

'Reading a Difference' Project

Frequently Asked Questions

These deal with practical questions that have been raised about the project.

1. Which public library authorities took part?

Bath & NE Somerset; Devon; Plymouth; Somerset; South Gloucestershire; Wiltshire in South West England

2. How was the survey coordinated across the 6 partners?

The project originator and Coordinator was Colin Bray. He works for Devon Library & Information Services and worked alongside Reader Development librarians in the South West through the Read South West group. All authorities represented on the group were invited to take part. The six participating authorities accepted this invitation.

During the life of the project most communication was carried out via email between the Project Coordinator and the Reader Development librarians in each authority.

3. What was the role of...?

The Project Coordinator:

- presented a project plan
- obtained funding
- developed the final survey plus data input tool together with a survey expert (see below)
- set deadlines
- arranged the design and delivery of surveys
- prepared information for front line staff on the purpose of the survey and gave practical instructions for handing them out
- worked with Survey Expert to create the project report

The Local Coordinators:

- were the main point of contact between the Project Coordinator and their authority
- liaised with both front line staff and senior managers in their authority
- decided which libraries in their authorities took part
- arranged for staff time to be given for data entry
- to feed local library data into the project report
- to give overall feedback on the project

The Survey Expert:

- works for Devon County Council's Corporate Consultation team – his time was paid for out of the project budget
- played a key role in formulating the final survey
- set up an online line data entry tool that could be used by front line staff
- collected the mass of data obtained on the DCC server
- disseminated the data gathered for reporting and analysis
- The Survey Expert was a very important key contributor to the project and has done a lot of work that could be applied in any future projects

4. How much did the project cost?

South West Museums, Libraries and Archives Council gave £5,300 in funding for this project. This included the time of the survey expert, design costs, technical advice from an academic and administration costs. The matching costs of staff help in kind from the authorities taking part was estimated at £6,000 although in reality this sum is very difficult to calculate. The staff taking part, including the Project Co-ordinator, fitted the project around existing work.

5. What were the practical aspects of the methodology?

- following initial local trialling in Devon, survey forms were sent to all participating libraries
- forms were given out with issued books at point of issue
- the forms were given out through a full loan period – 3 or 4 weeks, depending upon the local loan period
- a maximum of two forms were given out to each individual library customer to complete in their own time
- forms were received back on return of the books
- data from each form was entered electronically via a weblink form by staff in each library – this was a particularly successful part of the project. The weblink form process gathered the information efficiently and was easy to use.
- the local data was then collated by the Survey Expert and distributed back to the originating library authorities as Excel spreadsheets and the entire collated data formed the basis of the project report and its findings. The open comments from library users were also sent to the originating library authorities.

6. How did front line staff adapt to the survey?

It appears that the staff giving out survey forms and entering data found the survey straightforward to handle. Entering data was reasonably time-consuming but this has not been reported as being onerous. The staff showed pleasure at being part of a project that looked at the use of books and their importance.

7. What has resulted from the survey in terms of outcomes for the libraries involved?

In Devon the open comments received from the public about library stock and services were collated and the results were sent to the relevant library managers. The Project Coordinator talked these results through with them. It was generally recognised that the comments sometimes showed where the public were unaware of service details. There were some fairly consistent themes in the comments that have been picked up by the Management Team.

Exeter Central Library has adopted some of the public recommendations for stock additions and changes.

The focus on books and learning was picked up enthusiastically by library staff that could see an approach tying into what they saw as their core work. Several library managers found the conceptual work behind the project very interesting and said the general feedback can be summed up in the phrase - "at last, something that is meaningful to what we do."

Ideally the libraries involved in the project would have reported the results back to library users. I believe this feedback was patchy.

The open comments received were useful but largely a by-product of the main survey purpose – to demonstrate the value of public libraries at a policy level.

8. Where does the project go from here?

The SWMLAC funded project in the South West is now complete. It is hoped that an opportunity will arise for the continued use of this concept and survey method. There is continuing interest from library practitioners with regard to its potential.

The MLA is being kept informed of the project and there is due to be a presentation by the Project Coordinator at the PM7 International Conference, Cape Town, in August 2007

Some possible uses/developments of the survey:

- as a tool for showing the value that libraries add to policy priorities. With enough statistical evidence the results can be adapted to almost any priority set by national or local government e.g. healthy communities or 'environmental awareness' for instance
- that if applied on a large scale the weight of resulting data could

reinforce the value of public libraries at the national funding level

- when developed it may be of interest to social scientists and other researchers of learning in the social context. There may be scope to look at the differences in results between 'scales' of public libraries ie large cities, university towns and small rural libraries
- with some adaptation there may be some specialist applications of the technique in libraries i.e. in prison libraries; with adult learners; possibly with children's library books
- to find different ways of combining the information gained on such things as whether the book was easy to find, the balance between fiction and non-fiction stock in a particular library and other variables that have not been investigated from the 5,000+ returns so far.

A possible limitation of the survey:

- There may be a limitation on its use as a performance measurement tool. It is difficult to see how a benchmark could be created that would make the results comparable between libraries and authorities and how an approach to stock could be taken that would actively change the results. It remains to be seen whether this could be done.

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