Research reports

Research in public libraries: finding a way forward

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Discussion of the future of library and information science research in the UK, as reported in Information UK outlooks [1], includes the comment: "Although the number of projects based on public libraries appears to have increased in recent years, a lot of the research is retrospective and does not seem to address the new demands and problems that public libraries now find themselves having to deal with. Public libraries are now not only dealing with the public, but also with business and the TECs. They need more information on technology and equipment; on how people access services and what they are looking for; on ways of working with the private sector. There does not seem to be any useful research in these areas." In response, Dr Cannon of BLRDD noted that public libraries used to be very slow to pick up on the research carried out, but interest is growing.

Obviously these are times of great impending change for public libraries. The DNH/Aslib Review is one of several factors that emphasize the instability of the current arrangements. Most of the larger scale projects in recent years have been developmental (PLDIS) or cross-sectoral (LIPs); there is a definite lack of strategic work. Given the overall extent of the public library service in the UK - total gross expenditure of £797,000,000 in 1993-94, compared with a combined total of £454,000,000 for the national, university, HE and FE college sectors (LISU figures[2]) - this lack of fundamental research must be seen as extraordinary.

BLRDD[3] explains: "The Department has been concerned for some while about the difficulty of encouraging and supporting a strong research programme in the public library field. A grant was awarded to the Federation Of Local Authority Chief Librarians (FOLACL) to organize a seminar in February 1994, which discussed ways of developing a strategy and structure for public library research, and the Department has been involved in subsequent discussions to take forward the recommendations of the seminar." The project now starting has arisen from that seminar held in Kenilworth:

To review the present state of public library research, to debate what research is needed in the future and what structures to support it might be required.[4]

The quotation is taken from a paper circulated in October 1994 which proposed a project in three stages: a "state of the art" review, surveying research since 1982; a survey of public library research needs; and development of a model for the management of public library research.

The state of public library related research has been a concern of the public library community, intermittently, for a considerable time. Several meetings and seminars (eg: Banbury 1977; Sheffield 1984; Salford 1990; Kenilworth 1994) have discussed the issue extensively. Each identified a course of action, but little lasting result has come from any of them. This time round, FOLACL are determined that an effective and lasting way be found to encourage, coordinate, report - and implement the outputs of - strategic public library research and investigation.

The Project On Research in Public Libraries will run for six months from December 1995, and will cover the three topics identified after Kenilworth, as listed above. It is being carried out by John Pluse and Ray Prytherch, and managed by Essex Libraries on behalf of FOLACL. BLRDD has financially supported both the Kenilworth Seminar and this Project. There is a Project Steering Group: Geoffrey Hare, Derek Jones, Douglas Betts, Judith Elkin and John Burchell. However, any opinions expressed in this article are our own.

The three stages of the Project are distinct, but overlapping. Certainly our working on them will be to a considerable extent concurrent, especially in view of the six-month target.

One difficulty is in agreeing what we mean by "strategic", and the level of "research" in this context. John Burchell said at Kenilworth:

Research has to stand up to rigorous scrutiny and have more than local applicability.[5]

Earlier, Bob McKee said at Salford:

I do not want a piece of research that is academically rigorous, analytically comprehensive, methodologically impeccable, unreadable, 200 pages too long and two years too late. What I want is an OK investigation which is analytically and methodologically maybe 80% satisfactory, brief, of practical utility, and timely.[6]

So strict academic rigour seems debatable: pragmatism and applicability to the everyday world seems attractive to practitioners.

Then there is the question of "transferability": the extent to which research and investigation based on one or more public libraries is applicable across a wide range of (if not all) others. Transferability has been seen as an important and desirable outcome of PLDIS projects, but Roy Huse's work[7] shows it has rarely happened.

Consider also the outcome of most pieces of public library related research, even when clearly meeting the criterion of transferability: a report appears, there is a flurry of interest and discussion for a few months, then - nothing. It is difficult to understand why this happens and we see it as an important facet of this Project to try to get to the bottom of it. At the same time, we need to seek some clarity as to what we can all agree constitutes "strategic".

To increase the likelihood of research outputs being taken up and put to everyday use - to increase the chances of "transferability" - perhaps FOLACL needs to work to create a more widespread

climate of inquisitiveness (leading to more widespread research activity, both localized and "strategic") and spirit of sharing: we shall be looking into this also. Clearly, research and investigation outputs must be things public libraries *want* to act upon, not what are seen as ephemeral fads and fancies. They need to be widely acceptable solutions to widely held concerns.

We have produced a single questionnaire to gather the data we require for all three stages. It will be sent to all public library service heads and all heads of departments of library and information studies throughout the UK.

In addition we shall be consulting widely amongst professional bodies, cooperative agencies, quangos - indeed anyone we think may have something to tell us. Furthermore, our message to anyone in the research community and elsewhere whom we inadvertently miss out is - *please contact us*.

Part one of the overall Project is a survey of research since 1982, and follows on chronologically from similar surveys. Nick Moore has visited the scene twice: in 1978[8] and 1987[9] - with a degree of overlap. The years from 1978 up to the starting point for our own survey were very effectively reviewed by Linda Stewart[10]. In addition to examining the literature, and noting projects listed in CRLIS, we shall seek to establish what unpublished, unreported public libary related research and investigation has been carried out from 1982 to date. Assuming a full response, the data collected will form a valuable catalogue of recent research and investigation activity. Beyond this, close examination of the data should enable us to make some judgements about the current state of play in this area. We shall contact a selection of respondents for further discussion, and amplification.

The second part of the Project seeks to establish what the actual needs and wishes are for public library related research and investigation. There is a point of view, reflected in the reports of the seminars mentioned earlier, that not enough such research is carried out and, further, that much of what *is* carried out is not what the public libararies want. We wish to find out what these needs really are by collecting opinions from the public library community - who should be best placed to tell us - and from anyone else with a view on the subject.

Part two of our questionnaire seeks this information and, as before, we shall seek supplementary information and opinion from a number of respondents.

The aim must be to show whether all concerned can, collectively, agree an agenda of research activity for, say, the next five years. This involves not only identifying the needs, but also setting priorities within the list.

Managing and coordinating a research programme is the third part of the Project, and probably the hardest in which to find an agreed solution. The reports of some of the seminars on research and public libraries point to the lack of coordinating and managing mechanism overall, although there are few clues as to what body would be consensually acceptable to do this. What *is* clear at present is that the public library community as a whole feels little *ownership* of current public library related research and investigation and - perhaps not unrelated - there is very little take-up of research outputs in to practice (other than localized and very specific projects). It seems to be thought, on current evidence, that such research is largely divided between localized efforts, with hardly any transferability, and larger-scale projects devised and carried out by academically-based researchers working to some extent to their own agenda.

In the prevailing economic climate, research funding *and* human resources to put into research are equally scarce, and it could be thought that a more apparent pay-back is needed in terms of the community's strategic concerns and desire to improve everyday practice.

The third part of our questionnaire will invite respondents' views on these issues and, again, we shall explore the views of a selection of respondents in greater depth. To help move the debate forward, we will use all the data collected to construct some hypotheses, which we will then test out in a number of invited discussion groups.

Appendix

If you are not a questionnaire recipient we invite you to send us your views on the issues raised in parts two and three. A summary of these questions follows. The response address is given at the end.

Part two

What public library related research is needed over the next five years, on current and emerging issues? Please be as clear and specific as you can about topics. Please indicate a level of priority for *each* item by giving it a number in the range 1 (highest priority level) to 4 (lowest priority level).

Part three

To what extent should public library-related research and investigation be planned and coordinated nationally?

What organizations (existing or not) would be most appropriate for this role?

By what mechanisms could this coordination best be achieved?

Which do you see as the most appropriate funding bodies for public library related research?

How can implementation of research findings in everyday practice be encouraged?

The address for any comments or questions concerning this Project, and for responses to the above questions, is:
John Pluse & Associates, 14 Aireville Avenue, Bradford, BD9 4ET. Phone/Fax: 01274 594685

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A framework of the transferable skills of information professionals

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Background

This project originates from the comments of information professionals attending two seminars run by the School of Information and Media on the subject of *career development and planning*. The first seminar concerned a group of Scottish health sciences librarians. Much of this seminar concentrated on working through the Library Association's Framework for continuing professional development[1] with participants, but there were various opportunities for brainstorming and discussion about the opportunities and barriers to career development for health sciences librarians. Participants were unanimous and clear about what could most usefully be done to assist them with their career development. The most desirable aspect they wanted was recognition for their skills, training and experience. They wanted to feel there were pathways for their careers to develop along. They asked that their skills and competencies should be analyzed and presented within a framework document that could be shown to management. This would provide a tool which could be used in appraisal situations, when applying for jobs, regradings and so on. This would help information professionals to analyze their own skills and suggest how they these could be built upon in order to facilitate career development or enhancement.

A few months later another career planning seminar was carried out with librarians from the independent schools sector. Despite working in quite different types of organization, not surprisingly, their comments and requirements were very similar. So although this project is