

Scoping Paper

FAMILY LEARNING AND PUBLIC LIBRARIES: A SCOPING STUDY

Summary

NIACE has undertaken this scoping study in its commitment to strengthen the development of family learning in England. This paper, written by Rachel Spacey, NIACE Researcher in Family Learning, maps the involvement of public libraries in England with the family learning agenda. Through use of a literature review and survey of public library services a picture of activity and involvement in family learning is drawn with consideration of funding sources, working in partnership, consultation and opportunities for adult progression. Suggestions for further research and development in this area are detailed.

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Family Learning and Public Libraries: A Scoping Study

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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.

Introduction

Over the last eight years, public libraries in England have experienced something of a renaissance. Public libraries have always been community locations providing for local residents, at minimum, access to information, leisure materials and somewhere conducive for reading and study. In the 1970s the concept of ‘community librarianship’ was coined - a radical reawakening of the original notion of the library as a place for its working class community in which library workers sought to engage with the local community to “enable them to empower themselves” (Black 2002, p.7). This community role has been reinvigorated to some extent by a variety of Government-led initiatives and programmes aimed at upskilling disadvantaged communities and drawing new users into the library including the wide availability of Information and Communications Technologies (ICT), reader development initiatives and partnership working with local Sure Start programmes as part of the wider lifelong learning and skills agenda.

Learning in public libraries encompasses both informal and formal approaches although it might be argued that most learning taking place in public libraries is informal since it does not lead to a paper qualification (Brophy 2003). Formal learning ranges from structured courses, for example, family history, introductions to the Internet and ICT, to sessions in libraries that tie in with national promotions including Adult Learners’ or Family Learning Week (known as Family Learning Weekend until 2003). Similarly, family learning can be both formal and informal, covering “learning for parents/carers and their children, work with parents that is concerned with learning for or about their families and learning involving any intergenerational activities” (Eldred & Haggart 2002, p.7).

This paper adopts a wide definition of family learning reflecting recent work undertaken by Lochrie on behalf of NIACE. Lochrie (2004) has suggested family learning is expanded to successfully capture the wide range of activities taking place nationally, noting, “Family Learning programmes are those designed to enable adults and children to learn together. They should enable parents/carers to learn how to support their children’s intellectual, physical and emotional development or sustain families as discrete units and encourage their connectivity to others in the community” (2004, p.20). Family learning could therefore include:

- Literacy, language, numeracy and ICT including ESOL
- Children’s development
- Health and nutrition
- Home-school links
- Practical skills for families e.g. recent family finance initiatives

- Skills and knowledge, which link families to local regeneration.

Public libraries' involvement with family learning may include the provision of family learning courses, groups and activities, the creation of Family Learning Centres or the appointment of Family Reading librarians. Recent research suggests that little is known of the range and spread of family learning activity in public libraries (Kirk et al 2004). This study aims to extend current knowledge of this situation based on a review of the available literature and analysis of the results of a survey of English public libraries with subsequent areas for research and development highlighted.

Background and context

This section explores the policy context for public library involvement in family learning. It necessitates wider consideration of the relationship between public libraries and learning generally. A historical perspective of learning in public libraries is explored and more recent activity is investigated including reader development, the People's Network and UK Online, Bookstart and Sure Start initiatives all of which impact upon learning provision for adults and families.

Public libraries were established during the 1800s to provide adults with opportunities for self-education during a time when few adults were able to remain in education beyond their school years (Smith 1987). Providing space and access to resources for learning has not been the only role that public libraries have performed. As Smith notes, they have also been concerned with "promoting and servicing the creative use of leisure" (1987, p.21) and they have been purveyors of information to the public. However, the relationship between libraries and learning shifts and transforms over time. For example, in the 1970s and 1980s the concept of independent learning became increasingly popular and the development of open or flexible learning was formalised in the 'Open for Learning' project announced in the Conservative government's *People, Jobs and Opportunity* in 1992 (Allred & Allred 1999). This kind of initiative was often successful in engaging older people and adults without formal qualifications in studying a wide variety of subjects ranging from arts and crafts, business and management to information technology in public libraries.

Adults Learning

The education agenda of the current Labour government has stimulated public libraries' learning function through a number of high profile initiatives including the People's Network, accompanying ICT training programme for public library staff, *learnirect* and UK Online. This has been situated within the context of a drive for lifelong learning as a means to combat social exclusion and is best articulated in *The Learning Age: a renaissance for a new Britain* (DfEE 1998), where public libraries are envisaged as accessible community locations with "the potential to deliver information and

learning to people of all ages and backgrounds, right across the country” (1998, 4.37). In particular, *The Learning Age* presents the notion of public libraries as the obvious home for the provision of ICT as part of the *National Grid for Learning* (NGfL), a proposal first aired in 1997 to support teaching and learning electronically via a Web site providing educational resources¹. The Library and Information Commission (LIC now part of the Museums, Libraries and Archives council (MLA)) was asked to consider how public libraries might contribute to the NGfL and the subsequent policy documents, *New Library: the People’s Network* (LIC 1997) and *Building the New Library Network* (LIC 1998) explored how this might work in practice and how staff could support those wishing to make use of ICT in the library environment.

The Government responded positively to the LIC’s suggestions and the People’s Network scheme emerged, an innovative programme to ensure that the Internet was available in every public library in the UK. Funded by the Big Lottery Fund, formerly the New Opportunities Fund (NOF), public library staff were also trained in ICT skills from 2000-4 as it was appreciated that staffs’ experience of using ICT varied across services. The People’s Network, in terms of hardware and software installation, staff training and the impacts it has had on services is generally considered to be a success whilst acknowledging that services worked incredibly hard to ensure that computers were installed in time and on budget. Staff were required to attend in-depth ICT training, often in the form of the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL). There are certainly statistics to suggest that the People’s Network encourages users to engage in learning, for example, a recent evaluation reports that 23,600 people started a formal education course with 62,400 reporting having gained a new skill whilst 105,600 IT training sessions took place over the course of a year according to survey returns from a sample of library users (Brophy 2004).

The People’s Network scheme has seen the fashioning of public libraries as ICT learning centres as part of the UK Online initiative. UK Online centres are another strand of the Government’s attempt to provide everyone with access to the Internet in the UK. The centres are located in community locations hence public library involvement alongside Internet cafes, colleges, village halls and community centres whilst the UK Online brand was launched in 2000. According to the People’s Network website there are now more than 4000 ICT learning centres in the UK². The significance of ICT learning centres has been highlighted with Government announcements that ICT is a skill for life in its recent Skills Strategy, “Basic ICT skills will become a third area of adult basic skills, alongside literacy and numeracy within our *Skills for Life* programme” (DfES 2003b, p.25). Evaluations of UK Online centres suggest that they are successful in re-engaging learners, for example, research by Wyatt

¹ <http://www.ngfl.gov.uk/>

² <http://www.peoplesnetwork.gov.uk/about/index.asp>

et al of managers and users in 2002-3 found that “38 per cent of people attracted to the centres had not taken part in learning in at least five years. This was true for 41 per cent of those over 60 years old” (2003, p.2).

The relationship between public libraries and adult learners was reinforced when the former were included as full members in Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) partnerships set up in 2000. IAG was recently rebranded nationally as *nextstep*³. Public libraries work in IAG partnerships with other local providers including voluntary organisations and educational institutions offering information on learning and work. The success of some services in providing IAG has been recognised with the allocation of a national quality standard - matrix accreditation.

Basic Skills

The first recommendations for public library involvement in adult literacy were the Library Advisory Committee's, *The libraries' choice: public library services to the disadvantaged* in 1978 (Department of Education and Science 1978). More recently the Government has encouraged basic skills provision as part of its *Skills for Life* strategy in which public libraries are recognised as key players in addressing the needs of adults with poor basic skills. Parents are identified as a key target group for improving literacy and numeracy levels. In the library context, *Framework for the Future* (DCMS 2003) noted that public libraries could help alleviate social exclusion arising from poor literacy.

A recent small-scale study of adult literacy provision in UK public libraries (McLoughlin & Morris 2004) focussing on eight case studies found that successes in this area were based on a number of factors including:

- Marketing of activities and events, for example, word of mouth, networking, national promotions, publicity and marketing packs
- Community ownership of initiatives
- Partnership working, for example, multi-agency approaches such as funding from the LSC, community workers
- Networking, for example, library service membership of basic skills networks, learning partnerships, LSC strategy groups
- Targeting services such as aiming strategies at specific wards in an area.

The main difficulties experienced by services in this study were sustainability and capacity. It was incredibly difficult to appoint new staff to undertake adult literacy activity since this might mean

³ <http://www.nextstep.org.uk>

having to abandon projects once short term contracts ended whilst library staff might not have the necessary experience of work with socially excluded groups in the community. Services generally managed this situation by allocating dedicated adult literacy hours to existing staff or appointing employees from outside the service. Similarly, funding for adult literacy work was often difficult to acquire or to sustain since much of it is only available on a short-term basis. Although a review of the literature for this study had identified potential staffing issues such as unwillingness to embrace the basic skills agenda within their work, their results suggest that this problem was not encountered. Rather a sense of ownership was encouraged by staff involved in the adult literacy initiatives in an attempt to “embed the ethos of the authority’s adult literacy work into the culture of the library service” (McLoughlin & Morris 2004, p.43). For example, in Shropshire, library assistants were involved in managing and promoting adult literacy collections.

London Museums Archives and Libraries (LMAL) commissioned research to explore how museums, libraries and archives support basic skills development in London based on a survey of Chief Librarians in London (28 of the 33 responded), case studies of 11 services, learner questionnaires and interviews and focus groups with learners and practitioners. The study found that of motivations to learn, 46 per cent of respondents did so in order to get a better job whilst helping their children to learn was identified by 26 per cent of respondents, the majority of whom were women (Brockhurst & Dodds 2004). Suitable places for learning identified by learners included colleges (86 per cent) and libraries (79 per cent) compared to just nine per cent for museums and five per cent for art galleries, “All learners interviewed or attending focus group considered libraries as the most suitable venues for learning because of the informal atmosphere, which they considered conducive to learning” (Brockhurst & Dodds 2004, p.21). Both of these findings confirm that using the public library as a venue for family learning is appropriate not only in terms of the suitability of libraries as locations but in harvesting parents’ desire to help their children to learn.

Reader Development

Within the MLA sector, it is public libraries that have been the most proactive in supporting adults’ basic skills, building on libraries’ traditional role of providing study space and books (Brockhurst & Dodds 2004). Reader development work is the major strand of this provision and in relation to family learning includes, for example, *Families Reading* and *More Families Reading* in the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham. The importance of reading books has received considerable emphasis with the promotion of reader development, encouraging individuals and groups to engage in a positive way with books. More generally, there has been something of a national resurgence of interest in reading

illustrated in the popularity and success in terms of related book sales, of the television programme, Richard and Judy's Book Club⁴ on Channel 4.

The use of reader development strategies as a way to engage with adults with basic skills needs has been growing in popularity. The Vital Link initiative run by The Reading Agency (TRA) working with the National Literacy Trust and the National Reading Campaign, funded by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) Wolfson Public Libraries Challenge Fund aims to tie together reader development work in public libraries as a way to support and engage adults hoping to improve their literacy skills. The *Quick Reads* project in Essex is one particularly successful example of a Vital Link initiative built on an earlier project, *Ask Chris*, a web-based reader development resource. The public library service in Essex worked with adult community colleges to further embed basic skills in reader development activity with library staff working informally with learners to talk about books and reading in libraries. In terms of impact, the project contributed directly to formal adult learning of basic skills and indirectly to family learning amongst other impacts identified, for example, it was observed that as a result of the sessions some learners brought their children to the library for the first time (The National Literacy Trust 2003).

The benefits for adult and community learning and the public library sector from such an approach are clear; perceptions of the library may be changed by such activities and engage new users whilst adult education in the authority received support from qualified professionals willing to provide suitable community venues. Indeed, evaluations of the *Quick Reads* assert that its success is very much dependent on “the pre-existence and reported strength of the library-adult education partnership prior to the Vital Link project in Essex” (The National Literacy Trust 2003, no page number). Interestingly, the project was not as successful, from the libraries' point of view in engaging new learners outside the adult community colleges, which may be an approach that facilitators of family learning activity could support.

Outside of public library space, public libraries are also involved in reader development activity in a number of prison libraries much of which has a family learning thrust. The Offenders' Learning and Skills Unit in the DfES has funded projects encouraging prisoners to support their children's reading development whilst gaining skills themselves⁵. Popular schemes include Storybook Dads in which prisoners read and record a story for their children and the Big Book Share. The latter was launched in 2001 at HMP Nottingham and run by Nottingham City Libraries and TRA. The scheme aims to encourage prisoners to help with their child's reading development and play a part in family life

⁴ http://www.channel4.com/entertainment/tv/microsites/R/richardandjudy/book_club/book_club.html

⁵ <http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/campaign/prisons.html>

outside of prison and has since received funding from the Paul Hamlyn Foundation to develop the programme in other locations⁶.

Children Learning: Public and School Libraries

A recent MLA report, *Investing in Knowledge*, a five-year vision for England's museums, libraries and archives notes that 70 per cent of the children questioned in this study believed a library is one of the best places to learn outside school (MLA 2004b, p.2). This suggests a strong magnet to draw children and their adult parents/carers into public libraries. Recent research by The Reading Agency is useful in considering how public libraries might engage with young people and the implications that this might have for engaging adult learners in family learning. The study based on a literature review and consultation with relevant groups argues that some public library services have not successfully engaged with young people:

“These include the reluctance of some library services to address the needs of young people, because they find them more demanding than those of other sectors of the community. This reluctance manifests itself in a lack of investment in infrastructure, stock and relevant staff training. They have also been exacerbated by policy makers’ stereotypical image, lack of insight and low expectations of libraries” (TRA 2004 p.5).

Young people were consulted by the Agency and their strong views on the service are illuminating:

- Staff attitudes can be off-putting, for example, “Sometimes the staff aren’t nice” (p.21). “They felt that changes were needed to the kinds of people working as library staff. They would like to see more men and young people, and friendly staff, who move around helping people, not sitting behind counters” (p.22)
- Young people expressed interest in helping out in the library, for example, using IT equipment, doing courses on reading and writing and making websites.

The latter point suggests that there may be opportunities for family learning activity where adults and older children work together in the library in much the same way that the successful *Lads and Dads* scheme in Lancashire engaged adults and children in a classroom environment and through outreach and take-home activities using cricket as the subject⁷. Similarly, McNicol’s study of children’s services in school and public libraries found in relation to reading groups that “An innovative idea in one authority was to involve a local adult reading group in running the group for teenagers” (McNicol 2003, p.3). Indeed, volunteering offers many benefits to adults, children and the service involved

⁶ Similarly, in 2003 HMP Leeds won a family learning award for helping prisoners produce videos of themselves telling stories to their relatives.

⁷ http://www.lancashire.gov.uk/corporate/news/press_releases/2004/11/15/0002.asp

especially when one considers that in this particular study parents were often needed to help supervising out of school activities including reading groups, storytelling, the annual Summer Reading Challenge and school visits.

The working relationship between school and public libraries may also impact upon the potential provision of family learning services. McNicol found that reader development activities in her study included “working with family learning groups both in schools and the public library” (2003 p.7). There was certainly evidence in this study that partnership working was taking place and both school and public libraries were represented on groups such as learning partnerships, including social, education and community services and health trusts. The benefits of schools and libraries working together had implications for educational staff’s perceptions of the library service and what it could offer including “establishing the library service as part of the education agenda” and “promoting an understanding in schools of the role of libraries in the educational process, breaking down barriers between schools and libraries” (2003 p.12). However, joint working was not universal and there was some suspicion of such working arrangements.

Miranda McKearney of TRA has recently emphasised the way in which public libraries can work with young people aligned with the government’s strategy on young people, *Fulfilling their Potential*, noting that whilst staff were not always comfortable working with older children, this was an issue, which needed to be conquered:

“11-19 year olds are not an age group that library staff always felt very confident about, yet they are a critical audience. This period is a time of growth, often turmoil, when young people need libraries’ support. In marketing terms it is crucial to hang on to them after all the good work libraries do with early years and primary children” (McKearney 2004 p.4).

Study support, mainly in the form of homework clubs, are yet another example of public libraries’ works with young people although whether this can be considered family learning depends on whether there is parental involvement, for example, in the form of supervision or support. As Bevin and Goulding explain, “Helping children with their homework has long been a feature of public library work but in the last decade the amount of time that staff spend supporting children’s school work has increased significantly following various government initiatives” (Bevin & Goulding 1999, p.49). Certainly, helping children with their homework is often an informal as opposed to formal activity in most public libraries.

In 2003, the DCMS published its strategic framework for public libraries, *Framework for the Future* in which the importance of its roles in “education for children, adults and families” is highlighted

(Resource 2003, p.5). In relation to books, reading and learning, one of the three central areas of the framework, the action plan notes that programmes are to concentrate on the literacy and reading skills of under-fives and teenagers and the reading experiences of adults whilst widening participation in libraries generally. Again, family learning activity offers a potential strategy to accomplish more than one of these aims. *Framework for the Future* also emphasises the importance of a national approach to ensure effective services, “if we develop a national approach, then we ensure access for all, deliver economies of scale and ease negotiations with other funding partners” (DCMS 2003, p.44) thus establishing the extent of current family learning activity and disseminating examples of good practice assists authorities whose provision is in development and minimizes duplication of effort and resources.

Public Library Service Impact Measures – Proposals for 2005/6 (MLA 2005a) have been developed to complement the Public Library Service Standards published in October 2004 in the context of *Framework for the Future*. They illustrate the contribution libraries can make to five of the seven shared priorities agreed by the Government and the LGA including “improving the quality of life for children, young people, families at risk and older people” and “raising standards across schools” (MLA 2005a, p.1). Family learning is identified as one of the further activities, which contributes to improving quality of life (MLA 2005b). Services are expected to show which activities they are engaged in and provide evidence of impact measures utilised.

Family Learning

As the literature suggests, public libraries recognise that families are a key target group. There are numerous definitions of family learning and it encompasses a wide range of learning activities and programmes both formal and informal for children and their parents, carers and grandparents. As Brassett-Grundy suggests:

“Despite the differing definitions of family learning which are in circulation, most would agree that family learning is one of the critical elements of lifelong learning. The broadest view of this would encompass inter-generational learning, parental involvement in children’s education, and parenting skills” (2002, p.5).

At present the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) funds family learning through two strands in the form of family literacy, language and numeracy (FLLN) and Wider Family Learning (WFL) through Local Education Authorities (LEAs) where it is facilitated by Family Learning Co-ordinators. It is inspected by the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) who scrutinize LEA Adult and Community Learning (ACL). The latter is distinguishable from FLLN and can include family ICT, arts and crafts and parenting classes. Provision may also come from the Voluntary and Community

Sector (VCS) and the provision of services for children including Sure Start. However, the profusion of family learning provision is reflected in the funding landscape with contributions from specific government departments, money within the context of governmental initiatives and grants, charities and grant making bodies.

Family learning has the potential to benefit individuals, families and the community and for adult learners in particular may:

- Instil or inspire confidence to engage in learning
- Enable adults to appreciate the different ways in which individuals learn
- Be fun and enjoyable
- Promote respect and understanding within families and the community
- Improve relationships between adults and children (Rees et al 2003).

Family learning is advocated as a means to help promote inclusion in *The Learning Age*, where it is suggested, “Community, adult and family learning will be essential in the Learning Age. It will help improve skills, encourage economic regeneration and individual prosperity, build active citizenship, and inspire self-help and local development” (DfEE 1998, 4.18). Similarly, it is noted in the first public libraries and social inclusion policy framework that libraries can support family learning, “A regenerated and proactive library sector can help both individuals and communities to develop skills and confidence, and help improve social networking. It also supports community, adult and family learning” (DCMS 1999, p.4). The accessibility of public libraries is considered within this as an area upon which libraries could improve to make them more ‘family friendly’.

The *Skills for Life* strategy (DfES 2003b) emphasises parents with basic skills needs as one group amongst others facing exclusion and the value of family learning is highlighted within this strategy as a means of improving adult literacy and numeracy. In addition, both the green paper *Every Child Matters* (DfES 2003a) and its successor, *Every Child Matters: The Next Steps* (DfES 2004) detail Government policy to protect, promote and support the well-being and development of children and families encapsulated in its legislative form in the *Children Act* (Great Britain. Parliament, 2004). A number of initiatives with explicit implications emerged from this policy framework including Extended Schools, Children’s Centres and the extension of the Sure Start programme. There is no mention of public or school libraries within the green paper or *The Next Steps* as potential community locations offering information and support to parents and children. However, recent Sure Start guidance emphasises its desire to work with public libraries and actually increase usage of libraries by families with young children:

“Local authorities should therefore work to increase the use of libraries by families with young children in line with the Sure Start SDA target. Many Sure Start Local Programmes (SSLPs) have developed innovative strategies and approaches to support local libraries. This work should continue in order to make libraries more accessible, welcoming and responsive to local community needs” (Sure Start 2003 p.25).

Indeed, in 2002, a review of the research relating to library services for children and young people by a working group from the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) noted “Many library authorities are working closely with Sure Start schemes, and gaining funding for early years workers, additional mobile services and for supporting Bookstart in Sure Start areas. In Wakefield, Sure Start has funded the Sunshine library, the first designated early years library in the country” (CILIP 2002, p.39).

While there has been no widespread mapping of family learning activity in public libraries, there is certainly evidence to suggest that informal family learning takes place; for example, in 1999 a survey of open learning activity in public libraries found that family involvement in learning was stimulated by the use of computers, “Computer skills were shared in the family; a grandparent bringing a child into the library to learn what he or she had learnt, a man being able to understand how his partner’s work was carried out, a family being able to share in the use of the home computer” (Allred & Allred 1999, p.13). Similarly, as Drodge observed in *Support for Adult Learners in Libraries* “Across the country family learning schemes, helping parents to help their children learn, and providing them with learning opportunities of their own, are actively involving libraries in communities from St. Helens to Birmingham and on to Lewisham” (Drodge 2000, p.54). Arguably, as long as children have been welcomed into public libraries for story times and activities, a degree of family learning has taken place before the term itself was actually coined.

A recent exploratory review of activity based on 19 responses to a query on two Internet news lists, LIS-LINK and LIS-PUB-LIBS (Kirk et al 2004) noted that there is little comprehensive or systematic evidence of the scope of family learning activity in England’s public libraries. Of the 19, 14 did engage in regular family learning activity. Of the five services not offering regular provision this was due to staffing and funding issues in four services whilst one felt it was unsuitable because of lack of space in the library. Most services worked with between one and three partners including:

- Community education
- Schools
- Voluntary sector
- Charities

- Youth and community groups
- *Learndirect*
- Sure Start
- Health services
- Social services.

The authors suggested that family learning in public libraries merited greater attention not only in terms of assessing the spread of activity but perceptions of its value by families themselves. A recent Vital Link survey of library activity supporting adult basic skills learners found that of library authorities responding, 78 per cent targeted specific audiences with basic skills needs, of whom 63 per cent targeted families (The National Literacy Trust 2004). Similarly positive was the finding that of 87 per cent of authorities with active partnerships in place to support people with low literacy levels, 82 per cent of these were with adult and community education.

A recent article detailing the work of Croydon's library service for children noted their close working relationship with local family learning providers, the Family Learning Forum and *Skills for Families*, an LSC funded initiative for selected local authorities, such that "Many family learning initiatives now take place in libraries, some of which were developed as part of the local Sure Start programme" (McElwee 2004, p.25). Furthermore, this development is changing perceptions of the library service as "Family learning tutors are beginning to see libraries as the natural place for many of their activities for parents with pre-school children" (McElwee 2004, p.25).

The most obvious example of family learning activity in public libraries is the Bookstart scheme. The scheme started in 1992 with just 300 families in Birmingham when parents were given free books at their child's nine-month health check and was rolled out nationally in 1999. The rationale behind the scheme was that reading to and with children from an early age was beneficial to children's development. Indeed, evaluation of the children involved in the pilot project found that two years after receiving the books they were three times more likely to be interested in reading than those who had not participated (Bookstart 2004). Bookstart involves health visitors presenting parents/carers with a pack that includes free books and advice on sharing them, information about library facilities and activities and an invitation to join the library during the child's seven to nine month health check or equivalent. According to the recent *Report to Parliament on Public Library Matters* (DCMS 2004), 90 per cent of library services in England operate Bookstart. Bookstart is to be expanded with intentions to provide packs for children when they become toddlers and again at age three. Whilst health visitors deliver the Bookstart pack, the second and third packs will be delivered through public libraries or early years settings.

Evaluation of the Books for Babies project inspired by Bookstart and similar initiatives in the former coal mining community of Staveley in Derbyshire, an area of high unemployment and deprivation, identified a number of positive outcomes including:

- Gift of the book bag enables health visitors to broach educational matters to parents/carers
- Receipt of a book bag in the first year encouraged parents to share books with their children at an earlier age than usual
- The scheme draws other family members into the library
- Book bag contents are key in promoting family interest (Millard 2002).

Interestingly, whilst there has been evaluation of the impact of the initiative on children, little appears to have taken place on its effects on parents/carers. There would certainly appear to be some impacts in terms of library usage, as Millard notes, “There was good evidence that the renewed invitation to join the library and the provision of additional author and book making events drew in additional members of the family” (Millard 2002). Similarly, whilst parents and grandparents were encouraged to use the library, anecdotal evidence suggests that older brothers and sisters of the babies targeted began borrowing books. Tracking the experiences of adults from the point they receive the pack with their child to determine if this is an area family learning services could impact upon might be worthy of consideration.

Bookstart has engendered a number of other children’s activities in public libraries including Baby Rhymetimes although names for this vary across services including Baby Bounces which involve songs, nursery and action rhymes for parents, babies and children. Similarly, in Nottingham City and County authorities, Boots Books for Babies scheme included the use of rhyme with the production of a cassette for parents to use with their children that was felt to benefit “families with literacy problems” (Buttolph & Wainwright 2002, p.8).

A scheme in London, *First Steps*, illustrates how family learning can be successfully facilitated by public libraries. Ten London boroughs, 98 schools and more than 1200 parents were involved in the initiative funded by the DCMS Wolfson Reader Development Fund aimed at developing the reading skills of both children and parent through sessions in libraries. Communities with significant levels of deprivation were targeted and the project was particularly successful at engaging minority ethnic participants with the help of local schools. The use of interpreters and childcare provision were both important factors in the success of the project, which included an increase in library membership and the formation of family reading groups (Love & Richens 2003).

A similar scheme in the London borough of Barking and Dagenham built upon previous work involving the library service, college and education service. *Partnership with Parents* involved sessions in schools with one session led by the family reading librarian and used as a way to encourage families to join and use their local library (Dalton & McNicol 2002). One of the more pertinent evaluation findings was that “For a number of parents, *Partnership with Parents* acted as a route back into learning and they went on to enrol on other adult college courses” (2002, p.8). The notion of public libraries as neutral community locations was also challenged somewhat with the observation that some parents were unenthusiastic about entering a public library and that a useful way to counteract this was to set up taster sessions in leisure centres, community centres and workplaces.

A Best Value review of the public library service in Sheffield highlighting the need to make stronger links with other council departments facilitated the development of family learning in Sheffield libraries, taking advantage of the opportunities provided by the People’s Network sitting alongside current school-based programmes in Sheffield (Sheffield City Council 2003). A Family and Adult Learning Development Officer (Libraries) was appointed funded by the LSC, overseeing a project which concentrated on three communities in Sheffield who had received adult education opportunities in their libraries intermittently in the past such as yoga or IT. Following user consultation, three types of family learning activity were piloted during the project:

- Informal/drop in family learning
- Joint parent and child
- Adult-focussed provision.

Informal/drop in family learning proved useful as a way of engaging adults with no prior experience of adult learning/training. For example, during FLW in 2002, 17 community libraries held an ‘Open the Box’ event to encourage users to look at the family learning resources, enter a competition and complete the family learning questionnaire. Joint parent and child family learning built on the Bookstart scheme and a short course for parents and children based on an Open College Network (OCN) Family Learning unit Sharing Books with Your Children was developed. Indeed, a CILIP report noted that Bookstart is a useful hook on to other services rather than an end in itself (CILIP 2002). The course proved successful for the parents involved in that 85 per cent rated its usefulness as great or above average whilst for the library service new members have joined the library and the families involved have increased their visits. The service also ran a follow up course after parents expressed an interest on the parent and child sessions, which was based around supporting children’s early language and learning.

On a national stage, public libraries are involved in both Adult Learners' Week co-ordinated by NIACE and Family Learning Week (FLW). The latter was launched in 1998 as Family Learning Day becoming Family Learning Weekend in 1999 and FLW in 2004⁸. FLW is a national campaign to raise awareness of both the value and scope of family learning to a number of audiences including families themselves. Analysis of activities for both the weekend and the week from the data held by Campaign for Learning from 1998 to 2004 reveals that the largest group of activities were reading and storytime related events whilst family history sessions were also well utilised. The availability of ICT facilities in public libraries, which flourished from 2000, is evident in the provision of ICT related activities; for example, *improve your internet skills for parents, carers and their children*. The following table illustrates a breakdown of activity using data supplied by the Campaign for Learning:

Public library activities during FLW	No. of services
Reading, stories, storytime, rhymes, singing, dancing	75
Mixture of events	61
Family history, local history	44
ICT	42
Craft	29
Food, recipes, eating, cooking, diet, health	17
Quizzes	14

Table 1 Public library activities during Family Learning Week

More recently, family learning activity in public libraries has taken on a more formalised appearance with a new promotion developed by The Reading Agency as part of the Vital Link initiative; *Got kids? Get reading!* supports family literacy activity in schools, libraries, colleges and family centres with children with a reading age of nine to 14 and with children aged from birth to seven years. The project is running in eight local authorities and one prison.

A review of the literature thus far indicates the following:

- Adults are often motivated by a desire to help their children learn
- Public libraries rate highly amongst both adults and children as suitable locations for learning because of their informal atmosphere
- Public libraries' reader development work in recent years has established literacy work in this environment
- Public libraries wish to engage new users and increasing family learning activity can be a useful approach
- Public libraries have engaged with Family Learning Week and used this as an opportunity to promote their family learning credentials

⁸ <http://www.campaign-for-learning.org.uk/campaigns/familylearning/flweekend/flweekend.htm>

- There is little evaluation or research in relation to families' perspectives of the usefulness and value of library family learning activity
- There is greater potential for schools and public libraries to work together to facilitate family learning activities
- Much of the activity which can be described as family learning in public libraries has an early years focus.

Methods

A survey of public library services in England to gauge the levels of family learning involvement was undertaken in early 2005. A covering letter and paper based questionnaire was sent to the person within each service identified as responsible for family learning or related services from *Libraries and Information Services 2005* (CILIP 2005). This was supplemented by a follow up email and electronic version of the questionnaire during February. Responding services were assured that questionnaire responses were confidential with authorities identified, for example, as a county or unitary authority. The quantitative questionnaire data was analysed using SPSS (v.13) whilst the qualitative data was analysed manually.

Results and Discussion

A total of 81 completed questionnaires were returned representing a response rate of 54 per cent. Of those responding 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. The size of services in terms of the numbers of libraries they operated differed greatly illustrating the varied nature and size of public library services in England. Approximately half of responding services had between six and 15 libraries but the range ran from less than five service points to more than 96.

Less than half of respondents ran family learning activities in *all* of their static libraries (33 of 81), 17 ran them in the majority of their libraries whilst 15 services ran activities in less than half of their libraries. However, there was no obvious relationship between the numbers of libraries in an authority and the numbers of libraries with activity; of those services with more than 96 libraries, one service ran them in more than half of its libraries whilst the other had activity in almost all its service points. The variation in numbers of libraries with family learning activities within authorities is related to a number of issues including:

- Levels and availability of staff
- Adequacy of buildings and resources
- Funding

- Management
- Strategic direction of the service.

Depending on the activity the library wishes to run or become involved with, physical space and access can be an issue when inviting parents and their children into the library, for example, space to locate baby buggies. Although research from 2002 suggested that this was not really a pertinent issue for smaller children, “The need to get buggies into the picture book area tends to ensure that there is a reasonable amount of space for early years provision even in fairly small libraries” (CILIP 2002, p.53). As the head of service of one County Council with 56 libraries noted “*They all participate but to varying degrees. Central and larger libraries hold weekly events. Smallest may do annual events in the summer school holidays*”. The levels of staffing available in a library also impacts upon the ability to facilitate activities, it is much more difficult in a small library with fewer than five staff successfully to run the library and hold activities, although a designated Children’s Librarian or similar post holder responsible for a number of libraries may facilitate story time, for example.

Family learning activity has been underway in some services for a number of years as the following table illustrates although this may be related to the broad definition of family learning activities given in the questionnaire particularly storytime.

Number of years running family learning activities	No. of services
Less than 1 year	1
More than 1 year but less than 2	9
More than 2 years but less than 3	6
More than 3 years but less than 4	11
More than 4 years but less than 5	9
More than 5 years	22
More than 10 years	13
Varies - between 1 and 10 years	8
Not applicable	1

Table 2 Number of years public library services have been involved in family learning

The frequency of family learning activity in public libraries varies greatly, for example, in 22 authorities activity occurred weekly. The largest grouping here, however, was subsequently categorised as ‘varies’ (38 of 81) since activity may range from weekly in some service points to yearly in others - all within one library authority:

“The frequency depends on the type of activity (storytimes or rhyme times are weekly or fortnightly but some sessions may only occur in the summer holidays)” (County Council)

“Varies from branch to branch. Some have weekly sessions e.g. baby pop-in, others have special events e.g. yearly Family Learning Week events run through study support” (Metropolitan Council).

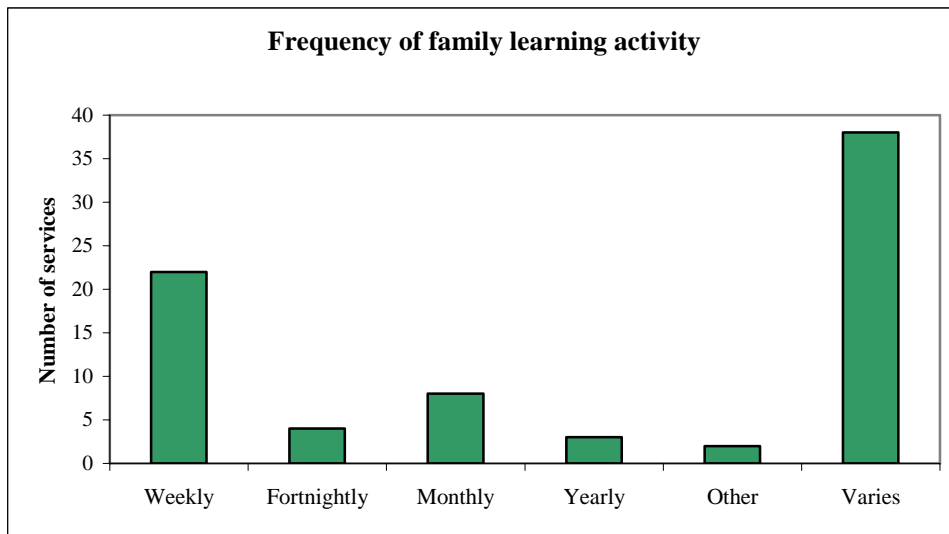


Figure 1 Frequency of family learning activity

Just two of the 81 respondents claimed that they did not run family learning activities in their public libraries. However, both commented that they certainly did host a number of activities listed in the questionnaire. This raises the issue of what the term means to different groups, as one manager suggested, “*I would have said we did very little in the way of family learning until I looked at your list of activities and realised that we did/do quite a lot!*” (Metropolitan Borough). There were a small number of respondents who felt that the term family learning was too wide-ranging, a ‘catch all’ for all things child and family related.

Activities

Bookstart and storytime were the most popular library service activities with 77 of 80 services facilitating these family learning activities. This reflects recent data that 90 per cent of authorities operate Bookstart whilst 95 per cent offer the Summer Reading Challenge (DCMS 2004). Other activities of note were tie-in activities during FLW (70) and in ALW (65), Baby Bounces/Rhymetime (67) whilst the majority of respondents ran homework clubs (53), provided information for families (54) or parenting resources such as books (58) or ran family ICT sessions (42). Over half of responding services held more than eleven activities (46 of 80) compared with approximately a quarter running between six and ten (28) whilst only six services held five or less activities in their libraries.

Activities which might be perceived as more commonly coming under the remit of LSC funded LEA activity, FLLN or wider family learning were also fairly well represented. For example, family literacy activities are undertaken in 38 services, family reading in 37, family poetry in 34, family crafts in 33

and family numeracy in 21 authorities. Dads and Lads activities aimed at older children and their parents/carers are held in 20 services whilst a baby and toddler book club is held in 12 with the Big Book Share⁹, a family learning project involving prisoners and their families, in 11. Seven services had a Family Learning Centre within their authority, seven ran or held parenting classes, six held activities for grandparents and one service ran family cooking activities.

Twenty-six services also identified other family learning activities in their libraries, which included locally managed schemes and involvement or tie-ins with national promotions or campaigns, many of which could be termed reader development or family reading:

- Baby Days
- Baby Music/Music with Mummy
- *Bookcrawl*¹⁰ (a Booktrust early years initiative)
- *Book Quest* (a scheme for older children to share books with parents at home)
- Celebrations of various festivals
- Children's Book Festival
- Circus skills day
- *Cradle Club* (neighbourhood library within Sure Start area)
- Family learning projects with local prison
- Family quizzes
- Games Clubs
- Local/family history courses
- *Premier League Reading Stars* (in partnership with the local football club)
- *Primary Link* (involves delivery of books directly into school)
- *Reading is Fundamental*¹¹ (a National Literacy Trust initiative)
- *Reading Rocket* (a children's mobile, which visits Sure Start buildings)
- *Read on Write Away*¹² (a literacy initiative in Derby City and Derbyshire)
- *Stories from the Web*
- Summer Reading Challenge
- Sure Start sessions
- Theatre shows
- Tot Art, Family Art project
- Toy library

⁹ <http://www.readingagency.org.uk/html/whatWeDo03.cfm?projectID=30&loc=projectsS>

¹⁰ <http://www.bookstart.co.uk/professionals/schemes/bookcrawl/>

¹¹ <http://www.rif.org.uk/>

¹² <http://www.rowa.co.uk/>

- Work with local hospital on Children’s Ward
- *World Book Day*
- *Wriggly Reader* (baby and toddler rhyme times)

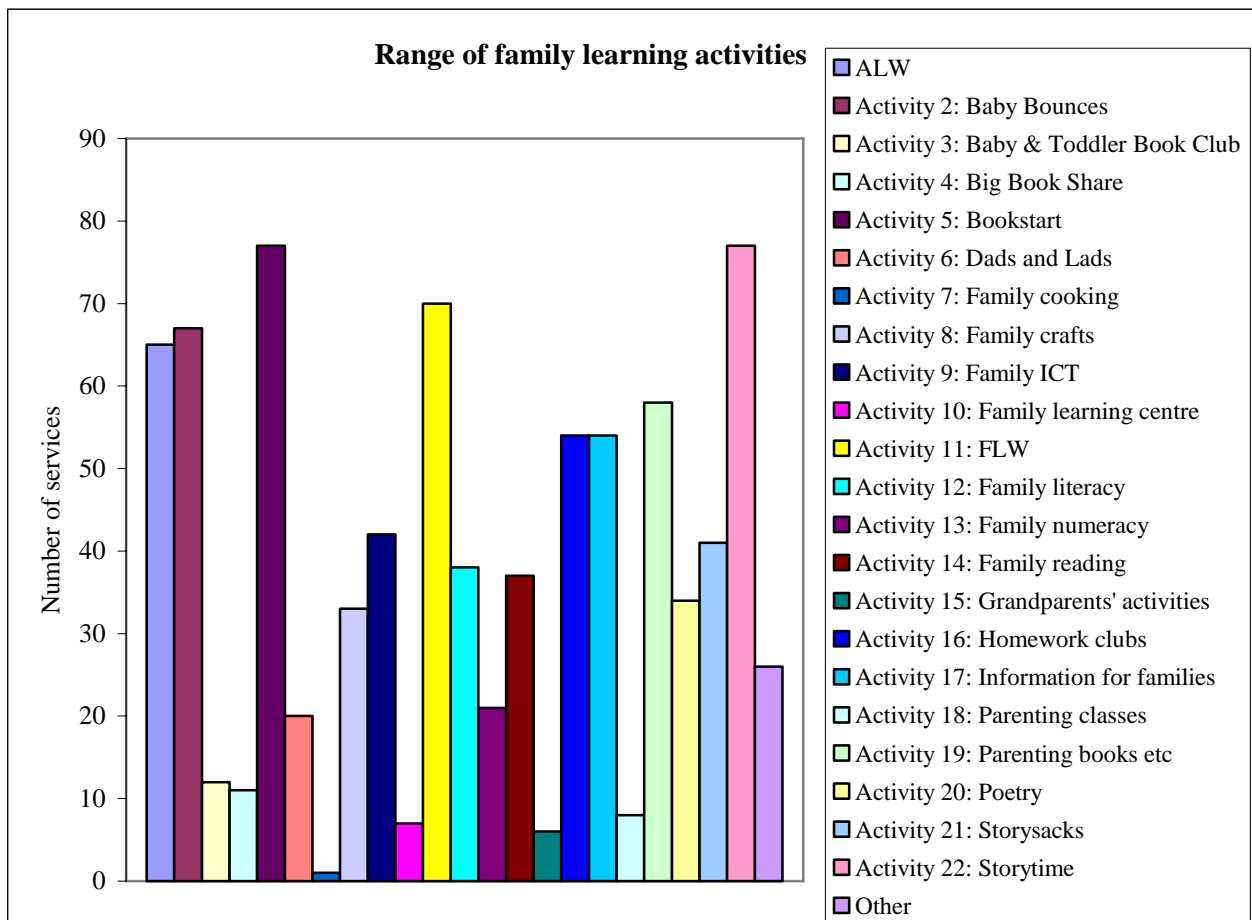


Figure 2 The range of family learning activities underway in public libraries

Partnership Working

All respondents completing this question worked in partnership to run family learning events or activities. Approximately 41 per cent of respondents (33 of 81) worked with between six and ten partners compared with 38 per cent who work with five or less (31 of 81). Surprisingly, approximately 21 per cent of library authorities work with 11 or more partners (16 of 81). This supports the findings of a NIACE evaluation of LSC funded family learning, which found that LEAs reported high levels of partnership working. Ninety four per cent of those responding (101 of 150) worked with schools whilst around 70 per cent work in partnership with museums and libraries (NIACE 2003).

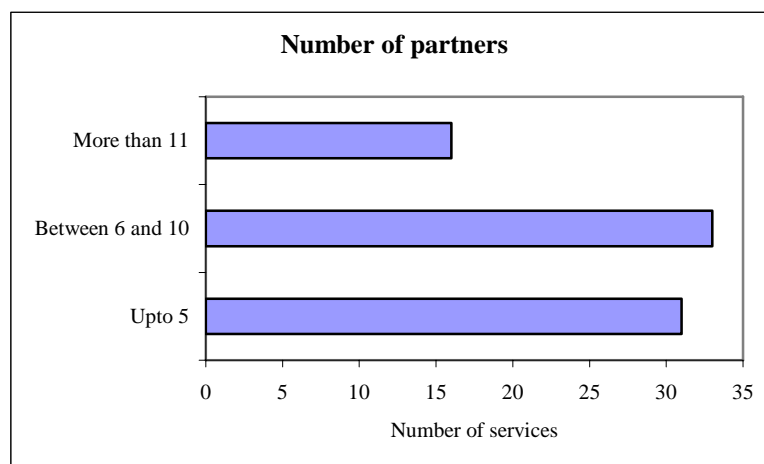


Figure 3 Number of partners library services work with

Public libraries' most popular partner in working together to facilitate events is Sure Start (67). The close working relationship between public library services and Sure Start Local Programmes was certainly suggested by a review of the literature and is confirmed in the results here. Working with other council departments e.g. community education or children's services was also a popular choice (65). Other prevalent partners included colleagues in education in the form of schools (48) and pre-schools (44) whilst the health service (50) and the voluntary and community sector (VCS) (40) were well represented. Just under half of services worked with colleges (39) and nurseries (38), the local LSC (29), museums (31), national organisations including the WEA, the Reading Agency, Bookstart (31), school libraries (24) and social services (20). Partnership working with the private sector was the least favoured method with just 12 services working in this way. This is unsurprising as research in 2001 found that partnership work with commercial partners such as publishers and booksellers was patchy (Thebridge et al 2001). A further 15 library services identified other partners they worked with in family learning including the following:

- *Connexions*
- *Early Years Development Childcare Partnership*
- Foster carers
- *Homestart*
- *Jobcentre Plus*
- Local childminder association
- Local Dyslexia Association
- *Neighbourhood Renewal Fund*
- Other public library services
- Parent and toddler groups
- *Prison Service*
- Private sector nurseries

- *Refugee Council Asylum Support Team*
- *Theatre companies/ Musicians/ Poets/ Storytellers/Artists*
- *Youth Service/Youth Offending Team*

From this sample of public library services it appears that partnership working is very much an established part of the way in which services operate. The plethora of services with which libraries work also suggests that services are unable to rely on a token few partners.

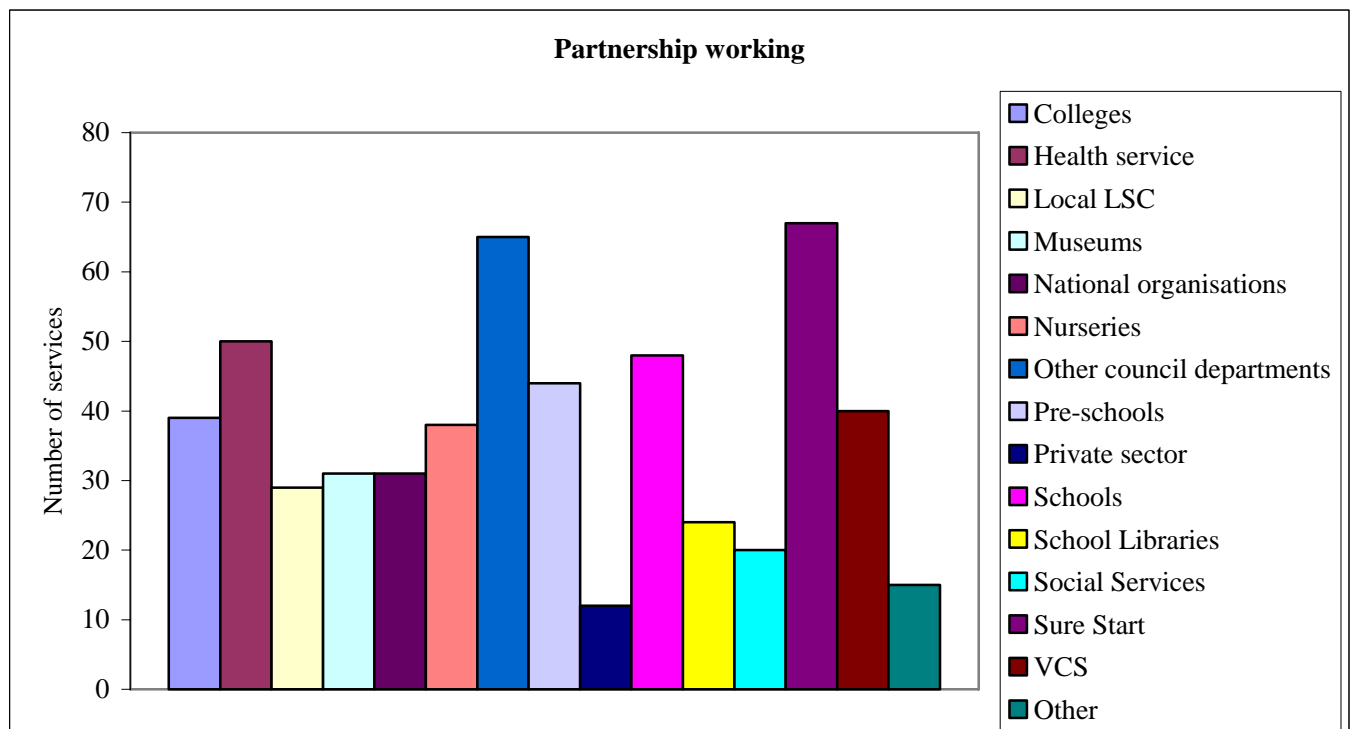


Figure 4 Range of family learning partners

Funding

Services’ response to a question on who provides the funding for family learning activity clearly reveals that this is from the local authority whether from the library budget or monies for family learning drawn down from the LSC through the LEA. Sixty-nine services funded family learning provision from the local authority with 39 from the local LSC:

“Access to LSC money is through Adult Education. Most events are funded out of library budgets as they are embedded in library provision” (London Borough)

“Mainly taken from our own budgets” (County Council).

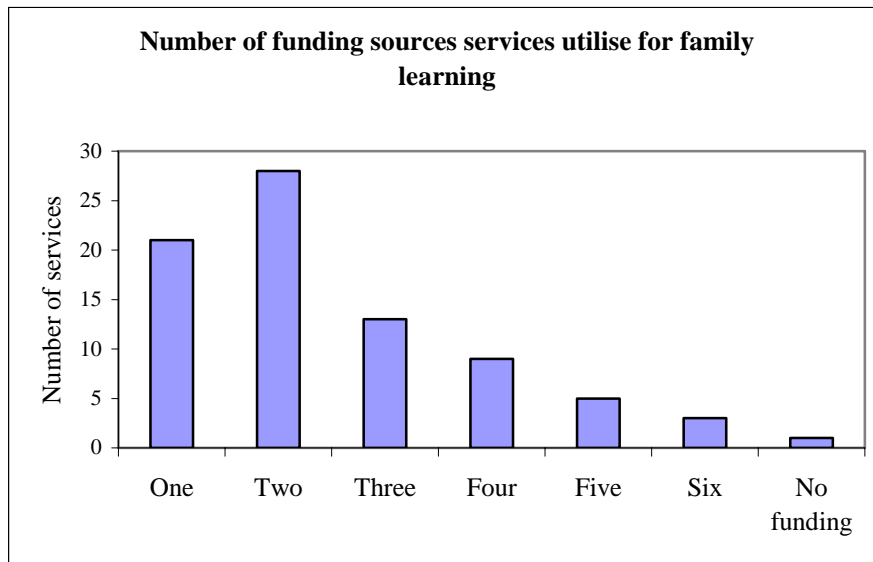


Figure 5 Number of family learning funding sources services utilise

Some services were also able to secure funding from the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund (16), Single Regeneration Budget (10), Voluntary and Community Sector (17), Sure Start Local Programmes (10), the Basic Skills Agency (9), private sponsorship (8) and Campaign for Learning (3). Approximately one third of respondents use two sources of funding (34.6 per cent) whilst around a quarter use just one source (26.3 per cent).

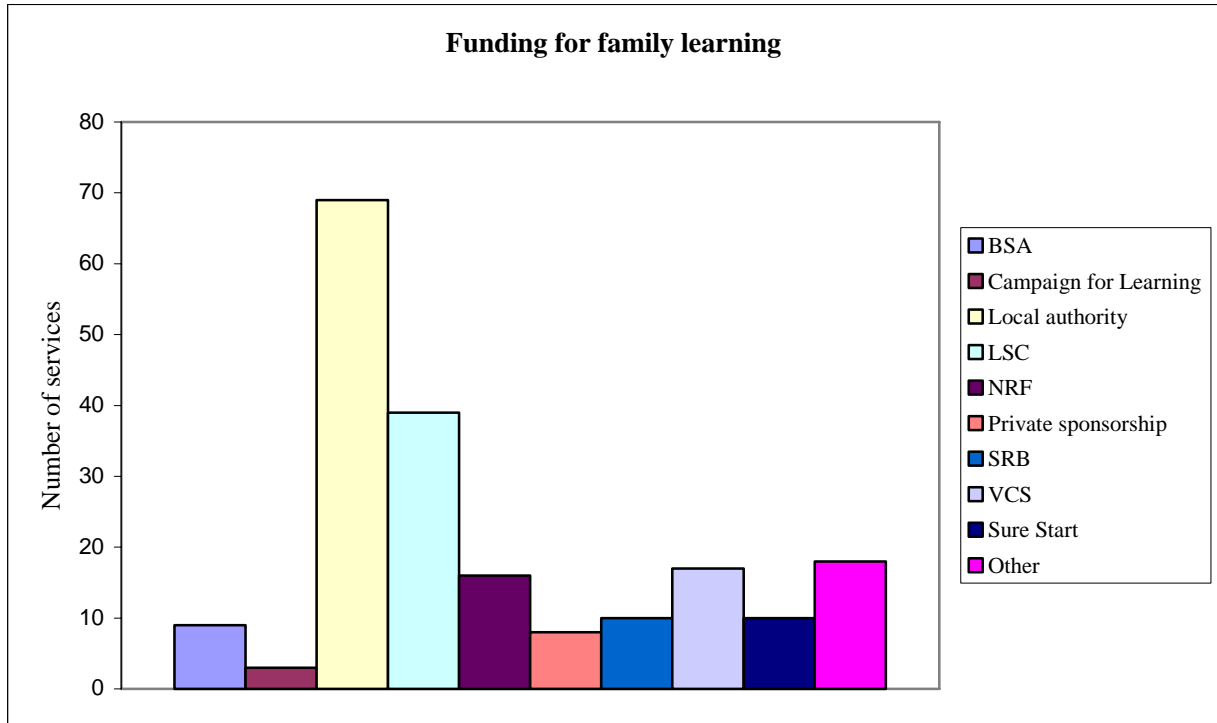


Figure 6 Funding for family learning in public libraries

Eighteen services also identified other sources of funding they utilised including:

- *Arts Council*

- *Big Lottery Fund*
- *Bookstart*
- *Children's Fund*
- *Children's Information Service*
- *DCMS Wolfson* (for *Vital Link* project)
- *Einstein Science Fund*
- *Excellence in Cities Action Zones* formerly called Education Action Zones (for *Storysacks*)
- Local service agreement between county council and government for project workers
- *New Deal for Communities*
- *Paul Hamlyn Fund*
- *Premier League Reading Stars*
- Regional MLA council
- *The Reading Agency*.

Managers highlighted a number of funding issues including:

- Low levels of funding
- Sustainability
- Bureaucracy involved in applying for and claiming monies
- Emphasis on outputs rather than impacts
- Inability to access funding e.g. on the part of rural services
- Need to have core funding.

Consultation and Targeting

The study was interested to discover whether consultation was taking place in public library services. There is concern that whilst public libraries claim to be socially inclusive a large segment of the population fails to use them¹³ and one way to remedy this is to consult with non-users to discover their perceptions and requirements of public libraries. Are library services consulting with the families that frequent them to tailor their services to the needs of their communities?

Twenty-nine services (36 per cent of respondents) consult library users compared with just nine who consult with non-library users. Consultation included work undertaken by organisations working in partnership with libraries, through family learning events, community consultation events and as part of project work primarily in the form of surveys and also through informal discussions:

¹³ For example, Vincent's recent literature review of public libraries and social inclusion/exclusion reveals mixed success on the part of libraries in tackling exclusion (Vincent 2005).

“Consultation was part of our SRB Family Learning project approach both before, during and after the project. Consultation at our current activities is more informal and verbal” (London Borough)

“We have carried out questionnaires about learning including family learning in our libraries – types of learning people are interested in, who is interested, how far they will travel etc.” (London Borough)

“Focus groups with ethnic minority communities including family learning activity questions”
(London Borough).

However, it was clear from the questionnaire comments made by respondents that there was some confusion over the differences between consultation and evaluation. Indeed, a considerable amount of activity in this area would seem to be reactive rather than proactive as evaluation takes place following events:

“Feedback from events in libraries and outreach sessions are evaluated and acted upon”
(Metropolitan Council)

“Evaluation forms are completed after every event or learning session” (Metropolitan Council)

Evaluation of services is certainly of crucial importance in terms of developing future activities and improving the quality of services libraries provide. However, consultation may save time and money in terms of identifying what communities actually want from the library service perhaps in identifying potential barriers or issues staff and services need to resolve. Consultation is embedded in government principles and policies as noted in *Inspiring Learning for All* (MLA 2004a), the framework for museums, libraries and archives to deliver and engage users in learning notes and can only help improve services and attract new people into libraries. *Inspiring Learning for All* provides libraries with advice on community profiling, consulting and involving new users.

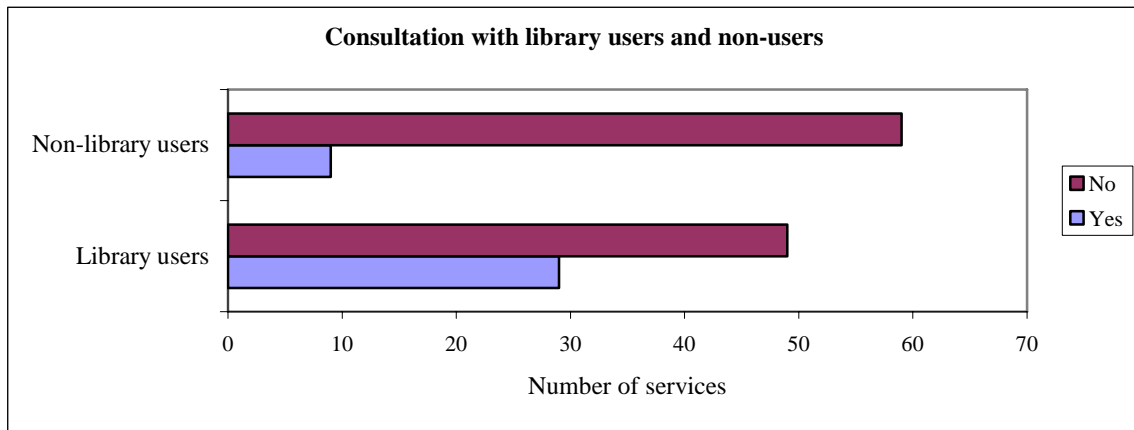


Figure 7 Scale of consultation with library and non-library users

Almost two thirds of respondents (53 of 81) target specific groups in their family learning provision. The list is exhaustive with some groups more prevalent than others, for example, families in Sure Start areas/areas of deprivation or the ‘hard to reach’ (21), adults with basic skills needs (8) and minority ethnic groups (8), travellers’ families (5) and refugees and asylum seekers (4). Target groups include families generally, adults and/or children/teenagers. The following list gives a flavour of the various groups libraries are attempting to reach with family learning activity:

- Children including children with dyslexia, babies under age one, under 5s and their parents, primary school children, school children, year one children in schools, children aged 8-12 and families, looked after children and carers, home-educated children, children in hospitals, teenagers
- Parents and carers including lone parents, new parents, teenage parents
- Unemployed and adults on low incomes
- Young offenders, prisoners and their families
- Dads and men
- Grandparents, *Silver Surfers* (internet users over the age of 50) and the over 50s
- Adults with basic skills needs
- Organisations that work with families
- Adults with disabilities
- Families of council employees involved in basic skills programmes
- Non-library users.

Libraries working with Sure Start would seem to be particularly successful in terms of identifying and targeting new groups of families to involve in library activity. Indeed, this would seem to be a reciprocal relationship, which benefits both libraries and Sure Start programmes. The employment of Sure Start librarians has been a significant development in the growing relationship between the early

years and the library sector since Sure Start Local Programmes were first set up in 1999¹⁴. This is illustrated in the existence of the Early Years Library Network, a CILIP group which “seeks to raise the quality of library services to pre-school children and their families”¹⁵ by providing support for specialist early years staff in the service. Established in 2003 as a three-year project, 122 local authorities and boards across the UK are subscribers.

Services are certainly engaging with families in a myriad of ways far beyond that of the stereotypical poster in the library. Staff are 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, indeed approximately 22 services utilised outreach either with development workers or Sure Start librarians and exploited links with other local agencies such as schools, nurseries, health service, community groups, Children’s Information Service, youth clubs and adult education tutors to promote their family learning services. As the following quotes reveal:

“Used outreach, engaging project workers from within the community to encourage activities in the libraries” (Metropolitan Council)

“We work closely with Sure Start and schools who have a greater knowledge of their ‘audience’ and mainly invite specific families personally to participate” (County Council)

“Work with Sure Start areas to encourage parental involvement, families in wards with high deprivation” (Metropolitan Council).

Talks in libraries, coffee mornings, events and enrolment sessions also provide opportunities to advertise the service. However, there is still a sense from the methods detailed that some services are more pro-active and experienced in the marketing of services than others. Again, this can depend on the physical space available in a library, “For major promotional events most libraries will put on displays. However, not every library has the space, staff confidence or expertise to do this effectively” (CILIP 2002, p.55).

A number of marketing tactics are utilised:

- Leaflets, letters, newsletters, mail shots, newspapers e.g. in community languages
- Posters e.g. in health centres, schools, libraries
- Use of local media e.g. press releases, radio

¹⁴ http://www.la-hq.org.uk/directory/prof_issues/eyes6.html

¹⁵ <http://www.cilip.org.uk/eyln/index.html>

- Local authority website
- Displays
- Word of mouth.

Adults Learning: Opportunities and Progression

Services were also asked if there were any opportunities for parents/carers to be a volunteer in library activities. In Sure Start programmes, for example, there is some evidence that parents who start as volunteers use their experience to raise confidence and/or skills and can be a useful stepping-stone to employment (NESS 2004).

Twenty-six services provide volunteering opportunities for parents compared with 53 that do not. Opportunities include involvement in supporting storytimes, summer holiday reading activities, homework clubs/study support, reading groups, ICT and craft sessions. There are some concerns about the use of volunteers in public libraries, particularly around the issue of volunteers taking the place of paid staff whilst other concerns include reliability, recruitment, supervisions and staff times (Cookman et al 2000). The recent Community Service Volunteers (CSV) Lending Time pilot project which aimed to demonstrate the ways in which volunteers could enhance and support libraries has trialled the use of volunteers in libraries and has been successful in illustrating the reciprocal benefits of such a relationship:

“Libraries could provide interesting and rewarding opportunities for volunteers, and ... involving volunteers could produce far-reaching benefits for library services. Not all experiences were positive, but the pilot demonstrated that the library sector held a lot of potential for hosting volunteering activities that were advantageous for all involved”¹⁶.

It is difficult to draw too many conclusions from such small numbers but it appears that reading and homework activities are useful vehicles for employment. This reflects findings from a study in 2000 in which 182 authorities in the UK reported that 21 services used volunteers for storytimes, 19 with children’s promotion activities and 15 as homework assistants (Cookman et al 2000). The following table illustrates the range of activities parents and adults generally may become involved with in public libraries:

¹⁶ http://www.csv.org.uk/NR/rdonlyres/E0FC72B2-BA2B-4B0D-B3ED-ECA21CE8D500/9223/LendingTime_EvaluationReport_SharedIntelligence.pdf

Volunteering opportunities for families	No. of services
Bookstart	1
Summer reading activity	4
Home library service	2
Storytimes	5
Rhymetime	2
Craft session	2
Homework clubs	6
Reading groups	3
Holiday activities	1
ICT	3
Sure Start	1
Study support sessions	2
Under 5s activities	1

Table 3 The range of volunteering activities available to parents in libraries

Almost all the responding services (74 of 81) have staff that are able to signpost parents to other learning opportunities. This ranges from information through advice to guidance; however, this depends on the confidence of staff, the training they have received and the service arrangements the library operates i.e. if guidance council staff are present in the library. Almost half of respondents (32) noted that staff could signpost parents to other opportunities, for example, referral to other agencies or colleges whilst twenty services recorded the provision of suitable information available for adults in libraries such as information sheets, leaflets or the library website.

The following quotes are indicative of those services with IAG arrangements:

“Signpost to other family learning opportunities of other adult learning providers through close working partnership with other agencies such as local collages, ACL and WEA etc.” (Metropolitan Council)

“All 46 libraries are Matrix accredited and can offer information and signposting in association with the local adult guidance service” (County Council)

“Staff are encouraged to signpost families to further learning opportunities both within the library and in the wider community” (County Council).

Summary

- There is some very good family learning practice taking place in public libraries in England. However, whilst appreciating the need to respond to local need, some services are performing better than others in this arena

- A wide range of marketing methods are being used to promote family learning in public libraries and raise awareness but this varies with some services making good use of local media
- There are low levels of consultation with both users and non-users of the library service although many services do evaluate their activities
- There appears to be a focus on early years activities within the family learning context
- There are high levels of partnership working between libraries and other agencies
- There was some confusion amongst library staff in terms of what family learning means and encompasses.

Conclusions and Recommendations for Further Research

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. However, in common with other public library authority research, this activity varies greatly across services ranging from services 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.

It appears that 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. While services are very much engaged with activities for children, which can be seen to come under the family learning umbrella, they are less involved with courses and activities with a decidedly adult focus. Similarly, whilst nearly all services had staff who could signpost parents on to other learning opportunities to greater or lesser degrees, this was not systematic and depended on whether parents asked for information and whether staff are suitably qualified in IAG, for example, services with matrix accreditation. Information and advice are services libraries seem happy with, guidance less so, presumably because this is seen as a service which should be provided by a individual with IAG qualifications and/or experience, and again this does vary greatly between authorities and libraries themselves within authorities. As Spacey and Goulding discovered in a study of support for adult learners in libraries, IAG ranged from drop-in sessions in libraries delivered by IAG partners, IAG centres and surgeries in libraries to IAG staff operating on a peripatetic basis to library staff qualified in IAG (Spacey & Goulding 2004).

While there are moves arising from *Framework for the Future* and its subsequent policy development such as *Public Library Service Impact Measures – Proposals for 2005/6* 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. Admittedly, family learning is identified as one of the further activities within the standards and services are encouraged to pursue and measure the impacts of such activity. This is aimed at professional staff as is training such as that emerging from CILIP, for example, the Branch and Mobile Group of CILIP ran a weekend school entitled *Family learning in today's libraries - Practical Solutions, Bright Ideas* in late 2004 which considered the national context and heard from successful family learning library projects including work in prisons; with travellers' families and the general practicalities of family learning in the library environment. Similarly, the Early Years Learning Network, also a CILIP group, hopes to give its training days in 2005 a family friendly focus. A guide for front-line staff would certainly seem to be a requirement to set the scene for this involvement, covering, for example, the issues surrounding work with parents and children, perhaps from a basic skills viewpoint in terms of building confidence amongst parents and offering ladders to progression both within and out with the library.

Funding was an issue in that money for family learning in libraries 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 LSC 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.

The development of family learning in public libraries in light of government plans for the roll out of Children's Centres is also under consideration at present. Children's Centres were announced in 2003¹⁷, a means to integrate education, family support, health services, employment advice and specialist support provision on one site. Most centres will emerge from Sure Start Local and Mini Programmes, Neighbourhood Nurseries and Early Excellence Centres under the strategic responsibility of local authorities. It is this latter point which offers library services not already involved in working relationships with Sure Start Local Programmes the opportunity to become involved at a strategic level in the provision of services of an educational nature perhaps, in family learning, in this context. There is already evidence, collected by the Early Years Library Network that some services have already engaged with this opportunity. Examples range from Tameside libraries working with Sure Start to establish Bookstart plus provision in all Children's Centres, to Derby,

¹⁷ Sure Start, 2003. *Children's centres— Developing Integrated Services for Young Children and Their Families. Start Up Guidance*. Available at: <http://www.surestart.gov.uk/doc/Toc48983354>

which has a new mobile - the Reading Rocket¹⁸, entirely aimed at children and young people, which visits five of the proposed Children's Centres.

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.

¹⁸ <http://www.derby.gov.uk/HiRes/Leisure/Libraries/About+the+Reading+Rocket.htm>

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Appendices

Family Learning in Public Libraries: an investigation

Dear

Here at the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE), we are currently mapping family learning activity in public libraries in England. We are doing this through means of a questionnaire that we hope you feel able to complete. Alternatively, *if you could pass this on to the most appropriate person in your service for completion this would be appreciated* as this represents the first time a national study of this kind has been attempted on this subject. We hope that the findings will be of interest to practitioners and policymakers in the field and used as a basis for further development work and guidance in public libraries.

NIACE has a recognised track record in the research and development of community and family learning and has worked with the Government and agencies such as the LSC. NIACE is the leading non-governmental organisation promoting the interests of adult learners.

Confidentiality

All questionnaire responses are confidential and will be used by NIACE for research purposes only. Authorities will not be identified individually in the summary report but referred to as a county or unitary authority, for example.

Please return your completed questionnaire in the pre paid envelope by DATE. If you have any queries about the questionnaire please contact Rachel Spacey, Research Assistant (Family Learning) in the Community Learning Team at NIACE.

Thank you for your co-operation.

Yours sincerely

Rachel Spacey
Research Assistant (Family Learning)

Family Learning in Public Libraries: an investigation

1. What is your role within the authority?

2. Which department/library do you work in?

3. How many public libraries are there within your authority?

Family Learning Activity

4a. Does your authority run family learning activities in its public libraries? (please tick)

Yes (go to 4c)	
No (go to 4b)	

4b. If 'no', please elaborate:

Now go to 8a

4c. If 'yes', in how many libraries does this take place?

--

4d. How often do they occur on average?

Weekly	
Fortnightly	
Monthly	
Yearly	

Other (please describe):

--

4e. How long have family learning activities been running in your public libraries?

Less than 1 year	
More than 1 year but less than 2	
More than 2 years but less than 3	
More than 3 years but less than 4	
More than 4 years but less than 5	
More than 5 years	
More than 10 years	

5. Please indicate the kinds of family learning activities/provision available in your libraries?

(tick all that apply)

Adult Learners' Week		Family literacy	
Baby Bounces/Rhymetime		Family numeracy	
Baby and Toddler Book Club		Family reading	
Big Book Share (prison libraries)		Grandparents' activities	
Bookstart/Books for Babies		Homework clubs	
Dads and Lads		Information for families	
Family cooking		Parenting classes	
Family crafts		Parenting books & resources	
Family ICT		Poetry	
Family learning centre		Storysacks	
Family Learning Week		Storytime/telling	

Other (please specify):

Ways of working

6a. Does your library service work in partnership to run family learning events/activities?

Yes (go to 6b)	
No (go to 6c)	

6b. If 'yes', please indicate which organisations/groups you work with to achieve this?

Colleges		Pre-schools	
Health service		Private sector	
Local LSC		Schools	
Museums		School libraries	
National organisations		Social Services	
Nurseries		Sure Start	
Other council departments		Voluntary and community sector organisations (including charities)	

Other (please specify)

6c. If 'no', please elaborate:

Now go to 7

7. How do your libraries fund family learning activity? (please tick all that apply)

Basic Skills Agency		Neighbourhood Renewal Fund	
Campaign for Learning		Private sponsorship	
Local authority		Single Regeneration Budget	
Learning and Skills Council		Voluntary and community sector organisations (including charities)	

Other (please specify):

Planning and consultation

8a. Has your service carried out any consultation into family learning in public libraries with:

	Yes	No
Library users?		
Non-library users?		

8b. Please elaborate:

9a. Does the service target any particular groups in its family learning provision?

Yes (go to 9b)	
No (go to 10)	

9b. If 'yes', who?

9c. How? (e.g. marketing methods, outreach)

Families: Adults Learning

10a. Are there any volunteering opportunities for parents in public libraries?

Yes	
No	

10b. Please elaborate:

11a. Once parents are engaged in family learning activity in the library, are staff able to offer information, advice or guidance about other learning opportunities?

Yes	
No	

11b. Please elaborate:

Please use this space to record any other comments you wish to make regarding family learning and public libraries, e.g. current issues and concerns, future developments, impacts:

THANK YOU

for taking the time to complete this questionnaire.

Please return it to *Rachel Spacey* at NIACE in the accompanying prepaid envelope.

*We would also appreciate any documents relating to family learning activity in your libraries e.g. evaluations of activities, policies etc. *