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An overview of public library research activity and developments in Northern Ireland

Helen Osborn

Abstract

The author describes research undertaken by the government department responsible for public libraries in Northern Ireland to inform policy development and by practitioners to inform practice or in pursuit of academic qualifications.

Unlike other parts of the UK, Northern Ireland does not have a well-established academic department providing a library research capability alongside professional library education. There are structural differences as well, with public library services currently being delivered by five Education and Library Boards. These will be replaced, in terms of libraries, by the Northern Ireland Library Authority (NILA) i.e. a single library service for the whole of Northern Ireland, in April 2009. The Boards are non-departmental public bodies funded by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) which is also responsible for setting strategic direction and policy; a role which will continue when NILA comes into being.

As a result of these two factors, public library research in Northern Ireland is generally practitioner research undertaken with a view to service development, or research commissioned by DCAL to inform policy development. Surveys and consultation form the basis of much of this research.

DCAL was established in 1999 and in 2001 embarked upon the most substantial research about Northern Ireland libraries for many decades, 'a review of the Public Library Service, to establish the current position of, and to create an agreed future vision for, the service.'

A research team based in the department's Policy Evaluation and Research Unit was set up and undertook a ten stage process:

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- Desk research which involved a literature search, sourcing relevant information to aid the review and discussing the information that was already available with library experts, academics and public library staff;

- Submissions were invited by placing advertisements in the press and 48 were received. The aim was to identify issues and stakeholders. This fed into the development of survey work and the Future Search Conference;

- An overview of the Historical Development of the Public Library Service was commissioned based on semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, past and present;

- Eight focus groups were conducted across Northern Ireland; Participants were selected to reflect such variables as age, frequency of use, with and without children, educational level, rural/urban dwellers and Education and Library Board area. The objective of this piece of work was to establish the views and opinions of users and non-users of public libraries across a range of issues including image, awareness, the role of librarians, the role of libraries, the impact of new technology;

- The general public were surveyed by including questions in the Omnibus Survey run by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA). A total of 1,176 respondents, representative of the population of Northern Ireland, completed the survey. The main aim of this survey was to quantify relevant issues that emerged from the focus groups and the submissions;

- 600 library staff completed questionnaires designed to identify current skills/competences and to quantify staff views on the current and future library service;

- Library users were also surveyed in 40 service points resulting in 962 completed questionnaires;

- The Research team carried out the data analysis for the three surveys mentioned above;

- DCAL hosted a three-day Future Search Conference which brought together 58 people with a key interest in the public library service to help identify and debate relevant issues and to begin to develop ideas for future action. Five themes emerged which were developed at a later stage by Action Planning Groups; and

- These groups addressed The Contribution of the Public Library Service to the Community, the Quality of the Public Library Service, Marketing the Public Library Service, Resourcing the Public Library Service and the Contribution of the Electronic Libraries for Northern Ireland (ELFNI) project and each group produced a report.

This process resulted in Tomorrow's Libraries (DCAL, 2002), a substantial report with 73 recommendations addressing most aspects of public library services other than, as the report's foreword acknowledges, the allocation of resources amongst the five Boards and the nature of regional services.

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Since that time DCAL has regularly sought views on library services through the insertion of questions in NISRA's Omnibus Survey, a sample survey which provides a representative snapshot of public opinion amongst adults. A systematic random sample of addresses is drawn from the Land and Property Services Agency list of addresses and then an adult (16+) from each household is randomly selected. This approach allows analysis of the views of both users and non-users of services. As well as a number of standard questions relating to levels and nature of library use, there is usually a focus on a particular aspect of library services. In 2007, for example, this focus was on opening hours. More recently there have been questions about the benefits experienced as a result of going to a library and the intention is that this approach should continue. DCAL also inserts a suite of questions into the Young Person's Behaviour and Attitudes Survey which takes place every three years.

These views informed 'Delivering Tomorrow's Libraries; Principles and Priorities for the Development of Public Libraries in Northern Ireland' (DCAL, 2006) which also drew on the results of a user survey delivered via the 1200 public access terminals in libraries and a public consultation process, as well of course, as the research for 'Tomorrow's Libraries'. This document addressed the two issues which 'Tomorrow's Libraries' failed to address.

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) has a remit to provide inspection services for three government departments including DCAL. From time to time it looks into libraries with its most recent library report dealing with essential skills for those for whom English is not their first language (ETI, 2008). This aimed to identify good practice in relation to these areas, to provide external quality assurance of the internal quality assurance strategies used by library services and to support DCAL in the dissemination of the good practice identified.

A number of individuals have conducted research, often as part of a degree or further degree course, generally relating in some way to their own service as well as to the broader environment.

Micky Doran, formerly of the Southern Education and Library Board (SELB), considered Portadown Library as a case study for the relationship between the library service and the local community in Northern Ireland. His literature review explored the complex links between the concepts of social disadvantage and political division and violence. He conducted interviews with librarians and local groups from both communities, individually, and in focus groups, to explore their perceptions of the current role and function of the library service in a deeply divided town. Amongst his findings was the perception by local people that social and political barriers existed, preventing optimum use of the public library service by all sectors of the community. Furthermore, the emphasis on traditional aspects of library services meant that local groups were circumventing the library service and setting up their own community information provision. Thus, unless the library service could become more fully integrated into the whole community, it would become increasingly marginalised within such a community. His dissertation (Doran, 2000) also formed the basis for a journal article (Doran and Preston, 2000).

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Similarly a journal article with Geraint Evans (Topping and Evans, 2005) resulted from Darren Topping's dissertation (Topping, 2005) which investigated the extent to which public libraries in Belfast were affected by the Northern Ireland Troubles between 1969 and 1994. He outlines the impact of the Troubles on the buildings, staff and finances of Belfast libraries, details the effect on the Falls Road branch, a library in the centre of the turmoil, examines the literature generated by the Troubles and discusses how the Northern Ireland Political Collection at the Linen Hall Library, Belfast has harnessed these materials.

More recently, a dissertation by Evelyn Johns (Johns, 2003) of the Western Education and Library Board (WELB) in which she examined best practices for the management and use of the Omagh Bomb Archive, an archive created following the car bomb in Omagh, County Tyrone on 15 August 1998 which killed 29 people and injured hundreds more, led to an article with the same title (Johns, 2007). She searched the literature on established practices for archive management and compared these findings to data extracted from questionnaires sent to other archives created spontaneously following a tragic event. Her findings have informed WELB's activities in developing the Omagh archive.

Individual research is not always undertaken as part of a degree in library and information studies. For example, Maire Coalter (Coalter, 2004) conducted a study into the policy and practice of Northern Ireland's libraries in relation to essential skills needs using action research as part of her Diploma in the Teaching and Management of Literacy and Essential Skills course at Queen's University, Belfast.

Only occasionally do individuals undertake research not associated with an academic course. Anne Peoples of WELB obtained the 2003 Travelling Librarians Award from the English Speaking Union and CILIP which enabled her to visit a range of libraries and organisations in three states in the US. Her subsequent report made a number of recommendations, about how what she saw could be adapted and implemented in Northern Ireland and this happened in a number of cases. The impact of this report was greatly increased due to wide circulation and a number of dissemination events, which were a requirement of the funding.

Northern Ireland's equality legislation and the requirement to carry out equality impact assessments (EQIAs) often result in research into particular aspects of library services. The EQIA of the Electronic Libraries for Northern Ireland project (ELfNI) undertaken by the five Boards co-joined with DCAL is a good example of this process. ELfNI provides public access to the Internet and other ICT facilities with almost 1200 public access terminals in Northern Ireland's libraries, staff ICT and a range of other services.

The available data and research with regard to ELfNI and the nine equality categories (Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 sets out a need to promote equality of opportunity between those of different religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status or sexual orientation; men and women, persons with a disability and those without; persons with dependants and those without) was considered. This comprised employment data relating to the gender

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and perceived religious belief of library staff, the location of libraries mapped against census data, such data as was available about the age and gender of registered library users and desk research into other library ICT projects.

A report was then produced setting out the issues e.g. potential barriers to use of ICT facilities by older people, the need for adaptive technology, issues around Irish Travellers, affordability of services and concerns about the potential transfer of some staff to a private sector provider, together with the proposed mitigations. This was used a the basis of a public consultation which included distribution of 1800 copies of the report, public meetings, meetings with special interest groups and the receipt of submissions. The outcomes of both stages in the process were changes to ELfNI which benefited customers and a body of information about people's views on libraries and their needs in relation to libraries.

More recently the five Boards undertook research into the potential role of libraries in relation to mental health to inform a funding bid. This research was funded by the Big Lottery Fund through a development grant and included an online and paper survey with 2,136 responses, 14 focus groups involving 130 participants affected by mental illness, interviews with 18 stakeholders, a survey of the mental health teams in health trusts and of healthy living centres.

Individual Boards have researched the views of library users and non-users in some detail in order to review and develop services with the North Eastern Education and Library Board (NEELB) carrying out the most extensive exercise of this sort. Its review was informed by initial consultation to obtain users' views of the service and, perhaps unsurprisingly, users wanted longer opening hours, improved books stock and better facilities, a view that coincided with the findings of an earlier lapsed user survey. This led to an options paper (NEELB, 2005) that was the basis of very extensive consultation with 1,418 responses and a total of 21 public meetings. The views expressed during the consultation were published and informed the implementation of the review (NEELB, 2006).

Much of the research described in this article has, due to its very nature and the circumstances that led to its being undertaken, has had a significant impact on policy and practice. However, there is a clear need for substantially more research to be carried out. This requires a coherent research agenda shared by DCAL, NILA and other institutions, an enhanced skills base, closer involvement with research being undertaken elsewhere and an effective methodology for the dissemination of findings are required. With the advent of NILA in April 2009 there are strong grounds for optimism that these requirements will be met.

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