

Public Libraries and Community Cohesion

Developing indicators



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Executive Summary

This report addresses the objective of developing indicators for community cohesion in public library services in England, and is based on a mix of telephone interviews, questionnaires, desk research, visits and focus group meetings. Initial research showed that there has been little significant activity in public libraries to suggest that community cohesion is either well-understood or that it forms the central focus of strategy or practice. The report argues firstly that community cohesion is a key component in a broad policy trend characterised as 'civil-localism,' which both challenges and creates opportunities for pluralism and the public realm. Secondly it argues that community cohesion is a legitimate central focus for library services. Where the public library can demonstrate a contribution to the quality of social relations in local communities it will recover its place as a recognised symbol of the public realm.

Community cohesion implies challenging the conditions that lead to the segregation of people from different backgrounds, in order to forestall any potential conflict caused by the misrepresentation of people's genuine interests. Numerous public library project and partnership activities can be said to contribute to this theme, but many have essentially social inclusion objectives and few reflect cohesion principles as central tenets of the library's purpose. The report offers a four-point structure for understanding the potential contribution of libraries: library as resource, librarians as expertise, library as place, and library as symbol.

In terms of areas for action, the report suggests three complimentary and self-reinforcing approaches: library contributions to community cohesion strategies; delivering services in a way that is consistent with the principles of community cohesion; and working with local residents and groups to support viable networks of self-support and communication.

In conclusion, a matrix combining the four attributes with the three action areas is proposed as the framework for developing indicators of community cohesion in public libraries.

Kevin Harris, Martin Dudley
Community Development Foundation, 2005

Introduction

This report forms part of the fourth theme, *community and civic values*, of the *Framework for the Future*,¹ the government's vision for public libraries in England. The Community Development Foundation was contracted by the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council in 2003 to "identify and promote good practice in libraries engaging in supporting community cohesion and diversity."

The main devices used to explore this issue and develop the research were these:

- A meeting of a sounding-board group to scope the work
- Practice and literature review
- A questionnaire sent to all chief officers in English libraries
- Telephone interviews with a ten of the respondents to the questionnaire
- Email responses from nine authorities that received the questionnaire
- Establishment and maintenance of a weblog² as a forum for comment and an information resource
- A study visit to a community library and project in Leicester
- A visit to two libraries and a focus group with staff in Sandwell.

There has been considerable activity in the field of community cohesion in the past couple of years, with several key reports from central government and other agencies. We offer a summary of developments in section 1 below. Nonetheless, our research revealed little significant activity in public libraries to suggest that community cohesion is either well-understood or that it forms the central focus of strategy or practice. We believe its principles *should* form such a focus. A library service that can demonstrate its contribution to the quality of social relations at local level will be one that recovers its place as a recognised symbol of the public realm.

Section 1 of this report amounts to an introductory essay on the theme of community cohesion in social policy, and the place of libraries within that. In section 2 we present the key points of our research, summarising what we learned from practitioners within a framework which is reproduced on page 37. In section 3 we offer a short checklist of possible

¹ <http://www.mla.gov.uk/action/framework/framework.asp>

² <http://neighbourhoods.typepad.com/libraries/>

questions from the library management perspective, and in section 4 we address the question of the development of indicators. The matrix provided in this section has been left blank deliberately, in order to avoid the 'solidification' of any untried indicators that we, as researchers, might suggest. Various possible indicators have emerged from our research and we hope to develop these alongside (not in front of) suggestions from the field, in the next phase of our research.

1. Social policy and the public realm

Introduction

There is a tendency to see community cohesion as just one of a number of possible foci for strategy and services, as if it were a potentially useful plant that has grown up in one corner of the policy garden, at first barely noticed but then beginning to dominate its patch. Meanwhile, the well-established social inclusion area may seem a better place to get things growing, or the promise of the rich soil of the new 'liveability' patch perhaps... As we report below, public library services and their authorities do indeed place cohesion and other issues in various contexts, and nurture them with varying degrees of care and effort. We would not necessarily argue that that is problematic in itself. Our purpose here is to illustrate the commonality of the issues, in order to resist fragmentation in social policy: if much effort and energy is invested in, say, community cohesion, without reference to other strategic foci, momentum and much else could be lost.

This gives rise to two preliminary reflections. First, community cohesion appears to be widely accepted as having lasting validity, as a guiding principle for local social policy. All 'new' policy buzzwords emanating from the think-tanks and from the corridors of Whitehall have to be examined for durability, before practitioners would be wise to roll up their sleeves and get stuck in. In the case of community cohesion, the early watchfulness has long since passed: it is recognised as a valid framework for the provision of services at local level.

Secondly, the commonality of the various social policy drivers is of the most profound importance for public libraries. Taken together, the driving ideas represent a shifting view, often foggy or obscured, of the public realm; near the heart of which, on a good day, the library could traditionally be spotted.³

We can explore this by simply considering some of the keywords of the recent policy agenda, such as:

- Social inclusion
- Active citizens
- Neighbourhood renewal

³ In this respect, it's valuable to keep in mind the essential contribution of literacy and communications to the emergence of the public sphere and the notion of 'public opinion.' See Blanning, T C W, *The culture of power and the power of culture*, Oxford: OUP, 2002.

- Sustainable communities
- Civil renewal
- Social capital
- Community cohesion
- Liveability
- Community engagement
- Antisocial behaviour
- Citizen participation
- Neighbourhood governance.

What such concepts suggest is an accumulation of attention being paid to localism, citizenship, and the relation of individuals to others around them and to the state in a multi-ethnic society. They also suggest huge amounts of energy being invested in *processes* and *change*, and we should note that for any service that is embedded in the physical (such as library buildings) this could become problematic.

This does not imply necessarily that recent government policy has been to unfold a deliberate social plan, in which all these issues were carefully worked out in advance, later to be fed to the population in digestible chunks. It would be truer to describe what we might call 'civil-localism' – the convergence of civil renewal and new localism - as more like a new paradigm; a dominant and self-reinforcing policy context whose message is flowing quite forcefully down several linked channels. It may cause turbulence as older paradigms struggle, but from our perspective the key point is this: civil-localism both challenges and creates opportunities for pluralism and the public realm. The representative role of public libraries in this sphere, we suggest, should be constantly in the spotlight. We therefore need to recognise community cohesion as an essential characteristic of a revitalised public realm.

Community cohesion

Community cohesion is generally considered in terms of the quality and character of relationships between residents of a given locality, as for example in this question which has featured in the British Crime Survey since 1984:

In general, what kind of neighbourhood would you say you live in? Would you say it is a neighbourhood in which people do things together and try and help each other or one in which people mostly go their own way?

The more diverse the local population, the more importance may be attached to such a question and to the findings.

Community cohesion is salient in social policy because of concern over the extent to which groups of people from different backgrounds within some localities are perceived to live culturally separate lives. This was a key factor contributing to the disturbances in towns in the north of England, in 2001. Residential clustering, unequal access to employment, and educational segregation all contributed to a sense of 'parallel lives' which proved to be a fertile environment for divisive rumour and distrust. In turn, in some cases, this proved to be the tinderbox for conflict, fanned by media misrepresentation of the distribution of regeneration funding.

Community cohesion implies challenging the conditions that lead to the segregation of people from different backgrounds, in order to forestall any potential conflict caused by the misrepresentation of people's genuine interests. It does not mean that differences should be disguised, nor that injustices or abuses should go unchallenged. A key recommendation in the reports that followed the disturbances was that there was a need for more *opportunities for interaction* between people of different cultures, in order to tackle some of the misunderstanding and misconceptions that had arisen.

Underlying the debate about cohesion and diversity there are sometimes tangled assumptions about the identification of people with places to which they 'belong.' This is a core tension of our civilisation, indeed of our notion of civilisation. Community cohesion implies association with locality, a shared sense of citizenship and values.

We tend to stop short of the notion of 'membership' of communities. Most of us feel uncomfortable with the idea of closed communities such as religious settlements and gated communities, characterised by a symbolised emphasis on difference. Belonging, however, is not the same as membership. It is the word we use for a sense of strong but not formal association; and from the outset we should recognise the role of libraries, as an enduring symbol of the public realm, in contributing to this.

It's worth noting then that the concept we are dealing with is in some ways nothing new: the term 'community relations,' once widely used, suggested similar intentions, perhaps in a more hesitant style. But the 2001 disturbances in England drew attention to the extent to which parallel lives between different ethnic communities had developed in some areas, and "ignorance about each other's communities had been turned in to fear, and even demonisation."⁴ The Cattle

⁴ *The end of parallel lives?* p7

report⁵ was subsequently published as the result of an independent review.

Following that report, the Home Office Community Cohesion Unit⁶ has promoted the definition of a cohesive community as one where:

- there is a common vision and a sense of belonging for all communities
- the diversity of people's different backgrounds and circumstances is appreciated and positively valued
- those from different backgrounds have similar life opportunities
- strong and positive relationships are being developed between people from different backgrounds in the workplace, in schools and within neighbourhoods.

On this basis, ten general indicators for these four attributes were published, with a headline indicator for "The percentage of people who feel that their local area is a place where people from different backgrounds can get on well together."⁷ The full list is reproduced in Table 1 below. With regard to the central term, 'people from different backgrounds,' it's worth noting the footnote provided to the tenth indicator –

A community is more likely to be cohesive where people of different ethnic origin and *social class* regularly meet and talk.⁸

On the whole, there has been comparatively little discussion of social class within the context of the cohesion debate.

⁵ http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/docs/community_cohesion.pdf

⁶ <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/comrace/cohesion/index.html>

⁷ *Building a picture of community cohesion: a guide for local authorities and their partners*. London, Home Office, June 2003, www.homeoffice.gov.uk/docs2/buildpicturecomcohesion.pdf

⁸ *Ibid*, Annexe A. Emphasis added.

Table 1, Index of community cohesion indicators

(from *Building a picture of community cohesion*, Home Office, 2003)

Headline outcome

1 The percentage of people who feel that their local area is a place where people from different backgrounds can get on well together

Common vision and sense of belonging

2 The percentage of respondents who feel that they belong to their neighbourhood/town/county/England/Wales/Britain

3 Key priorities for improving an area

4 The percentage of adults surveyed who feel they can influence decisions affecting their local area

The diversity of people's backgrounds and circumstances are appreciated and positively valued

5 The percentage of people who feel that local ethnic differences are respected

6 Number of racial incidents recorded by police authorities per 100,000

Those from different backgrounds have similar life opportunities

7 Local concentration of deprivation

8 The percentage of pupils achieving 5 or more GCSEs at grades A*-C or equivalent

9 The percentage of unemployed people claiming benefit who have been out of work for more than a year

Strong and positive relationships are being developed between people from different backgrounds in the workplace, schools and neighbourhoods

10 The percentage of people from different backgrounds who mix with other people from different backgrounds in everyday situations.

Meanwhile, the government's Community Cohesion Pathfinder programme⁹ established local initiatives in a number of local authorities and experience has begun to

⁹ <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/comrace/cohesion/pathfinder.html>

emerge. One device for channelling experience into the field has been Action Learning Groups, which have provided material on a number of themes including:

- Baselineing and measurement
- Programme integration
- Testing perceptions, and
- Mainstreaming.

The summaries for these and other issues, available on the Pathfinder programme website,¹⁰ show that our understanding of the complexities is still at an early stage. They illustrate the range of interests and partnership issues, as well as the elusiveness of meaningful data on which to plot progress.

Not so much a solution, more a way of life?

Given this recent history, it's unsurprising that community cohesion may be seen as a policy response to the manifestation of conflicts, harassment and fear, themselves arising from prejudices, institutional discrimination, unequal access to resources, and apparent cultural incompatibilities.¹¹ As we have suggested however, it is realistic, and perhaps more helpful, to see community cohesion as part of a more general movement towards civil renewal and new localism, which encodes the principles of *valuing diversity, challenging inequalities, and promoting a sense of belonging*. A key feature of our short inquiry has been the sense in which current policy frameworks tend to be seen in the library service just as solutions to social problems, rather than as part of a fundamental re-mapping of social relations. Our attention has been drawn to certain practical positive responses, illustrated by this quotation from one authority:

It appears that targeted services are not necessarily relevant here... Targets for people with disabilities, black and minority ethnic users, homeless, looked-after-children, refugees, etc. etc., can be patronising and labelling of people. Barriers to usage should be ascertained by public consultation and focus groups and where possible these barriers removed.

Our understanding of community cohesion then may need to be less about targeting specific groups and more about *removing constraints to social interaction*.

¹⁰ <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/comrace/cohesion/pathfinder.html>

¹¹ Gilchrist, A. (2003). "Community cohesion: community development approaches." *Talking point*, 204: 1-4, p1.

Examples: Pendle, Chicago, Anytown

This approach is re-enforced in a significant recent study of community cohesion in Pendle.¹² Drew Mackie and his colleagues used interviews, storytelling and workshops to bring to the surface a number of issues, threats and opportunities perceived by local people. Table 2 lists the common themes that emerged. While it is important to keep in mind that this was local research carried out at a particular time (summer 2004), it illustrates the complexity of social relationships, the feeling that many developments are beyond the individual's influence, and the gravitational pull of close ties (mainly family) where people sense a range of threats. It may be that a library service would struggle to identify a role for itself in response to this list of issues, but we would argue that such a list, as articulated by local people after facilitated deliberation, is precisely the right place to start.

Table 2, Community cohesion issues at local level

(from: Drew Mackie, *Community cohesion in Pendle*, 2004)

- **Family and community**
 - Family support
 - Community ties and obligations
 - Inter-marriage

 - **Threats**
 - Racial abuse
 - Anti-social behaviour
 - Economic decline
 - Drug culture
 - Decline in meeting places
 - Deteriorating environment
 - Ethnic divisions
 - Decline in family ties
 - Age divisions
 - Rural distrust

 - **Opportunities**
 - Educational opportunity
 - Equality in the workplace
 - Links between communities
 - Tolerance
 - Regeneration

 - **Trust**
 - Family, friends and locality were *most trusted*
 - Agencies, faith and other communities were *least trusted*
-

¹² Community cohesion in Pendle: a report by Drew Mackie Associates. Edinburgh, Drew Mackie Associates, 2004, <http://homepage.mac.com/davidwilcox/filechute/Pendlecohesion.pdf>.

In their collection of case studies of the development of social capital, Putnam and Feldstein report one example that may help us in this respect. They describe a fresh approach adopted by Chicago Public Libraries, and specifically the case of the Near North Branch, located on the border between two sharply contrasting communities.¹³

The location of the branch, the design of the building, the collections, artwork, and staffing all reflect an explicit determination to make the library attractive to the whole range of potential users. It is meant, too, to be a social force in the neighbourhood, a 'community anchor'... and a catalyst for change. (p37-38)

The authors make the point that for many users, public libraries have come to represent "a refuge from the world outside and a repository of a higher culture the neighbourhood may aspire to but cannot reach." They contrast this with a local library as "a place where people see a reflection of their own culture even as they get access to a wider one." The story of Near North, somewhat romanticised perhaps but consisting of components readily-recognisable from UK library experience, reflects a strategic determination to confront a crisis of cohesion by asserting the role of the library in reflecting neighbourhood life:

The book discussions, readings, and classes, the homework help after school, the nods and hellos people exchange when they see each other at the library for the second or fifth or twentieth time, the librarians greeting people by name, and even the artwork that reflects the talents and interests of the neighbourhood all contribute to the connections that bind people in community. (p49)

Cohesion and difference

Community cohesion is not an exercise in searching for a model of ideal communities. It is certainly not a recipe for individual happiness. Disagreement is a fact of life as much at local level as anywhere else, and the notion of a homogeneous community is both unrealistic and probably undesirable. Crucially, as Alison Gilchrist has highlighted, community cohesion is not the absence of conflict, but the ability to manage differences, and deal with conflict when it arises.¹⁴ In any given local situation, what matters are opportunities and occasions for exploring difference and its implications, as well as commonality. It is important to ensure

¹³ Putnam, R D, *et al.* (2003). *Better together: restoring the American community*. New York, Simon & Schuster, chapter 2.

¹⁴ Gilchrist, A. (2004). *Community cohesion and community development: bridges or barricades?* London, Community Development Foundation, p6.

that when people do come together it is not necessarily on the basis of conflict or competition. At the same time, it can be unhelpful for policy and the media to place emphasis on a 'sense of belonging' as an aspect of 'being British,' without supporting communities in managing diversity, and recognising people's efforts to deal with these issues themselves. Cohesion is not served by expecting people to discard those aspects of their culture that don't match some image of a prevailing national identity (unless those aspects infringe fundamental principles of human dignity and toleration). The central point here is that we should not equate 'community' with the denial of difference.¹⁵

Social inclusion and community cohesion

We have found that community cohesion does not feature significantly as a policy basis for public library service. Discussions about the topic tended to revert to work being done in support of social inclusion. So how does community cohesion fit in?

Citing a document published by the Office for Public Management, one correspondent suggested that:

there is a social exclusion, inclusion and cohesion policy continuum. First, we need to develop services that tackle social exclusion; then we can develop services that promote social inclusion; then we can develop services that support cohesion and diversity. Depending on your starting point (exclusion, inclusion or cohesion) will determine your analysis and actions.

This approach is helpful in seeking to distinguish actions that address exclusion from those that promote inclusion (although inevitably there will be a natural overlap). But it is problematic in that it seems to suggest a continuum that is on a timeline - and that you can't proceed except in a sequential manner. It is uncontentious to observe that there are neighbourhoods with high levels of social exclusion, which would typically be described as cohesive: many coalfield communities are characterised in this way. Similarly we should note that approaches to cohesion can be consciously exclusive. Thus in their research into ethnic identity, Campbell and McLean report how "many members of the Pakistani community worked towards exclusion in the private sphere of their lives."

15 Morley, D. (2000). Home territories: media, mobility and identity. London, Routledge, p253.

Religious informants in particular, they noted, “saw non-integration as a positive community strength.”¹⁶

This illustrates how people’s identities as part of excluded groups can often be a fundamental feature of their cohesion, and this will often be in tension with our ideas of diversity and hence with inclusion. To view social exclusion in terms of straightforward identifiable barriers that require demolition, clearing the way for the promotion of inclusive and hence cohesive measures, is in our view unhelpfully simplistic.

Community cohesion adds an explanatory dimension to our understanding of local social life; it is not a natural conceptual extension of social inclusion. As one of our correspondents put it, “Community cohesion is a journey rather than a destination.”

The public library in the public realm

We consider that there are four essential attributes of the public library that have a bearing on its place in the public realm and hence its contribution to community cohesion. They are:

- **Library as resource.** The library holds and provides access to a wealth of resources that people can use to explore differences, promote heritage, learn about solutions to problems, and so on.
- **Librarians as expertise.** Library staff offer skills and support in information seeking, retrieval and handling, and in the use of communication systems, which can be used to exploit the available resources and to share knowledge and experience.
- **Library as place.** The availability of the library as a civic building that people are encouraged to enter at no cost, and with few expectations in terms of norms of behaviour, gives it huge potential as a venue for everyday occasions for informal and formal interaction.
- **Library as symbol.** Similarly the library is widely perceived as a public resource providing a public good. This symbolises the relation of individual to

¹⁶ Campbell, C. and C. McLean (2002). “Representations of ethnicity in people's accounts of local community participation in a multi-ethnic community in England.” *Journal of community and applied social psychology* 12: 13-29, (p21).

civil society, presenting an image that, ideally, should reinforce the meaning of cohesion.¹⁷

Why is it that people who never or seldom use it, resist the threatened closure of a public library? We suggest that it's because there is a profound and often unrecognised association of individual identity with the notion of a public good. The erosion of the public realm is an erosion of the collective cultural wellbeing, and people suspect and detect that.

It is within this context that we have explored public library authorities' approaches to community cohesion, and our findings are reported in the following section.

¹⁷ We should acknowledge that this perception is not universally held, and that in some views, the public library is part of a constraining status quo and colludes in the processes that perpetuate disadvantage.

2. The public library

From the libraries' point of view, there seem to be three complimentary and self-reinforcing areas for action:

- library services can participate in wider strategies aimed at improving community cohesion
- they can represent the notion of community cohesion in the ways in which they plan and deliver services
- and they can work at local level with local residents and groups, to support viable networks of self-support and communication.

We therefore present this main section of our report under the following headings: public libraries and cohesion strategies; delivering services to promote community cohesion; and local engagement.

2.1 Public libraries and cohesion strategies

- *Vision* - Strategies are based explicitly on an understanding of the principles of community cohesion.
- *Indicators* need to reflect the extent to which community cohesion features in the library's strategy; and the extent to which the library role features in other cohesion and related strategies.

Strategic frameworks

Few of the library services that we contacted were working within a community cohesion framework. Very often the service was working within a different planning framework such as a cultural strategy, community plan, or social inclusion, regeneration or learning strategies. There might be overlapping or complementary strategies. Not all written statements specifically mention library services, but depending on the style of government, a range of corporate, departmental or service plans indicate roles and actions for libraries. Some position statements already include social inclusion and equality, but there is little evidence that cohesion issues have been taken on board.

An emphasis on localism and community planning in local strategic partnerships has to be seen alongside the requirement for local councils to measure their corporate performance across a range of outcomes. Responding to Audit Commission consultation, local authorities considered

that 'diversity' (with an emphasis on social inclusion and community cohesion) and 'user focus' should be more thoroughly assessed within the comprehensive performance assessment. The Audit Commission has made clear¹⁸ its intention to draw out a specific theme on diversity, to avoid

the risk that diversity and user focus issues are 'everywhere but nowhere' and are never drawn together to provide an holistic picture of the authority's success in this area.

Work is in hand to pilot this theme, and it is likely that a revised corporate assessment scoring system as part of the comprehensive performance assessment will be in place in 2005.

This may well deal with the concern that cohesion can be buried in a variety of planning mechanisms - equality, cultural, development, community, regeneration or learning strategies and agendas. Sometimes these are all embraced within an overall master plan as well as the Community Plan. Plans may overlap services, areas and partnerships. Many may be incomplete, or unfulfilled. Strategies for community health, community safety or young people may fragment this further. One surprising example we have found is that even in a local authority where there is a community cohesion pathfinder in progress, the library service has no formal part in it, even though it has taken a proactive stance itself.¹⁹ All this raises the question, what can library services offer within this context of strategies and policies?

A unique selling proposition?

There is a strongly held view that libraries offer a welcoming, neutral space that provides opportunities for personal, cultural and community development in appropriate circumstances. We asked librarians whether they considered that libraries have a unique selling proposition, that is, something that they alone can offer in support of the principles of community cohesion. Our analysis points to four important attributes, as outlined above:

¹⁸ *CPA 2005: the new approach: single tier and county council and district council comprehensive performance assessment from 2005*. London: Audit Commission, 2004, available at www.audit-commission.gov.uk/reports.

¹⁹ Report of the Select Committee on Community Cohesion, Sandwell Council, July 2003 available at <http://www.laws.sandwell.gov.uk/ccm/content/corporateservices/legalanddemocratic/communitycohesion.en>

- through the accessibility of information and materials about different cultures and their meanings: **resources**
- having access to communication skills and resources: **expertise**
- the accessibility of 'neutral,' local places for formal and informal interaction: **place**
- and by presenting an undifferentiated public service: a **symbol**.

This helps us to see that the unique offer of libraries is not any single one of these attributes, but *the combination*. Some of the above components are offered by other institutions - such as the BBC for instance, the education system, and the private sector. We suggest that the apparently unique offer of libraries could be redefined more clearly in terms of the sum of these parts, and that this constitutes a powerful engine for community cohesion.

Mainstreaming and the project culture

A fresh emphasis on community cohesion could help to bring about a reassessment of the place of projects in service development. We have argued that it is more appropriate to see community cohesion as a fundamental characteristic describing overall purpose, rather than as a framework for short or medium-term objectives. This means that it calls for readjustment and alignment of mainstream services more than putting specific *projects* in place. This is not to say that targeted, short-term and possibly experimental initiatives do not continue to have a place. But the mainstream service should be characterised by community cohesion principles.

One library service described to us their overall approach that concentrates on improving mainstream services. The declared intention is to minimise barriers to take-up; engage with the community directly and through partners; and concentrate on 'common needs' that are shared 'by all kinds of people.' This approach sees project based development as inadequate: what is required is a consistent policy and practice that ensures that all people feel valued, confident, and willing to associate themselves with the library's values and goals. The notion of place and a 'neutral' space is a necessary but not sufficient part of this.

Library staff have emphasised the importance of continuous communication with library users. This will allow library users to increase their own confidence in making use of library services, and will allow staff more clearly to engage with their needs. This, together with an emphasis on basic skills, is seen as the key to allowing people to make choices and

participate – conditions that underpin cohesion. Learning, it was said, is a key to participation, and therefore a route to cohesion.

Partnership

As one respondent pointed out, libraries can only be expected to *contribute to* the development of cohesive communities. But there may be various ways of doing so, through specific actions that libraries take, and by working in partnership with other agencies. Partnership implies recognition that the library contributes to wider objectives than those that can be reached independently. But it also implies giving due weight to such objectives, and committing appropriately to the collective endeavour required.

Libraries can function as conduits of information and bring information and communication skills to practitioners and residents at local and authority level. Library buildings can be a focus of action and interaction. They can be gathering places that reflect a sense of belonging or even ownership among users.

It's clear that partnerships are becoming critical, particularly where project initiatives overlap mainstream working, and in moving towards greater involvement with community groups and funded initiatives at local level. As partners, libraries need to demonstrate the skills for successful collaboration,²⁰ such as developing mutual trust, personal leadership and commitment through communication. This takes time and requires patience but is essential for the opportunities that it brings.

Correspondents also recognised that working in partnership with other agencies and community groups was a necessary condition to maximising the take-up of library services. We found that librarians appreciated the importance of an understanding of the role of such agencies, the work they do at local level, and the cultural context of their aims and methods. It was pointed out that it is not always easy to distinguish the contribution that some partnerships might make to community cohesion.

Meaningful partnership, it was said, is not an accident, but flows from vision, policy and communication. It is important to recognise that networks develop naturally, and partnerships grow 'organically' – and this can and does take time. There are two obvious difficulties on the way. The first is the need

²⁰ See *The guide to development trusts and partnerships* by David Wilcox, <http://www.partnerships.org.uk/pguide/pships.htm>.

for partners to recognise and signify the role that libraries might play, and trust that they can deliver. The second is the need for the library to play to a whole community whilst working in partnership with a range of partners that might in some circumstances appear incompatible. Working within a policy framework, and with a consistent approach, the library can obviate some of the difficulties that these tensions bring.

Specific examples that were mentioned by respondents include identifying with Local Strategic Partnerships, along with the voluntary sector agencies that have traditionally supported library work such as the WRVS, Age Concern, and disability organisations. There are important connections to organisations to do with learning or neighbourhood renewal (e.g. community development, IAG, Sure Start, colleges, Basic Skills) that were cited and continue to call for investment of time and energy. In other fields, Gloucestershire County's work with HM Prison Gloucester serves as an example of proactive partnership work. Several reader development projects have been undertaken "to encourage prisoners to use the library whilst in prison and to continue using public libraries on release."²¹

Relationships with regional and local partnerships are growing, including with funders, and other agencies such as race equality or travellers organisations. Our impression is that the fundamental shift is in the growth of such partnerships –

Many of our projects and the ensuing improvements in services are achieved through partnership working and outside funding.

One area where we felt that more involvement could be productive was in relation to housing associations. For instance, the National Housing Federation has published a case study in which a housing association developed a 'community induction' project aimed mainly at new residents. The project has employed two Community Induction Officers and their role is to ensure that:

- all new tenants are welcomed and provided with an information pack on all local services; and
- tenants are introduced to their neighbours and relevant community groups, sports events and neighbourhood watch schemes.²²

It's reasonable to suppose that libraries could make a small but qualitatively-significant contribution to the effectiveness of this kind of initiative.

²¹ http://www.seapn.org.uk/Pris_Lib_Dev.rtf

²² *Community cohesion: iN business for neighbourhoods*. National Housing Federation, September 2004, http://www.inbiz.org/files/documents/community_cohesion.pdf, p11.

2.2 Delivering services to promote community cohesion

- *Vision* - Services have clear objectives that contribute to community cohesion, and are delivered in a way that is consistent with its principles.
- *Indicators* would need to take account of the service's capacity to deliver; and to measure the extent of the contribution over time.

We found that changes in library policy in relation to community cohesion are beginning to emerge. Special posts are being created, and some libraries are re-structuring to meet the imperatives within *Framework for the future*. In addition, some libraries are re-defining how they present the service by seeking new models of delivery and in planning new libraries. The most complete examples of this seem to be the Idea Stores ('main streaming an environment that encourages usage from all communities') in Tower Hamlets, and the re-modelling of Cambridge Central Library.

To many people in the library field, the most obvious area where they can contribute to community cohesion is through their resources – the collections, displays and exhibitions that they hold. This is a hugely significant role in helping to raise awareness and understanding of diverse cultures, and it is one where libraries have a distinctive track record. The Community Cohesion Panel's report was emphatic about the significance of celebrating heritage:

The promotion of events, such as carnivals and cultural exhibitions, have been (*sic*) focused on minority communities. This is understandable as those minority communities were struggling to establish their identity. In a multicultural society, however, no-one's heritage should be taken for granted and should be promoted without any sense of embarrassment or difficulty. The promotion of heritage should be on an inclusive basis inviting other cultures to develop their understanding of that heritage.²³

This role is articulated by Gareth Daniel, Chief Executive of the London Borough of Brent: "We celebrate one another's

²³ *The end of parallel lives*, p14. In this respect, it's worth recording here that Sandwell Metropolitan Borough held a successful 'St George's Day' in April 2004, with the slogan 'Forever England, For Everybody.' See press release at <http://www.laws.sandwell.gov.uk/ccm/content/councilgeneral/pressreleases/pressreleasesapr2004/stgeorgeheretostay.en>

religions and cultures. In Brent, for example, we celebrate the Jewish festival of Hanukkah, we celebrate the Muslim festivals of Eid, everybody celebrates Diwali, whatever their religion..."²⁴

And it was strongly demonstrated to us in our study visit to a community library in Leicester. The service had developed a library-centred craft project for the purposes of community cohesion. The project was designed to link diverse constituencies on a fairly small inner city estate using shared experiences of traditional crafts and shared learning of new crafts. Several project groups that were facilitated by professional artists and community traditional craft workers, met regularly over a ten-week period to produce textile hangings. They used a wide range of books for inspiration and technique. The resulting hangings were displayed in the local neighbourhood centre. A number of events took place including an introductory craft fair, and group meetings in the library and the local school. Residents are looking at the idea of forming a co-op to sell their craft products.

Examples like this serve to illustrate the power (often unrealised) of the library as a combination of resources, expertise, place and symbol. They also illustrate the complex interlinking involved: about ten local agencies were represented in this initiative, which depended on external funding and was time-limited. Discussion with the stakeholders revealed the following features as having been significant in the project's success:

- geographical distinctiveness of the neighbourhood
- origin of the library in the neighbourhood centre
- partnership, especially with the school
- use of creativity as a theme
- working with children and parents
- importance of recognising the skill and experience base of all participants
- a long term perspective
- presenting the library as truly accessible to all groups.

This list might be regarded as daunting if it were seen as typical of the essential components that have to be in place for a ten week project. But we should note that only the first two are pre-existing and non-negotiable. All the other features of this success are really about attitude and a

²⁴ Quoted in the introduction to the sixth report of the Commons Select Committee on housing, planning, local government and the regions, May 2004, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200304/cmselect/cmodpm/45/4502.htm>

judicious choice of approach. They nonetheless happened to be regarded as crucially important.

Strategic approaches and leadership

According to one report,²⁵ a successful strategic approach to planning and delivery requires the following aspects all to be in place:

- Vision/policy
- Initiatives and incentives
- Leadership and steering
- Planning and organization
- ...and the means of delivery.

Failure to have any one of these components will lead respectively to confusion, stagnation, apathy, chaos or frustration.

Both the decision to undertake a dedicated effort in this field and the manner of its implementation will be influenced by the political priorities and the way societies - and library staff members – think of cultural minorities and immigrants.

Clearly this will vary from area to area, but vision and policy must underpin any sense of action. Such action might be based on short term initiatives, but the real value of these should only be to demonstrate value and capacity as a preparation for planned outcomes. Drawing on good practice in four countries, the authors posit three golden rules for success in serving the diversity of needs, that seem entirely relevant to delivering services to promote community cohesion:

If anything is going to happen, it will depend on leadership. Without leadership there will be no lasting result.

You need a holistic approach. When all aspects are taken care of in a coherent way the result will be much more than the sum of the various parts.

As to the means of delivery:

Respect is the key factor in communication and cooperation between persons and groups with different languages and cultural backgrounds. In any planning, the motto should be “Nothing over them without them!”

²⁵ Larsen, J I, Jacobs, D and van Vlimmeren, T (2004). *Cultural diversity: how public libraries can serve the diversity in the community*. Gütersloh, Bertelsmann Stiftung.
http://www.public-libraries.net/x_media/pdf/cultural_diversity_040217.pdf

At the core of delivery will be human interventions. We discuss some of the issues that arise from these below.

Staffing

Staff attitudes and perceptions may be a critical issue that limits what can be achieved – one librarian suggested that a ‘cultural shift’ is necessary, in this respect. At the same time, staff numbers, their background, skills and confidence levels may need enhancement or re-organisation in order to deliver long-term results. These are preferable to short-term, quick-fix initiatives that it is said can provoke a cynical response. As one librarian said, “we need the capacity to think out of the box.” Of course, positive recruitment and training policies are important too, to ensure that the workforce is representative. This means that staff from whatever background, and carrying out roles in and out of the public area, understand the changed environment of the new paradigm, and positively adapt their behaviour towards it.

One further aspect of this is the use of volunteers from the local community to act as the equivalent of “classroom assistants” in schools. We have noted parents of local children helping with homework and other tasks. It was said that volunteer programmes can be an important way of promoting integration.

Targeting and area based strategies

Our research revealed that there is a great deal of targeted work going on under the general heading of *social inclusion*. This is mostly aimed at particular groups of people, or concentrates on basic skills and reading in general. It also aims to encourage the take-up of library services. Important themes are the minimising of rules-based barriers, and developing a community development approach. Consultation-led planning for new or re-furbished libraries allows clean starts too.

Compliance with central government policy on consultation suggests that within community planning there will be an increasing expectation that services should be provided in response to market need. This could mean specific services being provided locally but not comprehensively across an authority. Management policy may dictate that some services will be either included or excluded from certain locations – even if sectional interests demand the opposite. This highlights the tension between the provision of services holistically and on an area basis. It may be argued that administratively all processes – membership, access, fees

for example – would be identical, but that the kind of service offered to any community varies according to need. This is quite different from the artificial ‘layering’ of services according to service point size and type, and is more in keeping with an area based initiatives approach. This may bring in partnership funding, which in turn raises the risk of being subject to issues of sustainability. A greater risk might be that a very local focus could reinforce the experience of parallel lives within communities, rather than promote cohesion.

2.3 Local engagement

- *Vision* - The library promotes cohesion among communities in the local area through its resources, its expertise, as a venue, and through representing the public realm. It works to enhance the effectiveness of groups at local level to promote community cohesion.
- *Indicators* depend on demonstration that particular initiatives or roles are related to cohesion objectives. They would also need to show that the library is perceived by local groups and associations as a significant contributor to community cohesion.

The civil and the local

The presence of a library in a neighbourhood is a solid affirmation of the relationship of the individual to the common interest: it represents not just the 'civic,' but also the 'civil.' Civil relations reflect the necessity for non-threatening relations between people who share and negotiate the same space on the planet. The origin of the concept is not trivial: it refers to people ('city-zens') who live in proximity but are not likely to know one another. Their relations are in this respect to be distinguished from those of villagers. Since it is not certain that they will have dealings with one another, but they may seek to repeat any dealings they have, citizens have evolved ways of behaving towards one another, in a 'civil' way. Recently the reliability of these behaviours has been felt to be in crisis in this country.²⁶ Our modern notion of a library as 'a public place for private activity' belongs firmly in this context, as a natural *representation* of civil relations, performing a 'stabilising role'²⁷ in civil life.

We noted above that community cohesion implies association with locality. It could be argued that the less our social relations are locally reinforced, the more they are in jeopardy, to the extent that civil society breaks down. It follows that the public library has to be embedded in local networks, in the local community sector, if it is to fulfil its potential in civil-localism and contribute to community cohesion. In this section we consider how libraries can contribute to local efforts to overcome divisive influences. As the Home Office *Strength in diversity* report observed:

²⁶ Blunkett, D. (2003). *Civil renewal: a new agenda*. London, Home Office, <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/docs2/civilrennewagenda.pdf>.

²⁷ *Framework for the future: libraries, learning and information in the next decade*. London:DCMS, 2003. http://www.culture.gov.uk/global/publications/archive_2003/framework_future.htm

“Communities are better equipped to organise themselves to tackle their common problems if they are not divided by mutual suspicion and misunderstanding of diverse cultures and faiths.”²⁸

The library reflecting cohesion

Librarians argue that the notion of the open, neutral welcoming space is a valued offer to all communities. Setting aside the question of those who are ‘hard-to-reach,’ what is this place actually like for people in diverse communities? Could it be seen as a model for the cohesive community? Leicester’s Chief Executive offers this vision:

I think a cohesive community is a community that has naturally many cross-links, where people from different race, age, background, feel free and happy to mix together in housing, in education, in leisure facilities.²⁹

What that might mean, for example, is that the library itself reflects the notion of cohesion in the way it goes about its business – offering people from different backgrounds similar life opportunities and being proactively receptive to new arrivals and new or emerging communities.

Focusing on issues of community cohesion and diversity helps to sharpen our understanding of how libraries actually do, or imagine they do, contribute to this agenda.

It’s reasonable to add that a sense of belonging for all communities, with an appreciation of the diversity of people’s different backgrounds and circumstances, might be realised through strong and positive relationships between people from different backgrounds *in the library itself*. A cohesive community shows evidence of unconstrained communication amongst residents, and a feeling that there are positive valuations on diversity and a feeling of belonging. We would also expect to see a willingness to cooperate (e.g. trust in people, confidence in institutions, respect for diversity), high levels of participation (e.g. participation in networks and groups, and political participation) and ‘good literacy.’³⁰

²⁸ Strength in diversity: towards a community cohesion and race equality strategy. London: Home Office, 2004, p16.

²⁹ Rod Green, Chief Executive of Leicester City Council, quoted in the introduction to the sixth report of the Commons Select Committee on housing, planning, local government and the regions, May 2004, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200304/cmselect/cm04dp/4502.htm>

³⁰ Buying in or dropping out: the public policy implications of social cohesion research. Department of Canadian Heritage, 2002, available at: <http://www.culturescope.ca> .

If then this can be made overt at the library - guiding the development of linkages, networks, and capacity for self-help and mutual support, within and between communities, and within the library - it may be seen to present a model for cohesion of itself.

This will be made manifest through appropriate displays and exhibitions; through library based activities that discover and share the creative skills of different communities: through culturally sensitive promotions and stock selection; through staff who are culturally-aware and communicative; and in working with local people in support of cohesion objectives. This is the context in which the role of libraries now needs to be articulated.

The library as public place

Much has been written about the kind of place that a public library *is* – usually in terms of being safe, welcoming and neutral; sometimes as being ‘middle-class,’ stuffy or exclusive. What we want to do here is draw attention to the potential for styling libraries in terms of the social interactions that they can generate.

In an influential report on local social relations, Victoria Nash distinguishes between situations in which people are just exposed to the presence of others, and situations in which they are expected to interact and co-operate with others. She notes that both are required for a healthy public realm.³¹ Libraries perform an important social function in the first of these categories, just by being there and being open.³² They encourage staying and most do not discourage interaction.

Of course, just having civic amenities and facilities is not sufficient for what we would recognise as ‘community life’ to flourish. It’s not the *use* of public facilities that generates community, but the social interactions that build up around such uses.³³ It has been suggested that public libraries need to consider how they contribute to social interaction at local level, and that they might take account of the interaction style

³¹ Nash, V. with I. Christie (2003). *Making sense of community*. London, jppr.

³² Given that shopping requires less and less interaction with others, it’s worth noting that shops now represent competition to public libraries in this respect as well as in others. They’re open mostly when needed, and it’s possible to be surrounded by other people without having to interact with them.

³³ See Janowitz, M. (1967). *The community press in an urban setting: the social elements of urbanism*. 2nd ed. Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

of other 'third places' that are accessible within the locality.³⁴ Some will be low-interaction places ('places of retreat,' of being publicly private) and some will be places of congregation or interaction. Community cohesion calls for a variety of appropriate places: could the library's style be adapted according to what else is available? Nash's work showed clearly that:

small-scale decisions about the nature of the places in which they live, and about the ways in which they can come into contact with one another, make a vital difference to quality of community life.³⁵

Public libraries and networks of support and communication

In our view there is an undeveloped role for libraries in supporting networks of mutual support and communication at local level. The connectedness of community groups and organisations is a major contributor to cohesion and articulation of need. Where information flow drops below a certain level, the local information ecology is vulnerable: levels of face-recognition drop significantly, people stop receiving information or sharing it, and the neighbourhood could begin to fracture or atrophy.³⁶ This is not about formal information provision, it's about healthy communication networks. There are three clear roles for public libraries:

- promoting information sharing;
- providing spaces and occasions where groups can meet, can meet each other, and can promote their interests and activities;
- stimulating the use of virtual spaces for networking, broadcasting information, and presenting community memory.

Consultation

Correspondents offered a range of examples of libraries' involvement in consultation exercises with various parts of their constituencies, such as young people and disabled groups. It seems that libraries are operating within a 'consultation culture,' but this tends to be more reactive than correspondents would like, apparently partly because of inadequate recognition of what the library contributes. It was

³⁴ Harris, K. (2003). "Your third place or mine?" *Public library journal* 18(2): 26-29.

³⁵ *Op cit*, p88.

³⁶ Harris, K. (1999). The online life of communities: nurturing community activity in the information society. In: *Building community information networks*. London, Library Association, p61-83.

felt that if the library role had a higher profile, consultation exercises and the learning that comes from them could be better planned and more effective. It was also felt that, to be effective, consultations needed to be focussed on specific outcomes, for example to a discrete group or service, or a building.

3. Checklist

It would seem useful to have a checklist to help demonstrate the library service contribution to community cohesion. This might be used in preparation for a peer review or an Audit Commission inspector measuring council performance. What would a library expect to have in place if an inspector calls? What sort of answers will be needed?

Policy and strategy

Is there a formal integration into published local strategic partnership and corporate planning strategies? What would be recognised as the library contribution to these? What definition of the library role to support community cohesion is shared across the service? What specific actions are there to meet cohesion objectives in the Public Library Position Statement?

Staff recruitment and training

Do staff largely reflect the make-up of the community they serve? Do they understand how the promotion of community cohesion is reflected in the work that they do in the library? Do they know and understand library policy in this respect? Do they know about the 'other' cultures in their service area – the significance of different religions, traditions, diets for example. Are there specific elements in the Training Programme in support of this? Is this programme offered on a shared basis with other agencies?

Reduction of rule based barriers

What is the minimum requirement for membership and use of library services? What steps have been taken to minimise bureaucratic barriers to use?

Marketing

Is there a plan that emphasises the library role and its services to all communities? Does the plan also market the service to partners and decision makers?

Consultation and user involvement

Are formal processes identified and organised? Are there systems of feedback in place to gather informal views?

4. Indicators

Respondents welcomed the idea

The prospect of indicators was warmly welcomed in general, although a number of issues were raised. It was felt that target setting for groups can be patronising and labelling, and doubts were expressed about using these for comparison. It was pointed out that while recording changes in uptake of services is important, counting is likely to be of rather small numbers. Nonetheless, indicators should be simple to collect, and should offer simple messages - about use of core services for example – that point to action that is required.

The profile of libraries has risen within councils. Library Standards, while imperfect, have helped this along. To take the community cohesion agenda forward and ensure libraries can sell themselves as serious players, some kind of indicators need to be developed and evidence drawn to support this stand.

The need for outcome measures was also raised – for example to lever in funding based upon:

- increased interaction with other people
- increased interaction with social structures
- increased educational attainment
- movement from passive consumption of services to involvement with delivery.

A framework for indicators

In the light of this we have provided a framework for indicators (see page 37 below) based on the structure we have used in this report. The next stage will be for practitioners to contribute to an exercise in completing this matrix, and from there it will be possible to devise specific indicators for practical application. There seems to be no reason why every one of the boxes should necessarily include an indicator; nor should any one of the areas necessarily be limited to a single indicator.

We wish to stress the importance of developing indicators for local engagement – the third row in our matrix. This is likely to be the area that library services find it most difficult to address, and it is arguably the area of greatest significance. The need is to demonstrate that libraries can contribute to the quality of social relations *at local level, i.e.* among individuals and groups in their day-to-day lives. It's apparent that this happens often enough – through connections made

in reading groups, through homework clubs, through services delivered to people's homes, through provision of a range of cultural materials, sometimes just through simply being a civic venue and being open. The task, as it always has been, is to identify and demonstrate where there is a connection between:

- enhancements to the sense of cohesion, and
- what the library does and means to people.

Resources that can guide our ongoing work in this area are beginning to emerge. For example, a recent Home Office report on indicators of integration, referring to the field of refugee integration within UK society, offers the following as a core indicator:

The proportion of refugees who report actively mixing with people from different ethnic backgrounds in everyday situations.³⁷

What this suggests is that in due course we should be able to determine the extent to which, where people from different backgrounds are interacting in everyday situations, the library's resources, expertise, building, and symbolic role, have played some identifiable part.

Practicalities of developing indicators

The example cited above also raises a practical point about indicators, which is that they can be expensive to collect unless they are bound-in to other data collection procedures. It may prove to be the case that the library service ends up with a combination of a number of relatively inexpensive, simple indicators of specific library performance (such as provision of meeting rooms, proportion of registered users from different social groups, services to community groups, and so on); and perhaps one or two more general indicators based around questions wedged into a wider council survey. An alternative might be to have a detailed library-specific survey carried out less frequently – perhaps every four years or so.

In our view it will be highly important to include some indicators that can appropriately be addressed to non-users as well as users of the library service, because people value and relate to the service even though they may make little or no use of it. It will also be important to avoid using indicators in a way that distorts practice by distracting effort in order to chase certain outcomes.

³⁷ Ager, Alistair, and Alison Strang, *Indicators of integration: final report*. Home Office Research, Development and Statistics Directorate, 2004, <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs04/dpr28.pdf>

Because of the variety of local circumstance we have uncovered, indicators for public libraries and community cohesion can be developed within the context of Best Value or Library Standards, or any other template, and questions might be included in the Public Library User Survey, or otherwise used in the local authority's own monitoring activities.

A single indicator

Finally, we propose the following as a possible overall indicator that would meet the requirements of simplicity, ease of collection and longitudinal measurement:

Proportion of residents who say that the public library contributes to strong and positive relationships between people from different backgrounds.

Framework for indicators on public libraries and community cohesion

	resources	expertise	place	symbol
<p>Strategy The library develops and contributes to strategies aimed at improving community cohesion.</p>				
<p>Delivery The library represents community cohesion in the planning and delivery of services.</p>				
<p>Local engagement The library works to enhance the effectiveness of local people and groups to promote community cohesion.</p>				

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