

Perceptions of Libraries

Desk Research Conducted for
Audit Commission



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Introduction

The Audit Commission commissioned MORI Social Research Institute to carry out desk research on attitudes to libraries to feed into the Commission's 'Learning from BV Inspections' report. There are two principal objectives of this exercise, which form the structure of this report:

- to highlight national and local data on priorities, satisfaction and usage of libraries, both among users and non-users
- to focus on reasons people give for not using libraries and what improvements are needed to motivate greater use – much of this comes from MORI's extensive qualitative work

Methodology

This research draws on a number of MORI, and other, research into perceptions and usage of libraries. Specifically, we have made use of a variety of qualitative and quantitative surveys:

- BVPI satisfaction data (2000);
- People's Panel (1998-2000) – representative panel of adults (16+) in the United Kingdom;
- 14 studies for local authorities (both qualitative and quantitative)

While quantitative surveys such as the BVPI user satisfaction data give statistically significant results, the strengths of qualitative research are that it allows issues to be explored in detail and enables researchers to test the strength of people's opinion – and the reasons why. However, it needs to be remembered that qualitative research does not allow conclusions to be drawn about either the extent to which something is happening or percentages of people who have certain attitudes and opinions. Qualitative research is intended to be illustrative rather than providing statistically representative data.

Throughout this report, use is made of verbatim comments from participants in qualitative research. Where this is the case, it is important to remember that the views expressed do not always represent the views of the group as a whole, although normally the verbatim is representative of at least a significant minority.

Where applicable, we have made distinctions between the views of lapsed users and non-users. However, it should be noted that these groups overlap as nearly everyone has used libraries at some point in their life. As a rule, we have defined non-users as people who have not used a public library as adults and lapsed-users as people who have used public libraries as adults, but who no longer do so.

Use and Satisfaction with Libraries

Use

The BVPI 2000-01 estimates indicate that the average number of physical visits per head of population to public libraries is 5.6. As the table below illustrates, usage is highest in London (6.6 visits per head of population) and lowest in Metropolitan areas (5.0 visits per head of population).

Number of physical visits per head of population to public libraries

Authority Type	Number
County	5.8
Metropolitan	5.0
Unitary	5.1
London Borough	6.6
All	5.6

Source: 2000-01 Estimated BVPIs

Around half of people have used libraries within the last six months, according to MORI's People's Panel data in 1998 (54%) and in 2000 (56%). The 1998 data show frequency of usage as follows:

- 1% everyday
- 14% at least once a week
- 26% at least once a month
- 13% within the last six months
- 7% within the last years
- 18% longer ago
- 21% never used

With respect to who uses libraries, there are no significant differences in terms of gender, though there are differences in relation to age, class and work status. According to the 1998 People's Panel data, those most popular users are likely to be:

- those aged 35-54 years (46% at least once a month; 71% at least once a year);
- professional classes (51% at least once a month; 74% at least once a year);
- part-time workers (53% at least once a month; 84% at least once a year); and
- parents with children (49% at least once a month; 76% at least once a year).

The least frequent users are:

- those aged over 75 years (55% use less than once a year);
- those of social class DE (52% use less than once a year);
- disabled people (50% use less than once a year); and
- unemployed (43% use less than once a year).

What people use libraries for

The main reasons why people use libraries are for traditional services: loaning books (adults and children) or for reference/information purposes.

Top Reasons for using libraries				
Authority Type:				
Unitary Council	Borrow books	Reference / Information	Photocopying / Fax	Borrow CDs / Videos
County Council	Borrow books (adults)	Reference	Borrow books (children)	
County Council	Borrow books (adults)	Reference	Borrow books (children)	General information

Source: MORI

Satisfaction

People are generally satisfied with library services. In the 2000-01 BVPI estimates, 69% of people say they are satisfied. As the chart below shows, there are variations between the type of authority, with those living in London Boroughs and Shire England, on the whole, less satisfied (63%) than people living elsewhere.

% of respondents satisfied with libraries		
	Range (%)	Mean average (%)
County	36 – 86	63
Metropolitan	51 – 82	71
Unitary	56 – 88	72
London Borough	45 – 85	63
All	36 – 88	69

Source: 2000-01 Estimated BVPIs¹

There are also significant variations, in terms of satisfaction, between users and non-users of libraries, with users roughly twice as satisfied (84%) as non-users (43%). Again, non-users living in London Boroughs are appreciably less satisfied with their library service than people living elsewhere.

% of users and non-users satisfied with libraries		
	Range (%)	Average (%)
All – users	64 – 94	84
All – non-users	10 - 74	43
County – users	82 – 92	87
County – non-users	31 – 74	45
Metropolitan – users	72 - 94	86
Metropolitan – non-users	37 - 60	46
Unitary – users	76 - 95	86
Unitary – non-users	10 - 70	45
London Borough – users	64 - 92	79
London Borough – non-users	25 - 56	36

Source: 2000-01 Estimated BVPIs

¹ Satisfaction based on all who gave an opinion

Reasons for satisfaction

Those users who are satisfied with their library say that this is because they are satisfied with the core aspects of the service: a wide range of books for adults and children, good reference material and helpful staff.

Top Reasons for Satisfaction with libraries (users)				
Authority Type:				
Unitary Council	Wide range of books for adults	Helpful staff	Wide range of books for children	Good reference section
London Borough	Convenient location	Helpful staff	Good reference section	Wide range of books for borrowing
County Council	Wide range of books for adults	Helpful staff	Wide range of books for children	

Source: MORI

Criticisms of Libraries

The tables below illustrate the main reasons given for dissatisfaction with libraries among users and reasons given for non-use by those who do not currently use libraries, from a number of MORI's *quantitative* local government studies:

Top Reasons for dissatisfaction with libraries (users)				
Authority Type:				
Unitary Council	Poor selection of books	Inconvenient location	Too few libraries	Inconvenient opening hours
Unitary Council	Poor selection of books	Inconvenient location	Too small	Too few libraries
London Borough	Poor selection of books	Inconvenient opening hours	Too few libraries	Poor Customer Service
London Borough	Inconvenient opening hours	Poor selection of books	Poor range of other items (videos/tapes/CDs)	
County Council	Poor selection of books	Inconvenient opening hours	Poor reference section	

Source: MORI

Top reasons given for non-use (non-users)				
Authority Type:				
London Borough	Too busy	Not interested	Prefer to buy books	
London Borough	Not interested	Prefer to buy books	Prefer to use college/work library	Too busy
London Borough	Too busy	Not interested	Prefer to buy books	
County Council	Too busy	Not interested	Prefer to buy books	
County Council	Prefer to buy books	Too busy	Prefer to buy CDs/tapes/videos	
County Council	Too busy	Not interested	Prefer to buy books	
Unitary	Prefer to buy books	Use Internet at home instead	Too busy	

Source: MORI

Generally, users and non-users are critical of libraries for different reasons. Users say they are dissatisfied because of the quality and choice of books available, inconvenient opening times and the convenience of getting to the library. However, non-users criticisms seem more fundamental and relate to their lifestyle – that is they say they are too busy, are not interested and prefer to buy books than loan them from a library.

These reasons, and suggested priorities for improvement, are explored in more depth in the following section.

Priorities for the future

MORI's *quantitative and qualitative* research into libraries highlights six factors which underlie why people say they do not use libraries or why people say they are put off going. These are key areas which libraries need to address if they are to meet the needs and demands of people today:

- Lifestyle;
- Lending Stock;
- Reference and ICT facilities;
- Environment;
- Access; and
- Customer Service.

These factors overlap and reinforce each another. For example, *access* issues, such as opening hours, will be dependent on a person's *lifestyle* – as such, a pensioner and full-time worker may require different opening times.

Moreover, some of the issues are more important to non-users than users or lapsed users. These are explored, where applicable, below. It is also instructive to note that the reasons for non-usage are to some extent based on different experiences. Non-users tend to have a very stereotypical image of libraries and their negative *perceptions* are partly rooted in former experiences, for example while as schoolchildren. In contrast, actual past and present *experience* is instructive in explaining the challenges faced by libraries in encouraging more use.

MORI research has shown that, in general, users want to improve the existing services available, for example extending opening hours and providing a better range of stock; whereas non-users feel that these are important, they also want new services from libraries, such as cafés, better access and for libraries to be more inviting.

Lifestyle

A consistent theme to emerge from MORI's research is the feeling, especially among younger non-users, that libraries are not interesting or exciting places to go to. Lapsed-users are more likely to say that they do not have the time to go to libraries anymore or do not feel the need to go (for example having left school); whereas non-users are more likely to say they have no interest at all in going to a library – they tend not to read or have other ways of spending their leisure time.

My daughter's doing her O-levels and I say to her, "Why don't you go and look that up in the library?" and she says, "Oh dad, I wouldn't be seen dead in the library!" It's not cool.

Non-user (Shire England)

You don't have the time to read. I suppose if you are a pensioner or something like that you have time to read but while you are working you don't get so much time to read.

Non-user (London Borough)

The principal reasons why non-users do not use libraries are to do with lifestyle issues – not interested/not got time - and these will be difficult to address. It needs to be recognised that there is a significant minority of non-users who feel they will never use libraries in the future. In a study in a County Council, for example, over one quarter of non-users said nothing would persuade them to use libraries.

However, there still remains a large number of non-users who could be attracted to using libraries – though this is likely to require some radical changes. People say they want libraries to be modern and welcoming. Raising awareness of what is available, having up to date stock, additional facilities, providing more information and extending opening hours may have some effect on increasing usage, and should increase satisfaction among users. These are explored later.

Lending Stock

A major issue both among users and non-users is the poor quality of lending stock, in terms of quantity, quality, selection and choice, and being up to date. For example, in a study in a London Borough, two-thirds of residents said that they would definitely or more likely use libraries if they had a better range of books. Non-users say they would particularly like ‘best-sellers’ to be available from libraries.

They never have new ones [books] or up to date ones in the library, and the ones that are there, they are a bit kind of twee, and you think they have been chosen by the librarians.

Lapsed-user (Shire England)

I think the priority has to be on the books... a library at the end of the day is there for books.

Non-user (London Borough)

Update the books they have. More choice with books. More copies of popular books as I have tried to get a certain book a few times and it has been lent out already.

User (London Borough)

People are also critical of library stock as the books are often thought to be dirty or have torn pages. Others are critical of libraries not replacing old, unused stock – instead just leaving them on the shelves. A further common complaint is that library books are generally hardback, whereas many people prefer to read paperbacks. This is seen to reflect the ‘old-fashioned’ image of libraries.

As it evolved, paperbacks became more fashionable, and they were more available, and things changed. It changed so slowly that you didn't even notice it was happening. Now you have got book stores all over the country, and it is easier to go and buy the book than go to the library. I mean how much does it cost you for a paperback book?

User (London Borough)

Reference and ICT facilities

The reference and information provision of libraries is valued. However, it is thought by some that means of accessing this information is outdated. While some specialist public libraries are recognised as having particular strengths and people are prepared to travel longer distances to use these services, many others say that they can find information required from other sources than libraries, such as their home computer and the Internet. This is particularly so for younger people. Moreover, there is often a perception that the computers in libraries are slow and old-fashioned.

They have probably got one bog standard computer in the corner there that no-one really wants to use anyway because their mate has got one that is 10 times better because computers are always getting better and better.

Lapsed-user (Shire England)

The ones they have are out-dated. They have no real computer access in the ones I visit, or many CDs. The range of educational books is also poor. My children are doing A-levels and they need somewhere decent to study.

User (London Borough)

It does not have the books that I want – specialised books on the arts and literature – music, modern literature, Japanese poetry. Very disappointed they no longer sell Charity Cards – used to be very good and inexpensive.

User (London Borough)

Will people use IT facilities in libraries? Some people will not because they have computers and Internet at home. Others will only use if it does not cost too much – or if it is free – and, more importantly, if the technology is modern. Some people recognise that libraries could have an important role in teaching people how to use computers, particularly the elderly and socially disadvantaged.

Access

Many users who are critical of libraries raise inconvenient opening hours as the reason, as opening times are often not seen to reflect the needs of modern living. Therefore, better and more **convenient opening hours** is seen by many, especially lapsed and non-users, as being key to improve libraries in the future. In a study of residents in London, for example, over 60% said they would definitely or more likely use libraries if they had longer opening hours

There is no consensus across the country as to how libraries should extend their opening hours, as this relates to the area and current opening times, as well as people's lifestyle. On the whole, people support longer opening times in the evenings and at weekends, especially on Saturdays. However, some people work six days a week and so Sunday is the only day they can use a library.

Yes, I think having extended weekend hours a few late nights opening hours in the week to accommodate working people.

Non-user (Shire England)

They have weird opening times and all that. They either close really early or open really late and things like that... That library, I would swear it opens some days at 12.00 and some days at 10.00am and things like that and they close early some days, and close late some days.

Non-user (London Borough)

You have to be so organised to use a library because when you want to look something up there and then you have to think if the library is open, it's peculiar.

Lapsed-user (Shire England)

Some people say getting to the library can also be difficult, especially in areas where public transport is not good. Poor facilities, such as too many steps are raised by disabled people as barriers to usage.

On one hand, libraries in town centres are convenient for those that make regular use of the town centre for other trips, such as shopping. However, some people say it is difficult or not worth making a special trip to the library if getting there or parking nearby is inconvenient.

Most libraries are in the town centre, it's just how the parking prohibitions have grown up around town centres.

Non-user (London Borough)

Environment

Particularly found through qualitative work, people say that libraries are not appealing because of the environment, which for many libraries are seen as poor, old-fashioned and too small, i.e. not fit for the purpose. From the outside, people say there is nothing to ‘draw them in’; and from the inside, the layout is criticised by some people for not being appealing or easy to get around:

- turnstiles are seen as a physical barrier – shops don’t need them, so why do libraries?
- stairs make access difficult or impossible for disabled and elderly people;
- books are displayed spine outwards and so nothing ‘grabs you’;
- the décor is dull and uninteresting.

Interior needs renovating. It looks like 1950s, after the war. Look at the doors, everything looks shabby. Look at the paint, the carpets – old, probably 30 years old. All those things take very little money.

User (London Borough)

Well there are stairs for a start, which make it difficult for people who are disabled. My husband is, which is part of the reason why we stopped going there. It is very small.

Lapsed-user (Shire England)

Should libraries be quiet places to read and study or should they be somewhere to talk, meet and relax? The modern library needs to be both. On balance users – especially those using libraries for reference and study – appreciate the quietness of libraries, and think this should be retained. However, this quietness puts some people off, and can be seen to add to an intimidatory impressions that some people have of libraries. It is felt that children should be encouraged to use libraries more, and for this to happen, parents must feel comfortable taking their children there.

...if I take my two year old in there she is not quiet and I think “Get her out quick or I will have everybody moaning.” So I would not take her in there because it is hard to keep her quiet.

Lapsed-user (Shire England)

Well it would be nice if we could choose a book and depending on if you have got children go to one part of the

library and if you are by yourself go to another part of the library and sit down in a nice easy chair with a cup of coffee or a cup of tea or whatever and spend some time on that.

Lapsed-user (Shire England)

I would like the children's library to be moved away from the main library, because sometimes you go there and there are masses and masses of children, especially in the summer holidays.

User (London Borough)

You got a card, and every time you read a book they stamp your card, and then when it finishes you just come in and you get your little medal. That was quite good, that got quite a few children in there. And it also encourages children to take the books out from the library instead of buying them.

Lapsed User (Shire England)

Therefore, more radical changes would be needed to encourage some people to use libraries. The **physical environment** needs modernising, which includes the provision of toilets, cafes, 'Cosy Corners' and bright and cheerful décor. Improvements to access are particularly important for parents with young children and for those with a disabled person in the household. Two-thirds of residents in a London survey said they would definitely or more likely use libraries if they had toilets; and a similar proportion said the same about having a café in the library.

...a coffee shop where people can take a book or get a coffee and take it to the computer and do the bits and pieces and spend their hour on the internet, reading books, studying, whatever. A social area would be ideal.

User (London Borough)

Customer service

There has been a significant, long-term trend from people loaning books for a short time to buying and keeping their own. People say they like to have their own books, so that they do not have to worry about taking it back and to re-read whenever they want. Libraries can respond to this in two ways - firstly, through selling books as well as loaning out them (although many are sceptical that libraries would compete with bookstores); and secondly, by making the lending process quicker and more customer-focussed.

Part of the reason some people are discouraged from using libraries is because of having to pay a **fine** for late returns. This could be because books are so late that the fine seems to be as much as the book would cost, but it is also because taking books back can be inconvenient – especially if opening hours are inconvenient. Moreover, there are negative connotation to the term ‘fine’ itself, which people do not like.

I think the word fine is such a negative word, it gets a negative response to it. If we were told we would have a charge, I think it would be better. It is the word fine... It is like you have done something wrong. And it gets to three or four or five weeks because you are so bothered about going back, that you keep putting it off.

Non-user (London Borough)

A number of ways to improve this aspect of customer service have been suggested:

- Change the term ‘fine’ to ‘charge’ and have different rates for length of time an item is loaned and possibly according to the age of the user;
- Have a ‘drop-off’ box facility for items when the library is closed, like at video stores;
- Be able to renew and reserve items on the Internet; and
- Search the library database on the Internet to save a wasted trip for an item that might be already on loan

It would be an idea that if it is closed you were walking past you could put it through a letterbox like a lot of video shops do

Non-user (London Borough)

Like if you want to make a reservation, instead of actually having to go there, you access the database to see if they've got the books. That would be absolutely brilliant.

User (London Borough)

A difference of opinion between non-users and users emerges over the **helpfulness of the staff**. Generally, users are satisfied with librarians' attitude and knowledge, whereas non-users (particularly younger people) are more critical – often seeing library staff as unwelcoming and intimidating. Some of this is because younger people say they feel 'watched' or 'under suspicion' when they walk through the door.

*I do think that too many libraries and particularly ones that I've been in, the librarians have made it quite clear that she knows everything and we know b****r all.*

Non-user (Shire England)

I think, whenever I've been in the library it's always struck me that it's run by an old school ma'am... you mustn't put the books out of place and you have to put them back exactly as you found them.

Non-user (Shire England)

I would like to say how good the staff are. They are very charming and they never get ratty.

User (London Borough)

Further challenges

In addition to the six areas outlined above – there are two further issues that people feel modern libraries should address – awareness of the services available and the challenge from the private sector.

Promote Libraries

It should also be appreciated that changes to the *image* of libraries, in addition to *actual* improvements, will be needed to motivate some people to use them. Therefore, to underpin any improvements, libraries also need to market and promote themselves better to lapsed and non-users – to tackle the poor impressions they may have of libraries and to inform them of the (modern) services that are available.

It's a publicity issue isn't it? You forget about the library. People forget that it exists as a public service. There is no advertising.

User (London Borough)

The first thing I would do is to use the media to spread awareness of the library. Media, radio, give out the information.

User (London Borough)

Communications and marketing. Libraries just seem alien really... they need to make them more appealing. People need to know what they have to offer and how they have been improved.

Non-user (Shire England)

The challenge of the private sector

A further challenge facing libraries is competition from bookshops. On a number of scores, people rate bookshops more highly than libraries. In the former, the stock is seen as better, the layout and presentation is more inviting and the staff are often seen to have a more pro-active attitude. Specifically, people mention the following as positive aspects of bookshops' stock:

- the books are new and in paperback;
- the popular best-sellers are available;
- the books are frequently changed and updated;
- the books are easy to find because sections are clearly labelled and individual books are front-facing.

Some people also say that bookshop staff are more enthusiastic, tend to be younger and are more approachable than traditional librarians.

Well I think if you are going to pay peanuts you are going to get monkeys and I don't mean to be nasty towards library staff but that is the way it is.

Lapsed user (Shire England)

People say they expect the same level of service and quality of standards from libraries as they can find at bookstores. At the same time, people recognise that libraries are an essential and important public service and they are keen to preserve libraries as a service **free** to all members of the community. Nevertheless, there is some support for non-core services, such as loans for CDs, sale of new books and possibly internet access, to be charged for. For example, over 60% of residents in a Shire England survey said they would support the library service charging for any new services they introduce (with the current services remaining free of charge). Moreover, some people say libraries could work more closely with the private sector to provide 'extra' services, such as coffee shops or Internet Cafes.

I think the libraries are marvellous because they are free. They are free and I love that. I think it is wonderful to be able to walk in there and do your reading and collect about half a dozen books, take them home with you, it costs you nothing. And it is just fantastic.

User (London Borough)

I feel when I think of going to the library that I am alienated and I don't feel comfortable in that environment. I would rather go to a shop because I felt comfortable there to pay for a book because of the environment.

Lapsed-user (Shire England)

If the Council and businesses got more in tune with the facilities the public wants them to provide it would be more useful to get together.

User (London Borough)

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Appendices
