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RESEARCH ACTIVITIES IN PUBLIC LIBRARIES

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**A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment
of the requirements of the
University of Northumbria at Newcastle
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis focuses on the relationship between public libraries, that is, those library services provided by local authorities under the 1964 Public Libraries and Museums Act for use by the general public, and research conducted in such services by professional library staff - 'practitioner-researchers' - within the local government context. The aims of the study are:

- To examine the relationships between local authorities, public library services, and research activities.
- To review and evaluate contemporary research activities in public library services carried out by practitioner-researchers.
- To identify and investigate the use of particular research methods and techniques used by practitioner-researchers.
- To analyse, and provide a clear understanding of, limitations in current practice.

Chapter One introduces the study and states the parameters and constraints of the research. The time period covered by this thesis is from the 1964 Public Libraries and Museums Act until April 1998.

Chapter Two argues that as local government moves from a traditional model of service provision to a model of activities in support of strategic policy objectives, more attention will need to be given to 'deep' research in order to address cross-cutting issues.

Chapter Three reviews the public library research scene from three perspectives, historical, thematic and current, and demonstrates the emergence of a more coherent approach with co-ordination and funding at a national level. It also shows that research methods remain undeveloped in the public library service as a whole. Research activity is largely confined to simpler issues of service development and does not extend to research addressing the impact of the service.

Chapter Four outlines and explains the methodology used for the fieldwork. It demonstrates the rigour incorporated in the naturalistic inquiry approach, verifies the sample, and describes the process of data analysis.

Chapter Five examines current practice in public library services through a series of twenty interviews with Chief Librarians. An overview of the findings is followed by a more detailed analysis which draws from the qualitative data. The analysis is set in context, making links with the earlier literature reviews. The closing section broadens the discussion to consider the influence of research on policy.

Chapter Six synthesises the themes of the thesis. A description of the new agenda, and an analysis of its implications for research and organisational structures, enables a reconsideration of the rationale for research in local government. It is argued that simply demonstrating the relevance of the service is not enough; the real contribution of research must be in terms of policy development. Approaches to research, and in particular research methods, are reviewed to assess their suitability and a way forward is identified.

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This thesis draws upon a wide range of primary and secondary sources and these have been identified at the end of each chapter. Chapter Three refers to two papers that were originally published in the *Public Library Journal*¹ and *Library and Information Research News*² and are reproduced in full in Appendices 1-2. Other publications based on the thesis are reproduced in Appendices 10-12.

¹ Goodall, D. L. 'It ain't what you do, it's the way that you do it': a review of public library research with special reference to methodology. *Public Library Journal*, 11 (3), 1996, p. 69-76.

² Goodall, D. L. Public library research methods: some observations based on an examination of 41 final reports of Public Library Development Incentive Scheme Projects. *Library and Information Research News*, 21 (68), Summer/Autumn 1997, p. 25-32.

DEFINITIONS OF TERMS

The definitions used in this thesis are as follows:

- 'public libraries': those library services provided by local authorities under the 1964 Public Libraries and Museums Act for use by the general public.
- 'library department': the department or directorate responsible for public libraries within a local authority. In other words it refers to the department/directorate as a whole and not just a library division, for example, Department of Leisure.
- 'local authority': an administrative body in local government, which may itself be defined as a system of administration of a county, district, etc. by the elected representatives of those who live there.
- 'practitioner-researcher': someone who holds down a job in some particular area and at the same time carries out research, however defined, which is of relevance to the job.

Definitions of 'research' match those used by the Library and Information Commission¹ as this terminology best matched that used by the interviewees quoted in Chapter Five.

- 'strategic research': research where practical applications are likely but cannot yet be specified.
- 'basic research': theoretical investigation and experimentation which seeks to understand the underlying principles.
- 'in-house research': research conducted within an organisation to benefit that organisation, even though there could be significant gains for others if the knowledge were to be shared.
- 'demonstrator projects': projects where the aim is to demonstrate how concepts can be put into practice.
- 'action research': projects which involve practical, participative objectives and techniques.

The term 'deep research' is also used and for the purposes of this thesis this is taken to mean research that extends into the full complexity of problems, in order to address the cross-cutting issues which are the priorities of local and central government today.

Prior to the interviews the library managers in the sample authorities were sent a letter outlining the study and explaining that the term research activities was being used very loosely to include the broad spectrum of activities that may be undertaken by library staff either singularly or in co-operation with others. The examples that were given included:

- surveys of library users to inform decision-making about stock or library layout
- the use of management information to examine the effects of changing opening hours or to justify expenditure
- market research in preparation for a new service
- investigative work to inform strategic planning and future development
- developing specific projects and applying for external funding from, say, local/central government, Arts Councils, European Union.

¹ Library and Information Commission Research Committee. *Prospects: a strategy for action: library and information research, development and innovation in the United Kingdom*, Library and Information Commission, 1998, p. 5.

CHAPTER ONE

Setting the scene

1.0 Introduction

This thesis captures a turning point for public libraries and their research activities. The election of a new Government in May 1997 brought an agenda of change and a recognition of the role that the public library service could play in helping to deliver that change. The new policy context in which services are planned and delivered centres on the key issues of regeneration, environmental sustainability, social inclusion, public health, community safety, lifelong learning and the information society. In local government the emphasis is also on democratic renewal and 'better government'. By interweaving these strands it is anticipated that the experience of democratic participation will become as central to people's lives as that of consuming services. In addition a whole range of issues from 'best value' to 'community participation' have emphasised the need for policy development and service improvement to be based upon sound information about needs, options and implications. This shift to 'joined up thinking' in policies and services will have to be underpinned by research and operations which span traditional organisational and departmental boundaries. This should be familiar territory for the public library service, it is after all "a classic example of the 'one-stop' approach"¹.

Throughout the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s the contribution of the public library service was often under-estimated or overlooked, though it was undoubtedly present. Various explanations can be pursued: in terms of local government organisation and management the service has not always been placed in the best possible position within local authority structures; in terms of assessment, even though the economy- efficiency- effectiveness drive of the 1980s eventually arrived at quality and choice with the Citizen's Charter in the 1990s, in the main public libraries are still being judged by the numbers of books issued, hours open, visits made, and money spent. It can also be shown that, at different times, neither the overseeing Government departments, professional organisations, nor practitioners themselves have grasped opportunities to capitalise on the contributions that public libraries make to broader policy objectives. For example, despite the time and effort invested by Government in a manual of performance indicators for public libraries, it was acknowledged that the approach being presented was not the most suitable:

Ideally one would like to know exactly how the application of public library funds affects the quality of life, learning, work etc. This is not feasible. However, it is possible to relate the application of public library funds to the amount and quality of services provided ...²

Where funding has been made available at a national level via, say, the Public Library Development Incentive Scheme, the success of the projects in achieving sustained impact has been questioned. On a professional level it has been observed that "the public library

has many friends - but not enough in 'high places'.³ The President of the Society of Chief Librarians has commented on the profession's "unnerving ... collective inability to define the core purposes of the service, to examine and verify its continued value to society and ... to enlist effectively at local or national levels, the political support necessary to its future."⁴ Despite the volume of work carried out in-house by practitioners the evidence is of a fragmented, low-key, pragmatic approach to research. For example, a recently compiled database⁵ indicates a wide range of research activity taking place in public library services. Almost all public library services are conducting management information gathering exercises, analysing census data and producing performance indicators but fewer are using qualitative techniques or tackling the assessment of needs. Although there is evidence of service innovation it is uneven; some library services are making use of research and investigation by obtaining funding however most are not. This confirms that "[public library] research is largely divided between localised efforts, with hardly any transferability, and larger-scale projects devised and carried out by academically-based researchers working to some extent to their own agenda"⁶. This situation has been summed up as being one where "although there is a great deal of development in the public library field, too often the activity is fragmented, not transferable, short-term, superficial, opportunistic, and poorly communicated."⁷

In recent years the British Library⁸, central government⁹, and research centres such as LISU¹⁰ and CERLIM¹¹ have acknowledged that the public library sector could benefit from help to exploit fully research and development opportunities and overcome practical problems. To date there has been relatively little joint research between public libraries and other services within authorities, between library services, or, for that matter, collaborative projects with academic institutions, commercial suppliers and so on. Although funders such as the British Library and the European Union stress the necessity of partnership and co-operation there are overarching tensions between collaboration and competition. It is hardly surprising that there little evidence of consolidation of research findings and transferability in the professional literature when there is still a need to facilitate co-operative work and dissemination, both within local authorities and between public library services. In the past the mismatch between the research process and practice has often been blamed on the divergences between funders, academic researchers and practitioners in the public library sector, as the following comments illustrate:

Research has to stand up to rigorous scrutiny and have more than local applicability. (Funder)¹²

Too many in public librarianship display an apparent distrust of theory; this has contributed to a neglect of basic research in the field. There appears to be an influential body of opinion which demands that research findings be immediately applicable in practice. (Researcher)¹³

I do not want a piece of research that is academically rigorous, analytically comprehensive, methodologically impeccable, unreadable, 200 pages too long and

two years too late. What I want is an OK investigation which is analytically and methodologically maybe 80% satisfactory, brief, of practical utility, and timely. (Practitioner)¹⁴

Without a substantial foundation of basic or pure research, applied research has little, if any, validity.

In defence of the public library service it must be said that it has, like all other local government services, had to cope with unremitting change. Usherwood¹⁵ calculates that between 1979 and 1996 the then Government introduced no fewer than 210 Acts that have affected the functions, responsibilities and shape of local government. Given the extent and scope of this change one might have expected to see more evidence of strategic research activity. However, as a study conducted for, LARIA, the Local Authorities Research and Intelligence Association found, local authority research is extremely varied; it is carried out mostly in-house, with no specific budget, using quantitative rather than qualitative approaches and in an environment where “a strong corporate commitment to research is still the exception rather than the rule.”¹⁶ The LARIA study reported that in only 17% of authorities did research make a key contribution to policy, in 73% it made some contribution and in 9% little contribution; this raises the question of how decisions are being made and the quality of information on which they are based. Snape and Boddy observe how the LARIA findings clearly demonstrate the importance of research to the ‘intelligent local authority’, able to learn and able to adapt to the changing context for governance but also note that, at the same time, “research remains marginal to much mainstream local authority activity. It survives, paradoxically, in resource terms in part because of its lack of visibility rather than because of its perceived importance and centrality to the policy process.”¹⁷ As the fieldwork for this thesis shows the situation in the public library service is much the same.

There are aspects of research activity that are, in theory, under the direct control of the profession such as research skills and methods but these are not known as areas of strength. Writing in 1998 Matarasso refers to “some reluctance within the library profession to embrace the need for better evaluation” and “the almost complete failure of community librarians to come to terms with the evaluation and measurement of their work.”¹⁸ The research carried out within library services is influenced by the personnel employed; this may range from ‘the reflective practitioner’ to contracted researchers on externally funded projects. Within the former group skills gaps may include the understanding and application of research; within the latter group research activity may be designed to meet specific project needs and as such may be isolated within the organisation and may not ‘get close to the customer’. Robson¹⁹ outlines the roles and relative advantages and disadvantages of practitioners, researchers and consultants in carrying out research projects. Developments since the early 1980s have placed increasing emphasis on accountability not only in local government but in education, health and nursing, social services and so on. It is important that professionals

can collect and analyse relevant information and evidence for reflective practice can be found in all of these fields. To give some examples, Webb's *Practitioner research in the primary school*²⁰ includes accounts of school-based research projects and so builds on concepts such as "extended professionalism"²¹ presented in Stenhouse's *Introduction to curriculum research*; Fuller and Petch's work on the reflexive social worker²² grew out of a training programme for inexperienced researchers run by the Social Work Research Centre at the University of Stirling since 1991; and there has been a considerable amount of literature produced following the launch of the NHS research and development strategy in 1991 that led to great changes in the role and status of research in the health service to the extent that "research-based knowledge has come to form a central core of policy and management initiatives ..."²³

Evidence for the rise of the practitioner-researcher in the public library field is not so striking. Coleman²⁴ speaking on the research carried out in public libraries by librarians at a conference in 1980 identified a number of problems; ten years later when speaking on the same topic at another conference Coleman still felt that they had not been resolved²⁵.

These problems were that:

- Librarians want research to be practical and directed towards real problem solving.
- Too much research is directed towards improving present systems and efficiency rather than improving effectiveness by increasing our knowledge and understanding of customer needs.
- Ideally research should be undertaken as a partnership between practising librarians and researchers.
- Librarians with good ideas need encouragement and funding to develop them through small-scale action learning projects.
- Research findings should be disseminated more effectively.
- Librarians should be given more influence in decisions about the research to be funded.

Coleman's examples of work being undertaken then by Birmingham Library Services emphasised the gap between public library service practitioners and library and information research initiators and funders:

In all of these projects ... the relationship between my department and other departments of the local authority is much more important than it is with other library and information service organisations. This will continue in the absence of any consistent or concerted approach to tackling these and similar issues within the library and information community. The most important focus for all local authorities, whatever their political complexion, is their customers ... Yet interest in customers and their needs is not ... accorded any priority by the main library and information research funders.²⁶

In 1995 the Public Library Review examined employee attitudes and organisational culture and in doing so raised questions about the research potential and calibre of staff²⁷. A

number of factors come into play here such as the fact that the image of the public library service is poor among potential recruits, so that, on the whole, public libraries are not recruiting high-flyers. Furthermore, some current staff are reluctant to develop new skills preferring to concentrate on the everyday routines. These findings about staff attitudes and organisational culture have crucial implications for the public library service's ability to move forward. If public library staff do have any research background, and as the profession is now graduate-entry this is not an unreasonable assumption to make, it is not visible in operational terms:

The generation of new ideas requires a receptive climate which looks outward to influences in the external environment for inspiration and challenge. However, none of the case study authorities had regular contacts with universities and colleges which conduct research relevant to public libraries. Nor are leading practitioners and consultants invited to visit to discuss how their work could improve the service ... the impression ... is of authorities whose perspective is predominantly inward-looking. There is scant emphasis on seeking new opportunities and initiating research to fill significant gaps in knowledge and know-how.²⁸

In local authority terms the outlook for public library research activities would not seem to be good. Chapter Three reports a study by Pluse and Prytherch that examined the staffing resources available to public library and information services to support research and investigation locally and found them to be lacking²⁹. In practice three sources of research expertise are available to local authorities: in-house research staff, professional research contractors, and academic research contractors. Blackman³⁰ reports the results of a 1991 survey that estimated that the number of graduates employed on quantitative social research in the UK was about 9,000 of which 17% were employed in the local government sector, primarily by housing, planning, social services and chief executive's departments, though in practice research is often part of a range of other activities carried out. The exception would appear to be social services where there is the expectation that services are based on assessments of need and evaluated for their effectiveness and relevance to users.

A further weaknesses of public library research activity is in terms of research methods and methodology. Several writers have commented on the paucity of methods in public library research because although a great deal of research had been undertaken there is no real sense of progress methodologically. For example, the methods used are not necessarily appropriate to the problem being considered or the situation in which the research is taking place. Meadows³¹ compares library and information research with research in the sciences. Whereas in medicine the theoretical framework for research is agreed upon and research findings can be built upon in a systematic and continuing way, in the social sciences there is disagreement about what theoretical framework to apply and several models may be used within the same area of research. As a consequence such research often lacks what Meadows calls the "element of progression"³². It is then possible to reconsider the complaint of practitioners that research does not produce immediately applicable results for their

situation. According to Meadows research with a methodology related to the natural sciences tends to be driven by its own internal logic. It may prove difficult for practitioners to relate the purpose of such research to their day-to-day activities. At the same time, research with a social science methodology may appear to address librarians' more immediate concerns, but it may lead to few results that are generalizable and so applicable to a range of environments. Meadows accepts that in both cases practitioners may complain about the applicability of research but goes on to comment that such an attitude "often reflects a lack of understanding amongst librarians of the nature of research" and that "public libraries, which constitute a particularly difficult constituency to investigate in a fruitful manner, are a case in point" as "a significant number of senior public librarians have little background in research, and so do not know what to expect of it."³³

There are problems in identifying the research issues and asking the right questions. It can be argued that an enrichment of methods would enable public librarians to find better answers to their questions, and to answer previously unresolved questions. The better application of methods would enable public librarians to answer harder questions. There is a need for an analysis of appropriate methods and their successful application to provide examples of good practice. It has been observed that "too often a known and tried method of research determines the problem to be investigated."³⁴ For Stewart³⁵ some of the problems surrounding methodology stem from the limited range of methods and not asking the right research questions. Stewart also highlights the fact that proven methodologies are rarely adapted³⁶ or evaluated after use. This point was also made by Luckham in a study of reading habits and library use: "we need more to repeat studies to check earlier findings and trends, more precision and rigour in the investigations, more specific hypotheses for testing ..."³⁷ For Stoker the lack of dissemination has resulted in the duplication of work and the failure to transfer results into practice.³⁸ Urquhart and Irving, in a study of methodology concerning access to libraries, felt that the problem of weak methods stemmed from inadequate training whereby some of the basic principles of research are ignored in research into libraries and information services:

A common way of trying to discover the reasons for non-use is to ask questions about hypothetical services. Natural scientists abandoned this method centuries ago when they stopped asking how many fairies could dance on the end of a pin.³⁹

Since the 1970s and 1980s questions have been raised concerning the adequacy of the research methods being used for public library research activity, for example, assessing the contribution of the service:

While ... performance measures are essential for assessing library services they do not add up to a sense of purpose and primary policies for libraries. Nor do they by any means tell the whole story. They do not help us to understand and evaluate the more intangible benefits of libraries.⁴⁰

The response to such criticisms has been minimal with the result that, on the whole, public librarians have continued to conduct research using relatively simple methods to tackle

relatively simple operational problems. There are obviously other factors to consider - and some of them are explored in later chapters - however, it is apparent that there is a gap between the contribution that the public library service can make to society and the demonstrability of this contribution. Much effort to date has concentrated on showing what public library services do with things - such as books, technology and money - for people; it has not shown what people can do with the things that are provided by the service:

The activities of public libraries are assumed to have merit but we need to know much more about the impact of services on individuals or local communities. Moreover in the public sector 'measurement' is never a simple statistical exercise. It is all too easy to count the obvious and fail to see what is significant.⁴¹

The turning point then may be seen as the maturing of a research approach underpinned by the '3Es' - economy, efficiency, effectiveness - to one based on the 'new Es' of equity and experience, a switch from accounting to social accounting. Some would say that this shift in thinking is inevitable; others that it is the culmination of a combination of critical changes. This thesis argues that to tackle the cross-cutting issues raised by the new agenda requires research methods to be reviewed to reflect issues of equity and experience. It is this emerging approach to research that has the potential for generating findings that, by being of value to practitioners, the profession and policy makers, will demonstrate the contribution of the service at the highest level.

1.1 Outline of the thesis

The remainder of this chapter gives the aims and the structure of the thesis and reviews key themes and findings. The area of study is described in general, parameters relating to the scope and purpose of the research are stated, and the distinctive qualities of the thesis are discussed. This thesis focuses on the relationship between public libraries, that is, those library services provided by local authorities under the 1964 Public Libraries and Museums Act for use by the general public, and research conducted in such services by professional library staff - 'practitioner-researchers' - within the local government context. The aims of the study are:

- To examine the relationships between local authorities, public library services, and research activities.
- To review and evaluate contemporary research activities in public library services carried out by practitioner-researchers.
- To identify and investigate the use of particular research methods and techniques used by practitioner-researchers.
- To analyse, and provide a clear understanding of, limitations in current practice.

To give an overall structure, Chapters Two and Six look at broader relationships between research and service delivery in local government. Chapters Three, Four and Five examine in detail the practice of research in one statutory area of local authority service, the public

library service, as an exemplar to enrich our understanding of the relationship between research and service provision. In terms of methodology, Chapter Two assesses the literature of local government and management studies, and these findings are validated at the general level regarding the public library profession by further desk research using secondary and primary sources in Chapter Three, and at the specific service level by investigative fieldwork in Chapter Five. Chapter Six explores, via the literature, the deeper concerns and theory arising out of these preceding chapters.

1.2 Key themes and findings

Chapter Two initiates the argument that as local government moves from a traditional model of service provision to a model of activities in support of strategic policy objectives, more attention will need to be given to deep research, that is research that extends into the full complexity of problems, in order to address the cross-cutting issues which are the priorities of local and central government today. This chapter uses four models to provide a structure for discussing changes in the organisation and management of both local authorities and the public library service, and the associated role for research, from the 1960s to the 1990s.

Chapter Three reviews the public library research scene from three perspectives, historical, thematic and current, and demonstrates how the historical situation of fragmented, localised, low-key research activity is being replaced by a more coherent approach with clearer co-ordination, direction and funding at national level. In terms of chronology the starting date for the thesis is 1964 with the Public Libraries and Museums Act. The split between historical and current work is set at 1995, which, in retrospect, has been described as a “watershed”⁴² in terms of the working out of ‘old’ policies and ideas linked to the historical perspective and the emergence of ‘new’ policies. The assessment of ‘current developments’, involving the Society of Chief Librarians, the Advisory Committee on Libraries, the Library and Information Commission, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the British Library Research and Innovation Centre, continues up until April 1998 with the Government’s response to *New Library: the people’s network*⁴³. The historical review demonstrates that public library research was not centrally driven. The thematic approach identifies five key problems, namely leadership and co-ordination, agenda-setting, funding, research skills and research methods. And the report on current progress shows that the issues related to leadership and co-ordination, agenda-setting, funding, and research skills are being addressed on a national basis. Research methods are still a concern, particularly given that the Library and Information Commission has identified the involvement of practitioners in research as one of the “critical success factors”⁴⁴ in implementing and sustaining the national research strategy. The findings from three literature-based studies reported in Chapter Three illustrate that, on the whole, research activity is largely confined to simpler issues of service development and does not extend to deep research addressing the socio-economic impact of the service. It is evident from the literature that the research methods employed and skills demonstrated are

appropriate to the operational level of development but that public library staff do not have the skills needed for policy and strategic development. Such assertions are tested through the fieldwork.

Chapter Four outlines and explains the methodology used for the fieldwork. It demonstrates the rigour incorporated in the naturalistic inquiry approach, verifies the sample, and describes the steps followed in the data analysis.

Chapter Five examines current practice in public library services. An overview of the findings is followed by a more detailed analysis which draws from the qualitative data enabling the practitioner's voice to be heard. The analysis is set in context, making links with the local government and public library service literature reviewed in Chapters Two and Three. This reinforces earlier findings concerning relationships between organisational structure and research policy and activity in local government; and regarding the fact that the improvements in leadership and direction for public library research have not yet had an impact on research activities at local level. It also provides evidence for limitations in research skills and methods. The closing section broadens the discussion to consider the influence of research on policy.

Chapter Six synthesises the themes from the preceding chapters. Firstly, a description of the new agenda, and an analysis of its implications for research and organisational structures, enables reconsideration of the rationale for research in local government. Secondly, the contribution of research is affirmed by showing its ability to demonstrate the relevance of the public library service to meeting the demands of this agenda. It is then argued that simply demonstrating the relevance of the service is not enough; the real contribution of research must be in terms of policy development. This argument is supported by referring to the analysis of the fieldwork and by assessing changes in the approach taken to evaluation and research. Finally, approaches to research and research methods, are reviewed at a broad level to assess their suitability for tackling the issues raised by the new agenda. Given that the social policy agenda of the Government requires research to inform and underpin policy development it is evident that the research capacity within the public library service remains underdeveloped, for example the service rarely engages with policy development at corporate level within local authorities. If the strategic potential of the service is to be realised then public library research must reinvent itself. A way forward is identified.

1.3 Parameters relating to the scope and purpose of the research

1.3.1 Area of study

The ideas expressed by Parlett and Hamilton⁴⁵ can be adapted to describe the "milieu" for public library research activities. This is the network of institutional, social, cultural, economic and political variables which interact in complicated ways to produce, in each local

authority, a unique pattern of circumstances within which research activity takes place. For instance, there are constraints, say, administrative and financial, on the organisation of research in the public library service; there are pervasive assumptions about priorities held by senior managers and committee members; there are also the characteristics of individual practitioner-researchers, their experience, professional orientation, private goals and so on; and there are user perspectives to take into account. To take a simple example, the introduction of, say, consultation activities will change relationships between service providers and users, they may even enable providers to reach non-users of the service and encourage them to become users and the feedback obtained may question patterns of service delivery and challenge political decisions. Acknowledging the diversity and complexity of the research milieu or framework is a prerequisite for any serious study.

It is not possible to account for all of the factors noted above within the confines of this thesis, and the core issues for the doctoral research could have been placed in any one of several wider contexts. The area of study selected focuses on a limited set of relationships regarding public library research activities, that is, the relationships between local authorities, public library services, and research activities as carried out by practitioner-researchers. In any public library service there is a wide network of formal and informal relationships which impinge on those stated. Chapter Two delineates the chosen context by exploring the impact and influence of local and central government on the public library service chiefly in terms of organisation and management; inevitably some major issues, say, the impact of the threat of compulsory competitive tendering and the 1988 Green Paper *Financing our public library service*⁴⁶, are not covered in this thesis as they are already well covered in the literature. Similarly in Chapter Three other professional associations such as Aslib and other initiatives such as the Public Libraries User Survey⁴⁷ could have been included, as could have the work of the research centres funded by the British Library such as CRUS and CLAIM/LISU as well as independent centres such as the Public Library Management Research Unit set up at Leeds Polytechnic in 1975 and the recently established Centre for the Public Library in the Information Society at Sheffield University's Department of Information Studies. All were excluded for the sake of brevity but this does not deny that their impact is tangible. In addition, the context described is not stable one and the recurring element in whatever milieu or conceptual framework is chosen is that of change. To reiterate, the time period covered by this thesis is from the 1964 Public Libraries and Museums Act until April 1998, the end of the new Government's first year in office. Having said that, there are a number of continuing and imminent developments that are likely to have an impact on public library services. For example, the potential impact of the consultative Green Papers *Modernising Local Government: Local Democracy and Community Leadership* and *Improving Local Services Through Best Value* was recently discussed by Fisher⁴⁸. In addition consultation papers released by DCMS in July 1998 relating to the Government's Comprehensive Spending Review include proposals to "take immediate steps to enhance the role of the Library and

Information Commission by giving it responsibility for undertaking those functions relating to library research currently undertaken by the British Library."⁴⁹ In Chapter Six, it is the impact of the *changing* pattern of organisation and management, aims and objectives, values and aspirations, that is taken as the key factor affecting research activities in public libraries.

1.3.2 Desk research

Throughout the thesis the emphasis is on developments in the UK and particularly the public library service within the English local government context. Whilst it is evident from the literature review that the topic of practitioner-research is under discussion in other countries⁵⁰ and in different professional contexts such as the health service, the focus of this study makes it both difficult and inadvisable to draw parallels from other countries and sectors. This is not to ignore the potential usefulness of what is available but to acknowledge that to fully incorporate such dimensions is beyond the scope of this thesis. The literature review draws mainly from secondary sources although some primary sources were consulted, namely the minutes of the various Library Association Committees concerned with research, and those of the Public Library Research Group and the Library and Information Research Group. Efforts were made to obtain access to the minutes of the Library Advisory Council for England, LAC(E), and the Library and Information Services Committee for England, LISC(E). Those for the LAC(E) are in the process of being transferred to the Public Record Office and will not be available for public consultation until Autumn 1998⁵¹; a complete set of minutes for LISC(E) is currently unobtainable, not being held by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport⁵², the Public Record Office⁵³ nor the Library and Information Commission⁵⁴. While it was possible to gain access to minutes from the British Library Research and Development Department's Advisory Committee for the Research and Development Department, BLRIC⁵⁵ was unable to identify the whereabouts of the papers emanating from the Group on Research in Public Libraries committees within the allotted timescale. In addition a collection of documents was compiled pertaining to research activities in public library services and local authorities during the fieldwork and examples from these have been used throughout the thesis.

1.3.3 Fieldwork sample

The initial unit of sampling was 'public library services in England' and Chapter Four provides a breakdown of the numbers and types of public library services in England. The scope of the target population was then modified to reflect the research objectives, the research budget, access considerations, a wish not to duplicate recent projects, the experience of the researcher, and the impact of local government re-organisation, to comprise those public library services within the geographical areas of the North-East and the West Midlands. The survey population then numbered 25 public library services and was selected by non-probability sampling, namely purposive sampling. While the sample is not representative of the wider population in the quantitative sense, neither is it ad hoc - instead the relationship is

one where “the sample is designed to provide a close-up... view of particular units ... which are relevant to or appear within the wider universe.”⁵⁶ This is appropriate where the aim of the research is “... to demonstrate in a detailed way the operations of a particular set of social processes in a specified context” and the relationship can be viewed as one “where the sample is designed to encapsulate a relevant range of [experiences] in relation to the wider universe, but not to represent it directly.”⁵⁷ As for the 20 public library services in the final sample, this constituted a range that allowed for the generation of data to explore similarities and differences rather than to make statistical comparisons.

1.4 Distinctive qualities of the thesis

The thesis considers public library research activities in a specific, rather than a general setting, that is, the public library service is considered within the context of changes in local government management and organisation since the 1960s. The core of the field work focuses on the experience of senior library managers many of whom, if not all, could be described as practitioner-researchers. Contrary to expectations, when the background literature on research activities in public libraries was assessed it emerged that there *is* a wide range of research methods available in the literature but they were, apparently, not being used by practitioners. While there is research going on in public library services there is a lack of reflection amongst practitioners, and a lack of understanding in the sector as a whole, of how to bring about change. There has been a tendency in the past to make cross-sectoral comparisons^{58,59} hence the relationship between public libraries and research is considered within the wider context of the local authority. There have been many changes in the nature and management of local authorities in recent years. Some of these changes have been adopted, if not developed, by the public library service, for example, customer care and performance measurement. For others such as enabling economic and community development, the contribution of the public library service has been less visible; nevertheless it has been observed that “when one can demonstrate that a cut or a gain in public library budgets is a cut or a gain in measurable social, educational and economic areas, then the tasks of central and local government in fighting for the service will be greatly eased.”⁶⁰

The final chapter of the thesis focuses on the underlying linkages between research and practice within the central and local government context. This is a pertinent direction to take given the fact that during the fieldwork period there was a change of Government. There has been unprecedented interest in the public library service and the Government now accepts that the public libraries can contribute to achieving policy objectives. As one chief librarian has said “we are getting noticed in new circles and we are on the cusp of a golden age.”⁶¹ Bearing in mind that the fieldwork findings had shown that the research capacity within the public library sector was underdeveloped, and the public library service did not engage with policy development at corporate level within local authorities, it was worth teasing out the implications of these findings for the future strategic potential of the public library service.

Exploring these relationships between public library services, local authorities and research activities gives this thesis originality and timeliness. Furthermore, in being written at a time of change, and by disentangling the elements of that change, the closing chapter of this thesis provides a number of research issues for future researchers.

It is intended that what follows will illuminate rather than represent the time that it was written; a time of changes, challenges and choices.

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CHAPTER TWO

Research in local government

2.0 Introduction

The changes in the 'emerging roles of local government' in terms of organisation and management, have had profound implications for the place of information and research:

... local authorities have had to respond not merely to changes brought about by Government legislation but to changes in society. In addition, the pressures brought about by resource constraint have forced reconsideration of the activities undertaken by local authorities and their ways of working. The fundamental reconsideration of activities required by all these changes and pressures is aided by research.¹

A local authority can become empowered in its dealings with central government by having at its disposal a strong research and intelligence capability. This is particularly important where central government makes decisions about the powers and expenditure of local authorities. Furthermore, research can inform new ways of working. Local authorities now recognise the need to be close to their public and research extends the means for learning of public concerns. Similarly an emphasis on evaluating performance requires research approaches that go beyond the collection of performance indicators. For example, in Birmingham one of the four broad goals set out in the *Policy Framework* is involving local people in the decisions that affect them and this has been achieved by mechanisms such as Retail Markets Customer Forums, focus groups to involve people in land use planning and design, City Pride Market Research, and people with a disability investigating the extent to which buildings actually meet their needs.² In addition greater recognition given to the role of local authorities in community leadership requires a deeper understanding of community issues:

As local authorities are called upon to play a role with partners in the processes of urban and rural regeneration, research can deepen the understanding of the social and economic forces at work. Resource constraint in a society of ever-rising public aspirations requires a readiness to work in new ways, requiring research to evaluate their effectiveness ... local authorities are facing new and complex problems which demand new understanding, coupled with a need to rethink approaches to long familiar issues to which former responses are seen as inadequate. A learning local authority is required and research can build the learning local authority.³

This statement hints at some of the 'harder questions' facing local authority researchers and as such is a defence of the value of research in a local government context. Fenwick is more concise in considering whether a local authority needs research by simply posing the question: "how many private industries with the annual budget of a medium-sized local council would be prepared to forgo a research and development capability, or be defensive about its existence?"⁴

This chapter argues that as local government moves from a traditional model of service provision to a modern model of activities in support of strategic policy objectives, more attention will need to be given to 'deep' research, that is research that extends into the full

complexity of the problem, in order to address the cross-cutting issues which are the priorities of local and central government. This chapter affirms the importance of research in local government and describes the current state of play by referring to the results of a recent survey carried out by Boddy and Snape⁵ for LARIA, the Local Authorities Research and Intelligence Association which was established in 1974 to promote the development and understanding of research practices in local government. An examination of four conceptual models of local government organisation and management provides a structure for examining selected changes in the organisation and management of both local authorities and public library services from the 1960s to the 1990s, and to make general points concerning changes in the role and use of research in each case. Examples are given to illustrate the contribution of the public library service. From this discussion of the application of research and the implications for research in terms of organisational arrangements, conclusions are drawn about the relationship between research, policy and practice in local government at the macro and theoretic level. The emphasis throughout is on research rather than developments in information systems or information technology; this is not to dismiss their importance but to limit the focus of this chapter. References to Fenwick⁶, Isaac-Henry⁷ and Dockery⁸ may be consulted for background material. The issues raised by this literature review, concerning, for example, the sort of research that local authorities and public library services should be undertaking within the current environmental context to tackle 'the wicked issues' are reconsidered in Chapter Six.

2.1 The development of research in local government

The first local government research and intelligence unit was established by the London Government Act 1963, creating a unit within the newly formed Greater London Council. Research and information units are now recognised to have a unique function in empowering the local authority. This stance is one which appears to have developed over time. The Local Government Act 1972 led to the reorganisation of local government in England and Wales in 1974 and gave the newly established county councils the power to carry out research relating to the county area but it was not a requirement. However the Bains Report⁹ in 1972 envisaged that a central research and intelligence unit would fulfil an information and forecasting role, a research and intelligence function, and would provide support for corporate planning. Blackman notes that "the new local authorities paid greater attention than in the past to research, but there was more emphasis on creating corporate planning units ... than on establishing research units."¹⁰ Since then research activity has developed unevenly.

2.2 What does research mean in local government terms?

Research in local government covers a wide range of activities. LARIA'S definition is:

Research uses knowledge, seeks out new evidence and analyses relationships that are not necessarily available or understood by decision-makers and by practitioners in the normal working of an organisation. Research will use a wide range of skills

and facilities both for gathering data and analysis ... Knowledge, information, analysis and techniques are the distinctive contributions of research to the working of local government.¹¹

Despite this vague definition LARIA's study of research in local authorities found evidence of greater value being placed on research in recent years: in 42% of authorities research had become more valued over the past five years and in 25% much more valued¹². The findings showed a wide range of research activities being undertaken, including basic information, socio-economic patterns and trends, monitoring and analysis of internal management practices, stock taking, analysis of service delivery, needs assessment, marketing, strategic development, resource maximisation and allocation and evaluation and impact studies¹³. The majority of local authorities anticipated a continuing increase in research.

2.3 The organisation of research in local government

Blackman¹⁴, Fenwick¹⁵ and Gostick¹⁶ all describe the diverse patterns of current arrangements. The location of research within a local authority varies and it may not be clearly separated from activities such as planning and economic development. Where a local authority has a central research unit this is usually located in the chief executive's or finance department; central units can also stand alone or be accommodated in a particular service department. For example, in Durham County Council the Economic and Corporate Research and Information Unit forms part of the Economic Development and Research Unit which in itself was set up "to give greater emphasis and priority to the County Council's efforts to regenerate and diversify the economy of the County and to support the research and corporate activities of the authority."¹⁷ In 1996/97 the work of the Economic and Corporate Research and Information Unit focused on

- using its statistical resources to make a case for support from Central Government, the European Union and other bodies and for strategic policy formulation, for example, analysing the extent to which the County benefits from jobs outside its boundaries;
- assessing the skills needs of employers and potential growth industries;
- publishing performance indicators and undertaking public attitude surveys.¹⁸

Where there is no unit dedicated to central research, research is often a corporate function found in a central policy unit and, or, in individual service departments. For example, in the City of Sunderland much research to support bids for external funding involves the Policy and Regeneration Team, which, along with four other teams, forms the Chief Executive's Department. In addition, there is a Performance Review Team within the City Treasurer's Department who review Departments on a regular basis and whose work involves comparisons using statistical and other sources to assess performance; and, furthermore within Education and Community Services there is a Research and Policy Unit.¹⁹

In the metropolitan areas, the chief executive's department is a key location, for example, in Wolverhampton Council the Policy and Review Team are based in the Office of the Chief Executive and Policy Co-ordinator. The Team's key activities focus on corporate planning

and performance review, information services, and policy development, quality and service improvement which includes:

- developing the Council's market research strategy, undertaking or co-ordinating research on key policy areas and priorities, and producing Consumer Satisfaction Surveys.
- supporting research sponsored by service committees by providing advice on survey design and data analysis to departments and maintaining a central research register.²⁰

Formal joint teams are also a common model. Such units are less likely to undertake policy analysis and tend to concentrate more on the provision and analysis of statistical information, for example the Joint Strategy Unit for Stockton, Darlington, Hartlepool, Middlesbrough and Redcar and Cleveland Councils provides "strategic advice and statistical information for European matters and for highways, planning and economic development initiatives which cross Council boundaries."²¹

2.4 A picture of research in local government

LARIA's comprehensive review of the role of research in local government was conducted between January - June 1995 with the purpose of establishing the nature of the research carried out by or on behalf of local authorities and to provide guidelines for the development of research in local government²². This was in order to address the current context of apparently growing needs for research data combined with the severe resource constraints. The LARIA findings were based on questionnaire responses from 253 local authorities, almost half of all authorities in England, Scotland and Wales, and 15 case studies.

2.4.1 Structures

In line with the points made earlier regarding the organisation of research, 27% of authorities were structured on a centralised basis and 14% on a decentralised basis but the majority had developed a hybrid approach with 57% mostly decentralised and some centralised:

... this latter approach is the most effective means identified so far of ensuring that both departmental and corporate research needs are addressed. Departmental researchers appear better able to contribute to policy-making within their departments and may be more closely integrated to departmental policy teams ... research specialists in service departments are a useful model but they need to be complemented by a corporate research function. There should be some means of communication and co-ordination between researchers in these separate areas.²³

The study goes on, however, to put forward the view that more important for research than the formal structure is the larger organisational culture: "... where the barriers between departments and the centre have been eroded, larger issues of organisational culture had been scrutinised and new systems were put in place to ensure better support for corporate working" and it is noted that "any review of the organisation of research should be related to the need to develop an organisational culture reflecting the role of local authorities in a changing society and the need for research to support that role."²⁴

2.4.2 Research culture

Elements of what constitutes a 'research culture' were explored in both the survey and the accompanying case-studies. Research culture was defined by LARIA in terms of the "strength of commitment to research, resources devoted to it; priorities placed on it; and the extent to which research is integral to policy formulation and integration"²⁵. Findings indicative of a 'good' culture were that 51% of authorities felt that research reflected corporate priorities well or very well; 13% thought that the research capacity in the local authority was viewed as a valuable asset or a somewhat valuable asset; and 17% thought research was a key component in policy formulation²⁶. The case studies demonstrated that research culture and practice change over time and the strength of commitment to research is linked to its demonstrated worth and utility to key personnel within the local authority. It is also related to the wider organisational culture and established styles of management and decision-making. The place of research may also be emphasised at times of reorganisation when major new policies or 'strategic visions' are on the agenda or when the culture and operation of the authority are under review.²⁷

2.4.3 Co-operation

The need for co-operation between authorities and the use of external research is essential in times of resource constraint. One problem was that even within authorities there are difficulties of co-ordination with individual departments not, apparently, learning from one another nor making effective use of the work done by others: "... the connections between local authority research units, both internally and externally, are not well established and free-flowing."²⁸ In such a situation there is wasteful duplication of research resources and research is not fully used because staff are unaware of its existence. Hence LARIA recommends procedures to identify research requirements, improve internal communication and co-ordination, dissemination, and using national research at a local level.

This is not to imply that there is no co-ordination at a national level. In terms of research LARIA aims to provide a national forum for the sharing of technical knowledge and research methods via conferences, workshops and publications including conference proceedings and the newsletter *LARIA News*. In addition the Local Government Association, LGA, was formed in April 1997 by the merger of the Association of County Councils, the Association of District Councils and the Association of Metropolitan Authorities to provide leadership and increase the role and influence of local government. The Local Government Management Board, LGMB, provides services and support to all local authorities in England and Wales with a particular focus on management, personnel and governance issues. The LGMB has a Central Research Unit that commissions and co-ordinates research projects and papers on issues of key importance to local government and publishes *Research Link* twice a year; and an Information Service that also maintains SIGN (Shared Innovation and Good practice Network) - a database holding summaries and evaluation of local authority management

initiatives and practices. As part of its 1998/99 research programme the LGMB is commissioning a project investigating how local authorities have sought to enhance their strategic research capacity.²⁹

2.4.4 Good, and bad, practice³⁰

Factors associated with research which is successful at contributing to policy formulation were identified in the case studies and included:

- clear interpretation of data which was user-friendly and jargon-free;
- flexibility of researchers in producing results in short time scales, adapting research questions and design as required and willingness to take on new types of work;
- analysis which reflects and incorporates local circumstances;
- recommendations which are of practical value;
- objectivity and independence in interpretations and recommendations;
- findings discussed and compared to similar research undertaken elsewhere;
- and use of innovative methods for the design and conduct of research.

Factors militating against useful research contributions included:

- lack of clarity about the objectives and capabilities of research;
- lack of clear parameters for the research, with research questions changing over time;
- failure to keep to the research brief;
- unoriginal findings or a generally low quality product (for example, superficial errors or flawed methodology);
- use of developmental or experimental methods which were ill-suited to the task or took a long time to make operational;
- and failure to commission, design and conduct the research in such a way as to facilitate its passage through political barriers and processes.

Lessons for ensuring more successful research in future were framed in three categories:

- preparation of research briefs;
- trouble-shooting and safe-guarding against difficulties before they occur;
- and improving the nature of liaison between clients and researchers.

2.4.5 Agenda for action

LARIA sets out an agenda³¹ for authorities to review their approach to research including:

- an audit of in-house expertise and the resources being used in research;
- the need for corporate /departmental priorities to govern the use of research resources;
- the need for research staff to have the appropriate research skills and 'be adaptable, flexible and responsive to changing political demands, priorities, and subjects of interest';
- the development of staff to appreciate both the need for research and how to use research effectively;
- an appreciation of the contribution that research can make to the role of the councillor and consideration of how its results can be made accessible to councillors.

To meet these issues it is recommended that authorities should consider the establishment of organisational processes both on a corporate and departmental basis to review research needs including audits of the use of research resources both internally and externally, establishing priorities, drawing up research plans and setting out past results, and ensuring that research is both affordable and accessible. The report concludes:

Such processes must allow for the necessary flexibility to meet immediate and pressing issues. These issues will not be resolved unless both the need for research

and an awareness of its potential are appreciated widely in local authorities. If they are, a research culture can be built within which these issues can be more easily resolved. A research culture cannot be built in isolation but must develop out of an understanding that it is required by the emerging roles of local government.³²

These recommendations for review were taken on board by the Strategic Research Group for Birmingham City Council in 1996³³. The Group identified many problems such as the fact that the resources applied to the research functions were not sufficiently well-defined, costs and values of the work involved were not measured or judged, and there was no corporate or collective management of activities to ensure that they met strategic objectives; a lack of information management and partnership working; a lack of internal data resources which led to a reliance on purchasing data and so on. Recommendations were made both at the corporate level, such as establishing a corporate budget and an annual planning process, and at departmental level to identify responsibilities, encourage partnerships and the sharing of data. Somewhat ironically, the Group found that:

The central library provides for vital intelligence services on legislation and for bibliographic resources, as well as some on-line services. However this service does not have a very high profile and the post of Local Government Information officer was deleted some years ago. This is an area of work that needs attention.³⁴

2.5 Four models of local government organisation

Benington³⁵ describes four models of local government organisation:

- The Traditional Authority - this prevailed in most UK local authorities from the end of the Second World War until the late 1960s or early 1970s, and some of its defining values persist today.
- The Corporate Authority - this used corporate management models or management by objectives and became fashionable in the mid 1970s drawing from American business and the defence industry.
- The Commercial Authority - this was introduced into public sector organisations in the UK in the 1980s as part of the Government's attempt to introduce competitive mechanisms into the delivery of local public services.
- The Networked Authority - this was developed by a number of UK local authorities in the 1990s as part of their attempt to give clearer direction to their organisations during a period of structural change and uncertainty.

These four models provide a structure for the rest of this chapter which examines changes in the organisation and management of local authorities and public library services from the 1960s to the 1990s. The table overleaf summarises the differences between the four models and examples of organisation charts are included at appropriate points in this chapter to clarify the differences between the structures. A description of the traditional model serves as a starting point; the corporate and commercial models are considered in more depth as they have the strongest influence on the emerging model of the networked authority.

Table 2.1 Summary of four different local authority organisational models

	A. Traditional Public Administration	B. Corporate Management	C. Commercial Contractual Model	D. Networked Organisation
1. Approach	Strong but separate Depts. and Cmts. loosely co-ordinated by Policy Cmt. or Town Clerk.	Centralisation of both political and managerial power behind corporate rather than departmental objectives.	Introduces quasi-market relationships and commercial business principles into management and administration.	Draws upon private sector ideas/models of management such as Japanese approaches to strategy, quality and participative work organisation.
2. Organisation structure	Strong departmentalism with several tiers of middle management between CO and front-line work force; powerful Heads/Depts. & Chairs/Cmts.	Officer system under overall direction of a CX who has ultimate authority over the Dept. COs and who aims to co-ordinate the whole officer system behind corporate goals and priorities.	Authority split into either purchasers or providers of service; series of competitive stand-alone business units and devolved cost centres; Cmts./ Depts. drastically reduced in number and remit is to specify contractual requirements and put out work to CCT.	4 interacting centres of power and initiative; strong political leadership with small cabinet style political executive; small group of strategic managers with corporate responsibility for translating political values / strategy into action; groups of operational managers responsible for management / delivery of policies and programmes; front-line services with devolved responsibilities for budgets/staffing and decentralised action in response to/in conjunction with service users/community organisations.
3. Management style	Traditional hierarchical line management; little or no interdepartmental co-ordination at any level.	Scientific management principles such as MBO, PPBS, output measures of performance.	Power dispersed, control over information / resources lies as much with the devolved units as with the corporate centre.	Erosion of hierarchical line management; separation between strategic and operational management; reduction in tiers; authority builds networks of relationships / partnerships with organisations in public, private, voluntary and community sectors.

Abbreviations

CCT Compulsory Competitive Tendering
Cmts Committees
CO/s Chief Officers

CX Chief Executive
Depts Departments
LAN local area network

MBO Management by Objectives
p/c personal computer
PPBS Planned programming and budgeting systems

TC Town Clerk

Table 2.1 Summary of four different local authority organisational models (continued, abbreviations as previous page)

	A. Traditional Public Administration	B. Corporate Management	C. Commercial Contractual Model	D. Networked Organisation
4. Chief Exec. - role	TC advises Council and acts as the representative for COs but not as a CX with overall authority.	Likely to be a treasurer or accountant.	May well be a business manager from the private sector.	Innovator, change agent, possibly with a background in community or economic development.
5. Key question for Chief Exec.	Is it legal?	How do we get best value for money? How do we target corporate priorities?	How can we make our services more commercial and more financially competitive?	How to take account of the role of elected councillors? How to maintain cohesion/ commitment to strategic goals through the culture and value of the authority rather than by traditional management control mechanisms.
6. Policy Committee - role	Acts as co-ordinating body and clearing house for other Cmts. but does not impose policy or budget priorities.	Policy (& Finance) Cmt. decides corporate priorities and sets the policy and financial guidelines for each of the various Depts. and services.	N/A-	N/A
7. Corporate-ness	No strong corporate direction of the political or officer system.	Strong corporate direction.	Fragmented and atomised.	Clearly articulated set of corporate values and programmes of cultural change.
8. Communications	Up and down Depts.; little between Depts.	Main lines of communication flow to and from the CX and corporate centre.	N/A	Less formal with face-to-face talking and networking across, as well as up and down, the organisation; shortening in the lines of communication between the front line and the strategic centre.
9. Information systems	Concentrated in separate Depts.; paper-based.	Concentrated at CX and corporate centre; data held on a mainframe, available to top managers but rarely to individual Depts., front line staff / users.	Systems devolved rather than centralised, based on p/cs as well as mainframes.	Supplemented by email and p/c based LANs which may include councillors, front line staff and even user groups.

The four conceptual models are of course ideal types, and in practice local authorities usually exhibit a mixture of various characteristics. However, they are useful as a means of illuminating the ways in which different organisational structures can reflect or reinforce different patterns, for example, of information use. At this point it is worth stressing that local authorities are not only organisations providing services, they are also political institutions. A key issue for local government management is how it combines both roles; there will be tension between the two because service delivery requires stability and the political process involves debate and disagreement. Furthermore the administrative structures are not neutral or value-free but reflect local and central government ideas, beliefs, policies, and conflicts. As Wilson and Game note in their presentation of 'four models of strategic choice' local authorities have significant choice about the kind of authority they wish to be:

It is important that authorities themselves recognise and address this choice because, while there is no single model of 'good' local authority management and organisation, there is 'fitness for purpose' ... unless an authority makes a clear choice about its role and purpose it can hardly hope to develop appropriate or fitting organisational arrangements.³⁶

It is with this in mind that we consider the four models.

2.6 The traditional authority

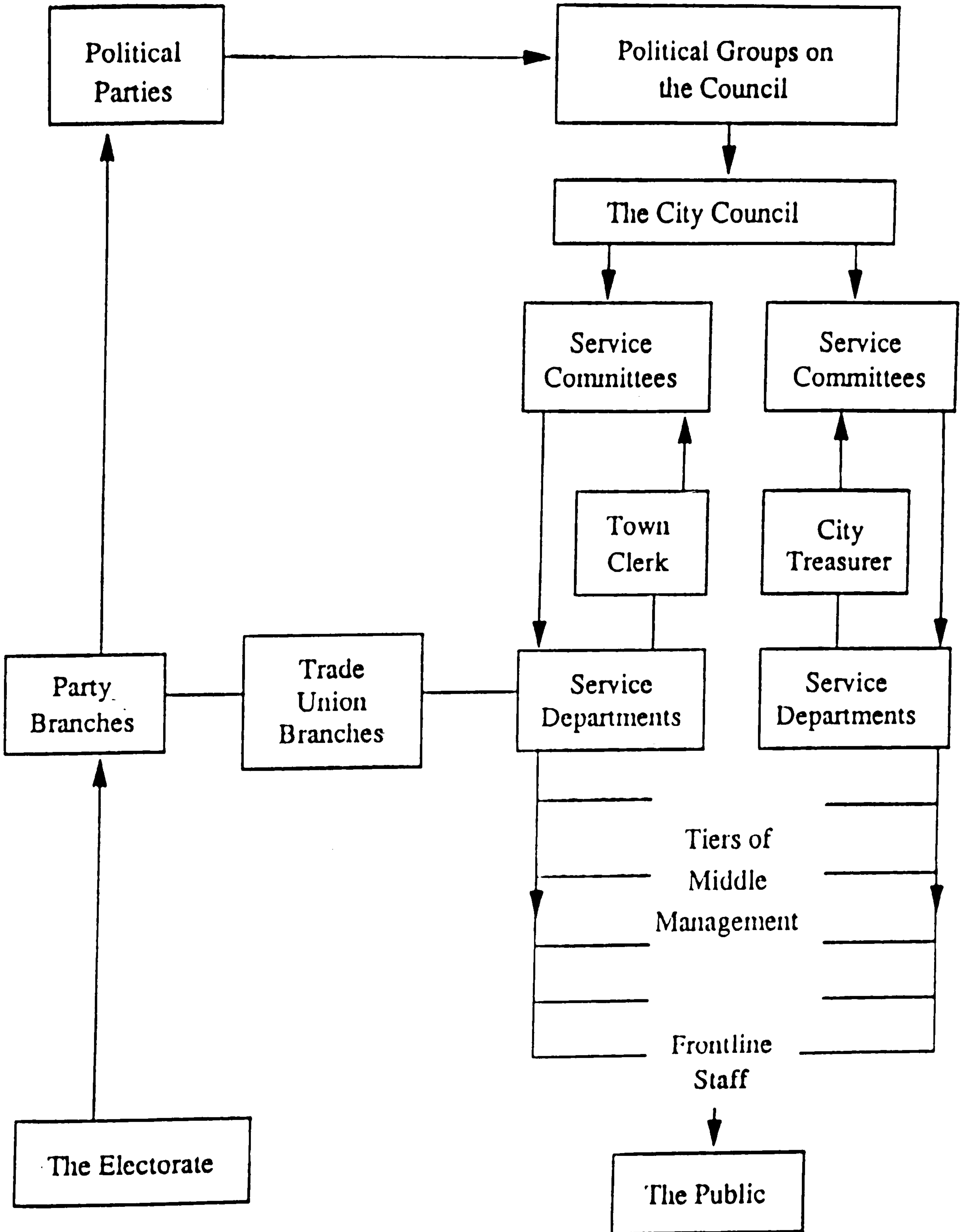
A traditional view of local authorities is that they have three main functions: the provision of services for citizens, the management of their resources of money, land and people, and planning to reduce uncertainty about the future³⁷. As Leach, Stewart and Walsh discuss, this system of local government became established after the Second World War during which the need for established services went unchallenged³⁸. It is based upon a series of strong, separate departments and committees, each of which was concerned with the quantity and efficiency of the services they provided, as illustrated overleaf.

2.6.1 Organisation and management within the traditional authority

The pattern of administration and decision-making to support these functions was a series of departments each reporting to a separate committee of councillors and relating their work only occasionally to that of the authority's other departments. The point at which the committees' decisions were collated and correlated was when all of the minutes of the various committees were brought to the full council meeting for final approval. Only at that stage would conflicts arise and priorities be questioned. From the 1970s these assumptions³⁹ whereby a local authority aimed to be self-sufficient with direct hierarchical management of its standardised services have been challenged⁴⁰. Whilst the period from 1945 to the mid 1970s had not been without change it had been continual and small-scale in nature, incremental rather than strategic, moving towards increasing consistency. In contrast the changes since then from the mid-1970s, and especially during the 1980s and 1990s, have involved fundamental shifts in the whole nature of the organisation, or, in the terms of Leach, Stewart and Walsh, a "reorientation rather than convergence"⁴¹

Figure 2.1: Model A: Traditional public administration

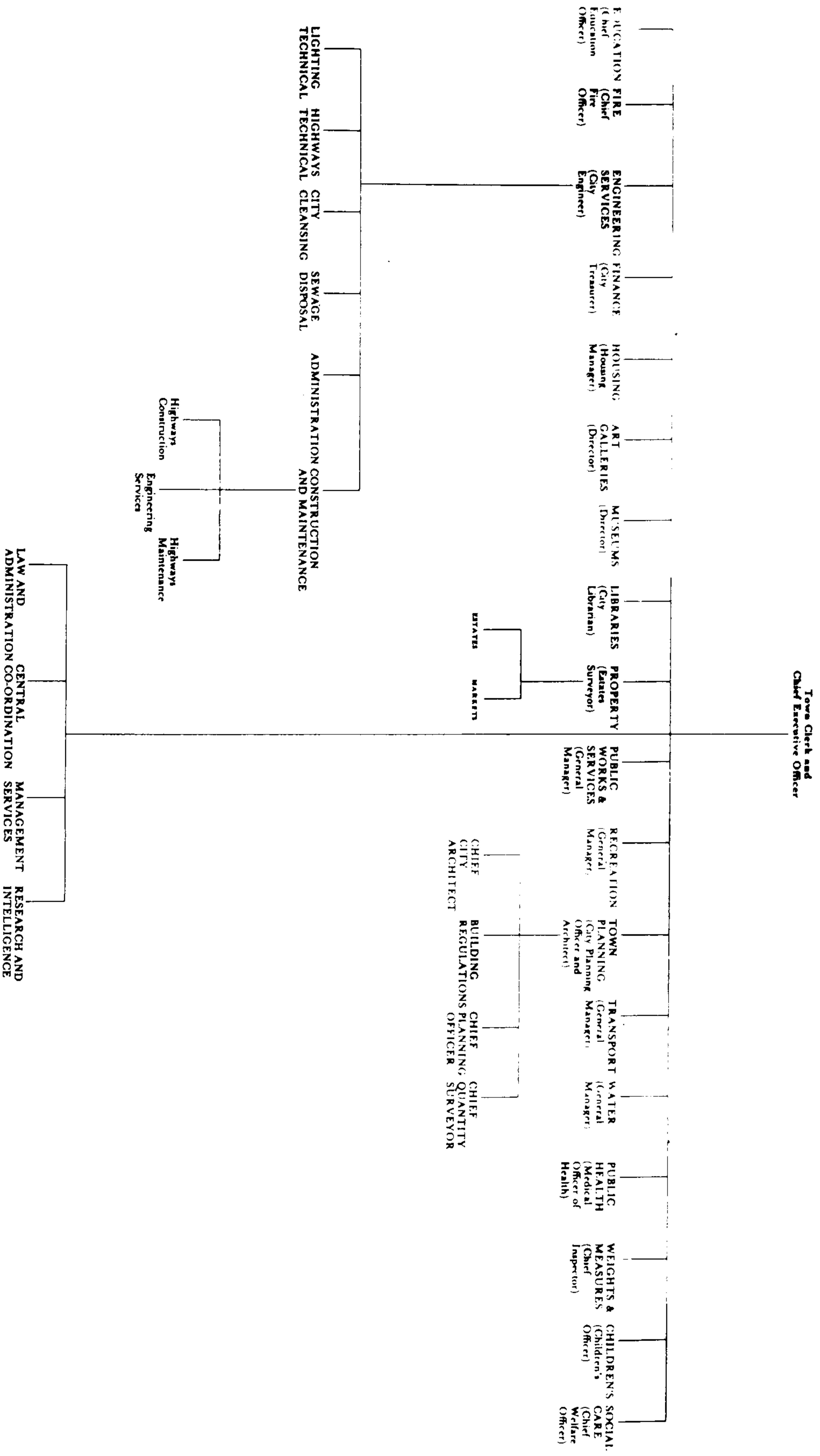
Source: Reproduced with permission from Benington, J. *Preparing for power: local government and local administration in a new South Africa*. University of Warwick: Local Government Centre, December 1992, (Local Government Centre Working Paper No. 17), between p. 21 and p. 22.



Keyword: Administration
 Key Profession: Lawyers
 Centre of Power: Chair of Service Committee and Head of Department
 Performance Criteria: Quantity, efficiency

Figure 2.2: Example of a departmental structure in a traditional authority

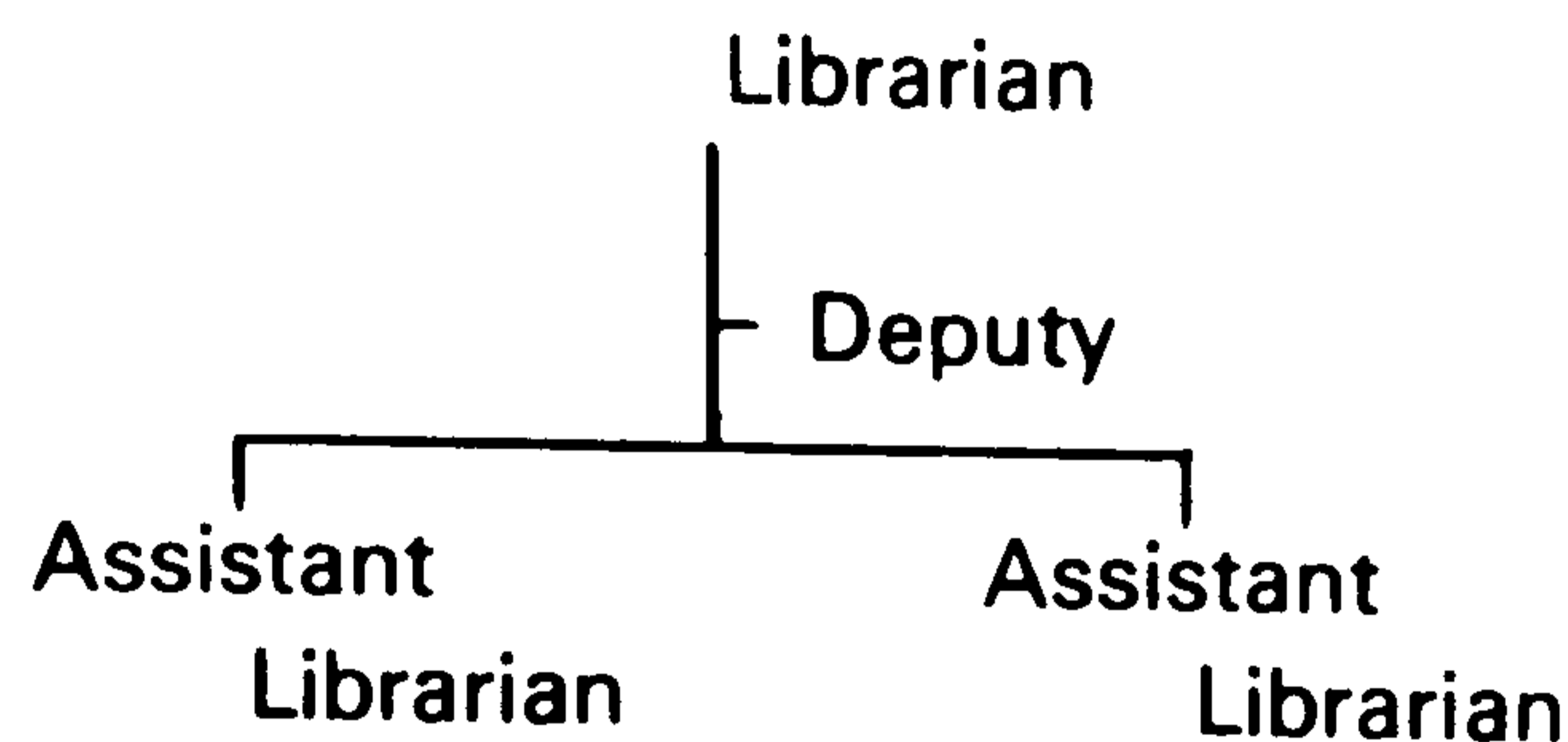
Source: Adapted from Figure 32.2 Existing departmental structure at Sheffield. In: Greenwood, R. and Stewart, J. D. *Corporate planning in English Local Government: an analysis with readings 1967-72*. Knight, 1974, p. 328.



2.6.2 Organisation and management of the public library service within the traditional authority

Figure 2.3 Example of a public library service structure in a traditional authority

Source: Example adapted from Figure 2. County. In: Tunley, M. *Library structures and staffing systems*. Library Association, 1979, p.20.



Kinnell⁴² explores the part that chief librarians have played in the development of public libraries within a changing local government context from the 1850s to the 1990s. While there have been changes in the concepts of leadership in relation to library services over the past century Kinnell identifies the involvement of councillors as a dominant issue:

Involvement of committees in the management of services still remains significant, even with the enhanced expectations of the chief librarian's role ... the input of members to policy implementation, as well as to policy development, remains considerable in some authorities ... the chief librarian's leadership role therefore still demands an ability to work closely with politicians and to manage the political as well as operational aspects of their job.⁴³

Both Kinnell's description of experiences from the nineteenth century to the present, and Lomer and Rogers' discussion of the library profession's demands for chief officer status for the chief librarian and a statutory committee during the 1950s and 1960s, demonstrate that this political context has been a key feature of public library development⁴⁴. In brief, the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 set the minimum population to be served as 40,000. This lasted until the reorganisation of local government in 1974. Prior to 1974 chief librarians were part of a vertical structure, with responsibility solely for their own service. They were invariably heads of their own department, reporting directly to a Library Committee and to the Town Clerk for administrative purposes. As with local government as a whole, communication and management horizontally between service areas was limited. A simple model, see above, with the chief librarian at the top, and then librarians in charge of specialist functions, for example, children's services, bibliographical services, reference and so on, would comprise a typical senior management team prior to 1974. As soon as authorities covered larger geographical areas, decentralisation became more necessary, which affected the relationship between chiefs and their staffs. Delegation to middle and

junior managers would become essential, with effective communication needed at all levels and a preoccupation with structure in public libraries would become more prevalent as library authorities grew in size and complexity in the 1970s.

2.6.3 Research activity within the traditional authority

There was no strong corporate direction in the traditional authority as there were few strategic choices to be made about corporate policies; it was a period of relative political stability and financial prosperity for local government. No evidence was found during the literature search to illustrate the use of research within the traditional authority as a whole. Stewart, speaking at a conference in 1970 reflected on the traditional, 'build up' or 'passive' style of management: "In a passive style there is little evaluation of what is achieved by the activity; there is no need for it ... a Baths Department succeeds if it provides more baths; a Parks Department if it provides more parks; a Library Service if it provides more libraries."⁴⁵

2.6.4 Public library service research activity within the traditional authority

A review of British librarianship between 1966 and 1970 features a chapter on user and library surveys, albeit finding a "patchy distribution of research effort"⁴⁶. In 1964 Groombridge's *The Londoner and his library*⁴⁷ was published which reported the results of some 500 in-depth interviews held in 1962 with users and non-users. This study is relatively objective funded, as it was, by the Library Association but conducted by someone outside of the library profession. Also in 1964 the Public Libraries and Adult Education Committee for the North West agreed to sponsor a substantial research project into the characteristics of library users, the image held by the public of the library service and the extent to which public libraries should become focal centres for adult education work and allied cultural activities. Over 1,600 library users and over 700 non-users were interviewed.⁴⁸ As well as reporting the findings from the survey Luckham comments on public library research as he found it at that time:

Research into public library use lacks co-ordination. More research is needed into the dynamics of library use, into user failure, and into the social significance of library objectives, policy statements and measures of success and effectiveness. There should be a transfer of research techniques used elsewhere to public library research, for example, operational research. A comparative assessment of the aims and achievements of individual library systems might yield a common pattern.⁴⁹

2.7 The corporate authority

Corporate management became fashionable in the mid 1970s. It derived from American business and the defence industry and was imported into UK local government as concern grew about unplanned growth in local authority expenditure and services, bringing with it scientific management principles such as MbO, PPBS, and output measures of performance. The corporate approach is based upon a centralisation of both political and managerial power behind corporate rather than departmental objectives. Making such moves was not a straightforward process and Rhodes' description of the changing conceptions of management

in local government between 1967 and 1974 draws attention to the difficulties. For Rhodes the combination of the inadequacy of traditional methods of resource allocation in a situation of financial scarcity, dissatisfaction with the belief that changing the physical environment changes behaviour, and the failure to recognise the complexity of urban problems lay behind the introduction of the approach:

Of all the factors giving rise to corporate planning movement - departmentalism, inadequate resource allocation procedures and the inadequacies of physical planning - none is more important than the growing realisation of the complexity of urban problems. In all probability, it is this single fact which underpins all other factors ... management as the separate provision of separate services [has] failed to meet the problems existing in the environment.⁵⁰

However, as Hambleton⁵¹ shows, this recognition of urban problems combined with local government reform, innovation in central government to, for example, break the link between budgeting and the parliamentary year, and political change in local government produced a receptive climate for corporate planning in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

2.7.1 Organisation and management within the corporate authority

Stewart's⁵² discussion of the weaknesses of the traditional approach in broad terms, which identifies the criticisms made within local government as well as outside, and the discussion by Leach, Stewart and Walsh pertaining to organisational continuity and change⁵³, illustrate that the structures and working practices suited to an era of growth and stability were simply not appropriate to the needs of a changing society. It was not the extent of change but the number of dimensions on which change was taking place. Leach, Stewart and Walsh⁵⁴ refer to major economic restructuring, massive reductions in public expenditure, periods of prolonged unemployment, changes in demographic structure, new social norms, the recognition of a multi-ethnic society and environmental threats and suggest that as a consequence local authorities found themselves out of touch with the communities they governed and served and out of date in management terms compared to other organisations.

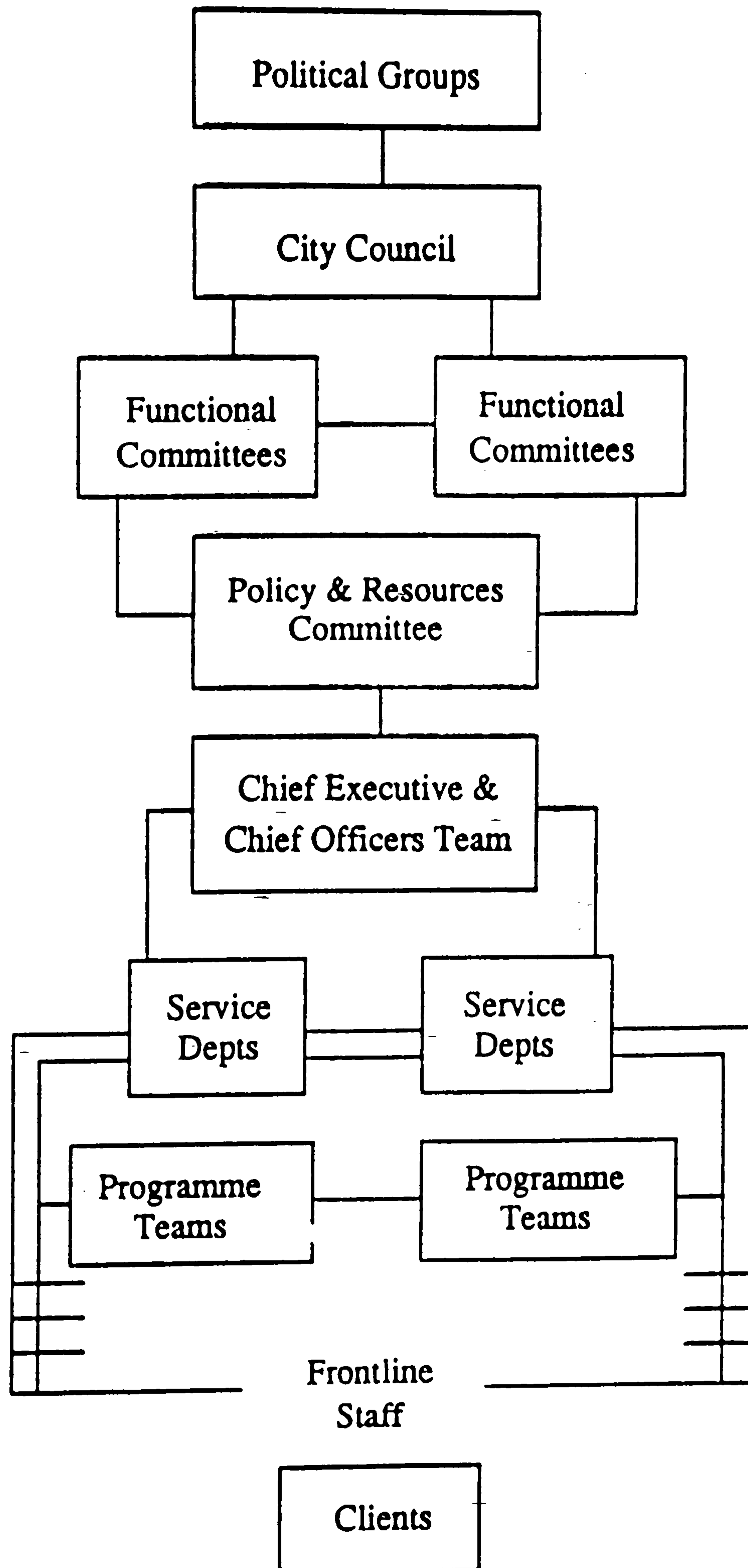
Stoker⁵⁵ identifies three critical factors. There was a new politics within local government. Changes in the social and economic environment from the mid 1970s onward led to a loss of confidence in the traditional principles of local government management. For example, constraints on public expenditure placed new demands and pressures on the system, long-term unemployment began to have an impact on many communities. Secondly there was a greater willingness to innovate within local authorities in order to resolve the weaknesses of the traditional management, for example, a realisation that opportunities for strategic management thinking were lost in the emphasis on routine service provision and that the public faced barriers in accessing services which in itself precipitated the introduction of a marketing approach. Thirdly, central government's programme of legislative reform, that included measures such as compulsory competitive tendering challenged traditional assumptions of direct management and self-sufficiency.

There was one other overarching determinant: the re-organisation of local government⁵⁶ in 1974 in England and Wales that introduced a two-tier system with counties, metropolitan or non-metropolitan, at the upper tier and districts at the lower tier. Radical changes were proposed to get away from the rigid departmental structure: policy committees, the Chief Executive Officer, streamlined committee structures, resource sub-committees, and fewer departments, as illustrated overleaf, arose from the Bains Report that recommended management structures for the new authorities. The earlier Maud Report had urged local government to adopt the process of “systematic management”⁵⁷. Or to move, in Stewart’s⁵⁸ terms, from ‘specialist management’ concerned with the management of the separate activities of the authority directed at separate problems, to ‘general management taken further’ dealing with the activities of the authority as a whole in relation to problems which are best seen as interrelated problems within a common environment. Stewart presents these approaches to the ‘management task of the authority’ as points on a scale with the concepts of ‘specialist management modified’ and ‘general management - a first approach’ in between. In making the move from a specialist to a generalist approach, the management task of a local authority is re-defined to take more account of the wider responsibilities of the organisation and external environment.

Although grounded in the movement for administrative reform the Maud Report can also be seen as the starting point for the corporate movement in local government⁵⁹. Rhodes supports this argument in his analysis of changes in the scope of management through a series of Government reports beginning with the Maud Report and moving through to the Bains Report in which he shows that although specific recommendations of the Maud Report concerning the process of management were rejected, such as the creation of a ‘management board’⁶⁰ to formulate the principal objectives of the local authority and review progress, many authorities acknowledged the need for improved co-ordination in terms of structural changes, as demonstrated in a reduction of the number of committees and departments. The significance of the Bains Report is that it broadens the scope of this approach. To paraphrase Hambleton⁶¹, the corporate movement is distinguished by two fundamental elements, that the local authority should consider its resources and activities as a corporate whole, and that it should plan and review them in relation to the needs and problems of its environment. This challenges the traditional view of local authorities to take a wider view of their role and responsibility for the general well-being of their communities, as well as discharging their statutory duties. Hence corporate planning had to become concerned with “... planning to meet the problems and needs of the community within a specified area, irrespective of the particular organisation that might be involved ...”⁶² This “change in local authorities’ own perception of their role”⁶³ implied the development of more complex networks of management, communication, policy making and forward planning, than proposed by Maud in order to respond to complex demands.

Figure 2.4: Model B: Corporate management

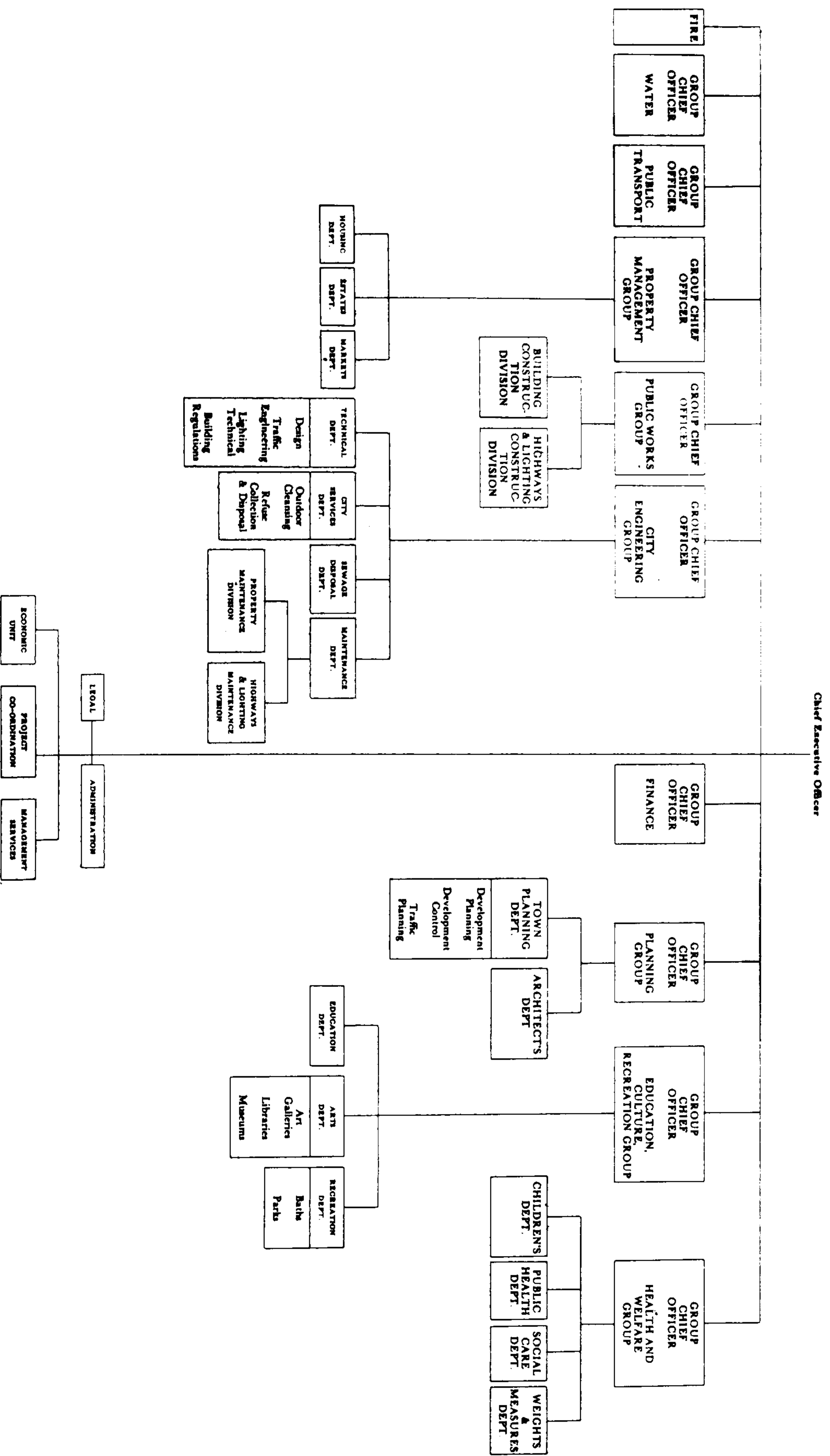
Source: Reproduced with permission from Benington, J. *Preparing for power: local government and local administration in a new South Africa*. University of Warwick: Local Government Centre, December 1992, (Local Government Centre Working Paper No. 17), between p. 21 and p. 22.



Keyword:	Corporate Management
Key Profession:	Treasurers/Accountants
Centre of Power:	Policy Committee & Chief Officers Team
Performance Criteria	Output, outcome, effectiveness

Figure 2.5: Example of a corporate structure

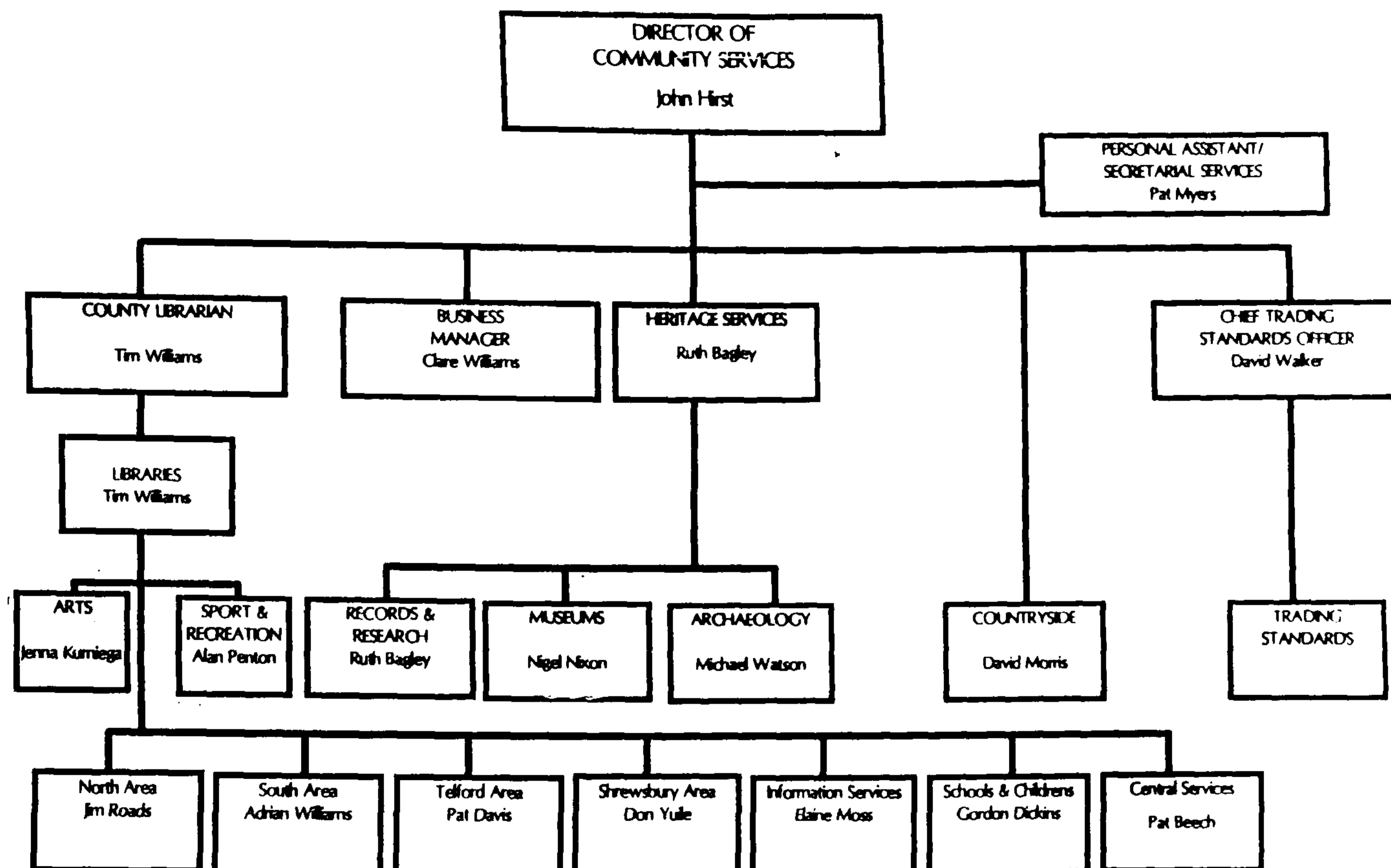
Source: Adapted from Figure 32.1 Departmental structure proposed by Urwick, Orr and Partners, for Sheffield C. B. In: Greenwood, R. and Stewart, J. D. *Corporate planning in English Local Government: an analysis with readings 1967-72*. Knight, 1974, p. 327.



2.7.2 Organisation and management of the public library service within the corporate authority

Figure 2.6 Example of a public library service structure in a corporate authority

Source: Example provided by Shropshire County Council, Information and Community Services. Correct at June 1997.



Local government reorganisation had resulted in fewer, from 383 to 115⁶⁴, and much larger, in terms of population, public library authorities, and what has been described as a 'patchwork quilt'⁶⁵ of management styles across the UK. In England responsibility for the library service rested with the county councils in the non-metropolitan counties and with the district councils in the metropolitan counties giving rise to two strikingly different patterns of provision: counties had to provide a service over a wide, sparsely populated, area entailing the use of mobile libraries, while metropolitan services were usually based on a central library with branches in suburban areas and the assumption that most people could visit the library. The Library Association put forward a model staff establishment for the new library authorities which included the comment that "the size of the new authorities will require for more local research into the needs of the communities than past library establishments have permitted" and placed the responsibility for research with a Principal Assistant Librarian for Development reporting to a Deputy Chief Librarian⁶⁶. A useful case study of the merger of eleven authorities being integrated into one organisation with centralised administration and support is given in Gee's⁶⁷ description of the transformation of the network of public libraries throughout Cheshire. The new district library for Runcorn epitomised the county's approach and was designed with the aid of a market research study⁶⁸ in 1977 which aimed to find out

what services New Town residents would use; this was an improvement on the research efforts put into planning libraries in New Towns in the late 1960s as described by Hall⁶⁹. Not every service adapted well and Tomlinson outlines how there was a reduction of senior staff when the number of employing authorities was reduced and how computerisation and centralisation with conglomerate departments reduced the need for professional staff further.⁷⁰ Such issues are also raised in Evans's⁷¹ interviews with retired chief librarians reflecting on management changes from the 1960s to the 1980s.

Whilst the planning approach advocated by the Bains Report was applicable to each individual service within a local authority, the corporate element raised questions concerning the role of a particular service in relation to the other services provided by the authority. As the Bains Report had argued "Local government is not ... limited to the narrow provision of a series of services to the local community ... It has within its purview the overall economic, cultural and physical well being of that community..."⁷², then, as Usherwood notes, "the public library has a part to play in carrying out these objectives."⁷³ However the public library service could only fulfil its potential if it could adapt to the new styles of management such as MbO and PPBS. Although they had gained rapid and widespread acceptance in some fields of local government they had not been found to be easily applied to public libraries. One problem was that the concept of the planning cycle was fundamental to such approaches and, at that time this was not something with which public librarians were familiar.

In 1973 research on public library management by the Library Advisory Council for England, LACE(E), examined the underlying philosophy of the new styles of management and proposed a methodology by which this might be applied to the library service drawing from two public library services which had already adopted such practices. It is worth noting that the Chief Librarians of both services had wide management responsibilities - at Kingston upon Hull as Director of Recreational Services, Chief Librarian and City Information Officer, and at Coventry as Director of Libraries, Art Gallery and Museums and also as Leader of the Leisure opportunities Programme Area Team⁷⁴. Within the report a five stage planning cycle applicable to public libraries is identified, covering the assessment of needs and problems, setting objectives in relation to local needs and problems, the identification and analysis of alternative strategies for achieving objectives, the allocation of resources to different objectives and monitoring output performance and achievement. Public library statistics were then collected annually, although only one output measure was included, the total number of books on loan on a day in March, which was hardly a suitable basis for comparing the performance of different libraries, monitoring achievement, or for relating output to input of resources. However since the work on standards of public library service in 1962⁷⁵, it was usual for levels of library provision to be assessed in input-related and quantifiable terms such as accommodation, staff, books and so on, even though it was recognised that "this alone is unsatisfactory because the amount of use bears no predictable relation to quality of

service ...” and the LAC(E) Working Party goes on to comment:

Statistics alone cannot be expected to produce all the information needed ... Interviewing and survey techniques, and user-panels are other methods which are being tried as a means of discovering the real effectiveness of different elements of library service. Research and experimentation are needed regarding measurement, both centrally in order to determine suitable methodologies and locally where the data relating to the use of individual libraries need to be collected and studied.⁷⁶

The LAC(E) report also considers the placing of the public library service. Most local authorities had six or more programme areas and there was always a problem of locating public libraries within such structures because of the multi-objective nature of library services themselves. Libraries tended to be placed with education, leisure or the arts and that tended to, and still does, reflect the attitude of the local authority towards its library service. An important feature of a system of corporate management was the management team of chief officers which did not always include the Chief Librarian. Both the Library Association⁷⁷ and LAC(E)⁷⁸ stressed that there should be liaison between the Chief Librarian and the management team. Overall LAC(E) felt that:

The new management techniques ... if properly developed and applied to library purposes, are able to improve the effectiveness of public libraries in meeting the needs which arise in their respective communities ... by ensuring that decisions are based on relevant data, collected and deployed in a systematic fashion. But because of this discipline which they impose upon management procedures, they also enable the managers to recognise new opportunities for the library service, and to develop their services more purposefully and more rapidly.⁷⁹

In 1979 Tunley⁸⁰ examined the implications of local government reorganisation for library structures and staffing systems noting a decline in the number of librarians having the status chief librarian and being responsible directly to a committee and a great decline in the number of authorities that had committees solely responsible for libraries. As well as the grouping of comparable services under multi-purpose committees another feature was the management of these programme areas under a director and only in a rare minority of cases has the director been a librarian by profession. Officers then come together to form a multi-disciplinary team and the team approach to management was an important concept in local government. In libraries this was reflected in the growth of team librarianship and matrix structures, although as Evans⁸¹ notes, this was also a factor of the need to economise on staffing whilst providing for more groups in the community. This is evident in Hendry's⁸² account of restructuring in Hertfordshire in 1992 based on the dual principles of delayering and community librarianship and underpinned by the concepts of matrix management and team work.

In 1983 Lomer and Rogers⁸³ reported on a study on the public library and the local authority in terms of organisation and management. Their research focused on how the balance between the specialist professional view of local public service and the co-ordinated corporate view was achieved. They identified patterns of management structure for libraries and related these differences to the running of the public library service in terms of the

influence and control and allocation of financial resources. Chief and senior officers in the rest of the local authority, who were asked to make a judgement about the relative importance of the library service vis-à-vis other local authority services, using whatever criteria for ranking which they wished:

There were few who ranked the library high in the authority. The library budget was seen as trivial in comparison to the education, social services budgets and the library service is perceived as inessential compared with the major social and environmental services. Nevertheless the library does achieve a place in the local authority 'hierarchy' by virtue of its long tradition and popularity with the public⁸⁴.

Lomer and Rogers concluded that despite the emphasis on teamwork in the corporate approach, for the public library service, the leadership of the chief librarian was the most important factor in the way the library operated and was developed.⁸⁵

2.7.3 Research activity within the corporate authority

The recognition that members and officers became too absorbed in the pressures of day-to-day activity to think about general policy was a great step forward from traditional thinking:

Optimal policy-making requires systematic thinking based on knowledge and oriented towards innovation on medium and long range policy issues. Not enough of such thinking can take place in action-oriented organisations because of the pressure of acute problems and the way that a pragmatic organisational climate, based on experience and oriented towards executing policies, depresses innovation.⁸⁶

Many local authorities created policy or research and intelligence units with a remit to develop new policies for the authority and co-ordinate departmental policies through corporate planning and new budgetary processes and to obtain information about the council's physical, economic and social environment and so on. According to Elcock their role was to "to challenge prevailing orthodoxies within the authority and to offer proposals for its future development."⁸⁷ Rhodes⁸⁸ identifies three areas of experimentation that became prominent with the corporate approach: the development of new systems of resource forecasting, new systems for describing and reviewing existing policies, and an increase in efforts to identify and analyse specific problems. One other source for better co-ordination, as discussed by Elcock⁸⁹, was the advent of the mainframe computer which required centralisation because these were so expensive and their capacity for storage, analysis and presentation of information was so great that they could only be employed efficiently on that basis. Ironically, developments in information and communications technologies have since encouraged decentralisation.

In 1975 a report by the Society of County Clerks noted that "most Research and Intelligence Units brought into existence in local government appear to have been created with no clear statement of their objectives, and their subsequent development has been dependent partly on the professional discipline of the Head of the Unit and partly on the use of the Unit made by the authority."⁹⁰ This somewhat idiosyncratic style was also evident in Fenwick's study⁹¹

of the policy/research function in eight local authority organisations in 1991 - he found considerable variation in the location of such units and the degree to which they carried out corporate research as opposed to research for specific departments. Elcock discusses the practicalities of the differing research arrangements noting the danger that such units may become ivory towers unless their work integrated with existing departments.⁹² This is illustrated by an example cited by Barnes and Wilson⁹³ concerning a typology of research organisation which identified three types of research unit: the integrated, the independent, and the isolated. In characterising these types reference was made, for example, to the way in which research dissemination took place. In integrated units research reports tended to be integrated into planning/policy documents; in independent units dissemination included seminars and research advisory groups; the isolated units were characterised by patchy reporting of research. This work was followed up by Barnes and Wilson in an examination of the impact of in-house research in social services departments. Their findings confirmed the validity of in-house research and the significance of the in-house researcher to the extent that "whether it would be possible to get the same value from commissioned research done by external consultants is debatable"⁹⁴ but again noted difficulties in respect of dissemination.

2.7.4 Public library service research activity within the corporate authority

In some authorities the move to the corporate approach saw the rise of the research library concept, and the Library Association highlighted some examples of good practice during its discussions on the Bains study group's recommendations, for example, in Cheshire it was the library service that took the lead in the provision of a Local Government Information Service to provide current awareness and literature search facilities for members and officers.⁹⁵

Barnett's review of the period 1971-1975 saw it as "an ideal environment for surveys of library use" as the reorganisation of local government gave public libraries a chance to study their services and to change or adapt them:

Many public libraries accepted the challenge of reorganisation ... and chose to plan their new library service on a sociological basis rather than historical, and to this end some authorities, when reorganising their staff structures, chose to appoint a senior officer who, under the guise of many varied titles, would be responsible for research, the collection of data and its analysis.⁹⁶

Ward's 1979-1980 review confirmed a continued growth in the field and noted a "rapid maturing of the approach to research, and a questioning of research methods, and of the organisation and administration of research."⁹⁷ Ward described the pressures exerted upon library and information services in 1980 as "catalysts" in forcing librarians to examine the findings of research in order to find possible answers to their problems: "For a large sector of the research community, the challenge has lain in trying to identify problems that are amenable to investigations in advance of their arrival, in order to produce findings and solutions to aid practitioners."⁹⁸ In the literature⁹⁹ there is evidence for research concerning

aspects of the corporate approach such as planning and marketing, and of research projects reflecting the concerns of the time.

Wilson's discussion of corporate planning in local government describes typical structures and general planning systems and techniques as well as specific library applications including a model of participative planning known as BASYC, Benefit Assessment of Systems Change, which had already been tested on a small scale within Derbyshire County Libraries. This was a cost-benefit model which takes account of the goals of the different groups involved in a major decision, be they staff, users, or local authority management. Regarding the general picture of management information at that time, 1979, he notes:

... Generally, internal statistics on various services are poor, and analysis of census data is slow and difficult. Putting these things right should take priority over any specific policy analysis for an embryo corporate planning unit, since the availability of basic data is a pre-requisite for the use of almost all techniques. A centrally held bank of information, or even an inventory of what statistics are available ... coupled with the facility of quickly extracting and analysing census data statistically, are probably more essential than the ability to use the most sophisticated techniques.¹⁰⁰

This is reflected in Weatherall's description of his experiences in the late 1970s in Leicestershire where the County Council had no centralised research unit so the library service had to rely on the expertise of its own staff; Weatherall describes the difficulties of being a Development Librarian being supported by a rota of trainees and notes that "the lack of a co-ordinating body at county level has meant that establishing contacts with external research units has even more importance than ever."¹⁰¹

The marketing philosophy had to be adopted in order to achieve corporate objectives. In 1979 Yorke linked the concept of marketing to library services. This examination summarises the marketing research in the library and information field including a report on an innovative project which established a residents' panel for the catchment area of a branch library which considered, among other things, how people went about solving problems such as vehicle maintenance, travel, homework, and local events.¹⁰² In contrast, it was not until 1989 that Walsh's *Marketing in local government*¹⁰³ was published; admittedly this takes on board the whole 'public service orientation' context but nevertheless Walsh covers much of the same ground as did Yorke ten years previously. Research in 1991-1992 examined the integration of long-term planned use of marketing principles into the day-to-day management of services by surveying library services and leisure services. The results showed that greater attention was paid to the various techniques and rather less to the integration of marketing into the decision-making processes within authorities.¹⁰⁴ Despite these criticisms marketing in libraries would still appear to be more advanced than in local government generally. For example, Stainsby's study in 1995 found that compared to museums, libraries, and leisure centres, other local government services, such as social services, were less well covered in the marketing literature and concluded that marketing in local government "is ripe for extensive empirical research and theory development on the

problems and opportunities of implementing marketing.”¹⁰⁵

Broome describes the most outstanding feature of public library work during the period 1976-1980 as being “the efforts made by librarians to improve the relevance of their services for those sections of the community thought to be little touched by public libraries.”¹⁰⁶ The wider concerns of the corporate approach and interest in measuring performance is evident in Totterdell and Bird’s *The Effective Library*¹⁰⁷, published in 1976. This was the first UK study considering the effectiveness of public library services and according to Sumsion “there has been no research ... in the UK comparable in scale or importance ...”¹⁰⁸ The study aimed “to measure the effectiveness of public library services within a given community, and to develop a methodology for so doing.”¹⁰⁹ It was felt to be important to try and evaluate attitudes towards libraries at the same time as actually measuring patterns of use, in order to relate the two. A total of 679 interviews along with attitude tests were completed. The study made progress in identifying forms of need in relation to the library service and in developing systematic attitude tests towards libraries. Totterdell and Bird’s conclusions include the findings that particular services are effective, not libraries as a whole; the effectiveness of a service must always be treated as a relative concept; and that “public libraries operate on a minimum level of user satisfaction, surviving largely on the good will, low expectations and relatively easy demands of the majority of users ...”¹¹⁰ Regarding methodology:

Personalised informal depth interviewing reveals attitudes, beliefs and behaviour apparently contrary to data collected via formal methods. The average person does not hold strong views about libraries other than (usually) having a vague feeling that ‘they are a good thing’. Fairly blunt tools for data collection do not pierce this comforting generalisation and many librarians have been lulled into believing that it is not really their fault if more people do not use libraries.¹¹¹

2.8 The commercial authority

While corporate management had not been without its critics¹¹², and Rhodes¹¹³ gives a balanced discussion of the major problem areas with corporate planning, it was with the election of a new Government in 1979 that a new pattern of local government emerged breaking away from corporate ideals and reflecting a dramatic change in the management climate. The Government attempted to privatise the state by introducing quasi-market relationships and commercial business principles to local authority management and administration. As far as the management and organisation of local authorities was concerned the emphasis shifted from traditional administration and corporate management: power became more dispersed with a reduction in the number of committees and departments and a change in remit to specifying contractual requirements and putting work out to tender, rather than simply providing services. This is illustrated on pages 41 and 41a.

2.8.1 Organisation and management within the commercial authority

What came to be known as ‘new public sector management’ stressed the values of economy, efficiency and effectiveness, or “keep it lean and purposeful”¹¹⁴. It was heavily influenced by

Government policies in the 1980s and early-mid 1990s which included reducing the role of the state and the proportion of the gross national product spent on state services, exposing public services to market forces through competitive tendering and privatisation, and seeking to ensure greater responsiveness to consumers. Hood¹¹⁵ gives an informed, broad discussion of conflicting origins of the new public management, noting the dichotomy between the drivers of 'user choice' and 'professional management expertise', and linking it to four other administrative trends: attempts to slow down growth, the shift towards privatisation, the development of automation and the development of a more international agenda. Hood¹¹⁶ identifies the doctrinal components of new public management as involving hands-on professional management in the public sector; more explicit standards and measures of performance with greater emphasis on output controls; shifts to disaggregation of units and to greater competition in the public sector; an emphasis on private-sector styles of management practice and on greater discipline and parsimony in resource use. These can be identified in such concepts as the enabling authority, the competitive council and the concern with the customer, quality and choice as shown by the rise of the public service orientation and the Citizen's Charter, all of which were dominant features of the 1980s.

One impact of central government legislation was to challenge the assumption of self-sufficiency and replace it with a mixed economy of provision. Local authorities now had to operate within a fragmented system of local government alongside a range of other governmental organisations and were being encouraged to act in partnership with the community, the voluntary sector and the private sector. The role associated with these changes is expressed in the concept of the 'enabling authority'. The exact meaning of this term varies, from that of being "no longer ... the universal provider"¹¹⁷ to a more advanced concept whereby the enabling authority is one that:

... accepts that direct provision of services is but one means among many of providing for the community. Its role as an 'enabling' council is to use all the means at its disposal to meet the needs of those who live within its area. It will produce some services itself. It will work with and through other organisations - in the public, private and voluntary sectors - aiding, stimulating and guiding their contributions.¹¹⁸

Clarke and Stewart argue that the enabling council needs, above all else, a capacity for strategic thinking and direction setting if it is to work with and through other organisations because "without a strategy, the authority's aims and objectives can easily be taken over by those with which it works."¹¹⁹ To this end the Association of County Councils¹²⁰ discussed the implications of the enabling style for local government structure and put forward a practical set of guidelines in 1991 for what it means to be enabling. These encompassed, for example, a strategic sense of the key policy issues facing local communities and of changing needs and a focus on determining the most effective response to those needs; an emphasis on clear objectives and standards, and on monitoring performance against them; and an investment in building long-term relationships with other agencies and organisations. Leach,

Stewart and Walsh¹²¹ put forward a wider, more accountable, vision of the enabling role whereby the model is of the local authority as community government, or as the community governing itself, as advocated by Stewart:

As community governments, local authorities' primary role is concern for the problems and issues faced by local authorities. They are the means by which communities confront and resolve those problems and issues that are beyond the scope of individuals or of other modes of social action.¹²²

The term 'competitive council'¹²³ was coined by the Audit Commission in 1988 in a report that put forward the concept of the recipients of council services as customers. The consumer concept is linked to the notion of the enabling role by Leach, Stewart and Walsh¹²⁴ and during the 1990s it became entwined with two further trends in the management of local government services: a commitment to quality in service delivery and providing choice.

The 'public service orientation' developed from a desire to find ways for local authorities to rediscover their lost legitimacy as providers of local services, coupled with the increasing influence of the management literature on 'excellence' in the early 1980s¹²⁵. The germination of the idea can be identified in a discussion paper resulting from an away-day held in November 1984 and hosted by the Local Government Training Board. A small group of chief executives were invited to discuss *In search of excellence* and how it related to the local government world. This resulted in the publication of *Excellence and local government* which was circulated more widely in a bid to stimulate further discussion. In the section considering productivity through people it is noted that, in local government:

While the long years of growth had provided their own motivation, the new motivation must be grounded in the present reality. It could be that a new emphasis on public service was required. Whatever the level of resources available the aim should be public service.¹²⁶

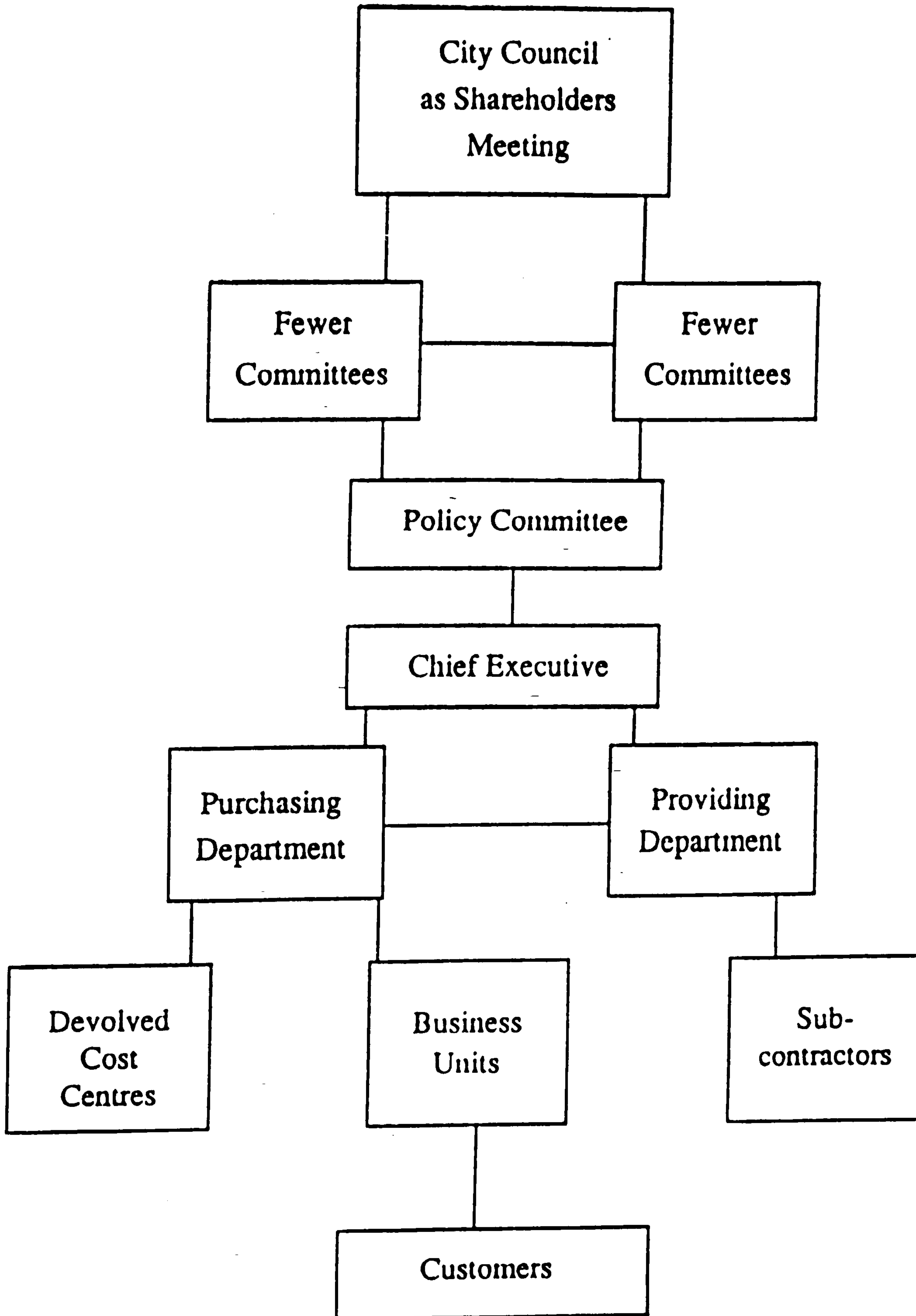
Elcock¹²⁷ notes that the impact of the public service orientation on the management structures and processes of the local authority were significant. It required, concurrently, strong central change to a local authority's culture in the direction of greater awareness of the consumer's demands and hence an effective core central executive, central training facilities to help managers and front-line staff to adjust to the new expectations people held of them, more systematic evaluation of services and the setting of performance indicators, and, extensive decentralisation of control if managers at all levels are to be close to the customers. Implicit in these descriptions is the requirement for a research base to be established, and this is echoed in the "positive staff policies"¹²⁸ noted by Clarke and Stewart, including the requirement for staff training courses to build specific skills in analysis and market research. Norris has identified, as one of the enduring aspects of the public service orientation, the fact that there were "groups of key staff skilled in both the use and limitations of market research techniques."¹²⁹

Another working paper¹³⁰, published in April 1986, encouraged local authorities to look

critically at present practice in order to make possible better practice. At this point the essence of the public service orientation was that a local authority that puts service for the public first would stress closeness to the customer and citizen, listening to the public, access for the public, seeing service from the public's point of view, seeking out views, suggestions and complaints, the public's right to know, quality of service to the public as the test of quality. *Getting closer to the public* and *Learning from the public*, both published by the Local Government Training Board in 1987 and 1988 respectively, summarise the practical approach and Fenwick and Harrop¹³¹ also describe some of the guises that the consumer perspective has taken. From the late 1980s there has been continued discussion of consumerism and the public sector. The attraction of Clarke and Stewart's particular concept of a public service orientation was in its apparent simplicity although Fenwick and Harrop felt that "if the fashion is not to fade ... the concept must be sharpened up and divested of its blandness."¹³² Others were more critical, for example, Potter¹³³ and Hambleton¹³⁴ who both identified limits of consumerism and issues which must be faced if consumerism was to have a legacy of real value. Rhodes¹³⁵ argued that a shift in emphasis from service delivery to the broader perspective of citizenship would provide a better grounding for a public service orientation. Certainly the consumer approach has its value and its limitations; Fenwick¹³⁶ argues that even when the approach has not had a direct impact on the provision of public services it may have exerted influence upon current styles of public management, for example, in the production of customer charters. The Citizen's Charter was launched in June 1991 and the objectives were to raise quality, increase choice, secure better value and extend accountability¹³⁷. In managerial terms the approach is about setting standards, consulting customers, providing information on services, customer care and reviewing performance. The mechanisms do not directly involve the citizen and politically the Charter approach promoted the objectives of privatisation, widening competition, contracting out, publishing performance targets and so on. Central to the Charter is the concept of the 'customer' which was not easy to apply to the public library service despite the efforts in applying marketing concepts to the service. The concept of "the privatisation of choice"¹³⁸, with its emphasis on the private citizen is difficult to interpret for the public library service given that a fundamental principle of the service is free and equitable access for everyone. The complexity of reconciling the provision of 'addressed services' and 'shared services' is debated by Mulgan¹³⁹. The significance of the initiative is that it signalled the Government's intention to make the improvement of quality in the public services a desirable goal alongside that of containing expenditure in short it "represented an adjustment in the Government's attitude to the public services, not just as a result of changing political and personality factors, but from the continued recourse to managerialism for its source of ideas."¹⁴⁰

Figure 2.7: Model C: The local authority as a commercial contractor

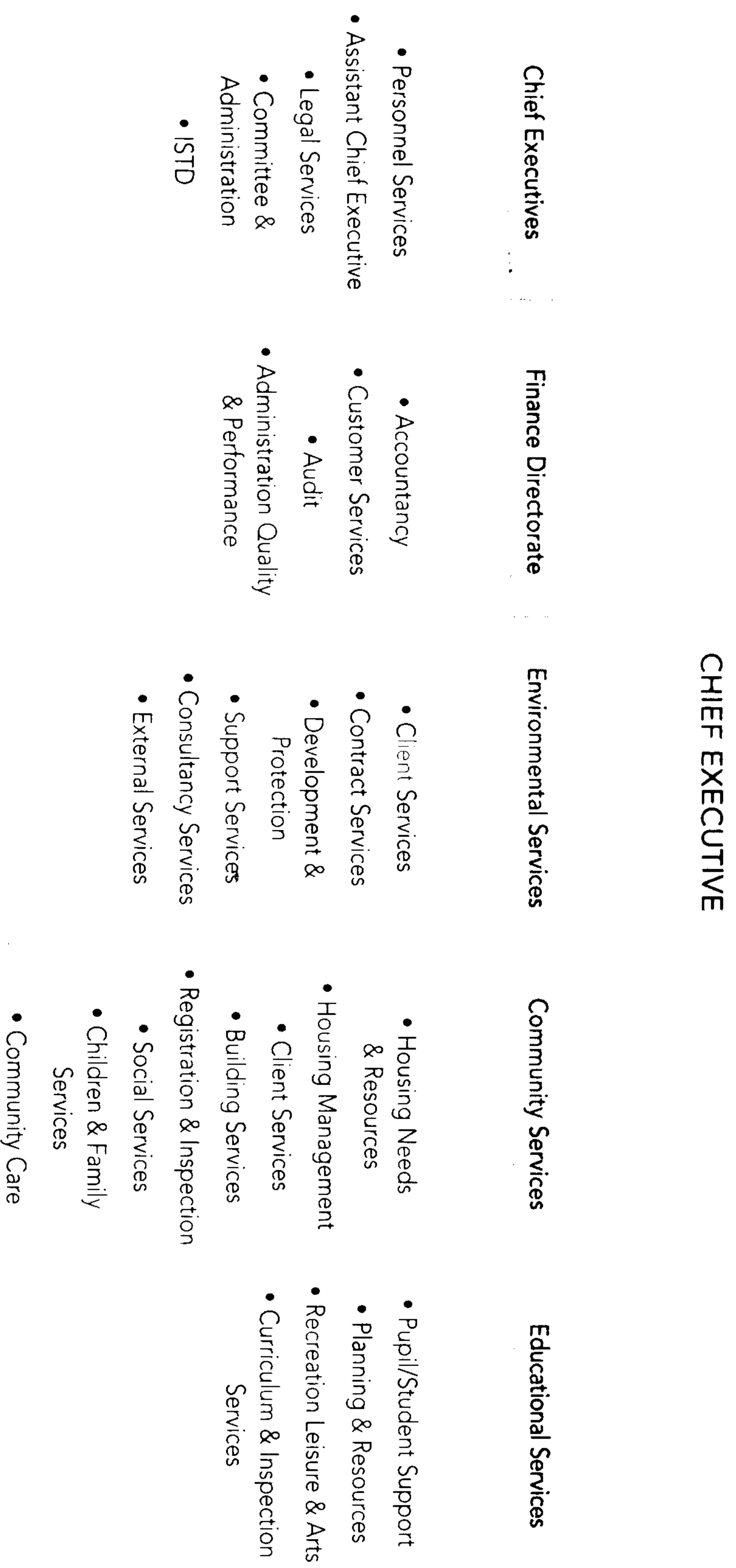
Source: Reproduced with permission from Benington, J. *Preparing for power: local government and local administration in a new South Africa*. University of Warwick: Local Government Centre, December 1992, (Local Government Centre Working Paper No. 17), between p. 21 and p. 22.



Keyword: Management, Competition, Contract
Key Profession: Private Sector Management Clones
Centre of Power: Leader & Chief Executive
Performance Criteria: The 3 E's

Figure 2.8: Example of a commercial structure

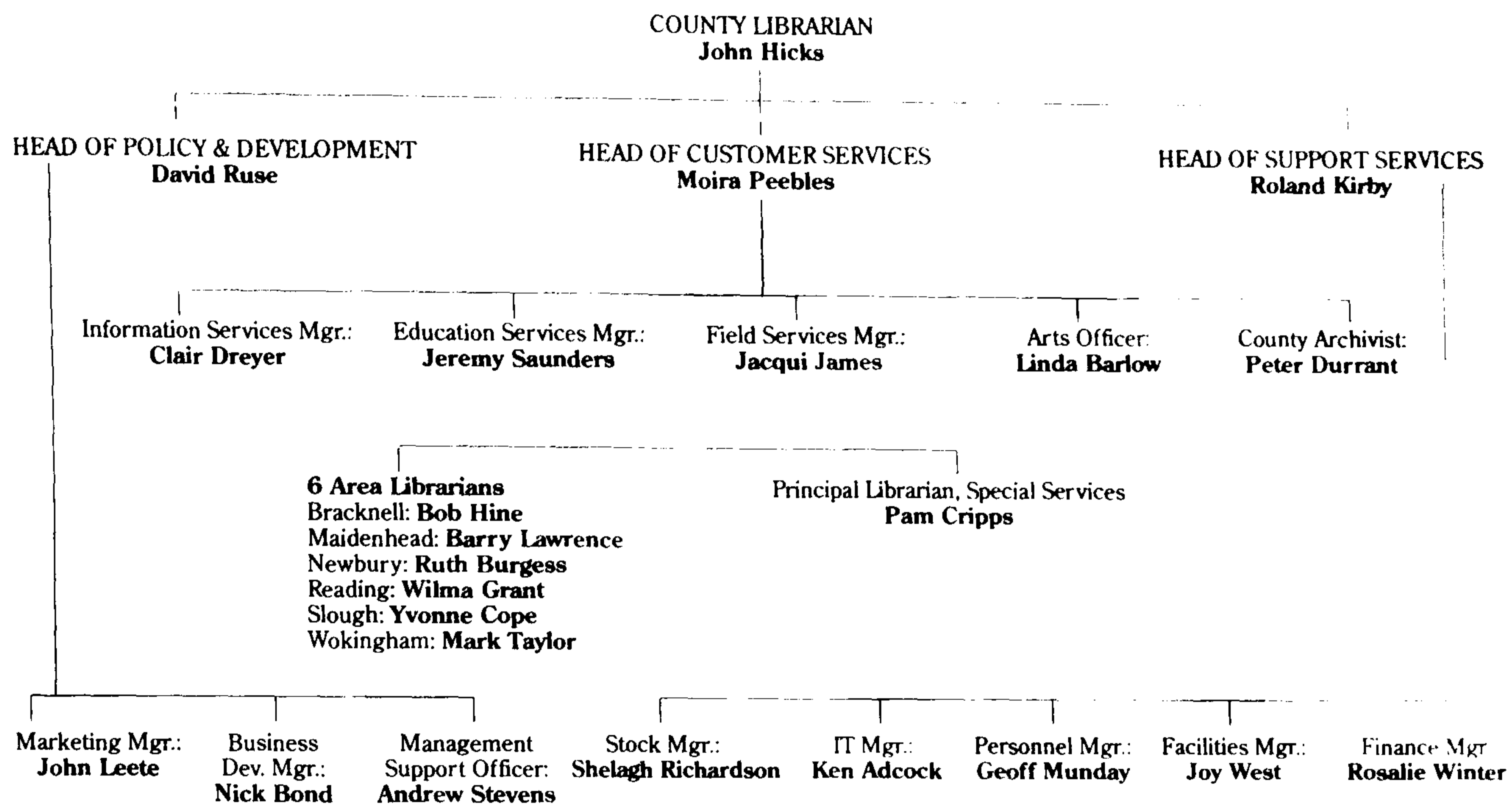
Source: Adapted from an organisational chart. In: *Barnet London Borough: a guide for job applicants*, p.3.



2.8.2 Organisation and management of the public library service within the commercial authority

Figure 2.9 Example of a public library service structure in a commercial authority

Source: Example adapted from Figure 1. Royal County of Berkshire Library and Information Service organisation chart. In: *Minding our own business. Public Library Journal*, 5 (6), 1990, p.149.



In 1982 the Office of Arts and Libraries published *The future development of libraries and information services* containing two reports, the first on the organisational and policy framework within which libraries of all kinds would be able to co-operate most efficiently and effectively in a co-ordinated library service and the second, on working together in a national framework. The reports warned that:

... failure to provide adequate access to the vast range of information now available can freeze attitude, hold back development, blunt efforts to improve the country's economic performance, and result in misdirected energies and duplicated research. Neglect of a country's library and information resources is bad management.¹⁴¹

Whereas these initial reports were concerned principally with the responsibilities of Government towards libraries, a third report¹⁴² emphasised the role of planning and partnership at local authority level and introduced the concept of the 'library and information plan'. In 1987 the report *Joint enterprise* was published by the Library and Information Services Council, LISC, formerly LAC(E), which considered the roles and relationships of the public and private sectors in the provision of information and library services. Produced at a time of financial constraint, when public bodies, including libraries, were being urged by central government to generate income to support their activities and reduce their dependence on public funding, coupled with the simultaneous development of the information industry, it is not surprising that the report found:

... ample evidence ... that interaction can be beneficial to both public and private sectors ... For the public sector, the advantages lie in achieving the right blend of skills and resources to enable better exploitation of information, the generation of income, and enhancement of the image of the public service. For the private sector,

initiatives and enterprise in joint ventures should help to stimulate the development of the information industry in the UK. The growth and prosperity of this industry will have a direct impact on exports and wealth creation.¹⁴³

It was against this background that the OAL developed a series of management tools for use in public libraries. CIPFA was commissioned in 1987 to produce a methodology for costing public library services¹⁴⁴. This was followed in 1990 by a manual of performance measures and indicators¹⁴⁵ and in 1991 by a manual for setting objectives¹⁴⁶ which also included a national mission statement for the public library service¹⁴⁷.

Proposals to extend compulsory competitive tendering to a range of local authority activities including library support services were set out in the Government's consultation paper *Competing for Quality* in November 1991¹⁴⁸. In 1992 the DNH invited library services to apply to be pilot projects to examine the feasibility of contracting out the direct delivery of all or various parts of the service. KPMG Peat Marwick and Capital Planning Information undertook the study during 1993-94 and initially suggested that contracting out was "feasible for main activities"¹⁴⁹ but argued for more research. The final report to the DNH recommended that it would be "inappropriate"¹⁵⁰ to apply compulsory competitive tendering to the public library service. Those library services involved in the pilot projects such as Kent and Brent drew attention to the difficulties and disadvantages of contracting out¹⁵¹. A fuller consideration of compulsory competitive tendering is outside of the scope of this thesis but it is interesting to note that although public libraries were not subject to compulsory competitive tendering, those that participated in the pilot projects, and indeed those located in Departments that were subject to compulsory competitive tendering, often demonstrate a more 'researched' style of management. For example, Brent Arts and Libraries became involved with customer surveys and researching likely competitors in order to compile tender documents¹⁵².

Generally, in terms of management, Stewart felt that the early to mid 1980s were characterised by "the lack of a conspicuous methodological approach" which was hardly surprising given that "with the repeated call for reductions in expenditure ... and in the absence of long-term strategy at both national and regional level, reactive management was the order of the day."¹⁵³ Evans identified a "perceptible shift towards much more organic management structures, with the use of ad hoc project groups and an increased broadening of the management base in public library services"¹⁵⁴ but admits that there is little to chart these changes. The earlier chart from Berkshire Library and Information Service in 1990, on page 42, following their reorganisation into an 'enabling structure', illustrates a structure typical of a library service within the commercial authority.

In 1991 the Minister for the Arts challenged the Library Association to produce a model charter for public libraries. The LA prepared *The Charter Approach* relating the concept to

libraries and with reference to existing practices “to show that the concern for quality services was not an invention of the Charter.”¹⁵⁵ In 1993 the *Charter for Public Libraries* was published and was later supported by a *Statement of Standards*¹⁵⁶ with the intention of helping libraries develop standards appropriate to their local circumstances. Implications for research are evident in the Charter Statement aiming to involve the community in establishing their needs by speaking regularly to users and “making regular surveys of people who use and do not use the library”¹⁵⁷, and in the Charter Promise whereby a statement of standards will be published with an Annual Statement showing how Charter commitments have been met in the past year and setting out targets for the coming year.

In 1991/92 the Audit Commission commissioned research to assess the attitudes of the public both towards libraries with a view to helping the Commission develop five performance indicators as a basis for comparing library services across local authorities. The research found that the main criteria for judging libraries appeared to be access to a comprehensive range of subjects and titles, an inviting atmosphere, helpful staff, late night and weekend opening hours, ample car-parking space, comfortable seating and good lighting.¹⁵⁸ Consultancy was provided by LISU and *Practical performance indicators - 1992* documents the consultation and gives examples of performance indicators and surveys then in use. These show that the use of performance measurement was widespread with a wide variety of approaches, mostly illustrating inter-branch features rather than inter-authority comparisons. Statistics were used for quite distinct purposes including control, planning and publicity although there was an underlying emphasis on the latent and explicit needs of users and the quality of service.¹⁵⁹ Sumsion comments:

That there are wide variations in the way these are practised in different authorities is evidence of the variety that enriches. That these different approaches are often little known beyond the home base is cause for concern.¹⁶⁰

The performance indicators set by the Audit Commission for 1993/94 were:

- Number of books / other items available / issued by the authority’s libraries;
- Number of libraries open 45 / 30-44 / 10-29 hours per week and number of mobile libraries;
- Number of visits by members of the public to public libraries;
- Amount spent per head of population on books and other materials;
- Net expenditure per head of population on libraries.¹⁶¹

In 1997 the requirements were extended in the *Reading the Future* report to include four additional indicators reflecting efficiency, such as net expenditure per loan, and ten showing access and usage, such as % of active borrowers¹⁶².

2.8.3 Research activity within the commercial authority

The developments mentioned earlier such as enabling and contracting bring into question the tradition of direct, hierarchical, controlled management. For example, the arrival of compulsory competitive tendering legislation led to the growth of management by contract

together with the previously unknown roles of clients and contractors. Where an authority did not have a contractual relationship with other providers there was a growing use of an authority's power and resources to influence those providers. Stoker¹⁶³ identifies the requirements for 'management of influence', one of which is that the local authority has to have a greater awareness of the powers and resources that are available to it, and this includes the information available to the local authority which might be improved by commissioning research or engaging in consultation. The breakdown of traditional structures saw a rise in 'devolved management' whereby "each individual manager has responsibility for delivering a service or achieving a stated result."¹⁶⁴ Improved management information systems are crucial and central to the success of devolved management. Dockery conducted case studies of 30 managers in a local authority examining their use of information in such contexts and concluded that the usefulness of information stems primarily from the contribution it makes to the co-ordination / control of financial and administrative activities.¹⁶⁵

Bramley's review of survey evidence on the demand for local government services in 1990 illustrates a range of ideas about approaches and includes a good deal of descriptive survey material. Bramley recognised the need to go beyond measuring use and looked towards more advanced approaches for assessing use of services, such as that being carried out in Cheshire at the same time in which ward data about socio-economic and physical geographic features and about local service provision was linked to survey data.¹⁶⁶ This work was later acknowledged by Stewart¹⁶⁷ for showing the potential of such analysis as a guide to policy.

2.8.4 Public library service research activity within the commercial authority

In 1984 the Library and Information Research Group held a seminar on *Public libraries: reappraisal and restructuring; the contribution of research to management and adaptation*¹⁶⁸. The themes of the conference were the economic situation, new technology, the user, and measurement and one of the aims was to suggest how research may help to solve such problems. Usherwood discussed privatisation of public libraries arguing that:

As practitioners, as academics and as researchers, we should attempt to develop a new set of criteria about how we measure and judge library and information services. Our concerns are interdisciplinary. The analysis of public library policy should draw on political science, public administration, sociology, economics, law and history. I am not suggesting that we simply borrow theories and models from these fields, but that we use them to develop models and theories based firmly in our own discipline of librarianship and information studies.¹⁶⁹

Papers by Cronin¹⁷⁰ on marketing and the identification of user groups, and Potter¹⁷¹ on the National Consumer Council's (NCC) work on establishing guidelines for consumers to assess the performance of council services including library services, make suggestions, in different ways, about how this could be achieved. The NCC's work was of interest to the Public Libraries Research Group (PLRG) who had a long established interest in performance

measurement. Although much had been written on the subject there had been no significant work on the measurement of library services by, and on behalf of, consumers, other than suggestions put forward in 'how to test your library' in 1970¹⁷². Nevertheless PLRG felt that "librarians have a positively developed understanding of the nature of performance assessment compared with some colleagues in other local services"¹⁷³ and were concerned at the pressure on value for money and the emphasis on efficiency rather than effectiveness in the activities of the Audit Commission. A meeting between the NCC and PLRG identified a number of problematic issues including the difficulty of defining a consumer with its implied emphasis on users and the fact that the more traditional functions of a public library service are more amenable to measurement than many aspects of community librarianship. Yet PLRG stressed that to move away from the consumer's viewpoint is fraught with even more difficulties: "to rely on analysis of issues or other use statistics, or to try and give value to expenditure as a measure of performance is at best misleading, can be open to disastrous misinterpretation, and tells one little or nothing about how 'good' a service is."¹⁷⁴

In 1986 the National Consumer Council published *Measuring up*¹⁷⁵ which focused on the methods by which certain local government services - housing repairs, road lighting, public libraries, refuse collection, trading standards and day-care for under 5s - could be assessed and aimed to encourage local authorities to set targets for 'consumer performance'. Despite PLRG's comments to the NCC most of the indicators developed were in relation to the quantity of services provided. Only one indicator, the time taken to satisfy reservation requests, concerned quality of service. The NCC's work was dismissed by Roberts - "neither methodology nor comment break new ground"¹⁷⁶ - who emphasised that librarians had carried out better work previously, and criticised for its "sweeping conclusions based on a detailed study of only two authorities"¹⁷⁷ at the Public Library Authorities Conference in 1987. As a contrast in 1987 Surrey County Library presented the seminar *Performance review in the library service*¹⁷⁸ which gave not only findings, results and lessons learned from their work on performance review, but also an evaluation of the research methodologies.

Against this background it is interesting to see that Meadows found that despite the pressures "interest in performance assessment has not necessarily led on to immediate action" - as evidence he cites the findings of a survey carried out in 1987 which found that over half of the library services which responded were not evaluating their services on any systematic basis¹⁷⁹. Cope's research at the end of 1989 similarly identified that over half of the responding library services were not seriously involved in the use of performance measurements¹⁸⁰. The reasons put forward by Meadows for non-implementation are that librarians may not be motivated to carry out the work that performance assessment implies because of a lack of resources to do so, that the effort may not be worthwhile because changes cannot be introduced because of a lack of resources, that the measures may seem

inadequate or inapplicable, or that the results from an assessment of performance may underline the efficiency of a service, but may also highlight inefficiencies.¹⁸¹

There has been a rapid improvement in performance indicators since the mid to late 1980s. As an exemplar we can look at the changes in the indicators used by Surrey as described by Betts¹⁸². When the authority was centralised early derived indicators, such as 'cost per ...', were used for specific purposes, for example, to compare library areas so that elected members were able to see where resources were shortfalling. Given that external standards were either non-existent or irrelevant, members were led to adopt an internal 'norm' as a benchmark as a first step to equalisation and hopefully, overall improvement in resources. Their use was therefore political as well as managerial with little impact on the public perception. Interest in the opinions and attitudes of users, including not only straightforward user research, but also attitude sampling and the use of focus groups led to the creation of performance indicators on the public's perceptions, whereby a list of questions is turned into quantitative indicators of the health or otherwise of the service:

Here we have original real research and understanding turned into an instrument [of] management primarily, for comparing service performance. Also, a useful political device, for heading off unpleasant attacks and backing up statements. It is probably quite doubtful whether the public actually care what others think about the service - they have their own perceptions, thank you.¹⁸³

As client/contractor relationships developed indicators such as those mentioned above continue to have their managerial function for the managers of the devolved units but there was also a new element, the client, who is interested in outcomes against broad objectives, rather than tight target setting. Most of the same indicators can be used for performance monitoring by the client, although budget monitoring takes on a new significance with the concern being how to measure value as well as value-for-money. Betts notes:

The imposition of broad indicators on an authority-wide base as required by the Government to support the Citizen's Charter initiative is irrelevant to managers now intent on looking at indicators at the individual library level for that purpose.

And concludes:

Our citizens are more interested in what is or is not going on at the local level and our devolved managers will be concentrating on that, by making promises against which performance can be judged ... It is unlikely that broad national comparisons will either impress or depress the average customer ... We will go on looking, however, for something which means something to the individual consumer of the service¹⁸⁴.

This is not dissimilar to views presented by Ammons who argues that the key to meaningful advances in performance measurement in local government may lie in "meeting the public interest challenge ... not only by formulating measures that address the public interest but, perhaps more critically, by reporting measures that capture public interest."¹⁸⁵

2.9 The networked authority

This has been developed by a number of local authorities in the 1990s as part of their attempt to find clearer direction during a period of structural change and uncertainty. In the 1980s the new public management was presented as a global paradigm but in retrospect Hood and Fenwick¹⁸⁶ have found that the ability to take on alternative and conflicting approaches simultaneously and sequentially means that there is unlikely to be a single uniform pattern of management in the future. There is evidence that current systems can no longer deliver effective responses to the increasingly complex problems faced by society. Whilst the new structures and cultures of the 1980s improved the capacity for economy and efficiency, they are proving increasingly unsuitable in the pursuit of effectiveness; for instance seminars with senior managers in 1997 revealed “increasing frustration at their inability to tackle effectively the major, complex, deep-rooted, intractable and multi-faceted problems that face communities.”¹⁸⁷ Jervis and Richards¹⁸⁸ identify democratic, development and design deficits in public management which, they maintain, have interacted to produce a system that is under-performing; they argue that a networked management is the only way forward. This phenomenon was first identified by Rittel and Webber¹⁸⁹ in 1973 and has since been articulated by Stewart who observed that it is not the rapidity of change but the number of dimensions on which change is taking place that is undermining structures. As this is considered further in Chapter Six, suffice it to say, that Stewart identified that:

... a series of problems are faced which can be characterised as wicked problems in the sense that they cannot be readily solved as problems in the past have at least appeared to be solved. They cannot ‘belong’ to a particular department, organisation or profession, but derive from the interaction between changes involving many.¹⁹⁰

An example would be where changes in the economy lead to physical changes in towns and cities, the costs of which are often seen in growing social problems. In terms of public library provision in such a case it has been argued that “the cost of maintaining a public library in areas of multiple social disadvantage, compared to the costs of not supporting the library (in terms of further community breakdown, social anomy and increased welfare provision), is an economic and social benefit in the wider sense.”¹⁹¹ The difficulty lies in demonstrating social costs and benefits and it is this scenario that challenges current styles of local government management.

As in the 1970s there is once more a re-organisation of local government to contend with. For brevity the ongoing reorganisation is not discussed - Wilson and Game¹⁹² provide an up to date discussion of the reform process. In terms of the impact on public library services Midwinter and McVicar examined the organisational implications of local government reform in 1993. Their research sums up the arguments on both sides and includes the findings of a survey which found that, as at the last reorganisation, professional librarians expressed a preference for fewer, larger authorities.¹⁹³ The implications for staffing were examined by Goulding who concluded that the situation “offers public library services

the opportunity to consider their position and role as regards council services and their communities".¹⁹⁴ Whist not ignoring the issues raised by Midwinter and McVicar, Malley¹⁹⁵ took a positive view arguing that many information-provision responsibilities previously held by other departments could come the way of libraries and identified opportunities for libraries in a corporate direction in terms of 'one-stop shops'. Parker, Banwell and Bent¹⁹⁶ completed an investigative study in May 1998 on the impact of local government reorganisation on public library users and staff. In contrast Favret¹⁹⁷ combined a historical perspective and a case study of Bromley Libraries to examine local government change. He observed a revival of interest in strategic management in local government and identified a continuum of strategic planning ranging from the highly structured model of analysis, choice, implementation and monitoring - essentially the Audit Commission's approach in the 1980s - to an alternative model of strategy formulation which sees strategy as emerging from the grass roots of an organisation in response to situations and opportunities - as often found in the 'purpose, people, process' approach of business. Whatever degree of strategic planning is adopted it is "a pre-requisite for creating an organisation that can cope with change."¹⁹⁸

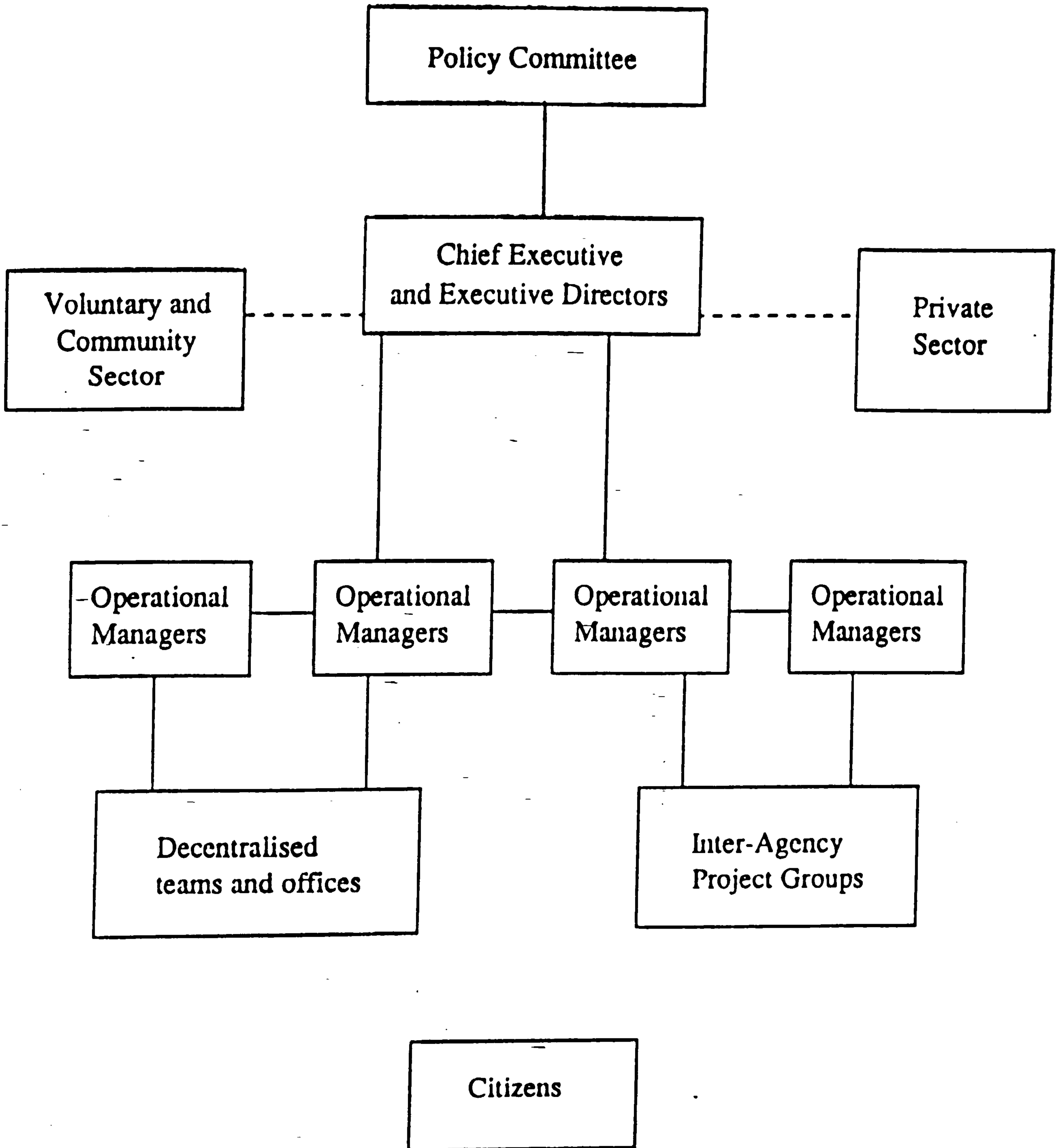
The theme of change is also evident in a set of three papers examining priorities for local government research in the 1990s published in *Local Government Policy Making* in 1992. The topics covered by Brooke's¹⁹⁹ listing of 15 key questions for research in local government, Clarke's²⁰⁰ proposals for closer links between practitioners and academics, and Stewart's²⁰¹ discussion of the research role of the LGMB are not surprising given the preceding analysis. What is interesting is that taken together they demonstrate a need not only for research into those questions, but also for a framework to address such questions:

In the last decade change has been notably unilluminated by research. Shifts in policy have often been motivated by theoretical principles without the benefit of serious analysis of the consequences of change. In the years to come can research play a greater part in influencing change rather than interpreting it in an historical context?²⁰²

The following diagrams illustrate the strategic management structure often found in a networked authority (page 50) and show how responsibilities are shared in a networked structure (page 51) where each executive director deals with one fraction of all six horizontal responsibilities.

Figure 2.10 Model D: Strategic management

Source: Reproduced with permission from Benington, J. *Preparing for power: local government and local administration in a new South Africa*. University of Warwick: Local Government Centre, December 1992, (Local Government Centre Working Paper No. 17), between p. 21 and p. 22.



Keyword:

Key Profession:

Centre of Power:

Performance Criterion:

Strategic Management

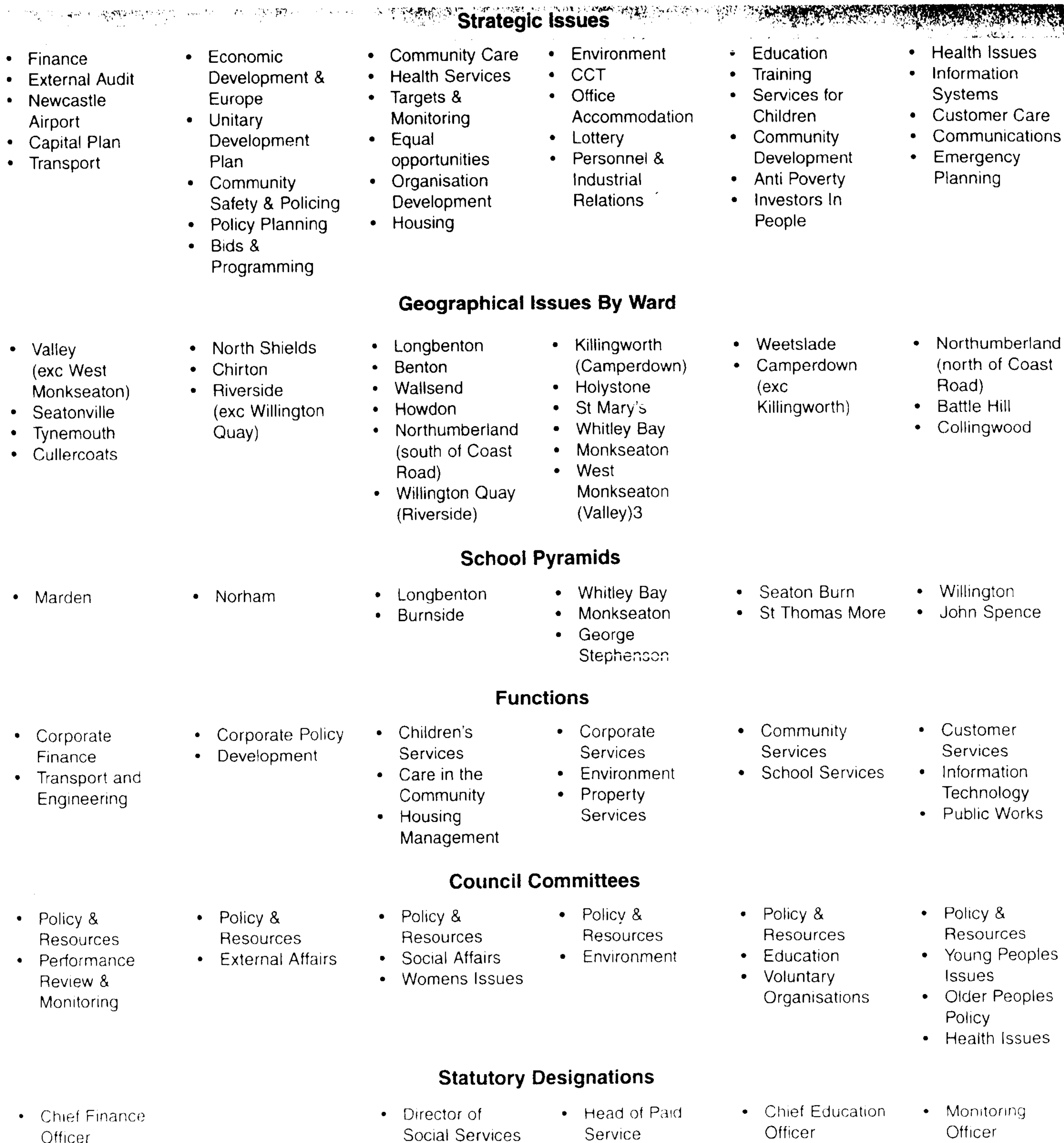
Strategic Managers

Policy Committee/Chief Executive Board

Strategy, leadership, quality, empowerment

Figure 2.11 Example of a networked structure

Source: Adapted from Executive Directors Lead Responsibilities. In: *Council Strategy 1996-1998*, North Tyneside Council, p. 19.



2.9.1 Organisation and management within the networked authority

The networked approach draws upon private sector ideas and models of management, such as those associated with Japanese approaches to strategy, quality and participative work organisation. Pressure to provide better services within constrained budgets in both local government and the health service has put a focus on the “delaying of management”²⁰³ and networked management is one instance of this. It relies on strong political leadership, a small group of strategic managers and a group of operational managers working together. There is often a separation of strategic and operational management, a reduction in middle management, and a shortening in the lines of communication. Stoker’s discussion concerning strengthening the strategic centre of an authority identified a number of initiatives which would now be recognised as features of a networked authority, for example, establishing a board of directors with broader and more generalist corporate management roles; restructuring staff to distinguish more clearly between those with corporate roles and those supporting front-line service delivery; creating new forums for members to establish corporate guidelines and priorities; and moving towards new bases for the division of work related to geography, clients or particular communities²⁰⁴.

The move to a management structure with a relatively small number of Executive Directors in place of the customary phalanx of Chief Officers each responsible for a range of individual services aims to create a more genuinely integrated form of management than in traditional local authority structures. The system adopted by North Tyneside is very much in line with these principles of networked local government. The reorganisation was adopted when faced with the need to make 12% reductions in budget and was “designed not just to meet the financial situation faced by the Council, but to place the Council on a firm footing to meet the many future challenges and opportunities.”²⁰⁵ As shown on page 51, the six Directors have no departmental responsibility but “work side by side across functions and issues which affect the council and the people of the borough.”²⁰⁶ Their primary role is collective by virtue of there being no Chief Executive and strategic and corporate in that they have no budgets or individual services to defend. They also have lead responsibilities which include, for each Executive Director, strategic issues; geographical issues by ward; school pyramids; functions; council committees and statutory designations. These remain strategic in nature and day-to-day management responsibility rests with the 15 individual Heads of Function. These Functions replaced the traditional departmental structure, and each is responsible for a range of related service areas previously located in several different Departments²⁰⁷.

The reorganisation is mirrored in the new member structure which transformed member/senior officer contact by introducing frequent, informal forums for discussing strategic issues and briefing members and by streamlining committee structure so that committees can concentrate on policy issues and decision-making. Furthermore the organisation was “refocused”²⁰⁸ through a commitment to organisational and cultural change

throughout the council including a video featuring the Leader of the Council outlining his vision for the council; an Organisational Change Steering Group; working towards Investors in People accreditation; and developing relationships between the controlling political group, the Executive Directorate, Heads of Function and the Joint Trade Union Committee. It is claimed that the benefits demonstrated include a real corporate approach to financial problems and greater cost effectiveness; better linkages across the organisation with greater integration between related, but traditionally separate, services; better relationships between elected members and senior management; a corporate commitment to cultural change with greater involvement of front-line staff and more attention to the public's perceptions.²⁰⁹ In this sense then the structure 'works' in terms of the challenges posed by Fenwick²¹⁰ in his discussion of the future internal organisation of the local authority.

This horizontal approach is also evident in Birmingham City Council's focus on cross-departmental working between Departments, which involves groups meeting together formally or on an ad hoc basis in order to carry out a particular task. Some of these are thematic groups based on the Council's core policies such as 'promoting health'. The emphasis on cross-service working arose with the arrival of a new Chief Executive in 1994 who considered it to be one method of moving towards a culture of "one organisation."²¹¹ Less hierarchical than traditional and corporate models, less fragmented than the commercial model, it is this emerging context of strategic management with its emphasis on strategy, leadership, quality and empowerment, the corresponding implications for research, and the contribution from the public library service, that will be revisited in Chapter Six.

2.10 Questions to be considered

The shift in service provision from a traditional model to a modern model requires research to assess the performance of services against objectives and standards, to analyse the outputs and outcomes of policies and programmes, to investigate the perceptions of service users and unmet needs, and to establish employees' ideas and views. This may be difficult to achieve without either a reasonably sized research unit or a budget to hire consultants. It also means that chief officers need greater skills than in the past in marshalling and applying information from many sources. Writing in 1995, Blackman comments:

It is still the case that few public sector organisations could be described as having a 'research culture' of the type that integrates action-research into its operations. Decisions are often founded on informal theory or implicit beliefs held by professional officers or politicians. Research methods do not fit in very well to the decision-making processes which are usually short-term and pragmatic, with decisions generally only involving marginal change from the current status quo.²¹²

However management practices such as performance monitoring are developing rapidly in local authorities and this is encouraging an environment more conducive to research. Even so there are a number of unresolved issues.

2.10.1 Role of research within local authorities

Fenwick²¹³, like Stoker²¹⁴, refers to the changed role of the 'centre' in a local authority whereby a directing or monopolistic influence on the management of the authority is being replaced by a strategic approach. The centre is now likely to, for instance, co-ordinate resource planning, provide corporate strategic guidance, establish systems for performance review, and lead corporate efforts on specific policy developments. This new role has an increased need for the generation of and policy-related use of information and research. Overarching all other aspects is the 'new agenda' for local authorities. Defined initially by Clarke²¹⁵ and more recently by the new central government, it covers issues surrounding changing local government and the new local governance, politics and leadership, strategy and purpose, organisation matters, and being closer to the people. A strategic planning, research and intelligence capacity is a necessary component of the new agenda:

... an attempt to take a longer term perspective on key issues and activities is important - not withstanding the high levels of uncertainty in which local government is operating. It needs to be fed by a research and intelligence activity which provides the information to challenge assumptions, leads the search for new ideas and approaches, and is able to think outside established patterns and conventions.²¹⁶

Clarke goes on to argue that there is no reason for the authority to be self-sufficient with its research and intelligence, and that thought needs to be given to making sensible use of the total resources available, even to the extent of working collaboratively.²¹⁷ If this is so then the role of research within local government needs to be reassessed to meet this challenge.

2.10.2 The rationale for research

It is evident that the notion of quality was seen as central to the public service orientation, although there was no discussion of the meaning of quality beyond the implication that it is defined in relation to the value of the service to the customer. Nevertheless one only needs to refer to Sanderson's *Management of quality in local government* published in 1992 to see how the situation has advanced from quality being merely one dimension of a public service orientation to one where quality has essentially replaced it as the force for local government.²¹⁸ Rather than abandoning the public service orientation Fenwick takes forward the discussion by questioning the lasting significance of consumerism bearing in mind that it is now possible to look beyond that perspective and incorporate more substantive elements of citizenship such as empowerment, for example, Fenwick notes that despite the fact that a number of local authorities carried out general consumer satisfaction studies in the 1980s they tended not to feed directly into policy and management:

If these studies are based around a concept at all, perhaps it is that public opinion data have a self-evident value ... technical questions of whether the results accurately reflected public opinion, or policy questions of whether the results would accurately affect service delivery, tended not to be the prime concern of such studies.²¹⁹

As the work of the NCC demonstrated, it is studies of particular services that are of most use,

but even when consumer research moves from the general to the particular it is not necessarily acted upon. For Fenwick²²⁰ the problem lies with the organisational problems of implementation, as indeed it did with Meadows²²¹. First, managers in local government are socialised into regarding the councillor as the appropriate proxy for the public: why look further? Secondly, implementation may not be the aim at all, the aim may be to demonstrate the organisation's adherence to consumer values as an end in itself. Thirdly, constraints upon resources are a permanent feature of local public services. Even where consumer information is reliable and usable it may be impossible to act. One can argue that such information may raise expectations which cannot be met; or alternatively, that information of this kind is an effective tool in the political battle for more resources. Whatever view is taken, there needs to be a restatement of the rationale for research in local government.

2.10.3 Transforming information into intelligence

Research can exist at any point along the spectrum between information and policy, but it is 'intelligence' that is required by those involved in policy-making and strategic management. Blackman gives various examples that demonstrate the role for research in turning information into intelligence but notes that a planned approach is rare in authorities and a reliance on action research is common; furthermore a strategic management style in which information systems and research services support the quality of the local authority's services, for example, the use of geographical information systems, is not always present:

In fact, research sits uneasily with the organisational culture of most local authorities. Research aims to produce rationally structured knowledge and information ideally on a continuous and consistent basis. By contrast, decision-making in local government is often founded on implicit beliefs and short-term pragmatism ... Scepticism about research ... is often based on the perceived failure to deliver results of operational value. The recent emphasis on the consumer is helping to focus research and information much more on tangible questions ...²²²

It is pointless conducting research if there is no commitment to using it. Blackman believes that "such a commitment ... requires a lead from chief officers in creating an organisational culture which expects recommendations to committees and operational decisions to be supported with appropriate research"²²³ but is also aware that "very few officers are fully acquainted with computerised information systems ... and do not have the time or reasons to interrogate the data for applied research purposes."²²⁴ Until fairly recently most local authority research was largely confined to statistical information. Blackman notes that "despite the relevance of social research to policy analysis and corporate planning ... there was rarely a major commitment to social research at chief officer level."²²⁵ The contribution of research in transforming information into intelligence needs to be recognised.

2.10.4 Qualitative versus quantitative

Previously there was a view²²⁶ that difficult social problems were capable of relatively easy solutions providing there was enough money to spend. Today the complexity of such

problems is not treated so lightly but they are recognised as, in the words of Stewart, “wicked issues”²²⁷, that is, issues which are hard to understand and hard to solve. Thus there is a need for more sophisticated research techniques such as those found in qualitative research, and this is supported by Usherwood²²⁸ and Everitt²²⁹, but most research has traditionally been the analysis of secondary datasets such as the population census and with surveys²³⁰. Furthermore, decision-makers want ‘facts’ since there is then less of a gap between the research and the decision-making that must follow. However as one research officer noted “often the research we do generates information whose accuracy goes far beyond what is appropriate for our ability to effect change.”²³¹ The LARIA survey revealed that only 19 authorities had undertaken qualitative research and that quantitative data were preferred because they appear ‘objective’ and prove things ‘statistically’ whereas qualitative data are perceived to be subjective and unreliable.²³²

Blackman's assessment of qualitative research notes that there is “a real danger in local government of ignoring the role of qualitative research at a time of social trends towards the qualitative rather than just the quantitative dimensions of services.”²³³ If local authorities are to tackle complex issues they must review their approach to methods given that:

The solutions to these problems are not clear and even their cause may be unknown ... perhaps the simple problems which can be given to an identified organisation, using established expertise to apply accepted solutions have been solved and we are left with the wicked problems, which will require fundamental changes.²³⁴

2.10.5 The relationship between research and consultation

Whilst local authorities have certain statutory obligations to consult residents we must be aware of the debate as to whether research is part of the consumerist strategy or one which actually empowers and supports citizenship. Hambleton and Hoggett argue that the pre-set questions in surveys “express the council's agenda, not necessarily the service users”²³⁵ and Blackman²³⁶ agrees that such research tactics may serve to alienate and marginalise. Fenwick²³⁷ also considers whether the development of the consumer perspective denotes a serious change in the respective power of public-service provider and the public, or merely an ephemeral change to a more user-friendly style by comparing the rhetoric and the practice and this line of thought is also pursued by Blackman:

Managers are generally interested in research to answer ‘how many’, ‘how much’ and ‘what is the evidence’ questions. This biases research designs towards studies that produce figures upon which generalisations can be based ... this approach reproduces a power relationship between those providing and those receiving services. People using services have to be involved in the early stages of decision-making in deciding how to assess service performance for example.²³⁸

Qualitative research, with its emphasis on understanding rather than measurement, is particularly useful here. Blackman identifies when it is appropriate to use qualitative policy-related research, for example when little is known about the subject or when the topic is not

easy to articulate, and gives examples of different approaches including focus groups, workshops, and involving local people in research design.²³⁹ Practical applications of these approaches are illustrated by Heiser's experience of qualitative research in Camden with, for example, under-5s day-care users²⁴⁰ and Clayton's report on crime and economic disadvantage which develops a "rich picture" in order to identify strategic objectives for Cheshire Constabulary²⁴¹. Blackman also suggests that using research to define people's needs directly, rather than having these needs represented through professionals, will also improve local people's identification with their services and interest in them.²⁴² Hambleton and Hoggett take this idea one step further and argue that the issues of equality and of people's experience of the services they receive should become central to performance evaluation, rather than focusing on economy and efficiency. The challenge for local authorities is to reflect equality and experience in their approach to measurement.

2.10.6 Public library service and research

To ensure survival, growth, and the realisation of its strategic potential the public library service has not only to contribute to delivering policy but to engage with policy development. At the local level public libraries have the potential to help their local authorities achieve their social, economic and political objectives. Given that the emergence of the networked approach in local authorities allows for the identification of cross-cutting issues and offers a chance for problems to be addressed holistically, the remit now is less straightforward than that accompanying the corporate model and less tight than that implied by the commercial model. Public library research can no longer be confined to 'simpler' issues to do with operational service development, but must extend to 'deeper' research addressing the social and economic impact of services. This is not to forget the value of the social role of the public library in terms of equity and equality, that is, about evenness of access and ensuring there is no discrimination inherently built into service provision. This is noted by Usherwood²⁴³ in *The future development of the public library service* and expanded in *Beyond the numbers* where he argues that equity has to be reflected in the way that services are evaluated. Like Stewart, who describes the search for equity as one of the "neglected issues"²⁴⁴, Usherwood views current approaches to performance measurement as "one of the issues to be worked upon."²⁴⁵ This means that public library services operating today need access to researchers with skills in quantitative and qualitative methods as well as a sound knowledge of social and policy analysis, market research, community development and customer care. Usherwood supports a drive towards research based practice even though it is questionable if policy makers and practitioners are aware of the value of research as a contributor to performance:

The 'implementation' of research findings involves more than simply applying a recipe. For research to be 'implemented' someone needs to know about it and must influence the organisation ... persuade the policy makers that change along the indicated lines will be valuable.²⁴⁶

All of these points coalesce with the issues pertaining to research within the wider local authority and it is proposed that the future development of research in the public library service requires the role of research to be reassessed, the rationale restated, the contribution in transforming information into intelligence recognised, and the approach to methodology reviewed to reflect equality and experience. The following chapters will assess whether the public library service as a whole and practitioner-researchers in particular have, or can develop, the structures, skills and strategies to meet these challenges.

¹ Local Authorities Research and Intelligence Association. *National review of the role of research in local government. Report of the Advisory Group chaired by Professor John Stewart*. LGMB, July 1995, p. 3.

² Birmingham City Council. *Policy Framework 1996/97*. Birmingham City Council, Policy Division, no date, p. 33-35.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁴ Fenwick, J. *Managing local government*. Chapman and Hall, 1995, p. 165.

⁵ Boddy, M. and Snape, D. *The role of research in local government: report for the Local Authorities Research and Intelligence Association (LARIA)*. Local Authorities Research and Intelligence Association/University of Bristol, School for Advanced Urban Studies, July 1995.

⁶ The management of information. In: Fenwick, J. *Managing local government*. Chapman and Hall, 1995, p. 144-169.

⁷ Isaac-Henry, K. Management of information technology in the public sector. In: Isaac-Henry, K., Painter, C. and Barnes, C. *Management in the public sector: challenge and change*. 2nd ed. Thomson, 1997, p. 131-159.

⁸ Dockery, E. Management and the usefulness of information. In: Willcocks, L. and Harrow, J. *Rediscovering public services management*. McGraw-Hill, 1992, p. 275-93.

⁹ *The new local authorities: management and structure. Report of a study group appointed jointly by the Secretary of State for the Environment and local authority associations*. HMSO, 1972. (Bains Report).

¹⁰ Blackman, T. *Urban policy in practice*. Routledge, 1995, p. 169.

¹¹ Local Authorities Research and Intelligence Association. *op cit.*, p. 4.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹³ Snape, D. and Boddy, M. Local government research and the policy process: a threatened relationship? *Local Government Policy Making*, 22 (5), 1996, p. 40-41.

¹⁴ Blackman, T. *op cit.*, p. 166-194.

¹⁵ Fenwick, J. *op cit.*, p. 157-166.

¹⁶ Gostick, C. Social research in local government. In: Sykes, W., Bulmer, M. and Schwerzel, M. (eds.) *Directory of social research organisations in the United Kingdom*. Mansell, 1993, p. 25-29.

¹⁷ Durham County Council. *Handbook for new entrants*. Durham County Council, Personnel Services, no date. p. 10.

¹⁸ Durham County Council. *Economic Development Statement and Business Plan 1996/97*. Durham County Council, Economic Development and Research Unit, no date, p. 14-15.

¹⁹ Hall, J. F. Letter to D. Goodall re: Background information: City of Sunderland and the Library Service, 1 May 1997.

²⁰ Wolverhampton Council. *The Office of the Chief Executive and Policy Co-ordinator*. (Unpublished.)

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CHAPTER THREE

Review of public library research activity

3.0 Introduction

Libraries contribute to four of this Government's most important policy objectives. They underpin education ... they enhance public access to ... knowledge and information; they promote social inclusion, by helping to bridge the gap between those who can afford access to information and those who can't; and, increasingly, they have a role to play in the modernisation and delivery of public services.¹

Since 1997 there has been a significant shift in the thinking surrounding the public library service and its potential contribution has been recognised at the highest level. This chapter tests the argument that the historical situation of fragmented, localised, low-key research activity in the public library service is being replaced by a coherent approach with clearer co-ordination, direction and funding at national level by reviewing the frameworks for research activities from three perspectives, historical, thematic and current. The chronological review takes as its starting point events leading up to the 1964 Public Libraries and Museums Act. The closing date for this chapter is April 1998 when the Government's response was published to *New Library: the People's Network*.

To avoid replicating the quinquennial reviews² of library and information work, this chapter focuses initially on three strands of influence relevant to an understanding of research in the public library service: the initial influence of professional organisations, namely the Library Association and the British Library Research and Development Department; the Public Library Development Incentive Scheme; and the role of independent research groups. The core of the chapter analyses four investigations of the state of public library research and five themes are identified that have remained linked to discussions about public library research activities: leadership/co-ordination, agenda-setting, funding, practitioner research skills and research methods. To advance a clearer understanding these findings are set within the recent and current context defined by three strategic reviews of the public library service in the early 1990s followed by selected key documents produced between 1996 - 1998 when the 'old' was replaced by the emergence of the 'new' in terms of policies, agendas, and initiatives with the change in central government. This section identifies a coherent body of work and shows how problematic themes identified are being addressed on a national basis.

3.1 Historical perspective

A history and review of the public library service until 1957 is given in the Roberts³ report dealing with issues of structure, staffing and premises, charging, legislation and co-operation of the public library service in England and Wales. The Bourdillon report⁴ in 1962 followed up the technical implications of the Roberts report by formulating standards of public library service in England and Wales. Before the 1964 Public Libraries and Museums Act came into

force the publication of the committee reports provided a stimulus for an improvement in library services. The Act and the preceding Roberts and Bourdillon reports meant that:

For the first time librarians and their committees were able to measure their achievements against more or less objective standards. For the better library authorities this was a chance to identify their shortcomings and ... to put them right; for the weaker authorities it was a revelation of the leeway they had to make up ...⁵

The 1964 Act placed the public library service provided by local authorities in England and Wales under the superintendence of the Secretary of State. There were two Library Advisory Councils to advise the Secretary and a scheme for inter-library co-operation. The Act made it the “duty of every library authority to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service ... and for that purpose to employ such officers, to provide and maintain such buildings and equipment, and such books and other materials, and to do such other things, as may be requisite ...”⁶ There is no mention of undertaking research.

Whiteman reviews the origins of research noting that, in Britain, in 1970, research in library science was still a very new topic “with the main developments of significance crowded into the last ten or fifteen years.”⁷ He also notes that while there has been a great deal of innovation in the solution of library problems, it is tradition that tends to be the most significant influence and points out that librarians do not “spend their lives in a long orgy of experiment.”⁸ Whiteman’s paper discusses the definition of research in the professional context and the distinction between research and development work. Jones, in contrast, in a historical discussion about research and the public library community takes research to be simply “the first-time assemblage and analysis of a substantial body of fact, most of it not previously in common currency, with a view to the formulation of conclusions and where appropriate to action.”⁹ Whiteman also identifies a range of events that promoted the idea of organised interest in research and development. These include the founding of the *Journal of Documentation* in 1945 and *Library Science Abstracts* in 1950, the development of the LA’s Classification Research Group, the Aslib Cranfield Research Project in 1957, the National Lending Library for Science and Technology’s work and “the awakening of interest in the scientific examination of management problems in the academic library field.”¹⁰

3.1.1 The Library Association (LA)

The Association became regularly involved in research in 1959 in terms of obtaining funds from other bodies for projects and encouraging small projects by means of an annual research grants fund¹¹. In 1965 Mallaber gave the first paper on research to be featured at a Library Association Annual Conference. This captures the cautious approach to research taken at that time and foresees limitations to research work that continue to be problematic today. Mallaber comments on his paper: “It will be a short survey, because while the Association as a whole has talked about research - and for a long time - it is remarkable how

little research has actually been undertaken.”¹² In December 1965 the LA’s Library Research Committee¹³ subsequently set up a Policy and Projects Sub-committee to consider the matters raised by Mallaber’s paper. In February 1966 this Sub-committee¹⁴ began discussions to create a coherent policy for the LA in the field of library research considering issues such as the LA’s relationship to research affecting its membership and also the wider field of librarianship; the boundaries of the LA’s interest in library research in respect of allied subjects and that conducted by other bodies; the priorities in library research and their financing; the desirability of taking on board an advisory or co-ordinating role; and the implications for staffing and funding. By September 1966 the Sub-committee had produced a preliminary list of 57 requirements in library research of which 12 items related to public libraries: topics ranged from developing a method of determining the optimum size of a library system in terms of costs and quality of service to studies of stock - requirements and withdrawals - and services such as ‘reader advice’.¹⁵

Mallaber’s paper identifies the practical problems for research at that time. A chief issue then was a lack of suitable trained and motivated staff and Mallaber writes of “the almost complete lack of librarians who are capable of research work or even wish to carry it out.”¹⁶ The library schools were blamed for failing to carry out any research into professional matters and the unfortunate consequences:

[Firstly] as their students do not work in an atmosphere where research is important, they place little or no value on research when they finish their studies. Secondly, there is every danger of teaching becoming ... stale if no research is done to stimulate advances in professional thinking. Thirdly, we are producing none of the natural directors of research ... until we have some experienced research workers who can train and direct the work of research assistants, it is ... not very profitable to give grants to young librarians.¹⁷

The situation had not improved by 1980 according to Maguire who observed that the reluctance of library school students both to take courses in research methods and to enrol in higher degrees meant that interdisciplinary links were difficult to forge:

Apart from the nature of librarianship’s dependency on other disciplines for fundamental concepts, the fact that students and young librarians perceive so little relevance in research training make it unlikely that many or major intellectual contributions will soon come from them.¹⁸

The other main limitation was, of course, the lack of money for the larger research projects however research proposals were also criticised for being insufficiently thought out:

Often they are little more than a general statement of the need for certain information. Often they make quite inadequate proposals on the methodology of the project, and it is sometimes clear that the proposer has little idea of the real size of the project or of its probable cost.¹⁹

Mallaber felt that most existing library research tended to be practical experimental work as “this is the field of activity that is capable of producing the most immediately useful results.”²⁰ However the overall approach to research methods was weak:

... being natural empiricists ... librarians are not noticeably enamoured of this type of research ... I cannot help thinking that the attitude of mind necessary for this type of work - the ability and willingness to peruse facts wherever they may lead, and to face whatever conclusions naturally emerge - is an attitude which is too rare amongst us and which should be encourage by whatever means are possible.²¹

Despite the limited amount of research carried out at that time it was felt that the Library Research Committee had learnt a great deal, for example, about how to assess research proposals put before it, about how to draft a research proposal to put to other bodies for funding, and about the factors that inhibit research. Regarding the precise functions of the LA in the field of research, Mallaber identified a task that has continued to tax the profession, that of producing “a full and balanced statement of what research ought to be done, in various fields, over the next 10 to 20 years.”²² Mallaber continues with a crucial statement:

We must take positive steps to create within the profession a belief that research is important, and a proper and valuable activity to have engaged in. Without a body of librarians trained and experienced in research ... we are in danger of having our research ... carried out by research workers from other professions ... Librarianship ... will not achieve equal standing with these other disciplines until it is seen that [it provides] scope for research, and that this research is in fact taking place.²³

In 1968 Lewis²⁴ continued this discussion, arguing for greater participation by the LA in research activities and identifying the administration of research matters as being the main problem. He viewed the Research Committee as “constitutionally ill-adapted to organise and exploit the manpower resources available for research within the profession” and the Research Officer and staff to “have so many duties unconnected with research proper that they cannot give sufficient time to research activities.”²⁵ An examination of the minutes of the Committee confirms its very broad remit simply in the number of Sub-committees reporting to it. Lewis proposed a Research Department with a full-time Director of research and staff of research people, not necessarily to be concerned with carrying out work itself but with “harnessing the activities of the available research strength within the Association”²⁶, for example, via participation by the groups and sections of the LA and the library schools in such a programme. These proposals were forwarded to the LA’s Research Committee by the LA’s Reference, Special and Information Section²⁷ who subsequently discussed the implications - “the nub of the whole matter, of course, is finance. The prosecution of an active research policy implies the existence of a permanent team of research workers ...”²⁸ It is worth noting that at this point the Research Committee were still discussing the LA’s function as an organisation active in research. However some of Lewis’s recommendations were taken on board by the Research Committee. Between 1969 and 1976 there were two sub-committees, the Grants and Awards Sub-Committee and the Advisory Board on Research, composed

mainly of persons with research experience, to advise the Committee on research policy. By March 1969 the Grants and Awards Sub-committee had devised conditions for the award of research grants, which, among other things, would “provide opportunities for practising librarians to carry out research.”²⁹ It is interesting to see that an earlier draft of these conditions would have allowed “in exceptional circumstances”, awards to be made to “non-librarians, or to organisations not primarily in the field of librarianship, where the research proposed is shown to be clearly related to the interests of librarianship.”³⁰ The new Advisory Board devised terms of reference³¹ for itself. These can be summarised as including advising what research is needed and what data exists in relation to the LA’s activities, considering what research the LA should undertake and whether adequate resources exist to do it, and the dissemination of research results and techniques. For example, the Board discussed a categorisation of library research believing that:

Research and development should form a normal part of a library’s activities. Every library should conduct from time-to-time small-scale research into its operations ... although this will usually be mainly of local interest, cumulatively it could shed a lot of light on library problems, provided that it is of reasonable quality and is properly co-ordinated.³²

One of the categories proposed was ‘social environment’, which included the relation of the library to its community and the social contribution of the library.³³ Minutes containing an analysis of research in progress identified it as “clearly a neglected area” and note that “it is rather shaming that one of only two projects is funded by the Booksellers Association.”³⁴ The Board also initiated a two-day Seminar on Library Research Methods, organised in collaboration with Aslib in December 1969; surprisingly participation was “restricted to teaching and research staffs of library schools.”³⁵ In 1970 the Board continued to discuss needs in research identifying the priorities as ‘practical problems which can be tackled using existing techniques’ and ‘practical problems where new techniques need to be developed’ and noted:

The feasibility of a particular project, and in particular the existence of techniques suitable for carrying it out, was seen to be a most important factor in determining priorities in library research. It was, however, possible for unsuccessful projects (in terms of results) to demonstrate either the existence or non-existence of methods for tackling particular problems.

Special techniques that are suitable for some of the peculiar problems of library research have not been developed so far, but some techniques are needed.

There is a need to look more closely at research going on in other areas. e.g., management ... and to study ways in which their methods could be adapted to use in library research.³⁶

In 1972 the Executive Committee’s Working Party on Association Services reviewed the work of the Research Department and criticised “the lack of clear lines of policy direction” and suggested that the Research and Development Committee “devote more time to the

discussion of research which the Association could usefully sponsor, bearing in mind that it does not have the financial resources or expertise to carry out any large scale work itself."³⁷ The Research and Development Committee accepted that "it might be more useful to concentrate on sponsoring a series of 'one-off' projects"³⁸ and the Advisory Board was subsequently not reconstituted as "it must be said that it did not go very far towards fulfilling its terms of reference."³⁹ In Moore's 1978 review he felt that "the Association ... sees its main role as advising on the research which needs to be done" and noted that "to an extent the LA does carry out research in order that the secretariat can offer sound advice to policy makers and to the profession."⁴⁰

3.1.2 The British Library Research and Development Department (BLRDD)

With its predecessor, OSTI, the Office for Scientific and Technical Information, established in 1965, BLRDD has been the main funding body for library and information research in the UK. O'Hanlon⁴¹ describes the history of OSTI which provided a regular programme of Government support for research aimed primarily at science and technology. In 1974 OSTI was assimilated into the British Library and, in essence, became BLRDD. Martyn⁴² describes how the broader remit of the Department was the promotion and support of research and development related to library and information operations in all subject fields, and all directed to the benefit of the national library and information system as a whole. It did not carry out research itself but awarded funds to institutions and sometimes individuals. Support was not confined to library topics but covered all aspects of information generation, transfer and use.

Meadows⁴³ describes the various channels through which BLRDD has influenced research by its efforts to develop a research community. The main function initially of BLRDD was to support research in librarianship and information work by funding individual projects, research centres and information officers. During the 1970s and 1980s overall priorities for research were determined by the Advisory Committee for the Research and Development Department, known as ACORDD. In addition BLRDD also funded related projects that did not fall into the usual pattern of a research project, for example, research reviews to bring recent and current research to the attention of librarians. Another way that BLRDD attempted to improve the spread of ideas and research results was through its international programme of awarding grants for study visits overseas and visiting fellowships. For example, Maguire's report⁴⁴ of her study visit in 1980 usefully gives an 'informed outsider's' view of library research in the UK. To combat the lack of a research tradition in this area the Department has supported initiatives to increase the awareness of research, ranging from annual research lectures starting in 1982 to providing basic training in research techniques and developing staff in research centres.

The prime reason behind this proactive approach to research is explained by Meadows as an attempt to make up for “the absence of a clearly defined library and information research community” with only a “restricted number of suitable research workers ...[and], unfortunately, few potential project heads who can successfully turn a research idea into a viable project.”⁴⁵ Although there were many practitioners, they had little or no background in research methods, and the questions that interested them usually derived from their immediate work activities. BLRDD’s insistence that a project must have a significantly innovative element, and must be generalizable beyond the immediate organisation or subject field, presented practitioners with some difficulties. Meadows refers to the ‘chicken-and-egg’ problem of building a library and information research community, noting that even in the 1970s, library and information research “was still not a coherent discipline.”⁴⁶ This view is echoed by Wilson and Moore who felt that the reluctance of public librarians to submit proposals for projects based in public libraries at that time stemmed “from a certain lack of confidence that the investigations carried out by public libraries were in fact ‘research’.”⁴⁷

3.1.2.1 BLRDD and the public library service

Public libraries were not originally a part of the BLRDD’s remit and it was on the basis of advice from the Library Advisory Council for England that the DES specifically asked the newly formed Department to “stimulate research of special benefit to public libraries.”⁴⁸ In 1975 BLRDD announced that £15,000⁴⁹ a year had been set aside for public library research and that proposals in this area would be welcomed. Over the next two years various enquiries were received but “it became evident that if public libraries were to become a research topic projects would have to be stimulated and assisted, rather than left to unsolicited applications.”⁵⁰ When it came to establishing a research programme for public libraries, BLRDD began by commissioning a review of the research that had already been undertaken. This review formed the basis for a seminar in Banbury in 1977 to bring public librarians and researchers together, to stimulate awareness of the potential role to be played by the British Library, and to identify the most pressing priorities for research. The review of research had identified over 150 projects:

When looked at together they demonstrated increasing sophistication in research techniques, the development of both theoretical and problem-oriented research and a growth in the range of organisations concerned with research.⁵¹

The main conclusion at the seminar was that:

... there was a pressing need for improved co-ordination of public library research at both national and local level so as to obtain the maximum benefit from the resources deployed. There was a general feeling that diversity was to be encouraged, and particularly that public libraries should become more involved in research.⁵²

The main recommendation of the Banbury seminar was put into effect in July 1978 when the Department set up an Advisory Committee for Public Library Research. The Committee's terms of reference were to advise on priorities for public library research, to review all relevant research work in progress whether funded by the British Library or by other bodies, and to advise on individual proposals in the light of priorities and of independent advice, where necessary, on methodology⁵³. The Committee recommended that "emphasis should be given to projects of practical value, undertaken in public libraries, which can yield methodologies applicable by practising librarians."⁵⁴ At first public librarians appeared reluctant to submit proposals for projects based in public libraries and in retrospect it has been observed:

This was exacerbated by the lack of people in public libraries in a position to co-ordinate such research ... or to link in with joint projects. This has been overcome ... by the award of grants to public libraries for pragmatic projects and by bringing together a number of libraries jointly to pioneer a particular development ...⁵⁵

In 1979 a seminar was held for research officers in public libraries to provide practical instruction on a number of aspects of research methodology, research aims and report writing and to consider the organisation, planning and future of research in public libraries⁵⁶.

3.1.2.2 The growth and decline of public library research activity

The development was helped by a regular flow of advice and comment from public librarians to the Department. The main channel for this was the Advisory Committee on Public Library Research, renamed as the Group for Research into Public Libraries in 1982. Under the Committee's guidance research activities developed rapidly. In 1980 ACORDD noted that "the public libraries programme is now large and ... well-founded and well balanced. The main problem is how big it should be allowed to grow."⁵⁷ By 1981, more than fifty grants for public library research had been awarded, a good proportion of them directly to public librarians, corresponding to an outlay of some £250,000 since 1978.⁵⁸ Initially the Committee did not indicate priority areas as it seemed more sensible in a newly expanding research field to see first what matters were deemed important by the practitioners: "the overriding consideration with this research programme has been to keep the research relevant to the needs of the public library community."⁵⁹ As a result early research covered a wide range of topics. Wilson and Moore's⁶⁰ review identified various approaches to research including reviews, for example, about public library services to disadvantaged groups; enabling studies, one of which developed techniques for testing library effectiveness; experimental projects varying from the impact of library publicity to experiments with Prestel and on-line information services; analytical studies, for example, looking at the place of public libraries within the structure of local authorities; and operational research projects.

By the early 1980s it was decided to concentrate on three specific areas, services in rural districts, performance measures and special services, but the programme was hindered by financial cutbacks, for example, the estimated expenditure for 1980-81 was reduced to £70,000, representing only about 50% of that planned in the previous year.⁶¹ Committee minutes from that time show how ACORDD was wary of encouraging public library research that it could not fund and how the Committee questioned the continued desirability of having a public library research programme. On the one hand there was a feeling that “the historical need (will) disappear and the projects that are now part of it will fall under other programmes such as ‘library management’ and ‘library policy’”, but on the other hand there was still evidence of “the difficulties inherent in involving public librarians in the research process, particularly in the formulation of research proposals.”⁶² Public library research activity waned in the late 1980s and by the 1990s the need to encourage more public library research again became apparent to BLRDD. The 1992/94 Biennial Report noted “the Department has been concerned for some time about the difficulty of encouraging and supporting a strong research programme in the public library field.”⁶³ Once more a seminar was organised. The meeting, held in Kenilworth in 1994, was arranged jointly with the Federation of Local Authority Chief Librarians, FOLACL, and discussed ways of developing a strategy and structure for public library research. While BLRDD’s representative at the seminar felt that “a lot of public library research has been carried out over the years” he agreed that there were problems with public library research, but maintained that it was not the lack of money that was causing difficulties:

... the problem is that public librarians are not getting their hands on it ... public librarians have considerable difficulties with grant awarding procedures. They resent the uncertainty of the outcome and find them mysterious and time-consuming.⁶⁴

The delegates agreed that a strategic plan for public library research was needed, and that its administration required co-ordination and clear direction in order to:

... establish goals, identify issues, set priorities, turn ideas into projects, monitor progress, develop and foster research expertise, ensure that research feeds into policy and practice, integrate public library research with other research and encourage co-operation with different communities.⁶⁵

Outcomes of this seminar included a review of research in public libraries, the identification of strategic research issues, and a project to develop research in public libraries.

3.1.2.3 Research priorities

Pressures on BLRDD's budget have meant that the development of the public library research programme has had a variable priority. For example, the low priority given to it by ACORDD in 1982/83 was raised to medium priority in 1983/84 and 1984/85 in anticipation of additional funds being available.⁶⁶ Meadows⁶⁷ compares research priorities between 1977 and 1994. While there is an overall similarity between those lists there is an increasing emphasis on

“research capable of influencing general policy decisions.”⁶⁸ By the 1990s BLRDD felt that priority setting should be a more open process. A draft statement of proposed priorities was circulated to the main library and information organisations in the UK for their comments.⁶⁹ The amended statement was published in Autumn 1993 as a five year research plan⁷⁰ concerned with:

- The continuing growth of information technology and its applications and implications for libraries and information services;
- The role of information in society with particular stress on the information needs of various communities and their ways of seeking and using information;
- Innovation in the provision and management of information services;
- Information policy and the economics of information.

The budget for the funding of external research and development projects in 1995/6 was set at £1,640,000. Whilst a significant amount of this budget was already committed to existing projects BLRDD publicised the fact that “although public libraries are not specifically referred to in the plan, we are anxious to increase our support for public-library-focused research ... and have set aside £100,000 for such work in 1995/96.”⁷¹ In July 1995 a new Director was appointed who stressed the changing nature of BLRDD as “becoming much more a centre for advice on the potential for proposals and a source of information on work in progress than purely a funding agency.”⁷² Spring 1996 saw BLRDD continuing to develop “new roles and strategies for difficult times” including being “a centre of excellence on good practice and research in library and information studies”, promoting “the significance of work among the wider community including policy makers, business leaders and senior managers”, and adopting a style that was “outward facing and entrepreneurial, with an emphasis on ensuring knowledge reaches those to whom it would be useful.”⁷³ Later in 1996 a new staff structure, and a new name, the British Library Research and Innovation Centre, BLRIC, reflected this approach. The research grant for 1996-97 was £1.34 million, a fall of 12.5% on the previous year. In 1997/98 the grant rose to £1,634,000.

3.1.3 Public Library Development Incentive Scheme (PLDIS)

PLDIS was established towards the end of 1987, initially for three years, to encourage public libraries to improve or extend their services and be a means of co-operation with other types of information provider⁷⁴. This approach was matched by Government thinking at that time regarding the need for an enterprise culture, as was the style of funding support provided whereby the Government contributed 40% of the total cost with the balance to be found by the participants in the project. The funding was provided by the Office of Arts and Libraries and BLRDD was asked to manage the scheme. In the first round of applications only 16 out of 96 were successful.⁷⁵ In 1988 a seminar was held on formulating and submitting grant proposals when it became clear that many librarians were struggling to formulate bids, not because of a

lack of innovative thinking but because of a lack of familiarity with the funding process and the detail required, together with the style of presentation needed to convince an outside body to invest its money. An assessment of the usefulness of the projects proved generally favourable so the scheme was continued for a further three years to 1994.⁷⁶ In the initial phase priorities were defined in quite broad terms, for example:

Projects involving collaboration between public libraries and other libraries and organisations in the private sector which enable new services to be provided or existing ones to be provided more efficiently, or which offer new ways of sharing resources and facilities.⁷⁷

Meadows notes that “in the first phase ... PLDIS embraced a remarkable diversity of projects ... [ranging] from a pilot project for the promotion of modern poetry to a study of how to use broadcast satellite transmission techniques.”⁷⁸ In the second phase the scope was narrower:

- Investigations of the scope for innovations in the effective use of contractors for public library functions or services;
- Projects arising from Library and Information Plans, or LIPs;
- Improving the operational efficiency of effectiveness of services through co-operation between public library authorities or with private sector organisations⁷⁹

A strategic evaluation found that PLDIS had encouraged many local authorities, co-operatives and voluntary organisations to bring forward new initiatives and to seek out partners in both the public and private sectors to carry through a wide range of projects. The scheme had brought into these projects national and other money that might not otherwise have been acceptable locally as PLDIS funding added credibility to projects. It also gave a number of library authorities experience in working with partners, creating business plans and managing sometimes complex projects to successful conclusions.⁸⁰ Having said that it is claimed:

PLDIS was never about research, only to develop small initiatives ... nevertheless ... the scheme had an effect on research activities in public libraries. In individual authorities there was a great deal of local research activity to get projects up and running, and the scheme also developed the skills of library staff.⁸¹

The evaluative report also identified some difficulties. For example, that the Scheme had had an impact on the edges of library and information services but not on improving core services; that there was little evidence of success in transferable lessons partly due to inadequate and uncoordinated publicity; that the priorities did not set out a nationally owned agenda; and that the level of funding available had tended towards small scale projects that had minimal strategic impact when compared to major schemes supported in the sports and the arts.⁸²

Recommendations were made for a new scheme to succeed PLDIS, where such development funding would be capable of setting a national agenda, offering clear direction and identifying a few key areas for action that have the potential for transferability.⁸³ In 1995 an interim scheme to act as the successor to the PLDIS was established to last until March 1997. Development Funding For Public Libraries was instituted to fund projects related to

identified problems facing the public library service in England in adapting to current circumstances and to broaden the opportunities for people to enjoy the benefits of the public library services. Ten awards were made.⁸⁴

Writing with hindsight Meadows felt that the strengths of the PLDIS initiative were that it "succeeded not only in putting public library research and development firmly on the Government agenda" but also "brought it to the attention of elected members and senior administrative officers in local government."⁸⁵ The problem was that PLDIS was developed during a period of considerable financial restraint in local government. Conway too felt that the Scheme "attempted to break the mould" in relation to how public library research was undertaken in that PLDIS "gave research studies a certain credibility and brought public library issues into the national arena."⁸⁶ In April 1997 Development Funding was replaced by the Public Libraries Challenge Fund, part-funded by the Wolfson Foundation and Government, and intended to be used for technological development, improvement of library buildings and refurbishment of reference sections.⁸⁷

3.1.4 Public Libraries Research Group (PLRG)

Various national associations and professional groups have attempted to provide some unity to research activities in the field. PLRG was formed in 1971 by a group of practising librarians who recognised the need for study into the quantification of management change and service delivery skills⁸⁸ and their aim was "... the promotion of research in the objectives, organisation and planning of public libraries and the publication of the results of any research."⁸⁹ It was dissolved in 1995 and in its lifetime it acted as a forum for public library research, attempting to promote interest in research and to discuss the findings of completed projects. PLRG has been described as one of the prime movers in 'theoretical research'⁹⁰, that is the testing of hypotheses without these necessarily being related to particular problems in a given library or libraries as the following examples show. One of its first concerns was the formulation of a set of aims and objectives for public libraries that arose out of the wider interest with the evaluation of public library services and the need for a firm basis for the justification of new and existing services; a project starting in 1973 attempted to extend the traditionally short term horizon for public library developments to a period of twenty years by using the Delphi technique to determine the long term future of public libraries⁹¹; other research attempted to improve evaluation techniques involved the formulation and testing of a scheme for categorising adult non-fiction material in libraries according to the intended level of use. This attempt to refine the technique of evaluation and output measurement was referred to in a seminar that PLRG organised in 1973 to discuss output measurement⁹² and was in turn followed up in 1976 by the publication by the Group of a survey and bibliography of performance measures⁹³.

Given PLRG's commitment to the role of research in the development of services research techniques were also a key area of interest and "members' diverse backgrounds [made] for a unique forum for considering the balance between theoretical and practical research methodologies."⁹⁴ Much of the Group's work related to the themes outlined above, but with the trend towards action oriented research the need to provide training in research methods for practising librarians was also acknowledged. In 1984 the Group held a workshop aimed at librarians involved or interested in public library research in lower or middle management posts and the proceedings were subsequently published as a guide to doing in-house research in public libraries⁹⁵.

PLRG saw itself as "an organisation which blends together the roles of invisible college, pressure group, intermediary, sounding board and educator ..."⁹⁶ and was keen to use this unique role in the development of strategies for public library research. However, despite all of this unique work it is difficult to point to any direct impact that PLRG has made. Writing in 1978 Moore considered that although the group was capable of doing much to further public library research its potential has been largely unfilled:

It is a small body without sufficient funds to finance research and without the direct affiliation to any body or institution that might ensure that its voice was more widely heard. In its current work it concentrates on the discussion of problems, the generation of ideas and the discussion and publication of research findings, and so is able to comment on the development of public library research and to indicate where research is needed. It is possible, however, that the lack of a firm organisational base tends to reduce the impact of any suggestions that the Group makes ...⁹⁷

This tended to be the case in the late 1980s when PLRG was "struggling to recruit organising capacity from within its ranks" and was "facing financial difficulties due to the lack of saleable publications."⁹⁸ A paper from the Marketing Officer to the Group identifies strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats:

"The strengths of the Group are its independence and its varied membership. Its greatest weakness is that the membership ... is inactive ... If there truly are bands of practitioners somewhere out there doing research (at whatever level) then PLRG has an essential role to play, as advocate, educator, counsellor, but the initiative must come from us because how many of them know we exist ... The threats come from the professional environment in which we operate. Public library services become less and less fashionable ... Research money has been steadily withdrawn from all professions unless an immediate monetary profit was evident."⁹⁹

The group continued as a support group until it was dissolved in November 1995¹⁰⁰. After the Group's dissolution the Society of Chief Librarians, SCL, absorbed PLRG as part of its research committee that now comprises representatives of the SCL together with nominees from a wide range of interested bodies.¹⁰¹

3.1.5 Library & Information Research Group (LIRG)

LIRG was formed in 1977 with the intention of bringing together practitioners interested in research and academic researchers. The Group continues to this day and aims to promote the value of library and information research, provide a forum for discussion on all aspects of research, represent the professional interest of researchers and to link research and practice. LIRG's professional meetings, training events and journal, *Library and Information Research News*, have proved useful in disseminating information not only about research, but also about research methods. In addition cash prizes are awarded on an annual basis to reward research completed by students and practitioners. Maguire described the formation of LIRG as "a promising step in the creation of an environment in which researchers of different orientations can communicate more effectively"¹⁰² noting the potential for LIRG to provide opportunities for outstanding library and information researchers and research managers to transmit their political skills to a wider audience. In practical terms LIRG organises regular 'research and practice' courses including a three day course aimed at practitioners new to research¹⁰³. LIRG was better placed than PLRG ever was in terms of developing a relationship with BLRDD. In recent years LIRG has sought to enhance this relationship¹⁰⁴ and indeed other links to organisations with an interest in research; it has been successful to the extent that it was cited in the LIC's strategy for action¹⁰⁵. Throughout much of its existence there has been a lack of representation from public library services on the Committee. This had led to the Group having a limited impact in that field, although steps have been taken to remedy this¹⁰⁶ and recent issues of *LIRN* have had a distinct public library slant¹⁰⁷.

In 1990 LIRG and PLRG organised a national conference on research policy at Salford. During this conference it became clear to many that there were issues about the way in which research, research skills, and the developments in public libraries were working, or not working, together. Some delegates felt "at present we feel there is no one organisation to promote research, to speak for and to represent the public library movement" and the fragmentation into associations - at the time this included the Society of County Chief Librarians, the Association of Metropolitan District Chief Librarians, the Association of London Chief Librarians, as well as FOLACL, PLRG and the Public Libraries Group of the LA - was described as "a handicap."¹⁰⁸ In retrospect this was the beginning of a movement to promote research and development for public libraries.

3.2 Reviews of public library research

Since 1978 there have been four substantive reviews of the state of public library research. Prior to that time there were smaller, topic-based reviews.

3.2.1 Public Library Research : A Study of the Development and Current State of Public Library Research in Great Britain

This was the first major review of public library research activity. Until the mid 1960s public library research had concentrated on general surveys of users, their attitudes and the services provided for them, with the earliest surveys dating back to 1947. They were often rudimentary, frequently relying more on narrative description than on analytical statistics, and often attempted to look at an overall pattern rather than analyse a particular aspect in some depth as can be gleaned from the examples listed by Ward¹⁰⁹. The years following the introduction of the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 marked a growth in public library research. Moore attributes this both to the formation of OSTI and to the development of the library schools that, by 1970, were undertaking large numbers of studies and were increasingly involved in conducting user surveys for local public libraries:

While the growth in the number of research projects was undeniable there was still some concern expressed about the quality of the work. It is possible to trace some significant increase in the sophistication of research techniques as people with an education and training in science or social science became more involved with public library research.¹¹⁰

Another factor was the investigations undertaken by the Library Advisors at the DES. By 1965 two Advisors had been appointed and by 1973 they had undertaken 77 examinations of public library services using a relatively sophisticated methodology for statistically evaluating the services provided: “these investigations developed considerably the techniques for evaluating the libraries and an incidental effect must have been to bring such an analytical approach to the attention of the authorities concerned.”¹¹¹ While surveys of users and provision were still popular the most significant developments were in research that was directly related to management problems in public libraries.

During the period 1970 to 1974 leading up to re-organisation of local government public library research activity increased dramatically both in quantity and in quality. Surveys of provision continued, though they were less common than before and were tending to become mainly statistical exercises. There was an increase in theoretical research aimed at establishing relationships and testing hypotheses without these necessarily being linked directly to a specific problem. The most significant development was the amount of research associated with the Arts and Libraries Branch of the DES, which both carried out and commissioned a number of studies. Moore describes this time as “a period of impressive expansion in all aspects of library research.”¹¹²

Local government reorganisation ensured that nearly all authorities produced some form of development plan and many of them were based on very detailed surveys and research. This activity continued after reorganisation to such an extent that, according to Moore, the most

notable feature of this period is the amount of research activity that was taking place within individual authorities, although it is hard to identify exactly how much work was done as projects were seldom distributed beyond the authorities concerned¹¹³. Reorganisation presented public libraries with enormous opportunities: previously fragmented services were consolidated into single authorities that were large enough to justify expenditure on research and development and the adoption of new styles of management. The main feature of this type of research is that it usually has a very clearly defined objective directly related to particular problems within the authority. The time following reorganisation was also marked by the general economic recession that concentrated the research activity on matters involving the justification of expenditure and into attempts to streamline services so that maximum use is made of existing resources. Although the situation differed from authority to authority, and Moore's case study of Cheshire¹¹⁴ is exceptional, he reports that many of the new authorities employed a research officer:

Usually these posts are well placed within the hierarchy, their holders often occupying a position on the senior management team that in itself, was an indication of the acceptance of the need for a research programme to monitor and develop the library service.¹¹⁵

By 1978, the closing date for Moore's review, there was a rich fund of results from these diverse projects, but it was a fund lacking in co-ordination and coverage of some problem areas. This variety was viewed as "symptomatic of a largely undirected development"¹¹⁶ and had resulted in a considerable degree of duplication and overlap. This had already happened to some extent in the field of user studies but Craghill's article shows that such researchers were quick to review the situation and take a strategic approach¹¹⁷. The duplication in public library studies is not surprising given that, on the whole, the problems faced by public libraries are similar, albeit that the local situation affects the nature of the problem and its solution. Moore was concerned with the potential for unnecessary duplication of research and while accepting that "it's simplistic to assume that the results of research conducted in Avon can be directly applied in Wolverhampton", he went on and argued:

If the problems are similar then the research strategies and methodologies will also tend to be similar even though the results reflect local variations. There is much ... to be gained by the wide dissemination of methodologies, and of results so that comparisons can be made. There may also be benefits in consolidating the results of a number of similar pieces of research to see whether the findings are of wider applicability ...¹¹⁸

At this time it was recognised that research carried out within libraries would usually be related to the solution of particular problems and that very few libraries would be able to justify the theoretical type of research that did not have an immediate objective. It seemed reasonable to suggest that this type of research would remain the prerogative of academic institutions or

research units and would be funded by one of the national agencies. In Moore's view there was no reason why such research should not be carried out by, or based on, individual library services providing sufficient finance is available:

... the benefits of such work could be considerable; it would greatly assist the spread of awareness of research; it would ensure that the research was carried out within a practical framework and it would do much to bridge the present gap between the theoreticians and the practitioners.¹¹⁹

The outstanding problem area in 1978 was funding, and public librarians' ability to access that funding. A related issue was whether national agencies have the power or the responsibility to fund research that is essentially local in nature but which might produce results of national significance. This problem re-emerged to an extent with the establishment of PLDIS. Closely related to the question of finance is the viability of large research projects. Moore suggested that "the comparisons do possibly indicate that an incremental series of small projects might yield greater benefits than a single project costing as much if not more"¹²⁰ however more recently there have been calls for fewer, larger projects¹²¹. There was also still a serious lack of awareness of research:

Relatively few public librarians are familiar with research techniques, and fewer have had experience in carrying out research. Further, the results of the research that has taken place are not widely known, and most librarians have little experience of applying research results to their systems.¹²²

There were also practical difficulties, for example, in collecting data and the time-lag between the formulation of a proposal and its acceptance or otherwise. With problem-oriented research this time-lag can often be critical. For example, in August 1995 Sheffield University's Department of Information Studies received funding to investigate the impact of an eight-week closure of Sheffield Libraries and Information Services through industrial action.¹²³ The originality and timeliness of the study drew from the interviews with 518 people returning items borrowed before the industrial action during the four weeks immediately following the end of the strike.

3.2.2 Public Library Research - A Review of UK Investigation Between 1978 and 1982

Stewart's review examined studies carried out between 1978 and 1982, to identify gaps, patterns of development and likely future trends. This review includes the results of a postal survey carried out by CLAIM, the Centre for Library and Information Management, that asked two questions of practitioners: what would be the major problems to be faced during the next ten years and which problems might CLAIM usefully investigate. There was an overall response rate of 33.5% to the survey. The problems were grouped into themes:¹²⁴

resources v demand for services (44%)
new technology (24%)
the management of change (16%)
public and political awareness of the importance of the library service (7%)
acquiring the right calibre of staff (3%)
decline in literacy (2%)
staff motivation (2%) and charging (1%)

As for the responses concerning research problems for investigation, Stewart found that the replies did not give a direction for research or consensus about important issues and ignored some of the important criteria for funding bodies. Two clear messages emerged from the survey of practitioners. First, responses were concerned with practical problems rather than theory, and second “most call for descriptive research rather than the testing of models, despite the fact that description yields little generalisable information, has low research status and is less acceptable for publication in professional journals.”¹²⁵ Stewart argues:

Although a great deal of research has been and is being undertaken one senses a feeling of no real progress ... This lack of progression could be due to the fact that we do not, or are unable to, learn from the results of research. Perhaps we should worry more about the substance and the form of research questions - many findings are perhaps too specific to one system for general implementation. Too often a known and tried method of research determines the problem to be investigated ... The timing of dissemination of results is critical too, as is the amount of information and detail to various levels of the profession. Quite simply the whole area of communication of research ideas and dissemination of results needs looking at.¹²⁶

Another concern was to do with asking the right question: librarians and researchers need greater familiarity with research strategies to be able to identify problems:

Too often in the past research has been undertaken with the purpose of guiding action rather than really having a chance (in practice) of influencing action. In truth research has been commissioned without having any action problem in mind ... the commonest cause of research failure (research undertaken for the wrong reason) has been where research is supposed to be influencing an ... action, which is not open to influence; the research is not to provide guidance but to provide reassurance.¹²⁷

Stewart discusses strategies for avoiding research failure seeing the definition of a research policy as being most important, followed by a balance being struck between subject areas within a profession, between research and research training and between different forms of pure and applied research. This latter point was re-iterated by Bowen¹²⁸ who advocated the pragmatic approach and suggested that this less rigorous method is needed alongside more conventional ways of collecting empirical data to help the practitioner/researcher relationship.

3.2.3 *Research and Practice: 21 Years of Library Research in the UK*

In 1987 Moore reviewed over 300 projects to update his previous report and concluded: Three hundred projects cover a great deal of ground, but there are still large areas about which we know very little. What we have is a developing body of knowledge and understanding. We need to add continually to this, for the results of research are an important contribution to the collective experience on which the successful future development of the public library service depends.¹²⁹

3.2.4 Research in Public Libraries

In 1994 FOLACL and BLRDD organised a Public Library Research Seminar attended by practising librarians, independent researchers, the public library academic community, BLRDD and the then Department of National Heritage, that discussed ways of developing a strategy and structure for public library research. Recommendations made at the seminar were carried forward by the newly-founded Society of Chief Librarians, SCL, previously known as FOLACL, one of which was the commissioning of a review of research in public libraries¹³⁰. The project reviewed the development of research and investigation in public libraries since 1982, surveyed the needs for future public library research programmes and examined ways in which strategic public library research could be programmed and managed in the future. The objectives were achieved by means of a questionnaire to public library services and other interested bodies in the UK, and a literature review. The response rate was not good, neither in number - 267 questionnaires were sent out and 96 returned - nor content¹³¹. This is not surprising given Stewart's earlier experience in eliciting research topics from practitioners, but the project brief did stress the need to identify the key research requirements of public libraries "as perceived by public librarians"¹³². Four key areas of the report are discussed below.

3.2.4.1 The management of research

Respondents were clear that national planning and co-ordination of research were necessary to minimise repetition, focus effort and resources, and better communicate research outputs. An Office for Public Library Research was proposed "to act as focal point, facilitator and clearing-house for information and activity."¹³³

3.2.4.2 The agenda for research

433 suggestions were received and it was felt "many items are not matters for research at all ... they are cries for help."¹³⁴ A comparison of these concerns with previous agendas shows:

... how alarmingly little demand is currently expressed for overall strategic planning, for targeting of impacts, for clarification and prioritisation of roles, for far-sighted agenda setting, and for analysis of trends and directions in the public library service environment. There is great concern for human resource issues, for day-to-day operational management issues, for user studies in various categories, and IT matters. Although these taken together have a strategic importance, they count for nothing if the overall future of public library services cannot be assured.¹³⁵

It was suggested that the agenda needed to be "more far-sighted and targeted at wider, higher-profile issues"¹³⁶ as the same questions that were mentioned several years ago were still being raised. Six major research programmes are identified: impact, roles, young people's services, human resources, electronic information sources and co-operation.¹³⁷

3.2.4.3 Public library research activity since the late 1980s/1990

The literature review examined some 160 items concentrating on strategic management, strategic planning, the environment of public library services, and the role of research. The authors note that “there seems to be a lack of understanding of the concepts of strategic management and strategic planning, made worse by the partial understanding of related activities such as objectives setting and strategic research.”¹³⁸ The database of research activity showed that very little overall strategic planning had been done and the questionnaire returns too demonstrated a lack of perceived importance. Pluse and Prytherch draw attention to the “remarkably little work on the political scene or local government changes.”¹³⁹ The database of research activity that accompanies the report contains some 500 records, representing about 70 library authorities. It shows that while several strategic issues have been the subject of research, for example, expenditure constraints, declining use, performance, human resources, marketing and co-operation, these topics have not been handled in a cohesive framework that could enable public libraries generally to use a package of results to inform their own strategic needs.¹⁴⁰

3.2.4.4 Resources available for research and investigation

24 of the 63 respondents had some access to dedicated staff for research purposes centrally within their local authority - the highest availability was amongst London Boroughs. Only 14 of the 63 respondents claimed availability of such a resource within the larger department of which the library service is part. The authors comment “these ‘conglomerate’ departments are often justified in terms of significant support benefits: clearly, in our sample at least, these are failing to materialise.”¹⁴¹ 20 of the 63 respondents claimed to have such a resource to some degree within the library service itself. This included significant quantitative variation in that three had more than one full-time equivalent (FTE) person, ten had one FTE, and seven had less than one FTE. Counties and London Boroughs seemed to fare best. Only 18 of the respondents had resources to buy in external support for research. The majority of these were counties (11) and they spoke of having very limited funds. The report concludes:

Dedicated resources, either human or financial, are not widely available to support local research ... by or for public library services ... Counties and London Boroughs seem least badly endowed; Metropolitan districts generally fare poorly ... This lack of resources makes the collective national effort ... more important ...¹⁴²

3.3 Thematic perspective

This section identifies five themes that have remained linked to discussions about public library research activities.

3.3.1 Leadership and co-ordination

There has been a lack of focus, leadership and co-ordination in public library research at the national, professional, level. This is evident in both the lack of a clear research agenda over the years and the numerous attempts to put forward such an agenda, the piecemeal approach to topics, and the lack of consolidation of research findings. There is also a lack of leadership at the individual service level. Public library services sit within local authorities that, implicitly or explicitly, influence their activities, including participation in research activities. Until recent years this overarching factor has not featured as an element of the public library research scenario yet the decline in public library research activity occurred at a time when central government was pushing local councils to evaluate their services in terms of efficiency, evaluation and effectiveness. The necessity of operating within a local authority context first, and as part of a national service second, can have an impact in the application of research results. Maguire¹⁴³ found that practitioners were described as blinkered with very little awareness or sympathy for the ideas of research; researchers on the other hand were seen as lacking in political sense and their concerns as irrelevant to the pressing needs of libraries.

3.3.2 Agenda-setting for research

Agendas have featured a mix of topics that are either very much of the moment or so general that they are open to a multitude of interpretations; there is a noticeable lack of, for example, medium-term, strategic projects that could inform policy and planning. There has been limited input from practitioners into the research agenda, and where it has occurred the results have not always satisfied those distributing funding or conducting the research. There are differences in approach between practitioners and researchers and this could explain why, even though there have been some excellent pieces of public library research over the years, they have not been owned by practitioners. Maguire recalled a discussion where:

... a very experienced researcher was moved to remind practitioners that she had not found them “the great fountain and source of problems researchable”. Yet there was general agreement among researchers that applied research in the field has to be focused on problems which arise in practice. There were also intimations ... that when a practitioner calls in a researcher to help solve a library problem, lack of shared terms of reference can cause serious difficulties.¹⁴⁴

The political realities in any situation do not remain static while an inquiry is pursued. Maguire felt “there are bound to be problems when a library manager, motivated to justify decisions or to protect resources, calls in a researcher who thinks he is there to increase understanding and influence rational decisions” and observed in her fieldwork that “the nearer a researcher's inquiries come to influencing contemporary events, the more such difficulty is likely to be experienced.”¹⁴⁵

3.3.3 Funding

The lack of sufficient and consistent funding has always been a problem but even when funding was made available via, for example, PLDIS, this did not lead to transferable research. It can be argued that one of the contributing factors was the lack of a research culture and supporting infrastructure within local authorities. The dominant funding role of BLRDD has had advantages where public libraries have been targeted for research and disadvantages when they have not. East¹⁴⁶ identified a discrepancy between funders' and researchers' interests and although this may be less true today, except for the first few years when BLRDD was anxious to encourage public library research, the onus has been, and still is, on the applicant matching the funder's criteria.

3.3.4 Practitioner research skills

The lack of practitioners with an understanding of research was noted early in the development of public library research - see section 3.1.1 - and continues to be a problem today. There is always the danger that if public librarians cannot carry out their own research then others will do it for them. This difficulty is amplified in that there is a lack of detailed discussion¹⁴⁷ about research training and education for public librarians as compared to other sectors of the library profession¹⁴⁸. Also, as noted in Chapter One, public librarians appear to be falling behind other professions such as teaching and nursing in adopting reflective approaches. Dissemination, both of results and methods, continues to be a problem and it will be interesting to see how the Pluse and Prytherch database is developed and used in future years. One worrying factor is the possibility of the demise of the *Public Library Journal*¹⁴⁹. Such research reports in the professional literature provide an entry point for the research-minded practitioner. They should inform the mind and invigorate the imagination. In order to establish if the findings will be transferable it is vital to understand both what was done and the way in which it was done.

A review of 44 research reports published in the *Public Library Journal* between 1986-1996, which itself was published in the *Public Library Journal* in 1996, can be found in appendix 1. Adapting the method set out by Peritz¹⁴⁹, all papers of more than one page, with the exclusion of book reviews, news items, and the like, were examined and the research papers among them falling into the categories stated above were identified. For each of the research papers a card was completed including citation data, method, brief synopsis and a evaluative comment. This review illustrated the variety of research being carried out in the public library sector, both in the range of topics being tackled and in the scale of work. Some projects were problem-solving, others were attempting to be more strategic. There were areas where public library researchers could gain from work done by academic and special libraries or by cross-sectoral work, and where work could be consolidated, but few cases of researchers building up a body of work. There was a lack of

detail about how the research was carried out; scant attention was given to describing methods in any detail in the research reports. Where details are given the paucity of research methods is all too obvious and appendix 2a illustrates the reliance on surveys and desk research. These findings are in line with those of Peritz¹⁵¹ who carried out a bibliometric survey of 39 core journals of librarianship for selected years between 1950 and 1975.

3.3.5 Research methods: practice and theory

Given the above situation it is not surprising to find that public librarians appear to be disadvantaged when it comes to research skills in the widest sense. Proposal writing is troublesome even though BLRIC has become more user-friendly, for example, in being willing to informally discuss draft proposals prior to submission. Methodology, including identifying the research question, has always been a weak link in the research process and it is one of the issues that divides researchers from each other as well as from practitioners. It can be argued that the situation of the public library service set, as it is, within a local authority framework with an annual budget process tends to favour work with local applications and quick results. It is not surprising that, on the whole, the methods used and the issues tackled have tended to be relatively straightforward.

This is evident in a review of 41 PLDIS reports which can be found in appendix 2 and was subsequently published in *Library and Information Research News* in 1997. PLDIS had a stated concern with methodology and the achievement of transferable outcomes. Putting aside the fact that the reports dealt with very different subjects what was immediately evident was the great diversity in the content and layout of the reports and this was particularly so in the sections regarding methods. Eleven reports contained no clear details of methods. The lack of detail given in some other reports would make it difficult to replicate research or assess if it was applicable to one's own situation. In some cases there was no clearly identified part covering method. In others the portrayal of the methods employed was brief and bare and sometimes descriptions of methods utilised had to be gleaned from a close reading of the report. Some projects simply presented themselves as accounts of how new services were set up although it is clearly implied that some market research had been previously conducted to determine the initial viability of the project or to provide the 'evidence of need' required for the PLDIS application. In these cases it is very difficult to pull out any distinct theoretical methodological strands. Only a handful of reports included any discussion of the pros and cons of the methods employed, or any evaluative comments on the success, or not, of a particular method, say, response rate to questionnaires or the usefulness of interviews in obtaining desired information. One report¹⁵² was exemplary in its approach to method but ironically was not well rated for viability in a strategic evaluation of the Scheme.¹⁵³

Placed alongside the findings from section 3.3.4, the analysis of a sample of *Public Library Journal* articles, this study of PLDIS reports identifies those research activities and methods

demonstrated by public library practitioners. The table below gives a breakdown of the methods reported in the two samples:

Table 3.1 Methods reported in two samples of public library research

	Methods - <i>Public Library Journal</i> sample	Methods - PLDIS projects sample
Survey incl. Community Surveys / Library Surveys & User Studies		
Postal/self-completion questionnaires	18	13
Structured interviews / questionnaires	10	7
Telephone survey	1	5
Interviews	4	0
Observation & Description		
Unobtrusive testing	2	0
Observation	4	0
Qualitative research		
Focus groups/discussion groups	3	2
Workshops	1	2
Consultation with experts	2	0
Case study	5	8
Documentary		
Literature review	7	10
Statistical analysis	4	0
Action		
Set up experimental service	4	11
Modelling		
Computer simulation	2	2

Sources: Goodall, D. L. 'It ain't what you do, it's the way that you do it': a review of public library research with special reference to methodology. *Public Library Journal*, 11 (3), 1996, p. 69-76; and Goodall, D. L. Public library research methods: some observations based on an examination of 41 final reports of Public Library Development Incentive Scheme Projects. *Library and Information Research News*, 21 (68), Summer/Autumn 1997, p. 25-32.1997, p. 25-32.

The two analyses also provide evidence that public library research activity is concerned with solving operational issues of service development rather than with addressing complex issues of policy. From these findings it can be argued that research skills and methods remain undeveloped in the public library service as research activity is largely confined to simpler issues of service development.

To explore this assertion further the research methods literature was reviewed - see appendix 3 for a full report - to ascertain whether librarians are disadvantaged, when compared to other professions, in terms of the availability of research methods in standard text books. In order to ensure that s/he will undertake the best research possible in the circumstances, the practitioner-researcher needs to be able to make an informed choice about research methods. This means being aware of the range of methods available and their qualities, and being able to select the method that is most suited to the research. The sense of this is borne out by the findings of Frylinck et al in their case study of research methodologies in a library opening hours survey which found that different methods produced different answers¹⁵³. Although descriptions of methods have been published, the literature is "diffuse"¹⁵⁴ and for certain techniques it is difficult to find examples. In the public library sector it is not yet possible to rely on one text book and Table 3.2 on the following page illustrates how a sample of five 'research methods'

Table 3.2 Coverage of standard texts on research methods in librarianship

Method	Text 1	Text 2	Text 3	Text 4	Text 5
Experimental	✓✓✓		✓✓✓	✓✓✓	
Historical	✓✓✓		✓✓✓	✓✓✓	
Survey	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓
Action			✓✓✓	✓	
Bibliometrics		✓✓✓		✓	
Case Study	✓✓			✓	
Community Surveys	✓✓				
Content Analysis	✓✓			✓	✓
Comparative Librarianship	✓✓			✓	
Cost Analysis		✓✓✓			
Delphi Study	✓✓	✓✓✓		✓	
Documentary	✓✓	✓✓✓			✓✓✓
Evaluation	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓	
Library Surveys	✓✓				
Library User Studies	✓✓				
Modelling				✓	
Observation & Description	✓✓				✓✓✓
Operations Research	✓✓		✓✓✓	✓	
Qualitative Research				✓	✓✓
Systems Analysis				✓	

Key

- ✓✓✓ Method described in full, i.e., in enough detail to work from that text
- ✓✓ Method partially described, i.e., reader is advised to refer to another text for more details
- ✓ Method mentioned in text, i.e., insufficient detail to work from, reader would have to consult alternative texts

Sources Text 1: Busha, C. and Harter, S. *Research methods in librarianship*. Academic Press, 1980.
 Text 2: Martyn, J. and Lancaster, F. W. *Investigative methods in library and information science*. Information Resources Press, 1981.
 Text 3: Moore, N. *How to do research*. Library Association, 1983.
 Text 4: Slater, M. *Research methods in library and information studies*. LAPL, 1990.
 Text 5: Powell, R.R. *Basic research methods for librarians*. 2nd ed. Ablex, 1991.

texts described / discussed twenty 'research methods' in varying detail. This would suggest that librarians are not obviously disadvantaged in terms of theory and any apparent 'weaknesses' in practice do not reflect a weakness in the literature. To speculate on this phenomenon, one explanation could be that practitioners use simple rather than sophisticated methods and techniques as these are most appropriate to their research concerns, that is, as suggested above, solving operational issues of service development. Another explanation could stem from the nature of the funding described in the historical review whereby the research carried out by practitioners in public library services had to have a practical dimension because the funders were not geared up for enabling and funding research for policy and strategy development. Another explanation can be extrapolated from the impact on research of changes in local authority organisation and management as discussed in Chapter Two. For example, whilst large scale survey methods were appropriate to informing the aims of a traditional corporate organisation different methods are required to tackle the complex and cross-cutting economic and social issues being addressed by today's networked structures. It could be that the research skills and methods currently prevalent in the public library service are behind the times.

To further place the methods identified in the texts aimed at librarians into a wider context a selection of research methods texts in four disciplines, education, politics, management, psychology, were scanned to identify research methods applicable to public library research problems. A table illustrating the findings is given in appendix 3. Overall, whilst few new methodologies were identified as such, suitable applications of methods and techniques could be found. A special issue of *Library Trends*¹⁵⁵ which examines the use of theories and techniques from other fields in research related to library services supports this finding and six examples are given below:

- Shiflett¹⁵⁶ argues that the looseness of **historical methods** allows the exploration of many problems that are approachable only in one or two aspects by other methodologies. The misunderstanding is that historical research is viewed as irrelevant to solving the real problems of today. Shiflett suggests that such research can help establish the context in which librarians work, for example, the status of women in librarianship; also that the details of the history of libraries are significant in themselves, for example, in the development of special collections.
- Concern with public accountability has seen **economic methods** applied to education and health, as well as library services. Van House¹⁵⁷ assesses research on the economics of libraries in terms of the economics of information services, for example, the demand and supply of library services, charging and staffing. It was felt that research into the economics of information had suffered because of the lack of experienced researchers in this area who also had sufficient knowledge of library and

information services, and in retrospect this could be true. Perhaps more so than other methods, such as historical research, the methods drawn from economics need adapting before they can be applied to library and information services.

- Robbins-Carter¹⁵⁸ assesses the suitability of methods drawn from **political science**, that, as a newer social science discipline itself, has a broad background. This article identifies particular political themes, such as 'power', 'representation', 'policy', and illustrates each of these with comparable examples in librarianship. An indication of the potential usefulness is that the data collection methods and research designs used in political science research are most often the general methods and designs used in social science research such as questionnaires, interviews, and so on, which makes for transferability between political science and librarianship. Even so Robbins-Carter found a dearth of politically-based research in librarianship.
- Fine¹⁵⁹ presents the psychological perspective on research in librarianship and explores the potential for the application of **psychological research principles** and practices to behaviour research in librarianship. She puts forward the case for more studies to understand the user, noting the difference that librarians think that users come to their libraries to find information, whereas psychologists argue that they come to solve problems. Fine suggests that librarianship could draw more from experimental approach adopted in psychology to get away from studying the 'what is' of survey research to the 'what might be'. A number of studies are identified that used the library as a laboratory, where the library users were the subjects of psychological research. For example, a study of territoriality sought to understand how people viewed the work spaces they had staked out. Fine also describes relevant examples of designs and methods that had been adapted from psychological research and applied to libraries. A test where subjects were given photographs of library situations to comment on revealed covert reactions to professional functions, for example, that some children's librarians disliked storytelling..
- Howard¹⁶⁰ identifies the major theories from **organisation theory** that have been used by researchers to investigate questions related to librarianship. The range is impressive including libraries as bureaucracies, contingency theory, decision-making, design and structure, technology, and organisational climate. Howard concludes that organisation theory has not been very useful in solving the problems of practitioners due to the fragmented nature of the research and inconclusive results. Nevertheless organisational theory offers many opportunities for identifying, understanding and solving problems and a combined approach is recommended.
- **Public administration**, like librarianship, is an interdisciplinary field with a broad scope and convergences of interest but not enough communication and dissemination of

research into practice. Research themes in public administration tend to follow practice rather than determine it and much research is evaluative. Prentice¹⁶¹ identifies areas that are applicable to libraries, namely, organisational development and change, decision making and evaluation, personnel, financial concerns and taking a marketing approach to service, and concludes that a lot of public administration research will have useful implications for library and information services, but to gain maximum benefit from such research it needs to be communicated across disciplines.

This is not to suggest that library methods be replaced with those from other disciplines, but that librarians can draw widely from other fields in order to enrich their own. As most methods drawn from other fields would need adapting before they can be applied to library and information services a joint approach would seem to be the way forward. This would enable librarians to increase their knowledge of different disciplines and theories and researchers from those disciplines to improve the tests of their theories in library settings.

Some of the issues raised by this discussion of the practice and theory surrounding research methods for public library research will be revisited in Chapter Six.

3.4 The current context

To advance a clearer and more comprehensive understanding of the situation these themes are set within the wider recent and current context. Firstly the 1990s saw the publication of three strategic reviews of the public library service produced by Comedia, by Aslib and by the Department of National Heritage. Secondly a series of documents can be identified that, taken together, have captured the spirit of the time and have promoted unprecedented interest in the public library service. These have been produced by the Advisory Council on Libraries, the British Library Research and Innovation Centre, the Library and Information Commission, the Audit Commission, the Society of Chief Librarians/Public Libraries Research Group and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport.

3.4.1 Strategic reviews

3.4.1.1 *Borrowed Time?*

In 1993 the Comedia Consultancy published *Borrowed Time?*, a wide-ranging report taking a critical look at the future of public libraries in the UK. It was the first study of its kind, an independent national research and advocacy project, and its purpose included stimulating debate about public library services, alerting policy-makers, librarians and library users to the current strengths and weaknesses of the present service, and demonstrating ways in which the library can act as a catalyst for urban regeneration and change. The work grew out of Comedia's 1991 study *Out of Hours* on town centre decline and renewal in Britain that identified the public library to be a key institution of contemporary civic culture. In *Borrowed*

Time? Comedia identified the dilemma in that on one hand the public library was of the most accessible and open of public buildings, yet on the other, there was no real national strategic thinking behind the service. In contrast to other public buildings such as theatres and concert halls, public libraries were not seen as central to urban regeneration initiatives in the 1980s:

Along with all other 'public' institutions, public libraries are having to develop a new rationale, management and funding system to survive in a mixed economy. Some seem capable of adapting to these new conditions. Some do not ... Public libraries have suffered a loss of visibility in the political realm through having no national body to represent their interests. As a result they have often been on the receiving end of policy documents such as local management of schools or care in the community - which have had major impacts on them but with little or no advance consultation.¹⁶²

The Comedia study identified five main areas of public life in which public libraries are making an impact: education, social policy, information, cultural enrichment, and economic development. In the latter case the report showed the vital role that libraries located in shopping centres have on the surrounding retail economy. On the negative side Comedia illustrated how libraries suffer trying to be all things to everybody. It was argued that if the public library service is to survive it has to find a new over-arching rationale and a new public library agenda. A key recommendation was the need to establish a body to promote the public library network at a national level. Such a body would have many functions including research and development whereby trends in public library provision could be interpreted in the broadest sense. For example, developing a fuller understanding of the economic and social impact of public libraries, evaluating the strategic buying power of public libraries, and developing more sophisticated performance indicators.

A review of this report makes the point that many of the Comedia findings are already well-known from the professional literature, but concedes that "it is perhaps an indication of the library profession's lack of self conviction that it takes a group of outside consultants to bring such ideas to public and professional attention."¹⁶³ Indeed, the Comedia research team was not impressed by the impact of the LA in many areas, including those areas in which the LA appeared to be playing an active role such as leadership, political skills, advocacy and advice. These criticisms were in fact picked up by the LA's Library and Information Services Committee in terms of suggestions for action¹⁶⁴. *Borrowed Time?* was useful for identifying the shortfall in national policy for the public library service. It noted that "the library service is under-represented within government and within national cultural policy making bodies" and drew attention to the dilemma whereby, in national terms, "the status of public libraries is ... high as a result of its statutory position, and low in terms of the attention paid to it by political decision-makers."¹⁶⁵ In contrast with the national picture, the Comedia report observed that public libraries are hotly debated at the local political level in library sub-committees, where a stronger commitment to the ideals of the traditional library service is still apparent. Warnings

were given about the impact of this lack of strategic policy making, or 'policy vacuum':

... the growing preoccupation with performance indicators and management techniques may threaten to displace true policy development in libraries ... if library policy is weak, development will be driven by the internal imperatives of management rather than the other way around.¹⁶⁶

3.4.1.2 *The Review of the Public Library Service in England and Wales*

The *Review of the Public Library Service in England and Wales*¹⁶⁷ was produced by Aslib for the DNH in 1995. The Review recommended a new library inspectorate, a central facility for collecting fines, regional centres of excellence, possible Sunday opening, library kiosks in service stations and village shops and a superhighway link-up for teleworkers¹⁶⁸. The *Review* was criticised by librarians and the LA for lacking vision: "there is still no basic vision of public libraries' future; no links to local authority or national policy objectives - and no recognition of the contradiction of recommending future expansion in a climate of drastic government cuts."¹⁶⁹

The *Review* stressed the importance of the development of electronic networking capabilities between library services across the country and the increasing use of IT for service delivery. In 1996 a report from the House of Lords Select Committee, *Information society: an agenda for action*¹⁷⁰, had identified Britain as an information-rich country that had a great deal to gain from technological and other developments but which lacked a coherent policy framework. The agenda for action recognised that terminals allowing Internet access should be established in all public libraries but Government interest and support for developing IT within and via the public library service has come in fits and starts. A paper from the Policy Studies Institute written in December 1996 draws attention to the "pressing need to develop British information policy" as "currently Britain lags behind our main competitors" in terms of creating or implementing frameworks of policy that will enable then to take full advantage of the opportunities offered by information and communications technology¹⁷¹. Ironically, the bid for funding by the Information for All company¹⁷² set up to connect UK public libraries to the information superhighway, while rejected by the Millennium Commission, is, in essence embodied in the Government's IT for All programme and the 'Public Library Networking Plan'¹⁷³ contained within the LIC's *New Library: the People's Network*¹⁷⁴.

Despite the criticisms and the questionable impact the *Review* makes a tremendous contribution to our knowledge of the public library service at a time of great social, technological and economic change. It is worth commenting on the methodology used for the research that informed the *Review*, and drawing attention to Usherwood's¹⁷⁵ reflections on the study from 'a researcher's perspective'. While there had been numerous conferences and books on public libraries, and many ad hoc studies, the research team adopted a research strategy that differed in some respects from the approaches in earlier

work in that they used a triangulation method by which they hoped to overcome problems of bias and improve the validity of findings.¹⁷⁶

Our surveys of users and non-users of libraries, of ... library staff and of local officials and elected members, gave us a representative set of opinions as a starting point. Evidence from library authorities, and from professional and other bodies, added a useful perspective. A wide-ranging search of the literature ... enriched the team's awareness of public library services ... Meetings ... and discussions stimulated worthwhile exchanges on our thinking as it evolved; and the circulation of early draft conclusions prompted critical and thoughtful responses, which have swayed our recommendations ... the work represents probably the most intensive and widely-influenced study of public libraries carried out anywhere in the world.¹⁷⁷

The research has created a database of qualitative opinions as texts structured for interpretation and a databank of responses to questions for statistical analysis for other researchers to use and augment. One of the recommendations of the review was promoting effective research, for example, into community or civic networking, partnership developments, trade off analysis, electronic publications, use by ethnic minority communities, and benchmarking: this is in contrast to the strategic research proposed by Comedia because Aslib felt that "this programme of research should focus on matters of practical relevance to public library services and joint ventures."¹⁷⁸

3.4.1.3 *Reading the Future*

In February 1997 the Department of National Heritage produced *Reading the Future*.¹⁷⁹ This investigation of public library policy for England stated that public libraries would play an important part in bringing the information technology revolution to the public through the Government IT for All programme, and also suggested that they should make more use of volunteer staff and be open when their users want them to be. A key recommendation was that, to raise standards, library services should publish annual plans setting out clearly how they have performed compared with their own targets and the standards achieved by other libraries. The plans would be submitted to the Department of National Heritage for evaluation. *Reading the Future* also announced that legislation would be introduced to combine the functions of the Library and Information Commission and the Advisory Council on Libraries, to provide a single source of public library advice in England. The report confirmed that central government did not intend to introduce compulsory competitive tendering "for the present"¹⁸⁰ but still insisted that the public library service should look for yet more ways of improving value for money.

3.4.2 *Current perspective*

What is noteworthy is that the current key players all appear to be aligning their work not only with one another but with the current agenda of the new central government.

3.4.2.1 Public Libraries: A Vision for the Future

The Advisory Council on Libraries, ACL, was established in 1995 following the winding-up of LIS (England) to advise the Secretary of State on duties relating to the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964¹⁸¹. *Public libraries: a vision for the future* was produced as part of the ACL's remit to advise on some priority areas for action arising from the *Public Library Review* that the ACL believed was "short on a comprehensive vision for the public library service."¹⁸² The paper was prepared as a contribution to the DNH's review of the public library service and puts forward a case for having a public library service, succinctly identifying what is needed in terms of stock, access, buildings and staff and so on, and proposing how the service can be funded and integrated with other local authority services to ensure its best development. It notes that:

Instead of seeking to ape commerce, we should exploit the natural strengths of library structures, which are to do with co-operation rather than competition ... public libraries should also be integrated with other local authority services in the development of broad policies which bring together different departments.¹⁸³

3.4.2.2 Interim Research Plan for the British Library Research and Innovation Centre

The arrival of a new director in 1995 brought many changes including a change of name and the British Library Research and Development Department became the British Library Research and Innovation Centre. BLRIC published an interim Research Plan for the period April 1997 to March 1998 that set out a framework for research until a national research strategy had been developed. The Centre stressed its commitment to funding projects affecting public libraries in the *Research Bulletin* noting that although "in the last few years RIC has increased the number of awards in subjects relevant to public libraries ... comparatively few are given to public libraries."¹⁸⁴ The priority topics were:

- The value and impact of libraries
- Technological advances
- Preserving the nation's memory and heritage
- Special libraries and especially management techniques.
- Public libraries: The Centre will pay particular attention to projects affecting public libraries especially access to information via new technology, the role and impact of libraries in the community, service improvement through best practice in management, particularly in the management of human resources, and co-operation between public and other LIS sectors.¹⁸⁵

3.4.2.3 Prospects: a strategy for action: library and information research, development and innovation in the United Kingdom

The LIC, the successor to the Library and Information Services Council (England) was established in 1995, following a period of consultation¹⁸⁶. Its core objectives are to provide a single coherent and efficient source of advice to central government on all issues in the field of library and information services, to draw the Government's attention to emerging issues and to suggest appropriate responses to them, and, to provide all advice on the basis of as

full a process of consultation within the library and information community as necessary and as time allows. The primary role of the LIC in relation to library and information services research is to provide strategic co-ordination and facilitation. Following a research mapping exercise¹⁸⁷ and the circulation of a discussion document¹⁸⁸, *Prospects: a strategy for action*¹⁸⁹ was published by the LIC in March 1998. The basis for the national research strategy is the LIC's vision statement. The three core concepts are connectivity, content and competencies and these are combined with two other fundamental themes, the value and impact of library and information services in the information society, and the economics of library and information services, to provide a framework for the research programme. The action plan presented in *Prospects* encompasses both a global and cross-sectoral scope and a wide view of the stakeholders in the research process ranging from practitioner-researchers to policy-making organisations. The plan defines the roles of the LIC and BLRIC and the relationship between the two organisations and targets five critical areas of the research infrastructure: forward planning, funding, assuring the quality of research activity, communicating research and transferring research into practice; and lists specific research issues arising from the five themes and so provides a research agenda.

Regarding forward planning of research attention is drawn to the national policies being developed that will impact on library and information services and it is noted that "attention should be given to research issues arising not just in the library and information sector, but in other sectors, and in cross-sectoral contexts too."¹⁹⁰ A more innovative approach than hitherto is proposed for gathering, evaluating and prioritising research ideas.¹⁹¹ Whilst for the immediate future core funding for library and information research will continue to be managed by BLRIC, the LIC will fund some strategic level research to support the development and implementation of the research strategy, for example, a review of research funding relating to library and information services.

While effective forward planning should improve the quality of research another mechanism for assuring the quality of research activity is "ensuring that high quality research skills and methodologies are in place and that effective evaluation systems are applied to research activity."¹⁹² This is an improvement on the emphasis in the original consultation document on simply 'kite-marking' projects¹⁹³. Furthermore in *Prospects* it is recognised that "the skills to improve knowledge-based practice and policy-making are required ... particularly by practitioners in the library and information services sector"¹⁹⁴ and proposals are put forward for training. In addition the report argues that an essential element in transferring research into practice and policy is the development of partnerships between:

The academic community, the present focus of most research activity and skills; the practitioner community, where evidence-based development and innovation are most needed; the policy-making community, to which the practitioner communities look for strategic planning, policy-direction, support and funding; and the users ...¹⁹⁵

3.4.2.4 *Due For Renewal: A Report on the Library Service*

Due for Renewal was the Audit Commission's national report on public libraries published in September 1997. The report analyses the performance of the public library service and assesses how well prepared it is to meet the challenges of the future. The main conclusions are that, although the service is well-used and well-liked, there are signs that the traditional role of book lending is in decline and that the opportunities afforded by new information and communications technology for stock management and enhanced service provision have yet systematically to be exploited, nor have libraries established effective partnerships with other local authority departments and agencies. To meet these challenges - although there are no new suggestions for funding - the report recommends going 'back to basics' and making improvements in stock management, costing and service planning.¹⁹⁶

The profession viewed some of the statements as being contradictory or unfairly critical, for example, the Audit Commission's findings regarding the lack of policy statements and poor strategic planning, and the apparently low use of costing approaches in service planning¹⁹⁷. The Library and Information Co-operation Council challenged the report for "focusing on the easily measurable" instead of taking account of "the contribution of the service to literacy, social cohesion, learning and participation in the arts" and noted that "the report ignores the political realities of operating library services in a local authority environment ..."¹⁹⁸ Despite the criticisms some felt that the report could provide a useful weapon for senior librarians in motivating their local authorities to ensure that libraries feature in their planning process. The report also targeted the level of co-operation between the library service and other departments and agencies. "Despite significant overlap of aims and objectives," it points out, "the library service is mentioned in the policy statements of other local authority departments in only 12% of the [110] authorities [who replied to the questionnaire]"¹⁹⁹. To assist managers in implementing the necessary changes the Commission is publishing a management handbook for public libraries in 1998. Audits of individual authorities started in January 1998.

3.4.2.5 *Strategic Research Issues for Public Libraries*

This document was published by SCL's Public Libraries Research Group in late 1997 and was put together as an outcome of the work by Pluse and Prytherch in the hope that the topics identified "will form a platform upon which major research programmes in the medium term can be built."²⁰⁰ Three key themes are identified:

Firstly, an ever more fragmented public library service urgently needs an agreed framework for strategic research through which scarce skills and finance can be channelled to best effort. Secondly, if these issues are those which can 'make a difference' to the future of this important information sector, then means will need to be found to ensure that good advice gets carried into effective practice. The third ... is the need to educate pragmatic and sometimes inward-looking senior professionals ... to regard research as a necessary and fruitful part of management.²⁰¹

Six research areas²⁰² are proposed, chosen either because they are widely recognised as strategic issues or because the results of such research are necessary to provide the evidence upon which the case for the public library rests as an institution. Taken together they offer a framework for public library research over the next three to five years and were presented as such in the SCL's formal response to the LIC's consultation exercise:

- assessing value and impact, with regard to formal education, literacy, lifelong and independent learning, economic development, information for citizens, supporting the community, general information and culture, and, economics;
- technological issues such as library systems, developing and measuring electronic information services provided through public libraries, digitising the public library, the benefits of collaboration through networks ... ;
- human resource issues, including training, employment and staff development;
- resource issues, including bibliographical services and stock acquisition;
- managerial issues such as benchmarks, income generation and alternative forms of finance, and, value for money research;
- monitoring the effectiveness of research.

3.4.2.6 *New Library: the People's Network*

In February 1997 the then Government asked the LIC to consider how public libraries could respond to the challenge presented by the development of new information and communications technology. A new Government was elected in May 1997 that had already shown its support for public libraries in its cultural policy document describing them as "the linchpin of our cultural life" and promising a "revitalised library service for the new Millennium."²⁰³ In October 1997 the LIC published their conclusions in *New Library: the People's Network*²⁰⁴. This report identifies six roles for public libraries as a people's network, namely education and lifelong learning; providing citizen's information and enabling involvement in society; business and the economy, training and employment; community history and community identity; national digital library; and developing the libraries' role. '*New Library*', as it has become known, combines both vision and tradition in that it is about "completely transforming libraries and what they do" rather than "simply bolting IT applications on to the existing public library system."²⁰⁵ This is evident in the two levels of networking proposed: at UK level a backbone network linking together local public library networks and providing a gateway to other networks, and at local level networks linking each library. For example, the report argues that the public library service should be linked to the information superhighway by means of a managed network, analogous to the Joint Academic Network. It also suggests the creation of a Public Library Networking Agency, whose initial role will be to energise and co-ordinate UK-wide networking developments to create the

backbone infrastructure. Unlike previous reviews *New Library* makes the case for public funding as well as partnership funding, and is “synchronised”²⁰⁶ to other Government initiatives such as the proposed National Grid for Learning, the University for Industry, government.direct and IT for All. As a minimum it is recommended that central government fund the work of the Public Library Networking Agency, underwrite the costs associated with training librarians, and provide funding to initiate the implementation of the UK public library network and to encourage library authorities to participate. Reaction to the report from the profession has been positive as evidenced by the declaration from twenty-eight library and information organisations in support of the Government’s vision of a learning society²⁰⁷ and the fact that the report has been presented to public librarians as:

... a report that should be owned and promoted by the whole library community as it represents the best opportunity for growth and development that public libraries have been offered for a generation. It is widely held that if public libraries fail to meet this challenge, then no other opportunities are likely to follow.²⁰⁸

3.4.2.7 *New Library: the People’s Network: The Government’s Response*

This paper provides the Government’s strategic response to the recommendations made in *New Library: The People’s Network*. As a sign of the Government’s commitment to the service, but chiefly in recognition of the significance of the public libraries IT network in delivering the Government’s wider objectives for the role of information technology in developing the Information Society, it is proposed that “where practicable, every public library should be connected to the National Grid for Learning by 2002.”²⁰⁹ In essence this will be achieved through the creation of partnerships between the private sector, local authorities and Government to encourage investment, and through training librarians to provide assisted access to IT. In practical terms the Government has asked the LIC to establish an Implementation Committee for the public libraries IT network; has earmarked £50 million of National Lottery funds for the digitisation of materials used to support lifelong learning and education, and a further £20 million for staff training; and is re-focusing the existing Public Libraries Challenge Fund to fund ‘Libraries of the Future’ in England whereby the libraries chosen will “act as cutting edge pathfinder projects demonstrating the potential of new technology.”²¹⁰ In addition, to pre-empt difficulties over telecommunications charges the Government will “explore with OFTEL and the telecommunications industry the scope for securing reduced connection and ongoing charges for libraries.”²¹¹ However, no new money was pledged to the networking of public libraries in contrast to the £100 million²¹² earmarked to fund equipment in schools as part of the development of the National Grid for Learning.

3.5 A new paradigm for public library research activity?

This assessment of current progress has identified a coherent body of work and shows that there are clear improvements in matters of leadership and co-ordination of public library research activity and agenda-setting through the activities of the LIC working with the support of DCMS, closely with BLRIC and supported by the profession through SCL's Public Libraries Research Group. Funding and advice is available via a variety of sources including BLRIC, LIC, DCMS as well as charitable foundations, the European Union, the Lottery and so on. While practitioners still need assistance in applying for funding this is in some way provided by BLRIC and LIC. This provides evidence that the fragmented structures of the past are being replaced by a co-ordinated approach, combining direction and funding at a national level, however, issues surrounding research methods remain to be fully resolved.

We can speculate on how this change in the level of thinking has come about. Of all of the activities reported in the historical review the publication of the Comedia's *Borrowed Time?*, although not without its critics²¹³, was invaluable for offering practitioners an external vision of the public library service and in challenging some of the traditions and rituals of public library practice and the profession. It predicted a different and greater need for research in the 1990s; it stressed the need for the service to confront the issues of social policy and political visibility to survive. Given the discussion in Chapter Two it can be seen that this work anticipated the policies of the new Government and the changing local authority context in which they public libraries are operating. There is now evidence that this shift in the level of thinking has been translated into action: for example, some of Comedia's recommendations have been picked up through BLRIC's Social Impact of Libraries Research and Demonstration Programme. While the impact of the local authority context on public library research activities remains much of an unknown, the ongoing work by the Audit Commission is drawing attention to the fact that local authority departments such as Leisure and Heritage, Education, Social Services and Economic Development work in the same areas of need as libraries and overlap, respectively, in terms of recreation and culture, learning, social welfare and economic development²¹⁴. The LIC too has made a genuine contribution to library and information research strategy through the publication of the *Prospects* document. As with Comedia, the LIC's emphasis is on critical areas such as the research infrastructure, ensuring adequate funding, assuring quality, and transferring research into practice. Most important though is the statement of recent thinking referring specifically to the public library service encapsulated in *New Library* and in the Government's response to that report in which the clear link to initiatives such as the National Grid for Learning have set public libraries at the heart of the information society.

To return to the perennial problem of practitioners and the research process it is evident that

training in the research process is being tackled in a practical way by the Developing Research in Public Libraries project. This aims to offer a four day training programme that will be reproduced as an open-learning package²¹⁵. The course will help public librarians identify researchable problems, show how research ideas can be turned into proposals suitable for research funders, identify potential research funders, explore appropriate research methodologies and train librarians in research methods, and as such is not dissimilar to the ground covered by LIRG's 3 day course on research methods referred to earlier. While this initiative is welcomed it is noted that the question of research methodology will only be tackled at a basic level and it is questionable whether the course will develop strategic thinking to the extent that the new agenda demands. It is worth recalling the success of a course run over a period of six months in 1991 by Malley and others on policy making and strategic management in libraries. This included a substantial project element meant to help participants develop various management techniques or skills and to show how 'research' of various kinds can be integrated with practice. As well as having an experienced personal tutor to guide projects the participants also supported each other and Malley observed that:

Peer group exchange of research ideas and skills is arguably as beneficial as skills handed down from senior researchers, and when the projects are similar in scope, their techniques, and their environment, then development of skills through the peer group is likely to be strong.²¹⁶

The LIC's proposals for training practitioners concentrate on improving the research process as a whole, although an understanding of research methodologies is identified as a core skill and guidelines and models of methodologies are among the items listed for inclusion in an Internet site for library and information research. No recommendations are made regarding developing methodology other than noting that:

To benefit from the methodologies and research management techniques in the social sciences and other disciplines, there is a particular need for cross-sectoral collaboration and team-working among researchers from different disciplines.²¹⁷

Given that the Government is acknowledging the core role that the public library service can play in advancing the information society, there is evidence now that the service has the influence and coherence that it lacked in the past to initiate and co-ordinate research activity to support such a role. The unresolved issue, highlighted in sections 3.3.4 and 3.3.5, is how far the research methods used by practitioners have developed in the public library service as a whole. This question will be addressed via investigative fieldwork in Chapter Five, specifically an examination of current research practice in a sample of public library services, as the potential of the public library service to seize the opportunity being offered may hinge on the answer.

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- ⁴ GREAT BRITAIN. Ministry of Education. *Standards of Public Library Service in England and Wales*. HMSO, 1962.
- ⁵ Kelly, T. *History of public libraries in Great Britain 1845-1975*. 2nd ed. Library Association, 1977, p. 359.
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- ⁷ Whiteman, P. Review of the origins and development of research. *Aslib Proceedings*, 22 (11), November 1970, p. 526.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 526-527.
- ⁹ Jones, G. Research and the public library community. *Library Review*, 35 (1), Spring 1986, p. 52.
- ¹⁰ Whiteman, P. *op cit.*, p. 531-32.
- ¹¹ Library Association. Professional Development and Education Committee. *Research Policy*. 16 January 1976.
- ¹² Mallaber, K. A. Research in librarianship. *Library Association Record*, 67, July 1965, p. 222.
- ¹³ Library Association. Library Research Committee. *Minutes of a meeting on research policy*. Dec. 1965. (LR 569).
- ¹⁴ Library Association. Library Research Committee. Policy and Projects Sub-committee. *Minutes of a meeting on questions for the Sub-committee*. February 1966. (LR 601).
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- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 225.
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- ¹⁹ Mallaber, K. A., *op cit.*, p. 225.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 224.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 223.
- ²² *Ibid.*, p. 226-7.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, p. 227.
- ²⁴ Lewis, P. R. cited by Whiteman, P. M. *op cit.*, p. 534.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*
- ²⁷ Wood, J. M. *Letter to H. D. Barry re: Resolution passed at RSIS Annual Conference*. 1 December 1968.
- ²⁸ Library Association. Library Research Committee. *Some points on LA research policy*. October 1968. (LR 988).
- ²⁹ Library Association. Research and Development Committee. Grants and Awards Sub-committee. *Draft conditions for the award of research grants*. March 1969. (R. 59).
- ³⁰ Library Association. Research and Development Committee. Research Policy and Projects Sub-committee. *Draft conditions for the award of research grants*. December 1968 (R. 16).
- ³¹ Library Association. Library Research Committee. *Minutes of a meeting on 26 March 1969*. (R. 72).
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CHAPTER FOUR

Methodology

4.0 Introduction

In order to choose, develop, and utilise, an underlying 'methodology'¹ for the thesis the literature describing research methods in various fields - library and information science, education, social sciences, nursing and management - was examined bearing in mind the dilemmas in choosing a research strategy and making methodological choices². Given that a specific context had been chosen for the study and that the focus of the thesis was the experience of individuals involved with research activities, it was apparent that these elements incorporated distinguishing features of both qualitative research³ and action research⁴. To satisfy the quest for originality under these circumstances, naturalistic inquiry, that is "inquiry that attempts to capture the natural setting in which it is conducted", was considered to be an apt choice as the guiding paradigm. While naturalistic inquiry is not new to the academic disciplines in the social sciences, it is only from the 1980s onwards, that it has made a significant impact in the professions such as education, social work and nursing. Even so Guba⁵, writing in 1982, still spoke of the "novelty" of naturalistic inquiry. Mellon's text book, *Naturalistic Inquiry for Library Science*⁶, published in 1990, was the first of its kind in the field. This chapter explains the naturalistic inquiry methodology, verifies the sample for the fieldwork and demonstrates the rigour incorporated into the approach.

4.1 Theoretical underpinnings

In terms of its place in sociological theory Denzin⁷ presents the logic of naturalistic inquiry in *The Research Act* showing how the approach was a reaction to the positivist views of the theory-research relationship in that it objects to the five central tenets of positivism, namely, objectivity, hypothetical-deductive theory, external law-like relations, exact and formal language and the separation of facts and meaning. Instead naturalistic inquiry "assumes the social nature of the research process, takes account of interactive meaning, locates language centrally in the research act, incorporates values into research, and focuses on the gendered nature of social life."⁸ In chronicling this move from positivism to post-positivism Denzin identifies three problematic areas, observing, sampling and recording data, and goes on to develop the position of naturalistic inquiry in these matters in *The Research Act*.

As the focus of this thesis is the relationship between research and practice it is appropriate to place naturalistic inquiry within the wider context of applied social research or as it is more generally known, action research. This is characterised by such features as its problem focus, the collaboration between practice and research, and by having a utilisation strategy built into the research design. The most influential source for the idea of action research was the work of Lewin during the 1940s⁹. Set in the context of the real world Lewin's model was a circular process involving planning, action and evaluation, and, most importantly, feedback

and collaboration between researchers and practitioners. Lewin believed that action research could be used to solve practical problems as well as informing theory concerning the “laws of group life.”¹⁰ Historically, action research has been most closely associated with industry and business administration, for example, it was used to study leadership style, group processes, and organisation development. From the 1960s this approach has been applied to the public sector. Ketterer¹¹ describes the growth of the action research paradigm as a response to questions of relevance and accountability experienced by academic social scientists and practitioners respectively during the 1960s and 1970s; and Batty¹² describes the action research background to urban planning in the UK that started in the 1960s and drew heavily from the American experience of developing policy-oriented social research whereby action research was a significant tool in the evolution of social policy. For example, Hambleton discusses the initiatives such as area approaches to housing, the Shelter Neighbourhood Action Project which ran from 1969 to 1972 in Liverpool and took as its concern not only the literally homeless but those parts of the city where homelessness principally occurred, and the ‘community development project’: “a modest attempt at action research into the better understanding and more comprehensive tackling of social needs, especially in local communities within the older urban areas, through closer co-ordination of central and local official and unofficial effort, informed and stimulated by citizen initiative and involvement.”¹³ A recurring theme in these approaches was the need to integrate separate policy initiatives and to see, for example, that it was urban decline that was the ‘total’ problem, not homelessness.

4.1.1 Action research

Altrichter, Posch and Somekh give a theoretical foundation for action research as being primarily concerned with change and grounded in the idea that development and innovation are an essential part of professional practice. This approach presupposes a reflective view of professionalism that is different from the more common technical-rational view:

Action research rejects the idea that changes and improvements are needed because there is some deficiency or failure on the part of the professionals, and sees change instead as an inevitable and important part of being a professional.¹⁴

‘Technical rationality’¹⁵ assumes there are general solutions to practical problems and that these solutions can be developed outside of practical situations and then put into practice. This is epitomised by the classical research-development-dissemination model of innovation with its hierarchies from theory to practice and from research to practitioner. In contrast, ‘reflective rationality’¹⁶ assumes that complex practical problems demand specific solutions; that these solutions can be developed only inside the context in which the problem arises and in which the practitioner is a crucial element; and that solutions cannot be successfully applied to other contexts, although other practitioners may wish to test the hypotheses.

Schon explained professional action in terms of reflective rationality in an account of

reflective practice based on an analysis of practice in different professions. Schon discusses the move from technical rationality to reflection-in-action by identifying and describing examples of “knowing-in-action”¹⁷ that draw on accumulated practical knowledge under routine circumstances and “reflection-in-practice” or “reflection-in-action”¹⁸ that begins when practitioners find themselves in complex situations. Altrichter, Posch and Somekh expand this concept as “reflection-on-action”¹⁹ which occurs when knowledge is formulated explicitly or verbally in order to distance ourselves from the action and reflect on it. Action research is based on the theory of reflective rationality and sees the construction of research knowledge as integral with the development of action; this is the link between Schon’s analysis of the relationship between professional knowledge and action and the process of action research. Hence it is appropriate that naturalistic inquiry, an example of action research, should be used as the paradigm for this study of professional practice and research behaviour.

4.1.2 Defending the choice of naturalistic inquiry

Rather than discussing theoretical orientation in terms of quantitative versus qualitative approaches Guba’s terms of ‘rationalistic’ and ‘naturalistic’ are adopted where rationalistic is used to describe the paradigm that informs conventional inquiry, perhaps more commonly referred to as ‘scientific’. As both qualitative and quantitative methods can be used to support either paradigm it is sensible to select that paradigm whose assumptions are best met by the phenomenon under investigation. When the focus and the aims of the thesis were compared to the points raised in Guba’s discussion²⁰ of the differences between naturalistic and realistic paradigms a naturalistic approach was seen to offer the best fit. This choice was confirmed by Mellon’s discussion of the appropriate use of naturalistic inquiry regarding the experience and personality of the researcher and the desired contribution. The considerations that determined the choice of naturalistic inquiry are summarised in the table below:

Table 4.1: Factors determining the choice of naturalistic inquiry

Difference between the two approaches	Rationalistic approach (after Guba)	Naturalistic approach (after Guba)	Naturalistic approach (after Mellon)
Nature of reality	Single reality. Variables can be singled out. Inquiry will converge.	Multiple realities - all parts interrelated. Inquiry will diverge as more is known.	Naturalistic inquiry focuses on describing the characteristics of a social phenomenon. The aim is to understand rather than to control. Naturalistic researchers are interested in knowing all about each characteristic, or element, of the social phenomenon and how the elements work together to create the situation under study. ²¹
Relationship between inquirer /object	Independent.	Interrelated.	“... there are two traits inherent in good naturalistic researchers: an interest in, and respect for, people as individuals and the tendency to process information by finding similarities and connections among actions, situations, and events.” ²²

Table 4.1: Factors determining the choice of naturalistic inquiry (continued)

Difference between the two approaches	Rationalistic approach (after Guba)	Naturalistic approach (after Guba)	Naturalistic approach (after Mellon)
Nature of truth statements	Assumes generalisations possible. Focus is on similarities.	Generalisations not possible - may achieve a working hypothesis relevant to a context. Focus is on differences and similarities.	"... naturalistic inquiry focuses on an in-depth understanding of a single situation, not on results to be generalised to all situations. Naturalistic researchers cannot make the broad claim of the quantitative researcher: 'Given this situation, here is what is likely to happen.' They must be satisfied to say, 'This is the situation in this setting.'" ²³
Methods	Preferably quantitative.	Preferably qualitative.	Naturalistic studies focus on viewing experiences from the perspectives of those involved to understand how and why people think and act as they do. Uses procedures from areas that have traditionally concentrated on in-depth study of people, e.g., the ethnographic techniques of anthropology and the qualitative methods of sociology. ²⁴
Quality criteria	Rigour.	Relevance.	Use naturalistic inquiry methods where in-depth understanding of human actions is the primary focus. They are inappropriate where prediction of what will happen in certain situations, generalizability to other settings, and the ability of researchers in a new setting to repeat a study are of primary focus. ²⁵
Source of theory	Hypothesis /questions generated from existing theory.	Theory emerges from data.	Collecting and analysing naturalistic data is an integrated activity: "In conducting naturalistic inquiry researchers begin by collecting data rather than designing a research process to be followed exactly. The data are analysed for themes or patterns. From this early data analysis, naturalistic researchers shape their studies." ²⁶
Knowledge types used	Propositional only.	Propositional and tacit.	In the search for 'rich information' ²⁷ .
Instruments	Use objective instruments between inquirer and phenomena to be studied.	Naturalistic inquirers use themselves as instruments.	Naturalistic inquiry is concerned with the 'who' of methodology, "how well suited is an individual to explore a question using a particular methodology" ²⁸ , instead of the 'how' of methodology.
Design	Preordinate, no changes.	Emergent, unfolding.	... occurs in phases that slowly blend from one to the next in contrast with the distinct steps by which quantitative analysis proceeds. ²⁹
Setting	Laboratory.	Real world.	"naturalistic studies describe real libraries" ³⁰ , not libraries in general.

Sources: Guba, E. G. Criteria for assessing the trustworthiness of naturalistic inquiries. *Educational Communication and Technology Journal*, 29 (2), 1981, p. 75-91; and Mellon, C. A. *Naturalistic inquiry for library science: methods and applications for research, evaluation, and teaching*. Greenwood, 1990.

4.2 Some criticisms of naturalistic research

Marshall³¹, writing in 1994, notes that “unfortunately, qualitative research does not yet have the general acceptance that quantitative paradigms enjoy and, therefore, more attention should be devoted to a sound rationale than with more traditional proposals.” As one of the newer types of qualitative methodologies naturalistic inquiry is open to criticism. Indeed, naturalistic research has been described as “fraught with special risks for an investigator” and “likely to be tarred with the brush of sloppy research”³². In order to defend the value and logic of any research study one needs to be able to identify criteria for the soundness of the work. This section identifies two issues concerning soundness, bias and trustworthiness, and describes the strategies used to tackle any potential problems.

4.2.1 Bias

Mellon does not offer a defence of naturalistic inquiry as such but is careful to describe the limits of such studies and the need to recognise bias³³. It is inevitable that bias will be brought to a research situation by a researcher who is studying situations and events with which they have a general familiarity, yet this ‘theoretical sensitivity’, to use the term coined by Strauss and Corbin, this “ability to recognise what is important in data and to give it meaning”³⁴, is also acknowledged as one of the strengths of a naturalistic approach. Mellon notes how “quantitative researchers rarely document climatic, social, or other unanticipated variations in experimental settings” but naturalistic researchers “systematically acknowledge and document their biases rather than striving to rise above them”; for example, after tape recorded interviews personal observations are separately noted and so Mellon argues that “the skill lies in recognising personal and cultural bias, not in eliminating it”³⁵.

4.2.1.1 Dealing with bias

Mellon suggests one tactic:

... a description of emotional response to various aspects of field work may be incorporated into the discussion of methodology. Did conflicts arise between objectivity and involvement? Did reactions to individuals, positive and negative create problems? How, and to what extent, was acceptance as part of the cultural scene obtained?³⁶

Marshall takes a more structured approach to balancing bias with a list of seven strategies, including, for example, following the guidance of previous researchers to control for data quality, and enlisting a research partner who plays ‘devil’s advocate’ and critically questions the analyses³⁷. Strauss and Corbin also identify and discuss sources of theoretical sensitivity and suggest how the researcher can maintain balance by stepping back, maintaining an attitude of scepticism and following research procedure³⁸. Chatman considers such issues as rapport, reciprocity and empathy³⁹.

Table 4.2: Strategies adopted to recognise and limit bias

Strategy	Evidence in research process
'Devil's advocate'	Supervision meetings
Audit of data collection	Chapter Four
Awareness of emotional response to fieldwork participants	Recorded on cover sheet after each interview

4.2.2 Trustworthiness

Detailed explorations and defences of the 'trustworthiness' of qualitative and naturalistic research are given by various authors⁴⁰. It is generally accepted that the criteria against which all research findings can be judged revolve around four aspects that can be phrased as questions: Are they truthful? Are they applicable to another setting or group of people? Can they be replicated? Are the findings neutral in that they are reflective of the subjects and the inquiry itself rather than a creation of the researcher's biases or interest? How these issues are phrased varies, for example, Strauss and Corbin talk of "fit, understanding, generality and control"⁴¹. In traditional terms, the findings are examined for internal and external validity, reliability and objectivity. Guba takes these traditional criteria and proposes four alternative terms that more accurately reflect the assumptions of the naturalistic paradigm namely credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.⁴²

4.2.2.1 Strategies for establishing trustworthiness

Guba illustrates, for both rationalistic and naturalistic inquiries, how these four issues can be tackled in order to ensure trustworthiness⁴³. For example, a naturalistic inquiry can be affected by situational uniqueness that would produce non-comparability. To take account of this Guba recommends collecting thick descriptive data and doing theoretical / purposive sampling in order to develop thick description in the hope that these actions will lead to transferability and produce findings that are context-relevant. In total twenty strategies are described that are relevant to naturalistic inquiry. Marshall also lists twenty standards,⁴⁴ of a more common-sense nature that were originally developed for judging qualitative study reports but also serve as criteria for assessing the value and trustworthiness of qualitative research. There is clearly an overlap between the two listings and a selection of strategies was used to demonstrate a concern for trustworthiness.

Table 4.3: Strategies adopted for establishing trustworthiness

Strategy	Evidence in research process
Peer debriefing.	Presentations and publications in professional press; feedback from respondents following distribution of transcripts and report of findings.
Audit trail of data collection / analysis.	Chapter Four.
Triangulation.	Chapters Three and Five and supporting appendices: data obtained by literature review, analysis of primary sources and analysis of data obtained during personal interviews.
Study is tied into the 'big picture'.	Chapters Two and Six.

Trustworthiness, in terms of reliability and credibility, of the findings is shown by ensuring the process of analysis is explicit. This chapter acts as an audit trail to enable the data collection and analysis process to be examined; the process of analysis is made explicit by the listing which can be found in the appendices giving definitions of the categories derived by coding up in the intensive analysis. It is almost inevitable that bias will be brought to a research situation by a researcher who is studying situations and events with which they have at least a general familiarity. Yet this is also acknowledged as one of the strengths of a naturalistic approach, as long as the biases are systematically acknowledged and documented. Colleagues took on the role of 'devil's advocate' by questioning procedures and challenging findings, so that both the method and the content of the thesis was continually reassessed. During the research period, articles discussing findings were published in professional journals and a summary report was distributed to interviewees in an attempt to feed back data to the people who were subjects of the study and seek comments. Such procedures are recommended by Blackman⁴⁵ as an aid to confirming the validity of findings. Chapter Three allows the findings of the fieldwork to be considered within a wider context so that any discrepancies stemming from the small size of the sample become evident. Furthermore, records were kept of 'emotional responses' to each interview. Being known personally to 12 of the 20 respondents had both advantages and disadvantages. On the positive side Chief Librarians were willing to be interviewed for an academic study by someone with a public library background; it was easy to establish rapport and concentrate on issues of concern; interviewees recognised that they were talking to a fellow professional and quickly started using 'insider words'. To ensure that all respondents were treated equally, the same preparation - requesting documentation and conducting a literature search - was done prior to each interview. In addition, the interview sheet was marked with prompts to ask for specific examples even if this duplicated what was known. Less positively, some interviewees made assumptions about background knowledge and used the interview as a source of information: again, prompts were marked on the interview sheet, such as 'tell me more' and 'what does that mean for you here' to obtain clarification; general questions to the researcher were deferred until the end of the interview.

4.3 The stages of naturalistic inquiry

Naturalistic inquiry proceeds in overlapping stages unlike the linear steps of quantitative research. Whilst Mellon's approach to naturalistic inquiry is essentially a single case study she concedes that the approach may also be applied to a multi-site or cross-site analysis⁴⁶.

4.3.1 Overview of collecting and analysing naturalistic data

The essence of naturalistic theory is in the integrated activity of data collection and analysis. Mellon writes:

As information is gathered, the naturalistic researcher examines it for recurring categories, ways in which to describe the categories, and how categories fit together to explain the phenomenon under study. The descriptions and explanations, or working theories are changed, clarified, or modified as new data are collected. When the information becomes repetitive, adding nothing new to what is being learned about the phenomenon, data collection is stopped. At this point the working theory, which has been formulated directly from the information gathered and analysed by the researcher, should reflect and be substantiated by the data. The findings are then reported in narrative form, using description and quotation to support the researcher's explanation of the phenomenon.⁴⁷

Mellon provides guidelines⁴⁸ for four ways in which naturalistic data are collected: participant observation, in-depth / unstructured interviews, cultural informants, and personal documents. The core of the data collected during fieldwork used face-to-face interviews and reference was made to Mellon's guidelines on planning interviews - selecting 'key' respondents, conducting the interviews, and using cultural informants.

4.3.2 Sampling theory

Mellon makes the following distinction regarding sampling: that quantitative researchers use random sampling in order to make predictions about how members of the group can be expected to behave under certain conditions in contrast to naturalistic researchers who are more interested in the range of behaviours found in the group they are studying⁴⁹.

Consequently theoretical sampling, as described by Strauss and Corbin⁵⁰, was used. Mellon advises that naturalistic researchers begin small: "First, they interview several subjects ... With this initial information, they identify new subjects to give a broader or deeper perspective to the situation they are studying."⁵¹ There is little in Mellon's text to substantiate or defend this approach to sampling. If one takes a traditional view then this approach severely weakens the external validity or generalizability of the research.

Sampling is a crucial issue as far as the external validity or transferability of research results is concerned. Any qualitative study's transferability to other settings may be problematic and generalizability is often seen as a weakness in the qualitative approach. One solution is to place the burden of demonstrating the applicability of one set of findings to another context on the researcher who would make that transfer rather than the original researcher. There are other, more helpful, approaches: Marshall suggests that the researcher states the original parameters of the research in order that those who design research studies within those same parameters can "determine whether or not the cases described can be generalised for new research policy and transferred to other settings, while the reader or user of specific research can see how research ties into a body of theory"; also that triangulating multiple sources of data can enhance a study's generalizability.⁵²

Schofield discusses the generalizability of qualitative research in more depth offering a re-packaging of Marshall's first point:

... for qualitative researchers generalizability is best thought of as a matter of the 'fit' between the situation studied and others to which one might be interested in applying the concepts and conclusions of that study. This conceptualisation makes thick descriptions crucial, since without them one does not have the information necessary for an informed judgement about the issue of fit.⁵³

Schofield argues that three useful targets for generalisation are 'what is', 'what may be', and 'what could be' and provides examples of how qualitative research can be designed in a way that increases its ability to fit with each of these situations. For example, a 'what is' concern of the fieldwork is the current state of research in public libraries and here Schofield suggests studying typical sites and performing multi-site studies; another concern is discovering 'best practice', that is, studying 'what could be', and here Schofield suggests selecting sites known to be ideal or exceptional and studying them to see what is actually going on there.⁵⁴

In light of the preceding discussion, arising as it did from Mellon's approach to sampling, it is interesting to see that Guba believes that undertaking theoretical / purposive sampling - especially in combination with collecting thick descriptive data - is a suitable technique for increasing transferability of naturalistic inquiries. It is worth referring to Guba's definition of theoretical / purposive sampling at this point:

... sampling that is not intended to be representative or typical ... but that is intended to maximise the range of information uncovered. The nature of the sampling process is governed by emergent insights about what is important and relevant. Naturalistic investigators ought to be able to demonstrate how the samples they selected met this criterion - for example, that successive interview subjects were selected by asking each respondent to nominate someone whose point of view is as different as possible from his or her own.⁵⁵

In practice, due to constraints on the time that was available for conducting interviews, a wholly naturalistic approach was not feasible. The criteria used to select the sample are given in the following sections.

4.3.3 Sampling for fieldwork

Mason's discussion of sampling and selecting in *Qualitative researching*⁵⁶ focuses on the questions that need to be asked in order to establish what principles and procedures should govern sampling and these were studied before making sampling decisions. Also borne in mind were Burgess's five criteria⁵⁷ regarding the selection of research sites:

- simplicity - a research site that allows researchers to move from studying simple situations to those that are more complex;
- accessibility - the degree of access and entry that is given to the researcher;
- unobtrusiveness - situations that allow the researcher to take an unobtrusive role;
- permissibility - situations that allow the researcher free, limited or restricted entry;
- participation - the possibility for researchers to participate in ongoing activities.

Although, as Burgess points out, it is rare for the researcher to be able to meet all these criteria in selecting a social setting and therefore some compromise is essential.

4.3.3.1 Sampling population

Whilst the fieldwork would deal with people the initial unit of sampling was public library services. Table 4.4 overleaf provides a breakdown of the numbers and types of public library services in England. The total target population as identified in the *Municipal Yearbook 1997* was the 36 Metropolitan Districts, 35 English County Councils, and 27 English Unitary Councils providing public library services in England (as at 1 April 1997). The scope of the target population was then modified to reflect the research objectives, the research budget, access considerations, a wish not to duplicate recent research carried out for libraries in London⁵⁸, the experience of the researcher, and the impact of local government re-organisation, to comprise those public library services within the geographical areas of the North-East and the West Midlands. The potential survey population then numbered 25 public library services and was selected by non-probability sampling, namely purposive sampling.

4.3.3.2 The relationship between the sample and the wider population

Mason stresses the importance of being clear about the principles used to select a sample and being able to specify the relationship between the sample and the wider population. Whilst the sample derived above is not representative of the wider population in the quantitative sense⁵⁹, neither is it ad hoc⁶⁰. Instead the relationship veers towards one where “the sample is designed to provide a close-up, detailed or meticulous view of particular units ... which are relevant to or appear within the wider universe.”⁶¹ This is appropriate where the aim of the research is “... to demonstrate in a detailed and rounded way the operations of a particular set of social processes in a specified context” and the relationship can be viewed as one “where the sample is designed to encapsulate a relevant range of [experiences] in relation to the wider universe, but not to represent it directly.”⁶² The sample used includes public library services that are known to occur in the wider universe of public library services and that are not untypical of those public library services as shown in the following table:

Table 4.4: Survey Population 1 April 1997

	England Total Potential Sample	North East Actual / Potential	West Midlands Actual / Potential	North East & West Midlands Total Actual Sample
Metropolitan Districts	36	5 / 5	5 / 7	10
English Counties	35	2 / 3	3 / 4	5
New Unitary	27	5 / 5	0 / 1	5
Total	98	12 / 13	8 / 12	20

Source: *Municipal Yearbook, 1997*

4.3.3.3 Actual Sample

Regarding the sample size, the principle that “your sample size should help you to understand the process, rather than to represent (statistically) a population” was followed⁶³. The public library services sampled constituted a range intended to allow the generation of data to explore processes, similarities and differences, to test and develop theory and explanations to account for those similarities and differences, rather than to make statistical comparisons between the public library services themselves within the range. The potential sample of public library services identified in the table were sent a letter explaining the study and requesting their participation. This correspondence was followed up by a telephone call. Five services declined to participate and the final sample was as indicated in the column Total Actual Sample. Statistical data on these public library services can be found in the appendices.

In practice semi-structured interviews were conducted between May - July 1997 with chief librarians or their equivalents in the sample of 20 local authorities. The sample covered a wide variety of library services ranging from those with a regular programme of research activities, those able to allocate staff and funding to in-house research activities either on an ad hoc or temporary basis, to those who did the best they could with few or no resources.

4.3.4 Theoretical sampling

At the same time as the practicalities of compiling a sample were being tackled there was also a concern with ensuring that the sample would allow the testing and developing of theoretical propositions and this takes us into the realm of theoretical sampling⁶⁴. Generally speaking, theoretical sampling means selecting examples to study on the basis of their relevance to the research question, your theoretical position and analytical framework, your analytical practice, and most importantly the explanation that you are developing⁶⁵. Theoretical sampling is concerned with constructing a sample that is meaningful theoretically, because it builds in criteria that help to develop and test your theory and explanation⁶⁶. The technique of “purposively selecting information-rich cases”⁶⁷ was favoured. Although susceptible to bias this method is well-recognised in the literature⁶⁸ and has, according to Payne⁶⁹, much to commend it when selecting a few cases from a diverse

population. Even though Burgess, in his discussion of selection strategies for individuals in field studies, echoes Mellon's relaxed view of sampling in suggesting that:

... in field research informants are selected for their knowledge of a particular setting which may complement the researcher's observations and point towards further social investigation that needs to be done in order to understand social settings, social structures and social processes.⁷⁰

- there was a desire to document the sampling procedure in order to demonstrate soundness while also recognising that the sampling procedure is a different procedure from the selection procedures associated with statistical sampling in survey research.

To recap, theoretical sampling is "sampling on the basis of concepts that have proven theoretical relevance to the evolving theory" where proven theoretical relevance "indicates that concepts are deemed to be significant because they are repeatedly present or notably absent when comparing incident after incident, and are of sufficient importance to be given the status of categories."⁷¹ The aim of theoretical sampling is to sample events that are indicative of categories so that you can develop and conceptually relate them. Strauss and Corbin recommend this variation in theoretical sampling technique, where "you look purposefully for data bearing on categories" and "you deliberately choose sites...", both for when you want to have the greatest opportunity to gather the most relevant data about the phenomenon under investigation and for when you want to uncover and validate relationships in the data⁷². This is similar to the process of discriminate sampling⁷³ where a researcher chooses the sites, persons, and documents that will maximise opportunities for verifying relationships between categories and for filling in poorly developed categories. This may mean returning to old sources or going to new ones where the necessary data can be gathered. Strauss and Corbin discuss how this sort of sampling differs from more traditional forms of sampling and reply to typical criticisms⁷⁴, for example, noting that one must be sure not to simply select those cases that support the initial findings and disregard those inconvenient ones that do not. There are several actions one can take to avoid such bias.

4.3.4.1 Negative instances

In order to sample in a way that will both develop explanations but also test them, it is recommended to seek out negative instances or contradictory cases⁷⁵. For example, initial findings from the literature search suggested that an established management/staff structure for research activity and the presence of a corporate approach to research could be important to nurturing research by practitioners in the public library setting. The sample of interviewees included five cases where these variables were not present and this was established during the initial telephone call prior to the interviewees agreeing to participate.

4.3.4.2 Quota targets

To ensure a range of interviewees a quota target list, recommended by Mason⁷⁶, was used:

Table 4.5: Quota target list

Total sample size = 20 public library services, = 20 interviewees (minimum)	✓ Achieved
To include:	
at least 15 people with experience of undertaking research within the public library service	✓ yes
at least 10 people with experience of managing research within the public library service	✓ yes
at least 5 people with experience of undertaking research on a corporate/cross-departmental basis	✓ yes
at least 10 people with experience of bidding for research funding	✓ yes

While this sample will not be representative of all the public library services it should be noted that the concern of this type of sampling procedure is with the representativeness of concepts in their varying forms. Strauss and Corbin explain:

... since we are looking for events and incidents that are indicative of phenomena and not counting individuals or sites per se, then each ... interview ... may refer to multiple examples of these events ... naturally the more interviews ... then the more evidence will accumulate ... thus there will be wider applicability of the theory, because more and different sets of conditions affecting phenomena are uncovered. If numbers are important for satisfying a committee or oneself, then instances of occurrence of phenomena can certainly be counted.⁷⁷

In terms of making generalisations to the larger population, the study is not attempting to generalise as such but to specify, in particular to specify the conditions under which the phenomena exist, the action/interaction that pertains to them, and the associated outcomes.

4.3.5 Introductory letter and interview guide

Prior to the interviews the library managers in the sample authorities were sent a letter outlining the study, requesting any documentation that was available, and defining the areas for discussion. The letter explained that the term research activities was being used very loosely to include the broad spectrum of activities that may be undertaken by library staff either singularly or in co-operation with others. The examples that were given included:

- surveys of library users to inform decision-making about stock or library layout
- the use of management information to examine the effects of changing opening hours or to justify expenditure
- market research in preparation for a new service
- investigative work to inform strategic planning and future development
- developing specific projects and applying for external funding from, say, local/central government, Arts Councils, European Union.

The interview guide is in appendix 5. The themes for discussion arose out of preliminary work⁷⁸ that was re-examined to consider Bogdan's suggestions on starting field research⁷⁹. Following Lofland's advice a "period of puzzlement"⁸⁰ was observed before compiling the first draft of the interview guide which took the form of a list of issues to be explored. Two pilot interviews were completed, one with the Deputy Chief Librarian of a county public library service and one with a group of senior managers and Chief Librarian of a metropolitan district library service. Given that a one-hour interview, when typed, amounts to 20-40 pages, the interview guide was then revised in line with Bogdan's advice to "think short"⁸¹.

4.3.6 Data analysis

To paraphrase Finch⁸² analysis entails a quest for understanding from the data in relation to the research objectives. A holistic approach was taken to the analysis with the aim of “providing an understanding of what was really going on” as this was seen as having far more value than the simplistic journalistic approach⁸³. The analysis was based on the data. Even though the interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide the data obtained were, essentially, unstructured. Self-transcription of the recordings of the interviews was undertaken as it played an important part in the initial data analysis, that is, sorting and structuring this data in order to make it accessible. Different authors break down this analytic strategy into different activities as shown in the following table:

Table 4.6: Overview of the stages of qualitative analysis of fieldwork data

Marshall	Finch	Hitchcock and Hughes
Organising the data.	Familiarisation - building up knowledge of themes and issues contained within the data.	Familiarity with the transcript.
Generating categories / themes / patterns.	Systematic description of the contents of the data in an accessible and reduced form, probably grouped into themes.	Appreciation of the time limits.
Testing the emergent hypotheses against the data, i.e., searching the data for negative instances.	Reflection on that description, looking at patterns, causal links, repetition and divergence.	Description and analysis.
Searching for alternative explanations to the data, i.e., searching for other plausible explanations and demonstrating how the explanation offered is the most plausible of all.	Explanation of what appears, from the data, to be going on, not just in a literal sense but in a more abstract or generalised way, with implications of meaning considered.	Isolating general units of meaning.
	Interpretation in relation to the research objective.	Relating general units of meaning to research focus.
	Checking out the interpretation as far as possible.	Patterns and themes extracted.
	Description and discussion of the emergent story (of the interpretation and the evidence for it).	Nature of typifications and perceptions.
		Self-revelation and researcher reflection.
		Validity checks, triangulation's, re-interviewing, and re-analysis.

Sources: Marshall, C and Rossman, G. *Designing qualitative research*, 2nd ed. Sage, 1994, p. 113-117; Finch, H. *Analysing qualitative material*. In: Slater, M. (ed.) *Research methods in library and information studies*. LAPL, 1990, p. 132; and Hitchcock, G. and Hughes, D. *Research and the teacher: a qualitative introduction to school-based research*. Routledge, 1989, p. 97.

The table above gives overviews of the stages of analysis. Each phase entails data reduction and interpretation where insight into the meaning implicit within the data is

obtained. At this point it is worth identifying the analytic techniques used.

4.3.6.1 Analytical techniques: codes, memos and diagrams

Three techniques, codes, memos and diagrams, were used to analyse the transcripts.

Mellon uses a vivid metaphor to describe the process of coding: "... researchers strip the data down to the conceptual skeleton' ... this represents the way that researchers come to understand the situation or event they are studying. In a later stage of analysis, they use the conceptual skeleton as the basis for constructing grounded theory."⁸⁴ Practicalities of coding from the data are covered in section 4.3.9. Mellon is unique for the three descriptions and examples of coding paradigms⁸⁵. These are defined as a series of general categories that represent the component parts into which researchers divide social phenomena in order to study them from various angles, the 'who, what, why, when and where' of any situation. The coding paradigm used drew from the examples cited by Mellon referring to the work of Strauss - the most straightforward, simply, conditions, interactions, strategies and tactics and consequences - and Bogdan's eleven "coding families"⁸⁶, namely, setting/context codes, definition of the situation codes, perspectives held by subjects, subject's way of thinking about people and objects, process codes, activity codes, event codes, strategy codes, relationship and structure codes, methods codes and pre-assigned codes, in order to gain a general perspective on the analysis.

Memos are written reminders or explorations of ideas that help researchers make sense out of data. The techniques are well covered in the literature. Mellon deals with three types: in-text, marginal and reflective and describes how to manage and use them⁸⁷. Bogdan takes a different approach categorising memos as reflections on analysis, on methods, on ethical dilemmas and conflicts, and on the observer's frame of mind, plus points of clarification⁸⁸.

Using diagrams as an analytic tool includes compiling lists, charts, matrices, tables and graphs. Mellon provides some simple illustrative examples but a more comprehensive text is Miles and Huberman's *Qualitative Data Analysis*.⁸⁹

4.3.6.2 Organising the data: the large-sheet-of-paper approach and the annotating-the-transcripts-approach.

Analysing the transcripts requires an ability for comparison but the very quality of qualitative data, its "richness and specificity"⁹⁰, raises problems in making comparisons. Breaking down the transcripts into segments and grouping them in some way can make the data accessible. Gordon and Langmaid⁹¹ give two ways of organising data derived through market research techniques: the large-sheet-of-paper approach and the annotating-the-transcripts-approach. For a naturalistic researcher these steps are little more than initial data analysis however they are briefly described below as they quickly illustrate two different approaches to

handling data and identify several important issues for discussion.

Firstly, a large sheet of paper was ruled up into squares. Along the top of the sheet, in each column, were written the initial letters of the public library services. Along the side were written the key issues from the interview schedule. While reading the transcripts either parts of the content were transferred into the relevant box as verbatim quotes, observations or summaries of comments and/or the passages colour-coded to match the categories. When all of the transcripts are treated in this way the result is a structured representation of the interviews in the form of a matrix. This technique brings reassuring order to chaos and ensures that each transcript is treated equally. The annotating-the-transcripts-approach begins with a close reading of the transcripts. Annotations are made in the margins summarising relevant points, contradictions and, if appropriate, interpretative thoughts. This ensures that each transcript is examined and as a whole not as a series of discrete responses to particular questions. The technique allows contradictions to emerge and for understanding to evolve in an on-going manner.

4.3.7 Initial data analysis

In naturalistic terms this involves skimming the data for concepts that are repeated and noting down a word or two to represent these concepts. These themes are coding categories. The data are skimmed a second time looking for information that helps in understanding and describing each category. Mellon notes:

Initial analysis should proceed throughout data collection, clarifying and giving direction to the study ... one advantage of integrating data collection and analysis is the clear picture that emerges by the time the data becomes redundant. Researchers have selected the focus and built the picture from the information they have collected, feeling free to seek more information as needed. They are well and properly informed as they move into the more formal stages of data analysis.⁹²

In this thesis the initial data analysis for the fieldwork used the large-sheet-of-paper approach. The transcripts were coded down to produce a matrix reviewing each respondent's comments across nine categories - first impressions, value placed on research, examples of research activities, ideas, methods, funding, impact of research on services and policies, local authority context, and doing/managing/supporting research - taken from the 12 topics listed on the interview guide.

4.3.7.1 Contribution of initial data analysis

The relatively unified and coherent view presented in the initial data analysis in Chapter Five is inevitably superficial as the summary is derived from, and structured to follow, the interview schedule. Nevertheless, the initial data analysis serves a purpose in that it reduces the data to a manageable length, in a structured and systematic way, and allows the 20 interviews to be viewed as one whole. This is, however, the point at which many researchers come to a halt in the process of analysis. The use of other techniques, such as identifying

dilemmas or intensive analysis may reveal different or greater insights.

4.3.8 Identifying Dilemmas

Scanning the matrix resulting from the large-sheet-of-paper approach revealed 'tensions', for example, in the approaches to research management taken by the different respondents, and also inconsistencies in what individual library managers were saying. This presence of a number of minority views and the apparent lack of definite answers made the data amenable to 'dilemma analysis' in order to explore these tensions in more depth.

The term dilemma analysis was first used by Richard Winter⁹³ in 1982 and is a method that can be used with any data. Altrichter, Posch and Somekh⁹⁴ believe it is particularly useful with interview transcripts and their examples, drawn from education and based on the notion that teachers are continually faced with dilemmas that require professional decision-making, seemed transferable to the responses made by library managers during the interviews.

Dilemmas can be expressed in the following terms: 'On the one hand ... but, on the other hand ...'. A list of dilemmas was compiled by reading through the interview transcripts noting inconsistencies, tentativeness or decision points. By looking for contradictions rather than commonalities it is possible to identify tensions emerging from the interviews. This approach is not without its problems: while it is not difficult to find dilemmas there is a tendency to pick upon points that resonate with one's own experience⁹⁵; and having identified a dilemma there is no general solution. Altrichter⁹⁶ suggests three pragmatic approaches:

- **Is the dilemma solvable?**

Many dilemmas express contradictory and unavoidable aspects of situations that cannot be resolved by any course of action. An example is the contradiction between 'on the one hand we can do research but, on the other hand, it may still be rejected by the committee if there are other more pressing considerations.' The dilemma is not solvable as research is only one part of the committee-decision-making process. In contrast, the dilemma 'on the one hand we do research to aid day-to-day management and influence policy but, on the other hand, when it's served its immediate purpose it tends to get lost in committee papers' is solvable if someone is prepared to make an effort in filing completed research reports.

- **Is the dilemma related to the complexity of the situation?**

Many dilemmas result from having to act in situations where many factors are unclear and causes and effects are only partly understood. An example is the indecisiveness between 'on the one hand research might tell you something new, but, on the other hand, it might not.' A library manager whose primary aim is to improve service delivery may not have sufficient knowledge about underlying policies and what causes them. In addition s/he may know little about the

consequences of various actions intended to improve methods (for example, asking the right questions, using a mix of methods, etc.)

- **Is the dilemma emotionally stressful?**

Stress often results from believing that you have to take some course of action that goes against your instinctive judgement. An example is the tension between 'on the one hand we want to do research that supports our own aims, but, on the other hand we don't want to be confrontational as far as the money is concerned.' Here, a library manager is concerned about the risk of alienating either library staff or funders by getting involved, or not getting involved, in research projects.

4.3.8.1 Contribution of identifying dilemmas

Unfortunately it is impossible to give any generalised explanation of how to deal with dilemmas. Dilemmas can be worked on to solve them if at all possible. Just talking about a dilemma may give rise for solutions and most dilemmas can be resolved to some extent. Even if a dilemma is judged to be not solvable, perhaps due to the complexity of the situation, it may be worth looking for an acceptable way of coping with it. Analysing and working on dilemmas may be important in valuing minority views, enabling a more stimulating and productive discussion and reducing stress:

... dilemma analysis is an alternative to searching for definite answers which can solve one tension only at the expense of increasing another one. If we accept that contrary perspectives can be enriching, we experience emotional relief. Our energy is freed to search for ways of dealing with dilemmas that we can accept.⁹⁷

Thus another useful outcome may be accepting the dilemma as the norm and this may reduce any frustration resulting from it. Chacha and Irving used a variation of this technique to analyse user problems in academic libraries. In their experience "when ... problems are analysed from different perspectives ... they prove to be more complex and can lead to a division of the problem into elements for which responsibility can be shared ..."⁹⁸

The technique of dilemma analysis is only partially applied in this thesis. A full analysis would entail collecting more data, for example, by organising a group meeting of the original respondents to discuss the dilemmas, holding follow-up interviews with individual library managers and asking them to reflect on the dilemmas identified at their first interview, or discussing the dilemmas with other interested parties such as funders or elected members. Nevertheless identifying points and expressing them as dilemmas and placing them in context usefully illustrates an alternative way of interpreting qualitative data.

4.3.9 Intensive analysis for theory generation

Although data collection and initial data analysis are viewed as one integrated process in naturalistic inquiry it is intensive analysis that follows when data collection stops:

... naturalistic researchers make sense out of their data by identifying themes, arranging the themes into patterns of behaviour, and developing statements to explain the patterns they observe. The end result of analysis is to present the themes, patterns, and explanations to an audience of readers ... so that they understand the phenomenon in the same way that the researcher does.⁹⁹

This activity is also known as grounded theory¹⁰⁰. Unlike quantitative research, where the goal is to produce a replicable study, naturalistic inquiry is intended to produce a unique theory grounded in the situation under study, hence Mellon argues:

... the theory does not require 'proof' in the statistical sense. It must, however, be derived from and clearly supported by the data. There is a vast difference between the two statements 'This is what I think the data means,' and 'This is what I think the data means because ...' The former could be a flight of fancy based on a cursory examination of the data; the latter represents a rigorous process of examination, speculations, integration, and explanation.¹⁰¹

Bogdan¹⁰² suggests that the designs of all qualitative studies involve the combination of data collection with analysis. In most forms of case studies the emerging themes guide data collection but formal analysis and theory development do not occur until the data collection is near completion. In 'analytic induction' analysis and data collection occur in a pulsating fashion, first the interview, then the analysis and theory development, another interview, and then more analysis and so on until the research is complete. The 'constant comparative method' is a research design for multi-data sources, which is like analytic induction in that the formal analysis begins early in the study and is nearly completed by the end of the data collection, but is different in that analysis and data collection goes on all at once with the analysis, as Bogdan puts it, "doubling back"¹⁰³ to more data collection. The other key difference is that analytic induction focuses on constructing one explanation for the situation under study and this occurs early on in the data collection and becomes the focus of the study. All data collected after formulating the initial explanation are an attempt to find and examine cases that contradict the explanation and although the explanation is continually revised to include contradicting data, it is rarely discarded to follow a completely different line of enquiry. The continual examination and revision of the explanation to encompass new findings is considered 'proof' that the theory is workable for the situation under study.

Like Bogdan, Mellon favours these two theoretical approaches for naturalistic analysis and shows how both methods are generated by the same three stages as scientific theory, that is, conception (an idea converted into a hypothesis), elaboration (drawing implications from this hypothesis, then expanding them into some form that allows them to be verified) and verification (seeing if the hypothesis and its implications make sense in the real world).¹⁰⁴

4.3.9.1 Constant Comparative Method

The Constant Comparative Method was originally described by Glaser and Strauss¹⁰⁵. This process, in essence, combines the coding of data with the generation of theoretical ideas. As the data are collected, they are examined to identify as many recurring topics as can be

the data are collected, they are examined to identify as many recurring topics as can be found. These topics, sometimes called themes, are assigned a coding category - a word or phrase to identify the idea they seem to fit. Coding can be as simple as a notation in the margin of an interview transcript. Each new incident that seems to fit into a coding category is constantly compared to all other incidents in the same coding category. By constant comparison of all incidents in the same coding category, the researcher develops ideas about the category, its dimensions and limitations, and its relationship to other categories.

The first stage of comparing topics and their categories leads to speculation on how categories fit together to explain the situation under study. These early explanations are the beginning of a grounded theory. As the explanation begins to make sense, new data are collected to clarify or expand the emerging theory. Succeeding data are used to delimit the theory by coding topics only if they add new aspects to the theory. Data continues to be collected, coded, and compared until the results become redundant. In the final stage, the categories, explanations, and supporting data are used to write the theory in narrative form.

Although the constant comparative method can be viewed as a series of steps, what has just been described goes on all at once, and the analysis keeps returning to more data collection and coding. The constant comparative is a complex procedure but "it is an important way of controlling the scope of data collecting and making multiple-site studies theoretically relevant ... although it may rely on descriptive data to present the theory, [it] transcends the purposes of descriptive case studies."¹⁰⁶ Although Glaser and Strauss suggest their approach is applicable to any kind of data Bogdan suggests it is "most often used in conjunction with multiple-site, participant observation studies."¹⁰⁷ Layder's critique of the constant comparative method notes that it "is limited to recording the exact features of the world as they present themselves to an observer, rather like a photograph presents us with a direct representation of the scene formed by the camera lens"¹⁰⁸ but this picture may be distorted as it excludes the wider context. To consider the full implications of this criticism is beyond the scope of this thesis, suffice it to say that the broader context for the fieldwork, that is, taking on board what Layder terms the "macro-micro link"¹⁰⁹ in order to develop grounded theory under wider terms, is evident in Chapters Two and Seven.

4.3.10 Categorisation

In the examples given in section 4.3.6.2 describing organising the data by the large-sheet-of-paper approach and the annotating-the-transcripts-approach the data are being categorised. There is a difference however in the gap between data collection and analysis. In the first example the categories are pre-conceived and are separate to the data. In the second example they are arising from the data. The disadvantage with pre-conceived categories is that the framework is constructed before the transcripts are read so that one is searching each transcript to find information to fit into a particular box. This is typical of quantitative,

hypothesis-testing research. Insights or observations that do not fit into the framework are ignored and these could be extremely valuable. Where data collection and analysis go hand in hand the theory derived is, inevitably, grounded in the empirical data. In this grounded theory process of analysis, to paraphrase Boulton and Hammersley's description, the researcher is guided by initial concepts and hypotheses, but shifts or discards them as the data are collected and analysed.¹¹⁰ It is this process of generating categories and gathering together segments of data that are relevant to some category that distinguishes grounded theorising from other forms of qualitative data analysis.

4.3.10.1 Creating categories: Line-by-line and holistic categories, middle order categories, coding up and coding down

Creating categories is a crucial part of the grounded theory process. Chapters in Dey's *Qualitative data analysis*, outlining the use of a computer and maps and matrices, show that qualitative studies need not consist purely of narrative. For Dey:

... creating categories is both a conceptual and empirical challenge; categories must be 'grounded' conceptually and empirically ... they must relate to an appropriate analytic context, and be rooted in relevant empirical material. Categories which seem fine 'in theory' are no good if they do not fit the data. Categories which do fit the data are no good if they cannot relate to as wider conceptual context.¹¹¹

Compared with browsing and annotating data during the initial data analysis creating a category set requires a more systematic approach. Even using a semi-structured interview schedule with open-ended questions, all of the responses produced cannot be assigned to categories in advance of analysing the data. At the very least the adoption of a pre-existing set of categories requires confirmation that these are indeed the important distinctions within the data. In generating and developing categories one moves backwards and forwards between categories and data. Boulton and Hammersley give examples in their discussion of the analysis of unstructured data regarding 'insider' words and labelling phenomena¹¹².

Dey discusses two approaches to generating categories, line-by-line and holistic¹¹³. The holistic approach is seen as being suitable where the analyst had a fair idea of what s/he is looking for in the data. Here one attempts to grasp basic themes or issues in the data by absorbing them as a whole rather than analysing line by line. Broad categories and their interconnections are then distilled from a general overview of the data, before a more detailed analysis fills in and refines these through a process of sub-categorisation.

Dey recommends that the most flexible approach is to develop 'middle order' categories that draw some broad preliminary distinctions within the data, often based on fairly common-

sense categories around which the data can be organised quite effectively, “without implying commitment to any particular theoretical approach”, so that once the data has been organised into broad categories the analysis can develop in a more detailed or holistic way as required.¹¹⁴ This is essentially the procedure described in section 4.3.6.2 where broad middle order categories were generated as the data were not entirely lacking in structure as a framework of key issues had been used to collect the data. Dey's¹¹⁵ tables and examples illustrate the move between broad category lists and detailed category lists, and consider the number of categories. The final selection however appears to be a matter of judgement depending upon the purpose of the research and the time constraints. This gives rise to the question how far can analysis be usefully pursued with this method? The aim of the analysis - of around 200 pages of transcript - was to produce a discussion of findings relating to the key themes under consideration and to identify issues for further study and this is in line with Boulton and Hammersley's expectations¹¹⁶. A more in-depth analysis, perhaps computer-assisted using a software package such as NUD.IST¹¹⁷, may have allowed for greater development of understanding of the perspectives and behaviour of the people being studied. Previous experience suggested that given the time available for word-processing, indexing, searching and analysing the 'new' database about the original data, that this approach was neither practical nor appropriate for this thesis. The aim of the interviews was, in essence, to illuminate issues rather than to provide definitive answers. The ability to carry out, say, unlimited indexing - in terms of size and intricacy - as offered by NUD.IST was not necessary for the level of discussion achieved. In many ways the context for the comments made during the interviews was equally important as the content of the comments. While NUD.IST may have been useful in searching for counter-evidence this was also achieved by manually checking for negative instances. To return to the discussion of categories, several authors¹¹⁸ suggest how initial broad categories might be compiled. These lists typically include research aims, previous knowledge and background reading.

A similar approach, termed coding up and coding down, is described by Fielding¹¹⁹ whose examples of coding qualitative data are based directly on coding quantitative data and, although in the early stages categorisation may not be exhaustive, and the categories may not be mutually exclusive, and the allocation not very rigorous, by repeating the process and re-coding the data as necessary one should aim to overcome these problems as if managing and coding quantitative data. If the research is to test a hypothesis, the categories should be derived from the theoretical framework and the data made to fit the categories. This is termed coding down. If the aim is to describe data in order to generate theory categories can be developed from the data and this is termed coding up. Altrichter, Posch and Somekh use the same procedures but use the terms deductive and inductive respectively.¹²⁰

Fielding gives step-by-step instructions for coding up¹²¹ and notes that coding question by question leads to greater consistency in coding each variable. It also reduces the possibility

of a build-up of any preconceived picture of the respondent that could lead to a bias in the coding of any ambiguous response. One can also code case by case beginning with separate unmarked transcripts looking for patterns and themes from the data.

Having generated a set of categories and gathered together segments of data the next step is to compare and contrast all the items of data that have been assigned to the same category in line with the constant comparative method. This process clarifies what the emerging categories mean and identifies sub-categories and relationships among categories. At this point it may be necessary to reassign data to new categories and review the data to identify any data previously not identified as relevant and overlooked. At the same time it is necessary to identify specific criteria to indicate the sort of data that should and should not be included. This movement between the data and the categories and between the categories themselves is the key to the analysis. Boulton and Hammersley describes the process as “an iterative process of analysis that generates categories and interpretations of the data in terms of those categories” and note that “over time, at least some of these categories will come to be integrated in to a network of relationships.”¹²² Dey also stresses the need for movement between the broad and detailed categories: “one stays close to the data, the other is at one remove, already implying implicit categorisation.”¹²³ So, whilst in the early stages of analysis the categorisation may not have been exhaustive, exclusive, or rigorous, all of these difficulties should have been overcome during intensive analysis.

4.3.11 Intensive analysis in practice

The constant comparative method was used for analysing the interview transcripts. As this process was carried out manually in practice this work was more akin to Lofland's 'paper shuffling at small levels' and his advice on the physical aspects of establishing and managing files for analysis was invaluable¹²⁴, as was Bogdan's on the mechanics of working with data and the examples of codes and coded field notes¹²⁵. The actual procedure followed was adapted from that given by Altrichter, Posch and Somekh¹²⁶:

- The pages of each transcript were colour coded in the left hand margin.
- The transcripts were re-read and passages underlined in order to “note topics / categories to which the data relate and that are relevant to the research focus, or are in some way interesting or surprising” a paragraph at a time.
- Each transcript were examined a second time only looking at the marked passages and a category was decided upon (a word or short phrase that expresses its contents) for each.
- Each category was listed on a card. A new card was used for each new concept.
- Using photocopies as needed, 73 files of clippings were produced.
- The name of the category was written in the left hand margin beside the text it referred to.
- The cards were sorted into related categories.
- New categories were created as appropriate.
- Definitions of the categories were written giving specific criteria to indicate the sort of data that should and should not be included. A list of the categories used in the intensive data analysis can be found in appendix 6.

4.3.12 Contribution of intensive analysis

As will be seen, one difference between the intensive analysis and the initial analysis is in the richness of the description. The categories used for intensive analysis match respondents' own words so it is possible to review some of the apparent anomalies in the initial data analysis. For example, the initial data analysis simply suggests that while research does impact on service development, for example, changes in opening hours, it has little impact on broader policy considerations. In the light of the intensive analysis it becomes more understandable why identifying whether research had been used for developing policy and/or for developing service was not always straightforward. For example, the managers themselves could not always unravel the complexity of policy development, there were differing definitions of policy, and the impact of research on a particular policy was not always clear as illustrated by these comments:

That project helped the council to put some substance to the fine words of equal opportunities. It's not so much that we came up with a radical new policy but that the work enabled us to clarify and substantiate policy with -- actions ...

Policy is driven by lots of things and research is just a small trickle ... the direction of the council, the amount of funding ... professional developments ... central government messages as well ... So this piece of research ... is quite a small voice against a much larger voice.

As with identifying dilemmas this approach has the capability to shed light and yield insight rather than simply summarise and report findings. The richness and diversity of the data is retained in intensive analysis and this is in line with the desire to explore and explain the issues.

4.4 Testing the findings

Given the criticisms of naturalistic research noted earlier it is essential to demonstrate the reliability of results.

4.4.1 Naturalistic hypotheses

To recap, the purpose of naturalistic analysis is to identify and verify themes and to use these themes to construct hypotheses. Mellon writes:

Hypotheses, to the naturalistic researcher, are plausible explanations of behaviour based on how participants define themselves, their activities, or the events in organisations in which they participate. These hypotheses, sometimes called grounded theories, apply only to the setting in which the study was conducted. Moreover, a grounded theory emerging from the work of one naturalistic researcher is very individual ... from the standpoint of naturalistic enquiry, different hypotheses arising from a study of the same situation are considered acceptable, even desirable, research results ... The validity of this type of research rests in whether each hypothesis is plausible ... The hypotheses constructed to explain a research situation depend heavily upon the researcher's purpose, methods of collecting and coding data, and general approach to naturalistic analysis.¹²⁷

In taking this approach the process of data collection and analysis should be made sufficiently explicit for a reader to make a reasonable assessment of the credibility of the findings. Furthermore, one can also improve credibility by critical analysis.

4.4.2 Critical analysis: Testing emergent hypotheses and searching for alternative explanations

Critical analysis should consist of two activities: checking the reliability of any evidence that substantiates a finding, also known as testing emergent hypotheses, and searching for any evidence against it, or alternative explanations. Both activities are important in testing the trustworthiness of findings and, as Altrichter, Posch and Somekh note, both also contribute to their development: the first by enriching and enlarging findings, the second by restricting and defining findings and therefore clarifying and sharpening understanding¹²⁸. Testing the reliability of results is essentially a never-ending process and there can be no such thing as absolute reliability. Nevertheless, the research must stop somewhere. One indication that it is time to finish is when it appears that collecting any additional data would yield nothing new in either a positive or a negative sense¹²⁹. This situation is known as 'saturation' and in the analysis the last transcript to be categorised was used to give an indication of the level of saturation.

The plausibility of developing hypotheses can be evaluated by testing them through the data, that is searching through the data in order to challenge hypotheses and search for negative instances. During this process the data can be evaluated for their "informational adequacy, credibility, usefulness, and centrality"¹³⁰ and at the same time one can take the opportunity to determine whether or not the data are useful in illuminating the questions being explored.

In practice a limited critical analysis was conducted that involved searching for negative instances and considering how the explanation offered is the most plausible in relation to the research objective. These negative instances were identified by checking the matrix compiled during the initial data analysis against the twenty key findings. Twelve out of the twenty key findings were found to reflect the views of all of the respondents; there were four findings where the negative instances referred to exceptional results from the same library services.

Regarding searching for alternative explanations, Marshall notes that as categories and patterns between them emerge in the data, the researcher must engage in the critical act of challenging the very pattern that seems so apparent because alternative explanations always exist and the researcher must search for, identify, and describe, and then demonstrate how the explanation offered is the most plausible of all.¹³¹ Gordon and Langmaid¹³² describe two approaches: "revisiting" the interview in the mind's eye by listening to the tape recordings

again to identify “intense but fuzzy moments” that may be worthy of reconsideration; and changing perspective by “interpretative reframing” whereby data are reorganised in form but not in content, that is, it is looked at from a different angle.

4.4.3 Demonstrating reflexivity

This consideration of the process of research is sometimes referred to as reflexivity. Boulton and Hammersley¹³³ propose that the researcher should be a reflective practitioner, continually thinking about the process of research, his or her own role in it, and the implications of this for the analysis. As noted earlier some such comments were recorded as memos and/or margin notes; some authors¹³⁴ recommend that this process of reflection should be continued throughout the whole process of the research. Riley¹³⁵ also gives a number of simple but effective techniques on topics such as ‘how to hear what your data has to say’ and ‘how to recognise and pattern your own ideas about your data’, many of which are reflective in nature such as self-interrogation, looking for missing categories, and looking for surprises.

The following reflective procedure¹³⁶ for testing the findings of the analysis was adopted:

- Write a series of sentences on cards, each expressing an important result of the analysis;
- Sort into sets according to the issues to which they refer;
- Lay out each set of cards in a way that makes them easy to survey and clarifies relationships between them;
- Each card is checked against available data. Any data that seem to relate to the sentence are noted;
- In the light of the selected data, look again at the sentences and expand, modify and illustrate them, either by writing additional sentences and adding these to the layout of cards, or by rewriting the original cards.

By reflecting on the intensive analysis in this way a set of key findings was generated. The final sentences, twenty in all, together with the exceptions (identified as negative instances above in section 4.2.2), are used to structure the presentation of the qualitative data in Chapter Five.

4.5 Writing up: products of analysis

The physical results of the initial and intensive analyses were three collections of paperwork. Coding down, which was carried out using a complete set of printed transcripts and a large sheet of paper, produced a matrix. A further set of transcripts was annotated to identify dilemmas and a separate matrix was produced.

Coding up was carried out using duplicate sets of transcripts and this resulted in bags of clippings and piles of cards denoting categories. Sufficient surrounding context was included in the data extracts to make the extract intelligible and placeable in the course of the interview. In practice extracts were never shorter than a sentence and most usually a

paragraph. Sometimes it was preferable to allocate duplicated sentences to different categories rather than breaking down paragraphs into sentences.

4.5.1 Fitting grounded theory into formal theory

The research for the thesis began in a traditional fashion by searching the literature. This information was then reviewed and summarised and has informed the research at various stages. Due to the focus on the changing state of the public library service it was also essential to keep up to date during the course of the fieldwork and analysis and much reading has taken place in parallel with data collection and analysis. This has its advantages, as Strauss and Corbin note, in that “by choosing the right literature in tandem with doing analysis one can learn much about the broader and narrower conditions that influence a phenomenon.”¹³⁷ Indeed, with naturalistic inquiry it is acceptable to begin with little or no awareness of existing literature: Mellon¹³⁸ argues that this allows researchers to observe with no preconceptions. It is only when fieldwork is complete and the grounded theory begins to emerge that ‘true’ naturalistic researchers turn to the literature to place their work within the framework of what is already known.

Substantive theory is the organised knowledge about that content area. Naturalistic researchers are interested in studies related to the same content area as the one defined by their grounded theory and fitting a particular grounded theory into the framework of what is known about the same content area builds towards substantive theory. Formal theory is defined as the organised knowledge about that conceptual area. Again, naturalistic researchers are interested in how their grounded theories fit into related conceptual areas and examining a grounded theory in relation to the broad concepts of sociological inquiry builds formal theory.

Mellon accepts that “fitting studies into the literature during analysis rather than developing studies out of the literature is often difficult” and adds that for those “used to literature search as an entry point for exploration, it may seem awkward and unnatural. This approach requires a new mental set, a different way of thinking about the literature and its place in research.”¹³⁹ Whilst not being able to undo the literature search carried out for Chapters Two and Three, following the analysis of the data from the fieldwork the literature was revisited and the analysis and discussion in Chapters Five and Six takes a naturalistic approach in that it attempts to place the findings within the framework of what is already known. This tactic is in line with that advocated by Strauss and Corbin who suggest that the researcher acknowledges that s/he has come to the research situation with some background, however:

... there is no need to review all of the literature beforehand (as is frequently done by researchers trained in other approaches), because if we are effective in our analysis, then new categories will emerge that neither we, nor anyone else, had thought about previously. We do not want to be so steeped in the literature as to be constrained and even shifted in terms of creative efforts by our knowledge of it! Since discovery is our purpose, we do not have beforehand knowledge of all categories relevant to

our theory. It is only after a category has emerged as pertinent that we might want to go back to the technical literature to determine if this category is there, and if so what other researchers have said about it.¹⁴⁰

4.5.2 Analytic description

During the process of writing up the analysis in Chapter Five an attempt was made to strike a balance between abstract and general concepts on the one hand and description and quotations from a respondent on the other as favoured by Lofland¹⁴¹.

¹ Strauss and Corbin note the common error of combining methods inappropriately to produce a 'methodology', hence naturalistic inquiry was adopted insofar as I have "utilise[d] its general procedures and many of the specific ones" as noted in Strauss, A. and Corbin, J. *Basics of qualitative research: grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Sage, 1990, p. 192.

² Gill, J. and Johnson, P. *Research Methods For Managers*. Chapman, 1991, p. 121-141 and p. 142-153.

³ As defined in Bogdan, R. *Qualitative research for education: an introduction to theory and methods*. 2nd ed. Allyn and Bacon, 1992, p. 29.

⁴ As defined in Altrichter, H., Posch, P. and Somekh, B. *Teachers investigate their work: an introduction to the methods of action research*. Routledge, 1993, p. 6-7.

⁵ Guba, E. G. Criteria for assessing the trustworthiness of naturalistic inquiries. *Educational Communication and Technology Journal*, 29 (2), 1981, p. 75.

⁶ Mellon, C. A. *Naturalistic inquiry for library science: methods and applications for research, evaluation, and teaching*. Greenwood, 1990, p. 2.

⁷ Denzin, N. K. *The research act: A theoretical introduction to sociological methods*. Prentice Hall, 1989, p. 69-101.

⁸ Ibid., p. 70.

⁹ Ketterer, R. F., Price, R. H. and Politser, P. E. The action research paradigm. In: Price, R. H. (ed.) *Evaluation and action in the social environment*. Academic Press, 1980, p. 2-4.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 3.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 4-9.

¹² Batty, A. The action research background to the leisure experiments. In: *Leisure and quality of life: a report on four local experiments: volume 2*. HMSO, 1977, p. 3-15.

¹³ Hambleton, R. *Policy planning and local government*. Hutchinson, 1978, p. 124-128.

¹⁴ Altrichter, H., Posch, P. and Somekh, B., op cit., p. 201.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 201.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 202.

¹⁷ Schon, D. A. *The reflective practitioner: how professionals think in action*. Avebury, 1991, p. 50-59.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 59-69.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 276, 277, 278 and Altrichter, H., Posch, P. and Somekh, B., op cit., p.205-206.

²⁰ Guba, E. G. op cit., p. 75-79.

²¹ Mellon, C. A.. op cit., p. 5.

²² Ibid., p. 18-19.

²³ Ibid., p. 19.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 3.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 20.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 39 and p. 65.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 56.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 17.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 23.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 2-3.

³¹ Marshall, C and Rossman, G. *Designing qualitative research*, 2nd ed. Sage, 1994, p. 142.

³² Guba, E. G. op cit., p. 89-90.

³³ Mellon, C. A.. op cit., p. 25-26.

³⁴ Strauss, A. and Corbin, J. op cit., p. 46.

³⁵ Mellon, C. A. op cit., p. 26.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 102.

³⁷ Marshall, C and Rossman, G. op cit., p. 145-146.

³⁸ Strauss, A. and Corbin, J. op cit., p. 41-47 and p. 75-81.

³⁹ Chatman, E. A. Field research: methodological themes. *Library and Information Science Research*, 6, 1984, p. 425-438.

⁴⁰ For example, Guba, E.G. op cit., p. 75-91 and Marshall, C and Rossman, G. op cit., p. 142-152.

⁴¹ Strauss, A. and Corbin, J. op cit., p. 23.

⁴² Guba, E. G. op cit., p. 79.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 79-88.

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- ⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 64-65.
- ⁵⁰ Strauss, A. and Corbin, J. op cit., p. 176-193.
- ⁵¹ Mellon, C. A. op cit., p. 65.
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- ⁶¹ Ibid., p. 92.
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- ⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 93.
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- ⁶⁹ Payne, P. op cit., p. 41.
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- ⁷¹ Strauss, A. and Corbin, J. op cit., p. 176.
- ⁷² Ibid., p. 181- 185.
- ⁷³ Ibid., p. 187.
- ⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 190-191.
- ⁷⁵ Mason, J. op cit., p. 94 and Strauss, A. and Corbin, J. op cit., p. 187-188.
- ⁷⁶ Mason, J. op cit., p. 99-100.
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- ⁷⁹ Bogdan, R. op cit., p. 153-163.
- ⁸⁰ Lofland, J. *Analysing social settings: a guide to qualitative observation and analysis*. California: Wadsworth, 1971, p. 76.
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- ⁹⁴ Altrichter, H., Posch, P. and Somekh, B., op cit., p. 146-152.
- ⁹⁵ Altrichter, H., Posch, P. and Somekh, B. *Teachers investigate their work: an introduction to the methods of action research*. Routledge, 1993, p. 147.
- ⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 149-152.

- ⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 152.
- ⁹⁸ Chacha, R. and Irving, A. An experiment in academic library performance measurement. *British Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 6 (1), 1991, p.13-26.
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- ¹⁰⁰ According to Strauss, A. and Corbin, J. op cit., p. 31-32: "Grounded theory is a qualitative research approach that was collaboratively developed by Glaser and Strauss. Its systematic techniques and procedures of analysis enable the researcher to develop a substantive theory that meets the criteria for doing 'good' science: significance, theory-observation compatibility, generalizability, reproducibility, precision, rigor, and verification. While the procedures are designed to give the analytic process precision and rigor, creativity is also an important element. For it is the latter that enables the researcher to ask pertinent questions of the data and to make the kind of comparisons that elicit from the data new insights into phenomenon and novel theoretical formulations. This approach can be used by persons of any discipline or theoretical orientation desirous of developing a grounded theory."
- ¹⁰¹ Mellon, C. A. op cit., p. 70.
- ¹⁰² Bogdan, R. op cit., p. 72.
- ¹⁰³ Ibid., 74.
- ¹⁰⁴ Mellon, C. A. op cit., p.73.
- ¹⁰⁵ Bogdan, R. op cit., p. 72-75, recounts the steps in Glaser's constant comparative method of developing theory as follows:
1. Begin collecting data.
 2. Look for key issues, recurrent events, or activities in the data that become categories of focus.
 3. Collect data that provide many incidents of the categories of focus with an eye to seeing the diversity of the dimensions under the categories.
 4. Write about the categories you are exploring, attempting to describe and account for all the incidents you have in your data while continually searching for new incidents.
 5. Work with the data and emerging model to discover basic social processes and relationships.
 6. Engage in sampling, coding, and writing as the analysis focuses on the core categories.
- ¹⁰⁶ Bogdan, R. op cit., p. 75
- ¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 75.
- ¹⁰⁸ Layder, D. *New strategies in social research: an introduction and guide*. Polity Press, 1993, p. 61.
- ¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 68-69.
- ¹¹⁰ Boulton, D. and Hammersley, M. Analysis of unstructured data. In: Sapsford, R. and Jupp, V. *Data collection and analysis*. Sage, 1996, p. 291-292.
- ¹¹¹ Dey, I. op cit., p. 96.
- ¹¹² Boulton, D. and Hammersley, M. op cit., p. 291-294.
- ¹¹³ Dey, I. op cit., p. 103-104.
- ¹¹⁴ Ibid., p. 104.
- ¹¹⁵ Ibid., p. 94-112.
- ¹¹⁶ Boulton, D. and Hammersley, M. op cit., p. 291-294.
- ¹¹⁷ NUD.IST stands for Non-numerical Unstructured Data Indexing, Searching and Theory building and is discussed by its creators in Richards, T. J. and Richards, L. Using computers in qualitative research. In: Denzin, N. K. and Lincoln, S. (eds.) *Handbook of qualitative research*. Sage, 1994, p. 445-462.
- ¹¹⁸ For example, Boulton, D. and Hammersley, M. op cit., p. 291 and Dey, I. op cit., p. 100-108.
- ¹¹⁹ Fielding, J. Coding and managing data. In: Gilbert, N. *Researching social life*. Sage, 1993, p. 218-237.
- ¹²⁰ Altrichter, H., Posch, P. and Somekh, B., op cit., p. 124.
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- ¹²³ Dey, I. op cit., p. 101.
- ¹²⁴ Ibid., p. 117-133.
- ¹²⁵ Bogdan, R. op cit., p. 175-181.
- ¹²⁶ Altrichter, H., Posch, P. and Somekh, B., op cit., p. 124-125.
- ¹²⁷ Mellon, C. A. op cit., p. 72.
- ¹²⁸ Altrichter, H., Posch, P. and Somekh, B., op cit., p. 131.
- ¹²⁹ For example, Altrichter, H., Posch, P. and Somekh, B., op cit., p. 131.
- ¹³⁰ Marshall, C. and Rossman, G. op cit., p. 116.
- ¹³¹ Ibid., p. 116-117.
- ¹³² Gorden, W. and Langmaid, R. op cit), p. 140-144.
- ¹³³ Boulton, D. and Hammersley, M. op cit., p. 294-296.
- ¹³⁴ For example, Boulton, D. and Hammersley, M. op cit., p. 294-296.
- ¹³⁵ Riley, J. *Getting the most from your data: a handbook of practical ideas on how to analyse qualitative data*. Bristol: Technical and Educational Services Ltd, 1990, p. 47-66, 67-113, 75-76, 101, and 59-66.
- ¹³⁶ Altrichter, H., Posch, P. and Somekh, B., op cit., p. 132-3.
- ¹³⁷ Strauss, A. and Corbin, J. op cit., p. 55.
- ¹³⁸ Mellon, C. A. op cit., p. 92.
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- ¹⁴¹ Lofland, J. op cit., p. 128-129.

CHAPTER FIVE

Relating the rhetoric and the reality

5.0 Introduction

Given that the social policy agenda of the current government requires deep research to inform and underpin policy development and strategic action, and that the government is beginning to accept the assertion that the public library service can contribute to social policy objectives, it is evident from the earlier literature reviews that the research capacity within the public library sector may be underdeveloped in these respects. Chapter Three illustrated how the historical situation of fragmented, localised, low-key research activity in the public library service is being replaced by a more coherent and driven approach with co-ordination, direction and funding at national level. However, other studies, for example by Goodall^{1, 2} and the Developing Research in Public Libraries project³, indicate that research skills and particularly methodologies remain a weak element in public library research activities. Chapter Two provided a context for this picture of research activity in that it explored the roles of local government in terms of organisation and management and used the public library service as an exemplar to consider the implications for the place, and contribution, of research within the service. It concluded by noting that public libraries have the potential to help their local authorities achieve their social, economic and political objectives but questioned whether they have the ability to do this and in particular to contribute to delivering policy and engaging in policy development.

In this chapter a picture of current research practice is examined to illustrate the extent to which the conclusions from Chapters Two and Three are reflected in reality. The analysis explores factors such as the purpose of research, the presence of corporate strategy, and the limitations imposed by lack of suitably trained staff, support and funding. This work reveals that the 'new paradigm' put forward in Chapter Three has not yet impinged on practice and, on the whole, reinforces earlier perceptions and comments about public library research activities as reported in the literature. For example, one concern is the finding that research activities and methods are largely confined to simpler issues of operational service development and do not extend to harder research addressing, say, the political and economic impact of the service, or the impact on individual's lives. This rather traditional concern with processes and indicators is unlikely to meet current demands for research dealing with impact and outcomes. The analysis also reveals that there was little involvement by the public library services, at the level in the hierarchy of the respondents interviewed, in corporate and strategic research and development. Where there were comments on library services contributing to local authority strategies there is little sense that the services were directly involved in any research and policy development activity underpinning corporate planning for cross-cutting issues considered in Chapter Two such as economic regeneration or social inclusion.

In terms of content and structure this chapter has three strands:

- an overview of the findings is followed by a more detailed analysis which draws from the qualitative data enabling the practitioner's voice to be heard;
- the analysis is set in context, making links with the local government and public library service literature reviewed in Chapters Two and Three;
- the closing section broadens the discussion to consider the influence of research on policy.

5.1 Overview of findings

Respondents' first impressions did not necessarily correlate with their involvement in research activities. The over-riding finding was that most respondents did not perceive themselves to be involved in research - it was something that was 'academic' and was not related to their day-to-day work. Instead respondents saw themselves as being involved in 'consultation', 'information-gathering', and 'business-planning'. Even so, the value of research was accepted although it was hard for respondents to demonstrate this value. The sorts of research activities that were carried out were many and varied but on the whole they reflected current operational concerns rather than broader strategic considerations. There is a considerable body of research taking place but it is not recognised and managed as such, and it is rarely written up in a form that is transferable to other library services. Comments on methods were limited and there was a predictable reliance on desk research, surveys, unobtrusive testing, focus groups, and the pragmatist's methodology of 'trial and error'. Many of research efforts that were discussed were well-meaning but amateur.

Respondents had received no formal training in research other than that gained as part of a degree course. The approach is ad hoc, small-scale and informal; staff carried out projects within part-time academic courses or exploited expertise by means of informal channels. There were two exceptions where there was a sense of research being managed within a strategic framework of service objectives, but the impression is one of practitioner-researchers working in isolation. Costs, in terms of time and money, have to be 'absorbed'. Respondents were hampered in applying for funds by a lack of confidence, expertise or time.

Most local authorities appear to have some corporate research expertise, be it a policy or research unit within the Chief Executive's Department, a service development team within the wider Department, or expertise in bidding for external funds within the Economic Development Unit. Some respondents have close working relationships with these units but others showed a sense of remoteness or lack of awareness. While respondents felt able to speak on behalf of their library service, few felt informed enough to even comment on the research activities of other departments and sections of their local authority. A key purpose

of research is to provide evidence to support recommendations made to the committee, particularly in considering service reductions. More positively, business planning, customer consultation, 'working in partnership' and the 'Charter approach' are also stimuli to research.

As for the impact of research, most work was undertaken, often reactively, as part of a short-term service development, and the purpose of the research was usually to inform the management or the committee decision-making process. Because of this, research does impact on service development, for example, changes in opening hours, however it has little impact on broader policy considerations. There is some confusion about the link between service and policy. Respondents were clearly aware of the need to get the message across to the committee to protect the service. Even though service development may be research-driven in some individual library services, because the research is not acknowledged as such, but is subsumed in a committee report, there is little evidence of transferability or a build-up of knowledge, that could influence policy. Having said that, some respondents were aware that their research did show how the library service was contributing to wider council policies, even if it was not instrumental in defining policies.

5.2 A picture of current research practice

The key findings and exceptions, given in the boxes, are used to provide a structure for reporting the qualitative data. If there are no exceptions the key finding reflects the views of all of the respondents to a lesser or greater extent. Comments are attributed to the respondents by means of superscript letters and the key can be found in appendix 7.

5.2.1 First impressions of public library research

Key finding: Although first impressions of research activities were unclear there was a value attributed to research.

Exceptions: These instances relate to first impressions being positive and value placed on research being high. Even where first impressions were positive there was often discussion as to exactly what was meant by the term research. There was an awareness of the added value of research, but, excepting K and R, there was a tendency to see benefits of research as spin-offs rather than genuine contributions.

At the start of each interview respondents were asked to recount their first thoughts when they had been asked to participate in this study of research activities in public libraries. There were some candid responses: "my first reaction was we don't do any"^J, "it's nothing to do with us"^B, "who has the time?"^S, "research is not the main function of the public library service."^H Others declared it was a 'good thing' even though they felt they were not very involved in research activities: "I thought we don't really do any but it's becoming more important - to make changes you have to get your market place in order."^A Another commented "It's one of those topics that everyone talks about and doesn't do anything about, or don't realise that they are doing it in the first place."^G And another that "... it should be an

important part of our service and we do a fair amount of it, but we could do better I think, and there are gaps that we could plug.”^T It was suggested that the terminology was a problem with one respondent observing that “terms can be quite influential on people’s perspectives, and ‘research’ for practitioners is often considered to be rather daunting and actually something that practitioners don’t embark upon.”^G

In contrast, during the course of the interviews respondents often inferred the importance of doing research. When asked is there a value placed on research within the local authority some comments were quite cautious. Most said ‘yes, for Libraries’^{F, J, L, Q, R, S, T} but were unsure about other departments, with one respondent claiming “yes, to the extent that I imagine within the council as a whole we do as much research, if not more, than any other area of service”^L. Only one respondent said “no”^P but others qualified their responses adding “there certainly is in term of intent”^Q, or clarified their answer in their terms: “It’s valuable that we are able to demonstrate how we are supporting the priorities of the council in terms of community development, regeneration ...”^T and “within this library service there is definitely a value placed on development work.”^H One respondent spoke of a dichotomy: “... there’s a recognition that long-term research, not directed by force of circumstances, is valuable” whilst noting that “there’s also research that is more pragmatically based, that’s reacting to circumstances, or is necessary to continue practical management.”^M Comments made in another interview illustrate a tension between the respondent’s own view of research and the value placed on it in his library service and this can be expressed as a dilemma:

On the one hand I think, research is something rather obscure and rather academic, which may be of very limited use to what we do at the sharp end. On the other hand in a broader context there is a value placed on research in this library service. The business plan for 1997/8 highlights engaging the public by measuring customer satisfaction with our services, our accessibility ... and [includes] developing community profiles to enable us to match resources to local needs ...^Q

In this case the respondent’s personal view did not deter him from getting involved with research activities however this dilemma could be used for exploring the gap between the perception and practice of research activities in public library services.

5.2.2 Definitions of research activities

Key finding: The respondents’ definitions of research activities were broad and pragmatic, not academic. Respondents did not see themselves as having a strong involvement in research despite the amount of research activity within their public library service. Much research activity was viewed as part of day-to-day management, information-gathering which assisted with decision making.

Exceptions: This finding reflects the views of all respondents to a lesser or greater extent. There were two exceptional cases, K and R, where the respondents saw themselves as being very strongly involved in research activities from the outset of the interview.

Research was a “grand term”^R to some respondents: “[Research] sounds a bit academic and highbrow for what we actually do ... we gather management information and interpret it.”^L To

others it lacked clarity: “really it’s separating out those of our activities that we can distinguish as research” because “we do quite a bit of analysing data and information gathering usually in response to specific situations that arise.”^M Others felt that while they did do research it wasn’t research in the academic sense. One respondent explained “... a lot of what we do will be interesting to you, though it is probably using research in a way that academic colleagues might not recognise as such.”^H Another noted:

I don’t normally use the term research because it gives me the feeling that research equals ‘academic’. A lot of what I do is research but it doesn’t come across as academic research as it’s a fundamental part of what we should be doing anyway.^F

It was difficult to tease out what was meant by academic research:

To me research is quite a broad term, I don’t think I thought research in a kind of narrow academic sense. Yet I know there’s a very academic element to it and that although there are things we do ourselves as practitioners in the field, really simple research, there’s more in-depth work that can be done with professional help.^E

We’ve been involved in work that could loosely be described as research that involves collecting information, and evaluating it and presenting findings ... our research isn’t very academic, it’s applied ...^M

For many respondents the activities that made up research were part of day-to-day management: “I see it almost as gathering information to assist in decision-making processes...”^F Some respondents used examples to explain their definition of research including such aspects of management and marketing as targeting services and monitoring.^E Others spoke of consultation activities: “research can be the formal consultation processes that we have with the public, they’re not referred to as research but happen on a regular basis”^F and “... a lot of the research we do is at the low level. We do get involved in grander projects but we are involved in a lot of day-to-day activities, getting feedback from current users of the service ...”^H Research then was “practical, focused”^S and very much an ‘on-the-job’ activity. This is not to deny the complexity of the situation as discussed by one of the respondents and illustrated by this dilemma:

On the one hand most of our research is reacting to situations and is done pragmatically to aid management and policy in the department. It’s separating out those activities that we can distinguish as research because we do quite a bit of data analysis and information-gathering. On the other hand I think there’s a recognition that long-term research, not directed by force of circumstances, is valuable. But I think there is a lack of time to do that and we are probably blown off course by both a lack of time and finances.^M

This respondent later reflected on this situation and in doing so described how the dilemma was resolved in practice:

This is really the way I suppose what might be called ‘research’ sometimes happens: you have a need to do something, you don’t particularly research it, but you put up a model that you think is going to work, and you make it work, and if it doesn’t you have to try and do something else ... it’s research while you are actually doing the job, it’s very practical in that sense.^M

Another described a typical scenario:

... I tend to say to staff 'I want you to come up with some figures for me. I want you to go out and find out and quantify this.' For instance, the special services librarian is developing the service with a book bus, so she's done an audit of homes, residents, what our service can provide, and from that kind of information she will tailor her schedule ... so it's that kind of thing really, it's very practical stuff ... we are such a small outfit, we haven't got a huge administration doing that research for us ...^E

One respondent queried the terminology saying "... research is a useful shorthand term but it doesn't convey to the practitioner ... very much at all" and went on to suggest an alternative term: "needs identification."^G Another stressed that the library service did 'development work': "if you use the terms research and development side by side then it is much more the development side that I think of when we pursue these projects."^H Other respondents revisited their definitions during the interview:

Having had this conversation, what is coming through is understanding the terminology. We obviously have got a fair amount of experience of talking with local people and consulting with people. I suppose my mind had settled around the idea that research equals the scientific approach to undertaking consultation but from what we are talking about it seems that we are not too far away.^T

You've completely floored me by making me look at my job in a very different way! I didn't think that [it was research] right up until the point when you asked me the question, then it suddenly clicked ... To us it was just information gathering and putting it down on paper.^J

5.2.3 Impetus for research

Key finding: The impetus for research in public library services varied and included some external stimuli such as a concern with quality, customer consultation, the Charter approach. Opportunities for research, other than annual commitments, often came through restructuring and opportunism.

While respondents did not speak of an impetus for research as such for some there were driving forces or sea-changes that had initiated the research approach. "Finding out what the market place wants"; checking "whether you are providing best value for money"; and "targeting resources" to cope with budget reductions and inform members of the options were the driving forces in three library services^{A, C, E}. In another^M research activities had resulted from a consultant's study on the effectiveness of the library service in terms of value for money. Restructuring was the key factor in two library services:

[Research] started when we had the new management structure and a management team post for policy and research was established. He was not a librarian he was a specialist researcher, so he started driving us forward in proper research ...^K

The big change for us was in 1988 when Libraries moved into what was then a Leisure Department ... At that time we had a research assistant in the Leisure Department and a lot of their work was connected with the Libraries and they actually set up all of the systems that we have continued.^R

A new council approach was the key development in another:

... the other impact is working in partnership with other departments, organisations and local people. Libraries are fairly well ahead in that anyway when it comes to working in partnerships, looking at securing funding and so on. It also provides us with information back about our services when you work with others. The whole thing has come about because of the council's 'New Ways of Working'.^U

All respondents from new unitary authorities were aware of the use that they could make of research even if the structures to enable it to happen were not yet in place:

In the new unitary local authority we don't have quite the same privileged position anymore, there is a lot of pressure on budgets ... it has been a shock to the system to be in the firing line ... so we have reached a point now where we have to prove our worth in a way in which we did not have to in the past.^J

In other services it was opportunism that initiated some research activities:

If you want to catch some of these opportunities you can't wait for one to fit absolutely with everything else that you are doing. Sometimes you have to say 'we'll be pushed' but it is too good an opportunity to turn down.^H

But such an approach raised a dilemma for one respondent who was wary of the complexity of the situation:

On the one hand we want to do good research. On the other hand very often it is [opportunism] that guides us because we have budget constraints, political direction, customer expectation, and to respond to all of those in the given time frame means that research cannot be undertaken.^P

Other respondents avoided such dilemmas by being primarily service-led in their research.

One described how a project simply "arose out of a specific service need, something that we wanted to do, and we saw an opportunity to do some research at the same time and so attract funding."^M The presence of 'the Charter approach' set the tone for some library services with the publication of a Library Users Charter^Q requiring research into service performance and customer satisfaction: "We are a Charter Mark organisation so you do need to consult, and research is part of the consultative process."^R Another respondent noted, the demands made under the Citizen's Charter require certain performance indicators to be published each year^B. Other respondents used these as a starting point for considering additional indicators, or looked to their own customer charter for guidance^{K, Q}. For example, this respondent commented:

A lot of our research is driven by the Library User's Charter ... We promise to do a lot of things and we have to measure if we have done these things or not ... So now we have an annual process to do that, the user survey.^L

Given the drive for accountability it is not surprising that the most common form of research activity involved customer consultation in terms of getting feedback from users. As one respondent put it:

It is difficult to target your services towards the needs of your users if you don't know what the needs are. It's easy to presume, because you are part of an organisation that has been there for a long time ... that you are doing the right thing.^J

Consultation was "part of our ethos" for one respondent: "we are seen very much, and we try and put ourselves across very much, as a department into consulting with the public."^F

Consultation was viewed as “an ongoing process in terms of getting feedback to inform our decision-making” and as important “whenever we have a new development in the offing.”^F For another respondent there had been a focus on “trying to involve people in the decision-making process.”^T This was especially so for the respondent who was “keen to find out what exactly is it that the people of this unitary authority want, not what was appropriate to the people of the county a few years back ...”^J One respondent gave an interesting example describing how external funding had been obtained where “the council said, and this was one of the key areas that convinced Government to give the money, that it would involve the community in spending the money.”^T Hence consultation, “very much about talking to people...”, not form-filling, was a large part of that library service’s research programme.^T

Several respondents took on board customer comments through complaints and comments systems^{J, Q} and also through consultation with specific user groups, such as users of the Schools Library Service^{E, J, Q}. Some of this consultation was undoubtedly driven by the pressure of competition, for example, for two library services^{J, Q} delegating to schools the budget for the schools library service became a spur to market research into the needs of schools. Some of this consultation too came about through the integration of library services into broader directorates^R where there was already a culture of market research in order to achieve success in delivering business and service objectives.

One respondent described how they regularly used research to feed into the library service’s performance measurement system^K; another how “to convince the politicians and ourselves about performance ... we have an intricate set up of performance indicators ...”^P Four respondents^{H, K, L, P} cited quality procedures as a reason for research.

Although not stated explicitly, the need for research to underpin bids for external funding was evident in some research activities:

The ... research project has become embodied in the words that the Lottery require, that is, the ‘feasibility study.’ So we have completed our feasibility study and I will be presenting the results to our committee and seeking their agreement.^G

The Lottery expect you to know what your business is and to show it on paper.^S

Business plans too sometimes included statements that implied research:

The business plan for 1997/8 highlights engaging the public by measuring customer satisfaction with our services, our accessibility, responsiveness and so on. Further down in the business plan there are examples of, say, continuing to work on community profiles to enable us to match resources to local needs, so there’s quite a lot in the way of highlighting the fact that we should be doing research.^Q

5.2.4 Purpose of research activities

Key finding: The purpose of research for public library services was to feed into management and committee decision-making. Research was thus service-led and concerned with value-for-money or accountability.

Research activities were carried out for several reasons but an overarching purpose was that of accountability, be it to customers, politicians, funders. Time and time again respondents pointed out how “it is increasingly important to be able to build within your argument bodies of evidence that demonstrate need”^T. Respondents described research to justify the library service^C, identify priorities^E, argue its case^M, and to demonstrate that they were “providing something the public wanted”^M. Research then was very practical: “we’re not here to improve our image, we’re here to improve the service.”^N One respondent described:

... in my career accountability on the use of resources has become more acute, so to be accountable you have to have evidence one way or the other ... we have a formal programme of customer response. That raw data that is brought in will then be analysed and will inform decision making about resources and will also be used in relation to accountability in the form of a report to the county council ...^G

Dealing with budget cuts and consequent reductions in service meant that some research “was all done from the aspect of ‘how can we save money’, not ‘how can we offer a better service.’”^C One respondent reflected:

... assessing the effectiveness of the integrated library system was a major piece of work and resulted in a large report to the committee that contained a lot of interesting information ... but it’s main purpose was to demonstrate to the committee that there was no staff saving that they could take off the department ... Research often has a purpose you know, we haven’t got time to do it for its own sake.^M

5.2.5 Management approach to research

Key finding: There was unlikely to be a strategic approach to research activity as presented in a research strategy document. There was little evidence of research management in the public library services in terms of planning, staffing, budget, and support.

Exceptions: There were two exceptional cases, K and R, where the respondents evidently managed their research. There were other cases where there was some structure to research activities, or a structure was being developed, but this was not necessarily supported by documentation, funding, staffing and so on.

How research activities were managed within the library services varied, from “producing project and task groups”^P, or delegating to the head of the appropriate service^{O, P}, or “a small headquarters staff” who acted “fairly informally and pragmatically.”^M One respondent reported “I produced a mission statement for Library Services that I gave to the research people and they have used that as a base for a number of issues ...”^F. Another commented that “It used to be fairly ad hoc but not now because we wanted to make comparisons ... surveys for different libraries are now planned for the next five years ...”^P Some respondents had no organised approach:

I suppose we are guilty in the sense that we pay lip-service to research, we think that it’s valuable but there is no organised programme, and we tend to react to situations rather than thinking about where the service is going in that kind of detail.^C

While it was recognised that research had to have a context this respondent admitted:

... you could argue that that structured research framework isn't there. We're operating on a number of fronts and research, consultation, is taking place but ... there isn't an overall policy in terms of 'what research are we going to undertake over the next twelve months' ... it's an evolving process.^T

Another interview revealed a dilemma whereby the respondent relied on professional judgement for managing research:

On the one hand for all of the projects we get involved in we want to see them fit in to some overall service development strategy. We do not chase money for the sake of chasing money. On the other hand we don't have a forty page document called the service development strategy, that's where I have to use my judgement as the Director to assess whether or not a project seems worth pursuing, bearing in mind what the committee has been happy with in the past, or ... what I think is important to pursue in strategic terms for us as a library service ... I don't have a checklist where, if it scores nine out of ten, you pursue it.^H

Such a dilemma would have been a good starting point for a group discussion as there was no consensus as to how research should be managed within the public library service.

Research was clearly managed in this library service:

Our research activity is based around a research and performance strategy steering group and we're supported by a central unit in the Leisure and Community Services department called Strategy and Planning ... The Director of Central Lending has research as a strategic responsibility ... He's responsible for developing research and chairing the research group and leads on all research and performance issues. We don't have a separate person doing it; it is right there as a part of the management team's responsibilities.^K

And similarly in this library service where the respondent explained:

The thing that channels the research is our service planning ... we are obviously aware of the regeneration strategy so a lot of our planning will look at how we can feed into that, but it's the service planning that shows where we have research needs, and day-to-day management.^R

As far as staffing was concerned:

Our Information Services Librarian has a specific responsibility for looking at research needs and how we can implement them ... and it's managed from [Central Services] ... we take it that management team have the ability [to manage research] by the fact that they are the management team.^R

As ideas for research developed they were:

... fed to our research project leader who databases them and decides when, where, why, what opportunities there are. The management team will establish what we regard as priority areas and as low-key areas.^R

One respondent felt that the research stance was evident in the fact that "we try and base decisions on an interpretation of management information, and where such information is not available we think of ways of collecting it" and explained how this approach had evolved:

... within the management team there are people who are interested in the subject and prepared to do something about it. Like everyone in local government we're under pressure and over stretched and it's a question of priorities. We've always felt that research is important and that it's something that we must do.^L

Another noted "... in terms of our management process [research] is built into the requirements of senior and middle managers."^G Yet another claimed research was "very much embedded in our thinking"^R in terms of commitments to annual surveys. Another said:

It's in people's attitude and approach to their work ... [take] an events programme, part of that is drawing up an business plan and saying why certain events are going on ... But people wouldn't really necessarily equate that as being researching the needs of their community, they just do it.^G

And along similar lines another respondent emphasised:

... for all of the projects we get involved in we want to see them fit in to some overall service development strategy, rather than it just being a case of 'this is an interesting research project' ...^H

Those respondents from the new unitary authorities were busy developing such thinking:

"The ethos I want to develop with senior staff is that they've to get on within their own discipline and find out as much as possible about the people."^O One respondent spoke of moving away from "a very centralist approach" where "individualism and free thinking were actively discouraged" to a situation where staff are "beginning to think outside of the box."^S

There were some examples of structured approaches where library services had clear guidance, for example: "we have the key activities areas that give our main objectives ..."^N and another drew from a district cultural centres strategy^T A third found that within the council "research is an integral part of the service delivery cycle" so that whilst there was "a minimal research and development unit" each Chief Officer was fully aware that research "had got to be built in to your overall management ... it is not just one or two people: it is the sort of thinking that has got to permeate the organisation."^G Another respondent gave a lucid description of the "strategic context" for any research activity, commencing with "local governing party policies" that were used by the council to "produce a policy framework document" that "sets key objectives" to which everyone is expected to contribute. Each committee then produces its own objectives under those headings so that, finally, "my individual unit plans are under those four headings and then I draw them together for an area plan ..." This respondent added "It's very important to have that context, you just can't do research for it's own sake, and if it isn't in context then it doesn't have a service development benefit."^K

Sometimes objectives were expressed as a business plan. In one library service this was "drawn together by two of the senior managers in the Department" although the "input comes from the practitioners ... out of staff development interviews ..."^Q In another the respondent was keen to see "each service point do an action plan from the business plan for each year" so that "everyone is working towards the same objectives, even if they are going about their own ways to get there."^A Both respondents recognised the need for staff to have an awareness of the whole picture and the importance of 'ownership' of such plans. Another described how a strategy had evolved as the management team had had to take on the

research role following cuts in funding that stopped the practice of seconding staff to short-term research projects:

[The Library Management Team] plans on a three year basis now ... and we set priorities ... Out of these arise policies, like developing children's services, that we have linked into the council's strategies for young people ... a number of those have included lines of research about the local community. Each library has been developing a community profile over the last year or two and these can also be used for development purposes. Out of all of that have come revamps of our services, new services and so on.^U

5.2.6 Corporate strategy

Key finding: Best practice occurred where library service research strategy was linked to corporate strategy.
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Those respondents who were able to identify a clear guiding corporate strategy or approach to research activity were almost always involved in research activities themselves. Indeed an indication of the bigger contribution that libraries can make to the local authority can often be found in the corporate plan. This link was clearly set out by one respondent:

... we have the leadership from the centre, from the city council as a whole, and that sets out priorities for us ... That is the strategic context. There is a philosophy, or management style, for quality and equality too... The Director and Central Library Manager have that vision to interlink them all and give strategic leadership. The rest of us contribute at different points in terms of supporting that work but that structure helps me see, at middle management level, what the priorities are, and it helps me influence my managers to make choices [and] choose priorities.^K

Corporate strategy was commonly expressed in documents identifying key objectives^{A, K} or frameworks such as regeneration^{B, R} - "even though this may seem a little to one side of Libraries"^B, - or anti-poverty^{J, M, N} to which every department was supposed to contribute, for example:

... the strategic context for any research activity [is] ... our local governing party policies ... they produce a policy framework document for us that sets key objectives. For example, improving the quality of life, securing the city's future, tackling inequality ... These broad but key things apply to all services and everyone is expected to get involved in them ... in the case of libraries we can chip in to most, if not all, of those themes.^K

Another respondent described an Area Co-ordination Initiative:

That has involved council services and local agencies and local residents ... all working together to deliver services that local communities want, in the way they want. Staff can be seconded to that to represent their own department or to work on a particular project. Each area has got its own Area Co-ordination Office ... Six areas in the city that are getting special treatment in that way and each has involved some research and development, and library services have been involved.^U

Another noted "we have maintained the practice during the last year of ensuring that if there is a policy in place then we actually act on it and target our resources accordingly."^J Similarly another respondent explained how "the structure of the corporate plan is used to shape our development plan because it does demonstrate that we, as a library service, are supporting the council's strategies."^T This library service used the corporate plan both to guide their own

activities and to identify opportunities for feeding in their own projects into much larger regeneration bids. Even something as simple as setting up a user group was seen as worthwhile “because there is an awful lot happening in that geographical area that we need to build on, and you need to involve local people to help you build up the community.”^T Such involvement could also act as a lever for further development opportunities.

In some cases the corporate plan listed activities such as “listening and learning from our colleagues as well as the public.”^Q To facilitate this process in some local authorities “matrix groups of managers”^A or “big events”^{O, T} were held to encourage people to work co-operatively. One respondent recognised how “the council is making steady progress with its market research generally ... and if it weren’t for that we would not have been able to do a lot of the stuff we have done.”^H Other library services were not so fortunate:

The driving force in the local authority is the anti-poverty strategy ... the Lead Executive Director is hell-bent to bring in business and industry and everything has been directed at that. There have been several projects that nothing has got in the way of, and if you weren’t connected at the beginning you couldn’t get in at all ...^N

Another felt there was a disinterest of the local authority in supporting research:

There is no corporate plan or corporate information system here ... we actually know of parallel activities going on and people being surveyed one week on one instance and the next week on something that is almost exactly the same.^P

5.2.7 Research activities

Key finding: Research activities reflected current operational concerns rather than broader strategic considerations.

Exceptions: Whilst some respondents claimed that their research activities took on board broader strategic considerations the examples given were not substantial.

Overall the research activities discussed during the interviews tended to reflect current operational concerns rather than broader strategic considerations. The three main areas of interest were users, service delivery, and IT applications. Typical examples of research activities are, respectively, surveys of non-users^R, lapsed-users^L; unobtrusive testing of the delivery of information services^R, reviews of Schools Library Services^{E, J, Q}, library opening hours / Sunday opening^{F, L, R, S}, branch library closures^{A, S}; monitoring use of public access Internet sites^R, specification for new computer system^J. Most of the projects were carried out in-house. There were fewer examples of externally funded or joint research activities.

5.2.8 Research topics

Key finding: Research topics related to the needs of individual public library services and local authorities; there was little sense of drawing from or contributing to a national agenda, except through the larger, externally funded projects.

Exceptions: This finding reflects the views of all respondents to a lesser or greater extent. Although funded projects matched the funder's criteria which in turn drew from wider agendas set by the British Library or the European Union, those library services involved in externally funded projects were hoping to obtain benefits relevant to the needs of their service.

Ideas for research activities came from many sources, for example, professional journals and looking at what other services have done^{C, E, U} and "... listening to customers ... colleagues"^N.

^Q One respondent felt that "some of the topics are identified by our masters ..."^Q The most frequently mentioned source were the staff of the library service and ideas were picked up by respondents, either on an ad hoc basis, for example, "I try and maintain a very open style of management"^P, or through a structure including staff suggestions^K, relying on specialist staff to take the lead in developing their services^{T, G}, and drawing from local authority policies and plans^{H, L, U}. Management team was often focal point of ideas.^R Four respondents noted the advantages of library staff mixing with other groups of staff, such as in a cross departmental marketing group^L, or liaising with colleagues when the Corporate Policy Unit sent out its annual memo requesting bids^E. One such respondent explained:

There's no formal group. I suppose if we were to talk about it formally it comes out of the policy advisory group in the department which is the Chief, a senior colleague and myself plus the Personnel and Training Officer and the Museums Officer and the Archaeological Officer. So ideas will come out of that and often from informal discussions amongst that group.^M

Ideas are coming from the staff within Libraries and we do work alongside staff from Cultural Services and Community Arts so they have had a strong influence on some of the activities that we have done... within the service development planning framework we have divisional working groups, internal working groups, council working groups on the top of that, and staff feed into those and obviously bring back news of what is happening elsewhere ...^T

Two library services maintained a shopping list or a menu of ideas so that "if anybody writes in we have a list that we can go to and amend or adjust the level or whatever"^R, or because "sometimes funding opportunities just occur."^K Two other services felt that their ideas simply came from "reacting to circumstances."^{C, M} One library service had been contacted by the project leaders and asked to participate in a national funded study.^A

Collecting statistical data for CIPFA was considered as research by some library services^{B, E} especially where such information was not easily obtainable from the computer system. CIPFA's standardised public library user survey package known as PLUS was the main research activity in one library service and was highly praised: "it was as economic of staff time as it possibly could be and it's given us the foundation of some very good information that we can build upon in the future."^N However another respondent was not totally

convinced: “it strikes me as being too much about performance indicators and is not really going to help us with day-to-day decisions about where the service is going to go.”^C Other respondents valued the potential for obtaining comparative data from the PLUS database^{N, T} and the flexibility of repeating the surveys^N.

5.2.9 Staffing issues

Key finding: Within the library services staff lack training and time to do research; there is a reliance on interest rather than expertise. The role of the practitioner-researcher is not recognised nor valued. It is acceptable for research to be carried out by ‘enthusiastic amateurs’ and students.

Exceptions: G, K, R, T, were exceptions and this finding reflects the views of all respondents to a lesser or greater extent. There was evidence that specialist research staff posts have been lost; new posts, if they have a research element, tend to concentrate on marketing and development, or be funded on a casual basis.

The responsibility for carrying out much research fell upon the Chief Librarian and senior staff^{A, L}. Some of these had relevant experience, for example, “I had 10 years out of librarianship running the Arts where I had to know what our business was”^S and “I was previously involved in pure research that involved grants, performance indicators ...”^O The more typical situation was one where this was not the case and where “we don’t have specific officers to do [research], so it’s part of lots of other work that I do.”^L Another respondent said “... any R&D work has to be driven by me ... If it’s related to a specific issue, it’s me and that officer.”^E Someone else explained:

The head of library operations is probably our most research oriented person of them all ... he knows how to operate the questionnaire staff and he does all the performance indicators and the CIPFA returns ... he is also responsible for how the service is delivered through all library outlets. But we haven’t got anybody, other than that, who has got the time or the opportunity to do it in a significant way.^P

Another respondent was, theoretically, in a slightly better situation in that “we have a senior officer, part of whose brief is to carry out research and investigation”, but “she also has a finance brief so it’s a small part of her remit” and in practice “the research is done basically in the spare time of people, including myself, who have other duties.”^M If such staff left then there was a gap. Sometimes volunteers were used^{A, L, S} or staff were invited to apply:

We invited ... staff to apply for 15 hours of work at grade 6, a level where someone would perhaps have project or research management skills, to spend time doing some research and consultation.^K

... we asked people to tell us about their experience and how they would approach [the project] ... it went to all staff and I got a good range of people, right down to library assistants who had experience of using IT and another who had experience of graphics as part of her degree. What we actually did, as well as setting up a project officer, was to make sure all of the other people who said they were interested got involved ...^F

One respondent said that “for some types of research we know there are staff with particular types of interest and we put them onto it.”^R Another was planning to nurture younger

librarians who “have still got the college mentality”^O Some research activities were achieved through delegation: “the annual user survey is something that happens in every service point and it is a delegated responsibility of operational managers to do that”^L; or through secondment:

... we regard it as a development opportunity for staff because ... it is increasingly difficult to offer staff opportunities for promotion ... there are people who will use project funding for an opportunity to either to move sideways into something that enables them to develop, or indeed something that will replace promotion in terms of financial benefits as well as career benefits.^H

A different strategy was to identify staff with relevant skills, for example, one respondent described how staff who were studying for a management diploma were involved in survey work^J, another library service was benefiting from someone doing an MBA^R, and in another the respondent predicted that “there will be a number of projects coming out over the next few years because we have a number of staff doing part-time courses at the university.”^L As one said “it’s very much offering it around to people and trying to get them involved ...”^F

Specialist or dedicated research staff were few and far between. Whilst they may be recruited for externally funded programmes^M, it was equally likely that these would be seen as opportunities for existing staff^{M, Q}. One respondent explained how, due to the library service’s involvement in a larger council project, he was able to make the case for replacement staffing and hence “we created the post of library projects officer because of all the work that was happening on so many fronts...”^T He went on to describe the dilemma that he then faced:

On the one hand I regard having a research post as a high priority given the nature of the change going on in local authorities and within public libraries. Such a post allows dedicated staff time to be spent on getting some of these projects off the ground and working alongside staff who are at the sharp end, bearing in mind that you never get any additional staffing for these things, and is extremely valuable. On the other hand the difficulty of course has been the funding, and maintaining that funding against a wider background of reducing the revenue budget ...^T

Another respondent faced a similar situation:

On the one hand I thought the research post was important. On the other hand I was being asked, at a moment’s notice to cut five hundred thousand pounds from a £4.8 million budget. What the politicians told me was that I could not take that saving from front line services, I would have to take it from the centre. And at the centre the very vulnerable activities are research, training, anything that, in the politician’s eyes, is not directly linked to service delivery.^P

A third respondent felt the solution required difficult choices to be made:

... if we need to do [research] then we will endeavour to make sure we do it and that may involve making choices, so it may mean that some other things don’t happen.^G

A minority of respondents had ready access to staff with research skills within their wider departments, although these staff in themselves were not always specialists^E, for example, one respondent could make use of an ‘interpretation officer’ “who can do all of my statistics for me and make them into meaningful charts”^O, and another could call on “a technical

expert.”^K But on the whole it was a myth that some library services had “... officers purely there to conjure up bids.”^{C, E, N} Even so, many of the smaller library services felt that they were competing on an uneven playing field: one respondent from a new unitary local authority complained “because we are so small we don’t have anybody” and compared her present situation unfavourably to her previous experience in a county where “we had an officer who dealt with all the statistical returns, performance measures ... now it is me doing all of that ... as well as everything else.”^E Another respondent in a small metropolitan local authority felt it was time to “... sit down and prove to ourselves what the lack of a dedicated research officer has meant in terms of stress and non-completion of projects and under-achievement...”^N Another noted “an awful lot of research and development work gets done at home ... We end up doing our own thing and we might even cross-over between our own staff because you are relying on personal communication and co-ordination.”^C

Whilst one respondent pointed out how the reduction in numbers of professional staff over the years had reduced the potential research capacity^B, reductions in staff with specific research responsibilities were noted by four respondents^{K, P, Q, R} including the loss of a planning and development officer in 1991^P and a departmental research officer in 1993^R through budget reductions. However, three new posts were also mentioned. In one local authority a research post had been added at reorganisation as part of marketing division.^S In another library service “a new post that has recently been brought in is a ‘libraries development officer’ and one of her key roles is to look at external funding opportunities.”^K Another respondent was looking forward to the arrival of a “departmental business and development officer” which was “a new post, created specifically to look at marketing and promotion”, noting “there are definite elements to what she is going to be ... that involve research and involve research with a view to marketing.”^Q

Few respondents thought of themselves as practitioner-researchers, indeed one respondent described himself as “a happy amateur who is dabbling really”^L, but there can be no doubt, given the degree to which research activity is combined with day-to-day work, that many senior library staff could fall into such a category. One respondent described how the situation had evolved:

In the past we were more able to, say, second staff to special projects but now the staffing budget is so tight that that is just not as possible. I suppose what we tend to do is to expect the higher paid staff to take on the research function ... It’s put into their job description now when we are setting up posts. It may not be described as research as such, probably policy development.^U

As one respondent said “... there’s a phrase in here that you use to describe people in libraries who do research, practitioner-researchers, yes, that’s right I thought that’s me, library managers who have to do it all.”^L

As for research skills, respondents only referred to training gained at degree level or acquired primarily through experience: "it's very much self-taught ... any research training would either have come along in general education at degree level or they would've picked it up as they went along."^{C, G, J, M} Another source was previous experience^{E, Q}, for example, "I've brought quite a lot over from my old life ..."^O, or personal interest^{F, H}, rather than formal expertise. Or relying on a key person:

We have only one person who has actually been on training courses. He's been on LISU's courses and he's connected with the PLUS user group, he's also worked with Performance and Monitoring within the council.^N

We tend to rely on the Director of Central Lending, he is very knowledgeable on research and is involved with the CIPFA committees and things like that. Some of us have been involved with the research group for a few years and so we have acquired skills. Also we rely on our technical expert.^K

In one library service, prior to the take up of CIPFA's PLUS, it was a case of:

A colleague's husband is an economist and she often uses his expertise in guiding us when we have done mini-surveys in the past, about how questions should be asked, but we have nobody else who has any training.^N

Even where a researcher was brought in for a project, skills could be lost on his/her departure unless efforts are made to pass them on:

We've picked up a lot of skills by working with research over the last eight or nine years ...it's skills development by osmosis as much as by anything else ... we've picked up some of the skills from the Tourist Information Centres, from people doing theses and projects ...^R

One respondent in a library service where there was no one with any research training commented:

We are amateurs at it. Our skills lie in other directions that are concerned with providing services to the public. If you undertake consultation with people from that skills base then there are going to be gaps because you aren't bringing in the most appropriate expertise that you could apply.^T

As well as there being a lack of staff trained with research skills there were, as indicated earlier, few staff who had any training in applying for funds.

Sparing staff time for research^R and "quite simply, it's finding the time to do it"^D were serious problems in the library services visited, even where funded staff were employed:

... even though the Project Officer's post was paid for ... there was a lot of background research to be done; we provided staff time and support for all of the market research. A colleague was seconded part-time too for about six weeks so we had to back up her by another secondment. We got money back for her time but it caused staff disruption because there seemed to be no real outcome for our staff.^U

Respondents lacked "time to plan and manage research"^{C, M}, time to "get away from the day-to-day practicalities of someone coming to find me with a staffing crisis"^C, time to allocate and supervise staff^{M, R}, time to ensure the work is used^R and that "gut feelings"^C are accurate and valid. One respondent spoke for many in saying: "Whilst we may see [research] as a good thing to do we are too busy dealing with day-to-day problems and don't

necessarily ... pay a lot of attention to research.”^B Sometimes whether or not research was undertaken was determined by how well it fitted in with other activities: “often it will depend on how deeply we are involved with other things at that time. Have we the capacity to take on that project?”^H

5.2.10 Funding issues

Key finding: The lack of a specific budget was a key problem. Projects tended to be short term and small scale, using tried and tested methods where costs, particularly staffing costs could be absorbed.

Exceptions: Only one library service, K, had a dedicated budget for research activities.

The amount of money available to support research activity varied greatly between library services. In line with Boddy and Snape’s findings about research in local government generally, research activities were often sustained despite funding cutbacks and restrictions “through a wide variety of creative means.”⁴ Only one respondent had a defined budget:

There is a small budget though it’s probably called something else to hide it. It might be called professional consultancy or something like that but it is actually a research budget ... about £13,000.^K

Even so it had to be “quite flexible” to cope with “the range of things it is used for and the range of demands on it.”^K Another library service had fully devolved budgeting so there were opportunities to fit in research activities. This didn’t stop this respondent from declaring “one of the problems, of course, is always resources” but in reality that library service was in a much better position than many others in that the respondent went on to say:

If we are looking at something as broad as a non-user survey then it costs coppers, basically just a couple of hundred quid, to provide expenses for students and that will come out of the corporate fund. So our budget is sufficiently flexible to allow us to aim funding towards the task.^R

Most library services had no budget or no allowance for “any kind of research activity that’s costed as such.”^P Other library services managed as best they could but not surprisingly there was a concern with getting value for money. One respondent compared the cost of his time to research something against the cost of carrying out a survey:

... that survey cost us just over £400 to get the analysis, which was good value for money ... And that’s the issue, if it costs £2000 for me to research the things I’m interested in that would get us five surveys analysed ... It’s a drop in the ocean in the overall budget of £1.4 million but so much of our budget is inflexible these days that we don’t have even that sort of option.^S

Despite not having a budget several library services were still able to conduct research as long as costs could be hidden, “squeezed out of the budget”^L, or absorbed, for example, survey work was funded by the publicity and promotions budget^A, the printing budget^L or generally absorbed^{J, M, Q, S}. As one respondent explained:

There was no special pot of money for doing that project, 'absorbed' is how I would describe it ... When I started to plan this work I did have an idea of the costs, particularly of staff time, and how they would be accommodated ... very high costs were involved in data input/analysis and the council picked up those costs through the policy team without an additional charge to us.^H

The real problem were the implications for the cost of staff time^{G, J, M, N, T} although even this could be minimised: "as far as the management team goes the cost would have been minimal as everybody tended to do the work outside of work time ..."^J It is all very well saying "we are very good at getting things done on the cheap!"^R but the lack of a dedicated budget for research activity can have other implications for the research process. As well as acting as a deterrent, for example, the financial costs put off one respondent from considering taking the lead on any regional projects^N, research may also become outcome-driven, for example, another respondent noted "I'm not paying to have questions answered and analysed when you don't know what the results will be used for."^K There are clearly problems with staffing and ensuring continuity of staffing, especially given a background of budget cuts^T. One respondent noted that "resources for training are limited" so there was a tendency to rely on internal expertise^O. A more positive view of this scenario was that not having to pay for internal expertise enabled a library service to conduct research that it would not otherwise have been able to^L. Another spoke about the effect of funding research on staff morale: "you can get a poor reaction from staff ... because it's taking up five grand that we could use for the service."^Q This respondent drew attention to the dilemma raised by the cost of using internal expertise:

On the one hand we've got information derived from the postcodes, scatter plots showing where people come from, which we should overlay on the notional catchment area described in geographical terms to find out more about our customers. On the other hand we are not very good at using that data that yet. It is also too expensive: it costs about £40 a page and we have 39 libraries.^K

Later in the interview he reflected on some possible solutions:

I'm hoping that with our own IT developments we might be able to do things like that ourselves as it is expensive and time-consuming to go to others to exploit data. I want to have a machine in my office so I can do it all myself in half an hour! Or bring in another manager in and let them play with their results.^K

Limits on funding could also be responsible for limits in methodology. One respondent pointed out "any kind of collection and analysis of data is very expensive so the whole thing has been designed to be incredibly simple to do."^L Methods were chosen that were "the most cost-effective option" with the result that "it was a very simple survey because we did not have a budget: we did all the analysis ourselves."^L Another respondent gave a similar response in describing why he was interested in different methods:

... it's about managing budgets ... Our user survey costs about £3,000 in terms of getting questionnaires printed, results analysed and reports produced, whereas for two or three hundred pounds you can do a lot of desk research or even just create staffing time to release someone to do a piece of work.^K

And another identified the dilemma that:

On the one hand we might set quite a bit of store by surveying or by management information. On the other hand we are not prepared to spend an awful lot of money on it apart from staff time which of course is hidden within budgets.^L

This respondent went on to give an example of how this was resolved in practice:

Our annual user survey is incredibly simple, it only asks six questions, we make no analysis of the users by age, sex, ethnicity, or whatever, because analysis is very expensive. All we do is randomly sample the borrowers as away of getting a range of opinion.^L

5.2.11 External funding

Key finding: Respondents lacked experience, expertise and confidence in applying for external funding.

Exceptions: G, H, L, M, Q, R and T are exceptions showing varying degrees of experience, expertise and confidence.

Bidding for external funding tended to be the responsibility of senior management^{H, M}. Those respondents who had written bids described the process as one of 'trial and error':

You just learn by doing it and if you are not successful you have another go. The thing is to find out what they want, it's like a job application, it's no good saying one thing when they're asking you for something else ...^M

Writing a good bid involved taking advice and filling in the forms carefully and using the right terminology. For example one respondent described how his preliminary work had to "become embodied into the words that the Lottery require, that is, 'the feasibility study'"^G and another commented "... they are very keen on 'transferable benefits' and you have to demonstrate that what you are doing has got the sort of benefit that they want"^T. Above all it was important to remember that "what their needs are and what our needs are might not be the same ..."^P, for example:

You have to be very creative when you apply for money. Other people aren't looking at it from your point of view, they have criteria that they have to match and you have to find ways of shaping what you do to fit in with that and hopefully there is a spin-off from that, a new way of providing a service, or a new type of user.^E

One respondent described repackaging a research project:

... there was some work in developing a bid around digitising local history resources but it was geared towards preservation [instead of] towards exploitation and creation of more resources ... You have to be prepared to say 'this funder isn't really into libraries, can we do anything that fits in with their requirements that we can use?' ... It's a matter of framing the proposal in their terms but still achieving what you want.^F

Applying for external funding was essential in some library services:

In service development terms we have to look externally, or build an extremely strong case within some of the council's external funding applications ...^T

The mainline budget is fully stretched just trying to keep the day-to-day service going so that is why we do have to look for these external funding opportunities.^H

Even if they were successful library services they invariably had to come up with matching funding^K. The main sources of external funding mentioned were SRB^{B, D, E, F, G, S, T, U}, the Lottery^{B, E, G, H, L, S}, Europe^{F, H, L, M, S, T, U}, PLDIS^{M, N, Q, R, T}, and the local TEC^{J, M, U}. Other 'one-off' sources included the Arts Council, West Midlands Arts, and the Rural Development Commission^{M, U}. As much research was carried out internally often there was not a need to apply for funding. However some Departments or respondents had introduced the bidding process within the internal environment and this approach could be useful to hone up such skills rather than adopting ad hoc strategies.

... all areas of service are invited through the management structure at about budget setting time to come forward with ideas, project proposals with an indication of methodology, expected outcomes, costs and so on.^K

As well as the lack of knowledge about funding sources there was almost a reluctance to apply in some cases. One respondent new to his post had found that "traditionally we have tended not to [apply for external funding] ... But this again is something I want to change."^F Even in another library service that appeared to have research well organised the respondent commented "I don't think we make enough of external funding opportunities" and added "hopefully the new libraries development officer will get a grip on that."^K Another explained:

... we're awful at putting in proposals and getting money from elsewhere. None of us in library management have any knowledge of what external funding is available and outside funding is regarded as something they [other Officers] don't want to know about. Our previous Chief felt this too ... his view was 'what's the point of doing a project that can't be supported by our budgets', so we don't do anything.^C

Another respondent spoke of a perceived difficulty in bidding for large amounts of European money in comparison to applying to the British Library:

I think that to apply for Telematics funding would involve much more stringent, academic standards and that is something that I don't have any experience of.^L

A different explanation for this apparent lack of interest in applying for external funding in some library services could be that funding did not match the most pressing needs^E: "there is not a lot of external funding that helps us deliver the lending service ..."^H However another respondent had found that, by being creative, it was possible to gain such funding:

... some standard library services can involve some research, for example, the local TEC has just given us money to put laptops on a couple of mobiles with employment and training information on. Undoubtedly part of that work will include some research on how effectively they are being used ...^M

He noted that funding had:

... arisen out of opportunities we've seen to do fresh things in service terms and to carry out some investigation. The two things have gone together because the research element has obviously attracted the money.^M

Another respondent felt that there did not seem to be much funding available: "[The British Library] only have a few hundred thousand spread over all the library services so it's not

much each.”^T For one respondent it wasn’t that the failure to obtain funds was disheartening but rather that it had been a waste of time:

Many years ago I made a bid to PLDIS and we were unsuccessful. We didn’t get a good response from them and we’d put an awful lot of work in and at the end of the day the amount we were asking for was quite small.^T

This respondent was worried that funding could skew service:

I’ve seen the Regional Library System [apply for funding] and ... it wasn’t as bureaucratic and as rigorous as I expected ... but I think it’s finding the time and a project that meets the criteria. That is the problem with running public services at the moment, you are chasing money and skewing services to reflect the criteria of the funding body not because that’s how you want to drive your service forward.^L

However another was happy to have gained funding by being added to a consortium bid:

... we put a bid in through SRB for that project through an organisation that oversees bids to external funding agencies for the City and the County ... Because they deal with a lot of bids they eventually put ours together with another one they considered to be a like project ... but the bid fell down ... so some of these partners who were put together stayed together and tried to get other funding ... we applied for Telematics funding with our partners for a project called Regionet.^U

Finding the time, and the time scales for writing a bid caused difficulties. One respondent complained “it is time-consuming to actually put the bid together and to line up with the criteria of the funding body.”^P Another spoke of the “telephone directory of verifiable evidence” required for an application for European Union funding.^G Another explained the complexity of the situation in terms of this dilemma:

On the one hand we have thought of applying for funding to do more research. On the other hand the difficulty we find is that we have to step off the treadmill in order to put the bid together. To put the bid together properly you have to define what the outcome is likely to be and how that’s going to be beneficial to others and inevitably there are hidden costs to this authority in terms of briefing, training etc. ... The funding bodies have their agenda and my authority has its agenda. Even if they overlap the time scale is bound to be different.^P

Even if a bid was successful there could still be more administration work and two respondents referred to the time required to complete all of the paperwork during the life of a project funded by the European Union.^{H, U}

5.2.12 Research methodology

<p>Key finding: Experience of research methodology was limited, other than methods which were action-based or user-oriented. Respondents wanted straightforward methods which would provide accountable results.</p>

The approach to methods by most respondents was succinctly summarised in this comment:

To be honest it’s ‘keep it simple, stupid’ as far as we are concerned. We are not looking to break new ground. We want information and we want it collected in a robust, testable way, so we try and do it as simply and straightforwardly as possible ... we want information that feeds into our, and into our members’, decision-making processes. We don’t want to be clever with methods.^R

Several respondents spoke of dilemmas concerning methods and such comments inform our picture of the respondents as reflective-practitioners, for example:

On the one hand we are interested in methodology. On the other hand we are not looking to break new ground. We are not looking to pioneer research in libraries ... we try and do it as simply as possible.^R

On the one hand we do undertake a fair amount of consultation in one shape or form. Some of it is just about talking to people, not filling in survey forms, but even so it gives valuable feedback and does inform strategy. It is increasingly important to be able to build within your argument bodies of evidence which demonstrate need. On the other hand I would put a question mark against the methodologies we sometimes use in terms of techniques, because of the limited expertise we have to draw on from within in-house ... Our skills lie in other directions, we could do better ... Increasingly such work is going to have to be more structured and you will have to improve the methodologies that you use.^T

Methods were decided “in a very pragmatic sort of way” by one respondent who explained:

We’re not experts so we generally go through the process of gathering information in one way or another, analysing that information and forming conclusions. Obviously some thought goes into what information you need and how you gather it ...^M

Some queried how “scientific” their methods were^Q or apologised for their simplicity^E: A lot of it is very informal and low-tech; it is usually done by me on the telephone.^C Others used a range of methodologies because they thought it was good practice^O or to stretch the budget^{K, M}. Some^{B, O} thought that research units could use more sophisticated methods: “We have got some skills but we don’t have the mechanisms in place in the way that Corporate Policy have. They’d perhaps use focus groups and they’d have a whole range of tools at their disposal.”^E Others^{K, O, T} noted the importance of choosing a suitable method:

... previously you approached a survey as ‘get them as they come through the door’ ... there is probably too much subjectivity with that ... having the sampling methodology that turns it into a research exercise...^T

There was little sense of there being any management of methodology. One respondent described how, after the results of one survey were too general to be of any use, they had changed their approach so he would now “... really target surveys, so we have specific questions we want answering and that is all we ask.”^L Another commented that “as the findings come through from the various instruments modifications can be made, if they don’t work you can go back and try again.”^G But on the whole there was no other mention made of evaluating the methods used to obtain data. There was an awareness of sampling^{R, S, T} in that this tended to be the area where respondents sought advice.

The research methods used ranged from the straightforward, for example “all we do is randomly sample the borrowers as a way of getting a range of opinion”^L; to the more innovative:

Working alongside [an arts group] has shown me the role arts can play in consultation, because it’s not just about getting people to say what they like, it challenges their perceptions, and gets them involved in a very direct way.^T

There were conflicting views about focus groups which were 'flavour of the month' at the time of the fieldwork: one respondent described them as "... absolutely wonderful, we have tapped into an enormous vein of information that user surveys would never touch on"^F; others were wary, criticising the subjectivity of the method^G and the lack of authority of the findings.^H

5.2.13 Involvement with other departments

Key finding: Working with or across other departments, taking an interdisciplinary approach, was not the norm, although some respondents gave specific examples. There was no structured approach to networking; contacts depended on the individual.

Exceptions: As shown in the table below there were various degrees of cross-departmental work ranging from specific joint projects to being involved in working groups stemming from the local authority's approach to providing services.

Table 5.1: Involvement with other departments

Department	Project / [Respondent]
Economic Development	Web site [G]
Education	Poets in residence scheme [E], services for schools [E, G], parent information points in libraries [P], child care information service [U]
Environment	GIS software [R]
Planning	Mobile library route software [M]
Planning and Architecture	Census data [K]
Planning and Transportation	Census/community data [P]
Performance and Monitoring	Residents survey [N]
Social Services	[G, P, S], Community information strategy [R]

Working with other departments tended to occur on an ad hoc basis or "at the sharp end"^L:

... we would tend to involve other departments as and when we thought they would be useful to us [and vice versa]. Libraries has always got something to contribute! Like all Libraries departments we are keen to make sure that we are not left out from the big battalions like Education and Social Services make a move, but for the bulk of the research that has been done it has been done solely within Libraries.^M

Some library services were quite self-contained:

It would be nice to say yes [there is involvement] but the reality is that departments are quite isolationist and we don't talk to each other. In the library service we would like to widen the scope but there is very little cross-departmental work ... We have no ideological hang up about it, but the reality is that we don't do it.^L

Another respondent felt that, regarding cross-departmental working, while there was "a lot more so than in the past" there was "not as much as there should be" and explained: "people are still jealous of their areas, of what were traditionally their empires, and you are almost trying to work against the tide."^P Another said "there's a wish to work corporately in the department, in the county, but there's a lack of resources to do that in a thorough way."^M On a more positive note one respondent worked in a local authority where:

... there is a commitment to break down departmental barriers - we have done away with departments now, we have clusters, and the council is encouraging groups to look more strategically and to think of the wider picture not just their own bit.

And another described how:

All through my career the interdisciplinary approach is one I've fostered ... where you start from the issue and bring in whatever professional skills you have ...^G

5.2.14 Research culture

Key finding: Research culture was influenced by factors such as the approach of the Chief Executive and leadership from senior library management.

Each public library service was provided by a local authority. There were differences between the services in terms of position within the local authority's structure, funding, staffing, and so on. However there were also cultural differences in terms of how 'research-friendly' they were. Corporate culture can be thought of as the existence of a shared value set amongst employees. Fenwick⁵ elaborates on this point by saying that the culture of an authority could be defined by factors such as whether there is an openness to the results of research, or a relatively closed system of policy-making or whether the consumer is part of policy review and so on. Articulating culture, and particularly research culture, was difficult for the respondents as was anticipated, given both Cooke's discussion of quality, culture and local government⁶, and Boddy and Snape's findings that nine out of ten local authorities do not have a planned research programme for the authority as a whole⁷. The topic is only discussed here at the level of the comments made by the respondents as a fuller consideration of research culture lies outside of the purpose of this thesis. There were vague statements such as "there is a culture of recognising the value of research within the new Borough Council ... but I don't really have ... too many specific examples to quote to you."^D In trying to explain how research activities in Libraries fitted in with the rest of the council's activities one respondent in a new unitary local authority identified the shared goal as being pushed "to know what our business is"^S before moving on to researching operational issues. Others described the corporate ethos in terms of accountability: "undoubtedly over the last decade or so, quite rightly, services have not been able to get away with a couple of lines saying this is what we want to do."^G In contrast this respondent complained:

We've done research on particular problems but research as a necessary integral activity for developing services within the local authority is not present here. It has been in others I've worked for... that had cultures oriented to community focus and investment so that when opportunities arose they could be taken.^P

Five respondents spoke more confidently about the research approach in their local authority. For example, one said "it is pretty well embedded in all of our Department .. the wider Department perhaps slightly less so and then it will vary across the county council"^R; another described how research was "very central" to the local authority explaining how consultants had been brought in to develop "a position statement as to where the local authority should be in five years time" so that "we are acutely aware that in making decisions about what sort of local authority we are ..."^G One respondent noted the value of stability: "It's a very stable local authority in lots of ways and although we are doing exciting things it is

only because we have a stable base.”^H Another respondent described how the council was working at “changing some of the culture that exists within the council” and described “leading edge” consultative meetings with local people regarding regeneration money. He explained:

... the terminology [research culture] is not something that I'm familiar with ... but there's a lot of consultation taking place ... there's a culture within the council to set up mechanisms to do that ... officers, managers, get together alongside the public and community representatives ... the meetings are carefully facilitated ...^T

Another respondent spoke of his involvement in a cross-departmental working group that generated a lot of research activity, noting “you need to have things like that to be creative, there are times when you just have to sit around a table and bounce ideas around.”^L Four respondents^{A, B, O, S} referred to the positive influence of the Chief Executive as an individual in developing a research approach, for example: “the Chief Executive is very keen on research and empowers people to do things, so I think the lead comes from him”^A and “we got a new Chief with re-organisation and he came from Birmingham, big city, big resources, but they knew everything about everything, whereas here it was not our ethos.”^S

5.2.15 Local authority context

Key finding: Advice and support is available within the local authority but its source, level, access, and the degree of communication between the relevant units and the library services, varied greatly between local authorities.

On the whole, at the level in the hierarchy of the respondents interviewed, surprisingly few knew whether or not their local authority had what could be termed a ‘corporate research unit.’ The new unitary authorities each had access, on a commissioning basis, to a Joint Strategy Unit that had previously been the county’s research and investigation unit^{E, J, O, S} although there was some doubt as for how long this arrangement would continue and what would happen to all of the computerised data (population statistics, economic data, etc.) given that each new unitary local authority was having to develop its own computer system. This new routine was very different from the previous one “when it was your slot you had things done”^H, or where “there came a point, either because your needs were so great, or simply that you had reached the front of the queue, that you had your work done.”^J Otherwise arrangements varied greatly. One respondent from a large county authority said there was “no central policy unit at all”^P although he could get raw data from a Planning Department, as did others^{M, U}. In three library services^{E, F, Q} the respondents could make a bid to the Corporate Policy/Information Unit to undertake research. These units also took on a co-ordinating role: “when they are doing surveys for a specific department they look to see if there are other elements or departments they ought to be including in that survey.”^Q

Some respondents utilised the expertise within the Chief Executive’s Department in terms of “the policy and planning people”^L or “Performance and Monitoring.”^N In the case of one local

authority^L the Chief Executive's office organised cross-departmental working groups to discuss, for example, the biannual residents survey and would also assist with survey work:

My colleague in the Chief Executive's Department rewrote the survey ... they have also got the software. We have to send staff along to input the data but they allow us to use the machines and then do the analysis for us and produce the graphs ...^L

The level of assistance varied. One respondent noted "Strategy and Planning provide us with expertise and support"^K, whilst another found that "Policy Services are supportive in but resource-wise they are stretched, so they give advice but there's no staffing to spare."^T Economic Development Units were mentioned by some respondents^{G, R, T}, particularly as a source of advice on bidding to Europe.^M One respondent queried the terminology "there is Corporate Policy but I don't think any of the officers are styled 'research officers' but there are policy analysts and I think there's a strong research element in the work they do ..."^H

Four respondents^{F, K, R, S} had access to research skills within the wider Department in which Libraries was based. This could vary from an individual, "she is our expert advisor and her unit will collate some of our data for us - they have more sophisticated packages ..."^K, to a Development Team: "they don't just work for libraries but they are librarians. When we were restructured that team was put together because we didn't want to make people redundant."^R Another had access to a small general departmental research section, "I think we'd be lost without them as librarians tend not to have research expertise ..."^F, as well as a larger research section within the Chief Executive's Department.

Otherwise contacts were ad hoc. Respondents spoke of "pockets of expertise all over the local authority"^O, for example, "there is a lot of expertise within the council on sample sizes."^H Another identified the single individual who comprised the survey team^C as being a useful contact. In another local authority there was a newly set up group, a research policy team, within Education and Community Services: "Quite how that team will find a balance between the proactive and the reactive work is the nub of it."^B One respondent mentioned a bidding team who were "difficult to pin down!" because their role was "exclusively to attract funding for corporate projects [and] Libraries up to now haven't been a part of that."^N

5.2.16 Using research

<p>Key finding: Research results were used to defend management decisions to, or to inform, Committee, and were invariably service-oriented. It was at this level then that political lobbying occurred and respondents could not be certain of being able to influence the political and financial decisions made by members.</p>

Action usually followed the results of research activities, providing that the changes "don't disturb the politicians."^N Sometimes findings from consultation were used to inform a library service's strategy,^T as well as developing services^{J, L}. Less often there was further follow-up research to confirm findings, for example, action research after weekend opening survey^{L, T}. One public library service that had been involved in a research project for blind people

recognised the transferability of their experience and later got involved in a another research project with deaf people.^H Much research formed the basis of committee reports.^{C, K, L} One respondent^B claimed that some survey research had had no impact whatsoever, another that the impact had been very limited: "... [the survey] was quite an interesting exercise and I suppose over the years we have used the results of it but to a certain extent it was 'oh, that's interesting' and it was put to one side."^L

Identifying whether research had been used for developing policy or service was not easy as the respondents themselves could not unravel what could be a complex situation, for example, research may not change policy but it may reinforce it:

The two things go together ... although policy is supposed to come before service development, they often come together and service developments lead you to adjust the policy ... with the two projects we have done we saw a need to expand our service in a particular area and that reflected our policy of widening access ... You obviously learn lessons as you go along and you end up with some type of service development that becomes permanent, sometimes through policy, at the end of it.^M

A distinguishing feature of research in the public library context is that much of it is conducted to inform committee decision-making. The influence of the members is undeniable, with one respondent saying they were "more important than the officers because they dictate policy."^C Political circumstances varied between local authorities as did members' interest in library services, at best "the members are very interested in libraries and very keen to see what is going on"^J, and at worst, despite being "very heavily member controlled", there was a "complete lack of interest" in libraries.^C There was an expectation that research should be present in committee reports to provide accountability, or, as one respondent put it, "concrete evidence", for example, that the public wanted one set of opening hours against another.^N This was also emphasised by another respondent:

You can't just present them with something saying 'we are doing this', you have to prove that you have taken steps to ensure that that's the area of most importance ... they're quite likely to ask 'what involvement did the community have in this?'^E

However two respondents felt that whilst members expected to be informed they were not necessarily research-oriented:

They wouldn't use the term research, they would use terms like, 'has the chief officer made the case?' One of the difficulties is of perception - sometimes research is seen as being an end in itself ... members want to do things and they would be looking at whether the case has been made for the course of action being recommended.^G

Research is not a word that I use with elected members ... if I was given the choice between using the word research or development then I would always use the word development ... members of the local authority don't regard research as something we can afford to do ... From where I sit research is an element of service development, but I think the connotation that research has for members is that it's something that academics do.^H

Another felt that:

Selling research at the moment to a public library committee is no good. They will pay for a consultant to research a particular issue, but that's usually with an outcome in mind. To say 'we need to know this' and then back it up by investing in research is very difficult. There's a great contrast with the private sector where R&D ... is the part that is protected most.^P

The degree to which research findings were used by the members was also questioned raising a dilemma for this respondent:

On the one hand Committee require research to support cases. On the other hand I don't think it's always digested in its entirety ... there was probably a five or six page report with a lot of facts and figures in it but I don't think the majority of members would read all of the way through that. But they would gain an overall impression and the conclusions at the end would get a validity.^M

Taking into consideration the comments made by other respondents it would appear that such a dilemma is difficult to resolve. Some respondents spoke of members' stubbornness in refusing to accept valid research findings: "it's a not-in-my-backyard thing and even when you can prove the complete failure of a library because of demographic changes they won't accept it."^N Another respondent described how a survey had to be repeated because "some of the answers the members didn't like."^S Another bemoaned their limited views: "All our members are interested in is the region... if we set new charges the first question asked is 'what do they charge in the rest?', so all committee reports tend to be written in comparison to other local library services."^C One respondent spoke of the dilemma of reconciling findings from focus groups and members views:

... elected members are voted in to represent local people ... whatever group you put together lacks authority to speak on behalf of the public at large ... If the focus group says 'we want this' and the Libraries Committee says 'we don't want that', who would you go with? Now you might say 'you should go with the focus panel' because they are real people ... but does that mean that their opinions should carry more weight to develop the service when you have actually gone through the full procedure to come up with this other set of people to speak on behalf of the public at large?^H

Another felt that the library service was at a disadvantage because:

... the Chief Librarian does not see the members as often as he would like ... Sometimes the Head of Leisure will take a report, and you lose influence because of that. Even though he's amenable to libraries his background is contracting and administration so he has a different approach ... he tends to look at things from an income generation point of view, so there have been differences of opinion about charging, for example.^C

One respondent felt that the impact that research could have was inevitably limited raising the dilemma that:

On the one hand we can advise and prepare facts. On the other hand at the end of the day, many decisions, particularly in relation to budget, are political decisions and whilst we can advise and prepare the facts they aren't always taken on board.^B

One consequence of this situation, as another respondent noted, is that one needs a strategy in using research findings to influence policy decisions: "it tends to be not one killing blow, but it's making a lot of opportunities to drip-feed the information to them."^R

5.2.17 Impact of research

Key finding: Research had an impact on service but only a limited impact on policy. Respondents did not initiate research into policy, except at a superficial level.

Because research is undertaken to inform management and ultimately committee decision-making it does impact on service development. One respondent said “it always feeds into service development, in a whole stack of ways”^R, however another added that “some of them are quite low key.”^K Service development may be research-driven in some library services but it does tend to be small scale:

I find the edges blur as to what is policy and what is service delivery ... In the service delivery end you have got customer comments ... a long way down in the hierarchy of research but it's something somebody has told us that they would like to see done ... it's small scale research but probably quite important.^Q

Another respondent commented:

... that project will help our IT strategy over the next few years. It's shown us very practically what can be done in terms of public access to electronic information, and given us experience, in terms of carrying out projects and getting funding.^U

To give some examples, one library service introduced a new service, videos, even though “there was no indication before we did the survey that that was a high public priority because there were video shops everywhere” because the research found that “people wanted to use them for things they couldn't get from video shops.”^P Another introduced graphic novels^K. Several library services extended or changed their opening hours^{A, K, L, N, P} One changed their provision for teenagers.^L Others improved services by following up comments from user surveys^K and comments forms^{J, Q}, regarding, for example, stock^{E, N} and promotional work^E. Other changes to service provision included incorporating toilets into a new library building^{B, Q}, developing a homework centre^T, changing fines^{K, P}, and producing book lists^Q. Another respondent described how what was originally a service offered via an externally funded research project had become part of mainstream library services and was now “entirely funded through mainline budget.”^H Finally, it is worth remembering, as one respondent pointed out, that “research does not necessarily lead to development.”^G In this case an evaluation of library services to small communities resulted in the closure of 24 library points.

Research seems to have little impact on broader policy considerations. This is not surprisingly given the nature of the research and the fact that it did tend to be more relevant to service than policy, and hence it was easier to discern the impact on service rather than policy^N, as illustrated in the following comments:

I tend to feel ... that most of it is relevant to service rather than policy ... we do tend to be better at taking it on board in the service delivery than we are on the policy side. I think we do take notice of what surveys say at the sharp end and we try and develop services according to that.^Q

... how much it feeds into policy is slightly more difficult, it does tend to feed in more at a nitty-gritty 'how do we make some quick improvements to service' level.^R

Only one respondent, in a new unitary local authority was clearly expecting research to influence policy: "... the driving force behind our research is to know our business ... we're really starting from scratch and the operational issues will come later."^S Another respondent was hoping that "the results of that [research project] will inform policy for the future" with regard to a particular service.^A The situation was different in established library services:

The other way research has influenced the system is that it has allowed us to test things out. I don't think the policy is usually quite clear ... but research allows you to test out options to see ... whether indeed something is of benefit to your readers, whether your initial assumptions are correct.^M

Whilst one respondent maintained "the results of the research programme can, should, and do, lead to specific programmes of action that can also influence changes in culture and policy"^K, and another insisted "it feeds directly into policy development because without that research we would be making decisions that had no foundation"^S, yet another was more wary: "I don't think the research has led us to modify the overall purpose of the policy or the aims, but I think it has reinforced those"^M, and went on to add:

I think the research reinforces and modifies the particular policy objectives within that overall aim that you are working in. But it hasn't up to now modified the overall philosophy that we have got. You can set out to prove anything by research and I'm sure if somebody came along with a different view of libraries ... you could devise a research programme that would justify that. Research is very subjective.^M

Specific examples of the impact of research on policy were limited in scope and number.

One respondent noted "we can identify customer concerns through user profiling activity ... that can lead to changes in policy and direct action" and gave an example of the provision of women-only desks^K. Others spoke about changes to book buying/selection procedures.^{E, J}

Three other respondents gave examples of how research findings that led to service developments were also used to influence policy, firstly:

Regarding policy, the main thing to establish is the two key areas that consistently come through on the surveys: that our customers want more new books and longer opening hours ... We try and triangulate these particular needs so that they are fed into the policies that our committee have, thus ensuring that their focus will be on protecting or enhancing the book fund and seeking to embed these particular problems in the council's 'Fair Deal' campaign.^R

Secondly, regarding the impact of developing services for blind people, via a research project:

There was a small group of people for whom this was a service that we should have been developing and not just for policy reasons. In other words we have a duty to service everybody in the area ... that was something that we did not have to have a big debate about but it was never expressed in policy terms ... until we brought in that service for the blind.^H

Thirdly, regarding the provision of services to children and schools:

The research made recommendations that including service merging. So to some extent that was one [project] where there has actually been something fed into policy. We have subsequently gone down the road of integrating the two services.^Q

One problem in using research findings to influence and shape policy was that was that “we’ve never set up a piece of work to say we want to look at this in policy terms.”^L Another was that “policy development is more difficult to get a handle on”^L, for example:

Policy is driven by a lot of things and research is just a small trickle ... the direction of the council, the amount of funding ... professional developments ... Government messages as well ... So this piece of research ... is quite a small voice against a much larger voice from elsewhere.^L

The complexity of policy development was clearly an issue. One respondent described the lengthy process of “informed debate and discussion” combined with the “intuitive element” regarding policy development in his local authority and concluded that “policy in part is formed by service research findings but also by intuition.”^G Returning to the example of developing services for blind people, the respondent reflected:

That [project] helped the council to put some substance to the fine words of equal opportunities. It’s not that we came up with a radical new policy but that the work enabled us to clarify and substantiate policy with actions and I suppose that is the point for me about all of this research: in a public library context you cannot engage in pure research, any research that we do always has to be done on the basis that we can sustain it in the real world with a real service development ...^H

5.2.18 Added value of research

Key finding: Respondents had evidence showing the added value of taking a research approach.

Exceptions: This finding reflects the views of all but one respondent, B, to a lesser or greater extent.

Whilst respondents found it hard to talk about impact of research on policy there was a greater awareness of the added value of doing research. Often staff involved in projects, particularly funded projects, retained a lot of expertise.^Q One respondent described how research could be used to aid him as a manager:

... it will give us the evidence and the management information that we need to make decisions about making improvements. It’s no good me saying to staff ‘I don’t think you’re very good at this but I can’t prove it’; unobtrusive testing will prove that and I can suggest resources or training to help them improve ..^K

The main benefit of research was that research provided accountability: “I think the more information you have got the more power you have got in terms of justifying the library service.”^E Research findings were “incredibly useful politically.”^L One respondent said “we are looking for research that provides information that can be used as a political tool.”^R Another noted that research “makes the case for making a decision about service development, but equally, if you want to stop doing something you need that body of evidence to support it.”^G Another described how the data from CIPFA’s PLUS survey package as a “dream come true” that “produced “genuine findings” to take to the politicians instead of working “very much on hunches.”^N Yet another valued research “for producing

committee reports, it helps with getting the message across when there are threats of budget cuts ...”^K One respondent was particularly pleased with the findings from a non-user survey:

... it shows that the issues aren't the holy grail ... and that is an important message that we have to tell politicians. We, like everybody else, are suffering from declining issues but what we have to tell them is that that is not to say that the role of the public library is declining but that we have a different role.^L

Respondents described how research verified actions by being able to get away from the “anecdotal” and enabled them to “challenge a lot of givens”^{E, S} and to demonstrate the mass they are working with:

[When] the councillors have said ‘the last thing we want to do is shut a library or reduce the hours’ that was not because they were swayed by my eloquent prose but because they are aware that it is the voters who are telling them this and that information has come through from our research.^R

Other respondents pointed out how research enabled them to ‘keep their eyes on the prize’:

... we have reached a point now where we have to prove our worth in a way in which we did not have to in the past ... not because you're not providing a good quality service but because you are not in touch with what actually the service needs to be doing and providing.^J

New information services might be booming but issues are dropping so we have to look at what we do, how we are doing it, and what the market place wants, and the only way we can do that is by research ...^A

As well as providing useful results one respondent noted that “... there is a certain amount of kudos in doing it.”^L Involvement in larger bids, even if they are not successful, often paved the way for smaller successful bids^T and raised the stature of the library service within the local authority:

There is a recognition that the work that's happening in libraries can support the wider ambitions of the council around the creation of what they call neighbourhood resources centres.^T

Another consequence of the work we've been doing is that we're now leading the production of the council's Intranet and we've got a place on the council's information strategy group. Maybe a few years ago that wouldn't have been the case, but I think that's a reflection of the change in feeling towards public libraries.^T

Other respondents^{Q, U} recognised that being involved in research activity could raise their profile. One noted how “... the library service does have a reputation for pioneering work in IT.”^H Another described the benefits of leading the council's Gateway to Information project:

It certainly raised our profile and we are very keen to maintain control of it within the department ... and make other officers better aware of the kind of services we provide. Pushing the fact that we are not just about romances for little old ladies, we are about providing information ... it makes us less expendable in the budget cuts ...^J

One respondent concluded:

Taking the financial situation aside I think there has been an awful lot of value in doing it ... It does encourage you to look beyond libraries ... There's a fair amount of work being done on building a vision for public library services at national level, but at a local level too it's all about defining and advancing our roles within the local authority and hanging on to what we have and encouraging other agencies to help us to develop services.^T

Another spoke of the process as being almost an act of faith:

Sometimes it is difficult to show exactly why you are doing something when there are no immediate benefits and it goes against you sometimes when there are people who are keen to criticise. And there are problems that you come up against because you didn't know exactly what the outcomes would be. I'm not saying that we are throwing money away but we are certainly putting in a lot of resources in kind, in staff time, to support work. But overall it is fairly positive.^U

5.2.19 Dissemination

Key finding: Respondents did not make the best use of their research findings. There was a lack of expertise in dissemination, there was no time to disseminate results and hence little opportunity to build up of a base of knowledge.

Exceptions: This finding confirmed by the lack of published literature relating to the public library services in the sample. There were three exceptions: K, L and R.

Dissemination activities varied. One respondent described how work was written up "for a number of audiences, library managers, committee ..."^L At the other end of the scale :

You write it up if there is a need to write it up ... You need to write it up if you need to justify resources or to get a decision out of somebody else. We haven't got time to write things up for the sake of it.^M

On the whole, for much of the research conducted in the library services visited, it was a case that "when it's served its immediate purpose it does tend to get lost in committee papers or internal documents."^M As well as losing research through not writing up projects there was also a loss through the failure to make best use of results internally. One respondent described how the findings from two PLDIS projects had been 'lost' because "We were wrapping up the projects at a time when we were looking at staffing and cuts and the intention to hold seminars around the county fell through ..."^Q Another respondent had found that where a Department had paid for some research it was reluctant to share results with other sections of the council.^C

5.2.20 Relevance

Key finding: Respondents questioned the relevance of the research approach given the need for alignment to match funders needs, the time to apply for funding, the influence of the Committee, and the predominance of 'the bottom line'.

Exceptions: The exceptions, K and R, were those authorities that took a planned approach to research.

Respondents were clearly aware of differing agendas: when resources are aimed towards the objectives of the public library service or the local authority "very often they don't line up"^P with the aims of research activities or those of potential funders. One respondent spoke of a dilemma in that:

There's a tension trying to do research that will support you in doing what you want to do ... but at the same time not disassociating yourself by being confrontational from the money.^Q

Another respondent explained how he tackled such a problem:

I guess a lot of my time is spent aligning some of the things we are doing with things other agencies are doing to build partnerships and to demonstrate where benefits might be made to agencies as well as to ourselves.^T

The prevailing local authority context could also be a limiting factor. One respondent noted “there are things that interest me deeply ... that I couldn’t defend to my local authority spending a lot of time on research ...”^S Others were reluctant to get involved in research projects that could not be sustained by the library service or the local authority.^{B, C} Others were keen in principle to work with other library services but found collective activity difficult “because there is a different political agenda in every local authority.”^P

One respondent spoke generally of the image of public library research as “something that’s rather abstract, not quite irrelevant, but not central to people’s lives.”^G Others were careful to “try and make sure that there is a realism in the research. When we are looking at a potential choice for sites for a new library we are very careful not to give people false expectations.”^R Even where a research approach was favoured respondents were conscious of the pitfalls including opportunities for bias^{B, C} whether they were researching the right issues^{C, S}, problems of “being blown off course by both a lack of time and finance”^M, problems in communication and co-ordination with other staff^C, difficulties in maintaining projects after the period of external funding has stopped^B and lack of time for planning.^C

One respondent queried the relevance of wider research to his local authority, noting the dilemma that:

Whilst the council is happy for me to be involved with the Society of Chief Librarians and Library and Information Commission ... if they ever got the impression that I was never here when I was needed they would soon lose patience ... the council tries very hard to make sure that we are not doing things that don’t have a clear benefit to local people.”^H

Such a comment illustrates the traditional view of the public library service as a local authority service first and foremost rather than an element of a national network. Another respondent questioned the value of local versus national networking projects feeling that, in retrospect “if we were to do it again we’d get involved with developing a project with other West Midlands library services”^U rather than getting involved in a national project. This theme was echoed by another respondent who gave the similar reasons for being “very borough oriented” and “a little parochial” in terms of research activity.^O Time and time again the bottom-line was emphasised:

The purchasing power of the book fund has been reduced by 41% in the last five years. In that context it takes a heck of thing to say ‘I want to invest in research activity’ when I can’t put books on the shelves...^P

5.3 Discussion: Setting the analysis within the literature and wider local authority context

Although the fieldwork did not aim to replicate the work of other studies much of the analysis adds weight to the results of earlier reviews of public library research activity. As these were considered in some detail in Chapter Three only a few examples are given here. The generally pragmatic approach to research activities and topics matches that found by Stewart⁸ and more recently by Pluse and Prytherch⁹; the lack of staff either wholly or partially dedicated to research confirms the work of Pluse and Prytherch¹⁰; the limited approach to research methods fits in with Stewart's comments on research questions and methods¹¹; and the lack of expertise in writing bids and dissemination is documented by Goulding¹².

Furthermore the analysis validates the selection of the five problematic themes identified in Chapter Three. The lack of leadership and co-ordination at a local level is confirmed by, for example, the finding that there was unlikely to be a strategic approach to research activity as presented in, say, a research strategy document. Indeed there was little evidence of research management in the public library services in terms of planning and funding and so it would appear that the leadership and coherence evident at the top of the profession, and at the top of some local authorities, has not yet filtered down to individual public library services. As for agenda-setting, in practice research topics related to the needs of individual public library services and local authorities; there was little sense of drawing from, or contributing to, a national agenda. The purpose of research for public library services was to feed into management and committee decision-making; research was thus service-led and concerned with accountability at a local level. Regarding funding, within public library services the lack of a specific budget was a key problem although as shown by the data gathered in the national survey of research in local authorities this was not a problem peculiar to the public library service. Above all the analysis shows the poverty of practitioner research skills. Staff lacked training and time to do research. The role of the practitioner-researcher is not recognised nor valued and it is acceptable for research to be carried out by 'enthusiastic amateurs' and students. A related problem concerns research methods. Experience of research methodology was limited, other than action-based or user-oriented methods. Respondents wanted straightforward methods providing accountable results.

The analysis can also be used to place the picture of research activities in public libraries within the context of research in local authorities. It is possible to argue that the picture given above of research activities in public libraries is a microcosm of the research situation in local authorities as a whole. Findings such as the practical definitions and use of research, the varied structures and limited funds for research, the lack of a planned research programme and what, in retrospect, can only be described as the influence of 'research champions' in enabling a research approach, were all present in the national survey of research activities in local authorities described in Chapter Two. To give some specific

examples, Boddy and Snape found that most people in their sample appeared to rely upon an intuitive understanding of what they considered to be 'research' and that definitions of research were envisaged as a spectrum with, at one end, a core of narrowly defined research activities often thought of as academic research, and at the other, activities which were less obviously research as such¹³. Academic definitions were seen as incongruous with the research needs of local authorities and, as with the respondents from the public library services, Boddy and Snape's interviewees often used terms like 'practical' and 'applied' to distinguish their research from what was perceived to be theoretical or academic research; indeed they too did not always see themselves as being involved in research¹⁴.

In terms of practical organisation the national survey showed that the most common approach was one where research activities were decentralised to departments, but with some activities carried out centrally. The national study also found that connections between local authority research units and individual departments were, on the whole, not well established and this was confirmed by the comments from many of the respondents in public libraries about their relationships with central research units, although it must be noted that some public library respondents did have good links to a central unit. Funding too tended to have a departmental rather than central focus. Whilst most authorities used more than one source of funding for research activities, including central, departmental and external funds 84% of the sample funded research out of general departmental funds and 38% of the sample funded research from only general departmental funds and had no access to central funding or to dedicated research funds¹⁵. Again, this would suggest that the responses from the public library services were not unrepresentative of local authorities as a whole; also that the apparently low level of spending - only one library service had a designated budget (£13,000) - is not unusual given that one in five of Boddy and Snape's sample of local authorities estimated that their total expenditure on research amounted to less than £25,000 per year and almost two thirds estimated their expenditure to be less than £100,000¹⁶.

Only very few local authorities, 7% of Boddy and Snape's sample of 253 local authorities, had a planned research programme for the authority as a whole; there was a higher degree of planning at departmental level with about two-thirds of the sample having planned research programmes and it is suggested that "this probably reflects the fact that research is organised largely on departmental lines and that research programmes are similarly geared to that level."¹⁷ The findings from the study of public library services appear to confirm this situation. Boddy and Snape's case studies showed that research culture and practice change over time and the strength of commitment to research is linked to its demonstrated worth and utility to key personnel and we can also discern this in the sample of public library services. For example, those respondents from services that were most research-oriented spoke of the leadership they had from 'research champions' such as senior library management or the Chief Executive, and the usefulness of research as a 'management tool' for informed

decision-making. At the same time it was evident that research activity could wax and wane in the public library services depending on the presence or not of such research experts.

Boddy and Snape's national survey is very detailed and the above comparisons simply serve to illustrate that research activities in the public library service encompass many of the features of research activities in local authorities as a whole. What is surprising, perhaps, is that many of the weaknesses encountered at individual service level, such as a lack of co-operation and dedicated funding, are present at local authority level and this raises questions about the impact of any research activities and the underpinning of corporate planning with strategic research. Of particular importance then are those findings dealing with the contribution and impact of public library research. It is interesting to see that where respondents were asked, for example, about the impact of research, their answers, at best, focused on their contribution to wider council policies rather than their involvement in the creation of such policies. The analysis identifies that research had an impact on service provision - often at the "nitty-gritty 'how do we make some quick improvements to service' level"^R - but had only a limited impact on policy development which was "more difficult to get a handle on"^L. There were a few examples of 'best practice' where the library service's research strategy was linked to, or derived from a corporate strategy:

... the strategic context for any research activity [is] ... our local governing party policies ... they produce a policy framework document for us that sets key objectives. For example, improving the quality of life, securing the city's future, tackling inequality ... These broad but key things apply to all services and everyone is expected to get involved in them ... in the case of libraries we can chip in to most, if not all, of those themes.^K

Such an approach certainly ensures that the research conducted by the library service is relevant to the local authority, but even so the impact on policy development appeared to be minimal. There were few examples of research conducted by the library service influencing say the creation or development of local authority policy. At best research enabled library services to "clarify and substantiate policy with actions"^H. During the interviews the practitioners found it difficult to engage in such debates and so the fieldwork produced little evidence that the public library services had a strategic emphasis to their research activity. Few respondents had enough experience to speak about the contribution of research to policy. Good practice in this matter seemed to occur where there was a strategic approach to research and where the library service's research strategy was linked to corporate strategy. The respondents which best demonstrated this approach, K and R, tended to be the exceptional cases throughout the analysis. It is interesting to see that the responses from these library managers differed from the findings for the rest of the sample for the same eight issues. Respondents K and R were exceptional in that they both had:

- very positive first impressions of research activities and the contribution they could make
- a view of themselves as being involved in research activities from the onset of the interview
- actively managed their research activities in terms of staffing, budget, and support
- staff who had more knowledge of research than was usual and time to conduct research
- some understanding of research methodology
- experience of working on research projects with other departments and agencies
- made some attempt to disseminate research findings either internally and/or externally
- no obvious difficulties regarding the relevance of using a research approach

This listing of features conducive to research in public library services is obviously exploratory in that it is based on such a small sample. As it stands it identifies a set of features which may have a positive influence on practitioner-research. Issues such as whether they are applicable to other public library services or the local authority as a whole, whether each is of equal influence or whether it is the interplay between them and so on are certainly worthy of further study but this is beyond the scope of the fieldwork for this thesis.

The comments made by public library respondents regarding the impact on policy show that it is difficult to distinguish clearly between different but related tasks where one activity feeds directly into another. Research may feed directly into policy development or into review and modification of practices. For example, simple monitoring may evolve into a more detailed analysis and subsequently feed into an established policy or pave the way for new policy. In terms of local authority respondents Boddy and Snape found that the overall picture is that research is thought, in the majority of cases, to contribute to policy-making and that its impact has increased in recent years¹⁸. Their case studies examined the impact of research in more detail and identified a variety of ways in which research contributes to greater effectiveness. The contributions included basic information, socio-economic patterns and trends, monitoring and analysis of internal management practices. stock-taking exercises, analysis of service delivery, market research, strategic development (i.e., best practices, pilot studies), analysis and forecasting of future market conditions, resource maximisation and allocation, and evaluation and impact studies. Examples of all of these contributions can be found in the study of the public library services but the respondents did not always perceive the contribution of their research in these terms. Thus the fieldwork is important in drawing attention to this gap between the research that is carried out by practitioners in public library services and its contribution and impact.

At this point, to further set the analysis within the literature, it is useful to apply a framework for identifying the different kinds of research that the public library service may be involved with, and the use to which that research may be put. Regarding the use of research the analysis revealed a defining feature of public library research to be its use to defend management decisions and inform elected members. Any strategic influence was played down as respondents could not be certain of being able to influence the decisions made by members; as one said, "at the end of the day, many decisions, particularly in relation to

budget, are political decisions and whilst we can advise and prepare the facts they aren't always taken on board." Furthermore in the fieldwork the link between policy and research was not clear for many respondents; if anything there was a tendency to see it as being determined by the policy framework, rather than to inform the framework, as indicated by research projects such as that on charges for overdue items "commissioned in the context of the Anti-Poverty Strategy of [the] Council ... to ensure that any policies implemented do not exacerbate the problems of poverty and low pay."¹⁹ We can recall that in the literature review Comedia questioned the outcome of this lack of strategic policy making in the public library service:

The absence of clearly defined policy can be a mixed blessing. On the one hand it allows librarians to get on with their work and can provide a smokescreen behind which all sorts of initiatives ... can be developed and tested. On the other hand, lack of policy contributes to the invisibility and marginalisation of the service. A policy vacuum cannot last, and the growing preoccupation with performance indicators ... may threaten to displace the policy development in libraries.²⁰

To impose some order on the diversity of public library research discussed by respondents we can adopt Bulmer's²¹ classification of kinds of applied social research in a local authority context. Research is classified by type ranging from straightforward data collection, to interpretation and understanding of the facts in some kind of broader framework, to causal analysis. Research can also be classified in terms of its purpose, for example, 'intelligence and monitoring' using census data; 'strategic analysis' which is more wide-ranging and illuminates a problem in such a way as to permit action to be taken; and 'scientific control', say using economic modelling, to predict the effects of changes. The adaptation of Bulmer's matrix identifies six types of influence and these are discussed below:

Table 5.2 Types of research and their purpose in local authorities/public library services

Purpose of research → Type of analysis ↓	Intelligence / monitoring	Strategic analysis	Scientific control
Production of data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> authoritative facts e.g. annual statistics 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> political ammunition e.g. strategic reviews (see Chapter Three, 3.4.1)
Interpretation and understanding		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>conceptualisation</i> <i>interaction</i> 	
Causal analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> tactical research e.g. OAL management tools (see Chapter Two, 2.8.2) 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> action / evaluative research e.g. The Effective Library (see Chapter Two, 2.7.4)

Source: Bulmer, M. *The uses of social research: social investigation in policy making*. Allen and Unwin, 1982, (Contemporary Social Research Series; 3).

Research to produce data may simply be research to produce reliable and valid quantitative evidence, authoritative facts, on the basis of which policy-makers can reach decisions. Such data are supposed to be politically neutral. A different though related view of the research to produce data is to see it as providing data which will enable a degree of scientific control of a

problem to be achieved. At a simple level, using such findings as political ammunition recognises that policy is formulated within a political system in which there are contending interests and that 'objective' research can provide evidence which will enable those pursuing particular policies to give them some scientific respectability. Authoritative facts extend knowledge; political ammunition reinforces attitudes and beliefs.

As far as causal analysis is concerned, the results of tactical research are designed to solve practical operational problems faced by policy makers. The sorts of issues tackled in-house are frequently of a tactical kind, concerned with a particular client group, or an administrative problem. Such tactical research differs from the production of authoritative facts in that it embodies an analytic framework and an attempt to analyse the causes of (narrowly delimited) phenomena to make recommendations for intervention. Furthermore, the objectives of tactical research tend towards intelligence and monitoring rather than scientific control: such research is useful but not earth-shattering. In contrast, the aims and claims of action research or evaluative research are much greater. The use of a rigorous research design, precise measurements, and a controlled environment make it similar to the classic experiment. Public library research projects have made contributions in all of these areas to a lesser or greater extent.

There are two other types of influence that research can have, the first of which may be termed interaction. Its main characteristic is a broadly strategic purpose and it ranges across all of the different types of analyses. Seeing research as interaction focuses primarily upon the political and social context in which research is used. For example, those engaged in making policy draw upon many sources of information, advice and experience and research is inevitably only one element in a complicated process. The final result is determined by the interplay of all of these elements. This does not mean that the role of research is limited; the role depends upon what research can contribute. In the words of one respondent:

Policy is driven by lots of things and research is just a small trickle ... the direction of the council, the amount of funding ... professional developments ... central government messages as well ...^L

An alternative view, conceptualisation, presents research as a tool of interpretation and understanding for strategic analysis. Here research provides a way of looking at, defining and approaching problems, even though this process may not be recognised as such by policy makers. Finch, in her discussion of the ways in which politicians and administrators actually use research findings, argues that it is unrealistic to expect policy makers to make direct use of research - several of the reasons were mentioned in Chapter Two - but suggests that the indirect influence on policy of research, through providing new conceptualisations, is highly relevant in, for example, "showing how much change actually occurs in practice; identifying the unintended consequences of policy initiatives; exposing the contradictions in policy which are apparent when it is established."²² One such example can be found in

Linley and Usherwood's social audit which identified "unintended disbenefits"²³ that can sometimes result from social objectives; another in the words of one of the respondents:

That project helped the council to put some substance to the fine words of equal opportunities. It's not so much that we came up with a radical new policy but that the work enabled us to clarify and substantiate policy with actions ...^H

It is within these last two modes of influence, interaction and conceptualisation, that research is most likely to be used in policy making. The way in which research is framed and specified therefore needs to be in line with these uses if it is to influence policy-making. Halloran makes the distinction between policy research, which serves the policy-makers on their terms, and policy-orientated research which addresses the same issues but "externally and independently, and with a view, where appropriate, to question and challenge, and propose alternatives with regard to both means and ends."²⁴ Neither featured strongly in the interviews with public library managers and the analysis tended to support the view that the development of policy is a "drawn-out, complex process, in which research has a part to play but not necessarily one of direct and immediate influence."²⁵ Looking beyond the fieldwork for a moment it can be seen that other services, such as those involved in community safety and housing, are more adept at using research for policy as shown in the conference papers presented at LARIA's annual conference on research for policy²⁶. Only two of the public library managers interviewed during the fieldwork, K and R, were au fait with this policy-based approach. As such they tended to be the exceptions to the rule in the list of the key findings and their comments, for example, in sections 5.2.5 and 5.2.6 are most useful in illustrating best practice. In the future it is likely that a planned, policy-driven approach will become more prevalent with the production of the Annual Library Plan, originally proposed by the *Reading the future*²⁷ report in 1997 and now a requirement of the DCMS. These plans should provide a framework at both local and national level to develop organisational research strategies in line with policy processes.

5.4 Contribution of the analysis of the fieldwork

This discussion has set the analysis of the fieldwork within the context of the public library service and local authority literature and in doing so it has added weight to the earlier debates in Chapters Two and Three. Of particular interest is the discovery that research activities in the public library service encompass many of the features of research activities in local authorities as a whole. Of particular importance is the gap in perception between local authority respondents, as reported by Boddy and Snape, and public library service respondents, as reported in the fieldwork for this thesis, concerning the impact of research and its contribution to policy. At a practical level the fieldwork illustrates the need, for example, for public library staff involved in research to have the appropriate research skills and for the development of staff to appreciate both the need for research and how to use research effectively. These findings in particular answer the 'unresolved issue' raised at the

end of Chapter Three regarding the research skills of practitioners and the implications of poor research skills. Clearly the research skills have not developed at the same rate as other aspects of the research process in the public library service. Indeed one of the most startling limitations to arise from the fieldwork is the apparent lack of influence on policy and this was explored at a theoretical level in the discussion using Bulmer's classification of types of research and their purpose. When the public library service is considered from such a viewpoint then there is clearly work to be done in ensuring that the contribution of the service is made visible and relevant and integrated with corporate plans and policies. It is this aspect of the discussion that determines the direction of the closing chapter.

It has already been proposed in general terms in Chapter Two that the future development of research in the public library service within the local government context will require the rationale of research to be restated, the contribution in transforming information into intelligence to be recognised, and the approach to research methods be reviewed. The analysis of the fieldwork provides a focus for these proposals. If public library research is to achieve an impact at local and national levels then public library managers and practitioner-researchers need to articulate better the issues with which they are confronted so that their research is aligned and integrated with policy aims and processes. Chapter Six then will consider the contribution and impact of public library research, and the implications of developing public library research activities in this way. Taking this approach to advancing the discussion has direct relevance both to issues raised by the fieldwork and of concern to library managers and practitioner-researchers and to the wider aims of the thesis. For example, it will enable consideration of whether adopting a new approach to research could resolve the issue of relevance put forward by some library managers, encourage the interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary approach as advocated by LARIA for all local authority research, or capitalise on the 'added value' that a research approach can offer to public library services; it will also serve to deepen the examination of the relationship between local authorities, public library services and research activities.

¹ Goodall, D. L. A Review Of Public Library Research With Special Reference To Methodology. *Public Library Journal*, May/June, 1996, p. 69-76.

² Goodall, D. L. Public Library Research Methods: Some Comments Based On An Examination Of 41 Final Reports Of PLDIS Projects. *Library and Information Research News*, 21 (68), 1997, p. 25-32.

³ Brittin, D. Public librarians will no longer be research's poor relations. *British Library Research and Innovation Centre Research Bulletin*, 20, Summer 1998, p. 11.

⁴ Boddy, M. and Snape, D. *The role of research in local government: report for the Local Authorities Research and Intelligence Association (LARIA)*. University of Bristol: School for Advanced Urban Studies/Local Authorities Research and Intelligence Association, July 1995, p. 23.

⁵ Fenwick, J. Policy research in local government. *Local Government Policy Making*, 18 (4) March 1992, p. 37.

⁶ Cooke, B. Quality, culture and local government. In: Sanderson, I. (ed.) *Management of quality in local government*. Longman, 1992, p. 142-162.

⁷ Boddy, M. and Snape, D. *op cit*, p. 37.

⁸ Stewart, L. *Public library research: a review of UK investigation between 1978 and 1982*. BLRDD, 1984. (CLAIM Report No. 35), p. 64-65.

⁹ Pluse, J. M. and Prytherch, R. *Research in public libraries: final report of the project on research in Public Libraries*. BLRIC, 1996, (BLRIC Report 8), p. 77-84.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 97-99.

¹¹ Stewart, L., op cit., p. 65.

¹² Goulding, A. Public library research - its future organisation and funding. *Public Library Journal*, 9 (3), 1994, p. 75-77.

¹³ Boddy, M. and Snape, D. op cit., p. 6-10.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 7.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 20.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 20.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 37-38.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 52.

¹⁹ Birmingham Libraries. *Research project into the impact of fines for previously unaffected borrowers*. Birmingham City Council, Department of Leisure and Community Services, November 1995, Introduction.

²⁰ Greenhalgh, L., Landry, K. and Worpole, K. *Borrowed time? The future of public libraries in the UK*. Comedia, June 1993, p.59.

²¹ Bulmer, M. The uses of social research: social investigation in policy making. Allen and Unwin, 1982, (Contemporary Social Research Series; 3), p. 151-176.

²² quoted by Webb, R. *Practitioner research in the primary school*. Falmer, 1990, p. 266. See also Finch, J. *Research and Policy*, Falmer Press, 1986, chapters 7 and 8 for a full discussion of the uses of qualitative research in evaluating existing policies and developing and changing policies.

²³ Linley, R. and Usherwood, B. *New measures for a new library: a social audit of public libraries*. University of Sheffield, Centre for the Public Library in the Information Society, 1998, (BLRIC Report No. 89).

²⁴ Halloran, J. D. Mass communication research: asking the right questions. In: Hansen, A. et al. *Mass communication research methods*. Macmillan, 1998, p. 27.

²⁵ Bulmer, M. op cit., p. 164.

²⁶ Howett, M., Atkinson, A. and Blackman, T. (eds.) *Research for policy: proceedings of the 1994 annual conference of the Local Authorities Research and Intelligence Association*. LARIA, 1994.

²⁷ GREAT BRITAIN. Department of National Heritage. *Reading the future: a review of public libraries in England*. No publisher, February 1997.

CHAPTER SIX

Moving forward with research

6.0 Introduction

In the run up to the General Election in 1997 the Library Association was quick to demonstrate the contribution that libraries could make to society with a library manifesto declaring "Information is the life blood of a democratic society. A democratic, literate and informed society is the basis of a strong, competitive economy."¹ Previously the contribution that the public library service could make at community and national level had been underestimated or in some cases overlooked; for example, in 1993 Comedia had queried how the true value of the public library service was no longer being recognised by those responsible for funding:

While other cultural institutions - theatres, opera houses, concert halls - were regarded as key elements in programmes of urban regeneration in the 1980s, public libraries (usually responsible for generating more city centre activity than all the others) were excluded.²

Immediately following the election the new Government stated that public libraries should "play a full part in shaping this country's future."³ Since the Government took office in May 1997 there have been several developments on the issues raised in the library manifesto, most notably the decision to re-join Unesco and progress on proposals for networking public libraries in the UK. In addition when the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport spoke at the Public Library Authorities conference in September 1997 he outlined the Government's vision of public libraries as "a central plank in the delivery of wider educational, social and economic benefits" and stressed Government's desire to "develop the library service as a platform for delivering wider policy objectives, and the vital principle of local determination that underlies public library provision."⁴ To achieve this Smith proposed the development of an overall national strategy within which local library authorities can operate and "form part of the bedrock of the developing information society."⁵ In practical terms these include the "shared responsibility" of developing Annual Library Plans by library authorities, access to Lottery funding in the shape of the New Opportunities Fund, and funding for IT applications from the joint DCMS-Wolfson Foundation grants; and in closer partnerships between DCMS, the Library Association and the Advisory Council on Libraries.

This is a positive starting point for this chapter which is concerned with the contribution and impact of research. Chapter Two began the consideration of how research feeds into policy development and service delivery in local government and general conclusions were drawn about the relationship between research, policy and practice in local government at the macro and theoretic level. It was proposed that the future development of research in the within the local government context required the rationale of research to be restated, the contribution in transforming information into intelligence to be recognised, and the approach to research methods be reviewed to reflect issues such as equality and experience. At the

specific service level the literature review in Chapter Three provided evidence that the public library service now has the influence and coherence that it lacked in the past to initiate and co-ordinate research activity but it questioned whether current practice could meet current challenges. This was tested by the fieldwork, and the analysis and discussion in Chapter Five led to the specific proposal that if public library research is to achieve an impact at local and national levels then public library managers need to articulate better the issues with which they are confronted so that their research is aligned and integrated with policy. This chapter will explore the case for these two proposals and consider the implications of developing research activities in these ways, both at local authority level and individual service level. There are three broad areas of discussion: firstly the rationale for research in local government will be considered in the context of central Government's new agenda and the concurrent need for changes in organisational structure; secondly the contribution of research will be examined in the light of its ability to demonstrate that the public library service is meeting the demands of this agenda; and thirdly approaches to research, and in particular research methods, will be reviewed to assess their suitability for tackling the issues raised by the new agenda.

6.1 The new agenda

This section identifies the new agenda for central and local government and argues that to tackle its concerns a new approach to organisational structure, and a different view of research⁶ than has been acceptable in previous years, are required. We cannot always predict how and when future changes will happen but it is certain that the pace of change will accelerate. This has profound relevance for local and central government. A society which is changing fast requires systems of government which are also able to change fast if they are to continue to address the public's needs. We live in a society where there is economic restructuring as basic industries decline and new manufacturing and service industries grow, high and continuing rates of unemployment, a growth in the numbers of elderly people and one-parent families, a recognition of the reality of the multi-cultural society, growing environmental concerns, and new divisions within society. Following the general election the Government made it clear that it was committed to renewing society by pursuing a number of key policy areas including regeneration, be it personal, community or economic; environmental sustainability; social inclusion; community safety; public health; lifelong learning and the information society. To execute these plans, as Byrne has argued, the bureaucracy must also be modernised: "all good strategies need an organisation fit to deliver them."⁷ Such a holistic approach requires collaborative relationships to span hierarchies and enable ideas, information and decision-making to be shared. For example, whilst Government departments are structured around narrowly defined categories of need such as 'unemployment', 'starting a business', 'education' and so on then, it has been calculated that young adults need to visit up to eleven different sorts of Government and private agencies to collect all of the help on offer if they want to leave home, seek a job, or enter education⁸.

The appeal of national policies such as Welfare to Work and Lifelong Learning lies in their recognition of the individual as a whole person, rather than as “an unrelated collection of needs, each one of which is to be satisfied separately.”⁹ However, initiatives whereby fragmented and time-consuming procedures are replaced by a convenient, customised and cost-effective system, such as a one-stop shop, require not only a change in thinking but also a change in organisational structure. Even though the new Government’s proposed programmes will “require a degree of policy co-ordination unparalleled since the war because they are so complicated”¹⁰ Byrne nevertheless advocates ‘simple government’, that is, one that appears seamless and is simple to use - this involves taking a strategic approach to addressing problems, imagining government from the citizen’s point of view and finding ways to seize the opportunities enabled by new information and communication technologies:

For the first time, managers are able to horizontally or ‘virtually integrate’ the complex tasks and processes which in a typical bureaucracy were sub-divided and out-sourced to different departments. This rebundling allows execution ‘all at once’ either by automating the process altogether, or by electronically synchronising joint efforts.¹¹

It is unsurprising that the new agenda of change brings with it an understanding of the important role that electronic networking could play in helping to deliver that change, particularly regarding education and lifelong learning, but also at an administrative level. Just as the private sector has used electronic networks to introduce new services, such as telephone banking and loyalty cards, then so too can the Government in, say, allowing licences to be renewed electronically¹². For example, *government.direct*¹³ - an Internet site offering information, guidance, and relevant forms - is part of an Access Business Initiative looking at improving regulatory information and guidance for the business community.

Since the general election, in nearly every area of local government, the traditional view of power and service delivery is being affected by changes in the relationship between local and central government. Local government has been invited to “bury the feuds of the past” and to join central government “in a new partnership for the good of the people we all serve.”¹⁴ The emphasis has shifted to ‘community government’ and ‘better government’ as evidenced by the Government’s signing up to the European Charter of Local Self Governance and the Better Government white paper. The underlying message to local authorities is clear: “If you are unwilling or unable to work to the modern agenda then the Government will have to look to other partners to take on your role.”¹⁵ It is within this context then that we briefly consider the impact of five issues, identified by Corrigan¹⁶, which have risen to the fore for local government: power, democracy, openness, pluralism and consumption.

A shift in the balance of power is evident in Hunt’s argument that local government at all levels needs to better understand the scope and limitations of central government and central government on its part must be provided with information about local conditions and the practical realities of policy implementation at local level. It is recognised that:

The two sides have much to learn from each other. Local government is often less skilled than central government at policy work; a problem exacerbated by the reduction of many local authority policy and research units. Local government has perhaps had more success than central government with cross-departmental co-ordination on major issues.¹⁷

The traditional procedure of civil servants developing policy on behalf of ministers and local government implementing the policies on the ground is no longer useful - instead, "there is an imperative to work jointly to tackle cross boundary issues of social exclusion, the environment and massive social and demographic change."¹⁸

In terms of democracy there is now an emphasis on seeking to involve local people in the way decisions are made about their lives. It is claimed that "new local government recognises that there is a democratic deficit between the town hall and local people which annual elections on their own cannot fulfil"¹⁹. Improving local democracy is a key issue for the Prime Minister as set out in his vision for local government²⁰. His three main challenges are that localities lack a clear sense of direction, there is a lack of coherence and cohesion in delivering local services, and the quality of local services is too variable. To resolve these issues it is proposed that new democratic legitimacy is needed which can be achieved by enhancing voter turnout and lifting public participation; developing new ways of working in terms of committee structures; introducing more openness, for example in terms of performance measures and by bringing in 'Best Value' as a replacement for compulsory competitive tendering; and enabling new powers because local authorities will increasingly need to tackle problems and deliver services in partnership with others. Campbell and Filkin²¹ also report how stronger partnerships between local government and the private sector are being promoted as a means of securing best value. Incidentally, seven library authorities²² are amongst the 37 authorities in England that have been chosen to pilot the 'Best Value' scheme - these authorities do not necessarily signify best practice in local government: they were selected because they demonstrated well that they can test elements of the scheme. The pilots will be demonstrating how to deliver measurable improvements in providing value for money services, rather than emphasising cost analysis.. They have to include elements such as good consultation with service users, use of measurable local performance indicators, and a 'rigorous examination' of the options for service delivery, be it privatisation or direct delivery. Libraries are included in 'themed' pilot studies such as in Birmingham, where 'services for the elderly' will include the housebound library service.

In addition, there is a recognition that people are more demanding, lead more complicated lives and want more flexible services, so how local and central government provides services is becoming as important as what those services are. Pluralism in service delivery is advocated in that decisions about delivery mechanisms are specifically made for each service. It is also recommended that public consumption provides local government with a basis for developing the relationship with the public as the experience of consuming services

is already a very strong one, as opposed to the experience of being a citizen and voting:

The quality movement has recognised the strength of this relationship. It provides people with the ability to influence local government through the way they use and consume services, at the real point of experience rather than in a public meeting or through a committee.²³

To this end Filkin²⁴ argues that all councils will have to place the public at their centre, and work to meet their needs and not the council's own. In particular they will have to do four things: firstly, see consultation, public involvement and opinion research as essential to a council which wants to be relevant to its public; secondly, have clear priorities for the council that reflect the public's priorities and political judgements on them; thirdly, be radical in changing policies and services to meet the public's priorities; and finally, be able to go back to check with the public if its actions have worked and be prepared to change again if they have not. All of these actions need to be underpinned by research.

6.1.1 Implications for research

The emphasis on tackling cross-cutting issues, such as social inclusion, community safety, disaffected youth, and sustainability in a holistic way, echoes Stewart's views on the 'wicked issues' of crime prevention and the aspiration to safer communities, the environment and the aspiration to sustainable development, drug abuse, social divides, and the transport crisis:

Issues emerge in society which cannot easily be resolved by traditional patterns of organisation and management. They belong to no one organisation, but call for combinations of skills, powers, resources and experience in new and often untried ways. The solutions to these problems are not clear and even their causes may be unknown and even contested. These are the wicked issues - the issues which are hard to understand and hard to resolve.²⁵

As discussed in Chapter Two there is evidence that the current system is under-performing and can no longer deliver effective responses to the increasingly complex social and economic policy problems. Stewart identifies the characteristics of these "knotty problems written continuously into the working of community problems"²⁶ as being that:

All call for a degree of multi-levelled and multi-organisational working that has traditionally been difficult to achieve. They raise issues about the interaction between different activities as much as about the relation of activities to specified objectives. They deal with areas where there are critical uncertainties about trends and about responses. [They] ... present a critical challenge not merely for local authorities but for all organisations in the public domain.²⁷

It is possible to view the challenge of public library networking in bringing about the information society as such an issue; it cannot be resolved by any one organisation, it requires an emphasis on future interests and a holistic approach focusing on the interactions between activities, and it involves high uncertainties associated with high risks. We can also identify these characteristics in the Local Government Association's²⁸ list of features common to the key policy areas - regeneration, environmental sustainability, social inclusion, community safety, public health, lifelong learning and the information society - for Government: none of them can be addressed satisfactorily at a national level - they all have

an important local dimension to them; they all involve more than one traditional department or service area in both central and local government and more than one agency at a local level; and local government is the only institution with a major contribution to make to them all. Tackling such policy areas at the local authority level will require a different approach, in terms of management and organisation, and to research, than has been used in the past. In Chapter Two it was suggested that the networked authority was the evolving style of the future and the next section examines this assertion.

6.1.2 Implications for local authority structures

Chapter Two used four models of local government - the traditional authority (A), the corporate authority (B), the commercial authority (C), and the networked authority (D) - as a structure for an overview of changes in the organisation and management of local authorities. To determine how well the models match reality a sample of local authorities was categorised according to the characteristics of the four models. The sample matched that used for the fieldwork as described in table 4.4 in Chapter Four. Chief Executives in twenty²⁹ local authorities in the North East and West Midlands regions of England were sent a multiple choice questionnaire - reproduced in appendix 8 - and asked to indicate statements that best described current arrangements regarding their authority's approach to organisation and management, organisational structure, management style, role of the Chief Executive, role of the Policy Committee, corporate direction, communications and information systems. An accompanying letter drew attention to the work already undertaken with the library service in the local authority to encourage a response rate to the questionnaire. Fifteen out of the twenty authorities replied within the given time-frame. The table below summarises the responses in terms of the characteristics of the four models. The numbers across the top of the table identify the local authority and a key is provided in appendix 9.

Table 6.1: Summary of questionnaire responses in terms of characteristics of local authority models

	1	2	3	4	5	6	8	9	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
Approach to organisation and management	B	A	B C D	A D	A B	B	B	A B C	B	A	B C	A B	A C	A C	B C D
Organisational structure	B	A	B D ²	B C D ⁴	B D	D ²	D ²	A B D	B	B	B C D	A B C D	A B D	A B	D ³
Management style	D	C D	C D	A B C D	C D	C D ²	C D ²	C D	C D	D	D ²	D	A C D	C D	D ²
Chief Executive	B	D	D	D	B D	n/a	A	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D
Policy Committee	B	B	A	A	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B
Corporate direction	D	D	D	D	B	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	B D	B	D
Communications	B D	D	D	A B	B D	D	D	A B	D	D	D	A	A D	A	B D
Information systems	C D	C	C D	A B	C D	C D	B D	C D	C	C	C D	C D	A C	C	C D

As Greenwood et al³⁰ found in their exploration of patterns of management in local government there was great variation in the organisational practices of local authorities, and not just between authorities, but within the individual authorities. The most striking feature is the degree of mixing and matching of the supposedly self-contained characteristics of the different models. For example, authority 12, organised by strong but separate departments with an officer system under the overall direction of a Chief Executive who has ultimate authority, also claims a management style based on networks and partnerships where information is devolved and communication is information and free-flowing. Some respondents apparently had no difficulty in reconciling contradictory statements: authority 4 identified with statements describing three quite different structures, corporate, commercial and networked, in response to the question about the approach to organisational structure. The respondent for authority 14 identified with elements of all possible organisational structures. Even allowing for the fact that the evolutionary link between traditional and corporate structures is closer than that between traditional and commercial or networked structures the number of instances - eight, or half of the respondents - of a traditional approach to organisation and management (A) being tempered by the commercial (C) or networked (D) management approach is interesting. Any overall categorisation is not attempted and extrapolation based on this data is not wise given that the balance of

statements reflects the content of Benington's paper; there is not an even distribution in that seven of the statements refer to traditional set ups, eight to corporate, only five to the commercial model, but eleven to the networked model. For example, the choices to describe policy committees only reflected the traditional and commercial models. To explore the responses fully is beyond the scope of this thesis, however this small study enables us to look at Benington's comments on his work in a different light:

It is a mistake to think of administrative structures as neutral instruments for the purely technical implementation of policies which are decided at arms length by elected representatives ... Far from being value free, organisational and administrative arrangements need to be seen instead as battlefields for competing and sometimes conflicting interests and values ... different organisational arrangements can reinforce or weaken the influence of particular stakeholders in the process of governance of the local community, and can foster very different patterns of communication and information strategy.³¹

Whilst this is true insofar as, for example, communication patterns in a wholly traditional authority are very different to those in a wholly networked authority, Benington does not take full account of the added dimension of conflicting elements within a single authority. Not only do different structures have different aims, but within any single structure there may be competing forces. For example, in authority 6, which claims to take a networked approach to communications and information systems it is enlightening to read that at the start of the Council's new Information Service in 1998 "although the Library Service is the largest council information provider, it will not be possible for it to link in with the Council Intranet until the computer system is upgraded ... 1999 is the earliest target date."³² This raises issues concerning, for example, the extent to which an individual department or service in an authority with a hierarchical structure and pre-determined policy and financial guidelines can foster innovation, networking, partnerships and open communications. Are some characteristics more amenable to change than others? For example, is the networked approach to communications and information systems driven by advances in information technology or changes in local authority culture? To what extent do both factors have to be present to produce a truly networked authority? Or is it possible simply to 'bolt on' the networked communications approach to any organisational structure as it is possible to infer from some of the questionnaire responses. Such scenarios would seem to be in conflict with Stewart's assertions that "any process of management can be sustained or can be hindered by organisational structure" and "new processes of management provide a need for a new organisational structure."³³ While it is arguable that some characteristics have developed in response to central government demands, such as the growth of working in partnership, it can be questioned how much this is encouraged by economic factors rather than a desire for organisational structures to reflect social policy.

For example, in 1995 Sandwell MBC reviewed the role of the Council to better face challenges such as unemployment, low education standards, housing problems, legislation affecting Social Services, and loss of control through compulsory competitive tendering.

First the Council decided what type of authority Sandwell wanted to be:

A community governance approach was the preferred role, with the Council providing civic leadership, building partnerships and involving local people to serve the whole area.³⁴

To make this change “there was a perceived need to create structures which could more effectively respond to clear political leadership”³⁵ and as a result the Council delayed; it streamlined committees and departments and set in place a new management structure based on corporate directors and heads of services. However it was also recognised that the culture of the organisation would have to be changed as well as the structure to achieve the new aims and 24 key actions were decided upon, relating to issues such as relationships between senior members and chief officers, management processes, management development, organisational culture and so on, to be addressed over a two year period 1996-1998. In the Strategy Update it is interesting to see a new emphasis on information:

[Between 1997-1999] there will be many technical developments in the Council affecting the way information is provided. These are likely to include use of the Internet to spread information and link with other organisations; increased support to reception staff with computers able to gain information from all departments; direct access to partner organisations through linking networks; and electronic mail ...³⁶

This description illustrates how some aspects, such as structural change, can be introduced more quickly than organisational and cultural change; it could be that some of the multi-faceted authorities in the sample combine conflicting elements by default, because the different elements of the authority as a whole are not yet synchronised.

It is not possible to argue that the networked approach is presently a dominant force in local authority organisation and management but it is clear that, across all of the local authorities in the sample, the influence of the networked approach was present in some form. The reasons for the growth of the networked authority were considered in Chapter Two. Aspects of a more advanced state of networked management can also be seen in the response of business to the dilemma that, on one hand, knowing that success depends on making time for things such as thinking long-term and innovating, but on the other hand, realising that they are under more pressure than ever before to perform in the short term and be efficient. Trapp reports how the emphasis on efficiency has driven many companies into a “frozen ... state ... where they have made themselves highly efficient to deal with a world that has passed.”³⁷ Instead of choosing one management strategy over another they are adopting a new approach termed the “fluid-network organisation.”³⁸ This is so-called because it is intrinsically linked with the structure of the organisation and addresses five variables of organisational design simultaneously. These five variables are the ‘glue’ that binds organisations together to co-ordinate their activities; the approach to defining ‘boundaries’; the choice of performance ‘measures’; the means of ‘influencing behaviour’; and the new ‘competencies’ required of potential leaders. For example, it is claimed that most efforts to improve organisational performance yield disappointing results because they address only

one or two of these variables, say, attempts to make people more innovative often focus on financial incentives but are less likely to consider the competencies that are needed: “the fluid network organisation can overcome such difficulties by providing comprehensive measures and methods for dealing with each of the five key variables ... and by enabling companies to integrate their efforts in each of the five areas.”³⁹

The organisation or business that adopts an integrated, networked approach puts itself in a stronger position for dealing with ‘wicked issues’. It is not unreasonable to suggest that the evidence for the networked approach as shown in Table 10, particularly as shown in authorities building a network of relationships/partnerships with outside organisations in the public, private, voluntary and community sectors, in having a clearly articulated set of corporate values and programmes of cultural change, and in emphasising communication and participation, indicates that some local authorities are already aware of these advantages. Ongoing research is currently evaluating how well local authorities’ internal structures and processes are being adapted to a networking environment and hence their ability to capitalise upon opportunities to become key actors in local governance networks, given the Government’s greater emphasis on collaboration in service delivery⁴⁰. In practice, this approach can be discerned in Birmingham City Council’s *Policy Framework* document for 1996/97. Regarding management structure:

To make maximum progress the Council will need to continue to reduce committee, departmental and professional barriers, and to work as One Organisation ... the needs of the city and its residents do not fit neatly within departmental boundaries and the Council must respond to those needs in a corporate, holistic way.⁴¹

Regarding delivery of services:

Through its unique role in the system of local governance, the Council will offer leadership on co-ordinating the work of public, private and voluntary agencies in the city and will work in partnership with them wherever appropriate ... it will champion the interests of people and communities, ensuring that partnerships are open and accountable, and increase the involvement of people in planning and decision-making. It will ensure that partnership working addresses social and community issues as well as economic and physical regeneration.⁴²

Regarding corporate values:

The City Council has continued to communicate and embed its core values internally through ... a regular Management Conference attended by all senior managers, a series of Public Policy Partnership seminars ... and the circulation of a staff newsletter to communicate developments within the organisation ... Area regeneration initiatives and cross-service working have helped the Council to respond as One Organisation to the needs of citizens.⁴³

It is this integrated approach to management that is needed to tackle the integrated problems raised by the new agenda. As Ackoff observed:

Managers are not confronted with problems that are independent of each other, but with dynamic situations that consist of complex systems of changing problems that interact with each other. I call such situations messes... managers do not solve problems, they manage messes.⁴⁴

6.2 The new agenda and the public library service

This section explores the implications of the fact that the Government recognises that the public library service has a broader role to play in society. The challenge for the public library service is in coming to terms with the significance that the new values have for service priorities, methods of working, and partnerships with other organisations. The public library service must demonstrate its relevance to the broad policy areas to which both central and local government are giving priority, just as other service areas do. The following discussion serves to contrast an LGA advocacy paper published in March 1998 for leisure and tourism⁴⁵ in which the contribution of the public library service was minimal, apart from the expected support for lifelong learning and the information society. The public library service has been described as “inseparable from the ‘localness’ of local government”⁴⁶. As such it must show that it too can support the delivery of all key policy areas.

6.2.1 Social inclusion

Public libraries make a major contribution to social inclusion by offering a range of accessible opportunities which promote quality of life and give people a real stake in their local community. By providing community information they are the source of information “that is needed in order to help the community to take root, become a neighbourhood, to effect change, instead of just suffering it.”⁴⁷ As Greenhalgh, Worpole and Landry remind us, this has been dramatically achieved in times of disaster such as the Hungerford shootings in 1987 and the North Wales floods of 1990⁴⁸. Being free to use, public libraries are designed to be inclusive, catering for all levels of ability and income; through their ‘openness’ they can attract young people, lone parents, older people, people from families with low incomes and ethnic minorities. The value of this has also been recognised by the Arts Council in the part public libraries play in promoting and housing arts activities⁴⁹. Public libraries can tackle isolation and help people create, extend and sustain personal networks, and can provide opportunities and information for activities which can maintain social cohesion and improve people’s ability to secure employment. Research by Proctor, Sobczyk and Usherwood investigating the impact of library closure on users found “Clear evidence ... of the very high value placed on the use of the library as a social resource, particularly in communities with a higher than average incidence of social and economic deprivation.”⁵⁰ This idea is expanded by Greenhalgh et al in their discussion of the local library and the network of caring:

Case study work [showed] how, in areas of multiple deprivation, local libraries were used by those members of the community who were active in sustaining the community. In supporting the emotional needs of ... the carers, the activists and the volunteers - the library was supporting some of the most strategically important people in the community who help to provide stability and continuity.⁵¹

This is not a new role. It was first made evident with the publication of *The Libraries’ Choice* by the DES in 1978, a statement of good practice which emphasised community needs and support for the education and information demands of the ‘disadvantaged’ society who were broadly defined as those who need to have the service specially delivered, or need materials

or equipment which the library does not traditionally provide, or help and encouragement to use the library or who are offered a deficient service. As the report itself notes “the striking fact is that our definition potentially includes the majority of the population.”⁵² This role is even greater now given the public library service's key part in delivering electronic networking which has been identified by the National Working Party on Social Inclusion in the Information Society as having “great potential for minimising the negative aspects of contemporary communities.”⁵³ For example, Walsall Library and Information Services tackled disaffection and alienation in Walsall's pupils, school leavers and young people by widening choice and opportunity through new technologies⁵⁴.

In 1998 Kerslake and Kinnell⁵⁵ reviewed the literature on public libraries and social inclusion and found evidence of the social impact of public libraries in three areas: first, the impact on the community, in sustaining local identities, in promoting social cohesion and in promoting cultural diversity; second, ‘the skills impact’, in helping to equip people of all ages to enter or re-enter the labour market; and third, the economic impact in contributing to local prosperity through the regeneration of town centres and local businesses and in decreasing poverty both on an individual and a regional level. The study confirms that libraries have a major role to play in shaping a socially inclusive Information Society, but it is not yet a universally accepted view. Kinnell's discussion of the findings of the National Working Party on Social Inclusion in the Information Society draws attention to the fact that the Working Party was unable to recommend that Community Resource Centres for locally based information and IT resource centres should be set up in public libraries. A variety of reasons are put forward but, for Kinnell, the real message of the Working Party's report is to highlight the need for local authorities to give more emphasis to library and information planning: “public libraries need to engage in the kinds of partnerships being developed by academic libraries through IT links to community providers, to counter this kind of criticism.”⁵⁶

6.2.2 Regeneration

The focus of regeneration policy is on social and cultural factors as much as on economic and physical development. The public library service can contribute to regeneration strategies by making the area attractive to business and by contributing to economic activity in their own right. When industrial action closed Sheffield Libraries and Information services down for eight weeks Proctor, Usherwood and Sobczyk took the opportunity to find out how users coped and also looked at the place of the library in the local economic infrastructure:

... we found that for many people library use is a key factor in determining the frequency of their visits to local centres, rather than the other way round ... the research suggests that the library's presence in a local community may have significant impact on local retailers and other businesses.⁵⁷

Incidentally, this study clarifies some of the questions raised by the Comedia review regarding the impact of the library on town centre retailing⁵⁸.

By providing information and support services public libraries help people to cope with unemployment. Typical examples include the action taken by Consett public library to combat the effects of massive unemployment when the British Steel works closed⁵⁹, and the work carried out by a library in Hartlepool with unemployed people - by providing information about vacancies, helping with CVs and application forms and so on 147 people in the local community found employment during the first 26 months that the service was offered.⁶⁰ During the 1980s the objective of economic regeneration was generally seen as an area of "patchy and uncoordinated initiatives" for public libraries until a project by Steele⁶¹ identified eight different approaches to economic regeneration by libraries of all kinds, of which five were based in public libraries. These contributions were: an emphasis on the information needs of small businesses, joint initiatives between libraries and economic development projects, promoting services to new users, creating new sources of information and fee-based services. These benefits however were not always recognised and integrated with other local authority efforts at regeneration. As public libraries have to work very hard to identify themselves with local authority strategies for physical regeneration, Coleman suggests that by taking an alternative approach they can play to their strengths in offering a means of linking physical and social regeneration through their direct contact with the community. For example, Coleman describes how the redevelopment of a notorious estate in Birmingham had been praised for the way in which the considerations of local people had been linked into the redevelopment process: "As part of this, [the] library, at the centre of the estate has been redeveloped as a focus for the community and a symbol of the local authority's investment in people."⁶² The validity of this approach is confirmed by Harris in his work for the Community Development Foundation: "community involvement has been identified as the missing ingredient in top-down initiatives which in the past have failed to take account of the structural nature of disadvantage."⁶³

6.2.3 Environmental sustainability

The public library service can contribute to environmental sustainability by making information available on rural and environmental issues, such as the work by Somerset Libraries⁶⁴ in setting up a business information service dedicated to the needs of rural business, and the experiments with environmental information services in Lancashire⁶⁵ and Cumbria⁶⁶. A positive environmental contribution can also be achieved by reducing the need to travel if information, education and leisure opportunities are available close to where people live: in Norfolk the expressed need for library services in communities of less than 4,000 population led to the development of libraries in village shops⁶⁷. In the long term increasing use of electronic systems might lead to a decrease in paper consumption.

6.2.4 Community safety

Given the now proven links between low literacy levels and crime and other anti-social activity⁶⁸ public libraries have a role in providing alternatives to anti-social behaviour by

providing access to activities and materials that challenge, interest and motivate young people and can enable people to gain new skills and achieve success. The public library service can also contribute to community safety strategies by encouraging developments and activities that regenerate town and city centres making them attractive places. In Wigan an innovative partnership between the library service, the police and community groups that established a basic police office at a library has demonstrated the contribution which libraries can make to strengthening local confidence and reducing the fear of crime⁶⁹. Furthermore, Landry notes how increasingly policy makers are concerned with issues of women and safety and points out that “the library world has made little of the fact that up to 60% of library use is by women, who see libraries as one of the few ‘islands’ where they can go undisturbed.”⁷⁰

6.2.5 Public health

The public library service can contribute to public health strategies by providing information to people about healthier lifestyles. Hertfordshire Library Service set up ‘Patients’ Information Collections⁷¹ in GP’s surgeries and Dorset County Library established ‘Healthpoint’⁷² to provide information on all health-related topics to the public and to healthcare professionals and to enable people to make informed choices about future health care. Birmingham Library Services have assessed the experience and needs of users with mental health problems⁷³. A partnership between the Queens Medical Centre and the County Library Service in Nottingham initiated ‘Healthfacts’ when the hospital librarian identified a need for patient information in lay language. Matarasso reports on the success of the enterprise: “the clearest evidence of the impact of Healthfacts is the fact that it was incorporated into mainstream services ... before it had completed its pilot year.”⁷⁴

6.2.6 Lifelong learning

Government initiatives such as *The Learning Age* Green Paper and the ‘national grid for learning’ have set public libraries at the heart of the information society, and, according to Shepherd⁷⁵, offer a ‘renaissance for the profession’ in terms of opportunities for collaboration and partnership, expansion and diversity, accessibility and flexibility, and widening participation. Admittedly the main focus of *Connecting the Learning Society*⁷⁶, the Government’s consultation paper on the national grid for learning, is on schools, however the document does emphasise the place of public libraries in the grid. The contribution that public libraries can make is illustrated in the Library and Information Commission’s report and literature review published in 1998 on the role of libraries in a learning society based on vignettes of learners in five settings, the primary school, the college of further education, the company, the hospital and the adult learner in a ‘learning city’ based on a public and academic library network.⁷⁷ The Local Government Association also recognises that “libraries have a particularly important part to play”⁷⁸ here by acting as a resource for people undertaking education and training; by providing opportunities for people, including those from disadvantaged groups and others who find themselves ‘disengaged’ from information

technology, to acquire the skills to make use of information technology for their own purposes; and in becoming centres to train people in the use of new technology and to provide access to the information society. Lifelong learning is not a new role for public libraries; they have always sustained an informal route into learning and just as they played a major part in the Adult Literacy campaigns in the 1970s, so they can now play a leading role in developing computer literacy and a socially inclusive information society.

6.2.7 The information society

At the local authority level Gallimore's⁷⁹ discussion of a public library information technology strategy for the millennium, based on Manchester Public Libraries, identifies four ways in which the library's IT strategy can contribute to the local authority's individual policies: in improving equal opportunities in terms of allowing remote access or access beyond normal opening hours; in overcoming economic disadvantage by the provision of public access terminals either free of charge or for a minimum cost; in having positive environmental implications by providing remote access to some library services and so reducing the number of journeys into city centres; and in providing support for employment by assisting people who work from home, people who want to find out about job opportunities, and people who want to improve their skills through open learning.

Technology is not a panacea for multiple disadvantages such as poverty, unemployment and poor housing. However it can bring about interaction and participation, and this has enormous potential for improving communication at a local level. This is illustrated in the projects described in the Community Development Foundation's review of community based IT initiatives. For example, the Coventry Community Network forms part of an initiative which seeks to attack poverty and inequality, make 'on the ground' improvements to local services, generate practical solutions in response to local problems, and empower residents through community participation⁸⁰. The key question is whether using such new technologies can help communities to break away from the cycle of disadvantage and disempowerment:

... if the Information Society were characterised by new levels of partnership and participation, by a policy willingness to empower communities and by renewed appreciation of social values, then the information highway and associated technologies offer a powerful mechanism for development. Without such a socially supportive context, access on its own will not be enough.⁸¹

The Genesis project⁸² is using electronic networking in Cumbria to tackle the difficulties the county faces in terms of transportation, rural scarcities and the major decline in both traditional heavy industry and agriculture. The project has three themes - lifelong learning, community and business - and has been described as "completely at one with Government thinking and aspirations"⁸³ in that the county council, local government partners, local businesses and the voluntary sector have worked in partnership to produce a project that will empower people, boost industry and create jobs, and in doing so electronically, protect the environment. For example, by allowing people all over Cumbria to communicate with each

other using computer links and video-conferencing it is claimed that local councils and other public bodies will become more responsive to the needs of local people, enabling opportunities for greater dialogue and a participatory democracy. Marcella and Baxter⁸⁴ question whether this will prove to be the case in their current project testing the need for citizenship information noting that “despite the ... attention paid to the use of IT to aid the democratic process ... there has so far been little evidence, either positive or negative, as to the public’s interest in the subject.” Nevertheless the Genesis project reflects the message of central government towards local government regarding the necessity for local councils to deliver the services which people want, in the best way: “In doing so they will reconnect themselves to local people - reinvent their own local democratic legitimacy and purpose.”⁸⁵

6.3 Demonstrating the contribution

It is implicit in the public library service’s self-styled remit of “sustaining the quality of life in all its aspects”⁸⁶ that a single initiative can contribute to a number of policy objectives. In the past the contribution has all too often remained implicit or low-key and this was evident in the fieldwork reported in Chapter Five. The respondents’ definitions of research activities were broad and pragmatic and on the whole they did not see themselves as having a strong involvement in research despite the amount of research activity within their public library service: research was “not the main function of the library service.” Respondents questioned the relevance of the research approach given the need for alignment to match funders needs, the time to apply for funding, the influence of the Committee, and the predominance of ‘the bottom line’. This understated approach was amplified by the fact that the purpose of research for public library services was to feed into day-to-day management and committee decision-making: “most of our research is reacting to situations and is done pragmatically to aid management ...” Research was thus service-led and concerned with value-for-money or accountability and research activities reflected current operational concerns rather than broader strategic considerations.

Despite the pressure from the previous Government to become ‘leaner’ the definition of public library purpose⁸⁷ has continued to be all embracing. Combined with the adaptability of the service, and if properly managed, this ability to embrace could now be viewed as the public library service’s trump card. But wider involvement should not be allowed to evolve by chance as the fieldwork would seem to suggest: “we would tend to involve other departments as and when we thought they would be useful to us and vice versa,”. It must be based on factors such as those identified by the LGA, namely:

... an understanding of the contribution ... services can make to cross cutting policy objectives ... [supported by] an integrated approach to the management and strategic planning of these services which reflects the importance of those links [in] a climate which encourages partnership and cross-sectoral working.⁸⁸

Research by the Audit Commission in 1997 confirms that more effort needs to be directed at developing partnership approaches. It was noted that public libraries have the potential to

offer much to other agencies as partners because of their widespread presence throughout the community, and that many agencies would welcome the opportunity to exploit libraries' capacity to reach more people, but:

... co-operation between the library service and other departments and agencies is poorly developed ... despite significant overlap of aims and objectives, the library service is mentioned in the policy statements of other local authority departments in only 12% of authorities ... although the library service has always worked in a range of policy areas, the pressure on library budgets and the increased emphasis on partnerships and joint working mean that library services must improve the quality of existing partnerships and establish partnerships where they do not exist.⁸⁹

The fieldwork confirmed that working with or across other departments, taking an interdisciplinary approach, was not the norm. Further evidence of this lack of linkage is provided by the research by Steele⁹⁰ which demonstrated that in many inner city areas libraries were regarded as an important element in promoting economic regeneration, and that a variety of library services have been established to meet needs. The success of these services depended largely on the extent to which they were integrated with the local authority's overall effort to promote economic growth. Furthermore Steele found "an almost total lack of assessment of the actual contribution that library services made to economic regeneration"⁹¹ though there had been studies in related areas such as the work of business information services and the needs of small firms. As Steele's work illustrated, and as the Audit Commission noted in 1997, without developing a partnership approach "... there is danger of duplication of provision ... and of failing to provide a comprehensive service to the user whose needs do not fit neatly into departmental boundaries"⁹².

Usherwood's⁹³ exploration of the social functions of the public library shows how it has long been argued for the service to get involved with problems 'outside' of the library's boundaries. For example, the link between unemployment and the increase in demand for library services is well-known, and it is accepted that the information poor are a group already vulnerable for social, economic, geographic and other reasons.⁹⁴ It can be argued that such linkages have never really been tackled in a systematic way by the profession. Indeed the fieldwork for this thesis revealed the lack of a strategic approach to research activity within individual library services and that the impetus for research in public library services tended to be a concern with quality, or customer consultation, or the adoption of the Charter approach, rather than, say, social concerns. Writing in 1986 Usherwood opined that:

We have only begun to consider the social, economic and cultural implications of library and information services; although individual librarians and library authorities have taken on such a social role for perhaps longer than we think.⁹⁵

Usherwood expanded upon this theme in *The public library as public knowledge*⁹⁶ published in 1989. This book raised many of the issues to be later extended by Comedia's research and also highlighted the 'equality' debate in discussing libraries and life chances, as well as introducing the idea of a 'social process audit' for measuring the social impact of public library services.

All of the examples in section 6.2 have illustrated ways in which the public library service has contributed to key policy areas and, indeed, some of the projects discussed in the fieldwork can also be mapped onto these areas, for example H's work in developing services for blind people contributes to social inclusion; U's involvement with Area Co-ordination contributes to regeneration and so on. Despite compiling such evidence it can be argued that while public libraries have succeeded in achieving a high profile in respect of specific initiatives, this profile has not become translated into a sustained impact, nor into an ability to exercise influence, whereby the position of libraries is recognised as of right. If it had, then there would have been no questioning of the role and position of public libraries. In terms of the fieldwork although first impressions of research activities were unclear there was a value attributed to research; indeed respondents had evidence showing the added value of taking a research approach. Having said that the fieldwork also revealed that research had an impact on service but only a limited impact on policy. In practice research results were used to defend management decisions to, or to inform, Committee, and were invariably service-oriented. It was at this level then that political lobbying occurred and respondents could not be certain of being able to influence the political and financial decisions made by members. This is the crux of the matter when considering practitioner research. It is not enough to make a contribution; that contribution must be demonstrated consistently across the whole service and across all local authorities. Furthermore it is not enough for practitioner-researchers to aim to make an impact on service; if their research is to bring about change then it must contribute to policy development.

Libraries can learn from other sectors here. In the arts there is now a cohesive body of evidence demonstrating value and impact ranging from Myerscough's exploratory work on the economic importance of the arts in Britain⁹⁷ to Matarasso's study of the social impact of participation in the arts in terms of contributing to social cohesion, community empowerment and self-determination, local image and identity, health and well-being.⁹⁸ In contrast, writing in 1993 Landry criticised library performance indicators as still being largely book based:

As a consequence it becomes impossible to ask certain questions, because they have no legitimacy in the way the library world accounts for itself. It is the rogue questions in surveys that might tease out what the real value of libraries are and they may be the basis for new indicators ... social bonding, civic pride generation, skills enhancement, being a more educated person, employment opportunities, relaxation, reduction in boredom and thus less vandalism, new friends or relationships established, contribution to social harmony ... unless we evaluate these kinds of issues, it will be difficult to define evaluation mechanisms that can build the new case for libraries.⁹⁹

A significant shift in the approach to evaluation and research in the library field can be identified by comparing BLRDD's research plan for 1993-1998 and the interim research plan, produced by BLRIC for April 1997 to March 1998. The earlier emphasis on the continuing growth of information technology and its applications and implications for libraries and

information services as a “main area of concern”¹⁰⁰ was replaced by the ‘priority topic’ of seeking to “highlight the value and impact of libraries ... which contribute to the social, educational and economic achievement of UK citizens.”¹⁰¹ This was given further prominence in BLRIC’s research plan for April 1998 to March 2001. There are eight research programmes derived from the LIC’s three core themes of ‘connectivity’, ‘content’, ‘competences’, and two linking fundamental themes, ‘value and impact’ and ‘economics’, of library and information services. The eight programme areas are value and impact, digital libraries, information retrieval, management, co-operation, providers and users of information, preservation of and access to the recorded heritage, and, public libraries. Of particular interest is the value and impact research programme, the overall aim of which is:

... producing evidence to assist policy-makers and decision-makers regarding the value and impact of library and information services. It will cover issues relating to social inclusion/exclusion and to the economics of information. It is expected that ... areas to receive attention in subsequent years will include public information (and the implications of Better Government and Freedom of Information) and also developments in the information industry and the impact of new content.¹⁰²

Furthermore, although public libraries were highlighted in the interim plan, the 1998-2001 research plan increases the emphasis. BLRIC reports that it is currently:

... singling out public libraries for special treatment in a programme of their own because of the range of recent Government and other initiatives acknowledging the vital role public libraries can play in education, leisure and in the provision of free access to information for all UK residents and visitors. In Year One work will continue on the development of research skills in public libraries and on investigations into models of service. In Years Two and Three of the period, the emphasis will be on public library management and the effects of changes in local government and the regions and in particular on the research implications of Public Library Plans and of funding schemes¹⁰³

The research plan also, and for the first time, explicitly acknowledges cross-cutting research activities for the eight programmes, although these will not be fully addressed until the publication of the next research plan. As an indication of the thinking it is proposed that a ‘rapid response’ fund will be created to allow the investigation of important developments and their implications as they happen, and that forecasting studies may be funded, as may ‘meta-research’ which analyses and synthesises previous research in an area. Given the foregoing analysis in Chapter Five there must be some doubt about how the public library service will be able respond to these opportunities. Respondents lacked experience, expertise and confidence in applying for external funding and although advice and support is available within the local authority its source, level, access, and the degree of communication between the relevant units and the library services, varied greatly between local authorities. Furthermore experience of research methodology was limited, other than methods which were action-based or user-oriented.

Given that central government is acknowledging the core role that the public library service can play in advancing the information society, and that there is evidence that, at a national level, the sector now has the influence and coherence that it lacked in the past to initiate, co-

ordinate, and conduct research activity to support such a role; the unresolved issue is how far research methods have developed in the public library service as a whole. The fieldwork analysis showed that on the whole respondents wanted straightforward methods which would provide accountable results. While the public library service per se can contribute to the new agenda, the extent to which public library research has developed the capacity to demonstrate this value and impact and to tackle cross-cutting issues is not yet evident. Discussions in earlier chapters and the findings from the fieldwork found that public library research activity was largely confined to simpler issues of operational service development and did not, on the whole, extend to deeper research addressing complex social and economic issues. Whatever the underlying reasons for using simple methods - whether they stem from choice because such methods are most appropriate to practitioners' research concerns, or from necessity because of the requirements of funding and support bodies - they are inadequate to cope with the richness and complexity of the new research agenda.

As evidenced by BLRIC's research plan for 1998-2001, demonstrating value and impact has become a key issue for public libraries. It is claimed that "doubts about the ability of quantitative data alone to perform this task adequately"¹⁰⁴ have brought about the 'social impact of libraries research and demonstration programme' which has explored different aspects of the social role of libraries and the benefits they offer to their communities. Overall the programme has found that:

... public libraries benefit individuals and communities in ways that cannot be demonstrated by statistics alone. It has shown that qualitative data, properly gathered, provides valid evidence of the value of libraries.¹⁰⁵

Green and McKrell¹⁰⁶ give an outline of the projects involved in the programme. As well as the literature review mentioned earlier by Kinnell and Kerslake and a report by Harris discussed further in section 6.4, these include:

- Green, Harris, and McKrell's national survey of libraries' contribution to strategies for community development - over half of the respondents had produced such a strategy¹⁰⁷;
- Matarasso's study of the social potential of library projects which drew upon 18 award-winning library projects to demonstrate the impact of libraries on six personal and community development issues, namely, personal development, social cohesion, community empowerment, local image and identity, imagination and creativity and health and well-being. Without diminishing the value of book lending, this study stresses "the wider, often unseen, importance of libraries to their communities, and argues for their presence at the heart of new Government policy"¹⁰⁸ and concludes:

... special library initiatives and outreach work have a real and valuable role to play in community development. They can be very cost-effective, often requiring no more than a re-prioritising of existing resources; they can also create funding partnerships which make resources go further.¹⁰⁹

- Usherwood and Linley's social audit of public library services¹¹⁰ in Newcastle and Somerset - the results of which are due to be available circa August 1998. This study aimed to develop a tool for evaluating the social impact of library activities, to investigate the social and economic impact of public libraries, and how far a library's activities contribute towards the achievement of its social objectives. Regarding the ways in which public libraries benefit individuals and communities, the audit has found that:

These benefits range from the impact on the wider community, such as the promotion of social cohesion, to personal benefits like improved health and well-being. Public libraries help individuals and communities 'get started' and 'keep going' on a range of activities, such as education and job hunting ... They are described as somewhere that people meet, interact and share common interests, forming 'part of the cement in the social fabric'. Public libraries are community landmarks, which reinforce community identity.¹¹¹

At the time of writing some of these reports were still forthcoming. However it is possible to locate comments in those reports by Matarasso¹¹² and Harris¹¹³, and in articles related to the research projects by Kerlake and Kinnell¹¹⁴ and Usherwood and Linley¹¹⁵ reflecting upon the inadequacy of existing library performance indicators as a management tool for reflecting the broad social impact of public libraries. If the contribution of public library services is to be demonstrated in terms of value and impact then this will call for different research methods.

6.4 Developing a new approach to research

In *Issues for the management of local government* Stewart suggests that we have inevitably reached the point of having to resolve the wicked issues because the simple problems, that can be given to an identified organisation, using established expertise to apply accepted solutions, have been solved. All we are left with are the difficult problems and success in tackling such issues will prove elusive without a fundamentally different approach. Halloran identifies a similar turning point in mass communication research methods by observing how the influences on early research in the 1950s contributed to an oversimplified approach:

... methods in mass communication research were not conceived and were not applied and developed in a vacuum. They were conditioned by external forces, political, economic and intellectual. The needs of the media and the market place dominated in the early days, and these ... led to a concentration on relatively simple and narrow phenomena (reading, listening, and so on). But these simple categorisations were not appropriate for the study of more complex social relationships and interactions ... yet they were often used in this way.¹¹⁶

Furthermore, the research was too media centred in that the tendency was to ask what the media did to people:

It would have been more interesting and more valid if the question had been rephrased to ask what people, differentially located in society, with different possibilities for control, access and participation, with different experiences and skills ... did with the media.¹¹⁷

Both quotations illustrate the danger of the possibility of methods - the means to an end - becoming an end in themselves and influencing, if not entirely determining, the questions to be asked in research. The proposal that library researchers expand their repertoire of

methodologies is not a new one. Brittain pointed out in 1982 that user studies had run into a number of seemingly intractable problems, one of which was that “the mainstay research methods in librarianship have gone largely unchanged over the years, even though the objectives of user studies have changed appreciably.”¹¹⁸ However, moving towards a more sophisticated methodology will not necessarily improve the situation: “... no matter how sophisticated the methodology, the research can never be better than the questions that are asked in the first place.”¹¹⁹ Schon discusses how professional practice, ill-advisedly, places the emphasis on problem solving:

... we ignore problem setting, the process by which we define the decision to be made, the ends to be achieved, the means which may be chosen. In real-world practice, problems do not present themselves to the practitioner as given. They must be constructed from the materials of problematic situations which are puzzling, troubling, and uncertain.¹²⁰

At this point it is worth considering the contribution of 'dilemma analysis' as a management tool. Although the issues identified as dilemmas in the fieldwork were not new problems, using such a technique can give a new perspective and take us forward. The transcripts of twenty interviews by different people in different situations, concerned with differing issues presents a diverse range of material. There were inconsistencies in what individual library managers were saying regarding, for instance, their first impressions and the value they placed on research, as well as inconsistencies between the views and experiences of the individual respondents. Expressing these views as dilemmas provides an acceptable framework for viewing such data which do not claim to be generally representative and may indeed be contradictory. To expand on an example from Chapter Five, in section 5.2.16 library managers realise that they can conduct research in order to support cases presented to the committee, indeed committees often make such research a requirement. But even so the managers also know that their recommendations may still be rejected by the committee if there are other more pressing considerations. Some managers resigned themselves to accepting this dilemma; others took a more reflective approach and in the course of those discussions new ideas occurred about how they could deal with this dilemma in an acceptable way. One respondent put forward the solution that one needs a strategy, such as triangulating or consolidating research findings, in order to influence policy decisions:

We triangulate findings about particular needs - more books, longer opening hours - so that they are fed in to the key issues affecting the policies that our committee has, thus ensuring that their focus will be on protecting the book fund ...^R

... it tends to be not one killing blow, but it's making a lot of opportunities to drip-feed the information to them.^R

Another emphasised the complexity of the situation in his local authority and the need to take the right approach with elected members:

Research is not a word that I use with elected members ... [because they] don't regard research as something we can afford to do ... We are not funded to carry out research, but for development work, yes.^H

By using this approach the original, rather narrow, problem - that research is not used by

committee members - may be used to re-focus attention on a wider strategic issue of how, say, to ensure that research can influence policy-making within the local authority. In practice, a consultant using such an approach, identifying difficulties and re-presenting them as dilemmas, could help library managers reflect on complex, cross-cutting problems in a new light and improve research practice and working relationships with colleagues, elected members, funders, and so on.

The questions that we ask in research should reflect the complexity of the issues under consideration: complex approaches are required for complex problems. If problems are unique or unstable or previously unrecognised then they may be beyond existing techniques. In the field of mass communication this is being acknowledged by the emergence of a more holistic, critical research approach, the essence of which has been to “remove the media from centre stage, and place them in a wider social context.”¹²¹ It is possible to detect a similar change in the field of information and public library research. Kinnell warned in 1996 how public libraries were facing “a reappraisal of their effectiveness and value which takes little or no cognisance of the past and the value of principles developed over time to match services to need.”¹²² Usherwood had previously argued for the “need to develop and justify an economic and social model which places [public library] services outside the market economy.”¹²³ In 1997 Black and Muddiman drew attention to the obsession for ‘performativity’ in research, the principle of achieving maximum output for minimum input:

This utilitarian, market principle has come to dominate modern science. The ‘best’ research is that which delivers ‘performativity’, thereby undercutting research which does not deliver demonstrably useful and practical ends and squeezing deductive research where critical theory drawn from a familiarisation with context and impinging disciplines allows for rich and meaningful investigation.¹²⁴

They advocated the importance of the social and historical context for research and suggested the perspective of ‘critical social research’ using historical analysis to challenge and question assumptions, beliefs and rituals, and if necessary re-evaluate and modify them:

Such an approach would need to be committed to situating libraries ... within wider social structures and social forces and relating the detail of [libraries] phenomena dialectically to broader explanatory social theory.¹²⁵

Black and Muddiman argue that it is only through taking a critical approach that one can undertake fundamental public library research. This is not to degenerate empirical studies but, as Black and Muddiman point out, even though such studies yield valuable and interesting data, “the significance of such data is underexplored because of an unwillingness to look beyond the immediate ‘facts’, a failure to link them to other work and ultimately a failure to situate them in the wider world.”¹²⁶ This supports the argument in Chapter Three that it is the ‘looseness’ of methods such as historical methods that allows the exploration of many problems that are approachable in only one or two aspects by other methodologies. Evidence of this kind of approach can be found in an in-house study carried out in Birmingham Library Services in 1993 and in funded work conducted by Harris in 1997. The study in Birmingham aimed to observe and identify those characteristics of the Longbridge

area which would inform strategic planning decisions about the provision of library services and the allocation of resources. At first glance the study was a community profiling exercise drawing from census data but it also involved:

Undertaking 'creative consultation' with a wide range of local people, encouraging them to tell anecdotes and stories for a book about the area which would take a sideways look at what makes the place 'tick' and stimulate discussion about local needs for information and imagination. The book might cover: popular local landmarks, hang outs and meeting places; networks of 'gossip' and informal information sharing; attitudes to libraries and reading; memories of the past and visions of the future.¹²⁷

It is this combination of the quantitative and the qualitative that has so often been missing in public library research - both approaches offer unique insights and can enhance each other but they are rarely juxtaposed in practice.

Harris's research, conducted as part of BLRIC's social impact of public libraries programme, is more explicit in its exploration of a methodology for demonstrating the social benefits of public libraries from a community development perspective. The changing context for the ways in which libraries relate to their communities featured in Comedia's *Borrowed Time?* and Aslib's *Public Library Review*. However Harris's viewpoint is that this debate:

... may have been based too much on established library functions and perceived mainly from the library's own viewpoint. There may be much to be learned from the exploration of new or under-developed library functions, for example regarding community access to new technologies; and in considering how people in communities view the role of public libraries.¹²⁸

Furthermore, he notes how managers have been pressurised to demonstrate in measurable terms that public libraries offer value for money and for many library functions they lack the tools to do this in any meaningful way. Hence Harris proposes that some deeper exploration is needed to review the local public library's meaning for its community, in the community's own terms, and that this could be done in a way which "eventually may result in 'indicators' of public library performance against community perceptions."¹²⁹ This echoes Matarasso's view that public libraries are "constrained by excessively narrow performance indicators" - classically expressed as the number of book issues - but "must negotiate a wider contract with the community which reflects and legitimises all the things that people use libraries for and look to them to provide."¹³⁰ As a practical reflection of this, Harris's methodology centres on engaging with community groups, say a youth group, who would work with a facilitator on what the library does and might contribute in their community, then with the library on the practicalities of that, then with a facilitator on the identification of indicators, and finally on their own in gathering the data, testing and applying the indicators. This is not a straightforward process and this broad thematic approach can be seen as having something in common with those methods drawn from political science as noted in Chapter Three. Making connections is essential, for example, one element of the study identified a feeling of apathy and confidence in different communities:

This factor has implications for developing a programme ... since it reveals an instance where the library could probably make little or no meaningful contribution to regeneration, without a major contribution from some other intervention ...¹³¹

Another element drew attention to the tendency, for library staff, to see the service only in terms of what it does now and has done in the past:

The possibility that the library might have a role in economic development measures, and in helping local people to mobilise and to develop their capacity to address the decline themselves, was not recognised. The decline of the area was seen in terms of diminished audience, not in terms of a challenge to adapt the service.¹³²

Incidentally this echoes the findings of CRUS, many years previously, that it is easier for libraries to respond negatively, rather than positively, to certain kinds of findings¹³³. Harris concluded that there is value in giving local people the time and the space in which to express their views, but observes that helping groups to explore new service options in relation to their own expressed needs requires a more structured approach.¹³⁴

In terms of local government too, in retrospect, it can be argued that the influences on performance measurement research in the 1980s contributed to an oversimplification of the issues. This is evident in Hambleton and Hoggett's comments made in 1990:

When the crucial issues of quality and effectiveness are introduced, we are forced to conclude that performance measurement in local government is still at an early and fragile stage of development. This is not because local government in comparison with the private sector is somehow backward. Rather, it's because the tasks, scope and environment of local government are highly complex.¹³⁵

They proposed that a more appropriate feature of performance evaluation for local government would include equality issues, that is focusing on the state of being equal, together with people's experience of the services and government they receive. This theme is picked up by Stewart¹³⁶ who notes how pressure on resources, awareness of growing need, and a concern for equal opportunities all combine to highlight the search for equity, or fairness in the sense of applying the principles of justice to supplement the 'law', and that a different sort of analysis is required to inform such a search. It is not enough to rely on a financial analysis to demonstrate the distributional effects of an authority's activities on geographical areas, or on social or ethnic groups. It is not simply access which is of concern, but equality of access to opportunity. The Government's emphasis on the experience of consuming services has already been identified and this switch in thinking mirrors that identified by Halloran: it is not what services do to people, but what people make of what the services provide. This is what the research should be about. To return to the public library service as an exemplar of a local government service Usherwood's illustration raises issues of equity and experience:

Satisfaction surveys should be designed not just to count, but also to take account of the experiences of different groups within a community ... In looking for indicators of equity library managers also need to consider the provision of equality-specific services, such as those aimed at meeting the needs of sexual or racial minorities. They may also investigate if, for example, working class people find the library less relevant to their needs, or more difficult to use, than middle-class people.¹³⁷

Such an analysis could reveal the true balance in the distribution of public library services. It may raise questions regarding the equity of the present provision and the relevance of services. As the work by Hoyes, Means and Le Grand¹³⁸ on performance measurement and community care shows, introducing concepts like equity and choice into performance measurement is not a straightforward option; there are at least five different types of equality to be considered before establishing to whom they are being applied¹³⁹. For example, Usherwood and Linley's data from the social audit suggest that "the library is perceived as providing equity for older people, those with disabilities and people from ethnic minorities. The equity impact is far less strongly felt by lone parents and unemployed young people."¹⁴⁰ Furthermore, the implications of using such an analysis to discover new relationships could be uncomfortable given that public library research has been for the most part pragmatically orientated: "... so closely tied to professionally acceptable solutions, that it seldom contemplates alternatives which might cause pronounced upheaval in the existing order."¹⁴¹ It behoves public librarians to escape from this albatross inheritance to make progress. Just as the public library service's contribution could be mapped onto central government's new agenda, then so too can the requirements for a 'new methodology' for public library research. Tackling cross-cutting issues will require a cross-cutting approach to research methods; untangling the knotty problems will require the use of more complex methods than hitherto; and unpacking the wicked issues will not be achieved in isolation. Making such changes will involve acknowledging the limitations of current methods, but not necessarily discarding them. Instead by refining them their contribution may be renewed as in the case of LISU's exploratory work on social deprivation and library performance¹⁴². This moves beyond performance measures to using statistical models to work out which councils are performing well - in relation to their level of deprivation - and which are performing badly. Some examples are:

- Stock turnover depending on percentage unemployment, book stock per capita, additions to this stock on a similar basis, opening hours per week and having a poor relationship to shopping facilities.
- Book issues per capita depending on percentage unemployment, additions to book stock per capita and audio-visual stock per capita.¹⁴³

Such data are likely to better inform broader policy decisions than the straightforward indicators required by the Audit Commission. Simple methods are fine for simple problems but there is a need to push the potential of research methods to capacity by conceiving research problems in the broadest context and with an eye on the policy process. By doing so the public library service will generate research which, by being of value to practitioners and concurrently addressing the wicked issues, demonstrates the contribution and the potential of the service at the highest level.

6.5 Research activities in public libraries: a new approach for a new agenda

'Muddling through' ... implies a positive outcome in the sense that somehow one 'gets through', but this mode of decision making has an underlying assumption, namely that the mud is not more than three feet deep. When the mud is ten feet deep, clearly some other method for getting through is necessary¹⁴⁴.

The title of this chapter is 'moving forward with research' and the quotation above is a good metaphor for the need to improve the research process in order to make progress. This thesis has been concerned with the research carried out in public libraries, and the methods used in public library research, by practitioner-researchers, within the local government context. In terms of methodology for the thesis, findings from the literature of local government and management studies in Chapter Two were validated at the general professional level for public libraries by further desk research using secondary and primary sources in Chapter Three, and at the specific service level by investigative fieldwork in Chapter Five. Chapter Six then explored the deeper concerns arising out of the earlier chapters and the analysis of the fieldwork. The aims of the study were:

- To examine the relationships between local authorities, public library services, and research activities.
- To review and evaluate contemporary research activities in public library services carried out by practitioner-researchers.
- To identify and investigate the use of particular research methods and techniques used by practitioner-researchers.
- To analyse, and provide a clear understanding of, limitations in current practice.

This section will summarise what has been achieved in relation to these aims and in doing so identify the contribution that the thesis makes to enable library managers to 'make progress' with research activities in public libraries.

6.5.1 The relationships between local authorities, public library services, and research activities

Chapters Two and Six looked at broader relationships between research and service delivery in local government. Both chapters have showed that to tackle the concerns of the new central and local government agenda requires both a networked approach and a deeper view of research than has been acceptable in previous years. Chapter Two initiated the argument that as local government moves from a traditional model of service provision to a model of activities in support of strategic policy objectives, more attention will need to be given to deep research, that is research that extends into the full complexity of problems, in order to address the cross-cutting issues which are the priorities of local and central government today. This chapter took an original approach to handling the literature by using four models to provide a structure for discussing changes in the organisation and management of both local authorities and the public library service, and the associated role for research, from the

1960s to the 1990s. This placed the discussion of research activities in public libraries firmly in the real world and took on board the complexity of local/national government relationships. A number of unresolved issues were identified concerning research activities in local authorities, such as the role, rationale and contribution of research, the approach to methods - qualitative versus quantitative, and the relationship between research and consultation. The practice of research in one statutory area of local authority service, the public library service, was chosen as an exemplar to enrich our understanding of the relationship between research and service provision.

Chapter Six revisited some of these issues in the light of the fieldwork. Firstly, a description of the new agenda, and an analysis of its implications for research and organisational structures, enabled a reconsideration of the rationale for research in local government. In essence it was concluded that an integrated approach is required to resolve the cross-cutting issues presented by the new agenda. Secondly, and moving from the local authority level to the specific service level, the contribution of research was affirmed by showing its ability to demonstrate the relevance of the public library service to meeting the demands of this agenda. It was then argued that simply demonstrating the relevance of the service is not enough; the real contribution of research must be in terms of policy development. This argument was supported by referring to the analysis of the fieldwork and by assessing changes in the approach taken by BLRIC to evaluation and research. Thirdly, approaches to research, and in particular research methods, were reviewed at a broad level to assess their suitability for tackling the issues raised by the new agenda.

6.5.2 Contemporary research activities in public library services

To provide a rich context for the fieldwork Chapter Three reviewed the public library research scene from three perspectives, historical, thematic and current, and demonstrated how the historical situation of fragmented, localised, low-key research activity is being replaced by a more coherent approach with clearer co-ordination, direction and funding at national level. The historical review demonstrated that public library research was not centrally driven; the thematic approach identified five key problems, namely leadership and co-ordination, agenda-setting, funding, research skills and research methods; and the report on current progress showed that the issues related to leadership and co-ordination, agenda-setting, funding, and research skills were being addressed on a national basis. Research methods were still a matter for concern. The findings from two literature-based studies reported in Chapter Three illustrated that, on the whole, research activity is largely confined to simpler issues of service development and does not extend to deep research addressing the socio-economic impact of the service. The analysis of the fieldwork reinforced findings in Chapter Two about relationships between organisational structure and research policy and activity in local government; and in Chapter Three regarding the fact that improvements in leadership / direction for public library research have not yet had an impact on activities at local level.

6.5.3 Research methods

The general literature review in Chapter Three suggested that the research methods employed by public library staff are appropriate to the operational level of development but that these staff do not have the skills needed for policy and strategic development. Such assertions were tested through three individual studies of the literature and the fieldwork which examined current practice in public library services and in doing so provided further evidence regarding limitations in research skills and methods.

The review of research methods literature reported in Chapter Three and appendix 3 showed that the library and information studies methods literature is rich and eclectic in ideas. Librarians however are not the only researchers with a contribution to make to the debate on, say, the information society; it is also the concern of sociologists, economists, educators and so on. An examination of the text books from other disciplines revealed few new methodologies as such but did identify suitable applications of methods and techniques. Examples of the use of theories and techniques from other fields in research related to library services were given to support this proposition. For example, the usefulness of historical research in establishing the context in which librarians work; the potential for transferability between librarianship and political science as both have a broad background and both rely on general social science data collection methods and research design; the possibility for applying psychological research principles to behaviour research in librarianship as a means to get away from studying the 'what is' of survey research to the 'what might be'. For some areas, such as economics, a combined approach was recommended because the methods need adapting before they can be applied to library and information services. For others, such as organisation studies, a joint approach would enable librarians to increase their knowledge of organisation theory and researchers improve their tests of organisation theory in library settings. This review also showed that research methods for librarianship are not in short supply.

On the other hand, the analysis of research reports in the *Public Library Journal* and the study of PLDIS final reports in Chapter Three found, in practice, a reliance on straightforward methods. The analysis of the fieldwork in Chapter Five confirmed that research activities in public library services were largely confined to simpler issues of operational service development and did not, on the whole, extend to research addressing complex social and economic issues. It was then argued that if public libraries are to move forward with research then it must be recognised that whatever the reasons for using simple methods they are inadequate to cope with the complex research questions posed by the new agenda.

Chapter Six reconsidered approaches to research, and in particular research methods, at a broad level to assess their suitability for tackling the issues raised by the new agenda. The

importance of problem-setting was emphasised and the technique of identifying problems and representing them as dilemmas was shown to be a useful management tool. Attention too was drawn to the importance of the wider context, or milieu, for a research and a need for studies to blend qualitative and quantitative approaches. The necessity of confronting complexity, rather than accepting oversimplification, when considering methods, for example, of service evaluation, was put forward and supported by an account showing a shift from using measures of judgement concerned with economy, efficiency and effectiveness to those of understanding encompassing equity and experience. It was argued that this emerging approach to research that has the potential for generating findings that will better inform and underpin policy development.

6.5.4 Limitations in current practice

The analysis of the fieldwork confirmed that practitioner-researchers in public libraries are hampered by, for example, a lack of training in research skills as well as a lack of funding to conduct research and time to disseminate results. These are long-standing problems which, as reported in Chapter Three, are now being resolved to some extent on a national basis. Simply providing more opportunities for training, however, will not necessarily develop public library research to the extent that it can make a contribution to policy. This is particularly so given that one of the main training projects is relying on “a ‘trickle down’ effect whereby librarians who attend the training courses then carry out practical work and pass on their expertise to colleagues in an environment where high quality research is an essential part of library life.”¹⁴⁵ This thesis has shown that very few public library managers are working in such an environment; and even if they were then surely research training should be accorded the status it deserves. The experience of library managers reported in the fieldwork suggests that expertise is just as likely to ‘trickle away’ as it is to ‘trickle down’.

The importance of the investigation of practitioner research in this thesis demonstrates that practitioners are not necessarily unaware of the differences that research can make but that research capacity at a local level remains underdeveloped, particularly in the use of research methods, and that public library services do not engage in the sort of strategic research required to make a contribution to policy development. By identifying and linking these two limitations in current practice this thesis opens up the debate within the profession about public library research activities and research methods in an original way.

6.5.5 Making progress with research activities in public libraries.

This thesis provides a clearer understanding of limitations in current practice so that consideration can be given to what steps need to be taken to improve the situation. Having said that, perhaps there has been some complicity over the years in accepting the limitations of public library research capacity, for example, in 1977 Roberts warned that “libraries may be able to function with some efficiency by a judicious combination of pragmatism and

simple empiricism, but surely suffer in the long term from policies fashioned in this way."¹⁴⁶ To make progress now calls for new, refined and matured research methods, although the old ones by no means have to be discarded. The public library service must face up to the challenge of the new agenda; the demands of tackling cross-cutting issues requires a complex, or eclectic, and holistic approach. Such an approach embraces complementary perspectives and takes account of the wider context. It requires a talent for synthesis and synergy. The beginnings of such a movement can be seen in the coherent body of research emanating from the social impact of public libraries programme. It is vital that practitioner-researchers nurture this integrated approach. This thesis commends to public library managers a research approach which is more qualitative, more collaborative and better able to be integrated into policy. The Government recognises that public libraries have a role to play and there is no reason why this opportunity should not be grasped if the skills of undertaking relevant research and using the results to develop policy can be improved. There are an infinite number of ways in which research can be woven into the library service's strategy. By the end of the decade the public library service should be clearer about its role and the opportunities that exist. It should have used the findings of current and forthcoming research projects to influence policy-making and develop policies of its own, so that it is by informed choice that the public library service determines its future strategic potential. By taking such an approach practitioner-researchers within the public library service will have the capacity to generate research findings that are of value to both the profession and policy makers, and to demonstrate the contribution of the service at the highest level.

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“IT AIN’T WHAT YOU DO, IT’S THE WAY THAT YOU DO IT”

A review of public library research with special reference to methodology

Research reports in the professional literature provide an entry point for the research-minded practitioner. They should inform the mind and invigorate the imagination. In order to establish if the findings will be transferable it is vital to understand both what was done and the way in which it was done. In this review DEBORAH GOODALL examines public library research activity in England from the viewpoint of someone interested in the research methods used by librarians and others engaged in public library research, and with particular reference to this journal.

A recent national study of research in local government found that local authorities are expecting research to make an increasing contribution to policy, and most of them value research more highly than five years ago.¹ Within local authorities almost all public library services carry out management information gathering exercises, analyse the census data and so on, but fewer use qualitative techniques or tackle topics like the assessment of needs. Although there is evidence of service innovation it is uneven; some library authorities are making use of research and investigation by obtaining funding however most are not. During the last year the British Library², the Department of National Heritage³, and research centres such as LISU⁴ and CERLIM⁵ have acknowledged that the public library sector could benefit from help to exploit fully research and development opportunities, for example:

- To date there has been relatively little joint research between authorities. Although funders such as the British Library and the European Union stress the necessity of partnership and co-operation there are overarching tensions between collaboration and competition. It is hardly surprising that there is little evidence of consolidation of research findings and transferability in the professional literature when there is still a need to facilitate dissemination, both

within and between public library authorities.

- In the past the mismatch between the research process and practice has often been blamed on the dichotomy of academics and practitioners in the public library sector, with one academic commenting: ‘too many in public librarianship display an apparent distrust of theory; this has contributed to a neglect of basic research in the field. There appears to be an influential body of opinion which demands that research findings be immediately applicable in practice.’⁶ But without a substantial foundation of basic or pure research, applied research has little, if any, validity. Indeed, there was a plea in the first issue of the *Public Library Journal* that ‘public library development can only be helped if the practitioners and the academics each recognize the very real value that they have for each other’.⁷ Having said that, the research carried out within library authorities is influenced by the personnel employed. This may range from ‘the reflective practitioner’ to contracted researchers on externally funded projects. Within the former group skills gaps may include the understanding and application of research; within the latter group research activity may be designed to meet specific project needs and as such may be isolated within the organization and may not get close to the customer.

- There are problems in identifying the research issues and asking the right research questions. Hopefully these will be resolved by the work commissioned by FOLACL⁸ to examine the state of public library related research and to make proposals for the future. However, there remains a fundamental need for an analysis of appropriate research methodologies. It is the aim of a PhD project currently being undertaken at the University of Northumbria at Newcastle to contribute to this realignment of research in public libraries by identifying appropriate research methodologies, and their successful application, in order to provide case studies of good research practice. The need to examine methodology in public library research is shown by the paucity of methods utilized in projects as demonstrated in this review.

Research reports in the professional literature provide an entry point for the research-minded practitioner. They should inform the mind and invigorate the imagination. In order to establish if the findings will be transferable it is vital to understand both what was done and the way in which it was done. This review, drawing from the reports published in the first ten years of the *Public Library Journal*, examines public library research activity in England from the viewpoint of someone interested in the research methods

used by public librarians and others engaged in doing research in the public library sector. The review does not strive to be comprehensive. Instead the focus is on projects emanating from two groups of research workers: firstly, those best described as practitioner-researchers in the individual library authorities, and secondly students and staff in 'library schools'. This restriction generates some notable exclusions, usually the larger-scale consultancy-type projects, such as the work commissioned by the DNH on competitive tendering, that carried out by ASLIB and Comedia on the future of the public library service, and that organized by the LA,⁹ LISC,¹⁰ BMRB¹¹ and CIPFA,¹² and readers are cordially invited to remember that this work is part of a larger ongoing study.

1986 New journal; old problems

The first issue of the *Public Library Journal* appeared in March 1986. One of the reasons, expounded in the Editorial, for producing the *Journal* was to inform readers of research in public librarianship. The inference that public librarianship was practice-based was evident in a letter from Alexander Wilson, the then-President of the Library Association, who noted the value of evaluation, analysis of the state of the art, and of 'the drawing out of principles from the welter of practice.' Somewhat ironically then the opening article in this first issue contained an review of research in progress written by two academics, Broady and Usherwood.¹⁵ They describe their investigations into a number of central and local government policy areas and their implications for public library services. It was felt that "at the present time, [1986], a number of factors are combining together to give impetus to public library research of a particular kind. The current economic and political climate has led to an emphasis on work which seeks to examine cost-effectiveness, the development of performance measures, and services to the commercial sector."¹⁶ This was evident in the first practice-based report by Cooke¹⁷ who describes attempts to identify and cost the 'additional' elements of service provision required to meet the library and information needs of a multi-cultural society. Leicestershire Libraries had made several attempts to cost its provision for ethnic minority groups including an investigation undertaken in co-operation with the research centre, CLAIM. Although the work described is far from complete, and no methodology is detailed other than the approach involving a case study, suggestions are put forward for what it is necessary to identify in order

to determine the additional costs involved.

Surveys have shown that fiction borrowing accounts for a high proportion of library use, yet librarians' efforts to interpret and encourage readers' interest have been limited. Jennings and Sear shed some light on the choices borrowers make in How readers select fiction – a survey in Kent. In preparing the survey the researchers drew on the findings of previous research. They chose to concentrate on method of choosing, comparing method of choosing with degree of satisfaction and looked to see how effective was the available advice and guidance. The methodology is described as follows:

"We interviewed people leaving the libraries... every person leaving was approached if the interviewer was unoccupied. Excluded from the survey were people who had not looked for fiction, and readers who only looked for large print books or junior books as it was felt these last two groups had their own distinct selection problems. In total 135 interviews were carried out using a schedule of prepared questions. An 'exit survey' was used so that the way readers had selected their fiction was still fresh in their minds. This did, however, stretch some readers' memories about the books they had returned on going in to the library!"¹⁸

The researchers go onto describe the schedule as being made up of a mixture of closed questions where we could easily categorize the answers and more open questions allowing for readers' comments. In a lucid discussion of the results the Kent findings are compared against previous work and some daring extrapolations are made with the data, for example, regarding consumer satisfaction:

"We looked for any possible correlation between how people choose their fiction and the likelihood of them enjoying the books. As this was an exit survey, we could only match readers' favourite method of selection on this visit to the library with their comments on the books they had just returned in the hope that, for most readers, this was a 'typical' visit."¹⁹

There is no room for such assumptions in *Market research in Enfield Libraries*.²⁰ This work, to identify factors of non-use of Enfield public Libraries, was undertaken for studies at the then North East London Polytechnic. To put his research into context Thorpe comments:

'Critical research into the usage of public libraries has been sporadic. Many authorities have done no such work, have studied use in relation to one branch only or one specialist facility. The best known projects ... included community surveys, but their questions on non-use were not searching enough. Some questions used in their surveys are used here - they are appropriate and have been pre-tested. The methodology used here is, however, quite different.'²¹

The method, using interviews in a street survey with quota sampling, is described in detail:

'The interview schedule or questionnaire was structured but included two open ended questions where people's answers were not pigeon-holed. Its aim was to allow us to record answers from a large number of people in a short time... there were six fieldworkers. That all except one were library staff did not seem to inhibit criticism of the Service! Interestingly people were far more amenable when they realized that the survey was for the Library Service rather than another part of the Council.'²²

In the conclusions Thorpe makes a comment which, anecdotal evidence suggests, is relevant to much research in public libraries, especially that which goes unpublished:

'Although conceived primarily as a learning exercise, [the survey] has provided valuable management data using limited resources. Modest amounts of money could yield even better results. It is many times smaller than other published research mentioned, but has concentrated on a very precise area, making it equally valuable in its way.'²³

Variety in 1987

An interesting range of research topics appear in the 1987 volume of the journal. Waltham Forest Libraries examined teenagers attitudes to reading and libraries.²⁴ Pleasingly the Working Party examined similar surveys from other library authorities and council departments before drawing up its own questionnaire and there is an informed discussion of the sample and return rate. Henry of Sheffield City Libraries describes a proactive three month research project²⁵ looking at racism awareness which included visits to a number of library authorities where training needs of members of staff in relation to an anti-racist strategy were being considered. Although the article is obviously well-

supported by reading the context of the research is not as clear as it could be.

In contrast *Room for improvement*²⁶ reports the basic findings of a full scale test of 24 English public library reference services using unobtrusive techniques which was carried out during 1985/6 by a research student at the then Manchester Polytechnic. This is pioneering work which applies techniques, well developed by American researchers, that had never previously been used in this country in a full scale survey. There is a clear outline of methodology, detailing the questionnaire census, the collection of real enquiries with a description of the sampling and a 'worked example' together with a commentary on the responses. This is the sort of article that offers inspiration to replicate the work in your own library service, or at least to read the original report.

Living up to its title *The elected member and the public library: learning from the literature*²⁷ explores the perceptions of politicians by looking at the views they have expressed in the literature and elsewhere. This is a description of work in progress at Sheffield University and the author notes that later research will involve a series of structured interviews with elected members so as to obtain a more representative, and presumably, more current, view.

With the luxury of hindsight *Reviewing the situation: performance reviews in Surrey*²⁸ is one of the first of many applications of performance measurement in a public library service. The approach taken by Surrey to develop performance indicators involved an impressive amalgam of research techniques although the researcher readily admits:

"I do not claim that much of our research is strikingly new or different, though much of it has been modified for our own purposes: similar pieces of research are being, or have been conducted elsewhere. I believe that our approach is interestingly different, however, in the way in which the research elements are packaged together, the way in which commercial market research techniques are being used, the way in which the data is gathered as part of a continuing and structured management process and presented in a form which enables action to be taken."²⁹

The article describes how and which data was collected and what calculations were carried out, how internal statistical information was used and how it was all placed in context in terms of the library authority's key objectives. The in-house research

included interviews with staff, descriptions of buildings, floor plans, community profiles, stock profiles and analyses, logs of time spent by staff, questionnaire and interview surveys of users and attempts to reach non-users, both individuals and groups, plus use of a commercial market research organization. This comprehensive and detailed approach is acknowledged to have dangers:

"In many instances, it is difficult, if not impossible, to predict whether a specific piece of research will tell us anything conclusive and the dangers of review staff becoming over-involved in an area of ephemeral interest or inconclusive research has to be recognized early. Equally, if the research is to meaningful it must lead to actionable information. If there is not the management commitment or resources to upgrade or adjust the services then the time and effort spent carrying out the researches is wasted. It is easy enough to say 'how interesting' but far more difficult to say 'what have we learnt and what should we now do?'. Additionally, we have to develop a critical faculty which will recognise when a research technique has failed and examine alternative strategies."³⁰

However a lack of experience does have its advantages:

'Had we been too entrenched in a variety of tried and trusted research techniques, we may not have been as adaptable in our thinking and we may have allowed the techniques to dictate the terms and parameters of the review process. As it was, we were better able to decide what we wanted to research and then to consider the most appropriate technique to do the job.'³¹

1988 Wider issues

*Public library education – the decline of a discipline describes a small scale study*³² which arose from anecdotal evidence from public librarians and former library educators, which gave cause for concern with regard to the present and future status of public library studies in library education programmes. The article derives from work carried out for an MA dissertation and explores the current provision for and, and status of, education for public librarianship via detailed interviews with the teaching staff of seven library schools, supplemented by a study course literature/annual reports of UK library schools.

1989 User issues

The 1989 volume of the *Journal* saw a

crop of user-orientated articles, some of which demonstrated an interest in both non-users and potential users. Two reports consider library provision for mentally handicapped people in North West England.^{33,34} The first focuses on a questionnaire survey of 17 public libraries in the North West region to find out the extent of provision and the second on the implementation of the findings in one library service.

In *Novel ideas: a browsing area for fiction*³⁵ Jennings and Sear describe their follow-up work to their survey of fiction readers. One of the recommendations had been the setting up of a browsing area for fiction and this article describes how this was done and the range of monitoring techniques utilized:

'We decided to use a wide range of monitoring techniques as we were seeking to measure customer satisfaction and ease of use – difficult areas to quantify! We relied first on self-completing questionnaires, but early on in the project decided also to use interviews as the questionnaires would only gather the reactions of those who had found the area and who were motivated enough to fill in a form.'

Comparative issues were examined by having a sample of books duplicated in the A-Z shelves and the browsing area. Library staff were also a source of information, passing on comments from readers, directly made or overheard. They were also asked to fill in an observation sheet three times a day (at random times) on the number of people using the area. The monitoring took place over a six month period, with different techniques being used at different times. This is a lively account and one in which the authors are aware of the haphazardness of some of the data collection techniques.

One of the few 'technical' reports to appear in the *Journal*, *OPACs in public libraries*,³⁶ describes some of the results of a survey of OPACs in public libraries carried out by Manchester Library School. An earlier paper had looked at the extent of OPAC development, including a brief review of recent surveys, at access points to the OPAC and at the kind of information made available via a questionnaire survey. In this paper several OPAC configurations are examined and various suppliers identified.

In 1988 a major consumer survey was conducted in South East Birmingham by a group of Management students from the Aston University Business School in conjunction with Birmingham Public Libraries and this is reported in *The marketing of public library services: a study of*

*community behaviour, attitudes and requirements.*⁴⁸ 868 personal interviews were conducted with residents in three inner city and suburban wards to explore the behaviour, attitudes and requirements of adults in relation to public library services. The study considers the extent to which public library services are used, reasons for use or non-use, the level of awareness of services provided, attitudes towards public libraries in general and specific services in particular, and the requirements and changes sought by communities. This is a substantive report, describing the survey method in some detail (short personal interview centred around a structured questionnaire). Respondents were interviewed at random in locations as varied as community centres, public houses, shopping centres, places of work, and in or near public libraries. Interestingly non-users tended to be as supportive of the libraries as beneficial to the community as users. A particular feature is analysis of findings by ward and by consumer group and the implications of the findings for marketing strategy are discussed, and recommendations are made for the adoption of techniques and strategy already commonplace in other sectors of service retailing.

It was against a background of falling issues and the need to establish effective performance indicators that Kent Libraries decided to investigate the degree to which services other than lending were being used, and to try to identify the activities of visitors to the library. The aim was to give a picture of 'whole library use'.³⁹ The research took the form of three separate exercises: a comparison of entrance gate and borrowing figures, a self-completion exit survey, and activity sampling based on observation of activities as listed on the questionnaire and the methodology used is described briefly for each. Overall, the study exposed the considerable amount of activity additional to borrowing, for example, at least a third of people entering the two libraries in the sample did not borrow material. One of the most intriguing figures produced by the survey was that for non-purposeful use, namely accompanying someone else, waiting for the bus, and so on:

'It was evident that a 'hard-core' of non-purposeful users exist. Some of these people may have used library services on other occasions, and all are potential users; the numbers involved... certainly draws attention to the role of the library as a kind of social centre.'⁴⁰

This is a finding which, although mentioned somewhat with surprise

here, reoccurs with great impact in later work by Comedia, the independent consultancy and research centre, who examined the place of the public library in society.

1990 Continued diversity

The 1990 volume continues to show great diversity in public library research ranging from bespoke and small-scale projects to those of national significance. Examples of the former include a report of a survey of large print books where the author notes, somewhat apologetically, "the research included, inevitably, a questionnaire which was sent to 39 library authorities in England and Wales."⁴³ There was also a questionnaire survey of 150 readers of large print books in 22 libraries. The survey found that both groups were reasonably satisfied with the range of large print books.

An intriguing piece of work, allegedly available as an "annotated listing"⁴⁴ identified five library-type services which are not normally offered by public libraries and which could be offered. They are: personal support services, research work, handling of documents and other materials, production of documents and related materials and management services. Sadly there is no explanation as to how this list was produced.

*Survey it yourself!*⁴⁵ describes how Warwickshire surveyed attitudes of the public to the library service starting from scratch. Drawing from mainly from reading, other examples of library surveys, and local experts, the team, on an almost vertical learning curve, developed a questionnaire to be administered by local students to a sample of about 1200-1500. The findings were useful and the experience encouraged further survey work.

Can libraries and information services contribute to economic regeneration in inner city areas? What sorts of services are being offered, and what makes them successful or otherwise? These were the main questions addressed by a research project funded by the British Library and carried out at the Centre for Information Research at the then Birmingham Polytechnic.⁴⁶ Information was gathered through telephone discussions with over 70 organizations and from review of published and unpublished material and the findings showed that in many areas libraries and information services were regarded as an important element in promoting economic regeneration and that a variety of services have been established to meet these needs.

In *Well worth reading: fiction promotion scheme comes of age*, McKearney⁴⁷ describes the process of evaluation for the fiction promotion

scheme which started in 1989 which led to the conclusion that the promotion was a considerable success. The methods employed included comparing stock and issue figures, and a questionnaire to readers. The very high rate of return in one authority was ascribed to the fact that "firstly, the questionnaires were attractively designed in an A5 format to match the rest of the promotional material. This made a huge difference to the 'user friendly' feel. Secondly they were always placed inside the book to be borrowed."⁴⁸

Whilst consultation with readers about books is not uncommon it is not often that library users are asked their opinion about the bits and pieces of new technology that provided to assist them. In Hertfordshire people were asked about their reaction to the use of ALS Online Public Access 'Browser Terminals'. The article⁴⁹ describes selected results from the survey carried out in 12 libraries during July 1989. Regarding methodology it is reported that

'The survey techniques involved interviewing an observing both users and non-users of the ALS touchscreen browser terminal. During the two week survey period, 559 browser users and non users were interviewed as they left each of the twelve libraries with a terminal [*sic*]. In addition to this figure, another 325 people, asked as they left the library, had not used the browser terminal, and were not interviewed. Two questionnaires were designed, for both browser users and non users. Opportunity was given throughout for respondents to give their comments and opinions. Observation took place in two central and two branch libraries and covered three full days and two Saturday mornings.'⁵⁰

The study concluded that, as far as the scope of the research allowed, it was possible to determine public reaction to the terminals, but that further research was required including a more detailed study of individual searches by users.

*Performance indicator work in public libraries in the UK*⁵¹ builds on work carried out by Fox⁵² in 1987 who aimed to discover the extent to which systematic evaluation of information services was being undertaken. Fox wrote to all library authorities in Britain and received replies from 75 and his findings showed a picture of very little activity except for the counting of numbers. In November 1989 LISU undertook a similar survey and wrote to all chief librarians to ask for documentation on performance

measurement from their libraries. 73 librarians replied. Again the results showed that a performance approach was lacking. Hence the value of a later piece of research by Bloor⁵³ on *Keys to success*. This manual of performance indicators for public libraries, was the subject of a British Library funded project at the then-Leicester Polytechnic Information Centre. In Bloor's work the manual was examined in detail to see how it would work in practice and if its ideas could be incorporated into a decision support system for libraries which has been developed at the Centre.

1991 Looking at library users, staff and suppliers

In 1991 Essex Libraries considered the question *Where have all the issues gone?*⁵⁴ in their lapsed borrower survey. Essex Libraries, along with most other authorities had been suffering a small but steady decline in book issues over the last few years. Instead of sitting back and accepting the situation, or explaining it away with theories of demographic change and competition from an expanded leisure market and so on, they believed that the best way of discovering why issues were failing was to ask the (former) users. A sample of adult readers who had not used their library ticket for three years were sent a questionnaire. This is a clear and concise report which highlights main findings and includes a copy of the questionnaire.

Another authority which was not afraid to approach a problem head-on was Manchester who looked at the non-use of its library service using a face-to-face questionnaire. Somewhat unusually there is a stated concern that the methodology should be sound; indeed, one of the objectives of the study was 'to carry out the survey using a methodical approach and based on the sound principles of market research.'⁵⁶ The survey had been developed by library staff and staff from the Planning & Development Office. This approach was taken to prevent the survey becoming purely a piece of academic research with no practical applications and to increase the local knowledge of library staff. The report includes a short discussion about the 'halo effect' which the team attempted to minimise by requesting as far as possible factual rather than evaluative answers to the questionnaire. The work is confidence-inspiring and the article, clearly written, presents key conclusions.

At Loughborough University Lewins⁵⁷ *et al* examined public librarians and their continuing education in a piece of research which considered the participation in continuing education and training activities of professional librarians and information scientists in

the academic and public sectors over the whole of the UK via questionnaires which were sent to thirty library authorities giving a total of 873 respondents. In the same year Goulding's⁵⁸ survey of the literature offers guidance on managing the job satisfaction of public library paraprofessionals. Comprehensive and lucid, this article covers a number of themes related to job satisfaction in time of change.

Finally, in 1991, contractual arrangements for library book supply were being widely implemented. Whilst model documents were being circulated formally around the library network studies adopting a broader perspective were in relatively short supply. Hence Gambles' article, *Which supplier? Book supply agreements: a case study*⁵⁹ is a timely contribution. The article presents a description and a critical evaluation of the process of awarding agreements for book supply to Birmingham Library Services and the case-study is a refreshing and useful approach.

1992 Rhetoric and reality

Perhaps surprisingly the 1992 volume of the *Journal* did not feature a glut of Euro-research. Instead a wider approach was taken to marketing in *Libraries and leisure services marketing - rhetoric and reality*.⁶⁰ Kinnell and MacDougall of Loughborough University report on their work to assess the extent to which strategic organization-wide approaches to marketing are being implemented. A national survey of all library and leisure authorities in the UK together with a series of five targeted case-studies of library and leisure services were undertaken to assess the extent to which strategic, organization-wide approaches to marketing were being implemented and to identify training needs. The survey revealed a lack of understanding of the implications of marketing strategies for service development and that much confusion exists as to the rôle that marketing can play in service organizations.

1993 From little acorns...

How can organizations change effectively, and how can they ensure that the views of everyone are incorporated into the development of services? In *Customer consultation and its implications for service delivery*⁶¹ Lucas gives a brief description of a project undertaken by Birmingham Library Services as part of a city-wide initiative called Learning From Service Users, and suggests one possible approach. The project looked at the access to library services for people with learning difficulties and started with an aware-

ness session for staff volunteers at a day centre for people with learning difficulties. As a result three areas of work evolved: developing the expertise of library staff around the training needs of people with learning difficulties; using library staff to develop the social skills of patients being discharged from a local hospital; and involving user groups to influence signs and notices within library buildings. All three elements involved close consultation with a very small number of adults with learning difficulties. This is an innovative approach and one which invariably raised more questions than answers. A companion article by Lucas⁶² describes a major project undertaken by Birmingham Library Services in conjunction with The Centre for Applied Gerontology at The University of Birmingham during 1992 which examined library use by elderly people. To collect data this project used a postal questionnaire and two focus groups, one to pilot the questionnaire and one to feed back information and discuss findings.

Although the contracting out of library services had been a potential topic for research for some time it was not until 1993/4 that any research reports appeared in the *Journal*. Early in 1993 Kent undertook a brief survey by questionnaire of English library authorities, asking what actions they were undertaking in relation to competition. Sear⁶³ describes the results and goes on to detail the activities in one authority as a case-study. (A later article reports on the work of the Department of National Heritage's five pilot projects examining the scope for contracting out the delivery of some or all of the elements of the public library service.)

1994 Qualitative and quantitative approaches

As one of the more research-orientated authorities Dorset County Library had developed a range of performance measurements for its libraries over the years. However, one of the areas on which Dorset lacked real information was how the performance of any one library compared with the potential level of use. In this report Woodhead,⁶⁴ of Dorset's Planning Department, describes how they set a clear benchmark for the level of use which can reasonably be expected from any one library, by using the Unit for Retail Planning Information 'Markets' retail expenditure simulation model. This software is normally used by the County Planning Department to investigate the potential impact of new retail development proposals and was adapted to provide the basis for providing a dynamic model of Dorset's library system. As far as it is known

this was the first time that such a detailed 'spatial interaction' model of this type has been used to stimulate the functioning of an entire county library system. The research method is described in some detail. Sample results are given together with sensible warnings about interpreting the results.

Moving along from simulation to real life *A view from the other side of the counter*⁶⁶ describes some findings of a two year research project into adult education and creative writing which looked at the rôle libraries played in the writing culture of Cleveland. The method, personal interviews by the writer-in-residence, is described thus:

'I stopped everyone who came into the library during my visits, which were between 3 and 5 hours long. The majority agreed to answer my questions... we spoke where we stood. interviews took between 2 and 20 minutes, with an average of 5 minutes. I spoke to 161 people in total. Although I didn't select my sample, it matches surprisingly well the profile of attendance at creative writing classes.'⁶⁷

This work is reported in an engaging and enlightening style and draws heavily on the comments made by respondents:

'... some of the richest material the survey generated was when people spoke about the books they liked to read. Initially they were taken aback by the questions, which suggested that they weren't used to talking about their reading. However, as they realized I was interested in their answers and aware of how difficult it is to express what it is you like about a particular author or book, it became clear people did a lot of thinking about their reading.'⁶⁸

Feedback from readers was an integral part of a promotion of new fiction⁶⁹ in Somerset Library Service which featured. In practice this took two forms: a questionnaire to readers and discussion groups with members of the public who had expressed a wish to participate when completing the questionnaire.

Changing from the qualitative approach to the quantitative, in 1994 Berkshire used standards and audits as a practical management tool to improve the quality of stock provision.⁷⁰ The audit techniques included comparative analysis of checklists to identify strengths and weaknesses in shelf stock, catalogue checks to verify shelf checks where problems were identified, analysis of issue trends and observation. In *The issue life of bookstock* Matthews⁷¹ summarises work carried out by Essex Libraries to establish the

shelf life of bookstock and calculates costs per issue. Experiments at one library indicated that a sample of 100 books in any one stock category would need to be surveyed at each service point taking part in the survey, before the average issues at discard settled at plus or minus one and that this average figure remained substantially the same even if a much larger number was surveyed. Information on the issue life of discarded stock was drawn from the return dates on the date labels. Although time consuming to collect the results were useful in informing the economic implications of discarding versus rebinding.

Finally for 1994 the *Journal* features a useful review of the literature⁷² on issues relating to quality management which recommends those items that may make appropriate and timely reading for public library managers. This was one of the outputs of a British Library funded project carried out by the University of Sheffield.

1995 Ten years on ...

Research to evolve up-to-date and appropriate quantitative and qualitative standards for public library services is described in the first issue of the *Journal* for 1995.⁷³ In order to develop the model Statement of Standards in the context of current professional opinion and practice, both quantitative and qualitative data were sought, the former by means of a questionnaire, the latter by means of semi-structured interviews with senior library staff in 12 selected authorities and via a consultative workshop which discussed a draft set of standards. Two members of the research team from the University of Sheffield also met with an expert. There is quite a detailed discussion of the findings and how they fed into the draft Standards.

A pilot survey to test the method of assessing the effectiveness of enquiry desk services and identifying training needs of staff was carried out in Hertfordshire Libraries and Arts and Information. The process leading up to the survey, the enquiry methods used, and recommendations for a standardized method are described by Dudley and Barraclough.⁷⁴ In essence, the research method was to draw up 4 questions, two of which would be asked in person at each library and two by telephone. The questions were asked by two Trading Standards Officers who made notes on the responses which were later transferred to a form. The authors note that in future tick boxes will be designed to allow factual recording of, say, sources used, and to score subjective impressions. The article includes the four questions and examples of possible forms for recording results, together with a

reflective conclusion on the usefulness of this unobtrusive method.

Enquiry desk services were also the topic of a survey carried out by LISU.⁷⁵ The variation in data collected by CIPFA on the number of enquiries handled by library authorities prompted LISU to send out a two stage questionnaire to nine library authorities. Part one of the questionnaire covered opening hours, provision of enquiry desks and so on. The main exercise was in part two which contained 50 example questions. Librarians were asked to decide which should be included in the enquiry count. The results revealed significant differences between and within the authorities. The article includes the full list of possible enquiries, including the answers and responses and a copy of the questionnaire.

LISU was also involved with work on inter-library lending statistics. These were examined through a series of nine interviews, conducted usually with librarians directly responsible for interlending together with a questionnaire sent to all Regional Library Systems. The questionnaire data was verified through a spot check on other sources of data.⁷⁶

I want to work with books and people described the outcomes of a survey of public library staff. This paper follows on from a literature review and reports the results of an interview-based survey of support staff, professional librarians, and senior managers in nine public library authorities as part of a study to assess the impact of external and internal change on the working conditions and job satisfaction of support staff working in public libraries.

Finally, two examples of pieces of research which were clearly used as a means to an end. In 1992 LISU carried out a short survey of all UK public libraries to find out about fiction promotion but in doing so discover whether there was sufficient support to justify a new edition of the *Readers Guide to Fiction Authors*. In 1994 another short questionnaire was circulated to find out what changes, if any, users would like to see in the contents and the physical format of an updated edition.⁷⁸ In West Sussex Libraries a survey of over 1000 teenagers about their reading an information needs informed the production of *Boox*, a magazine by teenagers and a new promotional tool for librarians to help encourage young people with reading.⁷⁹

Concluding thoughts

Above all this review illustrates the variety of research being carried in the public library sector, not only in the range of topics being tackled but in the scale of work. Some projects are simply

problem-solving, others are attempting to be more strategic. There are clearly areas where public library researchers could gain from work done by academic and special libraries or in cross-sectoral work, and where work could be consolidated. There appear to be few cases of researchers attempting to build up a body of work.⁸⁰ Most strikingly there is a lack of detail about how the research was carried out. Scant attention is given to describing methodology in the research reports. Where details are given the paucity of research methods is all too obvious. Table 1 below is offered as an indication of the reliance on a handful of standard methods.

TABLE 1:
Methods mentioned in 44⁸¹
research articles

METHOD	FREQUENCY
Postal/self-completion questionnaires	18
Structured interviews using questionnaires	10
Literature review/desk research	7
Case studies	5
Interviews	4
Desk research/statistical analysis	4
Set up experimental service	4
Observation	4
Focus groups/discussion groups	3
Consultation with experts	2
Unobtrusive testing	2
Computer simulation/modelling	2
Workshops	1
Telephone survey	1

Given the comments earlier about the level of reporting it is hard to say if this is an accurate representation or not. However, an analysis of the methods used in a sample of 36 PLDIS final reports revealed a similar reliance on postal questionnaires and structured or semi-structured interviews. Several writers have commented on the dearth of methods in public library research, for example, Stewart noted, in a review of public library research, that although a great deal of research had been undertaken there was no real sense of progress. One suggestion put forward for this was that "too often a known and tried method of research determines the problem to be investigated."⁸² Stewart also highlighted the fact that proven methodologies are rarely adapted⁸³ and this point was also made by Luckham in his introduction to a study of reading habits and library use: "we need more to repeat studies to check earlier findings and trends, more precision and rigour in the investigations, more specific hypotheses for testing..."⁸⁴ The doctoral research will consider whether methods are adapted or improved through a review of methods employed in public library research relating to use of particular service and also a review of methods relating to a particular user group. By focusing on specific areas it will be

possible to be comprehensive and thorough in the literature search, mapping the work of particular researchers and/or library services. The motivation for the work is straightforward: an enrichment of methods would enable public librarians to answer previously unresolved questions; the application of better methods would enable public librarians to answer harder questions.

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ERRATUM

In the article *Public Library Services in Welsh Unitary Authorities* by Tony Bamber in the March/April edition, Caerphilly was omitted from the table of Unitary Authorities. The relevant data is as follows:

Unitary authority	Population	Density per ha.
<i>Previous library authorities</i>		
Caerphilly	172,000	6
Mid Glamorgan (part)		
Gwent (part)		

Apologies to Tony Bamber, Mary Palmer the Head of Service and to readers.

Research Reports

Public library research methods - some observations based on an examination of 41 final reports of Public Library Development Incentive Scheme Projects

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Introduction

The Public Library Development Incentive Scheme (PLDIS) was intended to “encourage new enterprises which extended or improved public library services in England” ⁽¹⁾. The first grants, awarded after a two-stage competition, were made in 1988. At that time the Scheme was funded to the sum of £250,000 per year for three years. However, in total the Office of Arts and Libraries (later the Department of National Heritage) made six rounds of funding available to extend the Scheme to 1994/95. Various priority areas for the awards were publicised each year. In 1995/96 a one year successor scheme, Development Funding for Public Libraries, was introduced, with the aim of funding projects specifically “related to identified problems facing the public library service in England in adapting to current circumstances and to broaden the opportunities for people to enjoy the benefits of the public library service.”⁽²⁾

At September 1995 fifty-four awards had been made by the PLDIS. Five projects have not been completed. Forty three reports of projects are currently available for public consultation covering all reports funded in the first three years of the Scheme and several reports from later years. There are also two reports about the Incentive Scheme itself.

Methods used in Public Library Development Incentive Scheme projects

Table 1: Summary of methods mentioned in the PLDIS reports

Postal questionnaire	13
Experiment, ie. setting up of service	11
Literature review/desk research	10
Case studies, ie. follow-up interviews	8
Structured interviews using questionnaires	7
Telephone survey	5
Group discussions	2
Workshops	2
Priority Search exercise	1
Time exercise	1

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The table above and the following commentary are based on actual examination of 41 reports. Two other reports which are available could not be obtained within the timescale. In three cases the reports themselves are incomplete and therefore cannot be adequately assessed for the purposes of this review. A brief resumé of the aims of each project and the method(s) employed is given in the accompanying summary. Putting aside the fact that the reports dealt with very different subjects what was immediately evident was the great diversity in the content and layout of the reports and this was particularly so in the sections regarding methods. Eleven reports contained no clear details of methods. The lack of detail given in some other reports would make it difficult to replicate research or assess if it was applicable to one's own situation. In some cases there was no clearly identified section covering method. In others the description of the methods employed was scant and sometimes details of methods utilised had to be gleaned from a close reading of the report. Some projects simply presented themselves as accounts of how new services were set up although it is clearly implied that some market research had been previously conducted in order to determine the initial viability of the project or the 'evidence of need' required for the PLDIS application. Only a handful of reports included any discussion of the pros and cons of the methods employed, or any evaluative comments on the success, or not, of a particular method, say, response rate to questionnaires or the usefulness of interviews in obtaining desired information.

Commentary

Postal questionnaire

This was used in thirteen projects and was often followed up by a more in-depth interview or a case study. A copy of the questionnaire was usually included within the final report and as such could be re-used. However, not all reports gave any feedback on the effectiveness of the questionnaire in gathering data from the sample. It appeared to be the exception rather than the rule that a pilot was carried out. For example, Berkshire's work on library services to independent and grant maintained schools utilised a pilot survey - a series of interviews - to test the proposed questionnaire that would be distributed to all schools. It is noted that:

"The postal survey was revised on the basis of the pilot survey before being mailed to all schools. In practice the postal questionnaire provided relatively little new information, but was useful to the extent that it confirmed impressions based upon experience and the pilot survey."⁽³⁾

Structured interviews using questionnaires

These were often used in the library setting, for example, in Video libraries: the potential for public/private partnership Devon Library Service carried out a local market research survey at two libraries to assess the likely potential for a video lending service based in public libraries in Devon, which involved interviewing over 1500 individuals using a questionnaire. Personally administered questionnaires were also used to good effect, but for a different reason, in Sheffield Libraries and Information Service's work on setting up a fee based information service for tenants of a Science Park:

"In order to make tenants aware of the existence of information services generally, and to identify key individual needs, it was decided to conduct a semi-structured interview with all tenants in the Science Park. A semi-structured interview was considered to be the most appropriate method. A self-completed questionnaire would not enable any in-depth discussion to take place. There might also be low motivation to complete a questionnaire as firms often have little or no understanding of their information needs or how library and information services relate to helping solve their

problems. The interview method would enable information to be collected and personal contact to be made. This would be the first step towards building a positive relationship with them. The interview was semi-structured to enable comparable data to be collected on key issues while allowing some free discussion.”⁽⁴⁾

Telephone survey

Considering the relative ease of administration it is perhaps surprising that relatively low use was made of the telephone survey. The SEALS Project found that: “... a telephone survey to selected UK public library authorities was unexpectedly (in view of its tentative nature) productive and enlightening. Many practical tips were picked up from this informal process. The value of ‘the grapevine’ is easily underestimated.”⁽⁵⁾

Case studies in the form of follow-up interviews

In most cases these were essentially more in-depth, usually semi-structured discussions with suitable contacts who had been identified by an earlier survey. In Library services to independent and grant maintained schools in Berkshire, to complement the quantifiable data more qualitative information was gathered through five personal visits conducted by the Project Officer, accompanied by various senior schools library service staff. This follow-up work also took the form of targeted case studies, for example, for Video libraries: the potential for public/private partnership Devon Library Service sent a questionnaire to all UK public libraries to discover whether video services were provided and if they were, to obtain data on when and how they were established, on charging and selection policies and on administrative and staffing procedures. Visits to selected libraries were then made to interview staff involved in the setting up of video collections and to obtain internal documentation and committee reports relevant to these issues.

Literature review/desk research

Approaches to the ubiquitous ‘desk research’ clearly varied. Some, such as that described in Experiences of setting up a fee based information service, were structured:

“(Desk research) included collecting background information on the firms based in the Science Park, identifying the general availability of resources relevant to the main areas of activity of these firms and collecting relevant data on the experience of others providing client-based value-added services to industry, particularly fee-based services ... extensive research was undertaken to identify existing fee-based services. This was in order to learn from the experience of others and collect data on existing charging policies and structures and marketing strategies. Various studies and reports were consulted and a review of the key findings is given in the literature review.”⁽⁶⁾

Other projects took a rather more ad hoc approach:

“Information about the speakers of each language was collected in the first place by desk research. Shortcuts were taken by using the existing database, directories and previous research. Some information was taken from a collection of newspaper cuttings. It has not been possible to verify some of the information; some of the institutions may be extinct. The information on the whole helps indicate the extent of self-help activity in each language. The information was supplemented by browsing through the catalogue of the Library Association, the Institute of Education and other libraries.”⁽⁷⁾

Group discussion

This was mentioned in one project - Bookreach - concerned with the delivery of library and information services to disadvantaged client groups in Buckinghamshire, which was carried out for Buckinghamshire County Library by the consultants Capital Planning Information. Regarding consultations with the intermediaries it was noted that:

“Group meetings which had been used by the consultants very successfully in similar projects in the past were considered as a very useful means of soliciting views, encouraging inter-agency contacts and pooling disparate skills and experience ... the relaxed and informal atmosphere of these meetings encouraged a valuable exchange of views.”⁽⁸⁾

The questions (for example concerning gaps in provision and the best means of filling these gaps) were designed mainly to provide a structure for the meeting, but participants were invited to contribute anything which they felt relevant to the issues being considered as well as volunteering suggestions for improvements in areas of concern to them.

Workshops

Most projects made some mention of dissemination activity at the end of the project, which sometimes took on a workshop approach, but fewer made use of workshops whilst carrying out the project. LIVOTEC's feasibility study of a proposal to establish a support and advice service in the use of information technology in information work in Leicestershire for voluntary and ethnic minority groups used workshops to ensure that the voluntary sector was aware of the possibilities offered by the use of information technology. This approach appears to have been adopted due to the previous experience of the project participants:

“The participants in the project had gained experience in the uses of information technology themselves and had been responsible for developing awareness of the possibilities of IT in large libraries and educational establishments. They had noted the importance of the ‘cascade’ effect in introducing change, where a ‘waterfall’ of awareness is created by starting with a few who then inform an ever greater number until mass awareness results.”⁽⁹⁾

What happened in practice was that two computer workshops were held at about the same time as a sample of groups received a questionnaire. The programme had been drawn up in response to suggestions made during interviews with 18 mainstream voluntary sector organisations. Although the academic institutions involved in the project provided equipment and expertise for the workshops, two paid staff from voluntary agencies took an equal part in training and familiarising attendees. It is noted that “besides bringing their own applications programmes with them and their practical knowledge of problems encountered in the voluntary sector, they increased the credibility of the workshop and the project; some scepticism had been expressed about the location of the project in academic institutions on the part of one or two of the interviewees.”⁽¹⁰⁾ Furthermore, the brief note on the success of the workshops suggest that the approach was an appropriate one to use to reach the sort of groups that the project wanted to reach, ie. those who were ‘absolute beginners’ with IT.

The Northern training Group's project, Cooperative training, open learning and public library staffs, aimed to carry out an audit of training provision and an analysis of the training needs of library staff in the ten public library authorities in the Northern region of England. As a result of this analysis

the intention was to produce open learning material to assist in meeting these needs. What is described as a “participative approach”⁽¹¹⁾ was adopted, which reached beyond consultation to the direct involvement of the project partners both in the development of the methodology and in its application. For example, as part of the analysis of training needs five job contexts were identified which covered all jobs in libraries apart from Chief Librarians and their Deputies. Questionnaires were then devised and piloted at a workshop and administered by the individual authorities; the information obtained was entered on a database and the results verified at workshops in each authority. It was felt that this kind of approach would promote ownership and understanding, reach and deploy knowledge and expertise and ensure effectiveness, commitment and credibility for the project.

Other techniques

An investigation into the effects of transient populations on the development of library services made use of a range of techniques including postal surveys, street surveys, library surveys and a relatively new survey technique derived from personal construct theory - Priority Search - to measure satisfaction. Instead of measuring satisfaction in absolute terms, for example by using a five point rating scale, Priority Search allows relative assessment, comparing satisfaction with different aspects of the service. The technique was adopted because “... the initial measurements using simple rating scales indicated high levels of satisfaction. However, when the data were investigated further a very close correlation was found to exist between expressed levels of satisfaction and both the age of respondent and length of residency, which aroused suspicions concerning the results and the use of this methodology. A second technique, Priority Search, was therefore introduced ...”⁽¹²⁾ and it was found that “... using Priority search technique residents and non-residents expressed different priorities in their assessment of satisfaction.”⁽¹³⁾ (The analysis of the Priority Search questionnaires requires specific software produced by Priority Search Ltd).

Transferable lessons

Access to correspondence during the review stage of a PLDIS proposal between the then BLRDD and a grantee would suggest that ‘transferable lessons’ are a very important outcome of a PLDIS project. In practice this seems to be interpreted, for example by Huse in the evaluation of the PLDIS⁽¹⁴⁾, as little more than publicising the work completed during the project via the project report and seminars and presentations. Furthermore, few reports themselves mention transferable lessons gained from the project as a whole. For example, Leicestershire County Council and Ulverscroft’s Large print books in Asian languages? Customer needs in the 1990s gives this short comment on transferable lessons:

“The particular mix of expertise and experience and flexibility of resources which both Leicestershire County Council and Ulverscroft were able to bring to the study enabled the team to accommodate the changes required in both the timetable and budgetary allocations originally agreed for the project. The relatively high success rate achieved for both stages of the questionnaire survey may be attributed as much to the personalised approach adopted as to the pertinacity of the project team.”⁽¹⁵⁾

LIVOTEC’s project - An information technology support and advice service for voluntary and ethnic community groups - is typical in that transferable lessons from the whole project are given in the report but there are no comments referring to methodology. Other projects do contain

valuable feedback on methods but this is often lost within the whole report. For example, the study to provide an up-to-date information service to all businesses in the agricultural, horticultural and tourism sectors in the Somerset economy utilised a telephone survey to find out the information needs of farmers, where “experience proved the best times to carry out the survey were in the early evening and when the weather was inclement.”⁽¹⁶⁾

However, this lack of concern with transferability is hardly surprising given that the PLDIS scheme as a whole has been criticised for showing little evidence of success in transferable lessons (partly due to inadequate and uncoordinated publicity.)⁽¹⁷⁾ Huse’s strategic evaluation of the PLDIS noted that “many librarians needed assistance in defining the aims and objectives of their projects, particularly in the fields of methodology, budget management and detailed monitoring and dissemination.”⁽¹⁸⁾ As an aside it can be noted that a number of reports do include what are described as ‘outline methodologies’ for the development of, say, a business strategy. The one area where there was feedback was regarding the success or otherwise of marketing.

Ironically, the project which had most to say about research methods was one where the research “has not proved to be as positive or valuable as predicted”⁽¹⁹⁾. Humberside County Council’s investigation into the effects of transient populations on the development of library services was a feasibility study to develop a methodology for the collection of data concerning information and leisure needs of transient populations, in order to assist in the planning of library services. The end product was intended to be a system of guidance for other local authorities with large transient populations. It was noted that: “the findings on research techniques have been valuable within the Leisure Services Department of Humberside as a whole rather than in the ‘transient user’ situation. One positive outcome is the admission that many assumptions and techniques were wrong and the Research and Development team were able to learn from methodology mistakes.”⁽²⁰⁾ This seems a rather short-sighted view to take. It can be argued that of all the PLDIS reports this project report is the most interesting from the point of view of an examination of methods because it is the only one to comment in any depth in a self-evaluative way on the effectiveness of the methods employed. This extract for example illustrates the type of observations made:

“Survey design, question structure, number of questions, and question order were found to have an effect on responses. Postal surveys were found to be ineffective as a means of collecting broad data ... responses were considered so poor that this methodology was abandoned after the pilot survey. Street surveys were found to be more successful, but depended for much of their success on effective sampling. Costs of this type of survey, per response, were quite high since research staff were only able to conduct 8-10 interviews per hour. The ‘halo’ effect, whereby respondents say what they believe the interviewer wants to hear, was thought to have affected results considerably. The library exit survey was also successful and the results compared well with those derived from other surveys, but its effectiveness depended on well constructed sampling ... The Priority Search (a relatively new technique used to measure satisfaction using a rating scale so that satisfaction can be compared with different aspects of the service) was successful in the number of positive responses generated, but demanded more explanation, and was more time consuming than other surveys. On the other hand, since it used relative rather than an absolute assessment, problems concerning ‘halo effect’ were avoided and the results were considered to be more meaningful.”⁽²¹⁾

It is disappointing that the other projects do not appear to take such an open and evaluative approach to their work. From the point of view of the research community the knowledge that a research method does not work well in a given situation is just as important as knowing the circumstances in which it can be successfully applied. It is hoped that this sort of knowledge will be captured in one of the outcomes of the PhD work, namely a matrix, or toolkit, of potential research methods for application to particular research issues in public libraries.

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Review of research methods literature

A sample of research methods texts in librarianship

To identify and examine the research methods applicable to public library research a review of guides to conducting research in the library and information field was conducted. The four texts selected for their broad introductory approaches are also noted in a review of guides to conduction research in library and information science. An additional title was added following a survey of the LIRG committee regarding regularly-used research methods texts. The coverage of the five texts was assessed and Table 3.2 in Chapter Three reviews their contents. It is worth drawing attention to terminology at this point. A *method* can be defined as a *special form of procedure or a single identifiable approach* and a *methodology* as a *body of methods*. A methodology may combine any number of methods. Some of the texts used one term to mean another or to use both interchangeably. In total, twenty research methods are described / discussed in varying detail. The twenty methods identified are:

- Experimental
- Historical
- Survey
- Action
- Bibliometrics
- Case Study
- Community Surveys
- Content Analysis
- Comparative Librarianship
- Cost Analysis
- Delphi Study
- Documentary
- Evaluation
- Library Surveys
- Library User Studies
- Modelling
- Observation & Description
- Operations Research
- Qualitative Research
- Systems Analysis

Notes on texts

Text 1: Busha, C. and Harter, S. *Research methods in librarianship*. Academic Press, 1980.

An introductory account of the rationale and methods for research in library and information science. This work is straightforward to read, descriptive and well-referenced. One of the most comprehensive texts with just over a third of the book devoted to methods of research and just less than a third to the topic of measurement and statistical methods.

Text 2: Martyn, J. and Lancaster, F. W. *Investigative methods in library and information science: an introduction*. Information Resources Press, 1981.

Aims to describe straightforwardly the major investigative techniques relevant to research and evaluation in the fields of library and information services and to indicate the applications for which such techniques seem most appropriate. It does not deal with statistics or experimental design but concentrates on less familiar techniques. At first sight the chapter headings do not appear very helpful but the book is well-indexed and supported by lengthy bibliographies.

Text 3: Moore, N. *How to do research*. Library Association, 1983.

A practical guide for anyone starting a research project and has a much wider scope than purely research methods. The section on methods accounts for well over a third of the book; the discussion of each method includes a description, advantages, disadvantages, and hints on use. There is sufficient information to make a choice but reference to a more detailed text is recommended before applying a method in practice.

Text 4: Slater, M. *Research methods in library and information studies*. LAPL, 1990.

Aimed at students but is also intended to encourage more active participation from information professionals. The book suffers from being disjointed and repetitive as each chapter is written by an appropriate expert. Some chapters are stronger than others and, for example, the thoroughness of the chapter on analysing qualitative material contrasts the informative but somewhat haphazard chapter on doing qualitative research. The volume has two strengths, first that it considers qualitative research and second that it bridges the gap between research theory and practice, for example, the chapter on observation is unique in the LIS texts examined.

Text 5: Powell, R.R. *Basic research methods for librarians*. 2nd ed. Ablex, 1991.

This book has a less comprehensive coverage, but offers a more in-depth treatment for the selected areas. There is a strong statistical element and it is good for detailed explanations of concepts. A text for the practising librarian who needs to conduct research and publish.

Research methods in other professions

If a researcher borrows a theory from another discipline then s/he has to fully understand its assumptions and applicability; uninformed use can be damaging. While there are few methodologies that define the subject being studied, there are methods that are closely allied to a particular field. This is not to suggest that library methods be replaced with those from other disciplines, but that librarians draw widely from other fields in order to enrich their own. This was Shera's argument for team research: because librarianship is concerned with all human knowledge, the team research approach to library problems was especially promising and he

listed areas in which library research could profitably seek assistance from other branches of intellectual activityⁱⁱ. To place the methods identified above into a wider context a selection of standard research methods texts - compiled by consulting subject librarians at the Universities of Newcastle and Northumbria at Newcastle - in four disciplines, education, politics, management, psychology, were scanned to identify methods applicable to public library research problems.

Table A3.1 A sample of research methods in other professions

Text A	Text B	Text C	Text D
Quasi/Experiments	Historical	Quasi/Experiments/Single case	Interviewing
Surveys	Descriptive	Surveys	Critical incident tech.
Indexing	Surveys	Psychophysical methods	Repertory grid
Content analysis	Case studies	Psychophysiological methods	Projective techs.
Elite interviewing	Correlational research	Psychometric tests	Protocol analysis
Mathematical modelling	Ex Post Facto research	Direct observation	Group interviews
Comparative research	Quasi/Experiments	Focus group	Cognitive mapping
Statistical analysis	Action research	Diary techniques	Observation
	Accounts	Ethnographic research	Diary methods
	Triangulation	Action research	Surveys
	Role-playing	Historical analysis	
	Interviews	Computer simulation	
	Personal constructs	Interviewing	
	Multi-dim. measures		

Sources Text 1: Ethridge, A. *The political research experience*. Sharpe, 1990.

Text 2: Cohen, L. and Manion, L. *Research methods in education*. Routledge, 1994.

Text 3: Breakwell, G. M., Hammond, S. and Fife-Schaw, C. *Research methods in psychology*. Sage, 1995.

Text 4: Easterby-Smith, M., Thorpe, R., and Lowe, A. *Management research: an introduction*. Sage, 1991.

Discussion

The methods printed in bold in the table above were not found in the texts examined for library and information research. The methods in text C were quite specific to psychology, for example, psychophysical methods that are primarily techniques for measuring the parameters of the sensory and perceptual systems, and of mental processing in general. Those methods in texts B and D were also concerned with aspects of an individual's personality and their perception of the world. Whilst there is no reason why such methods can not be applied to librarianship they do not appear to be commonplace. The table above also shows that, regarding the examination of research methods texts from other disciplines, whilst few new methodologies were identified as such, suitable applications of methods and techniques could be found. This leads to the suggestion that the library and information studies methods literature is rich and eclectic in ideas, but that they are not necessarily applied in practice and reported in the literature.

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ⁱⁱ Cited by Lynch, M. J. Introduction. *Library Trends* 32, Spring 1984, p. 362-3.

Statistical profile of sample

	Resident pop	Staff in post per 1000 pop	Bookstock per 1000 pop	Pop per service point	Issues per 1000 books
Met Districts					
Tyne & Wear					
Gateshead	201,800	0.68 [3]	1792	10,621	11,500 [2]
Newcastle	283,100	0.72 [2]	2665	12,309	8,891 [13]
N. Tyneside	193,900	0.50 [13]	not available	12,119	9,910 [6]
S. Tyneside	156,300	0.43 [26]	2638	19,538	9,984 [7]
Sunderland	295,800	0.43 [28]	2135	13,445	10,212 [4]
West Midlands					
Birmingham	1,017,500	0.53 [9]	not available	24,226	5,706 [32]
Coventry	303,600	0.47 [19]	1377	21,686	7,586 [25]
Sandwell	293,700	0.44 [23]	2493	12,770	7,595 [24]
Walsall	262,800	0.63 [5]	2340	11,945	9,499 [9]
Wolv'hampton	244,300	0.42 [29]	2183	11,105	9,743 [8]
Counties					
Durham	607,700	0.38 [14]	1908	11,466	8,678 [26]
Cumbria	490,300	0.37 [23]	1994	9,080	9,299 [23]
Hereford & Worcs	694,300	0.34 [23]	1673	18,271	10,766 [8]
Shropshire	419,900	0.33 [31]	1745	10,241	7,894 [30]
Warwickshire	498,700	0.37 [20]	1861	12,787	9,835 [16]
New Unitary	not available	not available	not available	not available	not available

Source: *Public Library Statistics 1995-1996*. CIPFA, 1997. Figures in square brackets are rankings.

	Av. issues per 1000 pop	Visits per 1000 pop
Met Districts		
Tyne & Wear		
Gateshead	875 [5]	6,963 [8]
Newcastle	882 [4]	7,586 [4]
N. Tyneside	1235 [1]	7,875 [3]
S. Tyneside	630 [11]	7,450 [5]
Sunderland	669 [10]	5,495 [22]
West Midlands		
Birmingham	not available	5,163 [26]
Coventry	516 [15]	7,252 [7]
Sandwell	451 [21]	4,469 [32]
Walsall	724 [8]	6,760 [11]
Wolverhampton	751 [7]	6,895 [9]
Counties		
Durham	221 [34]	4,922 [34]
Cumbria	1119 [2]	6,622 [22]
Hereford & Worcs	309 [32]	6,900 [14]
Shropshire	336 [29]	4,764 [35]
Warwickshire	510 [15]	6,641 [21]
New Unitary	not available	not available

Source: *Public Library Statistics 1995-1996*. CIPFA, 1997. Figures in square brackets are rankings.

	No. bks issued	No. other items issued	No. libs open 45+ hpw	No. libs open 10-44 hpw	No. mobile libs
Met Districts					
Tyne & Wear					
Gateshead	2,383,700	113,626	17	0	2
Newcastle	2,516,976	250,311	5	17	1
N. Tyneside	1,921,644	223,544	0	16	0
S. Tyneside	1,562,267	96,090	1	7	0
Sunderland	3,020,582	197,972	2	18	2
West Midlands					
Birmingham	6,469,224	592,650	2	38	3
Coventry	2,303,146	156,786	8	5	1
Sandwell	2,230,797	132,604	2	19	2
Walsall	2,496,338	191,587	1	19	2
Wolverhampton	2,596,169	183,348	1	21	0
Counties					
Durham	5,273,525	134,643	10	31	11
Cumbria	4,559,076	548,620	6	41	7
Hereford & Worcs	6,321,609	222,440	0	30	8
Shropshire	3,314,843	141,050	2	30	9
Warwickshire	4,904,548	254,458	3	30	6
New Unitary	not available	not available	not available	not available	not available

Source: Audit Commission. *Council Services Compendium. Local Authority Performance Indicators 1995/96.* Section M, 402-405, provision of a public library service.

	Expenditure per head - books	Expenditure per head - total net
Met Districts		
Tyne & Wear		
Gateshead	3.30	17.8
Newcastle	2.45	16.6
N. Tyneside	2.13	12.4
S. Tyneside	2.61	12.3
Sunderland	2.40	12.34
West Midlands		
Birmingham	1.97	13.96
Coventry	1.98	10.46
Sandwell	1.80	12.13
Walsall	2.64	13.15
Wolverhampton	2.60	12.33
Counties		
Durham	1.62	9.39
Cumbria	2.12	9.47
Hereford & Worcs	1.97	8.47
Shropshire	1.54	9.55
Warwickshire	2.46	11.04
New Unitary	not available	not available

Source: Audit Commission. *Council Services Compendium. Local Authority Performance Indicators 1995/96.* Section M, 402-405, provision of a public library service.

	Total Library Budget 1996/97	Total Library Budget 1997/98
Met Districts		
Tyne & Wear		
Gateshead	not available	not available
Newcastle	5,513,900	5,898,070
N. Tyneside	not available	not available
S. Tyneside	1,748,437	1,650,200
Sunderland	3,101,517	2,914,846
West Midlands		
Birmingham	not available	not available
Coventry	3,082,502	3,058,350
Sandwell	not available	not available
Walsall	3,364,230	3,277,794
Wolverhampton	3,443,510	3,443,510
Counties		
Durham	7,459,140	5,247,236
Cumbria	not available	not available
Hereford & Worcs	5,964,880	7,610,000
Shropshire	4,040,000	4,054,570
Warwickshire	5,122,902	5,654,492
New Unitary	not available	not available

Source: Municipal Yearbook and Public Services Directory, Municipal Journal/Newman Books, 1997 and Municipal Yearbook and Public Services Directory, Newman Books, 1998.

NB: There were no figures available for these dates for the new unitary authorities in the sample - Darlington, Middlesbrough, Hartlepool, Stockton-on-Tees, Redcar & Cleveland - due to Local Government Reorganisation¹. The Local Government Act 1992 abolished the counties of Avon, Cleveland, Humberside and the districts within, it also abolished the district of York City. In their place 13 new unitary councils were created, making a total of 14 unitary councils as the Isle of Wight became a unitary council in 1995. Thus 1996 saw the first major reorganisation of local government since 1974. This first phase of re-organisation brought in 13 English Unitary Councils including Hartlepool, Middlesbrough, Redcar and Cleveland, and Stockton-on-Tees. April 1997 saw the next phase of re-organisation bringing in 13 more English Unitary Councils including Darlington, making 27 unitary councils in total.

As of 1 April 1998 local government in England has:

- 34 English County Councils
- 32 London Borough Councils
- 1 Corporation of London
- 36 Metropolitan Borough Councils
- 238 English District Councils
- 46 English Unitary Councils

Regarding responsibilities for the public library service, county councils generally have responsibility for libraries, metropolitan councils are all unitary and run all services in their areas including libraries.

¹ Details taken from *Municipal Yearbook and Public Services Directory, Municipal Journal/Newman Books, 1997 and Municipal Yearbook and Public Services Directory, Newman Books, 1998.*

APPENDIX 5 Research Activities In Public Libraries: Interview Schedule

Many thanks for agreeing to participate in my work. These are the areas that I'd like to discuss at our meeting at time on day/date/month 1997, at place.

In each case I will be especially interested in your views and insights on the situation and in any examples you can give to illustrate how things work in practice.

To make best use of our time I would be glad to receive any documentation in advance that you feel would be helpful to me. Please post any items to my home address: 2, Cliff Row, Cullercoats, Tyne & Wear, NE30 4QT.

1. Research culture

What did you first think of when you saw the phrase 'research activities in public libraries'?

What is the value placed on research and development within this library authority?

2. Research activities and processes

What sorts of research and development activities go on within the library service?

How are topics identified?

What sorts of methods are used?

3. Structures and resources for research

How are research and development activities are carried out?

How are research activities managed?

How are research activities funded?

How are research activities supported?

4. The impact of research

How does research feed into policy development?

How does research feed into service development?

How does the research carried out in the library service fit in to the research carried out in the authority as a whole?

APPENDIX 6 Categories developed for coding data

a) Coding down

1. Examples
2. First impressions
3. Funding
4. Ideas
5. Impact
6. Local authority context
7. Managing research
8. Methodology
9. Value

b) Coding up

1. Absorbing costs - where there is no specific budget but research is still conducted
2. Academic research - comparisons between academic and public research activity
3. Alignment - between libraries aims and criteria of funders
4. Background information - about a public library service or local authority
5. Benchmarking - as a method
6. Bids - library staff writing bids
7. Bottom line - use of the phrase
8. Budget - comments on amount of money available
9. Business plans - mechanism for formalising research
10. Business plans - requiring research
11. Charters - mention of impact/influence
12. CIPFA - comments on compiling data for CIPFA requirements
13. CIPFA PLUS - use of PLUS by a library service
14. Committee - comments on influence of committee members regarding research activities
15. Committee - comments on involvement of committee members regarding research activities
16. Consultants - use of
17. Contribution - comments on research generally as opposed to the impact of individual pieces of work
18. Corporate culture - authority wide ethos
19. Corporate research projects - examples of, including Lottery, SRB projects
20. Corporate research unit - or whatever is the main source of expertise/advice within the local authority, comments on
21. Corporate strategy - authority wide aims/themes such as anti-poverty strategies to which everyone is expected to contribute
22. Criteria - general comments on funders' criteria

23. Current awareness - how respondents find out about research opportunities within the local authority and beyond
24. Customer consultation - as a reason for doing research
25. Definition of research activities - in respondent's own words, includes references to development work and information gathering
26. European Union funded projects
27. Examples of research activities (current)
28. Examples of research activities (past)
29. Examples of research activities (planned)
30. Expertise - skills, knowledge outside of the library service
31. External funding - general comments on obtaining
32. External funding, BL - comments on the British Library as a funding body
33. Funding sources - list of sources
34. Ideas - where they come from, how they are encouraged
35. Impact - general examples and comments
36. Impact on policies - specific examples and comments
37. Impact on services - specific examples and comments
38. Impetus behind the research approach - negative
39. Impetus behind the research approach - positive
40. Impressions of public library research - comments in response to opening question
41. Influence of the Chief Executive - on research activity
42. Involvement with corporate research unit - for research activities
43. Involvement with other departments - working with other local authority departments/sections on research (not including corporate research unit)
44. Joint projects - with other partners outside of the 'home' local authority such as other local authorities, academic institutions
45. Lack of time to do research
46. Library staff - doing any sort of research
47. Limited life - of research projects
48. Local dissemination - of research activities/findings within authority
49. Loss of research - admission of failure to make best use of research for whatever reason
50. Management information from the library computer system - used for research purposes
51. Management strategy for library services - taking a planned approach to research with aims and objectives and so on
52. Management style - less planned approach but still one involving research
53. Methods use - comments on use of methods
54. Methods - examples of methods used
55. Miscellaneous - anything not covered in other categories
56. Networking - with organisations outside/inside the local authority
57. Partnerships - references to

58. Performance indicators - as a reason for doing research
59. Performance measurement - as a reason for doing research
60. Practitioner-researcher - comments on library staff as researchers
61. Problems arising from the lack of a dedicated budget - comments
62. Professional dissemination - of research activities/findings to profession
63. Profile - raised, of the library service
64. Purpose of research activities - specific reasons for particular pieces of research
65. Quality - as a reason for doing research
66. Relevance/irrelevance - comments on either
67. Research management - taking a planned approach to research, comments on the practicalities of organising, staffing, doing etc.
68. Research results - factual examples
69. Students - using students to do research work, having links with colleges/universities
70. Time - having it to do research
71. Training - skills, knowledge in the library service
72. Use of research - take up of completed research for action by the library service, or using it a basis for further research work
73. Value - placed on research

APPENDIX 7 Key to public library services participating in interviews

A	Wolverhampton
B	Sunderland
C	South Tyneside
D	Darlington
E	Hartlepool
F	Newcastle
G	Durham
H	Gateshead
J	Redcar
K	Birmingham
L	Sandwell
M	Hereford & Worcester
N	North Tyneside
O	Stockton
P	Warwickshire
Q	Cumbria
R	Shropshire
S	Middlesbrough
T	Walsall
U	Coventry

APPENDIX 8 Text of questionnaire sent to Chief Executives

Please tick a box or boxes for each question to indicate which of the following statements **BEST** describes your authority's ...

1. Approach to organisation and management

- There are strong but separate Departments and Committees loosely co-ordinated by a Policy Committee or Town Clerk
- There is centralisation of both political and managerial power behind corporate rather than departmental objectives
- There is a concern with introducing quasi-market relationships and commercial business principles into local authority management and administration
- The authority draws upon private sector ideas/models of management such as Japanese approaches to strategy, quality and participative work organisation

2. Organisational structure

- There is strong departmentalism with several tiers of middle management between Chief Officers and front-line work force; powerful Heads of Departments and Chairs of Committees
- There is an Officer system under overall direction of a Chief Executive who has ultimate authority over the Departmental Chief Officers and who aims to co-ordinate the whole officer system behind corporate goals and priorities
- The authority is split into either purchasers or providers of service with a series of competitive stand-alone business units and devolved cost centres; there are a small number of Committees and Departments whose remit is to specify contractual requirements and put out work to CCT
- There is a strong political leadership with small cabinet style political executive
- There are a small group of strategic managers with corporate responsibility for translating political values and strategy into action
- There are groups of operational managers responsible for the management and delivery of policies and programmes
- Front-line services have devolved responsibilities for budgets/staffing and take decentralised action in response to/in conjunction with service users/community organisations

3. Management style

- We use traditional hierarchical line management; little or no interdepartmental co-ordination at any level
- We use scientific management principles such as MbO, PPBS, output measures of performance
- Power is dispersed and control over information / resources lies as much with the devolved units as with the corporate centre
- There is a separation between strategic and operational management
- The authority builds a network of relationships / partnerships with outside organisations in the public, private, voluntary and community sectors

4. Role of the Chief Executive

- The Town Clerk advises Council and acts as the representative for the Chief Officers but not as a Chief Executive with overall authority
- The role of the Chief Executive is one of a treasurer or accountant. There is a concern with how do we get best value for money? How do we target it on corporate priorities?
- The Chief Executive is a business manager from the private sector. There is a concern with how can we make our services more commercial and more financially competitive?
- The Chief Executive is an innovator with a background in community or economic development. There is a concern with how can we take account of the role of elected councillors? How can we maintain commitment to strategic goals through the culture and value of the whole local authority rather than by traditional management control mechanisms

5. Role of the Policy Committee

- Acts as co-ordinating body and clearing house for other Committees but does not impose policy or budget priorities on them
- Decides corporate priorities and sets the policy and financial guidelines for each of the various Departments and services

6. Corporate direction

- There is no strong corporate direction of the political or officer system
- There is a clearly articulated set of corporate values and programmes of cultural change

7. Communications

- The main lines of communication flow up and down Departments, there is little communication between Departments
- The main lines of communication flow to and from the Chief Executive and corporate centre
- Communication is less formal and depends on face-to-face talking and networking across, as well as up and down, the organisation; there are short lines of communication between the front line and the strategic centre

8. Information systems

- Concentrated in separate Departments and are paper-based
- Concentrated in the Chief Executive and corporate centre; corporate data held on a mainframe and available to corporate managers at the top 2 or 3 tiers but rarely distributed more widely to individual Departments, front line staff or users
- Devolved rather than centralised and based on personal computers as well as mainframes
- Supplemented by email and p/c based local area networks which may include councillors, front line staff and even user groups

APPENDIX 9

Key to local authorities responding to questionnaire:

- 1 Hartlepool
- 2 Redcar & Cleveland
- 3 Stockton-on-Tees
- 4 Sunderland
- 5 South Tyneside
- 6 North Tyneside
- 8 Coventry
- 9 Warwickshire
- 11 Shropshire
- 12 Sandwell
- 13 Cumbria
- 14 Darlington
- 15 Wolverhampton
- 16 Newcastle
- 17 Walsall

Questionnaire not completed but letter and documentation sent in response from Durham; questionnaire returned from Middlesbrough due to impending re-structure in August 1998 with an offer to provide information at a later date.

No response received from Birmingham, Gateshead and Hereford & Worcester.

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Research Activities in Public Libraries-Findings From Fieldwork: Facts and Methods

Deborah Goodall

The Author

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Abstract

Reports current research activities in public library services drawing from a series of interviews with 20 chief librarians. Findings reinforce earlier perceptions and findings about public library research activities. Of particular concern is the fact that research activity and method is largely confined to 'simpler' issues of operational service development and does not extend to 'harder' research addressing the social and economic impact of the service. To assess trustworthiness and make best use of the data the interview transcripts are analysed using three techniques: initial data analysis by coding down, dilemma analysis, and intensive analysis carried out using the constant comparative method. Concludes that the restricted research capacity within the public library sector may endanger the realisation of its strategic potential.

The occasion

The research described in this paper is part of a PhD thesis entitled "Research Activities In Public Libraries", begun in November 1995 and due for completion mid-1999. The thesis focuses on the relationship between public libraries and research conducted in such library services by professional library staff, often described as practitioner-researchers.

Introduction

As local government moves from an administrative model of service provision to a business or networked model of activities in support of strategic policy objectives more attention will need to be given to 'deep' research in order to address the social and economic issues which are the priorities of local and central government today. As part of the work undertaken for a PhD thesis the practice of research in one statutory area of service, the public library service, has been examined in order to enrich our understanding of the relationship between research, as carried out by practitioner-researchers, and policy and strategy in local government. Recent reports on the public library scene illustrate how the historical situation of fragmented, localised, low-key research activity¹ is being replaced by a more coherent and driven approach with co-ordination, direction and funding at national level². However, other studies^{3,4,5} have shown that research skills and methodologies remain undeveloped in the public library service as a whole. On the whole this examination of current research practice reinforces earlier perceptions and findings about public library research activities as reported in the professional literature⁶. However attempts are made to analyse the problems in more depth and move forward on the important issues. Of particular concern is the fact that research activity and method is largely confined to 'simpler' issues of operational service development and does not extend to 'harder' research addressing the social and economic impact of the service, or the impact on individual's lives.

This article serves two purposes. Firstly, it reports current research activities in public library services drawing from a series of interviews which took place between May - July 1997 with chief librarians or their equivalents in a sample of 20 local authorities in the West Midlands and North-East regions of England. To preserve anonymity the actual library services are not listed, however a break down by type of authority is given below. It is worth noting that the sample covered a wide variety of library services ranging

from those with a regular programme of research activities, those able to allocate staff and funding to in-house research activities either on an ad hoc

or temporary basis, to those who did the best they could with few or no resources.

	West Midlands	North East
Metropolitan	5 (out of a possible 7)	5 (out of a possible 5)
County	3 (out of a possible 4)	2 (out of a possible 3)
'New Unitary'	0 (out of a possible 1)	5 (out of a possible 5)

Secondly, it illustrates and compares the findings derived from different types of analyses in an attempt to begin to tackle some of the thorny issues which have become intractably bound up with the perception and reality of public library research activity in recent years. In order to make best use of the available data, and ensure trustworthiness⁷ of the findings, the transcripts of the interviews were analysed using three techniques, initial data analysis, dilemma analysis, and intensive analysis carried out using the constant comparative method.

Initial data analysis

Initial data analysis was carried out following the procedures described by Gordon and Langmaid⁸, and Fielding⁹. In brief, the transcripts were coded down to produce a matrix reviewing each library manager's comments across nine categories derived from the interview schedule, namely first impressions, value, activities, ideas, methods, impact, management, funding, and local authority context. The results are synthesised in the discussion below to give an overview of the findings. This is inevitably superficial as the summary is derived from, and structured to follow, the interview schedule. Nevertheless, the initial data analysis serves a purpose in that it reduces the data to a manageable length, in a structured and systematic way, and allows the 20 interviews to be viewed as one whole. This is, however, the point at which many researchers come to a halt in the process of analysis.

First impressions of research activity in public libraries

Each interview started with an open question whereby the library manager was asked to give his or her first impressions on being asked to talk about research activities in the public library service. Interestingly first impressions did not necessarily correlate with actual involvement in research activities. While only one manager could be described as 'unfriendly' to the idea of research the over-riding impression was that most library managers did not perceive themselves to be involved in research.

A number of explanations were put forward. For example, that research was something that was academic and was not related to their day-to-day work. Instead managers saw themselves as being involved in activities such as consultation, information-gathering, marketing, and business-planning. One library manager stressed the view that 'research is not the main function of the public library service'. Where there was research activity it was often described in terms of being pragmatic, small-scale, wide-ranging, low-level. Often library managers felt that it was simply part of their day-to-day activities as managers, and, above all, research was an activity that assisted the decision-making process.

The value placed on research Respondents were asked if there was value placed on research within the library service, and, if appropriate, prompted to say how this related to the authority as a whole. In all cases the value was readily accepted within the library service although it was sometimes hard for library managers to

demonstrate this value. In some library services the value was apparent in a wider management approach that valued, for example, customers or consultation. In other situations, the approach was more pragmatic, one where you had to 'know your business' in order to compete for resources. Some managers spoke about the influence of the new in establishing values, be it a new Chief Librarian or a new Chief Executive, or even working within a new unitary authority. The value placed on, and the level of, research activity in library services does not reflect, or relate to, that of the local authority as a whole.

Research activities The research activities that were carried out were many and varied but on the whole they reflected current operational concerns rather than broader strategic considerations. Although there is a considerable body of research taking place it is not recognised and managed as such, and it is rarely written up in a form which might be transferable to other library services.

Research ideas During the course of the interviews library managers were asked to talk about where ideas for research came from, specifically how topics for research were identified and whether there was any forum for discussing/generating ideas. Management teams were the main source of ideas but these would often draw from other staff too, and some managers were keen to encourage all staff to think more creatively.

There were other driving forces behind research activities. Some library managers described how ideas came from above, be it Committee, council policies or government. Many library services drew from their customer orientation, particularly those who had adopted 'the Charter approach', some from colleagues in other departments. Only one library service had a specific research group in Libraries, even so this library service also drew from a whole range of sources for ideas. Another research-rich library service demonstrated the advantage of being involved, with other departments, with the local community, and with the public library profession. Ideas tended to be practical, arising from day-to-day problems, staff suggestions and circumstances.

Research methods Comments on research methods were limited. Where methods were described there was a predictable reliance on desk research, surveys, unobtrusive testing, focus groups, and the classic pragmatist's methodology of 'trial and error'. CIPFA's PLUS was mentioned by four respondents and welcomed by all but one; others had used it to inform their own survey instruments. There was a welcome acknowledgement of the value of a nationally developed tool kit and some recognition of the importance of professional networking and sharing good practice via benchmarking.

Most library managers appeared wary of discussing methodology, readily admitting they were not experts, though some were aware of the potential pitfalls in sampling. On the whole they tried to conduct research as simply as possible. Only one had guidelines from a central policy division about how to prepare for consulting citizens. Most had varying access to experts within the wider Department of the local authority. Consultants were used, or had been used, where there was no expertise in-house, although it was recognised that they also provided objectivity. Many public library research efforts which were discussed were well-meaning, enthusiastic but often amateur. Most initiatives, with the exception of those driven by PLUS or annual survey work, are fragmented in terms of methodology rather than structured and co-ordinated.

Impact As the examples of research activities showed most research was undertaken, often reactively, as part of a short-term service development. Thus the purpose of research activity is usually to inform the management process or the committee decision-making process. Because of this research does impact on service development, for example, changes in opening hours and stock selection, however it seems to have little impact on broader policy considerations. Having said that, there is some confusion about the link between service and policy within the library service. Respondents were clearly aware of the need to get the message across to Committee to protect the service. Even though service development may be research-

driven in some individual authorities, because the research is not acknowledged as such, but is subsumed in a management paper or a committee report, there is little evidence of transferability or a build-up of knowledge, that could influence policy. Indeed, one gains an impression that for research to be tolerated in the public library arena it has to be concerned with the practicalities of service development; there is no place for 'pure' research that could be concerned with policy issues. As some library managers pointed out policy is influenced by many factors of which research is only one, and hence there is a feeling that it is better to concentrate research efforts where results can be put to good use immediately. Having said that, some managers were aware that their research activities did demonstrate how the library service was contributing to wider council policies even if it was not instrumental in defining those policies.

Managing research If there was little time to do research then there was even less time for training. Managers and their staff rarely, if ever, had training in research methods other than that gained as part of a degree course. Once again the approach is ad hoc, small-scale and informal. For example, staff carried out projects during part-time academic courses, or exploited external expertise by means of informal channels, for example, the colleague's husband who is an economist, students who write in. Library services rely on experience gained over the years, enthusiasm on the job, and whatever expertise is available at the time. There were two exceptional instances where there was a sense of research being managed within a strategic framework of service objectives, but the outstanding impression is one of practitioners working in isolation: as such there is no generation of a research culture.

Funding Costs, in terms of time and money, have to be absorbed rather than being set aside for research activity. Only one manager had a research budget (£13,000). Two others felt their own budgets were flexible enough to enable research activity. Many library managers were hampered in applying for funding by a lack of knowledge, confidence, expertise or time. There was also ambivalence about the value of bidding

for research funding where criteria do not match and where service development may be skewed and inhibited due to the perceived rigour of the bidding process. Many managers had not even applied to the British Library for their 'small grants'. Curiously some appeared to be more au fait with local authority bids for European Union and Lottery funding, presumably because someone else actually wrote the bid.

Local authority context Most local authorities appear to have some corporate research expertise, be it a policy or research unit within the Chief Executive's Department, a service development team within the wider Directorate, or expertise in bidding for external funds within, say, the Economic Development Unit. Some library managers have close working relationships with these units but others show a sense of remoteness or lack of awareness.

A key purpose of research is the need to provide evidence to support recommendations made to Committee, particularly in considering service reductions such as library closures or reduced hours required in order to manage budget cuts. More positively, business planning, the need to target resources effectively, the ethos of customer consultation, 'working in partnership', and the 'Charter approach' are also seen as stimuli to research.

On the whole there seems to be little involvement by the library services, at the level in the hierarchy of the library managers interviewed, in research and development in the corporate and strategic domains. A number of managers mentioned anti-poverty strategies in a vague way but not always with evidence of library service involvement. Where library services did contribute to council strategies there is little sense that the library services were directly involved in any research and policy development activity underpinning corporate planning in relation to issues such as lifelong learning, economic regeneration, social inclusion, community safety and youth employment - all areas which are high on the new government's agenda and where libraries have a role to play.

Dilemma analysis

Scanning the matrix obtained by the initial data analysis revealed 'tensions', for example in the form of the great differences in the approach to 'research management' taken by the different authorities and also inconsistencies in what individual library managers were saying. This presence of a number of minority views, and the apparent lack of definite answers, made the data amenable to 'dilemma analysis' in order to look at these tensions in more depth. The technique of dilemma analysis is described by Winter¹⁰ and Altrichter et al¹¹.

During the course of the interviews most library managers described situations, sometimes unknowingly, where there was a tension in terms of dilemmas that require professional decision-making. A list of dilemmas was drawn up by simply re-reading the interview transcripts and noting inconsistencies, tentativeness or indecision. Dilemmas can be expressed in the form "on the one hand ... but, on the other hand ...", for example:

On the one hand I regard having a research post as a high priority given the nature of the change going on in local authorities and within public libraries but, on the other hand, the difficulty of course has been the funding, and maintaining funding against a background of other budget cuts.

This approach is not without its problems. While it is not difficult to find dilemmas there is a tendency to pick upon points which resonate with one's own experience. Having identified a dilemma there is no generalised explanation of how to deal with it; Altrichter offers three pragmatic approaches¹².

Is the dilemma solvable? Many dilemmas express contradictory and unavoidable aspects of situations that cannot be resolved by any course of action. An example is the contradiction between 'on the one hand we can do research but, on the other hand, it may still be rejected by Committee of elected members if there are other more pressing considerations.' The dilemma is

not solvable as the research is inevitably only one part of the Committee-decision-making process. In contrast, the dilemma 'on the one hand we do research to aid day-to-day management and influence policy but, on the other hand, when it's served its immediate purpose it tends to get lost in committee papers or internal documents' is solvable if someone is, for example, prepared to make an effort in exploiting completed research reports.

Is the dilemma related to the complexity of the situation which makes it difficult to see what is happening? Many dilemmas result from having to act in situations where many factors are unclear and causes and effects are only partly understood. An example is the indecisiveness between 'on the one hand research might tell you something new, but, on the other hand, it might not.' A library manager whose primary aim is to improve service delivery may not have sufficient knowledge about underlying policies and what causes them. In addition s/he may know little about the consequences of various actions intended to improve methods (for example, asking the right questions, using a mix of methods, etc.)

Is the dilemma emotionally stressful? Stress often results from believing that you have to take some course of action which goes against your instinctive judgement. An example is the tension between 'on the one hand we want to do research which supports our own aims, but, on the other hand we don't want to be confrontational as far as the money is concerned.' Here, a library manager is concerned about the risk of alienating either library staff or funders by getting involved, or not getting involved, in research projects,

Of a sample of 34 dilemmas, eight could be judged unsolvable, 20 as complex and six as emotional. Incidentally the transcripts recording interviews with library managers who had limited experience, or little positive experience, of research activity, revealed themselves to be a good source of dilemmas. Even if a dilemma is judged to be 'unsolvable' we can still look for an acceptable way of coping with it. Just talking about a dilemma may give rise to ideas for solutions. Most dilemmas can be resolved to

some extent. Another useful outcome may be accepting the dilemma as the norm: this may reduce any resultant frustration. Working on dilemmas may be important in valuing minority views, reducing stress and enabling a more stimulating and productive discussion by ascribing equal value to perspectives.

Intensive analysis

Intensive analysis was carried out using the constant comparative method¹³. The factual contents of the categories of data, which were derived from coding up from the transcripts, are discussed in a forthcoming article in Library Management. One difference between the intensive analysis and the initial analysis is in the richness of the description and depth of findings. The categories used for analysis match library managers own words so it is possible to review some of the apparent anomalies in the initial data analysis. Three examples are given to illustrate this point.

Example 1: Research activities

Firstly consider these findings from the intensive analysis about the phrase research activities and what it conjures up in the minds of public library managers:

Research was a “grand term” to some library managers: “It sounds a bit academic and highbrow for what we actually do ... we gather management information and interpret it.” To others it lacked clarity: “really it’s separating out those of our activities that we can distinguish as research” because “we do quite a bit of analysing data and information gathering usually in response to specific situations that arise.” Others felt that while they did do research it wasn’t research in the academic sense. It was difficult to unpack out what was meant by ‘academic research’; such activity appeared to be specific and complex, compared to ‘real life research’ which “... isn’t very academic, it’s applied ... “ For many library managers the activities that made up research were part of day-to-day management: “I see it as gathering information to assist in decision-making processes...” Some library managers

explained their definition of research in terms of aspects of management and marketing such as targeting services, monitoring and consultation.

Research then was “practical, focused” and very much an ‘on-the-job’ activity: “most of our research is reacting to situations and is done pragmatically to aid management and policy in the department.” This library manager explained further:

This is really the way what might be called ‘research’ sometimes happens. You have a need to do something, you don’t particularly research it, but you put up a model that you think is going to work, and if it doesn’t you have to try and do something else ...

One library manager queried the terminology saying “... research is a useful shorthand term but it doesn’t convey to the practitioner ... very much at all” and went on to suggest an alternative term: “needs identification”. Another library manager was adamant about an aspect of the library service’s work: “I wouldn’t call it research, we’re gathering the data that will provide a proper analysis of the situation ...” Another stressed that the library service did ‘development work’, not research. Other library managers revisited their definitions during the interview, for example:

I think, having the conversation that we have had, what is coming through is understanding the terminology. We obviously have got a fair amount of experience of consulting with people. I suppose my mind had settled around the idea that research equals the scientific approach to undertaking consultation but from what we are talking about we are not too far away.

So, whilst very few library managers thought of themselves as practitioner-researchers there can be no doubt, given the degree to which research activity is combined with day-to-day work, that many senior library staff could fall into such a category, or as one redefined it “...library managers who have to do it all.” It is important to understand that this situation has evolved, it has not been planned, it has not arisen through choice, or with adequate support and training:

In the past we were more able to, say, second staff to special projects but now the staffing budget is so tight that that is just not as possible.

What we tend to do is to expect the higher paid staff to take on the research function ... It's put into their job description now when we are setting up posts. It may not be described as research as such, probably policy development.

Example 2: The purpose of public library research

As a second example, the contradiction between what library managers think about research ("it's very academic and not for me") and the value they place on research ("very high") can be explained by exploring the key purpose of research in the public library service, that is, as a political tool, providing accountability. Consider these findings from the intensive analysis:

Research activities were carried out for several reasons but an overarching purpose was that of accountability, be it to customers, politicians, funders. Time and time again library managers pointed out how research provided political accountability: "I think the more information you have got the more power you have got in terms of justifying the library service."

Research findings were "incredibly useful politically". One manager said "we are looking for research ... that provides information that can be used as a political tool ...". Yet another valued research "for producing committee reports, it helps with getting the message across when there are threats of budget cuts ..."

Library managers described how research verified actions by being able to get away from the "anecdotal" and "challenge a lot of givens", giving them "genuine findings" to take to the politicians instead of working "very much on hunches", and to be able to demonstrate the mass they are working with:

When councillors have said 'the last thing we want to do is shut a library' ... that's not because they're swayed by my eloquent prose but because they're aware that that information has come from our research [with] their voters..

As well as providing useful results managers noted the value of *raising the library service's profile* in that "... there is a certain amount of kudos in doing it." Involvement in larger bids, even if unsuccessful, often paved the way for smaller successful bids and raised the stature of the library service within the local authority:

Other consequences of the work we've done is that we're now leading the production of the council's Intranet and we're on the council's information strategy group. A few years ago that wouldn't have been the case ...

The Gateway to Information project certainly raised our profile and we are very keen to maintain control of it ... and actually make other officers better aware of the kind of services we provide. We're pushing the fact that we are not just about romances for little old ladies, we are actually about providing information ... it makes us less expendable in the budget cuts ...

A defining feature of research in the public library context is that much of it is conducted to *inform Committee decision-making*. The influence of the elected members is all-encompassing. Political circumstances varied between local authorities as did members' interest in library services. There is an expectation that research should be present in committee reports but some managers felt that whilst members expected to be informed they were not necessarily research-oriented:

Research is not a word that I use with elected members ... I would always use the word development ... elected members of the authority would not regard research as something that we could afford to do ... For me, research is an element of service development, but the connotation for most elected members would be that it's something that academics do.

The degree to which research findings were used by the members was also questioned. Some managers spoke of members' stubbornness in refusing to accept valid research findings, and their regional rather than national views. One manager noted the difficulty of reconciling focus group findings and members views:

... elected members are voted in to represent local people ... whatever focus group you put together lacks authority to speak for the public at large.

Another manager felt that any impact that research could have was inevitably limited because "at the end of the day, many decisions, particularly in relation to budget, are political

decisions and whilst we can advise and prepare the facts they aren't always taken on board." One consequence of this is that one needs a strategy in using research findings to influence policy decisions, thus, "it tends to be not one killing blow, but it's making a lot of opportunities to drip-feed the information to them."

Example 3: The impact of public library research

The findings above begin to reveal the conceptual and practical framework within which public library research activities take place. In the light of this analysis it becomes more understandable why identifying whether research had been used for developing policy and/or for developing service was not always straightforward. The managers themselves could not always unravel what could be a complex situation. Consider these findings from the intensive analysis:

Research seems to have little impact on broader policy considerations. This is not surprisingly given the nature of the research and the fact that it did tend to be more relevant to service than policy, and hence it was easier to discern the impact on service rather than policy. Only one manager, in a new unitary authority was clearly expecting research to influence policy: "... the driving force behind our research is to know our business ... we're really starting from scratch and the operational issues will come later." Whilst another manager maintained "the results of the research programme can lead to programmes of action that can also influence changes in culture and policy", another was more wary: "I don't think the research has led us to modify the overall purpose of the policy or the aims, but it has reinforced those".

Specific examples of the impact of research on policy were limited in scope and number. One manager noted "we can identify customer concerns through user profiling activity ... that can lead to changes in policy and direct action" and gave an example of the provision of women-only desks. Others spoke about changes to book buying/selection procedures. Three other managers gave examples of how research findings which led to service developments which were

subsequently used to influence policy, including this case of introducing services for blind people, via a research project. This manager reflected:

That project helped the council to put some substance to the fine words of equal opportunities. It's not so much that we came up with a radical new policy but that the work enabled us to clarify and substantiate policy with actions ... in a public library context you simply cannot engage in pure research, any research that we do always has to be done on the basis that we can sustain it in the real world with a real service development ...

One problem in using research findings to influence and shape policy was that was that "we've never set up a piece of work to say we want to look at this in policy terms". The complexity of policy development was clearly an issue.

One manager described the lengthy process of "informed debate and discussion" combined with the "intuitive element" regarding policy development in his local authority and concluded that "policy in part is formed by service research findings but also by intuition." Policy development is also "more difficult to get a handle on":

Policy is driven by lots of things and research is just a small trickle ... the direction of the council, the amount of funding ... professional developments ... central government messages as well ... So this piece of research ... is quite a small voice against a much larger voice.

Closing comments

By appraising the three sets of findings from the data it is possible to sift the wheat from the chaff, as it were, and tease out the harder questions that deserve to be investigated further in the final stage of the thesis. One such issue is whether the strategic potential of the public library service will be realised. Given that the social policy agenda of the current government requires 'deep' research to inform and underpin policy development and strategic action, and that the government is beginning to accept the assertion that the public library service can contribute to social policy objectives¹⁴, it is evident that the

research capacity within the public library sector remains underdeveloped and the public library service does not engage with policy development at corporate level within local authorities. One contribution of the completed thesis will be in providing a clearer understanding of such issues firmly based on a trustworthy analysis.

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Research activities and UK public libraries: past imperfect, future tense?

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Abstract

Investigates current research activities in public library services. Draws from interviews with 20 chief librarians. Findings reinforce earlier perceptions and data about research activities in the sector. Analysis explores factors such as research purpose, role of corporate strategy, limitations imposed by lack of suitably trained staff, support and funding. Presents evidence that research activity and method is largely confined to "simpler" issues of operational service development and does not extend to "harder" research questions addressing the social and economic impact of the service. Concludes that the restricted research capacity may endanger the realisation of the strategic potential of the service.

Introduction

Recent reports on the public library scene illustrate how the historical situation (Pluse and Prytherch, 1996) of fragmented, localised, low-key research activity is being replaced by a more coherent and driven approach with clearer co-ordination, direction and funding at national level (Library and Information Commission Research Committee, 1997; Society of Chief Librarians Public Libraries Research Group, 1997). However, other studies (Goodall, 1996; Goodall, 1997) have shown that research methods and research skills remain undeveloped in the public library service as a whole. As local government moves from an administrative or managerial model of service provision to a business or networked model of activities in support of strategic policy objectives, more attention will need to be given to research in order to address the "wicked issues" (Stewart, 1994) which are the priorities of local and central government today. As part of the work undertaken for a PhD thesis the contemporary practice of research in one statutory area of service, the public library service, has been examined in order to enrich our understanding of the relationship between research, as carried out by practitioner-researchers, and policy and strategy in local government.

This article investigates current research activities in public library services drawing from a series of interviews which took place between May and July 1997 with chief librarians or their equivalents in a sample of 20 local authorities in the West Midlands and North-East regions of England[1]. The analysis explores factors such as the purpose of research, the role of corporate strategy and the limitations imposed by lack of suitably trained staff, support and funding. Of particular concern is the evidence that research activity and method is largely confined to "simpler" issues of operational service development and does not extend to "harder" questions of research addressing the social and economic impact of the service.

This work is part of a PhD thesis, "Research activities in public libraries", due for completion mid-1999, which focuses on the relationship between local authorities, public libraries and research activities.

What did the managers mean by public library research?

Overall the research activities discussed during the interviews tended to reflect current operational concerns rather than broader strategic considerations. The three main areas of interest were users, service delivery and IT applications. Typical examples of research activities are, respectively, surveys of non-users (17), lapsed-users (11), survey to inform new library building (16); unobtrusive testing of the delivery of information services (17), reviews of School Library Services (5, 9, 16), library closures (18), library opening hours (18), monitoring use of public access Internet sites (17), specification for new computer system (9). The majority of the projects described were carried out in-house and within the individual local authority. There were fewer examples of externally funded or joint research activities.

Where does this phenomenon happen?

Each public library service was provided by a local authority for use by the general public. There were obvious differences between the library services in terms of position within the authority's structure, funding, staffing and so on. However there were also cultural differences in terms of how "research-friendly" they were. Articulating the *local authority's corporate culture* was difficult for the managers. Often managers described the corporate ethos in terms of "accountability" (7). Five managers spoke more confidently about the research approach in their authorities. For example, one said "it is pretty well embedded in all of our Department ..." (17); another described how research was "very central" to the authority and that "we are acutely aware that in making decisions about what sort of authority we are, what we are about ..." (7).

Those managers who were able to identify a clear guiding *corporate approach to research activity* were almost always involved in research activities themselves. Indeed an indication of the bigger contribution that libraries can make to the local authority can often be found in the corporate plan. Corporate strategy was commonly expressed in documents identifying key objectives (1, 10) or frameworks such as regeneration (2, 17) or anti-poverty (9, 12, 13) to which every department was supposed to contribute:

There's a corporate plan ... the principles are concerned with consultation, involvement, equality of access, participation. We've our own set of aims and values to add to that too ... but the structure of the corporate plan is used to shape our own development plan because it does demonstrate that we, as a library service, are supporting the council's strategies (19).

Other library services were operating in less fortunate circumstances:

There is no corporate plan or corporate information system here ... we actually know of parallel activities going on and people being surveyed one week on one instance and the next week on something that is almost exactly the same (15).

Why does research happen within library services?

While managers did not speak of an impetus for research as such it was clear that for some there were driving forces which had initiated the research approach within the library service. Some factors were internal to the library service and/or the local authority, others were external. "Finding out what the market place wants" (1) and checking "whether you are providing best value for money" (5) and "targeting resources" (5) in order to cope with budget reductions and inform members of the options (3) were the driving forces in three authorities.

Restructuring was the key factor in two library services (10, 17) and the introduction of a new authority-wide approach based on working in partnership with other departments, organisations and local people (20) was the key development in another. All managers from new unitary authorities were aware of the use that they could make of research even if the structures to enable it to happen were not yet in place. In other, more established local authorities, it was simply opportunism that initiated some research activities (8, 15, 19).

Purpose of research activities

Research activities were carried out for several reasons but an overarching purpose was that of accountability, be it to customers, politicians, funders. Time and time again managers pointed out how "it is increasingly important to be able to build within your argument bodies of evidence which demonstrate need" (19). Library managers described research to

justify the library service (3), identify priorities (5), and to argue its case (12). Research then was very practical: "we're not here to improve our image, we're here to improve the service" (13). Dealing with budget cuts, or to use one library service's euphemism, income generation activities, and consequent reductions in service (1, 3, 12, 16) meant that some research "was all done from the aspect of 'how can we save money', not 'how can we offer a better service'" (3). One manager reflected:

... assessing the effectiveness of the integrated library system was a major piece of work and resulted in a large report to committee which contained a lot of interesting information ... but it's main purpose was to demonstrate to the committee that there was no staff saving that they could take off the department ... (12).

A number of other, more positive, stimuli can also be identified, such as developing business plans (1, 16). Although not stated explicitly, the need for research to underpin bids for external funding was evident in some of the descriptions of research activity. The presence of "the Charter approach" (2, 16, 17) and the use of performance indicators (10, 15, 16) set the tone for some library services. Four managers (8, 10, 11, 15), cited quality procedures as a reason for doing research. Collecting statistical data for CIPFA was considered as research by some library services (2, 5), especially where such data are not easily obtainable from the computer system.

Given the drive for accountability it is not surprising that the most common form of research activity involved obtaining feedback from users. Consultation was "part of our ethos" for one manager and was viewed as "an ongoing process in terms of getting feedback to inform our decision-making" and thus important "whenever we have a new development in the offing" (6, 17, 19). This was especially so for the manager who was "keen to find out what exactly is it that the people of this unitary authority want, not what was appropriate to the people of the county a few years back ..." (9). One manager gave an interesting example describing how external funding had been obtained where "the council said, and this was one of the key areas that convinced the Government to give money, that it would involve the community in spending the money" (19).

Several managers took on board customer comments through complaints and comments systems (9, 16) and also through consultation

with specific user groups, such as users of the School Library Service (5, 9, 16). Some of this consultation was undoubtedly driven by the pressure of competition, for example, delegating to schools the budget for the schools library service becomes a spur to market research into the real needs of schools. Some of this consultation too came about through the integration of library services into broader directorates, for example, (17), where there is already a culture of market research in order to achieve success in delivering business and service objectives.

What makes research activity happen?

There are some intangible aspects of developing research activity. At the start of each interview managers were asked to recall their thoughts on being asked to participate in the study. There were some candid responses which did not always give a positive view of research such as "research is not the main function of the public library service" (8). One manager offered the explanation that "... if something is research it has an academic background which may be of very limited use to what we do at the sharp end" (16). Others declared it was a "good thing" even though they felt they were not involved in research activities: "... it's something we should be doing but we don't do very well, we should do more but it's difficult ..." (3). Another commented "it's one of those topics that everyone talks about and doesn't do anything about, or don't realise that they are doing it in the first place" (7).

Nevertheless during the course of the interviews managers often inferred the importance of doing research. However when asked, is there a value placed on research within the local authority, their comments were quite cautious. Some managers qualified their responses saying "there certainly is in term of intent" (16) or clarified their answer in their terms: "it's valuable that we are able to demonstrate how we are supporting the priorities of the council in terms of community development, regeneration" (19). One manager spoke of a dichotomy: "... there's a recognition that long-term research, not directed by force of circumstances, is valuable" whilst noting that "there's also research that is more pragmatically based, that's reacting to circumstances, or is necessary to continue practical management" (12). Only one

manager gave a resounding “no” (15) in response to the question.

Values need to be articulated to enable action and evidence for this articulation can be found in the prevailing, for want of a better phrase, management style. This link was clearly set out in (7, 8, 10, 11), for example:

... we have the leadership from the city council as a whole, and that sets out priorities for us ... That is the strategic context ... The Director and Central Library Manager have the vision to interlink them all and give strategic leadership. The rest of us contribute at different points in terms of supporting that work but that structure helps me see what the priorities are, and it helps me influence my managers to make choices (and) choose priorities (10).

Developing a research strategy

A number of topics were discussed which illuminate the development of a research strategy. First it was necessary to resolve the definition of research activities. Research was a “grand term” (17) to some managers (8, 9): “it sounds a bit academic and highbrow for what we actually do ... we gather management information and interpret it” (11). To others it lacked clarity: “really it’s separating out those of our activities that we can distinguish as research” because “we do quite a bit of analysing data and information gathering usually in response to specific situations that arise” (12). Some felt that while they did do research it was not research in the academic sense (6, 8). It was difficult to tease out what was meant by “academic research”; such an activity appeared to be specific and complex (5, 14), unlike “real life” research which “isn’t very academic, it’s applied ...”(12).

For many managers the activities that made up research were simply part of day-to-day management: “I see it almost as gathering information in order to assist in decision-making processes ...” (6). Some managers defined research in terms of marketing, targeting services and monitoring (5); others cited consultation activities (6, 8). Research was “practical, focused” (18): “... most of our research is reacting to situations and is done pragmatically to aid management in the department” (12).

Having a management strategy for library services was recognised as crucial in enabling a research strategy. Several managers, through no fault of their own, were struggling to work without a clear guiding strategy (3, 8). There

were examples of more structured approaches where library services had corporate guidance (10, 17), for example: “we have the key activities areas which give our main objectives ...” (13) and another drew from a district cultural centres strategy “linked to the wider council picture” (19). One manager gave a lucid description of the “strategic context” for any research activity, commencing with “local governing party policies” which were used by the council to “produce a policy framework document” which “sets key objectives” to which everyone is expected to contribute. Each committee then produces its own objectives under those headings so that, finally, “my individual unit plans are under those four headings ...” This manager added:

It’s very important to have that context, you can’t do research for it’s own sake. If it isn’t in context then it doesn’t have a service development benefit or an organisational benefit (10).

The management of research activities within the library services varied, from “producing project and task groups” (15), or delegating to the head of the appropriate service (14), or “a small headquarters staff” who acted “fairly informally and pragmatically” (12). Some managers had no organised approach (3) or relied on professional judgement for managing research:

We don’t have a 40 page document called the service development strategy but that’s where I have to use my judgement as the Director ... to assess whether or not a project seems worth pursuing, bearing in mind what I know about what the committee has been happy with in the past, or ... what I think is important to pursue in strategic terms for us as a library service (8).

Funding

As much research was carried out internally often there was not a need to apply for funding but some managers had introduced the bidding process internally to hone up bidding skills (10). Applying for external funding was essential in some library services (19) as “The mainline budget is fully stretched just trying to keep the day-to-day service going ...” (8) Writing bids tended to be the responsibility of senior management (8, 12); one manager described the process as “trial and error” (12). Another emphasised using the right terminology: “... they are very keen on ‘transferable benefits’ and you have to demonstrate that your work has got the sort of benefit that they want”. Above all it was important to

remember that "what their needs are and what our needs are might not be the same ..." (5, 15), hence it could be necessary to "repackage" a research project to tap into external funding (6).

As well as the lack of knowledge about funding sources (no staff had received any training) three managers spoke about the local authority's reluctance to apply for external funds (3, 6, 10) and another manager spoke of the perceived difficulty in bidding for European funds in comparison to applying to the British Library (11). One explanation for this apparent lack of interest in applying for external funding could be that funding did not match the most pressing needs (5). For another manager it was not that a failure to obtain funds was disheartening but rather that it had been a waste of time (19). Others worried that matching the criteria of the funding body could skew service (2, 11).

The budget available to support research activity varied greatly between authorities. Only one manager had a defined budget of about £13,000 (10). Another library service had fully devolved budgeting so there were opportunities to "fit in" research activities (17). Two library services had no budget (11, 13), another had no allowance for "any kind of research activity that's costed as such" (15). Others (6, 7) were prepared to be adaptable, although this would involve making choices. Not surprisingly there was a concern with getting value for money. One manager compared the cost of his time to research something against the cost of carrying out a survey:

... that survey cost us just over £400 to get the analysis, which was good value for money ...

And that's the issue, if it costs £2,000 for me to research the things I'm interested in that would get us five surveys analysed ... It's a drop in the ocean in the overall budget of £1.4 million but our budget is so inflexible these days we don't even have that sort of option (18).

Despite not having any budget several library services were still able to conduct research as long as costs could be hidden or absorbed, for example, survey work was funded by the publicity and promotions budget (1), the printing budget (11) or generally absorbed (9, 12, 16, 18). The real problem were the implications for staff time (7, 9, 12, 13, 19), although even this could be minimised: "as far as the management team goes the cost would have been minimal as everybody tended to do the work outside of work time ..." (9).

It is all very well managers saying "we are very good at getting things done on the cheap!" (17) but the lack of a dedicated budget for research activity can have other implications for the research process. As well as acting as a deterrent (13), research may also become outcome-driven (10), and there are clearly problems with staffing and ensuring continuity of staffing, especially given a background of budget cuts (19). One manager noted that "resources for training are limited" so there was a tendency to rely on the limited internal expertise (14). Another spoke about the effect of funding research on staff morale: "you can get a poor reaction from staff ... because it's taking up five grand that we could use for the service" (16). Limits on funding could also be responsible for limits in methodology. One manager pointed out "any kind of collection and analysis of data is very expensive so the whole thing has been designed to be incredibly simple to do" (11). Hence methodologies were chosen which were "the most cost-effective option" with the result that "it was a very simple survey ... we did all the analysis ourselves" (11).

Who is involved in doing research within library services?

The responsibility for carrying out much of the research activity fell on the chief librarian and senior staff (1, 11), some of whom had had relevant experience (14, 18), but more often than not this was not the case, and obviously such staff have other major responsibilities. Sometimes volunteers from library staff were used (1, 11, 18), especially if they were studying for professional qualifications (9, 11, 17) or staff were invited to apply for specific projects (6, 10, 17). Some research activities were achieved through delegation or secondment. One manager described how:

... it is increasingly difficult to offer staff opportunities for promotion ... people will use project funding for an opportunity to either move sideways into something that enables them to develop, or indeed something which will replace promotion in terms of financial benefits as well as career benefits (8).

Specialist or dedicated research staff were few and far between (19). While they may be recruited for externally funded programmes (12), it was equally likely that these would be seen as opportunities for existing staff (12, 16). A minority of managers had ready access

to staff with research skills within their wider departments (10, 14), although these staff in themselves were not always trained specialists (5). While one manager pointed out how the reduction in numbers of professional staff over the years had reduced the potential research capacity (2), reductions in staff with specific research responsibilities were noted by four authorities, (10, 15, 16, 17) including the loss of a planning and development officer in 1991 (15) and a departmental research officer in 1993 (17). However, three new posts were also mentioned which offered some degree of research capacity, usually within a wider marketing or development role (10, 16, 18).

Very few managers thought of themselves as practitioner-researchers, indeed one simply described himself as "a happy amateur who is dabbling really" (11), there can be no doubt, given the degree to which research activity is combined with day-to-day work, that many senior library staff could fall into such a category. One manager described how the situation had evolved:

In the past we were more able to second staff to projects but now the staffing budget is so tight that that is just not as possible. What we tend to do is to expect the higher paid staff to take on the research function ... It's put into their job description now when we are setting up posts. It may not be described as research as such, probably policy development (20).

On the whole any research training was gained at degree level or acquired through experience (3, 7, 9, 12), or previous posts (5, 16), or through personal interest (6, 8), rather than formal expertise. Or, alternatively, relying on a key person (1, 10, 13): in one case this was simply "a colleague's husband (who) is an economist ..." (13). One manager summed up the situation as "skills development by osmosis" (17). Another added "we are amateurs at (research). Our skills lie in other directions which are concerned with providing services to the public" (19).

Using consultants then was a necessity where library services did not have the expertise to prepare questionnaires, or the computer resources to analyse results (12), or where it was inappropriate "to use people from another department" as "they would not understand what we were about" (15). There were also advantages, namely objectivity and credibility (1). Cost, of course, was prohibitive, and the use of consultants was reserved

for major projects, "Lottery bids and that kind of thing", in one local authority (5), not for the library service. Furthermore, there was the question of value for money and two managers reported poor experiences with consultants (13, 20).

Who else may be involved?

There are staff external to the library service who may be involved in public library research activities, for example those in a corporate research unit. On the whole, at the level in the hierarchy of the managers interviewed, surprisingly few knew whether or not their local authority had a corporate research unit. Arrangements varied greatly between local authorities. One manager from a large county authority said there was "no central policy unit at all" (15) although he could get raw data from a Planning and Transportation Department (15). Similarly (12) used the Planning Department and (20) the Planning and Marketing Unit. In (5, 6 and 16) the managers could make a bid to the Corporate Information Unit to undertake research. The new unitary authorities each had access, on a commissioning basis, to a Joint Strategy Unit which had previously been the county's Research and Investigation Unit (5, 9, 14, 18) although there was some doubt as for how long this arrangement would continue.

Some managers utilised the expertise within the Chief Executive's Department in terms of "policy and planning people" (6, 11) or "performance and monitoring" (13). The level of assistance varied, while advice was readily available (10) staffing was not (19). Economic Development was mentioned by some managers (7, 17, 19), particularly as a source of advice on bidding to Europe (12). Four managers (6, 10, 17, 18) had access to research skills within the wider Department in which "Libraries" was based. This could vary from an individual (10) to a team (6, 17). Other contacts were ad hoc.

During the discussions the library managers were prompted to give examples of how library services had worked with different departments within their local authorities. For example, four managers described joint projects with Education, namely a poets in residence scheme (5), an assessment of services for schools (5, 7), developing parent information points in libraries (15) and introducing a child care information service (20). In

practice working closely with other sections of the local authority tended to occur intermittently or “at the sharp end” (11): “... we would tend to involve other departments as and when we thought they would be useful to us and vice versa ...” (12).

Another manager felt that, regarding cross-departmental working, while there was “a lot more than in the past” there was “not as much as there should be” as “people are still jealous of their areas, of what were traditionally their empires ...” (15) Only one manager spoke confidently of the success of his “interdisciplinary approach” (7). Another admitted “there is a wish to work corporately in the department, in the county, but there is a lack of resources to carry that out in a very thorough way” (12). On a more positive note one manager worked in a local authority where:

... there is a commitment to break down departmental barriers – we have done away with departments now, we have clusters, and I think the Council is trying to encourage groups to look at things more strategically and to think of the wider picture not just their own bit (19).

What is public library research used for?

Action usually followed the results of research activities. Sometimes findings from consultation were used to inform a library service’s strategy (19), as well as developing services (9, 11). Sometimes, but not often, there was follow-up research to confirm findings, for example, action research after a weekend opening survey (11, 19). Much research formed the basis of Committee reports (3, 10, 11).

Identifying whether research had been used for developing policy and/or for developing service was not always straightforward because the managers themselves could not always unravel what could be a complex situation: “... although policy is supposed to come before service development, they often come together and often service developments lead you to adjust the policy ...” (12). Because research is undertaken to inform management and ultimately Committee decision-making it does impact on service development but this does tend to be small scale, for example, introducing new services such as videos (15) or a homework centre (19). Several library services extended or changed their opening hours (1, 10, 11, 13,

15). Others improved services by following up user comments (5, 9, 10, 13, 16).

Research seems to have little impact on broader policy considerations. This is not surprising given the nature of the research and the fact that it did tend to be more relevant to service than policy, and hence it was easier to discern the impact on service rather than policy (16, 17). Only one manager, in a new unitary authority was clearly expecting research to influence policy: “... the driving force behind our research is to know our business ... we’re really starting from scratch and the operational issues will come later” (18). While another manager maintained “the results of the research programme can, should, and do, lead to specific programmes of action that can also influence changes in culture and policy” (10), another was more wary: “I don’t think the research has led us to modify the overall purpose of the policy or the aims, but I think it has reinforced those” (12).

Specific examples of the impact of research on policy were limited in scope and number. One manager noted “we can identify customer concerns through user profiling activity ... that can lead to changes in policy and direct action” and gave an example of the provision of women-only desks (10). Others spoke about changes to book buying/selection procedures (5, 9). Three other managers (16, 17) gave examples of how research findings led to service developments which were subsequently used to influence policy, for example, regarding the impact of introducing services for blind people, via a research project. This manager reflected:

I guess that [project] helped the council to put some substance to the fine words of equal opportunities. It’s not so much that we came up with a radical new policy but that the work enabled us to clarify and substantiate policy with actions ... in a public library context you simply cannot engage in pure research, any research that we do always has to be done on the basis that we can sustain it in the real world with a real service development ... (8).

One problem in using research findings to influence and shape policy was that “we’ve never set up a piece of work to say we want to look at this in policy terms” (11). The complexity of policy development was clearly an issue. One manager described the lengthy process of “informed debate and discussion” combined with the “intuitive element” regarding policy development in his local authority and concluded that “policy in part is

formed by service research findings but also by intuition" (7). Another felt that "policy development is more difficult to get a handle on" (11), for example:

Policy is driven by lots of things and research is just a small trickle ... the direction of the council, the amount of funding ... professional developments ... central government messages as well ... So this piece of research ... is quite a small voice against a much larger voice (11).

While managers found it hard to talk about the impact of research on policy there was a greater awareness of the added value of research. Often staff involved in projects retained a lot of expertise (16). However the main benefit of research was that it provided accountability: "I think the more information you have got the more power you have got in terms of justifying the library service" (5). Research findings were "... incredibly useful politically ..." (11). One manager said "we are looking for research ... that provides information that can be used as a political tool ..." (17). Yet another valued research "for producing committee reports, it helps with getting the message across when there are threats of budget cuts ..." (10). Library managers described how research verified actions by being able to get away from the "anecdotal" and "challenge a lot of givens" (5, 18), giving them "genuine findings" to take to the politicians instead of working "very much on hunches" (13), and to be able to demonstrate the mass they are working with:

(When) the councillors have said "the last thing we want to do is shut a library" ... that was not because they were swayed by my eloquent prose but because they're aware that ... that information has come from our research ... (with) their voters (17).

As well as providing useful results one manager noted the value of raising the library service's profile in that "... there is a certain amount of kudos in doing it" (11). Involvement in larger bids, even if they are not successful, often paved the way for smaller successful bids (19) and raised the stature of the library service within the local authority:

Another consequence of the work we have been doing is that we're now leading the production of the council's Intranet and ... we've got a place on the council's information strategy group. A few years ago that wouldn't have been the case ... (19).

Another described the benefits of leading the authority's Gateway to Information project:

The project certainly raised our profile and we are very keen to maintain control of it ... and

actually make other officers better aware of the kind of services we provide. We're pushing the fact that we are not just about romances for little old ladies, we are actually about providing information ... it makes us less expendable in the budget cuts ... (9).

The defining feature of research in the public library context is that much of it is conducted to inform committee decision-making. The influence of the members is all-encompassing. Political circumstances varied between local authorities as did members' interest in library services. There is an expectation that research should be present in committee reports but some managers (7, 8, 15) felt that whilst members expected to be informed they were not necessarily research-oriented:

Research is not a word that I use with elected members ... I would always use the word development ... elected members of the authority would not regard research as something that we could afford to do ... For me research is an element of service development, but the connotation for most elected members would be that it's something that academics do (8).

The degree to which research findings were used by the members was also questioned (12). Some managers spoke of members' stubbornness in refusing to accept valid research findings (1, 13, 18) Another bemoaned their limited regional rather than national views (3). One manager touched on the difficulty of reconciling research carried out through focus groups, and members views:

... elected members are voted in to represent local people ... whatever focus group you put together lacks authority to speak on behalf of the public at large (8).

Another manager felt that the impact that research could have was inevitably limited because "at the end of the day, many decisions, particularly in relation to budget, are political decisions and whilst we can advise and prepare the facts they aren't always taken on board" (2). One consequence of this is that one needs a strategy in using research findings to influence policy decisions, thus, "it tends to be not one killing blow, but it's making a lot of opportunities to drip-feed the information to them" (17).

Difficult issues

The interviews highlighted some serious problems for managers, such as sparing staff time for research (17) or "quite simply, it's

finding the time to do it" (4). Even where staff were funded there were still dilemmas in covering secondments and supporting external research staff (20). Library managers lacked "time to plan and manage research" (12, 3), time to allocate and supervise staff (12, 17), time to ensure the work is used (17) and that results are accurate and valid (3). The timescales involved in bidding caused great difficulties (2, 15, 19). Eight different funding agencies were mentioned during the interviews, each of which had different requirements for applications. Some managers lamented the bureaucracy and paperwork (7, 8, 20) and the need to cover matching costs (10) or hidden costs (15), all of which increased if the bid was successful.

Library managers were clearly aware of differing agendas (15, 19) of the local authority and potential funders. One manager described the "tension in trying to do research which will support you in doing what you want to do ... but at the same time not being confrontational from the money (16). The prevailing local authority context could also be a limiting factor. Some were keen in principle to work with other local authorities but found collective activity difficult "because there is a different political agenda in every authority" (15).

The approach to methodology by most managers was succinctly expressed by "keep it simple, stupid": "We are not looking to break new ground. We want information and we want it collected in a robust, testable, way, so we try and do it as simply and straightforwardly as possible ..." (17). The research methods used ranged from the straightforward, for example, "our annual user survey only asks six questions, we make no analysis of the users by age, sex, whatever" (11); to the more innovative:

Working alongside (an arts group) has shown me the role arts can play in consultation, because it's not just about getting people to say what they like, it focuses their attention, challenges their perceptions, and gets them involved in a very direct way (19).

On the whole the methods were drawn from standard practice including, for example, action research surveys, unobtrusive testing. Some managers apologised for their simplicity (3, 5, 16, 19). Others used a range of methodologies because they thought it was good practice (10, 14, 19) or to stretch the budget (10, 12), but there was little sense of there

being any evaluation of methods used to obtain data.

Regarding dissemination: "If there wasn't a need to write it up you would just leave it at that. You need to write it up if you have to justify resources or to get a decision out of somebody else. We haven't got time to write things up for the sake of it" (12). As well as losing research through not writing up projects there was also a loss through the failure to share findings and make best use of results internally within the authority (3, 16).

Some managers questioned the relevance to local people of public library research (7, 8, 14, 16, 17), for example, the value of local versus national networking projects (20). Even where a research approach was favoured managers were conscious of the pitfalls including bias (2, 3), researching the right issues (3, 18), "being blown off course by both a lack of time and finance" (12), communication and co-ordination with other staff (3) and maintaining projects (2, 3). Time and time again the bottom-line was emphasised: "The book fund has been cut by 41 per cent in five years. In that context it takes a lot to say 'I want to invest in research activity' when I can't put books on shelves..." (15).

The findings reinforce earlier perceptions and conclusions about public library research activities as reported in the professional literature (Goulding, 1994). Despite positive changes in direction, such as the consultative work in developing a national agenda on public library research, and the promise of practical support for public library research at the time of the interviews there was not a strong positive impact on research activities at local level and it is evident that the research capacity within the public library sector remains underdeveloped. To ensure survival, growth and the realisation of its strategic potential, the public library service has not only to contribute to policy objectives but to engage with policy development. The new government has proposed a vision of the future and the profession has been quick to demonstrate how libraries can help achieve this vision by showing how they can make a real contribution to education, economic regeneration, cultural enrichment and community development. At the local level public libraries have the potential to help their local authorities achieve their social, economic and political objectives. The surfacing of a more coherent and driven approach means

that research can no longer be confined to “simpler” issues to do with operational service development, but must extend to “deeper” research addressing the impact of services. This means that public library services operating today need access to researchers with skills in quantitative and qualitative methods as well as a sound knowledge of social and policy analysis, market research, community development and customer care. It is proposed that the future development of research in the public library service requires the role of research to be reassessed, the rationale restated, the contribution in transforming information into intelligence recognised, and the approach to methodology reviewed to tackle the wicked issues. One contribution of the thesis will be to provide a clear understanding of the limitations in current practice and to put forward recommendations for action to ensure that public library services are not excluded or disadvantaged in the research stakes.

Note

- 1 In order to make best use of the available data, and ensure trustworthiness of the findings, the transcripts of the interviews were analysed using three different techniques. Initial data analysis was carried out by coding down to produce a matrix reviewing each manager’s comments across nine categories derived from the interview schedule. Such findings are inevitably superficial as the summary is derived from the interview schedule. Scanning the matrix revealed tensions, such as the great differences in the approach to research management taken by the different authorities, and also inconsistencies in what individ-

ual managers were saying. This presence of a number of minority views, and the apparent lack of definite answers, made the data amenable to dilemma analysis in order to consider these tensions in more depth. These analytical techniques are discussed in a forthcoming article in *Library and Information News*. The findings reported in this article were derived by intensive analysis carried out using the constant comparative method. Comments are attributed to individuals by means of parentheses, however to maintain confidentiality no key is provided within this article.

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PUBLIC LIBRARY RESEARCH

DEBORAH GOODALL examines the place
of research in today's management and
development of public libraries.

"Tell me, what were your first thoughts when I asked to come and talk to you about research activities in public libraries?" So began a series of semi-structured interviews held with senior public library managers to gather their experiences, insights and opinions regarding research activity within their own library services. Much has been made of the poor state of public library research in the literature but less time has been invested in identifying and tackling the difficulties surrounding public library research activity. This article presents twenty key issues in public library research activity found in a sample of twenty county, metropolitan and unitary library authorities in the West Midlands and North-East regions of England between May - July 1997. It is evident that whilst the historical situation of fragmented, localised, low-key research activity¹ is being replaced by a more coherent and driven approach with co-ordination, direction and funding at national level² there has not yet been a strong positive impact on research activities at local level.

PERCEPTIONS

First impressions of research activities were unclear, but the value placed on research was high. There were some candid responses to that initial question such as "my first reaction was we don't do any" and "research is not the main function of the public library service." One respondent explained: "I immediately thought it's rather obscure, rather academic... if something is research it has an academic background which may be of very limited use to what we do at the sharp end." Others declared it was a 'good thing' even though they felt they were not very involved in research activities: "... it's something we should be doing but we don't probably do very well, we should do more but it's difficult..." During the course of the interviews

respondents often referred to the importance of doing research and when asked about the value placed on research within the local authority, although comments were quite cautious, most said 'yes, for Libraries' but were unsure about other departments. Others qualified their responses adding "there certainly is in term of intent", and "yes, but I don't think historically that that has been the case", or more frequently clarified their answer. "It's valuable that we are able to demonstrate how we are supporting the priorities of the council in terms of community development, regeneration..."

THE PLACE OF RESEARCH

Definitions of research activities were broad and pragmatic, not academic. Respondents did not see themselves as having a strong involvement in research despite the amount of research activity within their public library service. Much research activity was viewed as part of day-to-day management, information-gathering which assisted with decision making.

Research was a "grand term" to some respondents: "It sounds a bit academic and highbrow for what we actually do... we gather management information and interpret it". To others it lacked clarity: "really it's separating out those of our activities that we can distinguish as research" because "we do quite a bit of analysing data and information gathering usually in responsible to specific situations that arise". Some felt that while they did do research it wasn't research in the academic sense. It was difficult to tease out what was meant by 'academic research'; such activity appeared to be specific and complex, unlike real life research which "isn't very academic, it's applied."

For many respondents the activities that made up research were part of day-to-day management "I see it almost as

gathering information in order to assist in decision-making processes..." Some respondents used examples to explain their definition of research including such aspects of management and marketing as targeting services and monitoring. Others spoke of consultation activities. Research then was "practical, focused": "I would say that most of our research is reacting to situations and is done pragmatically to aid management and policy in the department."

The impetus for research in public library services was accountability, although there were other external stimuli such as a concern with quality, customer consultation, the Charter approach. There was no room for 'inquisitive research'. Opportunities for research, other than annual commitments, often came through restructuring and opportunism.

While respondents did not speak of an impetus for research as such it was clear that for some there were driving forces which had initiated the research approach within the library service. Some factors were internal to the library service and/or the local authority, others were external. "Finding out what the market place wants", checking "whether you are providing best value for money" and "targeting resources" in order to cope with budget reductions and inform members of the options were the influences in three authorities. Restructuring or the introduction of new authority-wide approaches, both often on-going in the unitary authorities during the interview period, could also be key factors:

The big change for us was in 1988 when Libraries moved into what was then a Leisure Department... At that time we had a research assistant in the Leisure Department their work was connected with the Libraries and they set up the systems we have continued.

...the other impact is working in partnership with other departments, organisations and local people... The whole thing has come about because of the Council's 'New Ways of Working'.

In others it was simply opportunism that initiated some research activities:

Very often it is [opportunism] that guides us because we have budget constraints, political direction, customer expectation, and to respond to all of those in the given

time frame means that research cannot be undertaken.

The purpose of research was to feed into management and committee decision-making. Research was thus service-led and concerned with value-for-money.

Research activities were carried out for several reasons but an overarching purpose was that of accountability, be it to customers, politicians, funders. Time and time again respondents pointed out how "it is increasingly important to be able to build within your argument bodies of evidence which demonstrate need". Respondents described research to justify the library service, identify priorities and to demonstrate that they were "providing something the public wanted". Dealing with budget cuts, or to use one library service's euphemism, income generation activities, and consequent reductions in service meant that some research "was all done from the aspect of 'how can we save money', not 'how can we offer a better service.'" One respondent reflected:

...assessing the effectiveness of the integrated library system was a major piece of work and resulted in a large report to committee which contained a lot of interesting information... but its main purpose was to demonstrate to the committee that there was no staff saving that they could take off the department.

A number of other, more positive, stimuli can also be identified such as writing a business plan and research to underpin bids for external funding. The presence of the Charter approach and the use of performance indicators set the tone for some library services with the publication of a Library Users Charter requiring research into service performance and customer satisfaction on an annual basis. Collecting statistical data for CIPFA was considered as research by some library services, especially where such data was not easily obtainable from the computer system. CIPFA's standardised public library user survey package known as PLUS was the main research activity in some services.

Given the drive for accountability it is not surprising that a common form of research activity involved feedback from users. This was especially so for the respondent who was "keen to find out what exactly is it that the people of this unitary authority want, not what was appropriate to the people of the county a few years back..." Another respondent described how external

funding had been obtained where "...one of the key areas that convinced the government to give the council money, was that it said it would involve the community in spending the money." Some of this consultation was undoubtedly driven by the pressure of competition, for example, delegating to schools the budget for the schools library service becomes a spur to market research into the real needs of schools.

PRACTICE

There was unlikely to be a strategic approach to research activity as presented in a research strategy. There was little evidence of research management in the public library services in terms of planning, staffing, budget, and support.

How research activities were managed within the library services varied, from "producing project and task groups", or delegating to the head of the appropriate service, or to "a small headquarters staff" who acted "fairly informally and pragmatically". Most respondents had no organised approach: "We don't have a 40 page document called the service development strategy, that's where I use my judgement as the Director... to assess whether or not a project seems worth pursuing." A few took a more structured approach, for example:

The thing that channels the research is our service planning... we are obviously aware of the regeneration strategy so a lot of our planning will look at how we can feed into that, but it's the service planning that shows where we have research needs, and day-to-day management.

As far as staffing was concerned:

Our Information Services Librarian has a specific responsibility for looking at research needs and how we can implement them... and it's managed from [Central Services]...

And as ideas for research developed they were:

...fed to our research project leader who databases them and decides what opportunities there are. The management team will establish priority areas and as low-key areas.

Best practice occurred where library service research strategy was linked to corporate strategy. These respondents who were able to identify a clear

guiding corporate strategy/approach to research activity were almost always involved in research activities themselves. Indeed an indication of the bigger contribution that libraries can make to the local authority can often be found in the corporate plan. Corporate strategy was commonly expressed in documents identifying key objectives or frameworks such as regeneration or anti-poverty to which every department was supposed to contribute. For example, as one respondent outlined:

There's a corporate plan... the principles are concerned with consultation, involvement, equality of access, participation. We've our own set of aims and values to add that too... but the structure of the corporate plan is used to shape our own development plan because it does demonstrate that we, as a library service, are supporting the council's strategies. Certainly where priorities are given by the council for improvement we are able to flag up areas on which we're working on too.

This library service used the corporate plan to guide their own activities and to identify opportunities for feeding in their own projects into much larger regeneration bids. Even something as simple as setting up a user group was seen as worthwhile "because there is an awful lot happening in that geographical area which we need to build on, and you need to involve local people to help you build up the community." Such involvement could also act as a lever for further development opportunities.

Another felt that within the Council "...research is an integral part of the service delivery cycle" so that whilst there was "a minimalist research and development unit" each Chief Officer was fully aware that research "has got to be built in to your overall management... it is not just one or two people: it is the sort of thinking that has got to permeate the organisation." Another respondent gave a lucid description of the "strategic context" for any research activity, commencing with "local governing party policies" which were used by the council to "produce a policy framework document" which "sets key objectives" to which everyone is expected to contribute. Each committee then produces its own objectives under those headings so that, finally, "my individual unit plans are under those four headings and then I draw them together for an area plan..." This respondent added "it's

very important to have that context, you just can't do research for its own sake, if it isn't in context then it doesn't have a service development benefit or an organisational benefit."

Research activities reflected current operational concerns rather than broader strategic considerations.

Overall the research activities tended to reflect current operational concerns rather than broader strategic considerations. The three main areas of interest were users, service delivery, and IT applications. The majority of the projects described were carried out in-house and within the individual local authority. There were few examples of externally funded or joint research activities.

Research topics related to the needs of individual public library services and local authorities; there was little sense of drawing from or contributing to a national agenda, except through the larger, externally funded projects.

Ideas for research activities came from many sources, for example, professional journals, looking at what other authorities have done and listening to customers. One respondent felt that "some of the topics are identified by our masters..." The most frequently mentioned source was the staff of the library service and ideas were picked up by respondents, either on an ad hoc basis, or through a structure including staff suggestions. Management team was usually the focal point of ideas.

Staff lack training and time to do research. The role of the practitioner-researcher is not recognised nor valued. It is acceptable for research to be done by 'enthusiastic amateurs' and students.

The responsibility for carrying out much of the research activity in the sample fell upon the Chief Librarian and senior staff. Some had relevant experience however the more typical situation was one where this was not the case and where "the research is done basically in the spare time of people, including myself, who have other duties." Sometimes volunteers from library staff were used or staff were invited to apply for specific projects. Some research activities were achieved through delegation or secondment. Another strategy was to identify staff doing relevant courses and one respondent predicted that "there will be a number of projects coming out over the next few years because we have a number of staff doing part-time courses at the university." Specialist or dedicated research staff were few and far between. Reductions in staff with specific responsibilities were noted by

four respondents however three new posts were also mentioned, although these were invariably development or marketing posts which included an element of research in the job specification.

Sparing time for research was a serious problem in the library services visited. Even when staff were funded there were still difficulties in providing support and replacement staffing. Respondents lacked "time to plan and manage research", time to "get away from the day-to-day practicalities", time to allocate and supervise staff, time to ensure the work is used and that "gut feelings" about research results are valid. One respondent spoke for many in saying "Whilst we may see [research] as a good thing to do I think we are busy dealing with the day-to-day problems and don't necessarily, maybe not advisedly, pay a lot of attention to research." This was true in established authorities as well as the new unitary authorities. Sometimes whether or not research was undertaken was determined simply by how well it fitted in with other activities.

Whilst very few respondents thought of themselves as practitioner-researchers, there can be no doubt, given the degree to which research activity is combined with day-to-day work, that many senior library staff could fall into such a category. One respondent described how the situation had evolved:

In the past we were more able to second staff to special projects but now the staffing budget is so tight that that is just not as possible. What we tend to do is to expect the higher paid staff to take on the research function... It's put into their job description now when we are setting up posts. It may not be described as research as such, probably policy development.

On the whole any research training was gained at degree level or acquired through previous experience, personal interest, by relying on a colleague rather than formal channels. One respondent in an authority where there was no one with any research training commented: "We are amateurs at it. Our skills lie in other directions which are concerned with providing services to the public."

FINANCE

The lack of a specific budget was a key problem. Projects tended to be short term and small scale, using tried and tested methods where costs, part-

icularly staffing costs could be absorbed. The amount of money available to support research activity varied greatly between authorities. Only one respondent had a defined budget of "about £13,000". Others had had no budget or no allowance for "any kind of research activity that's costed as such". Others were prepared to be flexible with devolved budgeting or by making choices. Despite not having a budget several library services were still able to conduct research as long as costs could be absorbed, for example, survey work was funded by the publicity and promotions budget. The real problem was the implications for staff time although even this could be minimised: "as far as the management team goes the cost would have been minimal as everybody tended to do the work outside of work time..." It is all very well saying "we are very good at getting things done on the cheap!" but the lack of a dedicated budget for research activity can have other implications for the research process. As well as acting as a deterrent, for example, the financial costs put off one respondent from considering taking the lead on any regional projects, research may also become outcome-driven. Limits on funding could also be responsible for limits in methodology. One respondent pointed out "any kind of collection and analysis of data is very expensive so the whole thing has been designed to be incredibly simple to do". Another respondent gave a similar response in describing why he was interested in different methodologies:

...it's about managing budgets... doing questionnaires and data analysis can be very expensive. Our user survey costs about £3,000... whereas for £200 or £300 you can do a lot of desk research or even just create staffing time to release someone to do a piece of work.

Respondents lacked experience, expertise and confidence in applying for external funding.

Writing bids tended to be the responsibility of senior management

and those respondents who had experience of writing bids described the process as one of "trial and error". Writing a good bid involved taking advice and filling in the forms carefully and using the right terminology: "...they are very keen on 'transferable benefits' and you have to demonstrate that what you are doing has got the sort of benefit they want". Applying for external funding was essential in some library services where "the mainline budget is fully stretched just trying to keep the day-to-day service going..." Though even if they were successful library services then invariably had to come up with matching funding. As much research was carried out internally often there was not a need to apply for funding, however some respondents had introduced the bidding process within the authority.

As well as the lack of knowledge about funding sources there was almost a reluctance to apply in some authorities. One respondent new to his post had found that "traditionally we have tended not to [apply for external funding] in this authority." Another explained "we're awful at putting in proposals and getting money from elsewhere... none of us in library management have any knowledge of what external funding is available..." Another respondent spoke of a perceived difficulty in bidding for large amounts of European money in comparison to applying to the British Library: "I think that to... apply for Telematics funding would involve much more stringent, academics standards and that is something that I don't have any experience of". Another explanation for this apparent lack of interest in applying for external funding in some library services could be that funding did not match the most pressing needs and others were worried that funding could skew service. Furthermore finding the time, and the timescales involved in writing a bid also caused difficulties. Even if a bid was successful there could still be more administration work and two respondents referred to the time taken to complete all of the paperwork

required by a project funded by the European Union.

Experience of research methodology was limited, other than methods which were action-based or user-oriented. Respondents wanted straightforward methods which would provide accountable results. There was interest in and use of consultative methods which tend not to be traditional library research methods. The lack of time and trained staff to conduct research resulted in weak methods, inadequate sampling, and hence questionable results.

The approach to methodology by most respondents was neatly summarised in this comment:

It's 'keep it simple, stupid' as far as we are concerned. We are not looking to break new ground. We want information and we want it collected in a robust, testable, way, so we try and do it as simply and straightforwardly as possible. What we want is information that feeds into our decision-making process and into our member's decision-making processes.

Methodology was decided "in a very pragmatic sort of way". Some respondents queried how "scientific" their methods were or apologised for their simplicity. There were only a few examples of there being any evaluation of methods although there was an awareness of sampling but this tended to be the area where most respondents sought advice.

The research methods used ranged from the straightforward, for example, "our annual user survey... only asks six questions, we make no analysis of the users by age, sex, whatever", to the innovative:

Working alongside [an arts group] has shown me the role arts can play in consultation, because it's not just about getting people to say what they like, it focuses their attention, challenges their perceptions, and gets them involved in a very direct way.

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On the whole the methods used were standard social science techniques including action research, community profiling/case studies, desk research including benchmarking, SWOT analysis, postal code analysis, focus groups, in-library surveys and unobtrusive testing.

Working with or across other departments, taking an interdisciplinary approach, was not the norm. There was no structured approach to networking; contacts depended on the individual. In practice working closely with other sections of the local authority tended to occur on an ad hoc basis or in situations when "we thought they would be useful to us [and vice versa]." On a more positive note one respondent worked in a local authority where:

...there is a commitment to break down departmental barriers – we have done away with departments now, we have clusters, and I think the Council is trying to encourage groups to look at things more strategically and to think of the wider picture not just their own bit.

Networking, working with organisations outside of the local authority, had its enthusiasts. There is, no doubt, a personal element in networking with one respondent admitting "it probably would be easier for people other than me", another that "you use whatever network you have got", and a third proclaiming "I have a network in the library world, and I feed on my colleague's network in the leisure world so the possibilities are endless."

LEADERSHIP

Research culture was influenced by factors such as the approach of the Chief Executive and leadership from senior library management.

Articulating the local authority's culture was difficult for the respondents. Only five spoke confidently about the research approach in their authorities. For example, one said "it is pretty well embedded in all of our section... the wider department perhaps slightly less so and then it will vary across the council"; another described how research was "very central" to the authority explaining how consultants had been brought in to develop "a position statement as to where the authority should be in four or five years time" so that "we are acutely aware that in making decisions about what sort of authority we are, what we are about..." In contrast another described how the council was

working hard at "changing some of the culture that exists within the council." Four respondents referred to the positive influence of the Chief Executive as an individual in engineering a research approach.

Culture and values need to be articulated to enable action and evidence for this articulation can be found in the prevailing, for want of a better phrase, 'management style'. This link was clearly set out by one respondent:

...we have the leadership from the centre, from the city council as a whole, and that sets out priorities for us... That is the strategic context. There is a philosophy, or management style, of strategic management for quality and equality too... The Director and Central Library Manager have that vision to interlink them all and give strategic leadership. The rest of us contribute at different points in terms of supporting that work but that structure helps me see, at middle management level, what the priorities are, and it helps me influence my managers to make choices [and] choose priorities.

And another simply described how:

Throughout all my career the interdisciplinary approach is one I have fostered... where you start from the issue and then bring whatever professional skills you have to do that.

Advice and support is available within the local authority but its source, level, access, and the degree of communication between the relevant units and the library services, varied greatly between local authorities.

At the level in the hierarchy of the respondents interviewed, surprisingly few knew whether or not their local authority had a corporate research unit. The new unitary authorities each had access, on a commissioning basis, to a Joint Strategy Unit which had previously been the county's research and investigation unit although there was some doubt as for how long this arrangement would continue. Otherwise arrangements varied greatly between local authorities. One respondent from a large county authority said there was "no central policy unit at all" although he could get raw data from a Planning and Transportation Department. In some authorities the respondents could make a bid to a Corporate Policy/Information

Unit to undertake research. Some respondents utilised the expertise within the Chief Executive's Department. The level of assistance varied, one Chief Executive's office organised cross-departmental working groups to discuss the biannual residents survey and would also assist with survey work but another respondent reported that "Policy Services are supportive but resource-wise they are stretched, so they give advice but there's no staffing to spare". Economic Development Units were mentioned by some respondents as a good source of advice on bidding for European funds. Four respondents had access to research skills within the wider Department in which Libraries was based. This could vary from an individual to a team. Otherwise contacts were ad hoc and respondents spoke of "pockets of expertise all over the authority" some of whom "difficult to pin down!"

USE

Research results were used to defend management decisions to, or to inform, Committee, and were invariably service-oriented. It was at this level that political lobbying occurred and respondents could not be certain of being able to influence the political and financial decisions made by members.

A defining feature of research in the public library context is that much of it is conducted to inform Committee decision-making. The influence of the members is undeniable. Political circumstances varied between local authorities as did members' interest in library services. Although it was not required as such there is an expectation that research should be present in committee reports in order to provide accountability. However some respondents felt that whilst members expected to be informed they were not necessarily research-oriented:

One of the difficulties is of perception, sometimes research is seen as being an end in itself... for an elected assembly, which wants to do things, they would be looking at whether the case has been made for a course of action that is being recommended.

Research is not a word that I use with elected members... I would always use the word development... I suppose, being blunt about it, senior management and elected members of the authority would not regard research as something that we could afford to do... the connotation that research has for

elected members as it's something that academics do.

The degree to which research findings were used by the members was also questioned and some respondents spoke of members' stubbornness in refusing to accept valid research findings. One respondent noted the difficulty of reconciling research findings and members views:

...elected members are voted in to represent local people... whatever group you put together lacks authority to speak on behalf of the public at large... If the focus group says 'we want this' and the Libraries Committee says 'we don't want that', who would you go with?

Another felt that his library service was at a disadvantage because

...the Chief Librarian does not see the members as often as he would like, he doesn't go to Committee all of the time, only if he asked... Sometimes the Head of Leisure will take a report... Even though he's amenable to libraries his background is contracting and administration so he had a different approach...

Other respondents felt that the impact that research could have was inevitably limited because "at the end of the day, many decisions, particularly in relation to budget, are political decisions and whilst we can advise and prepare the facts they aren't always taken on board." One consequence of this is the recognition that one needs a strategy in using research findings to influence policy decisions: "it tends to be not one killing blow, but it's making a lot of opportunities to drip-feed the information to them."

Research had an impact on service but only a very limited impact on policy. Respondents did not initiate

research into policy, except at a superficial level.

Identifying whether research had been used for developing policy and/or for developing service was not always straightforward because the respondents themselves could not always unravel what could be a complex situation. Because research is undertaken to inform management, and ultimately Committee decision-making, it does impact on service development. Research seems to have little impact on broader policy considerations. This is not surprisingly given the nature of the research and the fact that it did tend to be more relevant to service than policy, and hence it was easier to discern the impact on service rather than policy. Specific examples of the impact of research on policy were limited in scope and number. For example one respondent noted "we can identify customer concerns through user profiling activity... that can lead to changes in policy and direct action" and gave an example of the provision of women-only desks. Others spoke about changes to book buying/selection procedures and two gave examples of how research findings which led to service developments were also used to influence policy, for example, regarding the impact of developing services for blind people this respondent reflected:

...that was something which we did not have to have a big debate about but it was never expressed in policy terms... until we brought in that service for the blind... I guess that [research project] has helped the council to put some substance to the fine words of equal opportunities. It's not that we came up with a radical new policy but that the work enabled us to clarify policy with actions...

One problem in using research findings to influence and shape policy

was that "we've never set up a piece of work to say we want to look at this in policy terms". Also the complexity of policy development was clearly an issue. One respondent described the lengthy process of "informed debate and discussion" combined with the "intuitive element" regarding policy development in his local authority and concluded that "policy in part is formed by service research findings but also by intuition." Also it must be remembered that:

Policy is driven by a lot of things and research is just a small trickle... the direction of the council, the amount of funding... professional developments... central government messages as well... So a piece of research... is a small voice against larger voices from elsewhere.

Respondents had evidence showing the added value of taking a research approach.

Whilst respondents found it hard to talk about impact of research on policy there was a greater awareness of the added value of doing research, especially in providing accountability. Research findings were "incredibly useful politically". One respondent said "we are looking for research... that provides information that can be used as a political tool." Respondents described how research verified actions by being able to get away from the "anecdotal" enabling them to "challenge a lot of givens" and demonstrate the mass they are working with:

[When] the councillors have said 'the last thing we want to do is shut a library'... that was not because they were swayed by my eloquent prose but because they are aware that it is the voters who are telling them this and that information has come through from our research.

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As well as providing useful results one respondent noted that "...there is a certain amount of kudos in doing research." Involvement in larger bids, even if they are not successful, often paved the way for smaller successful bids and raised the stature of the library service within the local authority:

There is a recognition that the work that's happening in libraries can support the wider ambitions of the council around the creation of what they call neighbourhood resources centres... Other consequences of the work we have been doing is that we're now leading the production of the council's Intranet and ...we've got a place on the council's Information Strategy Group. Maybe a few years ago that wouldn't have been the case, but I think that's a reflection of the change in feeling towards public libraries.

Another described the benefits of being involved with the council's Gateway to Information project:

The project certainly raised our profile and we are very keen to maintain control of it... and actually make other officers better aware of the kind of services we provide. Pushing the fact that we are not just about romances for little old ladies, we are actually about providing information... it makes us less expendable in the budget cuts...

Respondents did not make the best use of their research findings. There was a lack of expertise in dissemination, there was no time to disseminate results and hence little opportunity to build up a base of knowledge.

Dissemination activities varied. One respondent described how work was written up "for a number of audiences, library managers, Committee..." and how for one project there was thought of "eventually publishing and selling it." But that was an exception and on the whole, for much of the research conducted in the library services visited, it was a case that "when it's served its immediate purpose it does tend to get lost in committee papers or internal documents." There was also a loss through the failure to make best use of results internally, such as lack of time and staff to do presentations.

Respondents questioned the relevance of the research approach given the need for alignment to match funders' needs, the time to apply for funding, the influence of the

Committee, and the predominance of 'the bottom line'.

Respondents are clearly aware of differing agendas in that when resources are aimed towards the overall service objectives of the authority they "very often don't line up" with the aims of research activities or those of potential funders. One respondent noted:

There's a tension trying to do research which will support you in doing what you want to do... but at the same time not disassociating yourself by being confrontational from the money.

This point was illustrated by another respondent who said:

A lot of my time is spent aligning things we're doing with things other agencies are doing to build partnerships and demonstrate where benefits lie to others as well as to ourselves.

The prevailing local authority context could also be a limiting factor and whilst being keen in principle to work with other local authorities some respondents found collective projects difficult "because there is a different political agenda in every authority." One respondent spoke generally of the image of public library research as "something that's rather abstract, not quite irrelevant, but not central to people's lives." Even where a research approach was favoured respondents were conscious of the pitfalls including opportunities for bias, whether they were researching the right issues, problems of "being blown off course by both a lack of time and finance" problems in communication with other staff, difficulties in maintaining projects after the period of external funding has stopped and lack of time for planning and co-ordination.

One respondent queried the relevance of wider research to his local authority, noting that whilst "the council is happy for me to be involved with the Society of Chief Librarians... if they ever got the impression that I was never here when I was needed they would soon lose patience." This respondent continued to explain that because of the background of financial pressure "everything that we do is put under the microscope... and the council tries very hard to make sure that we are not doing things that don't have a clear benefit to local people." This theme was echoed by another respondent who gave the similar reasons for being "very borough oriented" and "a little parochial" in

terms of research activity. Time and time again the bottom-line was emphasised:

The purchasing power of the book fund has been reduced by 41%... In that context it takes a lot to say 'I want to invest in research activity' when I can't put books on the shelves...

SUMMARY

This examination of current research practice in public library services reinforces earlier perceptions and findings about public library research activities. Of particular concern is the fact that research activity is largely confined to operational service development and that the public library service does not engage with policy development at corporate level with local authorities. Given that the government is beginning to accept the assertion that the public library service can contribute to social policy objectives,¹ it is evident that, at present, the research capacity within the public library sector remains underdeveloped and does not extend to addressing the social and economic impact of the service, for example. As one chief librarian has observed "we are getting noticed in new circles and we are on the cusp of a golden age."² It behoves public librarians to take and make opportunities to improve the situation regarding research otherwise the strategic potential of the library service may not be realised.

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- ¹ Recently expressed in Pluse, J. and Prytherch, R. *Research in Public Libraries* BLRIC Report no. 8, BLRIC, 1996.
- ² See *Prospects: A Strategy for Action* Library and Information Commission Research Committee, November 1997 and *Strategic Research Issues For Public Libraries* Society of Chief Librarians Public Libraries Research Group, 1997.
- ³ *New Library: The People's Network* Library and Information Commission, October 1997 and *New Library: The People's Network' The Government's response* Department for Culture, Media and Sport (Cm 3887), April 1998.
- ⁴ Kempster, G. Libraries need more than books. *Bookseller*, 7/3/978, 20.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AC	Audit Commission
ACORDD	Advisory Committee for the Research and Development Department
ACL	Advisory Council on Libraries
ASLIB	Association for Information Management
BLRDD	British Library Research and Development Department
BLRIC	British Library Research and Innovation Centre
CERLIM	Centre for Research in Library and Information Management
CIPFA	Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy
CLAIM	Centre for Library and Information Management
CRUS	Centre for Research on User Studies
DCMS	Department for Culture, Media and Sport
DES	Department of Education and Science
DNH	Department of National Heritage
FOLACL	Federation of Local Authority Chief Librarians
LARIA	Local Authorities Research and Intelligence Association
LA	Library Association
LAC(E)	Library Advisory Council for England
LGA	Local Government Association
LGMB	Local Government Management Board
LGTB	Local Government Training Board
LIC	Library and Information Commission
LIP	Library and Information Plan
LIRG	Library and Information Research Group
LIRN	Library and Information Research News
LISC(E)	Library and Information Services Committee for England
LISU	Library and Information Statistics Unit
NCC	National Consumer Council
NUD.IST	Non-numerical Unstructured Data Indexing, Searching and Theory building (software package for analysing qualitative data)
OAL	Office of Arts and Libraries
OSTI	Office for Scientific and Technical Information
PLDIS	Public Library Development Incentive Scheme
PLRG	Public Libraries Research Group
PLUS	Public Library User Survey (a 'tool kit' developed by CIPFA to enable public library services to conduct user surveys to a national standard)
SCL	Society of Chief Librarians
SCL/PLRG	Society of Chief Librarians/Public Libraries Research Group

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