Open to interpretation

Community perceptions
of the social benefits of public libraries

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This research was an exploratory exercise designed primarily to explore methodological implications, and to highlight issues to do with community perceptions of public libraries. As such, it was a limited exercise and some of the general implications drawn are necessarily speculative. Hopefully this is just the first stage in developing meaningful indicators in this area.

Any criticism implied in the work reported here is intended in a constructive manner, and should not be taken to reflect on any of the individuals who contributed so openly and willingly to this research. If in passing the fieldwork has identified weaknesses in services, it is worth bearing in mind that by far the most significant factor in such weaknesses is the effect of resource constraints over a lengthy period.

I also wish to thank my colleagues on the *Social impact of public libraries* programme for the insights and absorbing discussions which our work involved.

C O N T E N T S

Appendices:
      A   **Questions used in discussion groups**
      B   **Summary of meeting at Rhosllanerchrugog, Wrexham**
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Introduction

This research and the programme of which it forms a part, took place at a critical period in the relationship of public libraries and communities. In the political context, both the public library movement and the notion of 'community' have come through difficult times over the last 10-15 years. The social importance of each is being reasserted, for various reasons. Libraries, for example, are felt to have an indirect economic benefit as well as a social benefit, both of which ought to be measurable. Community involvement has been identified as the missing ingredient in top-down regeneration initiatives which in the past have failed to take account of the structural nature of disadvantage.(1) But some of the context and the values which underpin our understanding of the social role of libraries and of 'community' - such as public ownership, and the sense of neighbourhood associated with common employment, corner shops and public space for instance - have been eroded. Furthermore, as Black and Muddiman have made clear, community librarianship has declined as an activity which *prioritises* disadvantaged people: 'community librarianship is now conceived of in a 'safer' way, as 'librarianship for the community', in its entirety.' (2) The social context for community librarianship as it evolved in the 1960s and 1970s is irrecoverable.(3)

This changing context for the ways in which libraries relate to their communities featured in two of the major reports of the 1990s: *Borrowed time*, (4) produced by Comedia in 1993, and *The public library review* (5) published in 1995. These works drew attention to the need for imagination and commitment in the way libraries relate to their communities, and to the perceived importance of the library as a 'community asset'. However, it could be argued that the 1990s debate may have been based too much on established library functions and perceived mainly from the library's own viewpoint. There may be much to be learned from the exploration of new or under-developed library functions, for example regarding community access to the new technologies; and in considering how people in communities view the role of public libraries.

Three key problems emerge when considering the social contribution of public libraries in the UK. First, there are difficulties caused by the *unevenness* of activity, associated with such factors as local government reorganisation, and the position and influence of the Chief Librarian within the authority's structure. Thus in some areas there is clearly good communication between library staff and, say, social services or social work staff; in other areas no connection is apparent.

Secondly, the lack of sustainability of many innovations, and inadequate dissemination of good practice, can impede progress, stifle imagination, and dampen morale.

Thirdly, managers have for some time felt the need to demonstrate in measurable terms that public libraries offer value for public money, and for many library functions they lack the tools to do this in any meaningful way.

Two further points can be added from the community development perspective, drawing attention to the peculiar social position of public libraries. Their popularity as institutions and their tradition as universally-available resources should not distract us from the fact that, firstly, while they are based in the community they are not *community-based* - that is to say, they seldom give any sense of community ownership, community management, or accountability. And secondly, in some disadvantaged communities they can be seen as excluding and are not necessarily the default information-providing agency.(6)

It follows that some deeper exploration is needed, to review the local library's meaning for its community. It was felt that this could be done in a way which eventually may result in 'indicators' of public library performance against community perceptions. The research reported here is the first step towards this aim, in that it explores an appropriate methodology for demonstrating the social benefit of libraries from a community development perspective.

This point is critical for a full explanation of the social role of public libraries. The basic premise for this research is that social benefit has to be seen *in the community's own terms*. This means that some of the criteria have to come from the community sector, otherwise the indicators will lack validity and credibility. This is not to disregard the considered contribution of experts in the field, particularly library managers themselves of course, whose input is crucial in ensuring that measures are appropriate for the management and development of the services.

Certain contextual issues need to be raised to clarify the long-term intention at this point.

- First, public policy in the UK is clearly moving towards integrated provision on an area basis: locality is the byword, and the opportunities for libraries to play leading roles in community partnerships are increasing.

- Secondly, we need to remember that people's own perceptions of their 'community' or neighbourhood tend to be more local (*ie* smaller and more detailed) than is implied in a local authority's use of the term 'community'. In other words, people's sense of community is unlikely to map onto a library's constituency.

- Thirdly, it will be critical (but problematic, as this research has found) to engage non-users of library services if an assessment of community perceptions is to be complete and applicable.

- Fourthly, all communities differ and they are dynamic organisms. It will not be possible to specify a given standard set of criteria or indicators, either for two libraries in similar areas, or for the same library over time. Hence the importance of an appropriate *process*, the principles of which are universally applicable.

- Fifthly, the lessons from such an exercise will be diverse, and will have applications in library service planning, community development, the development of community and voluntary sector information resources, partnership building, the recognition of contributions in kind to regeneration and social inclusion initiatives, and so on.

This initial investigation, then, set out **to understand what sort of framework is necessary to help local libraries to work with people in their communities in developing indicators of their social benefit**. While the research reported here was very much exploratory and on a small scale, it represents an important first step because it suggests that:

- people find it easy to describe their own community and its characteristics, revealing a wealth of local knowledge and insight and identifying what they regard as particular strengths and weaknesses;
- people perceive their library to play a valuable public role, which many would defend strongly; but that this perception is based on established, traditional services, and takes little account of potential services;
- people find it less easy to think about possible new services or *new roles* for the library, whether or not these relate to major local issues which they have identified. This highlights the point that *libraries tend not to be associated with social roles*, particularly in terms of social inclusion;
- and that people in communities do not naturally think of justifying libraries in terms of social benefit, and therefore have difficulty with the idea of measuring what the library achieves.

In section 4 below I suggest a response to each of these four points.

References
1 *Regeneration and the community: guidelines to the community involvement aspect of the SRB Challenge Fund: 1997 edition*. London: Community Development Foundation, 1997.
2 Alistair Black and Dave Muddiman, *Understanding community librarianship: the public library in post-modern Britain*. Aldershot: Avebury, 1997, p44.
3 Kevin Harris, Andrew Green, 'Social impact of public libraries', *Library Association record*, 99(4), April 1997.
4 *Borrowed time: the future of public libraries in the UK*. Stroud: Comedia, 1993.
5 *Review of the public library service in England and Wales*. London: Aslib, 1995.
6 Patrick Roach and Marlene Morrison, 'The place on the hill'? *Library Association record*, 99(8), August 1997, p432-433.

2 Methodology

2.1   The research was based around local libraries in three localities: one in England, one in Wales, and one in Scotland. Library staff contacted community groups on behalf of the researcher and set up discussion meetings. The brief provided was:
• to invite members of community *groups*, rather than, say, individual users, in order to increase the likelihood that most people would know at least one other person there;
• for a *variety* of local groups to be represented;
• for *non-users* as well as users of libraries to be invited to attend;
• for the meetings *not* to take place on library premises (community centres and community college rooms were used)
• the ideal size of a meeting would be around 8-12 people, and the meeting might last around 90 minutes (most lasted longer);
• day-time or evening meetings could be arranged according to the preferences of the groups; and
• the meeting was to be about 'libraries in the community'.

2.2   A broad interview structure was prepared, comprising eight questions which are listed in Appendix A. The intention was to stimulate an informal discussion, minimizing *assumptions* about library service. The researcher's independence from the library service was made clear from the outset. Comments were recorded by hand, tape recording was not used.

2.3   The structure of the discussion was:
• to begin with descriptions of the local community, its 'pros and cons';
• then to talk about what might be needed to address some of the negative factors which had been identified;
• to ask what contribution the library service might make to such measures;
• and then, if a library contribution can be identified, to consider how we might demonstrate that it made any difference.
In practice, and unsurprisingly, none of the meetings came to grips with the final stage.

2.4   Following these meetings, and entirely separately, shorter meetings took place with library staff at which exactly the same series of questions was asked. It was made clear that their input was not the central focus of the research, but the opportunity was taken to augment the community discussions with a professional perspective. Where appropriate, comments from library staff have been included in the summaries, which are given as appendices. In Todmorden, one of the meetings was with two town councillors.

2.5   The locations for the fieldwork were:
• Rhosllanerchrugog, Wrexham
• Todmorden, Calderdale
• Auchinleck, East Ayrshire.
The fieldwork took place between July and September 1997.

2.6   Since a main objective of the research was to explore appropriate methodology, it makes sense to discuss here the methodological issues which arose.

2.6.1   Involvement of *non-users* of library services is critical for the validity of any community indicators which may be developed, since on its own the users' view, like the staff view, offers only a partial understanding. There seems little to be said for regarding users and non-users as separate categories, although this might be among the options which could be tested. The majority of those who contributed to the research reported here were regular library users. To ensure higher representation of non-users, and a broader range of participants generally, will require different arrangements and a lengthier period of preparation.

2.6.2   An exercise to develop appropriate indicators of the role of the library will require a *more purposive engagement with community groups* than was possible in this case. The fieldwork reported here was heavily dependent on the contributions of people who had spare time, at the right time, and were willing to talk freely on issues raised, receiving very little in return. This in itself - quite apart from the advance notice that the meeting was to be 'about libraries' -   meant that certain categories of people were unable or were disinclined to come along.

2.6.3 For this kind of contribution to be more fully representative and meaningful would require some kind of trade-off, so that it was clear to representative community groups that the exercise was in their own interests. Two possibilities immediately come to mind. The first is that a programme to develop public library indicators might be part of a local information strategy, to which the community and voluntary sectors should be contributing anyway. Using a more structured and systematic approach would also offer more options, in terms of using formal questionnaires for example. The second concerns the development of skills. If community groups can see that through their involvement they might acquire skills and experience in research, survey analysis, and so on; and if they have some ownership over the results and outcomes, then their initial participation is likely to be that much firmer and more representative.

2.6.4   For various reasons, (including the time of year), the size of groups at the different locations varied enormously. In one case there was one meeting with 19 people, in another there were five meetings (two of which were with only two people). There seem to be no particular reasons to believe that the size of group is of critical importance in this kind of exercise.

2.7 This leaves us clearer about how to establish community indicators of library benefit, but with still some way to go. After the first stage described here, the logical next step from what I have suggested is to engage with community groups and help them to take over the process if they wish to, focussing on the issues which concern them. Thus at any one of the locations in this study, youth groups, for example, would work -

- with a facilitator on what the library does and might contribute in their community
- then with the library on the practicalities of that
- then with a facilitator on the identification of indicators
- and finally on their own in gathering the data, testing and applying the indicators.

2.8 This would give us specific examples based on the general findings of need from initial community group meetings, and in due course the public library movement in the UK will accumulate a basic resource of examples of measured benefit. The ultimate objective is for general models to emerge which are applicable for all local libraries.

3 Public libraries: assessing community perceptions

3.1 Describing 'the community'

3.1.1 If people in communities are to reflect in a meaningful way on local service provision, it makes sense to anchor that reflection in a common understanding of their community. Participants in all the fieldwork meetings showed a tireless willingness and frankness in describing and discussing different aspects of their neighbourhoods. In what follows I offer some reflections on this part of the process.

3.1.2 The first point to make is that for public library services, this exercise on its own is probably well-worth investing in. It is inexpensive and could provide rich insights. As I have noted elsewhere, much of what people know about their community is tacit, unacknowledged and unarticulated.(1) A simple exercise which brings out, summarizes and analyses local people's views about the service can reveal a great deal about community perceptions. It is obviously desirable that this fieldwork should be carried out by someone who is independent of the local authority. There may be much to be said for exploring options for a collaborative exercise with one or more other partners, such as adult education for example.

3.1.3 Certain discrepancies will emerge, inevitably - as appeared for example in Todmorden, where there were contrasts between those who thought that 'Tod seems to draw people back' and those who felt that 'the brighter ones never come back again'. On the whole discrepancies like these are natural and in that sense reassuring without needing to distract us. If *significant* conflicts of views were to emerge, however - for example if some people felt there was widespread racist behaviour and others denied this - that could well indicate a need for a separate research and development exercise before the rest of the programme could proceed. That is to say, if in seeking to identify indicators of community perceptions, there was a noticeable conflict of views on a given issue, one could conclude that (a) appropriate objectives and indicators are extremely important in this case, but (b) it might require community development work to establish clear ground before that process could go ahead.

3.1.4 Participants in Rhos and in Auchinleck identified a number of similar strengths and weaknesses because of similarities in their history. These included, for example, a strong sense of community identity, a lack of options for young people, and an urgent need for economic development. There was a noticeable difference in morale, however, with people in Rhos able to express a bullish resilience which was not echoed in Auchinleck. While some of the needs expressed in both these communities reflect a level of deprivation, particularly in Auchinleck, the contrast with Todmorden raises a separate point. Generally, Todmorden is a noticeably wealthier town, but people were no less forward in identifying issues. These included, for

example, concern over the cutting of grass verges on the highway, and the contrasting livery of the various buses. It would be a mistake to belittle these attitudes. My intention here is to point out the contrast and to note that, when invited to do so, people will readily identify social features which they would like to see changed. But whereas in Todmorden there was confidence that members of the community could effect change by articulating their views, the level of apathy in Auchinleck suggests that there was little faith in circumstances changing. As one of the Auchinleck participants put it, 'there is a need for strong community development in all communities here'. This factor has implications for developing a programme on community perceptions, since it reveals an instance where the library could probably make little or no meaningful contribution to regeneration, without a major contribution from some other intervention, in this case through a community development strategy.

3.2 Relating the library to the community's strengths and weaknesses

3.2.1 Participants were asked to reflect on the needs they had identified (opportunities for young people, employment opportunities, etc) and the actual or potential contribution of the library to addressing these needs. It was noticeable on each of the fieldtrips that their concentration wavered and their contributions faltered at this point, as the summaries reveal. In some cases, the possibilities for making connections were straightforward. In Todmorden, for instance, there was discussion about the fact that the youth centre is in the same building as the library but there is no common access. In most cases, however, there were few suggestions or connections made.

3.2.2 Thus in each locality there was discussion of drug misuse and the possibilities of some kind of drug prevention or awareness initiative; yet no-one suggested any contributing role for the library. When the issue arose subsequently in discussion with library staff at one location, the response was: 'we could put out literature'.

3.2.3 There are two issues here. First, there is a clear methodological issue to do with the extent to which the discussion should be *directed* and the involvement of community groups can be *purposive*. More deliberate direction and the provision of examples in a workshop style, for instance, would generate clearer responses. I have discussed this in section 2.6 above. The point to add is that ordinary people cannot necessarily be expected to make such connections in an informal setting; but they will have a legitimate view on, and an interest in, any programme which is proposed for their locality.

3.2.4 Secondly, this example highlights the need for more imaginative responses from library staff. Liaison with police, school, youth, and health services, as well as local media, on imaginative ways to present information; discussion with community arts organisations on drama workshops about drug-related issues; the use of library resources for the accumulation of local evidence; establishing a newsgroup or database of young people's reviews of

fiction, film or music relating to the issues - all these might be options for consideration, whether or not resource constraints mean they are 'put on hold'. Working with volunteers and supporting voluntary organisations which are working on drug issues, are other possibilities which should not be beyond the imagination or the means of most public libraries.

3.2.5 A similar example occurred at one location where the need for economic development was being discussed with library staff. They pointed out that they maintain a Job Centre noticeboard daily, and made reference to the local Business Information Service. The key point about such examples is that they reflect once again the dominant tendency to see the service *only in terms of what it does now and has done in the past*. For people in communities, discussing issues in an informal group, this is not unreasonable. But a more proactive and innovative outlook might be expected of library staff.

3.3 Library roles: 'mind the gaps'

3.3.1 This research has highlighted the difficulties of prioritisation which library managers face, particularly in disadvantaged communities. This was illustrated by the final question posed to the groups, a mental exercise to prioritise what the public library should offer 'first and foremost'.(2) Most people simply could not make a choice: in one way or another they all felt, in the words of one of the Rhos participants, that it should be 'all things to all people'. When pushed to make a single choice, responses varied. In Rhos, for instance, the book-lending service was prioritised, whereas in Auchinleck (perhaps reflecting the strong Scottish tradition) the educational role was preferred.

3.3.2 The service planning issues which this research hints at have to do with differing perceptions of library roles, which we can describe as a kind of 'triple tension' between
• the library service comprising existing, traditional functions
• identified and expressed needs in the community
• new opportunities and responsibilities.
It has been beyond the scope of this research to explore the third of these areas in any depth, but I suggest that it comrpsies two key elements: new information technology applications, and the social inclusion and regeneration agendas. Library managers cannot ignore either of these, any more than they should pass over expressed needs in the community.

3.3.3 Behind this lies the popular defence of 'the book focus', described by Black and Muddiman in terms of the 'heritage turn' thesis, an emphasis on books which would lead to a rejuvenation in lending services. As they point out,
'the idea of retro-reformed lending services being placed at the forefront of the quest for core purpose fits neatly with the theory that community librarianship is in decline'.(3)

3.3.4 The point here is that it is difficult to relate the traditional book-lending role to, say, the present policy agenda on social inclusion, or indeed to many of the expressed needs of community groups. And as I have suggested, public policy is concerned increasingly with locality-based integration of services, to which book-lending will appear at best marginal. The methodology which this research has been examining could be a useful tool in clarifying such tensions.

3.4 Key issues emerging

3.4.1 It was striking that there was extensive discussion of two service areas, at all three locations, and this might mean that they hold more widely applicable lessons.

3.4.2 One issue concerned *opportunities for young people*, and there are two points to be made. First, apart from the two children who attended (but did not contribute to) the meeting in Rhos, no young people were involved. Obviously, as discussed in section 2 above, a valid programme of this kind would have to be inclusive and the views of particular groups sought. Secondly, a key feature of this topic in the discussions was the distinction between opportunities for those young people who are 'clubbable' and those who aren't. Workers at the Youth Information Project in Cumnock (whose constituency includes Auchinleck) confirmed that in their experience this was a genuine and problematic distinction. The implication of the discussions was that public libraries generally are expected 'to do something' for those young people who are less inclined to join formal organisations or participate in organised activities. One of the celebrated attributes of the public library is that its wealth is available to the individual and the collective alike. Few public institutions are trusted in the way libraries are to be in a position to contribute meaningfully to this issue.

3.4.3 The second theme to arise at all the locations reflected different understandings of *local studies* or *local history*. In Auchinleck and Rhos this related strongly to the cultural heritage of the mining community; in Todmorden the main focus was the cotton industry. In each case there seemed to be agreement that:
• what was being talked about was more than just 'local history' - 'community identity' might be a better term;(4)
• the library might be the key contributor to initiatives in this area; and
• such initiatives can add greatly to the sense of coherence and integration of a community.
One reason for this may be that community identity projects (including oral history projects, for example) are positive and celebratory, and not necessarily a response to adversity. Furthermore, they are usually inexpensive as social measures.

3.5 Making connections

3.5.1 While the views of library staff were not the main focus of the research (see 2.4 above), a reflection made by one member of library staff on the place of the public library in a 'declining' neighbourhood, perhaps offers lessons. The exchange was as follows:

Librarian: 'As the heart of goes out of these villages, that's worrying'.
Interviewer: 'What are the implications for the library?'
Librarian: 'Well, the main street's not so busy...'

The possibility that the library might have a role in economic development measures, and in helping local people to mobilise and to develop their capacity to address the decline themselves, was not recognised. The decline of the area was seen in terms of diminished audience, not in terms of a challenge to adapt the service.

3.5.2 This was not an isolated instance. As I have mentioned, there were several examples of connections not being made. Without doubt, to a large extent this is a function of the bewildering multiplicity of roles which libraries hold, and the stifling lack of resources with which to fulfil those roles. But this fact does not weaken the conclusion that libraries are not perceived either by people in communities, or by many of their staff, to be associated with community regeneration or social inclusion.

References

1 Kevin Harris, 'Information and communication in the community sector', in *Information management in the voluntary sector*, London: Aslib, forthcoming.
2 The four options are given at question 8 in Appendix A.
3 Black and Muddiman, *op cit*, p125.
4 The Library and Information Commission's report, *New library: the people's network* (London: LIC, 1997) uses the terms 'community history' and 'community identity', (p13-15).

4 Concluding remarks

4.1 From this tentative exploration of an appropriate methodology we can see the value of giving local people the time and space in which to express their views. At the same time it is apparent that the next stage, helping groups to explore new service options in relation to their own expressed needs, requires a more structured approach. In what follows I offer a response to the four findings listed at the end of section 1.

4.2 *'People find it easy to describe their own community'*
There is a role for libraries in taking steps to 'capture' such descriptions; to enable them, help record them, and make them available. This would be an extension of the 'community identity' function, with libraries in due course providing access to multimedia facilities, and web space, for groups to prepare and publish their own statements.

4.3 *'People's perception of their library's social role is based on established, traditional services'*
Perhaps only action can change this perception. Recent research by Comedia (1) has shown the huge range and enormous social value of library-based community initiatives. The point is that, where libraries participate in partnership initiatives to address social issues, the potential to demonstrate their social impact systematically surely increases greatly. The key may be to make such activity routine, and not seen as a one-off risky venture, the result of some opportunistic fundraising, or a reluctant response to political pressures.

4.4 *'Libraries are not associated with social roles'*
In some ways, this sounds like a perverse conclusion, because it can be argued that libraries have always performed a social role and delivered social benefit. However, this does not mean that people in communities, or indeed policymakers, think naturally of libraries when considering the social issues that trouble them: nor, conversely, do they tend to think of social benefit, when considering libraries. If people look to justify public libraries, they tend to do so in terms of the book-lending service and the educational facility which is 'universally available' and locally accessible.

4.5 'People in communities have difficulty with the idea of measuring what the library achieves'

People's perceptions of public libraries are of a static institution, not an active agency. (In terms of what society should expect from libraries, this may be wholly appropriate). It follows that they tend not to expect the library to 'achieve' things, hence the notion of measuring what the library *does* seems strange. The critical steps here must be to reinforce and demonstrate the notion of an *active library*, which participates in a range of local initiatives in the interests of the community. As I have suggested, the role of community groups in developing indicators of what they think the library should be doing, would then be a realistic goal.

References

1 Francois Matarasso, *Beyond book issues: the social potential of library projects*. Stroud: Comedia, 1998.

Appendix A: questions used in discussion groups

1 What would you describe as 'your community' or your 'neighbourhood'?

2 What's 'good' about this community? Examples of positive images. Would you describe the morale as high or low?

3 What's 'bad' about this community? What are the negative aspects of living here?

4 What might be needed to strengthen this community or improve it for you?
[amenities / facilities, *(eg litter bins, community centre, youth club, street lighting, music studio …)*
crime prevention / community safety initiatives
economic development / jobs / training
improved planning / transport / housing
drug prevention programes
improved consultation
community events
one-stop shop for enquiries and advice
youth club... etc]

5 Does the library contribute in any way, to any of these? If so, how?
If not, might it be able to contribute and how?

6 Where the library contributes or could contribute, how would we know?
How might we measure its contribution?

7 What else might the library be offering?
(Be as imaginative as you wish)

8 A public library should be first and foremost:
a)a book-lending service
b)a community meeting place with a range of resources
c)an information and advice centre
d)an educational facility

Appendix B

Rhosllanerchrugog, Rhos Community Centre, 29 July 1997

Summary of one meeting, attended by 19 people including two children

Rhos was described as 'a neighbourhood that can't care for its children, they've nowhere to go and some of them aren't Welsh. They're roaming the streets...'

The community has 'changed drastically' over the past 10-15 years, with many newcomers from urban centres such as Liverpool, Manchester, Wolverhampton, and Birmingham. Longstanding members of the community felt strong resentment: they believe they have been 'dumped' with young families being re-housed from problem areas of distant cities. This process of 'dumping' is on the increase, and it was said that such families were 'resented because people have such pride in their community.' There had been no consultation on the housing policies. There is now a serious issue of young people making the streets intimidating, with evidence of bullying, and of alcohol and drug abuse. Parents said their children would not go out after a certain time in the evening: there was a strong feeling that the streets were not safe for children.

> *'There are witches in that house. There's evil going on there at night.'*

A second theme, rather less intensely discussed, concerned the perceived threat to the community's cultural life. The community has a strong Welsh identity - particularly in language, music and drama - and people have been moving into the area with 'no respect for our culture.' The schools now provide Welsh language teaching but there seem to have been no initiatives to explain and celebrate the culture in a welcoming format to newcomers.

> *'They're fiercely proud, that's a characteristic of Rhos people, unusually so'.*

Having said that, two key projects could well make a difference to integration in this community in the future. The first is the renovation of 'The Stiwt' - the Miners' Institute building which was built in 1926, closed in 1976 and considered for demolition. A theatre consultant's letter described astonishment 'that so substantial and sophisticated a facility should have been constructed by public subscription in a modest rural community at a time of such economic depression.' A 'Save the Stiwt' Action Committee was formed in 1978 with a public appeal launched in 1986. A key event was the production in 1990 of a community play which directly involved over 300 local people. It is expected that the Stiwt will formally be re-opened in 1999.

Although subsequently it emerged that there are strong connections between the library and the Stiwt campaign, at the time I was given no indication of this

by either the group or the library staff. The Stiwt documentation includes a buried quotation from a 1990 newspaper report which mentions, in passing, 'exhibitions at the library'. But the library's involvement has been extensive over several years, with the Community Librarian active as Vice-Chair of the Stiwt Committee.

The second key initiative is the Rhos Youth Partnership, originally proposed by local police and involving representatives from a school, Crime Concern, Neighbourhood Watch and other agencies. There had been a survey of young people's needs, as part of this initiative. One comment on this was;
 'Young people should be asked what they want within the community, not what they want to do outside, going on a bus to ice skating or whatever...'
A further comment in this discussion noted that:
'There seems to be more and more emphasis on the disparity between age groups, rather than what they have in common...'

Provision for young people exists and there is significant take up. The Youth Club, which runs once a week, attracts about 150 youngsters, and the Theatre Club, for 6-18 year olds, works with about 100. The rugby and football clubs are also popular. There was mention however of particular need for a sports complex, including a swimming pool. As far as the representation of young people was concerned, and the expression of their views, there had been an attempt made by a Councillor to establish a Youth Forum: apparently this covered a broader geographical area than Rhos, and had not yet come to fruition.

Employment and unemployment did not feature particularly in the discussion. After over an hour of discussion, someone suggested that 'This has been a very impoverished community'. This statement was passed over by others, and subsequently contextualised by library staff as 'no more so than other places'. There was pride in a strong educational tradition - 'Rhos has produced scholars, but they're not here now... They went because there are no jobs for them.' At the same time, the Careers Officer observed that young people tend to prefer to take jobs locally, in Rhos: 'They're frightened to go outside.'

When invited to describe the positive aspects of their community or neighbourhood, people referred to its distinctive identity, friendliness, warmth and welcoming character. One person who had experienced a personal tragedy stressed that the community was 'very supportive and caring.'

'Very genuine, very friendly, very communicative and willing to integrate. The problem is the attitudes of parents'.

Library staff endorsed this, using the terms 'loyal' and 'supportive' - 'there is a very strong community feeling'.
Positive aspects which were mentioned specifically were:
- cultural activity, in particular the fact that there are four choirs, which is 'exceptional in this size of community'
- an excellent and informative monthly local newspaper (in Welsh, not

available in English);
* that people were good at supporting initiatives;
* the continuing strong role of the chapels;
* and public transport was seen as excellent.

As far as negative aspects were concerned, in addition to the dominant issue of opportunities for, and behaviour of, young people, the following general terms were used: 'nosy,' 'old fashioned,' 'narrowness,' 'parochialism,' 'people are defensive.' (It was pointed out that being nosy or old-fashioned wasn't necessarily just a negative characteristic).

Specific issues raised at this point were:
* lack of police presence;
* easy availability of alcohol;
* 'unusable' childrens play facilities in the park;
* inadequate cleaning (it was felt that Rhos is underserved by the street cleaning services because it is 'not on the way to anywhere').

Apparently one particular street was known to people outside Rhos as 'the centre of a drugs ring'.

Advice and careers services in Rhos were seen to be adequate (the CAB uses space in the library). It was felt that there was a need for a drugs prevention programme, although no-one identified a role for the library service in bringing this about or contributing to it.

Members of the community felt that access to the democratic process was adequate - it was pointed out that council minutes were available in the library - but there was little perception of the potential to influence the process. People weren't particularly critical of the council, they simply seem to feel themselves quite separate from it.

The main features of this community then, as expressed by the respondents, were of a sense of powerlessness in response to obscure and insensitive housing policies whjich threatened to undermine their cultural heritage; a sense of invasion associated with this; and sharp contrast in levels of acceptable behaviour between 'natives' and 'newcomers'.

The library service

Discussion of the library's role in the community generated a wide range of comments. The service was warmly praised, especially the ability to call on material and information beyond what is immediately available. Four themes emerged.

First, the effects of *financial constraints*. Some felt that they were not getting value for money - 'people deserve better than they're getting.'   Others

strongly defended the service but acknowledged that the library is very limited in what it can contribute, given resource constraints. There was concern about inadequate opening hours: 'Because you can't use the library when you want to, it becomes less and less used and falls into disuse.'

Secondly, people felt the need for *more space* - 'they need an extra room of advice services.' One person suggested that:
'They could extend it, there's plenty of room, have another room or a coffee bar.'

Thirdly, there were various comments about the nature of *the library as an institution*.
'If you're not dressed the right way there's a reluctance to go into the library...'

One library user thought that people 'associate libraries with authorities' and another said that:
'Library users are like opera lovers, they are an elite group.'

The fourth theme to emerge concerns the use of the library by *young people*. Musical events for children, run by the library, were particularly praised and it was felt that young people did make good use of the service. (Against this, library staff understandably said that 'Not as many young people use the library as we would like.') It was felt that the relation between schools and the library could be improved, and the discussion reverted to the attitudes of parents towards their children's behaviour.

'Children and their parents should be encouraged to use the library as a resource of books.'

Staff noted that 'a lot of what you might call 'dysfunctional' families have joined the library.' They also acknowledged that audio-visual materials and Internet access might stimulate use by young people, but in terms of technology, 'we're behind here.' (Videos have recently been made available, but there are no audio materials, no photocopier and no public computer access).
'The Internet would be a big draw for youngsters.'

Finally, when asked to identify what the library's role should be 'first and foremost', the consensus was that it should be 'all things to all people', although in discussion there was some insistence on priority being given to the book-lending service.

Appendix C

Todmorden 31 July, 1 August 1997

Summary of five meetings

"*We haven't got a community 'place'*".

Todmorden is a distinct town in Calderdale, situated between Manchester and Leeds, with a ward population of about 10,500. Originally there were more communities around Todmorden 'because of the churches and the valleys'. The councillors claimed that there was previously a feeling that 'this was a very close-knit community' but in the last 10 years there has been an influx of newcomers who commute to Manchester, Leeds and elsewhere. The town has a relatively high proportion of older people and 'the usual proportion' of unemployed people. Members of community organisations re-enforced the sense of a coherent community:
'I personally am a Londoner and I find the community is real here in a marvellous way... There is a friendliness amongst people ... If they don't know you yet, they want to know you ...'

Others stressed the 'uniqueness' of Todmorden, its insularity and independence.   'Tod people pull together when they have to. There's no village spirit of 'everybody knows what everyone's doing...' "
   '*Superficially at least, everyone's very friendly, supportive if you need them.*'

'If anything, the town is a bit insular'. The town is situated at the meeting point of three valleys: this, together with its location at the edge of the Pennines, and relative economic wealth, would suggest a very coherent community as well as an open and welcoming one. This certainly seems to have been the tradition but there were emerging contradictions which might be evidence of weakening in this coherence.

These contradictions have to do with a sense of peripherality, particularly in the context of local government administration, re-enforced by comments on possible economic marginalisation. The following three comments each come from separate groups:
                'Tod is a cut-off point, we're right on the borders here...'
                    '*... we're right at the end of the line for both councils'.*
                    'We suffer by being on the outskirts of the borough'.

It was pointed out that administratively Todmorden is part of the former Yorkshire county; the postcode is a Lancashire one; for rail services, the administrative centre is Preston; and their telephone directory is the Manchester one. One response was: 'there's a certain perverse pride that we don't belong anywhere.'

The councillors held the view that, while people say that Tod is 'on the edge', actually 'it's *in the middle*. This is where people cross the Pennines... People think the council does nothing for Tod, but in fact the reverse is the case. Per capita, they do better than almost any other area'. Library staff endorsed the view of Todmorden as a 'separate' place:

'A very tight community, everybody knows everyone else. Very few go out of Tod to school. They've grown up together...'
'It's a friendly town. People talk to you more, they're more interested...'

It's easy to see how changes in the economic context over the past 10 years might affect people's view of the independence and autonomy of their community. There was criticism of government policy which contributed to running down the cotton industry which affected the town:
'People moved away after the cotton industry, their houses filled with overspill from Halifax...'
Unemployment was felt by one person to be the biggest problem:
'The money isn't there any more, the shops have closed down'.

However, another view was that a significant number of newcomers were 'middle management and public sector professionals who live in the town but work out of it. Most people work out of Tod now. A generation ago they would all be part of the cotton...' Most of their shopping is therefore done elsewhere (typically in Manchester, it was felt), to the detriment of the local economy. This was described as 'consumer bleed.'
'We've lost industry and not attracted anything to take its place'.
'Rents are sky high and properties stand empty for that reason...'

It there were vague contradiction over the centrality or peripherality of the town, the contradictions over whether people choose to stay in the town were very clear. Some people felt that, when for example young people go away to university or people in their working lives have to move away, there's a strong likelihood that they will return:
'Tod seems to draw people back...'
'A lot of people from Tod go to university and come back'.

However, emphatic comments in the other groups were in sharp contrast:
'There's no question that this town has a tradition of good education, but the brighter ones go away and never come back again'.
'The cream of young people move away and don't come back'.

There was consensus on the extent to which ethnic minority groups were integrated into the community:
'A small ethnic community which is totally in harmony with the rest'.
'Groups of people like Ukrainians, Italians, Moslems too, who have been welcomed and settled into the community'.
However, one person noted that: 'Pakistani people don't participate, you don't see them at plays, they're not interested in the countryside'.

There was far more discussion about young people. The councillors felt that: '13-18 year olds would be the only category under-provided for, if they don't want to take part in sports or other organised activity'.
The controversial closure of the town's swimming pool a few years previously had left an acknowledged gap in provision.

'The youth club does a good job, but that really isn't enough'.

There seemed to be two issues: the first being provision for those young people in Todmorden who are not 'clubbable', the second being the tendency at weekends for the town to attract 'groups of young males who cause minor damage, disruption. They're attracted by musical events which are of high quality.'

Without a cinema or sports centre, it was recognised that provision for young people was 'a problem':
'It's alright if you're prepared to join organisations like scouts or guides and the cricket or the football clubs... we don't have a big problem, it's a little problem, a nuisance. There isn't a focal point where young people can do things.'

Apart from relations with the library (discussed below), three issues emerged from the discussion about young people. First, there was a strong sense of the need for 'places to go'. Funding has recently been announced for a new swimming pool and sports complex, which is 'what the young people want' - but it was still felt that for <u>all</u> groups in the community, 'a town centre would help.'
'We haven't a focus, there's nowhere to meet, to have morris dancing if you want or whatever ...'
'We've no town focus for the community'.

Secondly, there is vaguely perceived to be a drugs problem. This was confirmed strongly in a conversation with the local chemist; but people in the groups had no idea of its extent or degree of seriousness.
'I have a suspicion that people use the corner of the cricket ground that are dealing in drugs... It's low key as a problem'.

Thirdly, there was felt to be an issue around young people's sense of association with Todmorden:
'Young people don't feel as if they belong to the town. You can't get through to children that it's their town, their trees, their facilities'.
'Half of them don't feel as if they belong here'.

The range and quality of cultural events in Todmorden was a source of pride. The choral society, orchestra, brass band, operatic society, folk and pop groups, annual pantomimes, agricultural show, carnival, photographic society, and antiquarian society were all mentioned, in addition to the sports clubs.

The issue of local economic development, discussed above, was covered by the two councillors:
'We could do with productive local employment, local rather than commuter-

based. There's no production here to speak of any more'.
The largest company employs around 400 people, but there are unused
buildings and gap sites which could be used.

Other problems mentioned included the amount of litter and dog muck; the
need for improved wheelchair access to buildings; the shortage of parking, the
fact that roadside grass verges don't get cut; and changes in the livery colour
of the buses.
                              'We're like Radio 4 listeners, we want to cling on to the past.'

The town has six primary schools, one secondary school taking about 1,500
pupils, and a community college which offers school leavers and adults basic
training, vocational qualifications, adult education classes etc.

It was pointed out that the local police station was no longer staffed, but 'this
is the low crime area'.
'Tod is safe, safer than a lot of places. People here are able to go out and
about'.

The Library Service

*'There's a need for some initiative pulling together available local history
resources, the library, and young people...'*

Perceptions of the value of the library service were very positive indeed:
        'Wonderful, wonderful...'
        'Library staff are absolutely superb. If they decided to shut it we'd
        chain ourselves to the railings'.
        'They're very good, they'll get you anything'.
        'It's got to be the best-used place in Tod'.

There were three main themes to the comments about the library.

The first was the concern with options for *children and young people*. It was
vaguely felt that the library could be doing something to engage them.

    *'There's a problem influencing those young people who don't use the library.
                        You have to get to them through the schools...'*
            'How do we get through to those children who nobody cares about?'

There is a youth and community centre in the building directly behind the
library. Library staff commented that, with the youth centre opening at 8pm as
the library closes, young people 'don't use us as a library, they use us as a
waiting room'.

One participant suggested that:
'In many ways it would be more sensible and efficient to run the whole
complex together... They could be run jointly and indeed physically they could

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be joined'.

There were expectations of a certain standard of behaviour in the library and this tradition was tentatively challenged:
'The library's got a tradition of silence. Teenagers want to be able to talk, they need a separate room ... There's no place for them to talk, there's no privacy, it's not encouraged...'

The second theme concerned *local history*, which was clearly important for a range of people.
'The library could display the history of Tod, it could be developed because there isn't a focal point ... children could go along and see what their town was all about.'.
'Young people won't even know what cotton was, what a cotton mill was...'
'We have very little historical material in Tod that relates to Tod. I have to go... to Halifax to examine the things that are about Todmorden'.

'Some kind of museum adjunct to the library. It could be a centre to encourage all kinds of artistic and scientific societies... A good thing if the library was able to offer accommodation to groups which wanted to study local history, for example...'

According to library staff, the schools do quite a lot of work on local history, but 'we haven't got a local history photograph collection, photos that you can take into schools...'

The third theme concerns what we might call 'new options', where people were invited to speculate on changes they might like to see, based on the social needs they had expressed. One of the councillors had contemplated a new resource centre for the community, and had a particular site in mind - 'and it would be used.' Some suggestions constituted extensions of current practice. For example:
'It would be nice if they were open on Sundays'.
'...put on exhibitions, about drug abuse, health facilities'.
'I would have thought that one of the things that a library could support would be a music-making club'.

There was recognition that the library isn't for everyone:
'People expect bright lights, bright colours, it looks dull and dusty... The library could be seen as a haven from the bright and the brash, but most people won't see it like that ...'
'A lot of people will see the library as intimidating if they can't read or whatever...'

The following sequence of comments illustrates how discussion kept reverting from what the library *could do*, to what the library *does*:
'I don't think they should get noisy...'

'For co-ordinating things, they'd need an extra member of staff'.
'The library has to go *out* to people'.
'One thing they could do, make people more aware of what the library offers...'
'People aren't aware, if you take someone into a library they've not been into, they're amazed'.

Finally, there were a number of comments about the social value of the service, sparked by discussion of what the library should be 'first and foremost':
'It should be all these things'.
'The whole lot rolled into one'.
'I think it should be free. I'm quite prepared in my taxes to pay for the service, but it should be free...'
'Book lending should not be lost'.
'More than an educational facility'.
'It would be a great pity if the community were not lured into such a complex, to use the resources there. I can see only a bonus in having all sorts of activities going on associated with the library.'

Appendix D

Auchinleck, 4 September 1997

Summary of one meeting with eight people

'The people of this area have been severely deprived since the mines closed, and no help given them'.

Auchinleck is a small village in East Ayrshire which is relatively isolated following the closure of the mines in the mid-1980s, and the building of a by-pass about four years ago. It has a population of about 4,000. Most of the housing is former council housing. There are no tenants associations. There are two primary schools and one secondary school, a park but no swimming pool. Some light industrial units have been built on former coal mining land. There have been protracted efforts to establish a credit union. The large community centre is used by various groups such as a Young Mothers Project, a Senior Citizens Club, the Skills Training Unit, the Mental Health Group, and so on. The library is a small unit adjacent to the community centre.

The first comment offered about Auchinleck was: 'a dump'. There's very little work, quite a lot of vandalism, violence and drugs. There isn't enough work for young people.
                    'There's a culture of stagnation, a lot of apathy in Auchinleck'.
At the same time, I was told, 'it's a welcoming community, a friendly place. If there's trouble, the biggest majority of the community would come forward to help you.'

   'You can always rely on your neighbours ... with the older community there's more people that will support one another.'

There is no housebuilding 'but there are families moving in so someone must be moving out!'
'A lot of people through unemployment in the area became under-confident, there's a lot of difference once they're through the door.'

The need to offer provision for young people immediately arose as a key issue for this community.
'The youngsters are disillusioned.'
'Young people will not come to services seven days a week, any more than adults... They're looking for someone to take an interest in them.'

Apparently very few men in Auchinleck will come forward to work with young people, there are still difficulties for many men in coming to terms with unemployment following the closure of the mines. (Exactly this point was also made by the group of librarians). A high proportion of young people have

clothing grants and free school meals. Misuse of drugs and alcohol by young people was felt to be a major issue: 'you think it's way out west, but it's closer than you think'.

We discussed what would be needed for the young people: 'There would have to be a whole education package ... with lifeskills, not just learning, self discipline ... give them an outlook on life ... employment and a wage.' Youth workers I spoke to pointed out that there is a definite division between the kids who are clubbable and those who are not. In Auchinleck, football is extremely popular and the youth club is usually very well-attended (although it was closed at the time of the fieldtrip because of an incident).

There was a sense of mingled bitterness and resignation about the marginalisation of the community, due to the decline of industry and the effect of 10 or 15 years with no investment. 'We need something to come, and to stay, not something that will fly off.' People felt that the problems were magnified because they are a small community. There were believed to be instances of social 'dumping' - 'Incomers have not chosen to come to Auchinleck, it's been chosen for them'. The sense of being isolated and irrelevant to the rest of the world is apparently echoed in people's behaviour. There are families which have lived in Auchinleck for generations, and seldom go anywhere else: 'they'll no' venture into other areas.'
'People are comfortable and happy to be in their village ... it's comfort zones.'

'The perception is that it's a dead community but there's a lot going on. Young people say 'there's nothing for us', and then when you say there's that and that and that, they say 'oh right enough'... There's a lot that goes on.'

One of the library staff commented that 'It's more like a sleepy town than one with social problems'. There was criticism of the bus service, particularly the fares.

Economic development

When asked what might be needed to strengthen this community or improve things for them, people said 'jobs! employment!' They talked about the possible regeneration of the main street, which betrays the decline of the local economy. 'A helping hand from the authorities wouldn't go amiss'.

'Councils set so many blocks sometimes, so many barriers for a group to overcome and they just get disillusioned, it's really hard work and the rest of their lives are really hard work already'.

A local economic development strategy has been prepared and it includes plans for developing small businesses. There are a number of learning and training programmes in the area, including the Forge Ahead, Skillseekers and JumpStart initiatives. Will these initiatives work?

'It depends if there are jobs for them...' This led us onto discussion of 'the chipboard factory' - a controversial episode in the village's recent history and in its way a classic local political issue. A major employer had moved to establish a chipboard factory on the outskirts of the village, which in theory would bring jobs, although there was uncertainty about how many, to what extent they would be skilled jobs, and whether they would be jobs for people from Auchinleck. The controversy, the details of which are well beyond the scope of this research, seems to have had two aspects: first, the acceptability of the health hazards associated with the work; and secondly, reports of extraordinary political antics and bullying tactics in and behind public meetings. People felt the consultation to have been spurious. The factory is being built and the community is apparently divided and resigned: 'it should not be here, but it was work'. People spoke as if there'd been yet another skirmish in some battle, in some war they were involved in, for some reason, and they'd lost that one too, again.

'The whole community is still in mourning for the pits. Every morning in this community centre there are men gathered in that room and they talk as if they were still down the pits, that's all they talk about. It's as if the whole purpose of the community went.'

Many people left the area but for those families that remained, many have seen a reversal of roles, as the women have got part-time jobs and the men have become house-husbands. A lot of men still have problems adjusting, the women have been able to re-skill themselves, go into further education, in much larger numbers: 'the men have been devastated.'

There were mixed feelings about public consultation generally. There are forums and local committees in place for community groups to participate. East Ayrshire prides itself on its area committee structure, through which local people can influence the decision-making processes, and this was recognised. However, reference was made to the episode of the chipboard factory, and 'the experience that people have is that no-one listens to them, the decisions will be made whatever they say, they have made up their minds'.

Libraries

People were very positive about the library and the helpfulness of the librarian.
'I find our library and our librarian are very good, anything you require they will go out of their way to get it'.
'Sometimes the most obvious place to go for resources is the one that's forgotten, it's the library.'

There was an unprompted discussion about the library's image and options.
'Another complimentary name would help, where they don't have this image attached, like in Ayr they've got the library and cyber-centre, you have to

modernise it's image, The Learning Place, you've got to open it for everybody, to get them, it's got to be a social place.'

'... need for a new set-up which would make the old image redundant'.

'The library could be a lot more proactive for themselves, they could go out and meet people ... if the librarian was allowed time to come in and see what we're doing for example...'

'Getting the library involved in the community,
it seems such an obvious thing to do'.

There were several comments about the need for more space in the library, and ideas about what could be done with the space, for example having rooms for community meetings.
'It must be a welcoming place'.
'An information and advice centre, a one-door approach to council services...'
'Young people always want CDs, with headphones, music, literature, Internet access, tea and coffee facilities, someone they can speak to - someone who's young-people-friendly'.
For young people, 'having a place to go, with music and being able to feel relaxed is much more important than having access to the technology.'

'Librarians have special skills ... it's an awful shame that they're locked away in a building ... the skills surely could be used in the community'.

When asked what they felt the library should be, first and foremost, three said 'an educational facility' and two said 'an information and advice centre'. (The remainder found it impossible to prefer one role over the others).

The librarian herself said 'I would like it used as a centre point because it's in the centre of the village... A lot of them come in to ask questions, people who are not regular readers'.

The group of librarians were concerned about how any new initiatives might be brought in and what implications they would have. They pointed to political pressures from elected members to develop initiatives, for example, and the need 'to take up the baton, to work in partnership'.
'East Ayrshire is awash with IT, there's computers a-plenty but no strategy'.