

# 'Like a light going on'

the report on the Local Living Library project



There is nothing in life as rewarding as taking an interest in people.

Kevin Harris and Linda Constable  
2008

## Acknowledgments

We would like to thank all the volunteers who committed time and energy to being Books in this project and thus made it possible. All the project staff involved at Bournemouth, Bradford, Kent and Staffordshire have been patient, resourceful and enthusiastic: in particular we thank Gerardine Bodey, Anne Brown, Jenny Carter, Karen Cotton, Carolyn Date, Christine Dyson, Sheila Golden, Sian Hudson, Rachael Jorgenson, Catherine Mann, Peter Walker, and Karen Yeomans.

We wish to thank Sarah Wilkie at the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council who has been enthusiastic and supportive throughout.

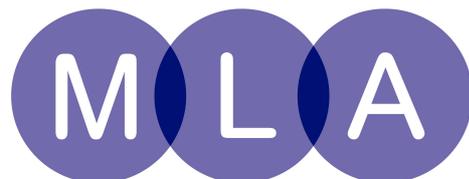
Finally, we owe a debt of gratitude to Ronni Abergel and his colleagues who devised and developed the original concept.

The Local Living Library project was run by Linda Constable and Kevin Harris for Local Level and was funded by the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council in 2008.

The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and may not reflect the opinions or policies of the MLA Partnership or its staff. If you have any queries about the work of the Partnership, please telephone 020 7273 1444, or email [info@mla.gov.uk](mailto:info@mla.gov.uk).



[www.Local-Level.org.uk](http://www.Local-Level.org.uk)



MUSEUMS LIBRARIES ARCHIVES  
**COUNCIL**

# Contents

<b>Introduction and summary of key points</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1. The idea</b>	<b>3</b>
1.1 The tradition	3
1.2 The local model	4
1.3 Community cohesion: living with difference	5
1.4 Community engagement	6
1.5 Challenging stereotypes	7
1.6 Conversational democracy	8
<b>2. The project</b>	<b>9</b>
2.1 The venues	9
2.2 Days and times	10
2.3 Working with library staff	11
2.4 Recruiting Books	13
2.5 Publicity	15
2.6 The catalogue	18
Table 1 - Selected Book titles	19
2.7 Books with multiple hats (and props)	22
2.8 Attracting Borrowers	24
2.9 The loans	26
2.10 Defining the loan in space and time	29
2.11 Finding things out	31
2.12 Benefits to Borrowers	32
2.13 Looking after the Books	33
2.14 Benefits of volunteering	34
<b>3. Strategic issues</b>	<b>37</b>
3.1 Local Living Library in the public library	37
3.2 One-off or regular event?	39
3.3 Towards a set of guidelines for Local Living Library	40
3.4 Concluding remarks	41



# Introduction and summary of key points

Living Library gives direct access to someone else's experience, by allowing people to 'borrow' a person for a conversation. This might be someone who has significant personal experience or a particular perspective to share. Living Library can be used to confront stereotypes and prejudices, to explore diversity, and to stimulate conversations that otherwise might not happen.

'Loans' take the form of a conversation, and can last for a variable period, typically 30-60 minutes. In this report we use the capitalised words 'Book' and 'Borrower' to refer to the conversationalists.

The Living Library idea was introduced in 2000 by the Danish Youth organisation 'Stop the Violence', and has since been developed in a number of countries. It has been promoted by the Council of Europe's youth programme on human rights with a strong emphasis on using the methodology to address discrimination and confront stereotypes.<sup>1</sup>

A seminar was held in October 2007<sup>2</sup> to explore the concept in the UK, and this was followed by a project in English public libraries, funded by the Museums Libraries and Archives Council, described in this report.

The project was designed to explore a community development model of Living Library within public libraries in England. Local Living Library places an emphasis on local ownership of the events, relationship-building, and the discovery of themes and experience of local interest. In addition it contributes to the community cohesion agenda by helping people to explore issues of living with difference, in a safe, supported and relatively neutral environment.

Four library authorities participated in this pilot: Bournemouth, Bradford, Kent and Staffordshire. The first two authorities opted to run events in their large central libraries; in Staffordshire, the small community library in Norton Canes was chosen; and in Kent the integrated library, museum and gallery at Sevenoaks, a medium-sized market town, was used. Thus we had a range of contexts in which to explore the idea of Local Living Library.

Twelve sessions of Local Living Library were organised, three at each venue. A total of 326 loans took place, an average of 27 per session.

Evaluation material was collected from Books, Borrowers, and members of staff who were involved in organising the events. The main sources were separate two-page questionnaires for Books and Borrowers: 78 completed questionnaires were received from Books and 142 from Borrowers. The volunteers were also invited to write their thoughts down in prepared

---

<sup>1</sup> Arbergel, R. and others. *Don't judge a book by its cover! The Living Library Organiser's Guide*. Council of Europe. 2005, <http://www.eycb.coe.int/eycbwwwroot/HRE/eng/documents/LL%20english%20final.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> See Constable, L. 'I am a book, borrow me.' *Public Library Journal*. 22(4) 2007, p19.

notebooks called eBooks: a total of 17 were returned.<sup>3</sup> In addition, five record sheets describing activity during the sessions were supplied by staff. The authors attended two of the three events at each venue, and provided support by telephone and email. An online group was also established where staff shared ideas, reflections, files and images.



## Summary of key points

- Local Living Library engaged people in thinking about how they relate to unknown others and encouraged conversations that otherwise might not have happened. Response was overwhelmingly positive: almost all participants enjoyed the experience and wanted it to be repeated.
- Staff at all the participating libraries spoke of running more events afterwards. It was clear that Local Living Library was felt to be consistent with the public library role.
- We can expect the benefits of Local Living Library to be as varied as the benefits of reading and gaining access to information. Each individual brings their own experience to the loan and it can help pass the time in a rewarding way, provide a single nugget of information or learning opportunity, help with taking an important decision, or give rise to profound personal reflection.
- Local Living Library provides opportunities for partnership working and extends the range of events delivered to promote community cohesion.
- In considering developing Living Library sessions, library services will want to take account of the extent to which the events can help deliver on specific local policy priorities and key national agendas, such as community cohesion and community engagement.

**Key practical points** to do with running Local Living Library events are provided after each topic is discussed in section 2. A discussion of **strategic issues** is provided in section 3.

---

<sup>3</sup> The eBook is a digitally generated handbook devised by the Diffusion creative studio ([www.diffusion.org.uk](http://www.diffusion.org.uk)). They can be printed with prepared text and are ideal for people to jot things down as they move about.

# 1. The idea

## 1.1 The tradition

The original idea of Living Library was initiated in 2000 by the Danish youth movement 'Stop the Violence.'<sup>4</sup> Since then, many more Living Library sessions have taken place across Europe and elsewhere around the world: the Living Library website<sup>5</sup> currently lists 100 known events. The methodology was developed by the European Youth Centre in Budapest and in 2003 Living Library became part of the Council of Europe's youth programme on human rights education:

The philosophy of this programme contends that human rights cannot be defended by legal texts alone. They need to be protected and fostered by everyone. In order to encourage citizens to think about their own human rights and those of the Other, awareness needs to be raised in the wider public about the importance of human rights for the personal well-being of all.<sup>6</sup>

In this established European tradition, Living Library is promoted very much in terms of exposing borrowers to their own prejudices and stereotypes:

The Books in the Living Library are people representing groups frequently confronted with prejudices and stereotypes, and who are often victims of discrimination or social exclusion.

Guidelines for loans from the Living Library include suggestions to consult librarians:

The Librarians are there to help you choose a living book that reflects your prejudice. To aid you in identifying stereotypes, the librarians have a list of the available literature, with examples of the most common stereotypes.<sup>7</sup>

Here, the librarian is the facilitator of the connection between the potential Borrower and the information source (which in this case is a person). This does not mean that the facilitator is at other times necessarily a librarian, nor that Living Library necessarily belongs in public libraries (although the use of professional and trained librarians is recommended<sup>8</sup>). Most examples have been in other settings, especially festivals. Thus the tradition does not assume a role for public libraries: the phrase 'Living Library' exploits a familiar metaphor to summarise what happens in

---

<sup>4</sup> Images from this event are available at <http://picasaweb.google.co.uk/LivingLibrary.org/The1stLivingLibraryRoskildeFestival00>; and further material can be seen at <http://living-library.org/the-concept-of-the-living-library.html>.

<sup>5</sup> <http://living-library.org/>

<sup>6</sup> Abergel, R. and others. *Don't judge a book by its cover! The Living Library Organiser's Guide*. Council of Europe. 2005, <http://www.eycb.coe.int/eycbwwwroot/HRE/eng/documents/LL%20english%20final.pdf>. This and the following quotation are taken, without irony, from the book's cover.

<sup>7</sup> See Guidelines for readers, <http://living-library.org/guidelines-for-readers.html>

<sup>8</sup> *Don't judge a book by its cover!* p49.

practical terms, which is the connection between someone seeking information or knowledge (broadly defined) and a source for that information or knowledge.

The concept certainly has a powerful resonance. In the project described here, we asked Borrowers what they thought of the idea of Living Library. The responses show that 92% of respondents were impressed or very impressed:

Very disappointed	Slightly disappointed	OK	Impressed	Very impressed
-	1	10	49	80
	1%	7%	35%	57%

This can be compared with findings from a festival-based Living Library event in Istanbul in 2007, which suggests 9% and 89% for the last two categories of response, respectively.<sup>9</sup> At a public library-based event in Lismore, New South Wales, Australia, in November 2006, 100% of respondents said they would visit the Living Library again and would recommend it to a friend.<sup>10</sup> Such evidence constitutes emphatic endorsement of the idea.

In section 3.2 below we offer some reflections on the appropriateness of the public library for the kind of events we describe.

## 1.2 The local model

The present project was designed to explore a community development model of Living Library. Without contradicting the human rights principles which emphasise the need to confront damaging stereotypes, Local Living Library is concerned more with local ownership of the events, relationship-building, and the discovery of themes and experience of local interest. As we discuss below, the model also deliberately contributes to the evolution of 'conversational democracy' and is perceived to have a role to play in the convergence of community cohesion with community engagement.

In practice this meant particular emphasis on partnership working and supporting staff in making connections with local networks. We worked collaboratively with library staff at local level to support them in taking decisions and building their initiatives. While the process was informed by our suggestions and supported where necessary, the contacts made to recruit Books were local contacts, the publicity was local, the interest generated and the ownership of the events was local. Where there are community development outcomes, these have been grown locally to be harvested locally.

<sup>9</sup> A similar five-point scale was used in the Turkish evaluation. See <http://living-library.org/assets/files/evaluation/LL%20Tyrkish%20Evaluation.doc>.

<sup>10</sup> See <http://living-library.org/assets/files/evaluation/Living%20Library%20-%20Lismore%20evaluation.pdf>

All this can contribute to the building of relationships and to community cohesion, without reference necessarily to prejudices or stereotypes. Living Library is about human relations and requires sensitive handling. It's clear that the way in which a person is presented is critical in influencing the extent to which the encounter, or the event as a whole, might be seen. As the Living Library website claims, 'provocative titles encourage reading'.<sup>11</sup> There is a balance to be struck between being too provocative and not being provocative at all:

'Not all books can be political[ly] correct and that is the whole point.'<sup>12</sup>

Such tensions have to be seen in a social policy context beyond just the community cohesion and human rights agendas.

### 1.3 Community cohesion: living with difference

The issue of 'living with difference' dominates much debate about contemporary social issues. As our neighbourhoods, workplaces and public places reflect greater social heterogeneity, and broad cultural differences are exposed at the societal and the local level, it has become apparent that social and behavioural norms are less easily established and shared than they were.

'To contribute fully to community cohesion, relevant services should not just avoid discrimination; they should actively encourage cross-cultural interaction and opportunities for local people to meet people from communities other than their own.'<sup>13</sup>

When what constitutes acceptable behaviour in public places appears to be unstable and under continuous scrutiny, stereotypes form and prejudices harden. How do people work out the behavioural norms that they find acceptable – for instance, with regard to costume, littering, rowdiness, overt displays of faith or sexuality? The habits, assumptions and trust needed to ensure that diverse people get on together without conflict, are harder than ever to negotiate.

Various suggestions can be put forward to help stimulate conversations and create meaningful social interaction among people of different backgrounds.<sup>14</sup> A range of devices have been put forward in this cause and Living Library belongs among them because it illustrates the potential for contact with people from different backgrounds to lead to understanding. As described by Sabina Baltruweit for Living Libraries

---

<sup>11</sup> <http://living-library.org/recuiting-books.html>

<sup>12</sup> <http://living-library.org/recuiting-books.html>

<sup>13</sup> *Community cohesion: an action guide*. London, Local Government Association, 2004, p.41.

<sup>14</sup> The department for Communities and Local Government is preparing guidelines for local authorities on promoting 'meaningful social interaction,' to be published autumn 2008.

Australia, it promotes community cohesion by breaking down barriers between people belonging to different groups in society.<sup>15</sup>



After a conversation with 'The Girl from Zanzibar' about her experience as an African Muslim, one of our respondents wrote:

'It closes the gap between people who in normal cases wouldn't have anything to do with each other.' (Borrower, Norton Canes)

## 1.4 Community engagement

Local Living Library very clearly contributes to community cohesion but it is not clear how it relates to community engagement. The potential convergence of the cohesion and involvement agendas is a matter of current policy debate<sup>16</sup> so it is appropriate to reflect on this angle here.

Community engagement means people who have something in common being involved collectively in influencing what happens to or around them. Local Living Library functions not so much by stimulating collective activity as by facilitating shared reflection on a one-to-one or small group basis; with no requirement that the reflection should relate in any way to a decision-making process. However, several references in the material we gathered from Borrowers describe Local Living Library as 'a way of engaging the community'. This kind of response is common and reminds us just how much need there is for semi-formal and informal 'occasions' that can result in connections between people who live in the same place. Further, it points to the need for a restored public realm in which such encounters can more readily be anticipated and take place, and are not seen as exceptional.

It's also important to keep in mind that those who participated as Books were volunteering to be part of a **public** initiative which is self-evidently about community cohesion. In that sense, every loan was a micro event demonstrating a link between public participation and cohesion.

---

<sup>15</sup> *Introduction to resources*. Living Library Australia, 2008, [http://www.livinglibraries.org.au/images/uploads/02-Introduction\\_TEXTOnly.pdf](http://www.livinglibraries.org.au/images/uploads/02-Introduction_TEXTOnly.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> See for example Creasy, S. and others (2008). *Everybody needs good neighbours? A study of the link between public participation and community cohesion*. London: Involve, [http://www.involve.org.uk/cohesion\\_report](http://www.involve.org.uk/cohesion_report). Blake, G. and others (2008). *Community engagement and community cohesion*. Joseph Rowntree Foundation, <http://www.jrf.org.uk/bookshop/eBooks/2227-governance-community-engagement.pdf>.

## 1.5 Challenging stereotypes

As we have noted, the tradition of Living Library places an emphasis on challenging stereotypes and confronting prejudices in the context of human rights.

The community development approach adopted in the present project has helped to explore some of the more local and less overt ways in which the Other is treated as negative.

We can distinguish at least three kinds of prejudice or stereotype which Local Living Library might bring to the surface:

- what we might call the 'big themes' (prejudices against people because of who they are or their situation – *eg* ethnic groups, refugees and asylum seekers, particular age groups, sexual orientation);
- local territorial in-groups and out-groups (established or outsider, from 'that estate,' or 'the posh end'); and
- more personal and specific prejudices such as against lifestyles or particular visible forms of behaviour (*eg* environmentalists, Goths, skateboarders).

The Local Living Library model also requires us to reflect on the extent to which a volunteer can be said to be *representative* of his or her category.

It is obviously legitimate to recruit volunteers to have a conversation about their experience in a given role, without the individual feeling uncomfortable with the implication that they somehow *represent* that category. At the same time, if the individual appears to have been packaged as 'representative', other members of their category might be offended, for various reasons.

There are profound issues here, and two points seem to us to be fundamental.

First, when we consider the experience of a gay person, a Buddhist monk, a carer or a war veteran or any other distinctively categorised experience – these are valid topics of conversation *if they and their Borrower decide they are*.

Secondly, if both Book and Borrower find the encounter rewarding, it confirms a wholly valid role for the public library in making that experience accessible.

And as this project illustrates (see section 2.9 below), the Living Library process can play a role in surfacing non-confrontational and subtle discrimination as much as it does in exposing outright prejudice.

## 1.6 Conversational democracy

Democracy is changing. It has been argued that 'citizens are coming to demand a less distant, more direct, conversational form of representation.'<sup>17</sup> Democracy is about relationships as much as it is about formal processes; it is about dialogue as much as decision. This reflects recognition of the vitality of conversation as an indicator of a healthy public realm: as Samuel Jones has noted, conversation is at the heart of our assumptions about the public realm.<sup>18</sup> A diminished public realm implies a stifled culture, whereas a public realm where people feel encouraged to take time out for conversations is likely to be more vigorous and its democracy more robust. The practical message is that we need to stimulate conversations, to look for opportunities to make them happen collaboratively, and to be making and supporting connections between different actors on the local scene.<sup>19</sup>

Living Library is a response to the need to prize, stimulate and protect the values and knowledge that local people bring to their shared experiences in their neighbourhoods. To do that we have to ensure that there are more occasions for encounters and more conversations between different groups of people. Living Library contributes because, by pre-negotiating trust and reducing the fear of interaction, it provides non-threatening opportunities leading to cultural acceptance of others. As Living Library pioneer Ronni Abergel has put it,

'If people talk to each other, they'll understand each other better. And with understanding comes better tolerance.'<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> Coleman, S. (2005). *Direct representation: towards a conversational democracy*. London, ippr, p.9,

<http://www.ippr.org.uk/publicationsandreports/publication.asp?id=320>

<sup>18</sup> Jones, S. (2006). *Talk us into it: putting conversation at the heart of the public realm*. London, Demos, p16.

<sup>19</sup> Harris, K. (2007). *Localism, governance and the public realm: issues for the local cultural sector*. London, Museums Libraries and Archives Council, p.15, [http://www.mla.gov.uk/resources/assets//L/localism\\_governance\\_public\\_realm\\_11107.pdf](http://www.mla.gov.uk/resources/assets//L/localism_governance_public_realm_11107.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in 'I'd like to renew Lesbian Feminist,' 23 July 2008, [http://www.macleans.ca/culture/media/article.jsp?content=20080723\\_80437\\_80437](http://www.macleans.ca/culture/media/article.jsp?content=20080723_80437_80437)

## 2. The project

### 2.1 The venues

Four library authorities participated in this pilot project. They were selected to offer a variety of contexts in which to explore the idea of Local Living Library.

In Bournemouth's large town centre library, the 'Conversation Corner' was used. This is a pleasant well-lit space with plenty of natural light, close to the main counter of the first floor of the library, with several tables and screens. It offered the apparent advantage of being wholly observable from outside the area, for those who might just want to watch what was going on.

In Bradford, the events took place in the Learning Zone on the first floor of the central library. The zone has glass partitions and a door (which was kept open during the day), so in this context each session was very much a separate activity which people were unlikely to discover by chance. Within the Learning Zone a large sofa provided a sense of relaxed informality for Books between loans. Loans took place at tables behind screens at one end of the room.

In Staffordshire, Local Living Library events took up most of the community library in the village of Norton Canes. Books had to occupy seats between shelving, thus constraining the normal use of the library and making the events hard to ignore. This meant that if things got busy, there would be a lively sense of bustle; but if things were quiet, it might seem off-putting, at least to a library user who did not want to borrow a living Book, but was faced with one between each stack.

Events in Sevenoaks, Kent, were held in an exhibition gallery above the library. This offered the apparent advantage of appropriate scale, but like Bradford with the apparent disadvantage of being away from routine footfall. In practice, this was the only venue where there were comments on the sound quality, with and one or two people not being able to hear clearly what was being said.

The library location is an important consideration. This project has demonstrated that it can work well in a city centre and in a medium-sized town. The small community library in Norton Canes was successful for those who took advantage of the sessions, but this context depends even more heavily on local publicity and on mobilising local community networks to stimulate participation.

The particular library space will make a difference to participants but does not appear to be crucial for prospective Borrowers. In the small community library the conversations took place between the stacks of shelving, and there was a sense of light-hearted innovation about this. The main point is that if the allocated area is not within the main flow of traffic then – as we found in Bradford – the staff will need to work harder to promote to customers walking through the doors. We comment on publicising the space, in section 2.5 below; and on defining the loan in terms of space, in section 2.10 below.

## Key points

- Local Living Library can work well in a city centre or large town, and in a medium-sized town. The ambitious attempt to run events in a small community library could probably be successful in a distinctive way if local networks of support can be mobilised.
- If the space used is not close to normal footfall then staff will need to work harder to promote the event to customers walking through the doors.

## 2.2 Days and times

Staff considered optimal times and days of the week for the events in discussion with their colleagues, and settled on their own preferences. Each included one Saturday, and 10.00 a.m. was the preferred start time. Only two libraries included an early evening option.

Views on the Saturday option varied:

'People are busy and less likely to be available to be Books.'  
(Borrower, Bradford)

'Saturday morning might be a good time for family loans.'  
(Borrower, Bradford)

'Perhaps a library on a Saturday morning is the wrong venue for this event?' (Borrower, Bournemouth)

### **Bournemouth Library**

Sat 3 May 2008, 1000-1400  
Wed 7 May, 1400-1700  
Mon 12 May, 1000-1300

### **Bradford Central Library**

Wed 14 May, 1500-1900  
Thurs 15 May, 1000-1400  
Sat 17 May, 1000-1400

### **Norton Canes Library**

Sat 26 April, 1000-1200  
Wed 7 May, 1000-1200 & 1330-1500 (Library normally closed at this time)  
Thurs 15 May, 1700-1900

### **Sevenoaks Library**

Tues 29th April, 1400-1700  
Sat 10 May, 1000-1300  
Wed 14th May, 1030-1430

At Norton Canes two laudable attempts at variations were unsuccessful. First, staff explored the option for a group of children to visit from a local school, but unfortunately the event coincided with examinations and they were unable to attend. Staff also began negotiating to hold a session at the local youth centre, but were unable to organise this in the time available.

The Local Living Library event went ahead in the library, at a time when it would normally be closed, with the potential advantage that more space would be available.

'Although there was a great atmosphere in the library again, with Books talking amongst themselves and to library staff, we didn't get a single member of the public through the door... The balance of holding the session when the library is closed is the space available in such a small building...'

Creatively, those present turned the event into a learning opportunity by Books and staff adopting the role of Borrowers. This confirms the assertion made on the Living Library website, that

'Should it ever happen that no readers would attend an event, the organizers can be sure that the books will read each other during the wait time.'<sup>21</sup>

In Bournemouth, with its enviable coastal location, there was a sense of vulnerability to fine weather influencing footfall in the library:

'The downside was that the weather in Bournemouth on Saturday was beautiful and coupled with the long [bank holiday] weekend, we didn't get many people through the door, and many of those that did attend were in a hurry to check their email, borrow books and leave.'

Similarly, staff in Sevenoaks reflected on the timing of a midweek session:

'Our last session was on Wednesday 14th May and was scheduled to run from 10.30 to 2.30. By holding a session over the lunchtime on a weekday we hoped to attract people working in the town who may not have been able to get to the other sessions. There were 9 books... The first two hours were busy but the lunchtime period turned out to be much quieter than we had anticipated.'

What is striking about these comments is the high expectations that were held. In spite of the sense of disappointment, at the final session in Sevenoaks there were 41 loans, an impressive average of ten per hour.

## Key points

- It is probably better to schedule events for a day when the library is open anyway.
- While Local Living Library is still a novel experience, it makes sense to experiment with a mix of days and times in order to maximise the number of people who can participate.

## 2.3 Working with library staff

Each authority identified a key member of staff and contact was made by phone and email to explain the background, timescale and deliverables of the project. Other key members of staff were identified for face-to-face briefing sessions and they were all sent a copy of the briefing guidelines prepared for the project.

Each briefing session covered the basic practicalities of the project and included a review of the background to Living Library, with a discussion of stereotypes that might be relevant in each local context.

Practical details included such issues as:

---

<sup>21</sup> See <http://living-library.org/what-do-books-say.html>

- where and when the events were to be held;
- how many staff would be needed to help;
- selecting, recruiting and supporting the volunteer Books;
- publicity and promotion of the event;
- presenting the information about the Books; and
- managing the Borrowers.

All of the briefing sessions were held in the library where the events were to take place which enabled the team to walk round, identify the most suitable location in each, and consider pros and cons. This helped the library staff to focus on the practicalities and to visualise the events taking place.

Staff tended to be slightly apprehensive about the idea of Living Library and unsure how it would work in their context. Their main concern was selecting and recruiting the Books. As they grew more confident they felt able to draft a 'long list' of about 15 Books. The staff also identified local contacts and networks for the purposes of recruitment.

Building the confidence of the local library staff and managers was a key part of these initial sessions. The aim was to finish the session with a suggested list of locally-relevant Books and a list of contacts and networks to start the recruitment process.

Essential to this approach was having local library staff with local knowledge and experience of holding events in the library; together with managers to support and motivate their team and project manage.

We provided additional support to library staff by email and telephone. An online group was established to share files, images, requests, ideas and experience across all four sites. This proved valuable in maintaining enthusiasm and momentum.

After the Local Living Library sessions we asked the Books and the Borrowers to rate the support of the library staff and the results were as follows:

	Unhelpful	Not very helpful	OK	Helpful	Very helpful and supportive
Books	-	-	-	3	70
Borrowers	-	-	4	23	99

## Key points

Briefing sessions were held and staff were supported throughout the process of organising and running the events. The key components were:

- building initial confidence and understanding

- library staff with local knowledge and experience of running events in the library
- managers who supported and motivated their team
- exploring links with local networks of potential volunteers.

## 2.4 Recruiting Books

Following the briefing session local library staff and other locally nominated staff began to make contact with volunteer Books by telephone, email or personal visit.

The successful recruitment campaigns were very much down to the commitment and enthusiasm of individual library staff although each authority seemed to approach it differently.

'The staff have worked hard to attract a range of Books in a small community.' (Borrower, Norton Canes)

It could be argued that potential volunteers were being asked to do slightly different things in different places: being available for conversations on a Saturday morning in Bournemouth central library is quite different to a Thursday evening in Norton Canes community library. Having said that, three factors seemed to influence the success of the recruitment –

- connections
- time
- management commitment.

The requirement for library staff to have good connections among local people and organisations is self-evident. An exercise like this could expose network weaknesses, but it could also help build up or reinforce such connections. The lead staff member in Bradford commented:

'I found that contacting our local third sector partnership, the community and voluntary sector, worked really well. I had people approaching me wanting to be books, which was encouraging. From that partnership I have Books on the following subjects - caring, volunteering and working with the homeless. This sector can obviously see the benefits for them.'

By contrast, staff in one of the other locations had invested effort in publicising the events to their local strategic partnership, and were disappointed when no-one from the partnership came to participate in any of the sessions.

We found that staff were realistic about the amount of time needed to recruit volunteers, and this was important because in some cases a combination of persistence, stamina and imagination was called for.

Similarly, it was apparent that staff needed to feel that their organisation was as committed as they were to making the event successful. In all four authorities we felt that, while it was essential to have one person leading and driving the initiative, it was equally important to have a sense of

committed support around them – for example when it came to coming up with alternative suggestions when a line of enquiry drew a blank, or to identify additional staff time for managing the events on the day.

Nonetheless, it's necessary to keep in mind that however well a library fulfils these three criteria, even the most ideal potential volunteers still might not commit or, worse, might commit and not show up. So for example the lead member of staff in Bournemouth reported:

'Unfortunately the Polish Mother's baby was ill, and the Big Issue Seller didn't turn up, so we had four books available with the Baptist Minister only arriving for the last hour.'

It transpired that the Living Sober Book had forgotten about the event and had not picked up phone message reminders that had conscientiously been left for him. In a perverse reversal of the assumed power of targeted communication, he was reminded by an article in the local newspaper and attended the next session.

There was one 'bad loan' in the whole of this project, which can be explained by a confusion in the recruitment process and which escaped notice until it was too late. A volunteer who was recruited to represent an organisation, at late notice pulled-out and provided a substitute who was inadequately briefed by the original recruit. Our understanding is that once the substitute had provided the Borrower with information about her organisation she lacked the communication skills to develop this into a more sustained conversation, giving the Borrower a negative experience:

'The lady who was my Book seemed to have dried up and had difficulty communicating.'

It's difficult to legislate against such an unfortunate combination of actions and characteristics, but this example points to the need to ensure that people who are recruited to be Books for Living Library do need to be adept communicators, who have had the chance to discuss, appreciate and reflect upon the role beforehand.

In each library, Books were identified from among the staff, thus exploiting a ready resource and offering the option of making them available in case of shortage on any given day.

We asked the Borrowers for their views on the selection of Books available, and most were impressed:

Very disappointed	Slightly disappointed	OK	Impressed	Very impressed
-	1	29	61	43
	1%	22%	45%	32%

Finally we note that the libraries began from a stationary point and are interested in building momentum for recruiting Books in the future. We asked the **Borrowers** whether they would consider becoming Books in the Living Library: 42 said 'Yes' and 70 said 'No'. We feel this is a reassuring distribution. Most people probably recognised that being a Book does not suit everybody, and requires certain characteristics; but

more than one third of the respondents must have felt they have something to offer.

## Key points

- The recruitment process will be more straightforward where library staff already maintain live connections among local networks and groups. Mobilising such connections is not only likely to provide a wide range of potential recruits, they are also likely to be more reliable.
- Volunteer Books need to be adept communicators, who have had the chance to discuss, appreciate and reflect upon the role beforehand.

## 2.5 Publicity

All the participating authorities committed time and energy to publicity and promotion, recognising that the idea does not have immediate appeal to everyone and that a level of interest had to be stimulated. Staff used the online group to discuss this theme in particular, sharing ideas and commenting on draft press releases for instance.

We have distinguished five areas for attention under the general heading of publicity:

- **Promoting to the media** – press releases were prepared by all four libraries, resulting in newspaper articles, some radio coverage and a television item. Bradford Libraries were successful in attracting the attention of a regional television company, BBC Look North: a short film was broadcast and made available online.<sup>22</sup> In the other libraries, local journalists visited the sessions and published articles: in Sevenoaks the journalist turned into an impromptu Book and immediately attracted two Borrowers.
- **Publicising to the public** – the libraries produced posters and leaflets, and made announcements on their web sites. Leaflets were made available in other libraries. Staff were also active in promoting the events by word of mouth, ensuring that mentions were made to partnership meetings, community groups, book groups and user forums. In Sevenoaks, staff wore the 'Living Library' T-shirt (see below) and spent time 'floor walking' inside and outside the Library to explain the concept. The volunteer Books also used their own networks, such as environmental groups and care support groups, to spread the word and promote interest.

---

<sup>22</sup> See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/7393323.stm>

- **Presenting the catalogue and the Books** – Kent County acted quickly to design and print a number of T shirts, a black version worn by Books and a white version worn by staff. In Bradford, distinctive sashes were worn by the Books. Different approaches were taken to presenting the catalogue. In two cases, the Books were described on a large display board; in another, the descriptions of the Books were placed in the front of empty video cases and displayed; elsewhere, a leaflet and poster design included Book titles on the spines of books in a distinctive graphic image. One option to be considered in future is a set of video clips running on a loop on a screen at the entrance, showing Books describing themselves and some shots of loans in action. The same sequence could also be made available online.
- **Attracting attention at the location** – banners, displays, posters and leaflets were used to try and differentiate the area where Living Library was taking place. But it's fair to say that it was hard to anticipate what was needed or appropriate in this respect. In the two central libraries it seemed difficult to give prominence to information about the Living Library events, because of the great variety of information on display on posters, notice-boards and signs that try to attract visitors' attention even before they cross the threshold of the building. We discuss this further in section 2.10 below.
- **Promoting in person on the day** – it was helpful to have a leaflet to hand to people when trying to engage their interest in the concept. As noted in section 2.8 below, many people find it difficult initially to grasp what the idea of Living Library implies. We were also surprised at the extent to which, even in a public library, people appeared to resist being approached and 'sold' something. This reticence – sometimes, arguably, put forward as an English national characteristic - can be accommodated by providing information on a leaflet which people can read at their leisure, particularly if there are events on future dates which they can anticipate. Finally, all four libraries were aware that staff on duty elsewhere in the library had a role to play in explaining the concept to people and encouraging them to try it: having made sure that they were fully briefed proved valuable in several instances.

We asked Borrowers how they found out about the events, and responses varied greatly. Most participation was entirely serendipitous on the day; some Borrowers had absorbed the advance publicity but seemed not to have come to the library with the particular intention of taking part; others appeared to have been motivated to come along because of the publicity; and a small number had taken the initiative and made a reservation (in Sevenoaks and Bradford some advance reservations had been secured; and in Bournemouth, a group of English language students had a planned visit).

In spite of the efforts at publicity, misunderstandings still occur. One Borrower wrote:

'It was good to have a one on one discussion. I had expected it to be a talk.'

We asked participants how they found out about the event: some of the responses are listed here.<sup>23</sup>

How did you find out about Living Library?	
Sample responses	
Was well-promoted, saw in several posters / articles	Read about it here
From librarian at book club	By accident!
TV	Publicity leaflet
From a friend	Telegraph & Argus
Greeted on entry	Just walked in
By invitation (from staff member)	Poster in Urdu
From my teacher (foreign language student)	Through the press
Internet	Informed on entry to library
	Overheard a conversation
	Happenstance

## Key points

A number of suggestions about publicity can be put forward on the basis of the experience in this project.

- A concise description of the concept of Living Library is essential and belongs on most promotional material (not necessarily on T shirts).
- At least until such time as we have more systematic ways of evaluating the marketing effort, it seems that all five of the above areas of activity merit attention: the mix is important.
- There would seem to be scope for some imaginative and creative approaches that take account of (a) what we might call the slightly delayed 'graspability' of the concept and (b) people's inclination to react against being 'sold' something new while they are in a public space that is perceived as 'neutral'.
- Some of the publicity needed will vary according to whether the concept is *new* and relatively innovative (as in the present project) or whether it is intended to become or has become *routine* (as for example in the case of Lismore, New South Wales).<sup>24</sup> We discuss this issue further in section 3.1 below.

<sup>23</sup> In organising future evaluation of Living Library events we suggest it could be worthwhile re-working this question on the Borrower evaluation form to provide a quantifiable set of multiple choice options.

<sup>24</sup> Lismore offers a three hour session once every month, with approximately fifteen Books available from a pool of about fifty. See

## 2.6 The catalogue

While all four libraries rightly began with a draft catalogue that was characterised by diversity, their ambitions were inevitably eroded by the practicalities of recruiting Books in a limited amount of time.

A straightforward lesson from this project has been that, until such time as the idea of Living Library is more widely understood, it can be time-consuming to explain to people and gain their interest, and difficult to recruit a balanced list. It's worth reiterating here that the recruitment began in a sense from a stationary start: whatever their connections into the community and voluntary sector, no-one had been having conversations about Living Library and there was no momentum to build on. Furthermore, as we have noted, organisers were also vulnerable to volunteers not turning up, or being able only to commit to part of a session.

It will always be necessary to consider the **balance** of the catalogue. The recruitment process might bring forward, for example, more Books representing roles or vocations, and too few people who experience disadvantage or overt prejudice. Developing the catalogue requires constant attention and ongoing dialogue with those who have expressed an interest and those who have volunteered. But while there were a few regrets about potential topics not being covered, we did not hear any comments about any lack of balance in the overall catalogue.

All the libraries managed to come up with a blend of Books comprising volunteers who could be said to represent the stereotypical 'big themes,' other stereotypes more personal and specific, and a range of local interest Books less likely to be described as stereotypical. We saw considerable variety in all four cases, from an allotment gardener to a Big Issue seller, from a highly active war veteran to a Polish émigré, from nightstop host for homeless young people to someone living with HIV/AIDS. Table 1 below lists a large selection of the titles used.

'Good mix of people/subjects on offer for all age ranges.' (Borrower, Norton Canes)

'Good mix of books, something for everyone.' (Borrower, Sevenoaks)

Table 1 - Selected Book titles

<p><b>Sevenoaks</b></p> <p>Woman Minister</p> <p>Young Entrepreneur</p> <p>War Veteran</p> <p>School Inspector</p> <p>Counsellor</p> <p>Vine Cricket Club</p> <p>Allotment Gardener</p> <p>Sevenoaks Historical Society</p> <p>A Life in Politics</p> <p>Locally Sourced Produce</p> <p>Police Community Support Officer</p> <p>Editor of local paper</p> <p>Ex-drummer of Wizard</p> <p>Textile specialist</p> <p>Environmental campaigner</p> <p>Mr Interesting</p>	<p><b>Norton Canes</b></p> <p>WW2 Evacuee</p> <p>Street Warden</p> <p>Fire Fighter</p> <p>Volunteer</p> <p>Olympic medallist</p> <p>"Girl from the tropics" (from Zanzibar)</p> <p>Family historian</p> <p>Police Community Support Officer</p> <p>Teenager</p> <p>Local Judo Club volunteer</p>
<p><b>Bournemouth</b></p> <p>Traffic Warden</p> <p>Living Sober</p> <p>Baptist Minister</p> <p>Polish Mother</p> <p>Pantomime Dame (in full make up and costume)</p> <p>Police Community Support Officer</p> <p>Soldier from the Royal Signals</p> <p>Nun</p> <p>Magistrate</p> <p>Big Issue Seller</p> <p>Muslim Woman</p> <p>Youth Worker</p> <p>Body Positive - Living with AIDS</p> <p>'Black and blue' (black former policeman)</p>	<p><b>Bradford</b></p> <p>Goths, alternative living, youth today</p> <p>Buddhist monk</p> <p>Sikh</p> <p>Women's football player and coach</p> <p>Visiting the Hajj</p> <p>Host for homeless young people (Bradford Nightstop)</p> <p>Environmentalism, composting</p> <p>Minibus driver for disabled group</p> <p>Cornish Coastal Path walker</p> <p>Carer of person with Alzheimer Disease</p> <p>Former vicar, allotment holder, Munroist</p> <p>Knitting</p> <p>Support for carers</p> <p>Polish émigré experience</p> <p>Ex-teacher, poet, traveller, chaplain and devoted Hindu</p> <p>Counsellor</p> <p>Reading scheme volunteer</p> <p>Tales of old films and theatrical performances</p>

The approach here seemed to be to find a blend of the unusual and the standard, the predictable and the provocative, the known and the exceptional, such as would appeal to and engage the library's constituency. In this it seems to be consistent with the selection of the conventional stock for a public library.

It seems reasonable to argue that this softly-softly long term approach to challenging stereotypes - building up public trust through an ongoing series of events that are locally reported as interesting, challenging and worthwhile - will result in the genuine transformation of many people's perceptions over time.

Among the volunteers recruited were several people, including immigrants, teenagers, a homeless person and a recovering alcoholic, who might be seen as representative of groups experiencing discrimination or prejudice, and perhaps what is striking is that they seem not to have been borrowed noticeably more or less than those who represented topics of general interest. For example, at Bradford the most popular loans at the first session were Goths (5 loans) and Buddhist monk (4); at the third session they were Knitters (6), Homeless host (2), and Sikh (2).

All those involved in the recruitment were aware of the need to avoid the possibility that someone might be accused of using the occasion for **political or commercial exploitation**.

'Living Library should not be abused for political propaganda, egocentric public relations or for commercial purposes.'

Abergel et al, (2005) *Don't judge a book by its cover!* p22.

We also recognised that someone could represent a category of people experiencing discrimination, or talk about their unusual experiences, and at the same time occupy a position which is politically or commercially connected. For example, many asylum seekers would find it hard to describe their situation in non-political terms: being an asylum-seeker is a political status and most people would regard it as healthy to explore that in a civilised conversation. Or, to take another example, would it be right to deny participation to a Book who has been a member of a street gang just because they might be writing a book about that experience? Libraries, after all, organise talks given by authors who make money from book sales, and this is regarded as part of the legitimate promotion of culture.

Such questions of political balance are not new to local authorities or to library services, and we found no evidence that any Borrower felt uncomfortable about the 'neutrality' of any of the Books. When in Bournemouth the Big Issue seller light-heartedly invited people to buy his 'last copies', civic principles were not suddenly in jeopardy. It would be a great shame if the enormous potential of Local Living Library were spoiled by excessive preoccupation with any implied covert agenda.

Having said that, we did come across an example where a *Borrower* sought to divert conversations to her own agenda. Perhaps confusing conversation with conversion, she proved to be consumed with inappropriate religious fervour. One of the Books told us how they dealt with it:

'She was always twisting the conversation every chance she had... and started preaching at us repeatedly. I told her on several occasions that this wasn't the subject and in the end had to call an end to it.'

Several Borrowers suggested or asked for a wider range of Books to be made available. This illustrates the difficulties in striking another kind of balance, because at each venue there were dull periods, with plenty of Books and no Borrowers.

As far as the wording of the catalogue entries was concerned, Books and staff seemed to find it best to work with the combination of a title with some descriptive blurb or contents list. Possibly more use could have been made of sub-titles.

In Bradford there was a deliberate decision taken not to use full names:

'the first decision a Borrower made was based on the title of the Book as shown on a display of book mock ups.' (Staff, Bradford)

There was also a balance to be struck between allowing the Books to have free rein in describing themselves, or for this to be done in conjunction with library staff who might have the professional skills to help prepare a lucid and concise summary.

We asked the volunteers and their Borrowers for their views on the descriptions of the Books. Responses were as follows:

	Inappropriate / inadequate	Not very helpful	OK	Fair	Very clear, well-described
Books	-	-	11	15	42
Borrowers	1	1	14	14	95

In practice, it was reassuring that in many cases they had been involved in writing the description themselves. There is an important point about how this personalises the presentation of experience, which relates to the issue of representativeness (section 1.5 above):

'Getting the Books to describe themselves and think of their own titles can help to avoid the perception that they are representing a category.' (Staff, Sevenoaks)

## Key points

- It's important to keep in mind the balance and range of the catalogue. A blend of the familiar and the challenging can provide a reassuring context for the exploration of alternative experience.
- Organisers need to be aware of any political, commercial or other bias by either the Book or the Borrower, and seek to minimise it.
- It makes sense to work with Books to help them describe themselves for the catalogue if possible, looking for conciseness and appeal without underselling the individual.

## 2.7 Books with multiple hats (and props)

Some Books offered themselves as covering more than one topic and wore multiple hats. It might seem that there is a lot of potential for confusion, although we came across no evidence to suggest that Borrowers were put off.

For example in Bradford the blurb for one volunteer read as follows:

'Experience of working in the universities of Libya and Nigeria as researcher and teacher in botany; working as a qualified nurse in the field of mental health in Liverpool; working as Indic Languages Officer with Bradford Libraries; actively involved in multi-faith activities in Bradford Concord Interfaith Society and Bradford District Faiths Forum; background knowledge of cultures of the Indian subcontinent; interest in Indic literature with two works published...'

This comes across as an example of someone whose diversity of experience is what counts, not just one part of it. But how to make this immediately intelligible to people? His catalogue entry was boiled down to 'Travel and overseas experience of working,' and judging from his written feedback it seems that he talked with his Borrowers mostly about the politics and religions of north Africa. It may have made a difference that staff who were on hand to advise Borrowers were aware of the breadth of experience that he offered.

Similarly in Bournemouth, one Book presented herself slightly enigmatically as 'Multicultural baby, society integration'. This woman was an active volunteer, coordinating activities for immigrant parents and children and promoting integration. Far from being ignored through confusion, she proved to be Bournemouth's most borrowed Book, with six loans on one day and 'about 11' on another.

Where the topics are linked, such examples may just offer added interest to the Borrower. If people offered quite distinct topics - such as being a traveller and a carer – perhaps there is a case for more than one catalogue entry.

In effect the variety that volunteers offered meant that there was more depth to the catalogue without having had to recruit more volunteers.

It could be argued that Books who offer a range of topics, related or not, simply illustrate the diversity of human experience and the extent to which people can be fascinating to one another.

### **Insanity, Engineering & the Art of Being a Clown**

From Lismore Living Library<sup>25</sup>

Poet, dancer, musician and songwriter;  
devoted husband and father of four;

The mild mannered introvert by day, you need only scratch the surface and you will find a burning desire to break the shackles and find freedom through creative expression.

Rod's life experience ranges from joy found in self expression, delusions of grandeur disintegrating into despair, the depths of depression and grappling with the legacies of the past. In the midst of all that fun, Rod has also learnt to cope with living with a psychiatric illness for the past twenty years.

'At times deeply challenging, but still a good read'.

In theory, the idea of Books with multiple hats was taken a step further in Sevenoaks, with a Book advertised enticingly just as 'Mr Interesting'. Unfortunately he did not turn up at the session he was advertised to attend, which may or may not have added to his credentials as intriguing. But it raises a serious point, which is to ask whether the idea of some kind of a 'lucky dip' offer like this would be appropriate and would be valued by people? Living Library can certainly be fun and entertaining: offering a kind of blind date option would be a way of acknowledging that conversations with people we previously knew nothing about can be enormously rewarding, not least when they are unexpected.

Some Books used **props** or brought in some small token of their role or experience. We saw Olympic medals and running shoes, a firefighter's helmet, war medals and various items from Zanzibar. The soldier wore uniform, as did the pantomime dame, inescapably.

We feel this is an area with potential that merits a little more attention. It's common for a conversation to be enriched by some tangible object being passed around, or being able to see an object that is felt to be an inseparable part of a significant experience. A suitcase, for instance, is well-recognised as a powerful symbol of migrant or refugee experience.<sup>26</sup> At the risk of reducing the event to some kind of conversational jumble-

<sup>25</sup> See

[http://rtrl.nsw.gov.au/site/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=258&Itemid=130](http://rtrl.nsw.gov.au/site/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=258&Itemid=130)

<sup>26</sup> See for example the 'I packed this myself' exhibition described at <http://www.bridging-arts.com/projects/suitcases-reveal-lives-of-migrant-workers>; or the 'Suitcases and sanctuary' exhibition described at [http://www.24hourmuseum.org.uk/nwh\\_gfx\\_en/ART17153.html](http://www.24hourmuseum.org.uk/nwh_gfx_en/ART17153.html)

sale, perhaps Books could be encouraged to consider what they might bring along to add impact to their loan. If it ends with someone handing-out free samples of a product for disguised commercial purpose, it will have gone too far.

Where cultural diversity is concerned, there might be particular attention paid to craft and food. Is there a case for using Local Living Library as part of a food-based multicultural event? The connection between food and conversation is well-established. Local Level's recent work on street parties served to illustrate how, as one participant told us, 'People are proud of their food, saying, do you know how to eat it?'<sup>27</sup>

## Key points

- It may be wise to accept that interesting people have a number of facets of experience that are hard to separate. The challenge is to prepare a concise and appealing catalogue entry which does them justice.
- It may not be immediately apparent from the catalogue, but an engaging Book with a range of related experience may prove highly popular. Organisers of Local Living Library should not be too keen to constrain diversity where it is offered.
- It's worth encouraging the use of props related to the loan topic.

## 2.8 Attracting Borrowers

Apart from the specific publicity initiatives described above, members of staff were proactive at the time of the events in trying to stimulate more interest among visitors who came in to the library routinely. In a couple of cases this extended to spending time in the street outside as well as engaging people as they came through the doors.

There were some notable successes with this tactic. Several people left the library having had an unexpected experience which delighted them. For instance, one visitor to Bradford Central Library, knowing nothing about Local Living Library as he entered the building but engaged by staff as he came in, made a choice from the catalogue and spent forty minutes deep in conversation with someone he'd never met before, about matters of faith and visiting the Hajj.

Nonetheless, when we spoke to library visitors to try and interest them in what was going on at the time, only a few readily grasped the idea and were immediately attracted to it.

One man in Bournemouth, for instance, was greatly excited about it immediately, and deeply disappointed that his schedule didn't allow him to

---

<sup>27</sup> See *Older people and neighbouring: the role of street parties in promoting community cohesion*. Streets Alive, 2008, <http://www.streetparty.org.uk/newsitem.aspx?item=6>

participate. Others were happy to find out what was going on, and either take a leaflet for further consideration, or spend some time browsing the catalogue.

Most people, however, appeared to have visited the library with a specific purpose as part of their schedule for the day, and were at best reluctant to be distracted from it. This should not surprise us, at least not in a busy town centre library, and reflects the timetabled and structured nature of much contemporary urban life.

Especially in a busy central library, promotional material about an event like this struggles for people's attention in an intensely competitive information environment.



It is not surprising if, bombarded by words and images from notice-boards and posters as they come through the door, most people are inclined simply to switch off and get on with what's familiar to them – returning books or going straight to the newspapers.

In the small community library at Norton Canes it was more obvious that something unusual was taking place, and in such a context people seem more susceptible to having suggestions made to them rather than wanting to be left alone.

In general though, visitors who were not aware of Living Library were not easily engaged. It may be that such responses also reflect two other phenomena: the novelty of the idea and the difficulty of grasping it; and a sense of resistance to being 'sold' something in a place where people do not expect to be approached. We suspect there is some truth in both explanations, and it points to the need to have 'meeters and greeters' available in the library to promote and explain what is going on. In the longer term, perhaps the best way of overcoming them is to build up a series of regular Local Living Library exercises so that interest and understanding accumulate.

## Key points

- Most people take time to grasp the idea and initially they may be suspicious that someone is trying to sell them something.
- It can be hard to get impact from promotional material in a competitive information environment.

## 2.9 The loans

The number of recorded loans at the four libraries, each having run three sessions, was as follows.

	<i>No. of loans</i>
Bournemouth	89
Bradford	68
Norton Canes	50
Sevenoaks	119
	<b>326</b>

We are aware that a welcome degree of informality developed in all sessions, so that some unrecorded conversations took place. Generally, when staff took time out to have an uninterrupted conversation with a Book these were recorded as loans. But where for example someone who recognised one of the Books happened to be passing when they were free, an explanation and usually a lively conversation would ensue. At other times, a member of library staff might spend time talking to one or more of the volunteers. These occasional chats do not constitute loans, but they remind us how structured occasions in public space give rise to social interaction.

Also, these figures do not include all the borrowing of Books by other Books.<sup>28</sup> In each session there were exploratory conversations between the volunteers, who, being available for loan, could not commit to uninterrupted conversation with one another. Several remarked on how valuable they found these connections:

'Good socially, talking and meeting other Books.'

'The most interesting bit was talking to the other Books.'

Overall 78 completed Book evaluation forms were received and 142 Borrower forms. We asked the volunteers to rate their general experience as a Book. None found it either 'Very bad' or 'Not so good'. Nine respondents described it as 'OK' and 64 felt it was either 'Pretty good' or 'Very good'.

We also asked whether they would be prepared to be a Book again. Seventy-two said yes, none said No.

In response to the question 'What was your general impression of your borrowers?' the results were as follows:

Awkward or indifferent	-	Not good listeners	2
Not very talkative	5	Too talkative	1
We got on well	53	Interested and sincere	57

---

<sup>28</sup> The second session at Norton Canes was a notable exception to this: see section 2.2 above.

We asked the Books and their Borrowers whether they thought the time allowed for conversations was 'about right'. The responses were as follows:

	Too brief	A bit short	Just right	Slightly too long	Far too long
Books	-	1	71	1	-
Borrowers	-	7	108	7	-

Seventy-one of the Books and 108 of the Borrowers said it was 'just right', with no-one suggesting that loans were either too brief or far too long.

However, the host libraries were encouraged to establish their own programmes and suggested duration of loans. In practice this was always going to be a function of the number of reservations and the levels of demand: because there were very few reservations and demand was manageable, most conversations started when a Borrower expressed interest and finished naturally, typically after about 25-30 minutes.

A member of staff from Sevenoaks reported:

'We had anticipated that our sessions would be 30-45 minutes for the loan followed by a 15 minute break for the Book to recover. However, we found we needed to be flexible with the timings to accommodate people arriving earlier/later than expected - or not at all. This meant we issued more loans in the time than we anticipated.'

In Bradford, the loan times were recorded systematically:

Session	Shortest loan (minutes)	Longest loan (minutes)	Average (minutes)
1	5	55	26.5
2	5	80	30.8
3	15	60	29.1

The conversations demonstrated the value of Living Library and how it can open up a dialogue between people who might never ordinarily speak to each other. Some of the comments from the Books and Borrowers showed how individual prejudices and stereotypical images were being reconsidered.

For example, Harry is a World War 2 Veteran approaching 90 years old. He was in his early twenties when he found himself stranded with his brother on the beaches of Dunkirk. He is now a familiar and popular face in Sevenoaks and was a very popular title with a remarkable story to tell. One Borrower commented that he 'brought alive books I have read. Like a light going on'.

Another volunteer, a former coal miner who was a Book in Norton Canes, wrote afterwards:

'It felt really good as I was conveying to the Borrower experiences of coalmining that are not available today. Also it was nice to be able to tell them about the area they live in and the things that have disappeared.'

We were not expecting to witness fear-based bias against the police. However, in Bournemouth, which has a visible fluid population of foreign language students, a young woman from China took a great deal of persuading that she could have an engaging conversation with English police community support officers. When she came to the Local Living Library event, there were no other Books available for loan at the time. But in her culture, we learned, people come to fear and avoid the police. Encouraged and supported by one of the project staff, she was gradually persuaded to discuss these differences with the two officers. The project staff member sat with her until she felt at ease. Books and Borrower all seem to have found the conversation fascinating and rewarding. This example showed us how the Living Library process allows global differences to be explored locally.

We feel that attitudes towards local in-groups and out-groups merit attention in the future. In one library session, a conversation took place between a young male teenager and a woman who had been evacuated from London in wartime and had lived in her village for 40 years. She said that she still did not feel that she was treated like a local, being neither explicitly excluded from nor included in local life. This is a tidy example of just the kind of nuanced, hidden aspect of local relationships that the Local Living Library process can bring to the surface. This woman may not have felt she was the subject of any kind of prejudice, nor conformed to any recognised stereotype, and yet her sense of subtle exclusion, of being an outsider, found expression through the accommodating structure of Living Library.

It was apparent in some sessions that there may have been quite a lot of impulse borrowing, with people keen to try out the idea and to have a conversation, just looking to see who was available and going from Book to Book. Future research might explore the question of whether Borrowers attended with the purpose of engaging on a specific topic; came without a specific topic in mind but latched onto one; or engaged widely over various topics.

## Key points

- Almost all volunteers said they would be prepared to be a Book again, and most said that their general experience as a Book was either 'Pretty good' or 'Very good'.
- Most loans lasted about 25-30 minutes and this was felt by a clear majority of Books and Borrowers to be 'just right'.
- The process can bring hidden experience of exclusion to the surface.

## 2.10 Defining the loan in space and time

In some cases we found that the loan as an occasion became blurred either in time (could we specify when it began or ended?) or space (should it be somewhere discrete or somewhere publicly visible?)

Does this blurring matter? Our view is that it only really matters if the event as a whole begins to lack coherence and becomes unintelligible to users of the library or, worse, to participants. It seems likely that if Local Living Library becomes routine and unexceptional, this atomisation would not be problematic and might be a valued characteristic. But with an experimental event, it probably makes sense to be alert to the potential for vagueness in the definition of the loan. One Borrower wrote:

'It was unclear to me what my choices were and how to sign up for them.' (Borrower, Sevenoaks)

It could be that the event will work best where the area used for all loans, which can be confined, feels *separate*, in that you *go into it* and *come out of it*. This was the approach adopted in Sevenoaks and in Bradford, and to a lesser extent in Bournemouth. It was not really an option at Norton Canes. Against this, it could also be argued that having a range of loans going on at different points within (and outside) the building introduces a sense of ordinariness to the fact that it is unusual – making the imaginative appear routine.

Similarly, it may help to work out a way of ensuring that there is a 'moment of issue' and a 'moment of return' which formalises the loan of a Book. All four libraries in the present project recorded loans systematically at the counter. But against this, it could be argued that informality in human relations is a natural and healthy sign, and where possible the interaction should be allowed to take its course.

For example, during quiet periods at any of the locations, one or two people might drift around the designated area and have a few words here and there with some of the Books, and these comments might or might not develop into 'conversations'. It also often happened that Books borrowed Books, as we have noted. So long as the claims of anyone who has made a reservation to borrow a particular Book are respected, this fluidity seems to us perfectly within the spirit of Local Living Library. As one Borrower wrote:

'The built-in flexibility is good.' (Borrower, Bradford)

At the second event in Bradford, some Books were encouraged to sit in the foyer area on the ground floor of the library, while others felt happier waiting in the separate, designated area of the Learning Zone on the first floor. A member of staff who was on hand downstairs might get involved with an interested Borrower and take them upstairs to meet their Book, and find on return that conversations had started that might or might not develop into loans.

In Bournemouth the 'conversation corner' used for the exercises was on the first floor to one side of the entrance to the lending library. Here, as mentioned above, we found that information about the event risked being drowned-out in a very competitive information environment. With a

beckoning library and reading area in front of the visitor, only those who were patiently observant and ready to linger were likely to discover for themselves what was going on. In a busy library like this, a glimpse of two people sitting chatting at a table makes absolutely no impact on the senses - apparently even when one of them is dressed as a pantomime dame in full costume.

By contrast, if you wandered into the defined space in Sevenoaks it was immediately apparent that it was reserved for a specific purpose. In practice, one person found the acoustics in this space demanding; but another told us that, as someone who struggles to hear in pubs, she expected it to be problematic 'but in fact it was fine'.



Should the Books be penned-in, and kept from the view of the prospective Borrower, who has to negotiate through a catalogue and an intermediary? Should they be penned-in *but visible* to the prospective Borrower perhaps, like cattle at a market – conceivably even through a one-way mirror?

We weren't comfortable with these options, preferring for people to feel relaxed in their environment and able to move around if they wished. The trade-off is that spontaneous unprogrammed encounters take place, but attempts to limit these would be wide open to accusations of control-freakery.

Indeed, it could be argued that *the stimulation of more informal, serendipitous encounters in the public realm is precisely what is needed in the interests of conversational democracy*. Local Living Library events, with reduced emphasis on controlling the relationship between Book and Borrower, seem to be one of several ways to achieve that end. We would argue that with Local Living Library we should not be re-enacting the history of librarianship, in which the librarian is reinstated as guardian or gatekeeper of knowledge. In running these exercises in a public library, we see no conflict with the more modern role of librarian as *facilitator of discovery*.

## Key points

- There is potential for loans to become blurred in terms of where and when they take place. This might be problematic if the event as a whole begins to lose coherence, but otherwise is probably desirable in that it reflects healthy informal interactions.
- Organisers therefore need to give consideration to ways to make the start and finish of the loan identifiable, even if flexibility becomes the preferred option; and to consider whether or not it is preferable to create a discrete loan area for the event as a whole.

## 2.11 Finding things out

'It's not books you need, it's some of the things that once were in books.'<sup>29</sup>

One of the features of the Local Living Library activity we witnessed was how it exposed an almost irrepressible interest that people have in finding things out. A partially-structured conversation with a new contact, in a neutral context, provides an ideal environment for those who revel in informal learning. Very often that may be why they're in the library anyway, and Living Library just gives them the opportunity to find things out in a different way.

Sometimes this was partially directed. One Borrower came in with a specific information need which the printed collection was unable to satisfy:

'I was looking for info on counselling, couldn't find books in library on Carl Rogers – great could speak to someone in the know.'

We asked '*What benefits (if any) did you feel you gained from the experience?*' This respondent wrote:

'Info for essay – points would have missed.' (Borrower, Bradford)

Similarly, at Norton Canes relevant subject material was on display and a young boy took out some judo books as a result of speaking to the person who represented England at Judo.

Questionnaire responses confirm that there is potential to build on the interest generated. We asked Borrowers if they felt motivated to find out more about the subject of the Book they had borrowed. A total of 102 said Yes, 16 said No. One wrote: 'May read more on the subject.'

Several Borrowers told us how they had learned through the conversation, or how the insights gained would be useful for them. One wrote:

'Often when I read I have questions that remain unanswered, so to be able to hear about a life / experiences / interests and then ask the questions – very good.' (Borrower, Sevenoaks)

In this sense, Local Living Library complements the traditional public library almost seamlessly, although another comment seems to highlight greater benefit from the specific nature of the interaction:

'I'm much more informed than I would have been if I read a book on the subject.' (Borrower, Sevenoaks)

### Key points

- The events clearly stimulated further interest in the topics discussed. There may be scope for some imaginative ways of linking Local Living Library with existing library collections.

---

<sup>29</sup> Bradbury, R. (1954). *Fahrenheit 451*. London, HarperCollins, 2000 ed, p.90.

## 2.12 Benefits to Borrowers

Numerous comments were provided to us describing the benefits that Borrowers felt they gained from Local Living Library. They range from an uncomplicated sense of relaxed pleasure, to the suggestion in some cases that some profound connection had been made.

The examples quoted here illustrate the different ways in which people found the experience beneficial, and our view is that it is this diversity of benefit which distinguishes the idea and which needs to be captured. If libraries can be 'all things to all people', so can Living Library.

'I felt enriched.' (Borrower, Bradford)

'Got to hear different experience and have an interactive conversation.' (Borrower, Sevenoaks)

'Love the notion, want to be involved... Shame I couldn't access them all.' (Borrower, Bradford)

'Talking to Harry brought alive books I have read. Like a light going on.' (Borrower, Sevenoaks)

'It has helped me to reach an important decision.' (Borrower, Bournemouth)

'An opportunity to ask questions of people I might not otherwise have had the chance to speak to.' (Borrower, Sevenoaks)

'An inspiring afternoon. Most enjoyable and informative.' (Borrower, Sevenoaks)

'More knowledge about war, feeling of community spirit.' (Borrower, Norton Canes)

'This has been like chatting to my neighbours.' (Borrower, Sevenoaks)

'A chance to meet and find more depth than a more casual encounter.' (Borrower, Sevenoaks)

'They said it was useful in knowledge with their own children.' (Book [Teenager], Norton Canes)

'A number of people spoke about getting in touch with their spiritual side for the first time in years.' (Staff, Bradford)

### Key points

- We can expect the benefits of Local Living Library to be as varied as the benefits of reading and gaining access to printed information. Each individual brings their own experience to the loan and it can help pass the time in a pleasant way, provide a single nugget of information, help with taking an important decision, or give rise to profound personal reflection.

## 2.13 Looking after the Books

Books are volunteers with a special contribution to make: it can be crucial to show that the contribution is valued. The relationship is not confined to what happens at the event: it spans a period of time from initial contact; detailed discussion, agreement and confirmation; participation on the day; possible feedback and involvement in publicity; and may extend into suggestions for and participation in future events.

Books were invited to arrive in time for a short group briefing before the session started, but in practice it was sometimes not possible to get everyone there in good time. Some volunteers could only make themselves available for a given time-slot, others may have cut it too fine or arrived late, and in a couple of cases volunteers did not turn up at all.

Each library in the present project made efforts to help the Books feel at ease, by providing space and refreshments, and reassuring them about procedures where necessary. On the second and third sessions, most Books were 'old hands' but a few were standing in for others or making their first appearance and had not attended a group briefing. These volunteers seem not to have been disadvantaged particularly. They had their questions answered and seemed to fit into the smooth running of the event without difficulty.

Pre-briefing of Books by staff, as part of the recruitment process, seems to have been the key. It helps to minimise the amount of information that needs to be shared on the day, and can reduce the importance attached to a general briefing on the day. Most Books arrived for the event with an understanding of what was expected.

Finally, we note that there was emphatic recognition for the helpfulness of staff and the support they provided, as evidenced in the responses to our questionnaires (see 2.3 above).

### Key points

- There need to be refreshments, staff readily available to support the Books and Borrowers, and a comfortable environment.
- Thorough *pre-briefing* of Books during the recruitment process, to help ensure that they understand what will happen, is possibly more valuable than a group briefing. But we recommend a *group briefing* in addition, to cover housekeeping arrangements such as security and access to toilets, to eliminate any potential misunderstandings, to provide reassurance, and to stimulate conversation between Books.
- Helpfulness of staff and the support they provide is valued.

## 2.14 Benefits of volunteering

The benefits of running Local Living Library do not fall just to the Borrower and to the organising agency. In this section we want to ensure that some recognition is paid to the benefits which can accrue to the volunteers who put themselves forward, at the risk of either being bored, feeling their time has been wasted, or feeling unwanted (if they are not Borrowed); or of being 'pumped' for information and becoming exhausted (from high demand).<sup>30</sup>

There can be a feeling that the contribution of voluntary time is taken for granted. It was acknowledged only by a very few Borrowers. One noted:

'These sessions must be tiring for the Book so great that they gave their time.' (Borrower, Sevenoaks)

We asked the Books what benefits they thought they had gained from the experience. Although several expressed disappointment about the low number of loans, it was clear that most had had a rewarding and enjoyable time.

Among the more poignant comments was this partly tongue-in-cheek note from the recovering alcoholic:

'I stayed sober'. (Book, Bournemouth)

This may be more than a throwaway remark, in that it hints at recognition of the value of having been engaged to contribute to something in a public context.

We also asked the Books what benefits they felt were gained by their Borrowers, and it's reasonable to deduce that some of their comments reflect a sense of benefit to themselves.

For instance, one volunteer seems to have been reassured at the likelihood that his Borrowers 'gained knowledge that it is OK to live with HIV and that there is life after diagnosis' (Book, Bournemouth). A Muslim woman in Bournemouth noted that Borrowers seemed 'reassured that we were normal people'. She noted:

'I gained their trust and respect.' (Book, Bournemouth)

People seem also to have found it rewarding to have had the chance to think about how their experience might be presented to others. One person from a faith community referred to having the ability 'to focus on

### **What benefits (if any) did you feel you gained from the experience?**

Greater confidence

Met new people and was able to offer advice

Learned from other people about their experiences

Being appreciated for my volunteer role

The opportunity to meet the people in the community I would not otherwise have met

Meeting people. Great fun

<sup>30</sup> Not all participants were there in a voluntary capacity: for instance, some were there because of their professional or vocational role (such as Police Community Support Officers, a soldier and a firefighter) and some of these presumably were there in paid time.

where a specific person was in their interest, and start from there.’  
Another said it was:

‘Challenging knowing how to pitch the conversation [and] rewarding seeing how enthusiastic people were.’

## Key points

- Participation in Local Living Library can bring benefits to the Books as well as to the Borrowers. The contribution of their time and experience should not be taken for granted.



## 3. Strategic issues

### 3.1 Local Living Library in the public library

'I think we have taken the first steps towards developing a potentially very powerful means of demonstrating the role libraries can play in contributing to community cohesion. We will definitely be planning some more events.' (Staff, Sevenoaks)

Living Library is not inseparably associated with public libraries. Community centres, public parks, housing associations, schools and pubs all might be put forward as appropriate venues. Living Library might be run at festivals, street parties, in old people's homes and day centres, at careers fairs or in factories.

In this section we offer some reflections on the appropriateness of the public library for Local Living Library.

- First, most obviously, libraries are a **local** focus for residents and that attribute can be exploited.
- Secondly, being **public** matters. Running an event in the public library implies public ownership of the event, according to values that are reflected in democratically accountable policies – adhering to equalities policies, promoting learning and community cohesion, and so forth. The public library has the advantage of being a trusted public body. This means that people are likely to accept readily that their relationship with a Book has been pre-negotiated on their behalf and is safe. There is considerable value in this.
- Thirdly, we note that the organisation of Local Living Library is **consistent with the public library role**. It involves facilitating a connection between an individual and some cultural interest or need that they may have. It contributes to the sense of engagement in a commons and to shared learning at the local level. Public libraries already do this in a variety of ways, for example through contributions to outreach events, or organising reading groups and public talks. Local Living Library fits perfectly into this mix and is an appropriate use of public space. We found that participants were even sensitive to the perceived costs of running the events. One wrote:

'I would be prepared to make a contribution toward the costs.' (Borrower, Bradford)

Some reflections follow from the above points.

- In our project we saw some overlap with other resources held by libraries. The participating libraries all displayed books and DVDs relating to the Local Living Library catalogue, and as we have seen (section 2.11 above) there were one or two references to other sources of information. But there is probably more potential for blending the existing collections with Local Living Library loans.

- More than one of the libraries involved in this project is considering hosting Local Living Library events as part of an outreach event, for instance at a local literary festival. Other suggestions have included simply placing a large sofa in a shopping area, with a small band of Books, and inviting passers-by to engage with the idea. There was also some interest in the possibilities of 'alfresco' and 'peripatetic loans' where Book and Borrower take a walk – perhaps round a garden, park, building or housing estate – while talking. (Precautions in supporting participants, in case of incidents, would need to be in place).
- We were disappointed that in spite of recruitment efforts, there was no instance of a person **with hearing difficulties** coming forward as a Book. We feel that Local Living Library should adopt an inclusive approach with regard to people whose hearing is impaired. Their needs might include nothing more than a quiet area and a little consideration, or they might call for special conditions, assistance or equipment. Local Living Library events should explore these needs at the earliest opportunity.
- There seems to be no special reason why either the Book or the Borrower in Local Living Library should be single individuals. On several occasions in the sessions reported here, we witnessed **groups** forming – for instance there were three Goths for most of the Bradford sessions, sometimes being borrowed together; at one point a large cluster gathered around the 'multicultural mother' in Bournemouth, where students also came and sat occasionally in small groups; and in Bradford a small group of people with learning difficulties made a visit and borrowed collectively. We can envisage loans involving different groups such as war veterans, young people, faith groups, disability groups, carers or linking to other library themes and events. Is it possible to envisage a future in which special '**one-off**' loans are organised on request? For instance, could you email your local librarians and ask them to facilitate a loan for you with someone who has recently experienced bereavement, or someone who has experienced the trauma of war? Could a teenager uncertain of their sexuality find someone to talk to by this means? If this loan could not be arranged face-to-face locally, could an online loan be arranged? It would seem that the public library, with its local presence and national network, is well-placed to consider the implications of such a service.

Finally, we note that a national strategy for Living Library is being developed in Australia.<sup>31</sup> That suggests confirmation of a role for the idea in cultural development, a role which we hope the present report has helped to clarify. Staff in Bradford suggested that it has a place in the 2012 Cultural Olympiad. If a national strategy is deemed necessary or appropriate in the UK or in England specifically, it needs to take account of the initial experience reported here. Our view is that Local Living Library should be widely encouraged and supported by public libraries in partnership with other agencies – including community and voluntary

---

<sup>31</sup> See <http://www.livinglibraries.org.au/index.php/pages/about/>

organisations – while continuing to learn from the considerable experience that has been developed overseas.

### 3.2 One-off or regular event?

At several points in this report we have touched on the novelty of Local Living Library and its significance as a special event. Libraries have a tradition of providing special events. Our purpose here is to distinguish between three positions, noting that organising and managing a new kind of event is different to organising something that has become routine.

- Local Living Library as a special event, run occasionally as a novelty that will attract attention and have unusual impact
- Local Living Library begun (necessarily) as a novelty with a view to becoming established as a regular event
- Local Living Library as a regular event, run much as other public library events are, such as book clubs or baby rhyme-time.

The Local Living Library project was experimental and the library authorities involved were not expected to adopt one of these positions. Nonetheless we suggest that authorities take the above distinction into consideration, noting that the option of running events at different locations (and not just in libraries) could give great flexibility. Certainly a number of responses that we received implied a wish to see Local Living Library included in the public library's overall service:

'There should be this all the time.' (Borrower, Bradford)

'Just keep doing it – people will come.' (Borrower, Bradford)

'Excellent concept, please do more.' (Borrower, Sevenoaks)

'Hope it continues to be a regular event.' (Borrower, Sevenoaks)

'More of the same.' (Borrower, Bournemouth)

This necessitates a discussion about what the initiative is trying to achieve, which has to take account of some of the policy context we have outlined in section 1 above – for example the contribution of the public library to the community cohesion agenda, or in promoting volunteering. It also has to take account of the experience in this project, that however rewarding they are, organising and running living library events can be labour-intensive. Even allowing for the fact that follow-on events will be less demanding than the first experiments, staff still have to be briefed, details organised and the catalogue maintained.<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup> In September 2008 a follow-up session was organised in Bournemouth central library. Staff reported that it was considerably easier to recruit books, basing the catalogue on the 'regulars'.

### 3.3 Towards a set of guidelines for Local Living Library

*The Living Library organiser's guide*<sup>33</sup> is an indispensable introduction to preparing for an event. Additional specific guidance was also prepared for this project, and detailed guidelines have since been published as part of the Australian Living Library initiative.<sup>34</sup> Some of the key practical questions to be considered are these:

- What kind of space is appropriate for different kinds of constituency?
- What days and times suit Books, Borrowers and the chosen venue best?
- Is the catalogue balanced and well-described? Should the more complex topics have a contents list or blurb?
- Who's not there, who should be?
- What creative options are there for promoting the event to a wide audience?
- What creative options are there to link Living Library loans with other materials available through libraries?

Additionally, we have found that senior library staff are interested in the practicalities from a slightly different perspective: what are the more strategic questions that need to be explored? In considering whether to invest the time and energy needed into a series of Local Living Library events, we hope that public library authorities will find the positive experiences described in this report persuasive. But they will also have questions that can only be addressed in the context of local practice and local politics. Here we offer a start list for management teams to discuss:

- What would constitute success?
- Is it intended that this becomes a regular event or kept as something exceptional?
- Which agencies can we work with in partnership to mutual benefit?
- Can Local Living Library be used to address specific local issues – such as unemployment, territorial conflict, tensions towards refugees and immigrants - or should it be seen mainly as contributing to community cohesion generally? How might it be used to help deliver on specific local policy priorities?
- Are there opportunity costs in committing staff to such events, and are these offset by the advantages of enhanced relations to local groups and networks?

---

<sup>33</sup> *Don't judge a book by its cover! The Living Library Organiser's Guide*. Arbergel, R. and others. Council of Europe. 2005, <http://www.eycb.coe.int/eycbwwwroot/HRE/eng/documents/LL%20english%20final.pdf>

<sup>34</sup> See <http://www.livinglibraries.org.au/index.php/pages/setup/>

As experience accumulates, it will be important for all agencies to share their experience and take opportunities to develop new ideas collaboratively.

### 3.4 Concluding remarks

This project generated interest on several levels, from the most minute detail shared between Book and Borrower, to the philosophical question of the extent to which someone can represent a human category. It was based on the potential for partnership and the involvement of local people.

Local Living Library engaged people in thinking about how they relate to unknown others, encouraged conversations that otherwise would not have happened, and stimulated reflection on the significance of conversations in the public realm for cohesion and democracy. It also generated a widespread sense of enjoyment:

'This has been a great experience. Thank you for doing this.' (Book, Bournemouth)

'One might be too shy to start up a conversation normally but this made it possible.' (Borrower, Sevenoaks)

'They were able to explore questions they had about personal experiences of BME people and challenge stereotypes.' (Book, Bournemouth)

'There have been lots of people I would have loved to talk to over the years to find out their story so this was a great opportunity to do this.' (Borrower, Sevenoaks)

In our view, the combination of the apparently trivial and the personally profound is not accidental and should be celebrated: it's perfectly human, is rewarding, and just takes facilitation on the part of an agency like a public library.

'One of the most memorable moments was seeing three Goths and two knitters sat side by side on our library sofa knitting away contentedly... I think we successfully brought together sections of our community in a special way and all the feedback we received was positive.' (Staff, Bradford)

Staff at all the participating libraries spoke of running more events afterwards. It was clear that Local Living Library was felt to be consistent with the public library role.

- In terms of human needs, it addresses both the need for reassurance and the instinct of curiosity.
- In terms of social interaction with strangers, it minimises risk and maximises value. It works because the issue of trust has been pre-negotiated.
- With respect to community cohesion policy, it illustrates the potential for contact with people from different backgrounds to lead to understanding.

- It contextualises knowledge and information, providing insights about broad categories of people as well as personal experience.
- And with regard to the public realm, it demonstrates the civic role in facilitating the discovery of creative connections.