could not always unravel what could be a complex situation. Consider these findings from the intensive analysis:

> Research seems to have little impact on broader policy considerations. This is not surprisingly given the nature of the research and the fact that it did tend to be more relevant to service than policy, and hence it was easier to discern the impact on service rather than policy. Only one manager, in a new unitary authority was clearly expecting research to influence policy:"... the driving force behind our research is to know our business ... we're really starting from scratch and the operational issues will come later." Whilst another manager maintained "the results of the research programme can lead to programmes of action that can also influence changes in culture and policy", another was more wary: "I don't think the research has led us to modify the overall purpose of the policy or the aims, but it has reinforced those".

Specific examples of the impact of research on policy were limited in scope and number. One manager noted "we can identify customer concerns through user profiling activity ... that can lead to changes in policy and direct action" and gave an example of the provision of women-only desks . Others spoke about changes to book buying/selection procedures. Three other managers gave examples of how research findings which led to service developments which were

subsequently used to influence policy, including this case of introducing services for blind people, via a research project. This manager reflected:

> That project helped the council to put some substance to the fine words of equal opportunities. It's not so much that we came up with a radical new policy but that the work enabled us to clarify and substantiate policy with actions ... in a public library context you simply cannot engage in pure research, any research that we do always has to be done on the basis that we can sustain it in the real world with a real service development ...

One problem in using research findings to influence and shape policy was that was that "we've never set up a piece of work to say we want to look at this in policy terms". The complexity of policy development was clearly an issue.

> One manager described the lengthy process of "informed debate and discussion" combined with the "intuitive element" regarding policy development in his local authority and concluded that "policy in part is formed by service research findings but also by intuition." Policy development is also "more difficult to get a handle on":

> Policy is driven by lots of things and research is just a small trickle ... the direction of the council, the amount of funding ... professional developments ... central government messages as well ... So this piece of research ... is quite a small voice against a much larger voice.

Closing comments

By appraising the three sets of findings from the data it is possible to sift the wheat from the chaff, as it were, and tease out the harder questions that deserve to be investigated further in the final stage of the thesis. One such issue is whether the strategic potential of the public library service will be realised. Given that the social policy agenda of the current government requires 'deep' research to inform and underpin policy development and strategic action, and that the government is beginning to accept the assertion that the public library service can contribute to social policy objectives[14], it is evident that the

research capacity within the public library sector remains underdeveloped and the public library service does not engage with policy development at corporate level within local authorities. One contribution of the completed thesis will be in providing a clearer understanding of such issues firmly based on a trustworthy analysis.

References

1   Recently expressed in Pluse, J. and Prytherch, R. *Research in Public Libraries* BLRIC Report no. 8, BLRIC, 1996

2   See *Prospects: A Strategy for Action* Library and Information Commission Research Committee, November 1997 and *Strategic Research Issues For Public Libraries* Society of Chief Librarians Public Libraries Research Group, 1997, and copied in LIRN 70 (Spring 1998)

3   Goodall, D. L. 'A Review Of Public Library Research With Special Reference To Methodology' *Public Library Journal*, May/June, 1996, 69-76.

4   Goodall, D. L. "Public Library Research Methods: Some Comments Based On An Examination Of 41 Final Reports Of PLDIS Projects' *Library and Information Research News*, 1997, 21 (68), 25-32.

5   *Developing Research in Public Libraries*, an ongoing research project being undertaken by the School of Information Studies at the University of Central England in Birmingham, aims to develop research expertise and use by practitioners in the public library sector .

6   Goulding, A. 'Public Library Research - its future organisation and funding' *Public Library Journal*, 1994, 9 (3).

7   The PhD thesis also contains an evaluative discussion of the findings which, for example, demonstrates the reliability and credibility of findings by ensuring the process of analysis is explicit, say, by giving definitions of categories; describes how bias was recognised and dealt with; tests the findings against the data by searching for negative instances and searching for alternative explanations to findings and demonstrating how the explanation offered is the most plausible in relation to the research objective; and so on.

8   Gordon, W. and Langmaid, R. *Qualitative market research: a practitioner's and buyer's guide.* Gower, 1989, 132-155.

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10   Winter, R. 'Dilemma analysis: a contribution to methodology for action research. 161-174.

11   Altrichter, H. et al. *Teachers Investigate Their Work* Routledge, 1993, 146-152.

12   ibid.

13   A useful summary of Anselm Strauss's grounded theory methodology is provided in Bogdan, R. *Qualitative Research For Education* 2nd ed. Simon & Schuster, 1992, 72-75.

14   New Library: *The People's Network* Library and Information Commission, October 1997 and 'New Library: The People's Network' The Government's response Department for Culture, Media and Sport (Cm 3887), April 1998.