Research Reports

Public library research methods - some observations based on an examination of 41 final reports of Public Library Development Incentive Scheme Projects

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Introduction

The Public Library Development Incentive Scheme (PLDIS) was intended to "encourage new enterprises which extended or improved public library services in England" [1] . The first grants, awarded after a two-stage competition, were made in 1988. At that time the Scheme was funded to the sum of £250,000 per year for three years. However, in total the Office of Arts and Libraries (later the Department of National Heritage) made six rounds of funding available to extend the Scheme to 1994/95. Various priority areas for the awards were publicised each year. In 1995/96 a one year successor scheme, Development Funding for Public Libraries, was introduced, with the aim of funding projects specifically "related to identified problems facing the public library service in England in adapting to current circumstances and to broaden the opportunities for people to enjoy the benefits of the public library service."[2]

At September 1995 fifty-four awards had been made by the PLDIS. Five projects have not been completed. Forty three reports of projects are currently available for public consultation covering all reports funded in the first three years of the Scheme and several reports from later years. There are also two reports about the Incentive Scheme itself.

Methods used in Public Library Development Incentive Scheme projects

Table 1: Summary of methods mentioned in the PLDIS reports

Postal questionnaire	13
Experiment, ie. setting up of service	11
Literature review/desk research	10
Case studies, ie. follow-up interviews	8
Structured interviews using questionnaires	7
Telephone survey	5
Group discussions	2
Workshops	2
Priority Search exercise	1
Time exercise	1

The table above and the following commentary are based on actual examination of 41 reports. Two other reports which are available could not be obtained within the timescale. In three cases the reports themselves are incomplete and therefore cannot be adequately assessed for the purposes of this review. A brief resumé of the aims of each project and the method(s) employed is given in the accompanying summary. Putting aside the fact that the reports dealt with very different subjects what was immediately evident was the great diversity in the content and layout of the reports and this was particularly so in the sections regarding methods. Eleven reports contained no clear details of methods. The lack of detail given in some other reports would make it difficult to replicate research or assess if it was applicable to one's own situation. In some cases there was no clearly identified section covering method. In others the description of the methods employed was scant and sometimes details of methods utilised had to be gleaned from a close reading of the report. Some projects simply presented themselves as accounts of how new services were set up although it is clearly implied that some market research had been previously conducted in order to determine the initial viability of the project or the 'evidence of need' required for the PLDIS application. Only a handful of reports included any discussion of the pros and cons of the methods employed, or any evaluative comments on the success, or not, of a particular method, say, response rate to questionnaires or the usefulness of interviews in obtaining desired information.

Commentary
Postal questionnaire

This was used in thirteen projects and was often followed up by a more in-depth interview or a case study. A copy of the questionnaire was usually included within the final report and as such could be re-used. However, not all reports gave any feedback on the effectiveness of the questionnaire in gathering data from the sample. It appeared to be the exception rather than the rule that a pilot was carried out. For example, Berkshire's work on library services to independent and grant maintained schools utilised a pilot survey - a series of interviews - to test the proposed questionnaire that would be distributed to all schools. It is noted that:

"The postal survey was revised on the basis of the pilot survey before being mailed to all schools. In practice the postal questionnaire provided relatively little new information, but was useful to the extent that it confirmed impressions based upon experience and the pilot survey."[3]

Structured interviews using questionnaires

These were often used in the library setting, for example, in Video libraries: the potential for public/private partnership Devon Library Service carried out a local market research survey at two libraries to assess the likely potential for a video lending service based in public libraries in Devon, which involved interviewing over 1500 individuals using a questionnaire. Personally administered questionnaires were also used to good effect, but for a different reason, in Sheffield Libraries and Information Service's work on setting up a fee based information service for tenants of a Science Park:

"In order to make tenants aware of the existence of information services generally, and to identify key individual needs, it was decided to conduct a semi-structured interview with all tenants in the Science Park. A semi-structured interview was considered to be the most appropriate method. A self-completed questionnaire would not enable any in-depth discussion to take place. There might also be low motivation to complete a questionnaire as firms often have little or no understanding of their information needs or how library and information services relate to helping solve their

problems. The interview method would enable information to be collected and personal contact to be made. This would be the first step towards building a positive relationship with them. The interview was semi-structured to enable comparable data to be collected on key issues while allowing some free discussion."[4]

Telephone survey

Considering the relative ease of administration it is perhaps surprising that relatively low use was made of the telephone survey. The SEALS Project found that: "... a telephone survey to selected UK public library authorities was unexpectedly (in view of its tentative nature) productive and enlightening. Many practical tips were picked up from this informal process. The value of 'the grapevine' is easily underestimated."[5]

Case studies in the form of follow-up interviews

In most cases these were essentially more in-depth, usually semi-structured discussions with suitable contacts who had been identified by an earlier survey. In Library services to independent and grant maintained schools in Berkshire, to complement the quantifiable data more qualitative information was gathered through five personal visits conducted by the Project Officer, accompanied by various senior schools library service staff. This follow-up work also took the form of targeted case studies, for example, for Video libraries: the potential for public/private partnership Devon Library Service sent a questionnaire to all UK public libraries to discover whether video services were provided and if they were, to obtain data on when and how they were established, on charging and selection policies and on administrative and staffing procedures. Visits to selected libraries were then made to interview staff involved in the setting up of video collections and to obtain internal documentation and committee reports relevant to these issues.

Literature review/desk research

Approaches to the ubiquitous 'desk research' clearly varied. Some, such as that described in Experiences of setting up a fee based information service, were structured:

"(Desk research) included collecting background information on the firms based in the Science Park, identifying the general availability of resources relevant to the main areas of activity of these firms and collecting relevant data on the experience of others providing client-based value-added services to industry, particularly fee-based services ... extensive research was undertaken to identify existing fee-based services. This was in order to learn from the experience of others and collect data on existing charging policies and structures and marketing strategies. Various studies and reports were consulted and a review of the key findings is given in the literature review."[6]

Other projects took a rather more ad hoc approach:

"Information about the speakers of each language was collected in the first place by desk research. Shortcuts were taken by using the existing database, directories and previous research. Some information was taken from a collection of newspaper cuttings. It has not been possible to verify some of the information; some of the institutions may be extinct. The information on the whole helps indicate the extent of self-help activity in each language. The information was supplemented by browsing through the catalogue of the Library Association, the Institute of Education and other libraries."[7]

Group discussion

This was mentioned in one project - Bookreach - concerned with the delivery of library and information services to disadvantaged client groups in Buckinghamshire, which was carried out for Buckinghamshire County Library by the consultants Capital Planning Information. Regarding consultations with the intermediaries it was noted that:

"Group meetings which had been used by the consultants very successfully in similar projects in the past were considered as a very useful means of soliciting views, encouraging inter-agency contacts and pooling disparate skills and experience ... the relaxed and informal atmosphere of these meetings encouraged a valuable exchange of views."[8]

The questions (for example concerning gaps in provision and the best means of filling these gaps) were designed mainly to provide a structure for the meeting, but participants were invited to contribute anything which they felt relevant to the issues being considered as well as volunteering suggestions for improvements in areas of concern to them.

Workshops

Most projects made some mention of dissemination activity at the end of the project, which sometimes took on a workshop approach, but fewer made use of workshops whilst carrying out the project. LIVOTEC's feasibility study of a proposal to establish a support and advice service in the use of information technology in information work in Leicestershire for voluntary and ethnic minority groups used workshops to ensure that the voluntary sector was aware of the possibilities offered by the use of information technology. This approach appears to have been adopted due to the previous experience of the project participants:

"The participants in the project had gained experience in the uses of information technology themselves and had been responsible for developing awareness of the possibilities of IT in large libraries and educational establishments. They had noted the importance of the 'cascade' effect in introducing change, where a 'waterfall' of awareness is created by starting with a few who then inform an ever greater number until mass awareness results."[9]

What happened in practice was that two computer workshops were held at about the same time as a sample of groups received a questionnaire. The programme had been drawn up in response to suggestions made during interviews with 18 mainstream voluntary sector organisations. Although the academic institutions involved in the project provided equipment and expertise for the workshops, two paid staff from voluntary agencies took an equal part in training and familiarising attendees. It is noted that "besides bringing their own applications programmes with them and their practical knowledge of problems encountered in the voluntary sector, they increased the credibility of the workshop and the project; some scepticism had been expressed about the location of the project in academic institutions on the part of one or two of the interviewees."[10] Furthermore, the brief note on the success of the workshops suggest that the approach was an appropriate one to use to reach the sort of groups that the project wanted to reach, ie. those who were 'absolute beginners' with IT.

The Northern training Group's project, Cooperative training, open learning and public library staffs, aimed to carry out an audit of training provision and an analysis of the training needs of library staff in the ten public library authorities in the Northern region of England. As a result of this analysis

the intention was to produce open learning material to assist in meeting these needs. What is described as a "participative approach"[11] was adopted, which reached beyond consultation to the direct involvement of the project partners both in the development of the methodology and in its application. For example, as part of the analysis of training needs five job contexts were identified which covered all jobs in libraries apart from Chief Librarians and their Deputies. Questionnaires were then devised and piloted at a workshop and administered by the individual authorities; the information obtained was entered on a database and the results verified at workshops in each authority. It was felt that this kind of approach would promote ownership and understanding, reach and deploy knowledge and expertise and ensure effectiveness, commitment and credibility for the project.

Other techniques

An investigation into the effects of transient populations on the development of library services made use of a range of techniques including postal surveys, street surveys, library surveys and a relatively new survey technique derived from personal construct theory - Priority Search - to measure satisfaction. Instead of measuring satisfaction in absolute terms, for example by using a five point rating scale, Priority Search allows relative assessment, comparing satisfaction with different aspects of the service. The technique was adopted because "... the initial measurements using simple rating scales indicated high levels of satisfaction. However, when the data were investigated further a very close correlation was found to exist between expressed levels of satisfaction and both the age of respondent and length of residency, which aroused suspicions concerning the results and the use of this methodology. A second technique, Priority Search, was therefore introduced ..."[12] and it was found that "... using Priority search technique residents and non-residents expressed different priorities in their assessment of satisfaction."[13] (The analysis of the Priority Search questionnaires requires specific software produced by Priority Search Ltd).

Transferable lessons

Access to correspondence during the review stage of a PLDIS proposal between the then BLRDD and a grantee would suggest that 'transferable lessons' are a very important outcome of a PLDIS project. In practice this seems to be interpreted, for example by Huse in the evaluation of the PLDIS[14], as little more than publicising the work completed during the project via the project report and seminars and presentations. Furthermore, few reports themselves mention transferable lessons gained from the project as a whole. For example, Leicestershire County Council and Ulverscroft's Large print books in Asian languages? Customer needs in the 1990s gives this short comment on transferable lessons:

"The particular mix of expertise and experience and flexibility of resources which both Leicestershire County Council and Ulverscroft were able to bring to the study enabled the team to accommodate the changes required in both the timetable and budgetary allocations originally agreed for the project. The relatively high success rate achieved for both stages of the questionnaire survey may be attributed as much to the personalised approach adopted as to the pertinacity of the project team."[15]

LIVOTEC's project - An information technology support and advice service for voluntary and ethnic community groups - is typical in that transferable lessons from the whole project are given in the report but there are no comments referring to methodology. Other projects do contain

valuable feedback on methods but this is often lost within the whole report. For example, the study to provide an up-to-date information service to all businesses in the agricultural, horticultural and tourism sectors in the Somerset economy utilised a telephone survey to find out the information needs of farmers, where "experience proved the best times to carry out the survey were in the early evening and when the weather was inclement."[16]

However, this lack of concern with transferability is hardly surprising given that the PLDIS scheme as a whole has been criticised for showing little evidence of success in transferable lessons (partly due to inadequate and uncoordinated publicity.)[17] Huse's strategic evaluation of the PLDIS noted that "many librarians needed assistance in defining the aims and objectives of their projects, particularly in the fields of methodology, budget management and detailed monitoring and dissemination."[18] As an aside it can be noted that a number of reports do include what are described as 'outline methodologies' for the development of, say, a business strategy. The one area where there was feedback was regarding the success or otherwise of marketing.

Ironically, the project which had most to say about research methods was one where the research "has not proved to be as positive or valuable as predicted"[19]. Humberside County Council's investigation into the effects of transient populations on the development of library services was a feasibility study to develop a methodology for the collection of data concerning information and leisure needs of transient populations, in order to assist in the planning of library services. The end product was intended to be a system of guidance for other local authorities with large transient populations. It was noted that: "the findings on research techniques have been valuable within the Leisure Services Department of Humberside as a whole rather than in the 'transient user' situation. One positive outcome is the admission that many assumptions and techniques were wrong and the Research and Development team were able to learn from methodology mistakes."[20] This seems a rather short-sighted view to take. It can be argued that of all the PLDIS reports this project report is the most interesting from the point of view of an examination of methods because it is the only one to comment in any depth in a self-evaluative way on the effectiveness of the methods employed. This extract for example illustrates the type of observations made:

"Survey design, question structure, number of questions, and question order were found to have an effect on responses. Postal surveys were found to be ineffective as a means of collecting broad data ... responses were considered so poor that this methodology was abandoned after the pilot survey. Street surveys were found to be more successful, but depended for much of their success on effective sampling. Costs of this type of survey, per response, were quite high since research staff were only able to conduct 8-10 interviews per hour. The 'halo' effect, whereby respondents say what they believe the interviewer wants to hear, was thought to have affected results considerably. The library exit survey was also successful and the results compared well with those derived from other surveys, but its effectiveness depended on well constructed sampling ...The Priority Search (a relatively new technique used to measure satisfaction using a rating scale so that satisfaction can be compared with different aspects of the service) was successful in the number of positive responses generated, but demanded more explanation, and was more time consuming than other surveys. On the other hand, since it used relative rather than an absolute assessment, problems concerning 'halo effect' were avoided and the results were considered to be more meaningful."[21]

It is disappointing that the other projects do not appear to take such an open and evaluative approach to their work. From the point of view of the research community the knowledge that a research method does not work well in a given situation is just as important as knowing the circumstances in which it can be successfully applied. It is hoped that this sort of knowledge will be captured in one of the outcomes of the PhD work, namely a matrix, or toolkit, of potential research methods for application to particular research issues in public libraries.

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