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Between digital inclusion and social equality: the role of public libraries in Newcastle upon Tyne

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Abstract

This paper is based on findings obtained from qualitative research on the role of the public library service in reducing digital inequalities in disadvantaged neighbourhoods in Newcastle upon Tyne. Semi-structured interviews with four libraries' staff members, and direct observations during ordinary activities and events organised by libraries aimed to explore both the role played by public libraries in reducing digital inequalities and the current challenges that these actors face to promote digital and social equality. It identifies positive impacts produced by the public libraries through digital education and digital infrastructures on disadvantaged neighbourhoods, while also identifying some barriers experienced by public library authorities in providing such services.

1 Introduction

"The very existence of libraries affords the best evidence that we may yet have hope for the future of man" – T.S. Eliot

This paper's primary aim is to answer to the following questions: what role do public libraries play in promoting digital literacy? How important is digital literacy in increasing social inclusion? What kinds of activities do city libraries organise to enhance digital and social inclusion? The paper explores the extent to which libraries actively encourage digital literacy amongst local population by

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organising "free" educational activities. Furthermore, this paper explains the perceptions that library staff members themselves have of libraries as venues to develop and/or improve digital skills.

Traditionally, the role of libraries is to ensure the longevity of printed books by owning and organising them, and making them available through library facilities. In a similar way, this model is also valid for libraries that operate in the digital arena. Indeed, libraries tend to buy licenses, organise digital collections on local servers, and make them accessible to the community (Chua and Goh, 2010; Lougee, 2002). Since an increasing amount of information, knowledge, and news has been digitised and, sometimes, is exclusively available online, public libraries have become facilitators for accessing these data. However, since public libraries offer digital services and resources to the community, it should also be their duty to ensure that users acquire skills to use these services. In fact, the IFLA/UNESCO (1994) manifest underlines the importance of the public library in providing equality of access for all.

Given that before the advent of the "digital era" one duty of libraries was to help people in accessing and using library resources through direct support and educational activities, it seems natural to suppose that in the digital age they have to contribute towards enhancing digital literacy in order to make users capable of efficiently using digital services. In this sense, libraries are "hybrid" (Kapitzke, 2001) due to their double role in combining traditional and online services: on one hand, as physical identity, they have to ensure in-library services; on the other, as digital identity, they have to enhance digital literacy in terms of not only providing infrastructures but also skills and competences. In addition to providing efficient digital tools and infrastructure such as websites, electronic database and interactive digital communication (see Chua and Goh, 2010), this also means that libraries are expected to fulfil two requirements: training their staff, and enhancing the digital literacy of users. The resulting "cybrary" cannot be uniquely an electronic gateway but it is a combination of physical facilities and cyberspace and service delivery in person and online (Schmidt, 2006).

The relationship between libraries and social inclusion has been widely explored in the literature (Caidi and Allard, 2005; Hodgetts *et al.*, 2008; Muddiman *et al.*, 2000). These studies often underline the role of libraries in contributing towards integrating minority groups into host communities (Molz and Dain, 1999), towards challenging juvenile delinquency-related issues (Naylor, 1987) and towards increasing the information literacy of both children and adults (Adams *et al.*, 2002; Harding, 2013; Krolak, 2005). Moreover, libraries provide accessibility to computer stations and the Internet, increasing the possibilities for disadvantaged people to access information (Chowdhury, 2002; Dijk, 2005). Some authors highlight how, despite the library mission of serving the whole community, the accessibility (physical and digital) of its service is still far from adequate (Higgins, 2013; Krolak, 2005). Following the findings obtained by Usherwood (2001), the extent to which the public library service fulfils its social objectives largely depends on management factors. These include resources, marketing of the service, library rules and culture, structure and staff attitudes, the location of the library and the perception of safety. With regards to the study presented here, the issue of safety was considered marginal, while more attention

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was given to the location of libraries, resources available, training activities offered, and staff competences and attitudes.

In the UK, over 20% of adults do not have online access: as a consequence, libraries play a primary role in providing digital infrastructures, but also digital skills to bridge the digital divide (Department for Culture Media & Sport, 2016). In England there are over 3000 public libraries, with more than 225 million visits per year and 98 million visits to library websites (Department for Culture Media & Sport, 2016). Findings obtained by Liu and Wnuk (2009) in New England on six urban public libraries, show how libraries provide speed and easy access to the Internet. At the same time, users state the necessity to increase accessibility of the digital services in public libraries, by providing more workstations and longer hours of access. However, it is misleading to believe that the digital divide might be bridged by simply providing a large number of Internet points or digital devices. This techno-approach may reduce the first level of the digital divide, mainly based on physical access, but does not face digital inequalities (the second level of the digital divide), which in turn affect digital inclusion. Therefore, public libraries may play a key role in enhancing digital inclusion by improving digital skills and digital literacy. Indeed, the priorities of the Library Service in England are mainly related to enhancing health and wellbeing, social care, economic growth, community cohesion, access to cultural activity, but also promoting digital literacy, literacy and learning among both children and adults (Department for Culture Media & Sport, 2016).

Specifically, with regards to digital literacy, public libraries in England provide over 38,700 PCs and support digital literacy by providing free access to the internet, delivering training activities in collaboration with external partners, helping people get online, providing assistance to access online government and local services in critical areas such as for example benefits, business, health and wellbeing, jobs, and helping to develop higher end digital skills (Department for Culture Media & Sport, 2016).

The present research explores how a public library service addresses problems of social exclusion related to digital inequalities. The approach simultaneously considers physical access (availability of digital infrastructures) and activities provided by libraries to enhance usability and skills to satisfy precise needs (Warschauer, 2002). The work aims to fill a gap in the literature, which rarely considers the point of view of library staff members regarding digital equality and services provided for local communities. The paper is structured as follows: section two describes the context in which libraries are located in Newcastle upon Tyne; section three describes the methodology used to investigate the role of libraries in revitalising the area in which they are located; the fourth section reports and discusses the results obtained by both interviewing libraries' staff and directly participating in some activities promoted by the libraries. Finally, some conclusions will be drawn.

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2 Library Service in Newcastle upon Tyne

In 2016 in Newcastle upon Tyne 14 public libraries operate across the city (see Table 1). They are located in 12 wards which differ in terms of deprivation degree and presence of elderly residents (see Figure 1). Nine of them are run by the City Council: in November 2012, the Library Network Reduction and Library Stock Fund reduced the Local Services budget for Libraries and Cultural Service, Leisure Services, and Customer Service Centres by 47%. This caused a reduction in the number of Council-run libraries in the city (Murphy, 2013) from 18 to 9. Newcastle City Council (NCC) initially proposed the closure of 10 libraries, however, the majority of them were kept open thanks to new forms of management: there are four Partnership funded Libraries supported by the Council at a reduced cost; one library is unstaffed; and two Community Run libraries are staffed by volunteers and are separate from the core library network. The core network of nine Council-run libraries ensures that 96% of Newcastle residents live no further than 2.4 km from a Council-run library. Moreover, they are easily accessible thanks to local transport network (Murphy, 2013) and a Home Delivery Service is available. The library service also provides a mini-bus service run by volunteers at Kenton, Gosforth, East End and High Heaton Libraries.

Library	*Ward*	*% of 65-84 year olds in the ward*	*Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD, 2010)*
Walker Library	**Walker**	**15-18**	**65.94**
Outer West Library	**Denton**	**15-18**	**49.50**
Newbiggin Hall Library	Woolsington	15-18	43.66
Newburn Library	Newburn	15-18	30.74
Gosforth Library	West Gosforth	15-18	6.77
Blakelaw Library	**Blakelaw**	**13-14**	**45.70**
High Heaton Library	**North Heaton**	**13-14**	**30.63**
Denton Burn Library	Benwell and Scotswood	13-14	20.47
Fenham Library	Blakelaw	13-14	19.37
Cruddas Library	Elswick	9-12	61.64
West End Library	Elswick	9-12	47.14
Kenton Library	Kenton	9-12	9.64
East End Library	South Heaton	6-8	62.98
City Library	Westgate	6-8	14.66

Table 1: Libraries in Newcastle upon Tyne, % of 65-74 year olds and IMD per ward (Source: Newcastle City Council, 2011). Libraries included in the study are reported in bold
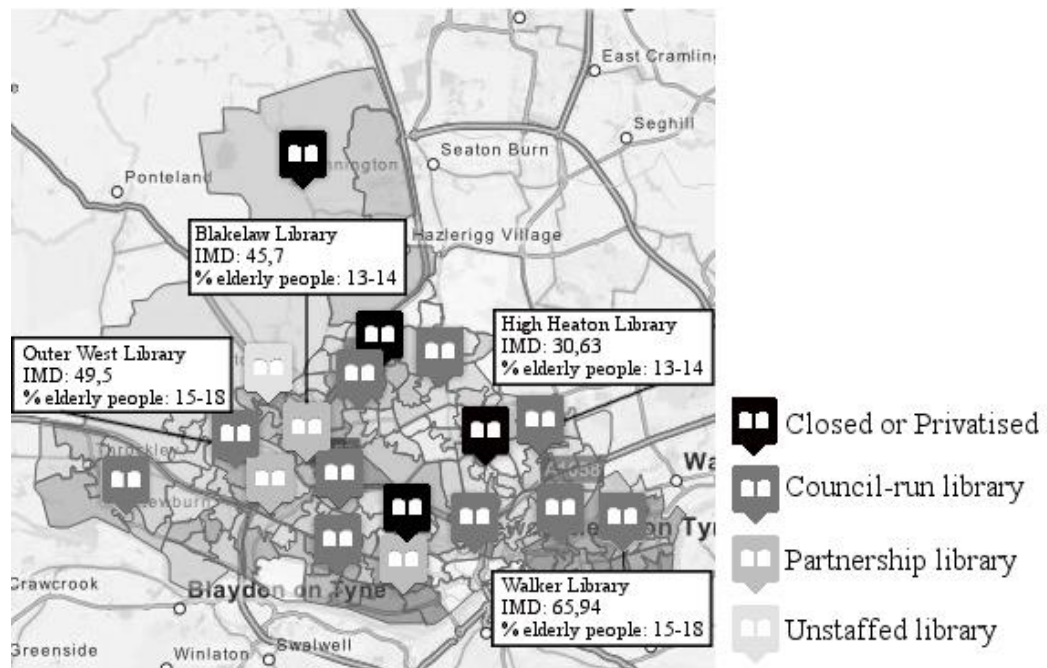
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Figure 1: Distribution of libraries in Newcastle upon Tyne and libraries included within the research (Amercader, 2013; Durcan and Shilton, 2012). Darker shading on the map indicates more deprived areas.

As reported on the Newcastle City Council website (http://www.newcastle.gov.uk/), one of the main priorities of the library service is to address inequalities across the city. In this direction, libraries provide some targeted services, such as activities to facilitate learning resources (e.g. PCs and Broadband access, books, newspapers, journals etc.). The Library Service provides internet sessions to older people, and literacy training and support to school children through homework help groups. In addition to physical infrastructures, the library service supports customers with Information Technology (IT) training activities. In particular, "1-2-1 taster sessions" are held by staff and volunteers on request.

The library service can be accessed 24 hours a day through the Internet (via PCs or mobile devices). In addition to IT support, libraries organise a number of face-to-face activities, which despite their "universal" character specifically aim to involve disadvantaged people. Some examples of these activities are café meetings, homework support, work club, reading and knitting groups, and health-related activities. All these activities are evidence of the library mission to create occasions of "collective effervescence" aimed at reinforcing community social cohesion. However, the Government spending reductions forced the NCC to reduce these services (in addition to staff size and resources) to avoid the closure of many libraries.

This reduction of services, in particular within deprived areas, might compromise the achievement of the above mentioned goals, in particular with regards to the promotion of digital inclusion in the most deprived areas. Even though, as reported above, most residents live no more than 2.5km from a library service, not everyone may be willing to use public transport to reach libraries (given costs for

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transport, and users' age and their potential disabilities). Online channels might have a relevant role in cost-cutting and service optimisation in libraries. However, on-line services can be accessed only by users with a digital background. This suggests that this vicious circle may be broken only if libraries maintain their hybrid character between physical and digital identity.

3 Methodology

The present research combined two qualitative approaches; direct observation and semi-structured interviews. Observational activities were undertaken during both ordinary and collective activities organised by libraries aimed at promoting digital inclusion. Four libraries were selected by considering two criteria simultaneously present in the ward: an Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD, 2010)[1] > 30 and a percentage of 65-74 year olds population >13% (Newcastle City Council, 2011). The following libraries were selected: Walker Library, Outer West Library, Blakelaw Library and High Heaton Library (see Table 1 and Figure 1).

As shown by Table 1, although Newbiggin Hall Library and Newburn Library fulfilled both criteria, they were excluded because the first one is an unstaffed library, and the staff of the second one refused to be interviewed. However, Newburn Library was visited twice in order to observe the library dynamics. We considered elderly concentration because the literature on the digital divide shows that elderly people tend to meet more difficulties in using digital tools (Niehaves and Plattfaut, 2014) even though these offer the elderly a number of benefits such as independence and linkages with family and friends (Cotten *et al.*, 2012; Czaja and Lee, 2007). However, findings obtained by Quan-Haase *et al.* (2016) show how the advent of the digital era has produced effects on senior users' experience of libraries, allowing them to become digital users.

In addition to interviews with the staff of the selected libraries, the Digital Inclusion Officer for Your Home Newcastle (YHN) and Newcastle City Council was interviewed as the person responsible for organising computer training courses at the City Library of Newcastle. Two different semi-structured schemes for interview were developed. In the case of library staff members they were asked about the following macro-areas:

- Services available in the library;

- Situation pre and post 2013 budget savings;

- Regular users of public library resources;

- Information and services searched by users on line;

- Dependency of users on computers provided by libraries for accessing the Internet;

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[1] The Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) combines information from seven distinct domains: Income Deprivation, Employment Deprivation, Health Deprivation and Disability, Education Skills and Training Deprivation, Barriers to Housing and Services, Living Environment Deprivation, and Crime (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2011). The IMD score in Newcastle varies from 7.4 (less deprived ward) to 65.9 (most deprived ward).

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- Internet connection speed;

- Upgrading of hardware and software;

- Number and type of workstations;

- Blocks and limitation on web-sites;

- Role of staff in supporting users to search for information on-line;

- Impacts produced by libraries on the community in which they are located.

In the case of the interview with the Digital Inclusion Officer for Your Home Newcastle and Newcastle City Council the following macro-areas were explored:

- Role of interviewee in the library;

- Digital services provided;

- Attendants of IT training programs;

- Benefits/advantages for users from participating in IT training activities;

- Main barriers to using digital resources for users;

- Dependency of users on computers/courses provided by libraries for accessing the Internet;

- Library staff IT training;

- Activities to address to users' needs.

Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, with the exception of two, where interviewer notes were used for the analysis. The observation sessions identified the main facilities available in the libraries (and how they are used by library patrons), how the staff interacted with users, and the overall internal social dynamics.

Among the libraries selected, Outer West Library and Walker Library are managed by the council, while High Heaton Library and Blakelaw Library are partnership libraries. Partnership libraries resulted from the budget savings, which forced the City Council to start partnerships with different bodies including Newcastle College, Your Homes Newcastle and "friends of" groups.

Outer West Library is a bigger library (with several staff members) then the other libraries selected. It provides 18 PC workstations and it is located in a shopping area (Denton Park Shopping Centre). The building is managed in partnership with Newcastle College. The Outer West Library also shares the building with the Outer West Customer Service Centre and the Outer West Pool. High Heaton Library is a smaller library, however it provides 18 PC workstations, four of which are located in an area specifically intended for children. This is a partnership between the City Council and the Newcastle College, which run the building.

Walker Library is a small library located in the Walker ward. It has 7 workstations and only one member of staff. It is collocated with a Leisure Centre (Walker Activity Dome), which is managed by a registered charity, the North Country

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Leisure (see http://www.northcountryleisure.org.uk/newcastle/walker-activity-dome). It is also located in front of a care home, the Walker Lodge Care Home.

Blakelaw is a small library located in the Blakelaw ward. It has 8 workstations and one member of staff. The library is located in the same building of the local Community Centre, run by the Blakelaw Ward Community Partnership (BWCP), which brings together residents and councillors in a charity organisation to revitalise the ward and support public services and social enterprise (see http://loveblakelaw.com/).

4   Results and Discussion

All the selected libraries offer almost the same services (see Table 2) in terms of computers with internet access, WiFi connection, online-catalogue, online journals/newspapers/books/music, and IT support. Public libraries in Newcastle provide the Internet access, services, training, and assistance that appear to be essential to both serving the needs of individual patrons and their communities, and delivering initiatives for digital literacy and digital inclusion (Bertot *et al*., 2012).

Services	*Walker Library*	*Outer West Library*	*Blakelaw Library*	*High Heaton Library*
Computers with internet access	7	18	8	18
On-line catalogue	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Wifi	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
E-books/E-Audiobooks	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
On-line journals	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
On-line newspaper	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
On-line Audio books	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
On-line Audio music	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
On-line movies	No	No	No	No
CD/DVD Book, Movies and Music	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
IT Courses or Support	Free 1-2-1 Taster Sessions	Free 1-2-1 Taster Sessions	Free 1-2-1 Taster Sessions	Free 1-2-1 Taster Sessions
Quick Surf computers (15 minutes session)	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Access via mobile using	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Table 2: E-Services offered by libraries

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Library staff recognise the primary role of libraries in providing access to the Internet for the residents of the area. In fact, the majority of PC users do not have their own PCs or an internet connection at home. Moreover, libraries offer several additional services such as printers and scanners that users do not usually have at home. As staff members stated:

> Some people don't have PCs at home, that's why they come here... Or their PCs are not working...We have also printing facilities WiFi connected... A lot of people come in to do work, courses.

> (Staff 1)

> The library offers a lot services such as, 1-2-1 internet taster sessions to customers on on-line shopping, basic internet and computers, email, file management, health information, music downloading, Facebook, Twitter, Skype, digital photography, I-pad and Android tablets [...]. I think that one of the most important service that we offer is the support to job-searchers. We help them to search jobs through the Internet, to build CVs. Often the library users do not have their own computers or printers at home. They have no access to Internet so the library services are very useful for them. Often people ask for help to go online.

> (Staff 2)

As stated by all members of staff, libraries' customers are a mixture of people: elderly people, family with children, children from primary schools (thanks to agreements with local schools), younger and disadvantaged people who use the library services in particular to search for jobs. In all cases the staff recognise that the majority of older people come to the library to read books, but also to meet other people and socialise thanks to the presence of café areas. Younger people usually come to the library to use computers and the Internet. However, what is often highlighted by the staff is the role of libraries in supporting users to build their curriculum vitae (CV) and to search jobs. They also underline that usually adults and older people ask for help from the staff for using computers, scanners and to navigate on the Internet.

Library staff recognise the importance of their libraries in revitalising the neighbourhood. In particular, they identify the impact of the libraries in the area in relation to the IT offered, which otherwise would not be accessible for people who live in the ward. In turn, this would also limit residents' possibilities to find a job and learn how to write and present their CV to potential employers. The role of these libraries in revitalising their neighbourhood is particularly evident in relation to the deprivation that characterises these areas. In fact, as stated by the staff, the library plays a significant role, on the one hand for elderly people who interpret the library as a place of socialisation in which they meet other people, participate in courses (e.g. knitting courses) and groups (café or reading groups), and relax reading books; on the other hand, the library represents a support for younger people and adults who need to learn how to use IT and find a job. Furthermore, they are places of learning for children that come to the library with their family or thanks to the agreement with their schools. Finally, libraries also represent a place in which people can be supported to find information related to city council

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services, job opportunities, and housing services. Findings obtained by D'Elia *et al.* (2002) are confirmed by the fact that even though the Internet becomes an integral and fundamental part of the library service and increasingly requested by users, its use does not affect the reasons why people use the library.

When asked to identify the main functions of the library in the wider area the staff stated:

> *Very important role in proving a public service for people who are social excluded, for people who use Internet facilities and they do not have the possibility to use them at home. It is also important for reading activities.*
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> *(Staff 3)*

> *That's a big resource in particular for children: around 200 children use the library. It is also a social meeting place to go for coffee for example, in particular for older people. This is also a place in which you can find information and help.*
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> *(Staff 2)*

> *What else is around here?... In this area... it is a deprived area and it offers free access to books and free access to a warm place to spend time.*
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> *(Staff 4)*

> *It's the centre of the community and a lot of elderly people come and might not go anywhere else and just come here, you know, to have a chat... That's a neighbourhood community library... So it's lovely.*
>
> *(Staff 1)*

> *The library is a nice atmosphere [...]. The atmosphere is so nice when people come here. People come to my course and they are looking for work... but they also need skills to meet employers... it's a circle.*
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> *(YHN officer)*

The description of public libraries made by the staff as warm places in which people can feel safe, socialise, and be supported to search for jobs, shows how in these areas the library becomes "the heart of the community" (Usherwood, 2001). This is also testified by the strong reaction of local communities to the threat of closure in 2013. They reacted by organising protest-campaigns, occupying libraries, creating community partnerships, associations, and charity organisations to manage the libraries, and proposing new solutions and plans to keep the libraries open. High Heaton Library was one of the libraries threatened by closure, but thanks to Newcastle College, which decided to run some of its classes for students in the building, the library service was kept open. The old Walker Library building closed on July 2013 and moved to Wharrier Street in July 2013 as part of Newcastle City Council's budget strategy (Brown, 2014; Swan, 2014).

Blakelaw library was due to close in 2015 as part of the 2013 budget savings, however the established Community Partnership now owns the building and buys back the library service from the Council. As suggested by the literature, libraries become easy targets for spending reviews, because their value in fighting social

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exclusion is often underestimated and they are not able to demonstrate their primary role in supporting community life (Jaeger *et al.*, 2013). Even though the considered libraries were not closed, some of them have reduced or changed their opening times. In fact, since the 9th of May 2016 the libraries involved in this research have reduced their service as follows: Outer West Library from 54 hours to 23 hours per week (p/w); Newburn Library from 35.75 to 18.5 hours p/w; Walker Library from 43 to 23 hours p/w; High Heaton Library has not changed opening times. Blakelaw Library has increased its service from 16 to 19 hours p/w, however opening times have changed: Blakelaw library used to be open in the morning on Tuesday and Saturday, after the changes it is open only in the afternoon. This means that in some cases library users have lost access to PCs and the Internet early in the morning. In fact, beyond the High Heaton Library, the considered libraries open at 10am and sometimes this can represent a constraint to users' job-searching activities:

> *The library now will be open later, so people who come in the morning will not have a chance to use a computer... It could be that someone sent to you an email saying: "email me back by 10 o'clock tomorrow and you'll get a job". How can they do if the library is not open until 10?*
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> *(YHN officer)*

> *And this is very important for people who are jobseekers because they are supposed to spend, I think, 30-40 hours on searching for job a week, but if they do not have the Internet at home how they are supposed to do that?*
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> *(Staff 4)*

To support people in their on-line activities, the original restriction of using computers up to a maximum of 2 hours per day per person has been recently revoked and users can ask for additional time if computers are available for other users. In the case of Blakelaw library, the new opening times (only in the afternoon from 2pm to 5 or 6pm) represent an obstacle for elderly and children from primary schools:

> *I think that a lot of elderly people won't come in the afternoon because I think that when it gets too late in the afternoon they don't like to be out, you know... But it's a shame that they couldn't keep it open in the morning [...]. Elderly people shared a couple of small groups in the morning... I think that the school will find difficult to come in the afternoon*
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> *(Staff 1)*

Even though the majority of IT courses are run at the City Library, which represents the core library in the city, local customers often ask staff to help them navigate online, and they can also book "one to one sessions" in their library. These training activities are provided by volunteers, who are part of a bigger digital inclusion project in Newcastle launched by the YHN in March 2015. In fact, the collaboration between Newcastle City Council and Your Home Newcastle, which manages council homes on behalf of Newcastle City Council, gave birth to "Your Homes Newcastle Digital Champion Pilot Project", to train tenants to become confident Digital Champions. As explained by the Digital

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Inclusion Officer of YHN, as soon as Digital Champions became confident with IT, they were involved in supporting other members of their community to access and use digital services. From this project a number of benefits and additional activities resulted such as improved digital skills of customers for accessing NCC services, and free WiFi was installed in all YHN sheltered accommodation, tower and community venues. 773 people were engaged as Digital Champions, of whom 22 are still active.

From this project, initially addressed to city council tenants, additional training activities were organised in the City Library to train not only tenants but all people willing to learn to use IT. Hence, volunteers started to train people in the context of specific courses or in one to one sessions requested by the different libraries. The total number of hours volunteered by Digital Champions was 1126 from March 2015 to March 2016. Following the literature on the role of libraries in urban contexts, some positive outcomes might be highlighted in relation to the ability of NCC to create partnerships between local libraries and external organisations (see Dutch, 2000; Pateman, 2000; Vincent, 2000): to create synergies between libraries work and social policies aimed at fighting poverty and exclusion (Linley, 2000; Muddiman, 2000); and to reinforce the educational vocation of libraries in relation to local needs (Dutch, 2000; Vincent, 2000). In fact, the Digital Champions Pilot Project was developed in relation to the results obtained by a series of qualitative tenant focus groups and a survey to identify a specific computer training programme.

In the same direction, NCC created a number of partnerships and joint projects with external partners, for example in the context of "Skills Hub", which is a support service with training, career and job advice provided at the City Library by a partnership between Newcastle City Council, Connexions, National Careers Service, Newcastle Futures, Generation NE, Newcastle College and Newcastle City Learning (see https://www.newcastle.gov.uk/jobs-and-careers/skills-hub). It was observed that those libraries which are collocated with other services are more frequented due to people using the other non-library services available. Moreover, from these partnerships a number of initiatives arose."Training Weekly Learn My Way" courses, which support the new Skills Hub, have been scheduled until September 2016 and the Digital Champions will support at these events, while four additional WiFi Launches in council housing estates have been scheduled in April 2016. One-to-one IT sessions are constantly provided by YHN and digital inclusion sessions are organised for groups and organisations when requested.

Digital Champions also support the twice monthly Techy Tea Parties at the Newcastle City Library and train other activities and people. The adoption of IT infrastructures and models allowed the City Council to transform libraries in participatory learning arenas aimed at increasing civic engagement, literacy and access (McShane, 2011). As a consequence, the interactive/participatory learning model also promotes inclusion by directly involving people in co-producing knowledge and activating the process of knowledge-transfer to increase capacity-building of local communities. In this sense, public libraries in Newcastle enhance social inclusion by providing both access to ICTs and those skills needed for guaranteeing democratic participation (Warschauer, 2003). Libraries play a

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proactive role in involving local communities in diverse activities (from education to entertainment) and offering them social meeting places in which the local and the virtual, different ethnical and social groups, different generations and different arenas of interest meet each other, thus promoting participation as central issue for social inclusion (Aabø, 2005; Usherwood, 2007).

However, since the majority of services and activities in Newcastle are provided at the Central Library, smaller libraries located in the suburbs (such as those included in the research) sometimes suffer from the scarcity of collective training provided. This is in relation to the lack of both public resources and customers' demand for these services. Moreover, IT training for staff is not mandatory, even though in the majority of cases the staff previously worked at the City Library and received some basic training. This means that, beyond the one-to-one sessions, which are arranged in relation to patrons' requests, staff members spontaneously help and support "digital users".

At the same time, IT training courses at the central library are attended by people from all over Newcastle also because they are widely advertised and involve several organisations which in turn publicise these activities. Moreover, as the Digital Inclusion officer stated, sometimes there is a need to involve people in IT training by attracting them with other pretexts. This is the case, for example, for the WiFi Launches in YHN sheltered accommodation:

> *A lot of people in sheltered accommodations are over 50, over 55 [...] we decided we did not want to say to them: 'oh hi you are gonna have WIFI... do you wanna come to have some tea and cake?'. One of my volunteers [...] said: 'why don't we have a World War II launch tea party [...]t?' They used tablets to do Google talk searches, [...], asking their questions, and it worked really really well [...]. It was a nice trick!*

> *(YHN Officer)*

This "trick" was used in relation to the awareness that people might feel inadequate for acquiring digital skills or that they are not interested in because they do not know the opportunities that IT can offer. Furthermore, a wide distance from the central library might also contribute towards discouraging people to participate in these activities in relation to a number of reasons such as lack of time, of individual transport and interest. However, thanks to partnerships with external bodies, NCC has been developing a comprehensive strategy which aims to provide Internet connections and infrastructures in council houses and basic IT skills for tenants to access on-line services. This also means that some advanced IT training might be offered on-line, thereby reducing costs for providing such activities. The vicious circle in which not only infrastructures are needed, but also competences and skills, which in turn are provided in relation to the availability of public resources, shows that a minimum amount of specific in loco activities are needed. NCC has taken many steps in this direction by adopting long-run strategies which are simultaneously focused on digital and social exclusion. However, the activities provided by the City Library might be not sufficient to involve all of those who are digitally excluded. Training courses should be increased in number and spread across the city by involving additional partners and local communities. Moreover, they need to be promoted in the context of

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other activities that attract people and show them the potential advantages of IT. However, the availability of financial and human resources limits the evolution of the process because in the majority of cases courses are run by volunteers, as explained by the YHN officer:

> *People come to the library all the time and they say 'I got a tablet, I got a computer'... So the library offers one to one taster sessions [...]. There are one to one taster sessions into my classes and I also run one to one with my volunteers... People can book them in library. I got eleven volunteers that are now active. For some courses I got twenty volunteers...[...], but people get a job, people get sick, people have family commitment, people have babies... So, you know, depends on a lot of things... They are so kind!*

> *(YHN officer)*

5 Conclusions

This paper presents some new insights about the role of libraries in promoting digital inclusion. It referred to four libraries run by the Newcastle City Council in order to understand the extent to which the presence of libraries is relevant to promote digital inclusion in deprived areas. The analysis of the interviews with library staff members on their perception about the impacts produced by libraries on the neighbourhood, showed some evidence of the role played by the city libraries in deprived areas, which might be synthesised as follows.

First of all, libraries guarantee digital access: they play a significant role in deprived areas in relation to the provision of IT services otherwise inaccessible for the majority of users who live in the area. In the Newcastle case, the libraries provide PCs, scanners, printers, Internet access that usually customers do not have at home. This means that these resources are the only ones available to support their work/study/entertainment/ordinary activities/communication/online social connections. Hence, this helps to reduce the first level of the digital divide.

Second, libraries not only provide physical access to the digital arena, but they also represent "learning arenas" in which on the one hand people can find physical resources such as books, newspapers, magazines, journals, and other kind of information, on the other they can attend several courses related to IT but also to other topics. More specifically, during our observation we noted the key role played by public libraries in Newcastle in improving digital skills (thus, reducing digital inequalities) by organising collective training courses (mainly in the main City Library), but also individual activities that consider the specific needs of users (e.g. one-to-one trainings). At the same time, the staff involved in enhancing digital inclusion recognise the importance of spreading training activities across the city (and specifically in most deprived areas) in order to make them more effective. In fact, sometimes disadvantaged people do not have the possibility (in terms of money, time, transport) to reach the central library in which the majority of IT training courses are concentrated. However, the lack of human and economic resources available to steadily provide IT training in all libraries represents one of the biggest constraints to the digital inclusion mission implemented by the City Council. Currently, the majority of IT related activities are carried out thanks to the engagement of volunteers who spontaneously support

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library's activities. However, the engagement of Digital Champions, selected from council housing tenants, has produced a number of benefits in terms of developing a virtuous circle in which trained tenants teach other members of their community. This produces advantages not only in terms of enhancing "digital independency" of tenants, but also of creating favourable conditions for increasing both the cohesiveness of the community, and the digital capital/capacity of tenants to further self-train on-line. This represents an example of how libraries and social policies synergistically work to fight poverty and social/digital exclusion, and adopt a comprehensive model for social inclusion.

Third, the role of public libraries has evolved from an educational vocation to a more complex system in which individual and collective training coexist with socialisation functions and other forms of material and immaterial support. Libraries keep their educative role by providing learning resources and study areas for individual or collective use (in particular, children use library services to learn and do their homework). However, in the most deprived areas, the library becomes a place around which the social life of the community revolves. In fact, libraries become a place of socialisation in which older people meet up, participate in formal and informal activities, and relax reading books. Moreover, those libraries which are collocated with other services (e.g. managed by community centres) are likely to be more frequented for social purposes in relation to the number of people who use also the other services available. At the same time, libraries support younger and adults who need help to use ITs to find a job. Finally, libraries also represent a place in which people can be supported to find the information they are looking for, related for example to city council services, job opportunities, and housing services.

The main constraints to the library work are caused by the availability of public resources that do not allow the reinforcement of those activities aimed at enhancing digital inclusion. In Newcastle, the budget savings are likely to affect the smaller libraries by reducing opening times and services provided, which by contrast, given their "social function", should be reinforced, in particular in those areas characterised by higher degrees of deprivation. In fact, the reduction of opening times and services limits the possibility for both children from primary schools and elderly people to use the library, but also for adults to search and find jobs. Currently, most of the activities, and in some cases the libraries (e.g. Heaton) are supported by volunteers and local community engagement. This means that the system might be not sustainable in the long run because the local volunteers might not guarantee the stability required by a library service. At the same time, the capacity of the NCC to cooperate with other bodies shows how the partnership model might produce positive effects on providing library services by connecting them to other kind of services and activities while reducing the costs of provision for the City Council.

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