

FAMILY LEARNING AND PUBLIC LIBRARIES: A SCOPING STUDY

Executive Summary

A review of the available literature and analysis of data generated from a survey of English public library authorities paints a picture of flourishing family learning activity in a substantial number of services. A total of 81 completed questionnaires were returned representing a response rate of 54 per cent of which there was a good cross section of local authority types represented including 20 County Councils, 19 London Boroughs, 24 Unitary Councils and 18 Metropolitan Borough Councils.

In common with the findings of other public library authority research, family learning activity varies greatly across services ranging from those who have only recently dipped their toes into the family learning pool alongside services who are very proactive in engaging families, experienced in partnership working with a myriad of other organisations and confident in securing funding from a number of sources.

Bookstart and storytime were the most popular library service family learning activities with 77 services facilitating these activities. Other activities of note were tie-in activities during Family Learning Week and in Adult Learners' Week, and Baby Bounces/Rhymetime. Over half of responding services held more than eleven activities compared with approximately a quarter running between six and ten.

Much of the activity, in common with family learning generally in recent times, has a decidedly early years focus and, whilst Bookstart is a wonderful and successful example of parental engagement with children's learning, it appears to be very much focussed on the benefits to children with the benefits to adults of lesser importance.

Almost all respondents worked in partnership to run family learning events or activities. Approximately two fifths worked with between six and ten partners whilst approximately one fifth of library authorities work with 11 or more partners. Public libraries' most popular partner in working together to facilitate events is Sure Start.

Funding for family learning activity is very much dependent on the strategic direction being pursued within an authority and the willingness of the library service to engage with the family learning agenda and simply whether libraries are able to tap into monies from the local Learning and Skills Council drawn down by the education department in their authority. This would seem to be reliant on relationships between key local authority personnel, historic working arrangements and the willingness of staff to work in partnership to plan, stage and fund activity.

Consultation especially with non-users was not well developed. Less than two fifths of services consult with library users compared with just nine who consult with non-library users. Almost two thirds of respondents target specific groups in their family learning provision. Target groups include families generally, adults and/or children/teenagers. There was some opportunity for parents involved in family learning to develop their skills, for example, through volunteering opportunities. Opportunities include involvement in supporting storytimes, summer holiday reading activities, homework clubs/study support, reading groups, ICT and craft sessions.

While there are moves arising from *Framework for the Future* (DCMS 2003) to ensure public libraries are effective at promoting and facilitating their learning function, as yet, there are no specific guidelines for staff in relation to family learning. Staff are, however, employing a combination of advertising and marketing, outreach and links with other agencies to promote their family learning credentials. By far the most popular route is outreach, either with development workers or Sure Start librarians.

A number of recommendations for further research and development work suggest themselves from the findings of this study:

- Development of and examination of the suitability of family learning provision with specific learning outcomes for adults and support for progression;
- Research measuring the impacts of family learning in public libraries;
- Family learning awareness and guidelines for front line and professional staff in public libraries;
- Examples of best practice in library services successfully engaging with the Children's Services agenda and the critical factors contributing to this success.