Evaluation of MLA South East Community Engagement Programme
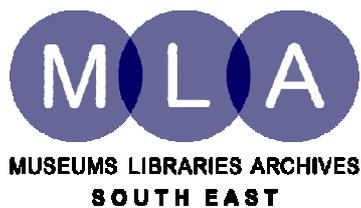
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September 2008

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SOUTH EAST

Local Level

This is a report on a series of activities commissioned by Museums, Libraries and Archives South East. Local Level were contracted to carry out the work and a team of four associates was involved. The activities were designed and facilitated by Catherine Herman and John Vincent. The evaluation was carried out by Kevin Harris and Rebecca Linley, who wrote this report.

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Acknowledgements

Summary

This report describes a varied package of interventions designed to stimulate community engagement in the local cultural sector by working with staff from museums, libraries and archives. The programme ran from January 2007 until July 2008 and was funded by MLA South East.

The main objectives were as follows:

1. to bring about an increase in understanding of community engagement and of how users might be engaged among museum, library and archive staff

2. to help develop new projects and services with user involvement

3. to develop the level of engagement with users beyond simple consultation

4. to develop a better understanding of and use of community and voluntary sector networks.

Activities carried out included:

- six one-day training courses in community engagement

- two facilitated action learning sets (ALSs) which met several times over a period of months. One of these was mixed, comprising museum and library staff from across the region, the other was specific to Kent County Libraries

- a case study investigation of an experimental model of community engagement in Southampton Library Service

- a programme of workshops on community engagement with one museum and two library services

- support for four library services on the development of community engagement plans under the Community Libraries Programme.

Core message

The programme of work sought a fundamental shift away from task-oriented approaches to service delivery, to a more flexible, responsive and embedded relationship with local people and groups. This shift was achieved in individual cases, is still in progress for others, and can be anticipated elsewhere. The task is to maximise its impact across organisations. There is still a need for broader appreciation of how community engagement has to be embedded in the organisation's values and strategy, rather than through a piecemeal or project approach or allocated to an individual. Without this organisational change, service transformation will not happen.

Key recommendation

Organisations should look to develop an optimum mix of the kinds of developmental approach used in this project, along with genuine commitment to the principles of community engagement.

Main findings

Feedback from participants showed that **the training** was relevant to their expectations and achieved a range of learning outcomes. In some localities it appears to have been a catalyst for further work.

The learning sets were highly successful as forums for sharing experience and developing understanding, largely due to the open and supportive context.

> In both groups, there was broad agreement that participating in the learning set had improved their understanding of community engagement.

> In terms of personal development, the ALSs appear to have had particular impact in strengthening levels of confidence among participants.

> Participants were helped in applying their learning directly to the local level, although this tended not to be through specific projects that were developed in parallel with this programme.

> As a consequence of the learning sets, participants speak with enthusiasm and confidence about the principles and the general applicability of community engagement in the work they do.

The workshops represented a whole organisation approach to community engagement. They had a practical focus and were successful in enhancing dialogue with partners. The timescales made it difficult to assess local impact, but there was a sense of organisations developing a more outward-looking approach and more specific projects and plans.

The Southampton Libraries **case study** brought to the surface an understanding of community engagement as an ongoing process which needs to be detached from the project mentality.

Support for staff **developing community engagement plans** suggests that organisations can learn and gain strength from the tensions which arise between strategic bureaucracy and community development processes.

Two of the overall **objectives** (items 1 and 3 above) were clearly met, the others were largely met.

Participants were not always able to develop new projects and services, but the programme helped them to apply what they were learning as and when they could. Many referred to refreshed thinking and confidence, or practical advances made in areas of their day-to-day work, as a consequence of participation in this programme.

Participants' understanding of community and voluntary sector networks was undoubtedly enhanced by the training sessions, workshops and learning sets. Numerous comments attested to new insights into the role and contribution of local networks and the advantages of engaging with them.

The programme fulfilled a highly-valued role in clarifying understandings of community engagement, and ensured that participants saw it as more than simple consultation.

1 Introduction

1.1 What is community engagement?

Community engagement is a process whereby people who have something in common are involved collectively, together with a responsible agency, in influencing what happens to or around them.

People are likely to participate in this process if they perceive that the potential influence is genuine. For influence to take place there has to be engagement between parties – a coming together - requiring some sort of dialogue. But as John May has put it, there is a kind of Catch 22 in operation here:

> 'public services want to engage with you if you are "ordinary," but if you show interest in engaging with them then you must be "extra-ordinary" … and therefore they needn't listen to you.'[1]

This point illustrates that there are tensions between the community engagement agenda and the prevailing democratic culture. Community engagement can be seen as part of a broad social project to create a culture in which it is *not unusual* to seek to engage with government, or for government to seek to engage with citizens.

Community engagement usually involves 'government' or an authority (such as a police force or health agency) on the one hand, and citizens collectively on the other.[2] But it does not mean one party inviting the other to help it or to do its work. Engagement is a process which creates the conditions for collaboration. It implies:

- a public agency and an identifiable group of citizens (residents of a given locality, or members of a community of interest or need; or some combination of these);

- the practice of 'working together' or collaborating in a process, towards some further objective; and

- building a relationship from which mutually-agreed change can be brought about.

If community engagement is perceived as an outcome rather than a process, it's unlikely to be successful as either.

We should also note that community engagement is more than citizen participation. A public agency might involve a number of residents as volunteers to serve, with officers, on 'community management groups' which take decisions affecting local service provision. That amounts to the participation of local people in decision-making processes, but it would be

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[1] May, J. (2005). *The triangle of engagement: an unusual way of looking at the usual suspects*, Metropolitan Police Authority Community Engagement Unit, p4. http://www.mpa.gov.uk/downloads/issues/0501.pdf

[2] Community engagement is not restricted to public services or agencies. For example, large development companies have for some time been exploring community engagement practices, and may bring new insights in doing so. To the extent that such companies cannot function without a degree of publicly-accountable direction, it could be said that they are acting in a public role.

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questionable to describe it as community engagement, unless there have been some fully open opportunities for all residents to participate, and some collective involvement in the agenda under discussion.

1.2 Where has it come from?

Increasingly, social policy declares an expectation that citizens should take greater responsibility for their own behaviour and quality of life. This powerful trend combines a number of related threads including:

- the decline in influence of established symbols of authority such as church, state and other institutions
- 'responsibilisation' – the requirement for citizens to regulate not only their own conduct, but also that of others
- emphasis on *processes of governance* in which a government itself is only one of several participants
- increasing involvement of citizens in decision-making processes that affect them.

Together these themes reflect the recognition by most western governments that late-twentieth century welfare-based societies are not sustainable and that citizens have to be encouraged to contribute more to the co-production of their quality of life.

The social forces of responsibilisation, governance and community involvement could be seen as a systemic rebalancing of the role of citizens in *the co-production of society*. From this perspective, looking back at an age of civic power since the Victorian period – an age which saw the emergence of libraries and museums, and later the BBC, as symbols of the public realm – community engagement appears in contrast to the sense of paternalistic authority which dominated twentieth century everyday life for so many people.

Whereas that sense of authority and security emanated from a robust civic culture, it now seems that social stability requires citizens collectively taking more responsibility for a new kind of civic culture. All of this implies a transformation of the public realm: community engagement in museums, libraries and archives is part of this process.

1.3 What does it mean for libraries, museums and archives?

The public library sector in particular has specifically identified community engagement as a development priority. This is most apparent in the Big Lottery Community Libraries Programme,[3] which has required libraries to demonstrate local involvement in their proposed activities and has brought a great deal of momentum to this theme.

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http://www.mla.gov.uk/programmes/framework/framework_programmes/Community_Libraries_Programme

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Nonetheless, a pivotal question was raised in the MLA baseline report for the Community Libraries programme, which looked at the proposed community engagement activity across the funded projects and included some in-depth case studies:

> 'there is a lack of fully shared agreement about what community engagement entails – a critical part of the vision. This includes a few respondents who still believe that community engagement is simply based on library use and issue numbers, rather than changing the relationship with libraries and empowering communities and individuals. While many have a more developed approach, the question remains unanswered: are we trying to get people involved in libraries, or in their community?'[4]

To put it another way: to what extent is this just about involving local people in library service provision? Or is it ultimately about libraries playing a role, along with residents, in promoting community cohesion and empowering people to get involved in local life on their own terms? The latter implies a fundamental shift in the way that services are developed, managed and delivered; the former does not.

This agenda is gradually becoming clearer for all concerned. The present report refers to a programme in the south east of England which was intended to stimulate this fundamental shift. The transformation was perceived to be necessary to create a step change in public involvement with services.

It may be that there are several mini-steps in this process of change. At a basic level, any library, museum or archives service might be working with local people as volunteers to help manage, deliver and perhaps develop their existing services. In time, this gives staff (as well as the local people involved) the confidence and experience to begin to play a supportive role in whatever local groups decide they want to do; and then hopefully into becoming consistently a proactive, deliberate stimulus for local social interaction. One consequence is that such a change will empower local people by building their confidence and skills, thus contributing to community development.

From the point of view of a regional agency such as MLA South East, the issue was to understand what kind of development support for museums, libraries and archives it was appropriate to offer, and when.

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[4] Taylor, B. and R. Pask (2008). *Community Libraries Programme evaluation: an overview of the baseline for community engagement in libraries*. London: MLA, http://www.mla.gov.uk/resources/assets/C/community_libs_eval_12857.pdf, p23.

2 The programme of work

The intended outcomes for the project were to:

1. to bring about an increase in understanding of community engagement and of how users might be engaged among museum, library and archive staff

2. to help develop new projects and services with user involvement

3. to develop the level of engagement with users beyond simple consultation

4. to develop a better understanding of and use of community and voluntary sector networks.

Initially it was envisaged that these outcomes would be achieved through two activities:

- one-day training courses in community engagement

- up to five action learning sets (ALSs), taking place over a longer period. Participants would develop their own mini-projects, involving their local community sector, and share their learning with the group as they progressed.

The training days went ahead as originally planned, but there was only sufficient interest to recruit two learning sets. One of these was specific to Kent County Libraries; the other included a mix of library and museum staff from across the region. The intention to develop a range of locally-based projects proved slightly too ambitious, as few participants were yet in a position to do this. Further, some flexibility was needed to meet the expressed needs of participants identified in the initial meetings of the ALS. These changes were followed by other adjustments to the work programme, with the following three additional components:

- workshop programmes on community engagement in New Forest Museum, Portsmouth City Council Library Service and the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead Library Service, that followed bursary applications from these services;

- an investigation of an experimental model of community engagement developed by Southampton City Council Library Service;

- support for four library services in the region in developing and submitting community engagement plans, to enable them to progress to the next stage of the Community Libraries Programme.

3 Methods and approach

Local Level were asked to deliver and evaluate this programme of work over an 18 month period between March 2007 and July 2008. The programme of training sessions and resources, the format of the ALS and the workshop programme were developed by Local Level. Facilitation was carried out by Catherine Herman and John Vincent; evaluation was carried out by Kevin Harris and Rebecca Linley. This report describes the programme and explores the key programme objectives:

- **Understanding of community engagement** among museum, library and archives staff – we sought to bring about and record an increase in understanding of how users (and potential users) might be engaged.

- **User involvement in development of new projects and services** – we set out to encourage and support the development of new projects and services which demonstrated user involvement.

- **Community engagement has developed beyond simple consultation** – the project was expected to ensure an understanding among participants that engagement is more than consulting with people.

- **Understanding and use of community and voluntary sector networks** – we expected to nurture and develop an appreciation of the role of local networks in relation to services.

An evaluation framework was developed that reflected both the intended outcomes and the different activities undertaken within each element of the project. In practice, the diverse and shifting nature of the project - complicated by external factors such as the Community Libraries Programme and organisational pressures affecting many participants - means that a coherent picture does not readily emerge. The extent to which ALS participants developed action learning projects with voluntary and community sector partners was relatively limited, which in turn constrained our ability to explore the understanding of and use of community and voluntary sector networks. Meanwhile, from a case study and the provision of support for authorities developing community engagement plans, we gained insight into organisational approaches to community engagement.

Various methods were used to collect material for the different stages of the project. For the training days, a written evaluation form was used. For the action learning sets, workshops and community engagement plan support, follow-up telephone interviews with participants were carried out. The evaluators also attended some of the workshops and ALS sessions (two sessions in Kent; three for the multi-organisation ALS; all three of the workshops in Portsmouth and two of the three workshops at both New Forest Museum and Windsor and Maidenhead). In addition, the two facilitators were interviewed. We also had access to correspondence and notes on all the components of the programme.

4. Summary of project activities

4.1 Community engagement training

4.1.1 About the sessions

The aims of the training days were to:

- To develop understanding of community engagement
- To consider different ways to engage with local communities and the 'barriers' for organisations and individuals that inhibit community engagement
- To examine case studies to inform practice
- To identify and develop a potential project
- To help to develop ongoing networks and sharing of practice.

The structure of the day reflected these themes (see the programme attached as an Annex). Participants were sent some information in advance and were asked to complete a pro forma about their proposed project.

Six training days were held between 7 and 23 March 2007, following publicity from MLA South East. They took place in locations across the South East region (Swanley in Kent, Southampton, Slough and two days in Brighton), plus one day held in London.

A total of 108 people attended the training. The vast majority of attendees worked in the south east region, with a small number of attendees from London boroughs at the London and Kent sessions. The majority of attendees worked in public libraries, with 25 from the museums domain and three from record offices.

Before each training day, the participants were sent background materials including a policy briefing and a proforma for identifying a current or proposed community engagement project or activity that the training would help them develop.

4.1.2 About the evaluation

An evaluation form was provided at the sessions. These were completed anonymously, so it was not possible to analyse any differences of response by the work background of the participants. Attendees were able to either hand in the form on the day or return to the evaluation team by post.

A total of 64 completed evaluation forms were received. The response rate (59%) is considered to be high for a written evaluation, and may be seen as an indicator of participants' interest in community engagement.

4.1.3 Quantitative evaluation

Participants were asked to assess the effectiveness of the training, with a score between one and four, where 1 was 'not at all' and 4 was 'extremely' effective. This question was asked in relation to the eight categories in the table below, which largely reflect the aims above. Scores given were broadly consistent across all the categories covered, as reflected in the table, which gives the mean score for each question.

How effective was the training day for:	Score
• developing an understanding of community engagement?	**3.7**
• considering different approaches to community engagement?	**3.5**
• considering the 'barriers' to community engagement for organisations and groups?	**3.4**
• creating an opportunity to focus on practice?	**3.3**
• offering an opportunity to learn from each other?	**3.6**
• offering an opportunity to draw upon your experience?	**3.5**
• helping you to think through an activity / idea for community engagement?	**3.3**
• using an interactive and participative approach?	**3.6**

N=64

All these scores were between 3.3 and 3.7, meaning that they all fall within the top quartile of the scale (3.25 to 4). Only two respondents used the lowest possible core of 1, both using it for two categories each.

On the basis of this scoring it is clear that the training met its aims and that there was very high participant satisfaction with the training. A more in-depth assessment of the training, however, can be made by considering the write-in comments from the evaluation forms.

4.1.4 Qualitative evaluation

Out of the 64 evaluation forms received, 55 contained write-in comments about the course. Other than comments about the venue, participants were asked four questions:

- Was there anything that struck you as particularly puzzling or illuminating?
- What would you identify as your key learning from the training?
- Any comments on the trainer's approach/delivery?
- Any other comments?

In terms of what was most illuminating, there were a number of responses suggesting the value of sharing experiences with other practitioners, including those from other domains:

'Useful to have libraries and museums together – lots of shared experiences.'

'Illuminating – the mix of people facing the same problems and difficulties but able to come up with excellent coping strategies.'

'Found it very helpful to share experiences of outreaching. Especially when other museums have different strengths to your own/or different culture – they have very fresh perspectives and great to be inspired.'

Other areas identified as being illuminating were:

- The session on the content on defining community engagement
- Content on the difference between outputs and outcomes.

Another participant noted:

'We've been doing CE for years – it's not so new and scary!'

- perhaps reflecting a fresh sense of clarity and instilled confidence.

Much of the key learning identified related to new ideas encountered and contacts made. A number of respondents also referred to how the learning might change their practice. Reflecting this practical focus, a number of comments referred to developing partnerships and engagement with colleagues and voluntary and community groups. Typical comments were that:

'Opened my eyes to how important this work is, started me thinking how to do this in a more joined up way.'

'Very fired up to go back and develop these ideas in my authority particularly with regard to engaging rest of staff.'

'CE sounds quite daunting but using common sense you can easily identify ways to go about it.'

There was also a cluster of comments about raising the profile of their organisations within the community:

'Desire to raise our "profile" within the county.'

'Perhaps to be more forceful in raising my organisation's profile.'

'Personal commitment to promote libraries and museums.'

In terms of how the course was delivered, the vast majority of participants commented positively on the relaxed and informal approach, which encouraged participation.

In the overall comments, most reflected the positive feel already reported, with participants commenting that the course was 'useful,' 'worthwhile,' 'informative,' 'very good value.' There were also two comments about how the course was pitched:

'It was obvious from the introductions that everyone present was working with CE as part of their everyday work, so it was a shame that we spent all morning talking about what this was. It was much more basic than I expected it to be.'

'I feel this course would have been of greater benefit with no experience of CE. For my own needs I would have liked to have had more time to work on specific projects or on useful resources, eg. funding streams, useful organisations/contacts etc.'

Both these comments were from participants at the same session, and no comparable comments were made at other sessions.

In addition, some participants contacted MLA South East to give positive feedback on the training, again suggesting how much it had been valued by the participants. A further indication of the value of the training was that one local authority asked Catherine Herman to facilitate an awayday, expanding on what had been learned on the day; and similar training was requested elsewhere. John Vincent and Catherine Herman used the materials developed in the community engagement training which the MLA Council rolled out across England. The materials and activities developed were also used in the ALSs and workshops that formed the subsequent stages of the MLA South East programme.

4.1.5 Concluding remarks on the training

Taken together, the qualitative and quantitative evaluations suggest that the first four aims (see 4.1.1 above) of the training were met. The opportunity to share ideas, within the training, was clearly welcomed by participants. The sessions could be said to have helped to 'develop ongoing networks and sharing of practice'. It has not been possible to assess to what degree such networks have become established or sustained. The clearest evidence of the development of ongoing networks was that some of the training participants had set up an online group, but this appears to have been relatively quiet.

Overall, it is clear from the feedback received that the training achieved a range of learning outcomes and was relevant to participants' expectations. The training was a catalyst for further work in some localities and also informed the next stages of the community engagement project.

4.2 Action Learning Sets

4.2.1 Introduction

Action learning brings together small groups of participants to work on and through organisational and individual issues in a supportive environment, using real problems brought to the group and discussed, and providing opportunities for shared reflection.

> 'Learning Sets give individuals time to explore issues that they need to resolve in an environment which is empowering and which helps the individual to find a solution – rather than be told what to do.'[5]

One of the criteria for these learning sets was the demonstration of support for the individual's involvement from their organisation. This implies being clear how the participant will feedback within the organisation, and allowing appropriate time for this to happen. Thus for the ALS to fulfil its purpose, managers were expected to have thought through organisational objectives for their member of staff's involvement and identify potential activity in relation to community engagement that their involvement will support.

Two learning sets were organised and run as part of the present project. The first included participants with a variety of roles, mostly but not all within libraries, from across the region. This set was facilitated by John Vincent, with three of the meetings being attended by Kevin Harris as evaluator. The group met eight times, and committed to remain in contact, to share news and information via email. The second set comprised a recently-formed team of seven community development librarians in Kent County Library Service. This set was facilitated by Catherine Herman, with two of the meetings being attended by Rebecca Linley as evaluator. This set met six times, and subsequently has continued to meet as a learning group without a facilitator.

In this section we review briefly each of the two learning sets, and then consider a number of themes in order to explore how they functioned and how they contributed to the overall project objectives. Telephone interviews were conducted with all but one of the participants. Our review also makes use of notes from the meetings, a specific visit to one of the projects under discussion, and a draft journal article prepared by one of the Kent participants.

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[5] Lawrence, J (2007). Introducing learning sets, National Library of Health, http://stage.library.nhs.uk/nlhdocs/NLH_STG_Inrtoducing_Learning_Sets.doc

4.2.2 Multi-agency learning set

Each participant in the multi-agency learning set brought a personal 'project' to the process, and each meeting included updates on progress with an opportunity to discuss issues and share insights with colleagues. In practice these project ideas were fluid because of changing circumstances, but they served their purpose in providing a real-world focus for the learning. In addition the facilitator brought a range of practical experience which shed light on these issues and served to extend the shared learning. One member of the group, a volunteer representative of a small museum, had to withdraw after the first meeting, and sickness affected the participation of one other participant,[6] but core attendance was reliable. One respondent explained:

> 'On something like this you know you've got certain slots through the year, you know they are manageable.'

The meetings were held at different venues across the region.

An attempt was made to establish an online group to supplement the discussion between meetings, to share notes and information and so on. This failed due to technical problems but the group felt the intention was sound and with a more reliable system it would be worth using this kind of additional channel. The group did communicate regularly by email.

The 'projects' that participants used as the focus for their learning included:

- supporting and developing user groups
- supporting volunteers (eg in museum front-of-house; in housebound reader services) and
- writing a community engagement strategy for a new town centre library.

One participant used the ALS to help maintain momentum in their authority, following rejection of their community libraries programme application, and to think through other opportunities to develop community engagement in other libraries. The participants were also given the opportunity to discuss and reflect on an anonymised case study (see 4.4 below).

Several respondents felt they benefited particularly from the cross-sectoral mix of participants. One person from a library said it was 'fascinating thinking about the museums' while their counterpart said:

> 'It was useful being in a learning set with libraries, it opened up new documentation to look at, whereas normally before I would have discounted material that was targeted at libraries, I wouldn't have looked at it... There was definitely a value in the learning set being cross-sectoral, one that I didn't expect.'

Another librarian was emphatic about the value of this mix:

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[6] The library authority recognised the value of continuity, and another member of staff attended the ALSs.

'It's *always* useful to mix with people from different authorities, and museums… We shouldn't be so insular.'

One participant felt that he wasn't working at the appropriate level to benefit fully from the learning set:

'It would have been more useful for someone higher up, a fairly senior manager, would have been better.'

Asked if there was anything to be said for mixing up the levels of responsibility in a learning set, he felt that 'just senior managers' should have been there.

4.2.3 Kent County community development librarians' action learning set

The following key aims were agreed in the first session of this group:

- Considering and exploring together the community development librarian (CDL) role particularly development / delivery aspects

- Providing support for each other in the ALS and after

- Developing an ongoing network

- Sharing examples of good practice.

The extent to which these aims were met is considered in the following section.

The aim of exploring the CDL role and, linked to this, the shift from delivery to development appears to have been very strongly achieved. This was a typical comment from one of the CDLs:

'I was new in the job and vague about community engagement and community development. From my notes of the early brainstorm, we were slightly clueless. We now have a different view of community development. The job is now different – more strategic.'

The group produced a 'Roles and responsibilities' document which was circulated to other staff in the county. Respondents reported that clarification of roles had been useful to both the CDL group and other colleagues.

A key impact appeared to be that the CDLs were succeeding in the shift from delivery to development roles, although acknowledging that sometimes this brought its own problems in their day-to-day work. Clearly, the CDLs would have needed to make this shift, whether or not the ALS had taken place, but participants saw the ALS sessions as instrumental in making this transition:

'We've moved away from the more practical side. I now spend half my life at meetings. My manager's OK with that, as it's profile-raising. I used to go into schools, but now it's more community forums and multi-agency working. It's stepping up a gear. I meet councillors and have influence at a higher level. It's taken a while, but the ALS has helped.'

'It's really helped me understand the balance between delivery and development. It's also changed my approach, not going into too much planning and detail and thinking when to back off.'

The aim of providing support for each other was generally agreed to have been met, with respondents mentioning how they had created a meeting structure in which individuals could bring issues to the meeting which they could discuss in confidence with their colleagues. Typical comments were that:

'[The ALS] did achieve team bonding and developing our new roles… A lot has been achieved through talking together.'

'I've only been in Kent for two years and we've not worked together before. It's been brilliant. We were meeting twice a month, once on our own and once in the ALS. The openness of the ALS has meant we've bonded as a group and we've built a relationship.'

Some respondents also referred to the difficult organisational context faced by the library service and how the ALS had helped with this:

'For us, there was a lot of negativity around and the ALS helped to turn it round and focus on what we can do.'

'It was very positive at a time when we were unsure of our roles. The chance to get together regularly as a group helped hugely… We did feel vulnerable, two reviews have hit hard on many of the same staff.'

The development of an ongoing network was generally agreed to have happened, again using the approaches developed within the ALS:

'It's given us a structure for the development of the team, which we wouldn't have had without the ALS. We're continuing the meetings, on the same lines as before. It's helped us to focus on specific tasks and what we need as a group.'

'With the CDLs, [we] share ideas and support each other. It helps in the working day, as it can be a bit of an isolated role. It's good to have someone to mull things over with.'

There was perhaps a little less emphasis, in the evaluation interviews, on the aim of sharing examples of good practice, but respondents mentioned how the ALS sessions were used for information exchange and discussing local projects.

4.2.4 General findings from the learning sets

Understanding of community engagement

In both groups, there was broad agreement that participating in the learning set had improved their understanding of community engagement. Our evaluation suggests that, at the outset, participants were at one of three levels: some already had a sound grasp of community engagement, some had a broad understanding (described by one as 'latent'), and some had a limited understanding. In all cases the level of understanding was endorsed or enhanced by the ALS process.

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Kent participants tended to express this in terms of the delivery / development issue, being more strategic and developing new partnerships. One respondent had done a large amount of online research on community engagement, but valued the ALS for giving 'the wider picture, not pertaining to libraries all the time.'

As we would expect, this was echoed in the multi-agency set, with one representative from a museum saying that:

> 'It gelled all the ideas around community engagement so I could make sense of them, to then inform a plan.'

Two respondents seemed to belong in the middle category:

> 'It sparked an understanding and clarified what was probably latent. And I was able to see a direct application.'

> 'The principles are relatively simple. [The ALS] helped me to think a bit more laterally and not feel it had to be done in a certain way.'

Other respondents, who may have made no claim to having a previous grasp of community engagement, were emphatic about the clarity of understanding that they came away with:

> 'The distinction between consultation and involvement – this nuance was brought out for me.'

> 'Whereas I might have gone into it originally thinking it was just a question of "asking the community," I came to understand that there are different ways of involving people.'

> '*Consulting with* means going in with an idea of what you're going to do and checking it out with a few groups. Whereas *engaging with* is about growing something with groups, involving them in the processes.'

One of the most consistent insights seems to have been encapsulated in the recognition that this is a different way of working, not an add-on to the existing culture:

> 'Community engagement is not a project. There may be projects within community engagement, but each piece of work won't have a defined beginning, middle and end.'

Personal development and confidence

It is striking how frequently the word 'confidence' occurs in the feedback from participants in the learning sets. For example:

> 'It came at a time when I needed my confidence boosting, I was doing this job on my own, I needed that contact with other people.'

> 'From the ALS I was able to be more confident.'

> 'I'm confident in my understanding of community engagement now.'

> 'I'm not convinced everybody in the library service sees it that way so I would be more confident talking about it.'

Members of the CDL team in Kent were able to identify examples of strengthened confidence which they attributed directly to the ALS:

> 'In the early days, there was some lack of confidence. I'd never been to a Forum meeting. It was daunting – there are 40 people there and they pass a microphone for you to talk about your work. I've been going since October, it no longer worries me and I now feel a familiarity with the Forum. The ALS helped me to make a start. That was partly Cathy's facilitating and partly through group bonding.'

> 'I'm now more confident. The situation in one district was that I felt out of the loop. I alerted the district manager. I'm not sure I would have done without the ALS. It was all right, she apologised. I was thinking "I'll make a stand" about my understanding of my role.'

> 'Personally, one of my tasks has been to actively engage with local politicians, rather than small groups. The ALS has helped with going to that level. I've more confidence in our standing. I would like to think it's making a difference locally. It's still early days, but it will happen. We've now set targets, one of mine is to work with local politicians. Yes, I've more confidence.'

Other respondents felt that they were already confident in engaging with local groups and residents. One found it less easy to access that sense of confidence outside the group:

> 'It all made sense in the action learning set. I'm not quite so confident back here. You do feel more confident, but it's not the same when you're back at your desk.'

Sensitivity to personal development was apparent in the multi-agency set as well:

> 'In terms of my own well-being it gave me a bigger perspective, I could survive a difficult time because I might get into something more interesting, from a personal development point of view it did me good.'

And one participant felt she had benefited significantly even without her organisation showing the capacity to take advantage of it:

> 'It doesn't matter that the organisation hasn't got a lot out of it: I did. They're not ready for it yet.'

The policy context and strategic approaches to practice

A few participants seemed to value the chance to understand the policy context for community engagement:

> 'I got political confirmation in terms of government policy of the importance of working in this way.'

This was an interesting contrast to another member of the multi-agency set, for whom there were other reasons for taking a strategic approach to their service:

> 'We're an independent museum, and the government isn't telling us to do these things, we're doing them because we believe it's good

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to do them. There's this moral responsibility to do community engagement that has no background in government policy. We have to have community engagement, it's not something I've learned through the ALS programme, it's what we're all about.'

For several participants, the ALS process provided the chance to reflect on a strategic approach to their work:

'[It's changed my approach] in prioritising things and who I work with. I can't talk to everyone and the ALS has made me think about who I should work with. I now work with the groups where I think I can make the most difference.'

'It's raised thoughts in my mind about what's going on beyond Kent. I've made contact with someone in a [London borough] neighbourhood service and visited there. I've used that to transfer back to my own service.'

Applying the learning

One participant took her insights from the first learning set meeting and proactively asked to be involved in developing a 'books on wheels' service to housebound readers. She has been engaging people in creating the guidelines for volunteers in their service, and claimed:

'I've been empowered to think that way by having been at the learning sets.'

Others valued the way they could take an insight from conversation and allow it to change their approach to practice:

'For instance, hearing someone make the point that "consultation meetings are for people who are comfortable going to meetings" – that gave me the confidence to go on and do other things involving the community, and give people some ownership. We found that relying on a steering group wasn't the way to do it, so we went out of our way to get other people involved. We found out where people were who didn't want to come to steering groups, then we worked with youth workers.'

'I think this came from the course, the sense that community engagement has to be done by a range of people in the organisation, in order to engage as many people in the community as possible. What I've set up is a team of people who are ready to work at community development and this creates a wider web.'

Not everyone felt able to apply what they had learned. One participant did not feel they were in a position to exploit the learning:

'I couldn't take what we were learning in the set and apply it. But if I have to go for another job I probably could use it.'

Organisational learning

One key impact identified by Kent respondents was the setting up of a further ALS with another group of library staff in the county. This was directly linked to the community engagement learning set:

> '[Another group of library staff] felt peeved that they weren't included. They're more isolated as they deal with different agendas … whereas we're all doing the same job. The direct result was that the library service found the money for another ALS. It wouldn't have happened if we hadn't fed back.'

There was also a sense that there was wider organisational benefit to the work on roles and responsibilities done by the CDLs:

> 'With other colleagues, the ALS provided lots of encouragement to talking to other staff. We've produced a 'Roles and responsibilities' document, which we've circulated to other staff. It helped us and them, clarifying our roles. Other staff were unsure of our role, they saw us as floating around like cherries on a bun, because we're working off-site and they don't have a clue what we're doing. There's more to do on bridge-building, but things have improved and the ALS helped.'

It is also relevant to note that Kent, by supporting an entire ALS, made a much larger investment in the community engagement programme than any other library service in the South East. Nonetheless, Kent respondents still suggested that had been a lack of wider interest from the library service, although they mentioned individual colleagues, including line managers, who had engaged positively. One respondent identified 'a lack of listening.' Similarly, one of the participants in the multi-agency set regretted the lack of interest in her organisation from 'all the people who knew I did the course, and had regular updates':

> 'What I feel has been lacking is anybody saying anything to me about it, since the course… There are library development projects around the county but they don't see that it's relevant, it's a new area for the county and I don't think they realise.'

We were also given an example of where an aspiration for partnership working could not be supported:

> 'I was also looking at an NHS healthy living "grow your own" project, using part of a library's outside space. This was cancelled by senior managers - it was reported back to me that this project did not tie in with any of the service's aims and objectives and this was the reason for not continuing with it.'

This participant referred to a lack of awareness, but hoped that this would be addressed by improved evidence of community engagement:

> 'Managers are not aware of our role in a wider sense. When it comes to the annual report, detailing all the things we've done, it will make an impact. The report will give evidence of libraries reaching out, and listening to and acting on what communities want, and we'll then be in a good place.'

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A number of respondents identified capacity and resource barriers:

> 'The main barrier is capacity to deliver. There's lots of potential and fewer people to deliver.'

One respondent turned round the question about organisational impact in a way that can be interpreted as a more positive comment about wider organisational commitment:

> 'In some ways, [the organisation] had changed before the ALS. It helped us adjust to what Kent County Council thought we should be doing. The idea of the CDLs was to go out and promote the library service. The ALS hasn't altered the identity of the organisation, but we've all come back with a more positive feel.'

As we have mentioned, one or two participants in the other set felt that they were not working at the right organisational level to exploit the learning fully:

> 'The hierarchy in the county means that I'm not empowered to engage with groups.'

Impact at local level

It is apparent from participants' comments that the learning sets helped them to apply their learning directly to the local level. This impact tended not to be through specific projects that were developed in parallel with this programme, but in a more opportunistic way. In that respect, we feel that the laudable objective of practical community development work as part of the programme was probably slightly over-ambitious, particularly given the difficult organisational pressures in all the services including budget cuts, redundancy, unpredictable change, and in some cases serious illness. A particular factor in Kent was that all the staff were new in post and were still working through what their roles involved. The interviews with the CDLs made it clear that this testing of new roles and responsibilities was an issue for managers, as well as staff and, inevitably, this had affected the degree of change at local level.

Respondents in the multi-agency learning set did not report significant development among community groups as a consequence of this programme, although one described a range of initiatives in which 'we've got a lot of community groups that are running things for us.' Against this, there was a unanimous sense that their approach to working with local groups and networks was 'clarified', given 'firm foundations', or otherwise refreshed.

As already discussed, participants had described how they were now more confident in working with local groups and were becoming more strategic in their approach, including engagement with local politicians and partnership boards. In many cases, this engagement was described as being at an early stage, so it was easier to point to potential than specific impacts. However, ALS participants were able to give some examples of partnership development. One reported that:

> 'There's a partnership with the local FE College. They're really keen on the "screen reads" theme in the National Year of Reading and it's

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looking good. We've got a scriptwriter and a manga evening arranged. We've definitely established the partnership and it's now a question of delivering – we're still very involved in the planning. Another partnership is the borough council. We're running a day for teenagers as part of a summer crime-reduction programme. We're doing rap, manga and drama workshops. Through the KCC youth workers we'll be reaching 50 of the most "hard to reach" teenagers.'

Another participant has written about partnership working and how this might contribute to community empowerment:

'I attended a story sack training session. The organisers, a local Early Years Project, suggested the library could really benefit from having story sacks for loan. They were very keen and we are developing a joint project where local parents will produce their own story sacks and donate them to the library for general use. This will benefit parents' literacy and social skills development as well as the library service. Another project that started through general conversation and consultation is with a group of adults with learning disabilities. The point was raised that material produced for adults with learning disabilities was quite poor and in discussion it transpired that there wasn't an alphabet aimed specifically at adults. I am now working with them to produce an *ABC for adults* which will be published and made available in libraries as well as for sale by the charity, Skillnet, to support their work. This was the turning point for me! It made me feel very positive about my role and what I could achieve. *It is not just about the library service delivering, but about encouraging community groups to support themselves to meet our joint aims*.[7]

We would argue that, partly through the ALS, this respondent has gained and is sharing the kind of insight which we referred to in our introduction above (see section 1.3).

Effectiveness of the ALS approach

One of the clear successes of this programme has been the appropriateness of the ALS model. Participants were very supportive of this approach, and saw the facilitator's role as essential in achieving their shared development:

'As a project, the ALS was brilliant. Cathy enabled us to come together as a group. That's a positive, that I see us as a cohesive identity.'

'I liked the way John led it without leading it, and the summaries were brilliant.'

One indicator of the success of the ALSs was the participants' commitment to attending several meetings over a period of months, despite the long

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[7] Extract from a draft journal article provided by Kent ALS participant. Emphasis added.

journey times that were often involved. For example, in Kent, all but one of the participants (who was away from work for several months) attended all the sessions and one of them rearranged annual leave to attend the ALS.

The supportive atmosphere was valued: one person who joined the multi-agency set for the third meeting (sitting in for a sick colleague) reported that he did not feel at any kind of disadvantage from not having been there at the outset. Participants compared the ALS approach favourably to one-off training, workshops or conferences:

> 'It was good because it was interactive and over the six months we developed our relationships with each other. It was very rooted in reality, whereas a training session you forget it all after a few days… It was a good way of developing. It wasn't imposed, but it was learning in a more focused way, responding to our own needs and wants.'

> 'The value is in the fact that it's a programme, it's not just a conference.'

At the same time, there was a view that the demands of the ALS approach could have been made more clear at the outset:

> 'I was expecting it to be training. You need to be clear that it's not that, but I would recommend it for anyone that needs to come together as a group.'

> 'You've got to be prepared to take part and it gets quite personal. I'd recommend with that proviso. People need to be aware that it's not a *done to* model, but *do it yourselves*.'

One respondent was not comfortable with a 'listening exercise' in their first session, and another expressed some disappointment that there had not been a significant project focus in the Kent ALS:

> 'We kept coming back to issues of delivery *vs*. development and this had to be addressed quite a few times. It would have been nice to have looked at a particular project, but we didn't have time.'

In the multi-agency set there were also suggestions for other ways of doing things:

> 'I would have maybe liked to have seen an approach where you had guest speakers who you could quiz, that would have helped, could have fast-tracked your learning… I would have valued something more formalised. Going back over the learning, I felt I don't have the strong headings to give structure.'

> 'Maybe it would have been good to have a session with members of community groups coming in.'

Of course, a learning set is more expensive than a short training course or conference: six or eight half-day sessions away from the workplace, with a paid facilitator, amounts to a considerable investment by various agencies. In the multi-agency set some people were travelling for a total of more than five hours across the region, for a conversation lasting three or four hours. When we asked if they saw this as good value, the response

was unanimously in favour, both in terms of perceived use of time and in terms of the importance of having conversations.

> 'Very definitely, because it's given me a totally fresh approach to what is a key part of my job.'

> 'The quality of those learning sets was so good, it was well-worth it, it was valuable.'

> 'Yes, definitely it was. There's more value in going back and being able to review conversations and build on them.'

> 'Conversation is really helpful… I found the conversations great.'

Perhaps the most important indicator of the success of the ALS model was that it had formed a sustainable way of working for the CDL team in Kent, as reflected in these comments:

> 'We still do the "caring and sharing" sessions, so they're useful. I valued the confidentiality and the support. I think the sessions will continue.'

> '[We still do] the general information exchange, that we did as a learning set ... We've kept the "care and share" session as the first item on the agenda. Any guest speakers come after this session. It's very valuable and you learn from others, and that's a direct result of the ALS.'

4.2.5 Concluding remarks on the action learning sets

Our main conclusions from this assessment of the action learning sets are as follows:

- Participants have clearly developed understandings of community engagement that are both robust and nuanced. They speak positively, with enthusiasm and confidence about the principles and the general applicability of community engagement in the work they do. They attribute much of this to the learning sets.

- As yet there has been limited application of this learning at the local level. This may be partly a consequence of the organisational pressures that people have experienced, in some cases a lack of organisational support, and also because community engagement *does* take time, it is not an instant transformation.

- The ALS model was successful. The process appears to have been highly appropriate for both the subject and the services concerned, within the prevailing policy context. Participants felt that the process was a good use of their time and that the shared learning experience was beneficial.

- The key missing ingredient appears to be systemic commitment, at all levels, to community engagement and adoption of this way of working among the organisations represented.

4.3 Workshops

4.3.1 Introduction

In addition to the training and the learning sets, the overall programme included workshops in three organisations, which took place between February and July 2008. Staff from New Forest Museum (NFM), Portsmouth City Council Library Service and the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead (RBWM) Library Service had each successfully applied to MLA South East for bursaries to address community engagement. Each organisation developed its own aims and intended outcomes for the programme in partnership with the project facilitator. However, all three programmes had a similar structure:

- an introductory workshop, covering some of the same ground as in the community engagement training (the sessions on definitions and barriers) and also on organisations' current engagement with local groups and residents;

- a second workshop with invited partners and stakeholders, which focused, to varying extents, on the development of partnership projects;

- a final workshop on ways forward.

This discussion draws on:

- six phone interviews with workshop participants (two staff from Portsmouth, one each from RBWM and NFM and two 'partners' from the New Forest);

- a telephone interview with the facilitator;

- the evaluator's perceptions from attending seven of the nine workshop sessions.

In NFM and Portsmouth, the bursary applicants were interviewed. This was not possible in RBWM due to long-term staff absence after the first workshop, but the lead RBWM contact for the subsequent workshops was interviewed. A further factor was that the final workshop in RBWM only took place in August 2008, so there was relatively little time to reflect on the programme as a whole.

The interviews with workshop participants used the same interview guide as the ALS evaluation (adapted for the two NFM participants, who were not employees), enabling comparison across the same themes.

4.3.2 Evaluation of workshop aims and outcomes

In NFM, the workshop aims related to shared thinking between staff and Trustees, and developing work with partners. As discussed in the next section, there was a general sense that, as a result of the workshop, there was closer Trustee engagement and an improved basis for partnership working.

In Portsmouth, the aims related to working with local library supervisors, engaging with partners and learning from what did and not work. In terms

of working with library supervisors, the lead contact expressed concern 'that some of the staff were perturbed by their direct manager being there,' but was more positive about the workshop with partners:

> 'I think it worked very well. Everyone had the opportunity to be part of it, but I'm concerned that the less confident members of staff didn't take it forward. People were able to express opinions and make contacts. Making that first step and having that informal dialogue was great. The great value since is that it's begun to empower local supervisors. It's been quite informal and it's taken a similar approach to the workshop, a looser two-way engagement… Some library staff felt out of their comfort zone, but Cathy "made us hold our nose and jump into the water."'

In terms of wider learning:

> There was a lot of learning going on. It was the first time that some staff's views were heard. We usually talk within ourselves, but this was wider. (Portsmouth)

Key aims for RBWM included increased understanding of CE, better understanding of the needs of residents in an identified locality and improved partnership engagement. Learning outcomes and partnership are discussed in the next section. In terms of understanding the needs of local residents, the second workshop included a detailed discussion of local provision for young people.

4.3.3 Learning outcomes

Asked about understanding of community engagement, there was a view that the initial session on definitions had been useful. In Portsmouth, one person was after more clarification:

> 'I'm still slightly bothered that we're mixing community engagement with community outreach, rather than a two-way process. It's not really a criticism of Cathy. She was trying to be positive about the things we already do, because of the difficulties that were obvious at the session [ie staff cuts being announced at the time of the first workshop], but we should have been challenged more.' (Portsmouth)

More generally, library service respondents echoed the Kent action learning set in suggesting that the workshops had engendered a more strategic view of CE, for example:

> 'For some managers and frontline staff it would have been something new. Understandably, their focus is often on keeping things afloat operationally, but the workshops will have opened their eyes.' (Portsmouth)

> 'Colleagues were thinking about another point of view and the effect of what we're doing on communities, especially if they're not thinking strategically. For example, they're focusing on the delivery such as storytimes, not necessarily thinking about the impact… It helped within my team, especially for new people - they're all busy

doing so the workshops gave time to reflect and to see the big picture.' (RBWM)

There was some suggestion that the workshops had helped develop more confidence in the participants, but this did not emerge as strongly as it did in Kent. Similarly, group bonding appeared a less important outcome than in Kent. The possible exception here was NFM:

> 'It was an equal forum for all staff, volunteers and trustees. It was quite bonding. I think everyone enjoyed it. It was a chance for people to shine and I liked the fact that it was a small group.' (NFM)

Echoing the point about staff having a chance to shine, there were some comments in the workshops, that staff valued having an input and that some had not had this kind of opportunity before.

4.3.4 Organisational learning

One success of the workshops in Portsmouth and, in particular, NFM was that there were tangible outputs. At NFM:

> 'We all really enjoyed the experience and feel that we have come out of it, not only with an increased understanding of community engagement but a tangible and realistic action plan for a future project.' (NFM, by e-mail)

A plan for a community history project was developed, with partners, in the second and third workshops, where:

> 'People in the group had already done some work, so we had a start and the skills. It seemed obvious to play to our strengths. We wouldn't have done otherwise, without the workshops. The project seemed a tangible way of taking CE forward. Without it [the project proposal], we'd have been better informed, but no more than that.' (NFM)

The work at NFM also suggested that a closer working between museum staff and trustees had been developed:

> 'What I liked about the whole set-up was the emphasis on a mix of trustees, volunteers and staff. We're always looking to engage trustees. It was an opportunity to get them in on the ground level. Paid staff have their own language and ways of working and it helped give trustees an insight into that… We're now going to be doing a financial workshop through MLA with trustees and officers… The workshops gave me an opportunity to build relationships with trustees.' (NFM)

In Portsmouth:

> 'It's informed planning for the development of library supervisors. Some of them were uncomfortable with the kind of engagement in the workshops, so it showed that there was work to be done. It kickstarted a process in the new structure, where these posts have more autonomy, focusing on the needs of the local community. We need to do additional training to empower these staff. We'd already

been thinking about the role of local supervisors, but the workshops have helped us take it further.' (Portsmouth)

In addition, Portsmouth Library Service is working on a community engagement strategy and, within its new structure, there will be a post that will lead on community engagement and 'we're also embedding CE in the operations plan.' These developments were happening anyway, but the work on priorities, in the third workshop, contributed to this ongoing process. Another respondent, however, pointed to the impact of the restructure and questioned 'whether there's a general appetite for these sorts of exercises.'

Unfortunately, in RBWM the lack of senior management representation at the final workshop meant that, in the words of the facilitator, 'it was not reasonable to ask people to come up with action plans which they could not be responsible for implementing.'

4.3.5 Community impact

In NFM, it is too early to say how the community history proposal will be developed, but the response of one of the community partners was indicative of the progress made:

> 'There was definitely a general local perception that they're not interested in offers of volunteering if you can't bring your own specialist research interests. The attitude now is a more positive way of community involvement, using everyone's skills and interests. That message will be transmitted in a place like Lyndhurst. It has changed.' (NFM)

In all three organisations, there was a feeling that the second workshop, with partners, had advanced partnership working. These comments were typical:

> 'For the library service, I hope that having met partners, it will remind people about who to work with. The second day was a huge profile-raising for working with other partners, in a positive way. Other departments were unaware of the library offer, but now we have partners for new projects. They see we're not just stamping books out… There is a continuing contact as a result of the second day, which might not have happened otherwise.' (RBWM)

> 'I had a very productive follow-up conversation with someone from health, and also contact with people from youth services and the sensory impairment team.' (Portsmouth)

Further, as a result of the second workshop in Portsmouth, staff extended the existing teen reading group to add in writing and sharing stories, which had drawn in more young people. However, in Portsmouth there was some criticism of how the second workshop was organised:

> 'The second session was invited library users and we should have gone out on the street and got non-users in. The people there were uncritical - perhaps they feared library closures. With the session with professionals, I'm not sure how useful it was as professionals

can often have the same barriers as the public about understanding how libraries have changed. There needs to be more concentrated engagement with partners. We missed a trick with the community session.' (Portsmouth)

At the same time, this respondent said:

'After the second session, one user told me that they felt that uncomfortable when the discussion got a bit heated, but I think it's important that people are honest. The workshops touched on hard issues, like the library classic of juggling the needs of entire and specific communities. More debate and challenge was needed, things tend to be self-congratulatory. However, the discussion between community members on whether or not libraries should be providing the People's Network or concentrate on books was in reality a dialogue that demonstrated tensions between younger and older users - that was a highlight for me.' (Portsmouth)

As In Kent, resource issues were also highlighted by some of the library service respondents, for example:

'The biggest issue is the resources and spaces to do CE properly. Fifteen years ago, I managed a big branch library and had no direct service duties, so I did CE every day. You couldn't do that now, we have five full-time-equivalents covering twelve libraries. You're never going to get the same level of engagement. On one level, we've got to deliver in partnership, but we can only deliver one-offs. The biggest obstacle to success is lack of people and space and money to buy new stuff. On a positive side, we can deliver in partnership and prioritise what's most important.' (RBWM)

4.3.6 Effectiveness of the workshop approach

There were broadly positive comments about the workshops, especially about their practical focus and the links made with partners. One participant commented that:

'What was particularly useful in the last session was Cathy's reality check. This has always been missing from other training that I've done. It's the first time I've seen a workshop leader address the capacity issue. We came to the conclusion that we needed money to get the project off the ground. It helped to look at different scenarios. It wasn't just a good idea, it was a more pragmatic approach.' (NFM)

As with the Kent ALS, there was a suggestion that participants had to be prepared for the openness and flexibility of the approach taken:

'It could have been a dangerous 'free falling' and I was glad when everyone came together. I could appreciate that it might not work in another setting. It could be too unstructured for some people. It worked for us, but we had an idea bubbling under. Being a small independent museum it worked to our advantage, as we sail close to the breeze anyway.' (NFM)

The facilitator's conclusion to the RBWM programme is relevant to the whole programme:

> 'There is clearly a willingness and enthusiasm to take a more outward looking approach, build relationships and networks and develop ongoing community engagement. This needs a long term, strategic approach in order to be effective and needs to be embedded in business planning. Core services are resource intensive and for community engagement to be everyone's business long term strategic planning needs to be carried out to ensure community engagement is embedded in the organisation's work.'

In other words, these short workshop programmes could only ever be a start, but, there were indications of positive steps being taken forward as a result of these workshops.

4.3.7 Concluding remarks on the workshops

All three workshop programmes developed engagement with local partners and there was a general sense of there being more of an outward-looking approach. The most tangible outcomes were at NFM, where there was a 'reality-checked' project proposal. There was also closer engagement between the museum's staff and trustees. The work at Portsmouth and RBWM was affected by difficult local issues, but in Portsmouth there was an intention to take forward the work done in the service's community engagement plan.

As well as the work with partners, a further key strength of the workshops was that they represented a whole organisation approach to community engagement. The action learning sets were a more profound and longer-term intervention, but were attended by only one member of staff from an organisation or, in the case of Kent, a discrete group of staff (six full-time equivalents). In the case of RBWM and Portsmouth, the workshops included staff from a range of levels in the organisation, including branch staff and those with service-wide roles, such as senior managers, and children and young people's librarians. At NFM, a much smaller organisation, the majority of staff attended at least one of the workshops, together with trustees and freelance workers who had a working relationship with the museum. There is an argument that this 'buy-in' from the wider organisation contributed to the progress made at NFM.

4.4 Southampton Library Service case study

Background

As part of the present project, Local Level were asked to carry out a small piece of work with Southampton City Library Services (SLS). In the autumn of 2006 SLS had begun an experiment in establishing 'community management partnerships' in the central area of the city, which had not been successful, and it was decided to take a step back and review it with external support. This piece of work was carried out by John Vincent, who provided a separate report to SLS and MLASE. The work is described here briefly because of the insights it may offer to our general themes.

SLS aimed to set up three management partnerships with local people in three libraries in areas of deprivation: Thornhill, Lords Hill, and Burgess Road. Working with the Community Service Volunteers (CSV) Consultancy Manager, SLS held a number of stakeholder meetings and a public launch. A leaflet was produced and the Community Involvement section of the Council had also been involved in generating interest and making local connections.

The leaflet described the 'offer' that was being made: the involvement of local people in decision-making about the Library Service. However, in the event, there was little interest in this offer, and only one person for each library was identified as interested in being involved in such a management partnership.

This low level of response surprised SLS as it did not seem to reflect the relatively high level of library use, increasing user figures and increasing levels of expressed satisfaction. The CSV Consultancy Manager was also surprised by the outcome.

Why was the level of interest so low?

The case study question which arises is, why was the level of interest so low?

Among the complicating factors, the following were identified:

- in the first six months of the project, the council began a separate consultation exercise which cut across the library work;
- a library was identified for closure, and this generated publicity (and negative views of the Council);
- a volunteering survey carried out for the city council in 2007 suggested that people may not readily give up time for greater engagement with the library service, especially if there appears to be some time commitment required.

However, it was felt that these factors do not adequately explain the overall position. In October 2007 the case study was offered anonymously to the multi-agency action learning set for discussion and reflection. In the remainder of this section we reflect, first, on the library service's own experience of and learning from what happened; and secondly on the use of the case study in our overall programme.

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SLS experience and learning

Subsequently, a representative of SLS observed that 'the project was a failure, it was too ambitious' and accepted that the initial approach was 'probably counter-productive.'

> 'We've moved on… We didn't lack confidence, we were looking for a management partnership with an element of control being placed in the community, for decisions on strategic issues. We did a lot of work with community development workers in the council, it just did not get any takers.'

This respondent went on to try to distinguish between an inherited model of community engagement which he felt services were expected to adopt, and an understanding which they at SLS have now reached. Of the notion of imposing a model he said:

> 'I'm not sure it can be trained. There's a self-consciousness about it which probably undoes things in the long run.'

The understanding at SLS now seems to be far more nuanced. The most telling lesson seems to have been around community engagement as an ongoing process which needs to be detached from the project mentality:

> 'The nine-month timeframe was unrealistic. Any timeframe for engagement is going to be problematic. It's arguable to call it a 'project' and have a timeframe and milestones… We've become more aware of the subtleties of community engagement and that it's going on all the time. The mistake is to call it a project – "We want you to do this, we want you to do that." It's not helpful. In some sense, the "project" is the evaluation, the post-mortem to tell you what happened.'

This experience has brought a refreshed focus on the everyday interactions between staff and users:

> 'It's a complex area, community engagement, it may be delusory as a notion. It evolves of itself with a little bit of the library service doing things. The daily interchange with customers is very significant. How do we develop an awareness of how to make more of it? It's about being alive to possibilities, how staff need to be receptive. It's quite subtle and almost imperceptible. If you feel a sense of well-being in a library and the staff respond to what you say, from that things might flow.'

The case study in the MLASE programme

The second theme to be considered is how the case study contributed to the learning process in our multi-agency action learning set. Participants who had the opportunity to reflect on the SLS experience, clearly felt they benefited from it, and one highlighted it as a particularly valuable point in the programme.

Their comments and suggestions were recorded and included in the report submitted separately. The following were among the most striking:

> There seems to be a gap between the links with socially excluded

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groups and a management partnership – it seems to have come from nowhere

It doesn't sound as though the process was thought-through enough - what steps did City take to get to this stage?

[The leaflet] It's a remit, not an invitation

Lack of ground-work, so this initiative looks as though it's appeared in isolation

Was there outreach work to lead up to this?

Ensure that groundwork has been put in place

Does this come from something that the community wants?

Community needs need to come before the Library Service's.

These thoughts confirm that the SLS case study provided a useful focus for participants' appreciation of community engagement. But this does not mean that this understanding was necessarily consistent or harmonious. The SLS experience described above seems to us to illustrate an evolution from a fairly rigid attempt to implement a given management approach to relations with users, to a more nuanced reflection on quite where the quality of relationship with users is best sought.

Here we want to explore briefly a contrast between the reflections of two of the ALS participants, in the light of the SLS case study. At the end of the programme, one told us that they would like to see a set of toolkits and benchmarks:

'Community engagement is susceptible to this approach, with minimum standards, guidance on measuring performance, what should go into your strategy, how to implement it – planning tools, benchmarking which links back to key texts.'

Another said that the ALS process 'helped me to think a bit more laterally and not feel it had to be done in a certain way.' This respondent had been through a similar process to SLS:

'One target was to set up a user group. The user group never met. It turned out that we could never get people there because they were busy. The ALS helped me realise that we didn't need to feel we'd failed and not ticked the box. Saying you're going to set up a user group and not doing so isn't a disaster. We found we could do it in other ways, so long as principles of involvement are demonstrated in what we do.'

We find this contrast striking, particularly given that both participants felt they had gained a great deal from the ALS.

4.5 Support for community engagement plans

Four library authorities in the south east region were successful in their initial bids to the Community Libraries Programme. In the spring of 2008 each authority was required to prepare a community engagement plan to progress their proposal, and Local Level were asked to provide support in the preparation of these plans. This work was carried out by Kevin Harris and Rebecca Linley.

The support that was provided varied from offering suggested changes to the text of successive drafts of the plan, having face-to-face meetings to explore specific and general issues, liaising with the MLA community libraries programme officer on specific questions, along with telephone and email support and advice.[8]

While this support was welcomed and valued, it came at an exceptionally busy time for the staff who were managing the bids. In all cases there were tensions between the bureaucratic requirements of the process, against a looming deadline, on the one hand; and trying to ensure a foundation of community engagement principles and practice on the other. One head of service managed to put a positive spin on this:

> 'I'm not looking at it so narrowly anymore. Originally I had a limited number of tasks in mind and this was a broadening of understanding of what had to be done.'

There is not a great deal of systematic evidence to be brought to the surface from this exercise. However, members of the project team have been involved in several aspects of the community engagement planning process under the community libraries programme beyond the south east as well as within the region, and in what follows we offer some reflections based on that experience.

One authority involved a community development practitioner in the preparation of the plan and described this as an advantage that could be built on:

> 'Having a community development person made a fundamental difference. What we've done in the past was *not* community engagement as perceived by someone who's done CD. We'd not really understood the theory, before. Having the CD experience, they understood what was needed… To an extent we're building on skills that already were in place, and a mindset. Sometimes you get "well it's my library and I decide what things I provide…" But here, staff were already accepting of community engagement.'

The key lesson for another authority seems to have been that community engagement is a progressive process:

> 'I've learned to accept that this isn't something that happens overnight, it's a long term thing… It's given me the confidence to

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[8] In one case we offered to design and run a half day workshop as part of the support but this was not taken up.

> realise that I'm not going to fail if I haven't achieved it next month - understanding that this isn't a quick fix.'

Overall the process encapsulated the broader tension between two different ways of looking at the world: the concept of community engagement, which implies non-hierarchical, unhurried conversation between parties towards some agreed end, and the power-weighted professional bureaucracy of planned tasks and targets. This tension is perfectly natural: to run a service you need plans and measures, but to establish and promote community engagement you need to appreciate the principles in a non-professional, non-hierarchical context and allow time.

It's fair to say that both worldviews survived these stormy times, although in some cases the sense of community engagement idealism may have been lost overboard as people clung hard to the fixed bureaucratic fittings. The community engagement planning exercise overall seems to have been a challenging learning experience and in terms of the present programme of work it has added to our insights into the difficulties that some library services faced.

However, one concern remains that the community libraries programme may not be bringing about 'a shift in the fundamental power relationship between the library and the public'. One of the facilitators, John Vincent, observed about public libraries generally:

> 'I don't think there's a whole service commitment to community engagement. They see it as this month's thing that you do… The need that is critical is the taking-on of community engagement by the whole service. That hasn't happened.'

This echoes the strong message from the community libraries programme baseline study, that:

> 'There is a lack of shared vision across and within authorities on what community engagement means in practice. Libraries are focused on outreach and service use, but not on improvement of the library service as a tool for community development.'[9]

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[9] Taylor, B. and R. Pask (2008). *Community Libraries Programme evaluation: an overview of the baseline for community engagement in libraries*. London: MLA, http://www.mla.gov.uk/resources/assets/C/community_libs_eval_12857.pdf, p6.

5   Conclusions

In the overall programme two of the original objectives were clearly met, and two were largely met. There was one dominant emerging issue, to do with organisational learning and commitment. In this section we address these points in turn and conclude with some remarks about the methods and approaches adopted in the programme.

5.1 User involvement in development of new projects and services

As described in the report above, not all participants were able to bring to this programme a parallel example of a project involving local people, which they would have developed as they participated. This was an ambitious objective but it is fair to say that the programme helped all participants to apply what they were learning as and when they could.

Clear successes were recorded. For example the workshops at New Forest Museum saw the development of 'a tangible and realistic action plan for a future project;' and one of the multi-agency ALS participants made progress on several fronts with community involvement across his authority, attributing much of this to refreshed thinking and confidence as a consequence of participation in this programme.

Most participants in the workshops and learning sets were ready to develop new projects or services involving users, and made reference to practical advances made in areas of their day-to-day work, even if these examples could not be described as consistent ongoing 'projects'.

In the Southampton case study, the express intention was not to develop a project but to learn from one which had stalled. The support that was offered to authorities developing community engagement plans, meanwhile, was necessarily about the development of new projects and services, albeit these were not bought to a shared learning environment.

5.2 Understanding and use of community and voluntary sector networks

Participants' understanding of community and voluntary sector networks was undoubtedly enhanced by the training sessions and workshops, and to an extent within the learning sets. Numerous comments attested to new insights into the role and contribution of local networks and the advantages of engaging with them.

It is fair to say that most ALS participants appeared already well-aware of networks pertinent to their roles; and if there were barriers impeding people's engagement with them, these were more to do with pressures of time and having something to offer in terms of a project relationship or organisational commitment to partnership.

5.3 Understandings of community engagement

The programme appears to have fulfilled a highly-valued role in clarifying understandings of community engagement. Many of the comments made suggest that some people had a superficial grasp of what this agenda implies, which could well have been very constraining for the local cultural sector if left unrefined. It is hard to over-estimate the long term importance of this clarification, combined with the opportunity to explore the practicalities of developing services and initiatives in a new way.

5.4 Community engagement has developed beyond simple consultation

Similarly, this programme has ensured that none of its participants is likely to regard consultation and community engagement as co-extensive. In practice there seems to have been very little attention paid to community consultation, *per se*, which probably helped people to an appreciation that community engagement amounts to something more. But at the same time, there may be room for closer understanding of how ongoing community engagement can contribute to reliable (and relatively pain-free) consultation.

5.5 Organisational learning and commitment

The evaluation of both the ALSs and the workshops has shown individual learning outcomes for participants, notably in understanding of community engagement. The evaluation has also demonstrated changes in approach and practice, for example being more outward-looking and working more closely with partners.

We would argue that a more holistic, organisation-wide approach is now needed. The community libraries programme baseline evaluation[10] refers to the need to change the library product and service experience and, just as importantly, to 'building capacity for change within the organisation – identifying the skills and attributes that will be required of staff in the future, and working out how to equip staff with these.'

The capacity for this sort of change has been developed, to varying extents, through MLA South East's investment in its community engagement programme. It is reasonable to claim that this capacity might have increased manifold had it been accompanied by broad organisational commitment among the participating agencies. The commitment of Kent County has been exemplary but isolated. Many services were affected by issues like budget cuts and restructuring, and these pressures undoubtedly had an effect. There is still, however, a need for broader appreciation of how community engagement has to be embedded in the organisation's values and strategy, rather than through a piecemeal or

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[10] Taylor, B and Pask, R. (2008) *Community libraries programme evaluation: an overview of the baseline for community engagement in libraries*, p27. http://www.mla.gov.uk/resources/assets//C/community_libs_eval_12857.pdf

project approach or allocated to an individual. Without this organisational change, service transformation will not happen.

5.6 Methods and approaches

This programme offered the opportunity to compare the effectiveness of three distinct learning and development approaches to the same subject.[11] The training, attended by 108 people over six days, was obviously a less costly model than the learning sets, with the cost per person for the workshops being somewhere between these two. However, these relative costs need to be considered alongside the benefits of the different approaches.

The training was successful in raising awareness of community engagement and a number of participants stated that they would apply this learning in their work. Even taking into account that there was no follow-up (so we do not know how, or if, any participants developed new approaches to community engagement), the training was a more specific 'one-off' intervention than the ALSs or the workshops. This compares to the way in which, within the learning sets, issues were worked through over time and networks were developed and sustained. The workshops also had this same sense of progression, albeit to a lesser extent, with each successive session building on the previous one.

Participants described the training as a shared and participative of way of learning, but it was very much individual learning. This can be compared to the organisational learning in the workshops and group learning in the ALSs. In the workshops, there was individual learning too, but the most significant impact was the bringing together of people from across the organisation and then working with partners on this basis. At New Forest Museum in particular, there appeared to have been very significant progress in the organisation's vision and engagement with partners.

The learning sets, although the most expensive model in terms of unit costs (approximately 14 people over 14 half-days) were qualitatively different again from both the training and the workshops. These sessions provided a depth of both individual development and group working. Individual learning was particularly evidenced in understanding of community engagement and increased confidence in working with local groups and residents. At a group level, the ALSs developed supportive networks, which are independently sustainable once up and running, offering accumulating benefit and value over time. We think it is significant that this approach was successful both for a cross-sectoral, region-wide group and for a unified team under a single authority.

Because the three models all offered such different benefits, it is not possible to make meaningful cost-based comparisons: we have no way of measuring the respective benefits. Each has their own value and, as the

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[11] While our general conclusions take account of the provision of support to authorities in developing their community engagement plans (section 4.5 above) and on reviewing the specific experience in Southampton (section 4.4) we do not include that work in this comparison of approaches. The support on community engagement plans in particular was highly sensitive to the timing of the offer.

NFM workshops and the Kent ALS suggest, it may be hugely beneficial to get the best fit between the training and development approach and the organisation's requirements. It could be that the workshop model is a particularly appropriate one for smaller organisations; or that one particular approach is better suited to the museum sector and another to libraries. Those are matters for further research. From the experience presented here, we suggest that organisations should look to develop an optimum mix of approaches, along with genuine commitment to the principles of community engagement.

5.7 Concluding remarks

To what extent can this programme be said to have brought about the 'fundamental shift in the way that services are developed, managed and delivered,' that was sought?

One of the facilitators, John Vincent, expressed the hope that people would continue to develop their thinking and practice around CE, as:

> 'It still feels like people regard community engagement as a set of techniques.'

This is a general observation, informed by a wider awareness of activity across the country. It does not contradict the finding that significant identifiable benefits have been enjoyed by individual participants. At the final meeting of the multi-agency learning set, in the absence of the evaluators, various summing-up comments were recorded by the facilitator. One of the participants expressed her understanding simply:

> 'Community engagement forms part of the ongoing conversation with the local community.'

In section 4.2.4 above we quoted what we regard as a similar powerful insight, from a draft journal article written by one of the Kent ALS participants:

> 'It is not just about the library service delivering, but about encouraging community groups to support themselves to meet our joint aims.'

This kind of understanding, we suggest, *does* indicate a fundamental shift away from mechanistic task-oriented approaches to service delivery, to a more flexible, responsive and embedded relationship with local people and groups. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that the shift *has* happened in individual cases, is still in progress for others, and can be anticipated elsewhere. The task is to maximise its impact across organisations. There will be no lasting 'fundamental shift' until services as a whole absorb this understanding, because as one ALS participant put it,

> 'You can't dabble in community engagement.'