

An investigation of the ‘creative consultation’ process and methods to capture and transfer good practice in public libraries

Hui-Yun Sung, Dr. Gillian Ragsdell and Dr. Mark Hepworth

Loughborough University
Department of Information Science
Loughborough, Leicestershire, UK, LE11 3TU
Correspond to : H.Sung@lboro.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

This paper is based on early reflections from Sung’s Master’s dissertation and current Ph.D. research regarding the present ‘creative consultation’ practices in public libraries. Since the Ph.D. is in its early stages, this paper is an opportunity to offer a review of the main literature, related to consultation practices and theories.

An awareness of the importance of effective consultation is increasing. This paper aims to discuss the key features of community consultation in public libraries, investigate how public libraries conduct community consultation, and examine whether user consultation has a positive impact in promoting library services. Textual and visual investigation of innovative consultation methods are provided with emphasis on Birchfield Library Community Consultation Project by Birmingham Libraries and The Art of Community Consultation by Bolton Libraries.

Investigation of these approaches has prompted Sung to explore other participatory approaches to research, such as Participatory Action Research.

KEYWORDS: creative consultation, participatory action research, public libraries

1. INTRODUCTION

Clients were put at the heart of public services by local government responsibility during the 1990s. According to the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 and the Local Government Act 1999, public library authorities already had legislative duties to consult users in the process of their service delivery. Moreover, Best Value 2001 claimed that public library sectors would now have more obligations to enhance users’ engagement with service provision on a general basis.

In addition to fulfilling the statutory obligation, there are other more worthwhile reasons for conducting user

consultation and incorporating their feedback into decisions regarding library services. For example, consultation helps library staff discover users’ needs, monitor their services and identify service problems. The feedback of the consultation can lead to user-centred service delivery of high-quality and achieve the aims and objectives of the library.

Unlike other types of libraries, the public library is set to serve the local community, varying from children to elderly people, from blue collar to professional and managerial, from illiterate to highly literate. The diversity of the user community makes the public library service delivery more difficult than that of other types of libraries. It becomes even harder to meet the needs of everyone of different ages and different social classes. Thus, community consultation becomes a priority for public libraries, both to improve service and achieve targets.

2. DEFINITION OF COMMUNITY CONSULTATION IN PUBLIC LIBRARIES

With respect to “community consultation”, community includes library users, lapsed users, and non-users. *Consulting Your Consumers* argues that the users of a public library will be anyone who lives, works or studies in the catchment area, even though some of those are non-users or dissatisfied ex-users (National Consumer Council, 1994). Certainly, the library should not only focus on the existing users but also put more emphasis on lapsed users and non-users to attract them into libraries.

Consultation has been defined as “a process of dialogue that leads to a decision” (Audit Commission, 1999, p.7). This definition highlights two points. Firstly, when applied in library services, the “dialogue” refers to a continuous, two-way exchange of views and opinions between library staff and library users, lapsed users and non-users. In other words, it implies mutual speaking up, listening to and considering others’ viewpoints about library services. Secondly, it implies that the result of consultation will be taken into account in the process of

decision-making or reshaping of library services and policies, which put users' opinions at the heart of its service performance.

Osborne and Gorman (2006, p.75) defined "community consultation techniques" as those which involve librarians in direct interaction with clients and the community in order to discover their needs and wants. Specifically speaking, user involvement in library services is championed through consultation and communication to overcome a perceived public sector weakness on the needs and concerns of users. There is a wealth of consultative methods, varying in scope from broad to in-depth, for example, questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, comments and complaints procedures, user satisfaction surveys, staff feedback and so forth.

3. PURPOSES OF COMMUNITY CONSULTATION IN PUBLIC LIBRARIES

The legislative framework to consult the public has already existed in many public body sectors for several years such as councils, police authorities, and health authorities. Certainly, it is also applied to the library service. According to the Public Libraries and Museums Act, library authorities are required to "provide a comprehensive and efficient library service for all persons desiring to make use thereof" (HMSO, 1964). The population served by public libraries consists of numerous large and small groups with different interests. In order to fulfil the statutory duties, there is an obligation to undertake some initiatives to explore different user groups' needs. Community consultation in this study refers to an ongoing, mutual exchange of ideas and opinions between library staff and users, which will be taken into account when decision-making about library service policy. It can be a very powerful tool for identifying and satisfying library users' needs and wants, and then improving the quality of library services.

Moreover, based on The Local Government Act, the duty of Best Value for local authorities requests each Best Value authority to "make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the way in which its functions are exercised, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness" (HMSO, 1999). Thus, the public library will now have more obligations to conduct consultation with its users about its overall service performance, instead of focusing on just certain issues.

In addition to consulting on a statutory responsibility basis, many libraries have conducted massive consultation programmes in the UK. They have also found that consultation is helpful, especially when it is done effectively, and have successfully engaged with decision-making. Consultation enables library staff to explore and respond to users' needs and wants, and then help them:

- To design and refine services in ways that match users' expectations.
 - To set up user-focused initiatives like complaints and redress procedures or consumer charters.
 - To identify or anticipate service problems.
 - To monitor services over time.
 - To compare one service with others.
- (National Consumer Council, 1994, p.6)

Overall, a good consultation process can lead to high-quality service provision, achieving the library's aims and objectives, and satisfying user's needs and preferences. However, Morris and Barron (1998) argued that it is useless for the service to offer users opportunities to comment but fail to respond to their feedback. The White Paper on transforming public service delivery stated that "The people affected by services should be consulted. Their views about the services they use should be sought regularly and systematically to inform decisions about what services should be provided" (Major, 1991, p.5). An old proverb goes that to say is one thing; to do is another. It is one thing to recognise the importance of users' needs and satisfaction, but quite another to implement consultation and put users at the heart of the service.

4. ROLE OF COMMUNITY CONSULTATION IN PUBLIC LIBRARIES

The White Paper on modernizing government highlights the necessity to ensure that users are at the heart of all decisions about public services (Cabinet Office, 1999). *Framework for the Future* asserted that library authorities must make use of their resources in order to provide the services that people really want (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2003). Goulding (2006) added that citizen engagement and user-focused services are increasingly being promoted as key public service policy philosophies. It is clear that users play the most important role in the process of library services provision, and community consultation helps to identify users' needs and promote library services.

Since the public library broadened its service range, library users have changed as well, as demonstrated by the facts and figures of public library use in the UK. Chart 1 reveals that there has been a steady decline in public library usage over the 1990s. While visits to libraries and demands for books decrease, information enquiring and audio/visual material lending are in slight, steady increase. Visits to public libraries have fallen down to under 300 million in 2000/01, which is far behind the targets set in national standards: 352 million visits per year. Book issues have fallen by approximately 25 per cent since 1993/94. On the other hand, Table 1 shows that there is a successful increase in library visitor numbers. Even though there has been a 3.1 per cent fall in book issues since 2003/04, more than 330 million books were borrowed from public libraries in 2004/05.

Chart 1: Trends in public library usage in the 1990s

Source: Audit Commission, 2002, p.9.

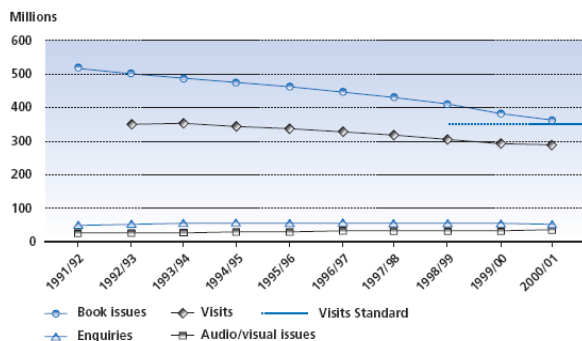


Table 1: Figures in public library usage from 2003 to 2005

Source: The Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA), 2006.

Library users	2003-04	2004-05	% Change
Housebound Readers (thousands)	110	113	2.9
Visits to Library Premises (thousands)	336,951	339,708	0.8
Stocks & Issues	2003-04	2004-05	% Change
Bookstocks			
Stock at end of year (thousands)	110,452	107,652	-2.5
Annual Additions (thousands)	11,976	11,990	0.1
Issues per year (thousands)	340,927	330,199	-3.1
Audio, Visual, Electronic & Other Stock			
Stock at end of year (thousands)	9,027	8,828	-2.2
Annual Additions (thousands)	1,731	1,697	-2.0
Issues per annum (thousands)	40,829	38,325	-6.1

Goulding (2006) suggested the growth in the number of library visits since 2003/04 is related to the People’s Network, a lottery funded government-led initiative to give everyone in the UK the opportunity to use computers and to access the internet in public libraries. Other key factors include the availability of electronic facilities, opening hours and so on. These changes bring about

some management issues in the library service. For instance, in addition to existing users, public libraries also should take non-users and lapsed users into account. In other words, while considering retaining active users, public libraries should explore and attract more lapsed users and non-users to use the library services as well. Thus, in order to make the most use of resources and meet the needs of all user communities, public libraries ought to take some better initiatives in user community consultation.

However, Osborne and Gorman (2006) conducted in-depth interviews with managers from medium-sized public libraries in the lower North Island of New Zealand and found four main drawbacks of community consultation techniques. They are costly, time-consuming, reliant on good communication skills, and difficult to analyse or codify. Nevertheless, there exist a number of potential benefits of consulting the community, including:

- Services can be targeted more closely on providing what people want, and avoiding what people do not want.
 - Take-up of services can be improved, making unit costs lower, especially where there is a charge for services.
 - User satisfaction with services can be monitored over time, providing a useful performance indicator on improvements to the quality of services.
 - Problems arising from proposed changes to services can be pinpointed in advance, and so avoided.
 - The results of consultation can be used to help to make decisions about policies, priorities and strategies.
 - Local people can be involved more in decision-making, rejuvenating the local democratic process.
 - Authorities, particularly councils, can strengthen their role in community leadership.
- (Audit Commission, 1999, p.8)

Likewise, these advantages of community consultation can also be applied to librarianship. Consultation provides a good method by which public library authorities can involve users in service planning and decision making, find out what users really need, identify the changing uses of library resources in advance, track user satisfaction over time, and improve service performance. Despite the shortage of financial support and resources, user community consultation can certainly be regarded as the most vital element in the library service circle and have a positive impact on library management.

5. EXAMPLES OF ‘CREATIVE CONSULTATION’ PRACTICES IN PUBLIC LIBRARY SERVICES

The two examples are selected for their innovative work on community consultation in the public library sector in

the UK. Birchfield Library conducted the Birchfield Library Community Consultation between 2006 and 2007, and Bolton Libraries conducted The Art of Community Consultation in 2005.

5.1 BIRMINGHAM LIBRARIES: BIRCHFIELD LIBRARY COMMUNITY CONSULTATION PROJECT

Birmingham Libraries started work on an in-depth, feasible consultation process in the middle of 2006, exploring the creative ideas for the design of a 'signature' building with a multi-purpose facility to replace the recently demolished Birchfield Library. It was hoped that a new library, adult learning, and neighbourhood advice and information centre on this strategic site would become a signature building located in the heart of the Birchfield community, reaching a broad range of people and ensuring that the resources, services and building were devised to welcome the whole community and fit the community's needs and expectations. Thus, Birmingham Libraries consulted with volunteers from Youth Service and different community groups, with organisations, including First Class Youth Direct and Connecting Histories, and with the architects. Innovative consultation techniques used in the project are shown as below.

- Introductory presentation and case studies on library staff working with local community groups.
- A street survey in the One Stop Shop location. (Figure 1)



Figure 1 : A street survey with Youth Service

Source: Birmingham City Council, 2007.

- Focus groups in three selected age categories—5 to 15 year olds, 18 to 30 year olds, and over 30 year olds.
- Questionnaires and discussion with local people through individual interviews.
- Focus groups at Broadway Youth Centre and an interactive session with the architects.
- Telephone surveys to introduce the role of the project worker and the plans to develop Birchfield Library.
- Personal visits to organisations, showing images of the library plans and encouraging discussion on library facilities and services.

- Discussion with disabled adult groups in the Employment Preparation Team.
- Discussions at Asian Stroke Victims Association event.
- Publicity on the Perry Barr Community Empowerment Network Website and published in the Network Newsletter.
- Birmingham Irish Forum presentations and discussions.
- Discussion with childrens groups, using drawing, in Aston Park Play Centre.
- Introductions, presentations and art activities of putting together library related images in Canterbury Cross School. (Figure 2)



Figure 2 : Consultation activities with Canterbury Cross School children

Source: Birmingham City Council, 2007.

- Discussions in Sikh Youth Service.
- Discussions with parents, using SureStart, at the "Real and Play" sessions in Birchfield.
- Discussions with individuals attending the celebration of the refurbishment of the adjoining Buddhist Centre.
- Feedback from Black Family Coalition.
- Presentations and discussions in East West Trust.
- Discussion groups in COPE Mental Health group.
- A focus group discussion in Voice of Aston.
- Discussions with older members in Birchfield Community Project during the weekly luncheon club.
- Publicity in Birchfield Bugle newsletter and one-to-one discussion at the Centre For The Aston Family.
- Discussions at one of Lozells Neighbourhood Forum monthly meeting.
- Discussions with a group of African Caribbean elders.
- Publicity on Newstyle Radio, a local community radio station.
- The Debate Event, including dance and music performances, a featured book review, short comedy drama, and the showing of the film, in First Class Youth Direct. (Figure3)
- PowerPoint Presentation and discussions at workshop in Aston Library.
- A visit to Central Library and discussions at heritage workshop.

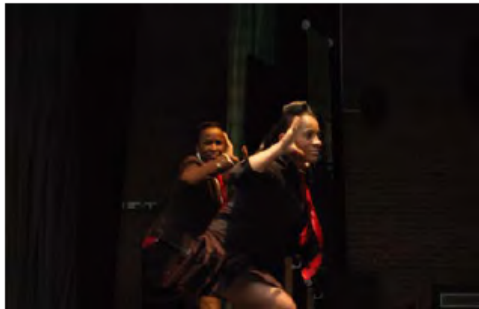


Figure 3 : The library theatre debate held by First Class Youth Direct

Source: Birmingham City Council, 2007.

- Creative activities, such as collages and montages, at workshop in Aston Library. (Figure 4)



Figure 4 : Collages in Connecting Histories

Source: Birmingham City Council, 2007.

- A day of visits to Bullring, Selfridges and Handsworth Library and a follow-up workshop of discussions with architects.
 - Displays of pictures and attached feedback form.
 - Direct meetings with the architects which were open to the public.
- (Birmingham City Council, 2007)

The consultation project shows the value of using a wide range of methods and places to cover the various needs of different community groups. There was one fundamental question that underpinned the whole process of the consultation project: “What will make you want to use a community library?” The public engagement programme targeted a wide range of people from various backgrounds, from children groups to elder people groups, from British groups to Asian and African groups. The information from the consultation practice established a deeper picture of what people expected to have in the new library. The opinions from young people were particularly important in the consultation as Birchfield Library wanted to investigate the key elements that could encourage those ‘hard to reach’ people to visit and use the library. The feedback was also successfully

incorporated into the context of the new library design to help the Library meet users’ needs and increase library usage.

5.2 BOLTON LIBRARIES: THE ART OF COMMUNITY CONSULTATION

Bolton Libraries conducted an arts-based consultation exercise in the middle of 2005, discovering suggestions and ideas to inform the modern library planning to replace the recently demolished High Street Library. It was aware that there is a large Indian population, whose first language is not English, in the area of Bolton and recognised that the community may not respond to conventional consultation techniques, such as questionnaires and focus groups (Thomas, 2007). In this context, new and creative ways of using art forms were assessed to engage with its culturally diverse communities. Bolton Libraries then decided to employ five local artists to consult with different community groups via various art forms to find out their perceptions of the demolished library and their expectations for the replacement library. Creative consultation methods adopted in the project are listed as below.

- Using Library branded luggage tags, to write down participants’ ideas.
 - Running Vox Box exercises, video recording interviews in a quiet location.
 - “Let your feet do the talking”, allowing participants to visualise what would encourage them to use the library.
 - Setting up a target in the style of dartboard to allow participants to decide the relative importance of different library services.
 - Running craft and interactive sessions.
 - Using disposable cameras to take pictures of the current library.
 - Making large collages.
 - Using video techniques for interviews.
 - Using silk painting and clay-modelling techniques.
 - Using traditional Asian dried foods and metal work to stimulate discussion.
 - Design for Real, allowing participants to respond to the 3D model of High Street area and express their thoughts.
 - The Yellow Brick Wall for attaching comments.
- (Bolton Libraries, 2006)

“This process encouraged local people to reflect on their experiences of using libraries and consider what they might want from their library of the future. It wasn’t just ticking boxes – it was tactile, visual and three-dimensional” (Thomas, 2007, p.14). This project progressed around three key issues concerning the new library developing; that is, “What is your perception of the library service?”, “What do you want from the Library of the future?” and “How can the Library fit the community’s individual needs?” These art-based

consultation methods not only overcame problems in communicating but helped imaginative thinking as well. The ideas gathered from these activities built up a better understanding of what people wished to have in the library of the future. The opinions from the Indian population were especially essential in the consultation because Bolton Libraries wanted to investigate the key factors that could encourage non library users to come in and use the library services. The feedback has effectively informed the new library design concept and the project has successfully set up a consultation model to share with other library authorities.

6. WHAT WORKS WELL FOR CONSULTATION PROCESS

Does creative consultation work effectively for library services? Involving the community in decision making and in delivering services that meet the needs of communities isn't the easiest option. (MLA, 2006, p.4) However, the advantages can be worth the effort, as the two successful examples mentioned above. Here, the authors will point out the key elements that contributed to the success in conducting consultation processes according to the study of the two example. Some of the key ingredients are shown below.



Figure 5 : Features for success in consultation

Client centre. It is obvious that Birmingham Libraries and Bolton Libraries placed a high degree of importance on public engagement. They consider what works for the library users and modify working practices to meet clients' wants and needs.

Creative thinking. Both of the libraries were willing to take initiatives and adopt new approaches to involve as many people as possible in the consultation processes.

These consultation projects consisted of, not only traditional techniques such as questionnaires, public flyers and interviews, but also many tactile, visual and three-dimensional methods, such as drawing, debates and visiting other libraries.

Willingness to learn. Both of the libraries learned from their experience. If something did not work out, they were willing to improve it or try a different method. Thus, they incorporated ideas from artists, architects and participatory community, and use a mix of conventional and innovative consultation techniques.

Mutual trust and respect. It is important to gain participants' trust first. Both of the libraries showed the community their trust and respect by being open, honest and hospitable in the process of consultation.

Collaboration. Work in partnership. For example, Birmingham Libraries worked with Cottrell & Vermeulen Architecture groups to design the new library building. Bolton Libraries employed five local artists to consult with different community groups via various art forms to find out their perceptions of the demolished library and their expectations for the replacement library.

Willing to make an effort. Both of the libraries were willing to take on a challenge and conduct a series of consultation activities. Therefore, they adopted a wide range of consultation approaches for the project.

7. CONCLUSIONS

The importance of conducting community consultation has steadily increased in public libraries. This increase is due, in part, to public libraries recognising that as well as fulfilling several statutory obligations, community consultation can play an essential role in promoting the effectiveness and efficiency of library services.

Firstly, this paper explained the definition, purpose and role of community consultation in public libraries. The authors then took two successful creative consultation practices as examples, and finally, using these examples, the authors identified the elements for successful consultation processes.

The Audit Commission (1999, p.8) broadly divides public consultation into two types: 'direct consultation' (representing the opinions of clients.), and 'consultation with delegates' (representing the opinions of the consultee). It is apparent that Birmingham Libraries and Bolton Libraries prefer direct consultation, which involves citizens' engagement in the consultation project directly. Identifying elements for successful consultation processes, using consultation projects which focus on clients' involvement has assisted the authors in learning more about community participation in consultation practices within public service organisations, particularly public

libraries, and in recognising future research possibilities. Following this work, the authors will build on this preliminary analysis and investigate more creative consultation processes and methods that use client-focused approaches. Participatory Action Research and Action Learning are two such examples.

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