Local Level
Understanding life in neighbourhoods

'Ask them'

Developing a consultation plan for Manningham Family and Community Library

1. introduction

Bradford Libraries is to receive a grant under the Big Lottery Community Libraries Programme to support the refurbishment and extension of Manningham Family and Community Library.

As part of the community engagement process for this development, Local Level was asked to work with a group of volunteer residents to develop a framework for consultation. Three sessions were held, in December 2007 and January 2008, followed by a feedback meeting with library staff, invited councillors and other stakeholders.

This report offers an account of the process and seeks to place the work in the context of community engagement policy and public library practice.

2. exploring local democracy

In the first workshop we carried out a few 'warm-up' exercises and began to clarify the task. First, participants were asked to write their names and the number of years they had been resident in or around Manningham, on a small post-it; and then to place it on an aerial map of the area, to mark the point where they live.

This exercise functioned as an ice-breaker; it generated quite a lot of discussion (partly because the map was deliberately hung upside-down on the wall to challenge familiarity), and demonstrated that within the group we had a total of 191 years of residence, an average of approximately 24 years.

We discussed the overall task and the group considered how confident they felt to address it. Responding to the question '**How confident do you feel to get involved in a local democratic process?**' participants had a go at the 'confidence spiral' – on a scale of 0-10, they ranged themselves between four and nine. This result reflects the fact that they were attending the exercise voluntarily, and therefore had a degree of motivation; but at the same time this was a new experience which some were unsure about.
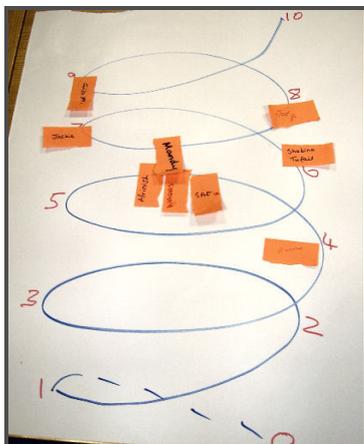
We then worked through a short exercise called '**It's not fair!**' Participants were asked to think about their earliest memory of a democratic (or undemocratic) experience; and then to talk about it to the person next to them. In the subsequent discussion we clarified certain **understandings of democracy** – for example that it is not just about politics, that it's about trying to choose what people want, that it requires *working together*, as well as *respect*, *compromise*, and *listening*.

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3. the public realm

Working in two groups, participants then took part in a short game devised to bring out some issues to do with the design of public buildings. Each group was given a set of children's bricks, a flipchart sheet and pens, and was asked to construct a model of a public building while *simultaneously* inventing a character who would have to use that building.

The characters were described to them in outline: one was a wheelchair user; the other was someone whose first language was not English. All other characteristics had to be invented by the group.
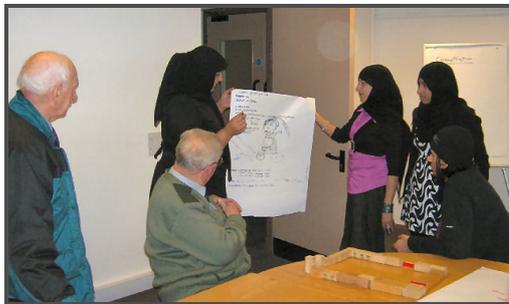
One group designed a library and invented a semi-skilled unemployed Polish male called Janosh. The other group designed a night-club which had to be negotiated by their wheelchair-bound character called Hannah.

Each group had to introduce their character to the other group and describe *how they would use the public space designed*. They then swapped characters in order to explore how the other would find the space, and we discussed what difficulties the characters might encounter.

The purpose here was to establish a mood of creative involvement and get people thinking about the inclusive use of public space. It was striking in this exercise that the groups were immediately ready to challenge each other about what they had come up with, without this seeming in any way confrontational.

4. the consultation themes

Participants then turned their attention to the intended outcome of the workshop series, which was to try to design a framework for questions and responses to about eight consultation themes.

The themes were pre-determined by the consultant in liaison with library staff. They comprise aspects of the planned family and community library building which are available for consultation, as follows:

- Décor and furniture
- Stock
- Technology
- Access
- Governance
- Garden
- Signage
- Meeting room use

One additional issue, *Opening hours*, was considered as a possible theme for consultation. However, it was felt that there were too many uncertainties at this stage, and that there was a risk of the exercise being spurious in this case. When in the future the weekly total number of available staff hours has been clarified, it will be appropriate to consult on this theme.

Throughout the process, the eight themes were presented in no particular order, to avoid implying any difference in priority, status or complexity between them.

5. the consultation questions

For each theme, we looked at the following seven questions:

1. **What's negotiable / not negotiable?**

2. **Who in particular needs to be consulted? Who else?**

3. **Will expertise / professional knowledge be needed in support?**

4. **What methods and processes (formal / semi-formal) will be used?**

5. **How will we be able to show that people have been consulted, and what they said?**

6. **What timescale applies? Urgent / medium term / long term? Once-off or ongoing?**

7. **Which other themes does this one particularly relate to?**

These questions were combined with the eight themes to provide a framework, or matrix. A version of the framework is provided at Appendix A.

We discussed several of these questions in more detail. For instance, we talked about the various options for engaging with people (question 4) – written or oral, face-to-face or remote, as individuals or in groups, and so on. Participants felt that there are advantages and disadvantages in different methods, according to the need and people's preferences.

Participants also noted that they could not be expected to provide answers to all of the questions. For instance, in relation to access, it's important to ask what is and what is not negotiable; but without talking to an architect and/or someone familiar with disability legislation, we might not be able to say.

We asked how consultation might be shown to have taken place – what appropriate ways would there be of gathering evidence? It was pointed out that this helps ensure that a consultation exercise is taken seriously. Thus participants working on Décor and furniture discussed visiting other public buildings and wrote:

> Take pics on visits and rate them (online?) Publicise that this has been done, keep records, record agreements with decorators and architects.

In each workshop, participants worked in groups of up to four, or sometimes solo, discussing the questions and jotting down their ideas.

Since some people can be diffident about expressing their thoughts and ideas, we used small slips of paper as well as flip chart sheets. Material was stored between sessions using distinctive pink boxes, each marked with a separate theme.

The kinds of issue that emerged in discussion were these:

Meeting room: if a local group can only meet at a certain time and the library is not open at that time, will they still be able to use the room?

Décor and furniture: how about tables with adjustable height?

Access: will there be a separate or extra fire exit?

Stock: should there be dual language children's books?

The task was not necessarily to answer such questions, but to come up with a framework to ensure appropriate consultation on them and on questions like them.

6. participation

Uncertain attendance is one of the hard-truths of community engagement exercises. The process described here was experimental and voluntary, so it is unsurprising that attendance varied, and this had an effect on the thoroughness of the outputs.

The workshops took place in mid-winter, having to be arranged to avoid three successive religious festivals, and with the weather probably influencing people's attendance. It was apparent that for three people who turned up for the second workshop, their absence from the first workshop made it difficult to contribute, and all three left before the end of that session.

Numbers varied between about six and twelve. Those who took part have made an important contribution and it is to be hoped that they gained from the experience. With more people attending consistently, even more detail could have been achieved, with possibly a stronger sense of consensus. The dynamics of the ethnicity, age and gender mix will always vary and these factors also have to be taken into account.

But it would be wrong to imply that this should or could ever have been a large-scale, systematically-rigorous democratic process. What it did was to generate creative local input to an ongoing series of developments relating to a significant public resource – the local library.

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7. consultation and democracy

These points help us to place the consultation design exercise in the context of everyday democracy. For the participants it was a heuristic experience of democratic participation, but it was a small experiment with a handful of local people, involving a small amount of staff time and an external facilitator.
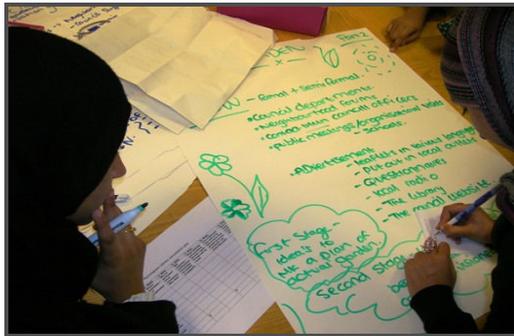
Various factors limited the input of local people. For example, there was not the justification to find budget for widespread publicity and recruitment: so it could be argued that the membership of the group was not subject to democratic processes.

Again, there was no public debate about the eight themes chosen as appropriate for consultation (although the group examined them and, as mentioned, discussed a possible extra theme).

Realistically, there is not likely to be any scrutiny of the democratic legitimacy of the outputs. So where does an exercise like this fit into local democracy? The group explored this too.

We carried out a little impromptu role-play exercise to consider the relationship between the role of the citizen, the professional with expertise, and the elected representative. Together the group 'invented' a town which had an entirely white population; the library in the town had a collection of multicultural material; and one of the residents came in to complain to the librarian about their council tax contribution being spent on material that was not relevant to the local population.

The point was made that if the council consulted local people on the provision of multicultural material in this particular library, residents might well reject it as an inappropriate use of resources: so how could the expenditure be justified democratically?

The task for the group was to work in pairs to role play the discussion between the disgruntled resident and the librarian. The key point to emerge from these discussions was a ready appreciation of the role of *expertise* – in this case, the librarian's – supported by accountable policies, in democratic structures.

It was observed that the librarian is appointed according to rigorous procedures and takes decisions under the guidance of council and professional policies. Participants quickly acknowledged that issues of this kind require professional expertise and appreciation of wider issues beyond the locality.

So long as this expertise is reflected in accessible policies and is fully accountable to elected representatives, who themselves are accountable to residents ('the common good'), it is a valid part of the democratic mix. In this way we came to an appreciation of *the limits of consultation* - that it should not be seen as a mechanical democratic device. We noted also the need for a *balance* of influence between elected representatives, citizens, and professionals: the circles in the diagram need to have comparable influence on each other and to be functioning in harmony.

Three roles in governance
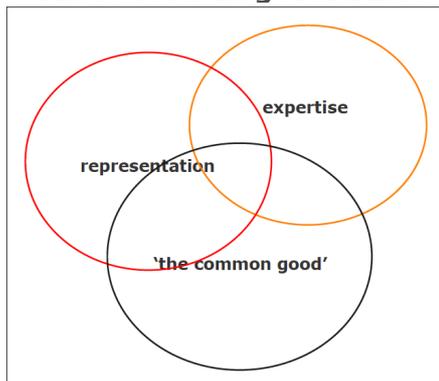
Participants applied this understanding in their work on designing the consultation process. For example, while working on the Décor and furniture theme they had to ask themselves to what extent professional expertise might be needed. The group argued that in the first place ideas should come *from* an expert design team *to* the consultation group responsible for this theme, not the other way round.

In our final session we reviewed the question 'what do we mean by consultation?'

The group felt that it is a set of processes through which people can contribute views, influence decisions, and have their suggestions taken into account. It's an opportunity for ideas and deliberation, not just saying yes or no. Timescale is important. People need to be informed in order to be able to contribute. Consultation is part of democracy, not a luxury add-on.

These points have been included in a note, 'What do we mean by consultation?' at Appendix C.

8. outputs from the consultation design process

The appendices include the following outputs from this series of workshops:

- The framework for consultation (Appendix A).

- The consultation plan (Appendix B). This is the main legacy of the group's work, and is being passed to the library project management group as a basis for community involvement in the development of the library.

- A note on 'What do we mean by consultation?' (Appendix C).

8. recommendations

These recommendations are offered by the consultant, and have not necessarily been endorsed by participants in the design exercise.

- The consultation plan should be seen as a guide, not as gospel. It is intended as a basis for community involvement in the ongoing development of Manningham Family and Community Library, offering suggestions as to whose views need to be considered, what issues might arise, how some themes relate to others, what methods or processes might be used to garner people's opinions, and so on.

- Each theme needs early attention and steady, monitored progress. Access was the only theme described by the group as urgent, but this may change.

- The project management group needs to be alert to the possibility that other issues may arise which need to be considered in similar ways. The consultation design group could make no claim to being comprehensive, but the process and principles described here should offer useful guidance as to how other themes might be dealt with.

- Monitoring or steering groups need to be formed to work on each of these themes, but the groups will not all be constituted in the same way. There are two key issues in the way they will function.

  o The first is the objective of having local people involved and one local resident chairing each group. The chair should be fully supported by a representative professional, whether from the libraries department, architects' department, or another agency. In certain cases this role could involve some mentoring, the point being that residents are not necessarily experienced in chairing decision-making groups, and this is an excellent community development

opportunity to develop such skills at local level. The agencies involved therefore need to be prepared to invest time and energy in supporting local people to contribute to the overall process: this is not just an investment in the library project, it is an investment in the people of Manningham.

o The second issue is the relationship between each group and its professional advisers. The framework provides guidance on where expertise is likely to be called-for. Two further principles could be useful. First, that appropriate expertise, which is as impartial as it can be, should be readily available to each group throughout their work. Secondly, that wherever appropriate, each group should be empowered to take decisions and make recommendations on the basis of the advice it receives, and not be expected to accept it without reflection.

▪ Channels of communication need to be opened for each of the groups in three directions: to and from the overall project management group; to and from relevant expertise; to and from local people. These channels should be opened at the earliest opportunity. The full exploitation of some means of communication may require support – for instance, some residents who have a role to play on groups may need email accounts and training in their use. There might be a good case for a linked series of simple blogs, with group members having posting rights and members of the public being able to post comments. Liaison with local newspapers will be important. Local traders can be asked to display posters and pass on information about meetings.

- The key to consultation is not the questions asked at the time or the way the 'results' are reported back to the constituency: it is *the contextual culture of community engagement* which makes consultation meaningful. If officials find themselves consulting with people with whom they are not already in dialogue, there is a far greater risk of failure. It follows that the key to success in this case is an ongoing series of events and activities designed to engage people in the development of the family and community library and its future use: a series of conversations. In turn this will help to strengthen the sense of democratic participation in the public realm, which libraries symbolise.

Appendix A.

Framework for Manningham Library consultation plan

		Access	Décor and furniture	Technology	Governance	Stock	Meeting room use	Signage	Garden
1. What	**What's negotiable / not negotiable?**								
2. Who	**Who in particular? (Core consultees) Who else?**								
3. Help	**Will expertise / professional knowledge be needed in support?**								
4. How	**What methods and processes (formal / semi-formal) will be used?**								
5. Show	**How evidenced? How will we be able to show that people have been consulted, and what they said?**								
6. Time	**What timescale? Urgent / medium term / long term? Once-off or ongoing?**								
7. Links	**Which other themes does it relate to?**								

Manningham Library consultation plan

Theme Access

1	**What?**	Refer to legislation; not just disability but also health and safety.
2	**Who?**	People with disabilities. Mothers with pushchairs. Temporarily disabled?
	Who else?	General public
3	**Help**	Planners, architects, builders. Disability orgs.
4	**How**?	Local disability orgs - ask **them** how they would like to be consulted. Ideas from discussions with parents at playgroups
5	**Show**	Meeting reports/minutes, written responses, photos, tape recordings(?)
6	**Time**	urgent / medium term
7	**Links**	Décor and furniture

Manningham Library consultation plan

Theme Meeting room use

1	**What?**	Budgets (requires income? / profit?) Charging structure. Is *kind-of-use-made* negotiable? Size of rooms? Choice of furniture. Refer to system used in other libraries.
2	**Who?**	Staff.
	Who else?	*(What about existing community groups?)*
3	**Help**	Decorators.
4	**How**?	Interviews, questionnaires (written and f2f)? Meeting with design team.
5	**Show**	Record interviews, use questionnaires?
6	**Time**	Once-off.
7	**Links**	Décor and furniture

Manningham Library consultation plan

Décor and furniture

Theme		
1	**What?**	Refer to legislation; not just disability but also health and safety. How about a symbolic mosaic of Manningham, consult on the design?
2	**Who?**	All age groups including very young children. Library users *and non-users*.
	Who else?	Library staff (they have to work there!) Local business people. Councillors. Local art/history groups.
3	**Help**	Health and safety. Planners, architects, builders (local firms - decorators and tradesmen). Initial ideas should come from the design team to consultation group, not the other way round. Use catalogues and books in a workshop. Are there any local design classes (students)?
4	**How**?	Questionnaires (give certain shortlisted choices from a portfolio) in libraries, schools, at local outlets, and at meetings. Focus groups? Consult local disability orgs re furniture. Get examples - go to showrooms, wallpaper etc shops, other libraries? Meeting with design team.
5	**Show**	Take pics on visits and rate them (online?) Publicise that this has been done, keep records, record agreements with decorators and architects.
6	**Time**	Medium / long term. Could be agreed then amended.
7	**Links**	Access

Manningham Library consultation plan

Stock

Theme		
1	**What?**	Certain library standards have to be adhered to.
2	**Who?**	Staff. Users. Non-users.
	Who else?	All cultures.
3	**Help**	Librarians, booksellers and suppliers.
4	**How**?	Surveys (written - remote) on proportion of stock, eg 70% books, 20% DVDs 10% newspapers… Proportion of foreign lang material. F2F meeting with staff. Questionnaire with sample of non-users.
5	**Show**	Results from surveys "choose best option", minutes of meetings, decisions taken and recommendations.
6	**Time**	Ongoing, long term.
7	**Links**	Access, Governance, Signage

Manningham Library consultation plan

Theme **Technology**

1	**What?**	More or less everything is negotiable. Note DDA and H&S regulations.
2	**Who?**	General public
	Who else?	local businesses and traders, community groups and educational orgs, schools, age concerns, churches and mosques etc, youth groups, sport organisations, nurseries, mums and toddlers.
3	**Help**	Media service providers. Bradford I, designers, council partners, special needs groups, police, DDA, PCT.
4	**How?**	Media formats - SMS, web etc. Radio phone ins. F2f interviews. Layout designs (people respond to). Public meeting?
5	**Show**	Interview write-ups. Feedback from text message poll. How to capture info from radio phone in?
6	**Time**	Medium term
7	**Links**	Access. Stock.

Manningham Library consultation plan

Theme **Signage**

1	**What?**	Nearly everything negotiable. Over 50 languages, but note policy pressure to minimise languages other than english. Accommodate needs of people who can't read, by using signs.
2	**Who?**	People with visual impairment. Adult learners. Wheelchair users. Teachers.
3	**Help**	Teachers, someone who can only speak english. Is there research on the best colours/fonts/symbols?
4	**How?**	Questionnaires based on examples, displaying examples, asking suitability of signs. Use library website. Focus groups withlocal mobility orgs. Meetings in library, regular users, covering all ages. Group visits to other libraries, take pics of methods used. Get people to respond to examples from design team. (i) form a group. (ii) give them a digital camera. (iii) send them to bus stations, other libraries, high street, town hall, colleges, university. (iv) take pictures and rate them 1-10.
5	**Show**	Comments and best ratings on the pictures/examples used. Need to ask proportion of public, not just the group.
6	**Time**	Medium term, once-off.
7	**Links**	Décor and furniture. Access. Stock.

Manningham Library consultation plan

Theme Governance

1	**What?**	There are legal requirements on the council to provide a service, and legal constraints on how that service is provided. But otherwise governance is open to community contribution and influence.
2	**Who?**	Staff, community groups, local residents. Representatives of users.
	Who else?	Non-users?
3	**Help**	Staff. Council legal reps, democratic participation unit or similar
4	**How?**	Written and verbal - mix. Letters sent to governing boards, councillors. Run a workshop to facilitate invention of the necessary structures - bring users and staff together in a miixed meeting.
5	**Show**	record of meetings, minutes, account in newspaper, report to council
6	**Time**	medium / long term
7	**Links**	All

Manningham Library consultation plan

Theme Garden

1	**What?**	Non-negotiable - trees cannot be moved. Limited amount of space. Budget limited. Negotiable - Should it be open to all? Accessible 24/7 or only library open hours or set times? Should it be themed (eg peace, story theme)?
2	**Who?**	All residents. Current library users.
	Who else?	Community groups. Gardening and conservation groups. Local education providers. Councillors. Schools and colleges.
3	**Help**	Architects. Landscapers, planning dept, community gardening groups. Flower shop.
4	**How?**	Design competition? Opportunity for sponsorship? Visits to other places. Meetings with designers. Web competition at school to design garden. Use local radio, the library, council website to publicise. Public meetings, organisational visits. Leaflets in various languages. Questionnaires.
5	**Show**	Images from visits. Designs and ideas from competition.
6	**Time**	Medium term, could be ongoing (maintenance)
7	**Links**	Décor; Access; technology (closed gates, CCTV). Signage. Governance.