

THE CURRENCY OF FICTION IN PUBLIC LIBRARIES:
THE IMPACT OF FUNDING REDUCTIONS

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Abstract

The currency of fiction in public libraries is an important subject since it not only relates to other areas of the service but can be a good indication of the direction in which public libraries are now heading. Despite this importance, there has been no substantial research devoted purely to this topic, although it has been mentioned briefly in various books and reviews.

Fiction provision in public libraries continues to be a controversial and divisive subject, with people disagreeing about the value of certain kinds of fiction. Currency in this study is examined in the context of other factors that have a significant bearing on it. These include book selection which was explored because these policies and practices determine which aspects of fiction continue to remain current. This is particularly significant, since funding reductions have forced librarians with responsibility for fiction selection to decide where their priorities and loyalties lie. Bookshops have the most current contemporary fiction available and their relationship with public libraries is examined. Although both are fundamentally different organisations, this study concludes that both should work more closely together to promote the value and importance of reading, especially in an age which is dominated by technological advances.

Reductions in funding are revealed to have the most drastic impact on the currency of fiction provision. For some public libraries, the situation is so severe that no money has been allocated for purchasing fiction for a certain period of time. This not only has implications for the immediate service but also for the future as gaps then exist in the collections. This study found that currency was an aspect of the service that users did notice and value, and in order for public libraries to provide the best fiction available, book funds need to increase substantially.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

A prominent writer has had this to say about the role of the public library as he personally perceives it:

“Libraries have a responsibility to ideas, to nurturing, sustaining, preserving, and making readily available the intellectual capital of our society to anyone who may want or need it, now or in the future. Collections are built to serve over time. By doing that, we show responsibility to the citizens who pay for the service.”

Bob (1982:1710)

However, for collections to serve this purpose, they must maintain a strong degree of currency, and for collections to grow, additions have to be made continuously. These and other aspects of the library service are under threat because of cuts in funding. For fiction this has meant varying degrees of reductions in book funds, public libraries have tended to respond in different ways to these cuts. Some have decided that

“Books on shelves must perform, they must be borrowed.”

Appleyard (1992:2)

To ensure high borrowing entails stocking books and materials which are known to be extremely popular, determined for instance by looking at issue figures. The dilemma for librarians with responsibility for book selection is where to place the emphasis, and what aspects of fiction provision are seen to be so essential that their currency must be maintained at all costs. The whole subject of fiction provision in public libraries has the potential to be very divisive, a true Pandora’s box. Some writers, like Hoggart, still see the public library as having a predominantly educational role, a duty to be ‘the poor man’s university.’ Others, however, argue that to keep up with the times, public libraries have to take a more demand led policy and this would include a role as a popular materials provider. The currency of a public library’s fiction materials can be a good indication of where their priorities lie.

The currency of fiction is by no means an insignificant or trivial subject since it has particular relevance for many areas of the service and the decisions taken can reveal much about the direction in which public libraries are heading. Yet curiously, it has not been singled out for substantial research, although it has been touched upon in various books and reviews. Spiller (1991), for example, in his book 'Book Selection : Principles and Practice' refers to a survey by John Sumsion. This survey found that the currency of fiction does play an important part in the usage of that material and most users preferred to borrow recently published titles. In his book on fiction, Dixon (1986) asserts that currency is vital not only because the subjects of books can lose topicality, but also because many books nowadays receive a strong amount of publicity when first released, and libraries need to capitalise on this free promotion of the material. All this publicity of course also creates demand from the public. However, there are writers, such as Labdon (1991), who criticise public libraries for giving into what they perceive as clever marketing by booksellers and publishers. They argue that it can be useful not to buy a book when it is first published, in order to see whether the demand for that particular title continues or whether it disappears along with the hype. Many who take this line believe it is justifiable because the public constantly demand new works and their appetite is too insatiable to be satisfied by any amount of funds. Although it is certainly true that readers can be swayed by marketing ploys, this should not deter public libraries from benefiting from this enthusiasm for new material. Afterall, most public preferences in other aspects of life, like clothes and food, are also to a great extent, in the long term as well as the short, determined by the marketing and publicity that saturates most visual, aural and printed media.

Currency is also becoming increasingly important as changes in publishing and the booktrade affect the relationship and practices between them and public libraries. For example, the relatively recent demise of the Net Book Agreement in 1995 has had many ramifications for the way libraries purchase books. Bigger discounts can now be obtained, although at what cost to range and

quality? This study will explore the various factors that will have a substantial effect on the currency of fiction available in public libraries. One of the major problems identified at the start was how to have a workable definition of currency, and it was finally decided that for this investigation “current fiction” meant works that were not more than two years old. Actual data on currency were obtained through a brief currency survey and through interviews with professional librarians who have responsibility for the selection and management of fiction in six central public libraries located across the country.

Chapter 2: Methodology

The principal objective of this dissertation is to investigate the currency of fiction in British public libraries and how this aspect has been affected by funding reductions. The challenge was to achieve, not so much a representative, as more of an illuminative study, within the strict constraints of time and resources:

“the central tendency among all types of case study, is that it tries to illuminate a decision or set of decisions: why they were taken, how they were implemented, and with what result.”

Schramm, 1971, quoted in Yin (1994:12)

Although the scope and implications of the task may appear to be somewhat Herculean at first, it is both feasible and worthwhile if the appropriate methodology is employed and if the aims are determined at the beginning of the research. The multiple case studies approach has been selected because:

“case studies are the preferred strategy when “how” or “why” questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context.” Yin (1994:1)

This study should seek to find explanations for events which would include personal opinions and not just facts and figures.

Since the research is going to be undertaken by one person, it is not really viable to choose more than six public libraries as case studies. The libraries selected were: Oxford and Nottingham Central Libraries, reflecting the English counties; Rotherham, Birmingham, and Sheffield Central Libraries, reflecting the metropolitan districts; and Willesden Green Library, Brent, as an example of one in London. These public libraries were not randomly picked but were selected based on statistics published by The Chartered Institute for Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) about their holdings. These statistics indicated that these places had suffered funding reductions in the past few years and the aim of this study is to explore currency at public libraries that had experienced cuts in

funding. Although it would have been interesting and informative to include the views of users of public libraries as well as professional staff, this proved to be too time consuming to implement. The difficulty was not only in selecting a balanced and diverse group but also finding the time to conduct and transcribe interviews. In the end it was felt that to be over-ambitious might jeopardise the quality of other aspects of the research process. The research will need to be analysed carefully since the nature of the research is exploratory and qualitative. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with professional librarians who have responsibility for fiction selection and management in their public libraries. This was identified as the best method to obtain the richest and most relevant data.

Apart from conducting interviews, a list of books selected from various reviews and literary awards was compiled, including the Booker prize nominations for last year. The books also had different dates of publication and included books published as recently as May and early June in 1997. The purpose was to see whether the case study institutions had the titles listed and if so how many copies were bought. This list was by no means easy to draw up: as far as possible personal taste was not allowed to consciously influence the decision, but at the end of the day, the author recognises that this list is by no means comprehensive and that it is to a degree quite arbitrary. However it was felt that it would be useful to have another source of information to compare and complement the opinions of librarians who worked at the libraries. Most librarians were anxious to know how many titles on the list their particular library had, regarding it almost as a test. One librarian, seeing his library nearly contained at least one copy of every title, jokingly commented that they had just failed to hit the jackpot!

Since interviews were chosen as the main method of gathering data, it was crucial that the questions were carefully structured and phrased. It was felt that relevant information would be more likely to be obtained if the appropriate kind

of questions were asked in the first place. In order to decide what questions were the most significant and to gain a clearer picture of what research had already taken place, a literature search was carried out. This proved to be of paramount importance not only in allowing the author to identify key texts and issues but also to pinpoint areas that had not been explored. The questions then covered the areas thought most appropriate to produce new insights and information. However, this had to be achieved in the context of questions that were open and not biased in any way. A useful way of selecting the right phrasing was to imagine oneself as the interviewee and to see whether the question could be seen as too ambiguous, complex or leading. Questions varied from those that were designed to gather statistics about the financial side to questions that would require more subjective answers. For these the Likert scale (see Appendix), in which interviewees were asked to rate how much they agreed or disagreed with a number of statements about fiction provision, was used. Interviewees were then asked to give explanations for their choice. In the actual interviews, it was discovered that most people forgot to pick a choice and just launched into their explanation! With hindsight, to prevent this happening it would have been better to give the Likert scale verbally rather than on a piece of card.

To arrange interviews, the author contacted the selected libraries by letter, giving details of the dissertation topic. Several institutions assumed that literary materials meant an interest in purely fiction, rather than fiction, poetry, drama, and literary criticism. This confusion stemmed from the fact that in those libraries, fiction and poetry were selected and bought by different people and from different funds, an arrangement not anticipated by the author. Since this clearly presented problems with making contacts, it was decided to limit this investigation to the currency of fiction in public libraries. This in itself was not an insignificant nor simple topic to tackle! This was one slight problem that would have been avoided had the author been able to conduct a pilot study. Unfortunately this proved to be impossible with the limited time available for research.

The main learning experience associated with this study occurred with the face-to-face interviews. Being a complete novice, the author was unaware how important body language was to the interviewing process, and how vital it was to make the interviewee feel at ease throughout. Although thorough preparation was undertaken, interviewing is something that improves tremendously with practice and the later interviews were smoother and more relaxed than those at the start. One reoccurring problem that proved to be a big hurdle was the lack of a personal office or private room which could be used during the interview. As a result the interview had to take place in the staff room with other members of staff present. Not only did this cause a lot of noise which was picked up by the tape recorder, but it also affected the interviewee. It was apparent through the way the interviewee moved and occasionally glanced across at the other people that they placed a constraint on the process and inhibited the freedom of expression of the speaker. This was not too surprising since some blatant eavesdropping was observed by the interviewer.

A tape recorder was used but only after permission was given. Several of the interviewees did show some nervousness at first when the tape recorder was produced, most forgot its presence once the actual interview was under way. Most also looked more relaxed once assurance was given that confidentiality and anonymity would be observed. Unfortunately a lot of the interviewees spoke very softly and quietly so their voice was only just audible and this made the transcribing process much harder. The use of the tape recorder can be justified in a number of ways, not only does it record faultlessly but more importantly it allows the interviewer to maintain constant eye contact and to give the other person full and undivided attention.

The interviews mainly resembled stimulating conversations and it proved to be a valuable experience to see how people expressed and justified their views. Planning for the interviews did not always ensure that the interview kept the intended course. Some of the questions inevitably touched upon similar areas

and more than once interviewees anticipated later questions or gave answers that made some of the further questions redundant. For example, when asked about the level of funding for their library in the last few years, many included comments about the budget for fiction in their replies. This was where semi-structured interviews proved to be the right method to choose since they proved flexible enough to accommodate surprises. The questions provided the interviewer with a sense of direction and was a reminder of what needed to be asked but the lack of a rigid format meant that one could probe and ask other questions to improve clarity and depth. As Stone and Harris have stressed:

“Sound interviewing requires skill. Interviews must be neutral. The interviewer must guard against conveying his own views by the way he delivers the question or of suggesting to the respondent that he should answer ‘Yes’ rather than ‘No’. Take a question such as ‘Have you read an abstract of this article?’ Try saying it in different tones of voice. Try emphasising different words. You will see how easy it is to deliver a question in other than a neutral way.” (1984:11-12)

The interview is very much a two-way process and probably revealed as much about the interviewer as the interviewee. The interviewer was able as time went on to pick up signs that indicated that the interviewee was uncomfortable with a question or that she or he had metaphorically pulled a barrier down. This normally occurred with questions that could be regarded as being potentially political or that might lead to a response that would appear to undermine the library’s position. Many of the libraries could not provide all of the figures asked for and many did not have an up-to-date selection policy. The last question of the interview which asked the interviewee for further comments and opinions turned out to be very productive, interviewees often volunteered further information or clarified earlier points. Many took this opportunity to expand on their library’s aims and objectives and to express how difficult it was to fulfil these in the light of financial constraints. One librarian admitted she was “quite

depressed” by the current situation, and another said that she felt they had to offer a “compromised service.” All interviewees were very generous with their time and very friendly. All seemed genuinely interested in this topic and more than one librarian commented on how useful it was for them to have to explain and sometimes justify their actions and ideas!

Chapter 3: Factors Relating to Currency

3.1 Currency Survey

In attempting to discover the currency of fiction materials in six major public libraries in England, this study took an illustrative, explorative approach rather than a strongly statistical one. This was a conscious decision by the author because it was felt that the factors that influenced currency were what were of interest rather than trying to determine currency by statistical methods. Most of the findings for this study are based on data gained through semi-structured interviews. However, a brief currency survey was conducted in order to complement the information gained from the interviews. Professional librarians at the six public libraries were asked whether they considered the fiction available in their library to be: (a) very current; (b) medium; or (c) not current at all. Their answers, although valid and of major interest to this investigation, however, should not be viewed as reflecting the ‘absolute’ and ‘objective’ truth about currency in each library since responses were decided on that particular day, and although they are informed opinions, they are inevitably mixed with personal perceptions and bias. None of the librarians picked category (c), not current at all, to describe their state of fiction provision and most chose (a), very current.

Although all of the libraries had experienced cuts in their book funds, librarians were determined to portray their stock in as positive a light as possible. For example, although Sheffield Central Lending Library were not spending on adult lending materials for the period 1997-1998, the librarian there, when asked, “How current is the fiction in this library?” chose to emphasise the range that still existed:

“In terms of the years when things went into stock you’d find quite a range, some of the stock will be 12, 15 years old and some of it will be relatively new. We tend to have a fair amount

of stock of older authors, we've always considered that we have a role to supply material to elderly people." (Case study 5)

Other librarians cited reasons why their fiction provision could be considered very current:

"We order pre-publication with some things, so as soon as they come out, they should come into stock and then with the fortnightly selection list, new stuff, current stuff is being bought all the time so it should be very current." (Case study 2)

The term 'current' itself is open to various definitions as one librarian pointed out:

"It depends on what you call current but I would said anything within 10 years old is fairly current, particularly with fiction, I would be surprised if that much of the stock we have upstairs is over 10 years old." (Case study 4)

Since interpretations of the term 'current' could and did differ, it was decided to impose a definition for this study that included only materials less than two years old. A list of novels, with publication dates within the last two years was drawn up to see whether they were available in the six public libraries visited. It is recognised that the list by no means totally reflects the complete spectrum of contemporary fiction, nor is it without flaws. The novels chosen are to a certain extent arbitrary, although to prevent personal choices dominating, the list included nominations and winners of literary prizes, including the Booker prize, and books were chosen from newspaper reviews. The range included books published in 1996 to those published as recently as early June 1997.

As can be seen by looking at the table of results (table 1), no library had all twenty-one books. It was not unexpected to see that the results were in agreement with other evidence, for example, about cuts in spending. Sheffield Central Lending Library and Willesden Green Library in Brent performed less well than the other libraries. This was due to the fact that the former has had no money allocated for adult lending materials for 1997-1998, and Willesden Green

Library at the time of the interview did not have any books published since February, because they were changing library suppliers and were also waiting for funds to come through. While the results cannot be relied upon to be completely balanced, since the sample selected was too small, it does indicate to some degree the effects of financial cuts on the currency of fiction provision. It was quite surprising and sobering to see that although the libraries did fortunately have important literary novels, most had only one copy available to the reading public. There were some cases of two or more copies available, but this was not generally the situation. Availability is an important aspect because most of these novels usually cannot be read overnight, so while it is being borrowed, other readers must wait impatiently for its return. Whether the books on the list were selected or not largely depends on the public library's book selection policy and that will be examined in the next section.

Title	Author	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	(e)	(f)
Every Man for Himself	Beryl Bainbridge	1	1	1	1	2	1
Independence Day	Richard Ford	1	2	1	2	1	1
Skin	Tobias Hill	0	0	0	0	0	0
Brief Hours	Stanley Middleton	0	0	2	1	0	1
Bleeding London	Geoff Nicholson	0	0	0	0	0	0
The Country Life	Rachel Cusk	0	0	0	0	0	0
Transgressions	Sarah Dunant	0	1	1	1	0	1
A Spell of Winter	Helen Dunmore	1	1	1	1	1	1
Love of Fat Men	Helen Dunmore	0	0	1	1	1	1
Going Down	Jennifer Belle	0	1	0	1	0	0
Fugitive Pieces	Anne Michaels	0	1	1	1	0	0
Last Orders	Graham Swift	1	2	2	2	4	1
Alias Grace	Margaret Atwood	1	1	1	2	3	1
Reading in the Dark	Seamus Deane	1	2	2	1	1	2
A Fine Balance	Rohinton Mistry	1	1	2	2	1	1
The Orchard on Fire	Shena Mackay	1	1	1	1	1	1
The House of Sleep	Jonathan Coe	0	1	1	1	0	1
Loving Ways	Maurice Gee	0	0	0	0	0	0
American Pastoral	Philip Roth	0	0	1	1	0	1
The Ventriloquist's Tale	Pauline Melville	0	1	0	0	0	0
Mason and Dixon	Thomas Pynchon	0	1	1	1	0	1

Table 1: Fiction titles used for currency survey, and results for the six public libraries.

Key to libraries: (a) Willesden Green Library, Brent; (b) Birmingham Central Library; (c) Nottingham Central Library; (d) Westgate Central Library, Oxford; (e) Sheffield Central Lending Library; (f) Rotherham Central Library.

3.2 Book Selection

Any thorough and effective discussion about the provision of fiction in public libraries needs to examine the intricacies of book selection and how decisions are made by those who have responsibility for this area. This is important to any debate about currency because book selection policies and practices determine the currency of various aspects of fiction. Considering the paramount significance of this subject, it is surprising to find that this topic has been neglected by many people. John Dixon writes:

“Little is taught about book selection in library schools, relatively little has been written about it; and hardly anything about fiction selection ... no textbook can do the selection for you, cannot take into account the varying local situations, aims, procedures, or finances. It can only suggest that certain factors be borne in mind when evolving a policy.” (1986:141)

Any aid or guide that can assist librarians to choose when they are confronted with a staggering number of titles cannot be dismissed. An article by Martin Neild (1997) in *The Bookseller* claims that 96,000 books were published in the UK in 1996, and although not all of them were works of fiction, of those that were, each would have had its own unique appeal. Guidelines then are especially important in a time when many public libraries are facing substantial cuts, so decisions about what to purchase are even more difficult to make.

David Spiller undertook a survey in 1978 to investigate fiction provision in twelve library authorities. Some of his conclusions, are still just as relevant and disturbing. One that is particularly pertinent to this study, is that:

“Most authorities operate their fiction provision on a decentralised basis, yet few have a fiction policy, and few have working arrangements which permit central control of selection or withdrawal. Little guidance is offered on fundamental questions such as the proportions of serious fiction to be

attempted, the supply of very light fiction, or the treatment of new authors.” Dixon (1986:10)

Since this survey was carried out in 1978, there was a possibility that the situation now could have been substantially improved. However, the research done for this study discovered that not all the libraries interviewed had a selection policy and of those that did, some ruefully admitted that it was not up-to-date and many parts needed revision. Some librarians were quite happy about the lack of a written policy since they felt this gave them more flexibility to buy fiction that was particularly suitable for their community. Selection policies are hard to formulate well but fiction policies would be an even more strenuous task since views about fiction are very subjective. No two people ever feel exactly the same way about a book.

The librarians interviewed not only had different methods of selection but also different priorities in certain areas. Some libraries still had the old approvals system, which meant librarians were able to fully examine books sent by library suppliers, before making decisions about purchasing. These, however, were in the minority, most had changed to selecting books from CD-ROMs. This move to CD-ROMs has been heavily promoted by library suppliers because it is a much cheaper alternative to approvals. However, this new method has its disadvantages as one librarian commented

“They piloted CD-ROMs and we found them not as effective a method of selection.” (Case study 4)

This is not surprising since the CD-ROM method does not enable the librarian to physically touch and browse through a book. Instead they have to rely on the information extracted. This information generally consists of a picture of the cover, a fly leaf containing the publisher’s blurb, and a sample page. There are other headings which provide details about things like type quality, paper quality, and category of fiction. These are aspects that under the approvals system, librarians would normally have the ability and responsibility to decide for

themselves. Some of the librarians interviewed expressed strong misgivings about being able to make the most effective decisions using CD-ROMs:

“You have to accept that if you go along that route you’re going to make a few decisions which are not going to be as good as they might have been.”

(Case study 5)

Librarians were also conscious of the danger of placing too much reliance on library suppliers and some had what they called ‘show and visit,’ where they go to the suppliers and look at the range on their shelves. One librarian confirmed Dixon’s suspicion that

“There is a conscious attempt to tailor the material on offer to suit a concept of the ‘typical library.’” (1986:148)

Library suppliers are, at the end of the day, not professional librarians, and therefore, cannot be expected to know the range and depth of books required by a public library serving a specific community. Librarians are only too aware of this:

“I think there is a percentage of material that we don’t see. The blockbusters are pushed, after that people aren’t quite sure what we want to see and there are definitely things we don’t see.” (Case study 4)

This failure to see the complete range needs to be addressed otherwise Spiller (1978) is correct when he accuses librarians of letting library suppliers “usurp professional roles and responsibilities.”

Book selection remains a duty that is still highly valued by librarians. One librarian said:

“You cannot get away from the fact that book selection is a very emotive subject, whenever you ask a librarian what they do, they always want to tell you they choose books.”

She went on to say:

“A lot of our staff have been with us for a long time and they had a perception of what they felt comfortable with and they

were people like Du Maurier, you know, and that was safe, that was tried. They're less sure about the modern authors and the modern novels and that was one of the things behind our creative reading courses, to try and make this type of literature accessible first and foremost to our staff because we know that this is the sort of thing that anybody who wanders into Waterstones or Dillons sees in vast array but it's something that our staff aren't always exposed to." (Case study 1)

It is not only important to make sure that staff involved in selection see and become accustomed to what is available in contemporary fiction but also for them to be aware of in-built attitudes and prejudices. As another librarian said:

"I think there is a lot of professional judgement. I think it's absorbed rather than learnt to a great degree. I think that's something I've learnt over the years, that we're taking on things subconsciously all the time which sways us in what we're going to select, but I think it's more than knowing which literary things are available, it's about knowing what people want, what we're expected to provide and things like that." (Case study 4)

In order to be successful at selection, staff may need to overcome personal likes and dislikes:

"I would say I'm buying books now that I really wouldn't have probably bought a few years ago, but I realise people want them and that they are not considered unsuitable by a lot of people and they're reviewed and they seem to be part of the mainstream in a way I don't think I would be happy for them to be when I flick through them, and I think how on earth could people read this!" (Case study 4)

More literature needs to be provided to help people choose and training should also exist to help people learn all the appropriate skills and keep abreast of new titles that are continuously appearing. Unless librarians all have certain uniform stock standards to aspire to, the currency of fiction in public libraries all

over the country will be widely different. A major factor in fiction selection voiced by many of the librarians was the need to consider issues. Funding cuts has made this a prominent subject. One librarian even selected books by examining the track record of authors and their previous works to gauge their popularity with his users.

3.3 Popularity versus ‘Quality’

A significant factor in book selection nowadays is the need to ensure high issues by providing books that people will want to borrow. The “Materials Selection Policy - Statement of Principles” put together by Sheffield Libraries and Information Services states that:

“Materials selection will ensure individuals and groups are provided with the widest possible choice, range and currency of materials which meet their learning, information, cultural and leisure needs. Specific emphasis will be placed on supporting the ability of people to: express their needs and aspirations; achieve their rights; and to develop their skills and abilities, both creatively and vocationally.” (Unpublished document)

In order to achieve these objectives, which encapsulate the very ethos of the public library, the provision of fiction and non-fiction materials has to be the best and most current. This is the ideal. The truth is that financial constraints are forcing most public libraries to rethink the sort of fiction they can afford to provide for their users. The emphasis on issues has forced public libraries to go down a path that they are not always happy to pursue:

“It’s very difficult because a couple of years ago I would say we had a real push at buying European fiction in translation, a lot of first novels, a lot of slightly more obscure things, but because we found they didn’t go as well as some of the more popular stuff, we’ve reduced the number of those kind of titles we’ve bought more recently, and I don’t know if we should be doing that. I think they should be there but we’ve just had to make that difficult choice: we need the Catherine Coonskin therefore that’s two paperbacks we can’t buy, so I think we are making decisions that aren’t really desirable.” (Case study 4)

Comments like these highlight the dilemma facing public libraries, whether to place the emphasis on more literary fiction that appears to have less

appeal, or to pamper to the popular taste for best sellers and lighter fiction. This debate about the quality and sort of service that should be provided centres around two very different ideals. On one side are those who agree with The Department of National Heritage's criticism in "Reading the Future: Public Libraries Review" (1997) that public libraries have veered towards "entertainment" instead of in the direction of "high seriousness." These critics tend to perceive the role of the library as being fundamentally more than a mass entertainment provider and they argue that in order to fulfil various purposes, like that of educator, libraries have to be willing to distinguish between 'good' and 'bad' fiction. Libraries cannot afford to take the line

"that says all reading is intrinsically good. No matter that it be Krauts or Steel, no matter that it be Coonskin or Jeffrey Archer, the act of reading is of itself virtuous." Appleyard (1992:2)

Appleyard carries on to assert emphatically:

"The real bottom line is what we know perfectly well already - Dickens is not only better than Archer, he is doing something fundamentally different, something infinitely greater. Unless they are prepared to state and act upon that truth at whatever cost to their gross lending figures, libraries do not deserve a penny." (1992:2)

Other prominent writers like McWilliams and Hoggart also firmly agree with the view that public libraries have to decide to enforce notions of quality. In an article aptly called "A Public Library is not a Burger Bar," Hoggart argues that librarians lack the courage to take a stand about quality. The result being:

"Books of quality have yielded ground to best sellers; new books which expand the mind are rarely bought; multiple copies of the latest popular fiction are." (1991:22)

He goes on to accuse the public library of having lost its soul, and now vacillates between being:

“the McDonald’s and Burger King of the printed word - and trying to be a sub-branch of information processing.” (1991:22)

However, of the six libraries visited for this study, it did not seem to be the case that all principles and scruples had been abandoned in the pursuit of high issue figures. Even the ones being hit hardest maintained that in times of financial straits:

“What would be hard hit would be second tier popular novels, the ones that would go out only 4 or 5 times a year instead of 10 or 11 times, the less than totally popular and the less than absolutely classic authors. A big name author, however literary it was, we would definitely get that, the very popular one we would definitely get that too.” (Case study 6)

This opinion was supported by other librarians and there seemed to be a consensus to target the middle range of fiction if enough money was not available. Librarians seemed anxious to achieve a balanced stock:

“I think what we try to do within a budget is have a mix of things really, which reflect the people who are using our fiction. We have to balance the fact that we want the popular titles, we’ve got to have a certain number of those, although I don’t think we concentrate on those to the extent that some of the local libraries do, we also feel that we should have a number of new writers, some quality fiction, I think it’s always just a delicate balance really.” (Case study 4)

It is however highly debatable whether this balance is being achieved and in trying to achieve this balance libraries could end up suffering “from trying to be all things to everybody” (Comedia,1993). And end up not satisfying anyone. The views expressed by the librarians tended to be more similar to critics who believe that in order for public libraries to prosper, they need to cater to all tastes, without discrimination or prejudice. As Bob Usherwood wrote recently in the *Library Association Record*:

“It is the role of the public library to provide access to the best. That, of course includes the best of the popular. In addition public libraries have a public duty to protect and promote good literature, first novelists and poetry.” (1997:197)

However it is never easy to make judgements about what qualities exist in a piece of work that will help to identify it as being better than the rest. In the face of such a quandary, librarians may be swayed by the fact that there is evidence to support a demand led policy. Comedia (1993) in “Borrowed Time?” points out that the five most borrowed authors in 1992 were not people regarded by the establishment as literary giants. Catherine Cookson, Agatha Christie, Danielle Steel, Dick Francis and Ruth Rendell can claim to have earned a place on the public library’s shelves through their massive popularity with the reading public. Comedia (1993) also refers to John Sumsion who revealed that according to Public Lending Right statistics, none of the top 100 novels borrowed fell under the category of ‘literary novels’.

The opinions of critics and librarians are not the only ones that should be taken into account in this continuing debate. Users should be solicited for their views since they are the ones who directly use the service and are therefore affected by changes in provision. As many as 75 percent of users borrow books to read for pleasure (Myers, 1994). Comedia questions the public libraries’ refusal to act upon this evidence:

“The overwhelming popularity of genre fiction is an established fact, yet it continues to cause embarrassment among some librarians, and an ambivalence and equivocation when it comes to formulating policy statements.” (1993:45)

The librarians interviewed did not display this unease, and although they expressed strong support for literary fiction, they also expressed support for popular fiction as well. One librarian felt that today’s society exhibited more tolerance about people’s preferences in reading:

“I think now more so than 10, 20 years ago, it is more recognised that people should be able to read what they want to, rather than what we choose for them. Some of the feeling is that people who come in to read Mills and Boon will end up reading, you know, Tolstoy or something, which I think is debatable ... they might move on to something slightly different but at the end of the day, what does it matter? If people want to read that’s fine, I don’t think we should be saying what people can and can’t read.” (Case study 4)

This desire to give people absolute freedom in deciding what to read is not in itself wrong or harmful, but the threat comes when the great push for issues leads to the reduction of creative and literary fiction which may not be so popular with the majority. However these literary books will be in demand by some readers and there is a danger that their rights will be overshadowed by the clamours of the more vociferous and obvious masses.

There is also the argument that supply to a great extent creates demand (John Dixon, 1986). Unless librarians are supplying a wide and diverse range, they will, through the process of book selection, limit what should be an ocean of choice to a small stagnant pool. The librarians interviewed acknowledged that supply did to some extent create demand from the public. One librarian said:

“If you get people coming in to the library and if they see the books you have that attract them, then they will borrow them.”
(Case study 3)

Another librarian however argued that the users could have an effect on what was supplied to them, the most obvious route being via requests. Her comment was:

“I don’t think it’s just what we have, I think it is what people who are aware of what’s around, and of what the reviews say, it can be the other way round. They demand things that we haven’t supplied but yes, to a certain extent people are limited to what we can supply, because at the end of the day we might not

be able to supply what's demanded, so they have to make their choice from what's provided." (Case study 4)

This surely means that librarians must take responsibility for what they pick and ultimately they need to say things like:

"Look, this does deserve our attention. This matters. This is perceptive and honest and, if we make the effort, enjoyable in a way the rest will never be." Hoggart (1991:22)

This need for professional judgement and courage are absolutely vital in these harsh times when the amount of money allocated could depend on the issue figures. For example, in Sheffield, it was asked what percentage of the budget was allocated to buying fiction:

"Certainly for the last few years, it has been based on issues basically, about 40 percent of the issues were fiction, so about 40 percent of the money allocated to the Central Lending Library was spent on fiction." (Case study 5)

Another librarian admitted that issue figures were having a strong influence in the selection of fiction:

"You wouldn't use that as the sole criteria but it would be a big factor." (Case study 6)

What the issue figures do not reveal is something that cannot be measured in any tangible way, the value or worth a reader has managed to obtain from a particular book.

This is the real hub of the case: whether it is the library's duty to provide serious fiction that is capable of changing a person's perception of life and of widening their horizons or whether the emphasis should lie with what the majority want, for instance the best sellers. In an ideal world, the library should be able to fulfil both of these objectives, but when budgets are cut how does any librarian decide which needs should be given greater priority? The librarians of all six public libraries were asked whether they agreed with the statement that

“fiction should enable people to stretch their imaginations and explore unknown experiences.” Most of the respondents strongly agreed with this view but here they also displayed a reluctance to pinpoint any particular aspect of fiction which would be more likely to achieve this goal. The stance exhibited was mainly a relativist one:

“I think it all depends on the reader, readers want to read to a particular level and their choice will stretch their minds.”

(Case study 5)

Another librarian said:

“All levels of reading could do that for some people.”

(Case study 3)

And one responded:

“I think it can be easy to assume everybody’s reading at the same level but if people find it difficult to read, purely by reading something that others may find trivial, it may be stretching them so again I think it’s very individual.” (Case study 4)

The day however may have arrived when librarians will be forced to make many more decisions about the value of different kinds of fiction, simply because there is not be enough public money for the public library to be able to be “truly comprehensive.”

3.4 New Authors

An area that has traditionally been seen as an important part of library provision but which might be heavily affected by the desire to raise issues and save money is the purchasing of new authors. In the past buying and promoting new authors has been perceived as an integral part of the public library service. This is because, as Margaret Drabble in the foreword to 'Managing Fiction in libraries,' (1991) has pointed out, few people are prepared to spend money on new authors, because they are not familiar with their work and therefore feel it would be a financial gamble. However this risk is one that the people are more willing to hazard if they meet a new author's work in their public library. And, unless there is a demand for these works:

“Publishers will inevitably move more and more towards the best selling title, the safe and tested favourite.”

Foreword in Kinnell (1991:viii)

Novels by new authors should not be regarded as luxuries or as a less important category, but as part of the range that should characterise a public library's holdings.

John Dixon writes:

“The new novel is in some ways a trial offer, a small sachet floated on the market, buoyed up not by the faith of the publisher, good publicity and production quality, adequate blurb and author's details, but at most by a few quotes from a successful author.” (1986:77)

Considering the hurdles encountered by first novelists, this study wanted to see whether reductions in funding were seriously affecting the purchasing of novels by new talent. All the public libraries involved in this study are central lending libraries, even if this was not apparent by their names, it was apparent from their location, and role in the community. Librarians were asked if money was insufficient what would be reduced, and they were given a list containing a

variety of options: (a) hardbacks, (b) first novels, (c) reprints, (d) multiple copies, (e) large print editions, or (f) light fiction. Some of the responses were quite unexpected. One librarian admitted that first novels were not high on their list of priorities:

“First novels ... We tend not to buy them anyway, I’m afraid, unless they’re very well reviewed.” (Case study 6)

Another suggested that first novels were more likely to be purchased if the genre was known and considered to be popular with the readers:

“We know family stories are very popular, if we then get a first novel from someone and it’s a family story and it looks the type of thing that will go, we would still buy it.” (Case study 2)

Others pointed out that all best selling authors were once first novelists:

“We wouldn’t want to say, right we’re not buying first novels, because we’ve made a concerted effort to purchase these things, and the first novel of somebody today is probably going to be the best seller of tomorrow and with short print runs, the chance of you being able to pick up previous novels in four years’ time are difficult.” (Case study 1)

However in a climate where issues are regarded as being of primary significance, some librarians are uncertain how to promote and encourage readers to try first novels:

“We do see ourselves as having a literary role whereas some of the community libraries may not take first novels, I think we do try to keep some credibility in what we’re trying to do, other than just pushing the latest blockbuster. I think we’ve actually tried to do what we can, because we are issues-led and it can be difficult to find out how to push first novels and things like that.” (Case study 4)

The answer could lie in promotions like that undertaken by Somerset Library Service with the help of the Library Fund set

up by the Arts Council of Great Britain in 1991. Somerset Library Service identified key reasons why they wanted to raise the profile of new writers. These were:

- “• The publication of new writers in hardback editions which disappear in ‘black holes’ in library stock.
- The relatively low profile of promotions of new authors.
- The constraint of a limited book fund.
- The constraint of limited promotional resources.”

Froud (1994:18)

These constraints are not only applicable to Somerset Library Service, they also apply to other public libraries across the country. In an era where funding for public libraries does not seem likely to increase, particularly in the near future, librarians need to actively promote their stock, including stock that may not be so familiar to the public. Initiatives like that undertaken by Somerset will need to occur more frequently. A feature of their promotion that will need to be considered seriously is collaboration with bookshops. The perceived and actual benefits make such promotional efforts worthwhile. For Somerset, some of the benefits identified included a greater awareness of new writing among readers, a desire by readers to investigate other writers and experience for staff of organising promotional events. (Froud, 1994)

Much has been written about the public’s appetite for mass produced novels and best sellers, less attention and publicity have been given to those who are willing to explore new writers, including first novelists. Public libraries can provide their readers with an opportunity to encounter different sorts of writing without demanding a price in return. As Somerset Library Service discovered:

“The promotion of first novels was welcomed for bringing the readers into contact with new authors ... There was a strong wish to experiment, and taken with the expressed statement that they ‘trusted’ library staff recommendations this suggests a major role for libraries in promoting new authors.” Froud (1994:19)

Somerset has not been the only authority to attempt the promotion of new writing. Berkshire has had a resident writer and Gloucestershire has tried to get private sponsorship to circulate new fiction (Dixon, 1986). Not all libraries can be expected to go this far but all can help by trying to have such things as prominent displays and reviews of the appropriate works. These steps need to be taken by public libraries because

“Library users are on the whole anxious to find new quality writing and will thank the service for bringing it to their attention.” Froud (1994:19)

Promotion of new material would be even more widespread and effective if conducted in conjunction with nearby bookshops. The results would be of great benefit to both sides as well as to readers.

3.5 Libraries and Bookshops

“The rapid growth of chains of quality bookshops throughout many of Britain’s towns and cities in the 1980s has posed a new threat to the public library. These tastefully and expensively fitted out bookshops, and their enthusiastic and dedicated staff, have espoused the cause of modern literary fiction with a vengeance, making the public library look even more behind the times than ever. There is a real economic problem here. Because as much as the public library may wish to stock multiple copies of the new Martin Amis, Julian Barnes or Jeanette Winterson novel, it cannot afford to do so in preference to all other claims on its resources. The market place, however, offers whatever new book you want, on the spot, if you are prepared to pay.” Comedia (1993:44)

There certainly exists evidence to suggest that bookshops, especially the major chains, are continuing to do well. As recently as 7th July, 1997, The Guardian newspaper contained a short article which announced Waterstones’ intended expansion by creating fifty new stores across the country at a cost of ten million pounds. However there are also other sources that suggest bookshops like libraries are experiencing problems in an age where reading has perhaps a less prominent role in people’s lives than in the past. In an article called “Warning: Books Change Lives,” Christopher Norris depicts a rather worrying trend:

“Recent figures suggest that the book market has not grown in size for over seven years, even with the demise of the NBA in 1995. Roughly one in four people do not visit bookshops, 60 per cent of the population own library tickets (but fewer than half actually use them) and, in 1995, only 48 per cent of 11-year-olds reached level 4 reading standard of the National Curriculum in English.” (1997:366)

Even if these figures, and no mention is made of the source, show a more pessimistic outlook than is really the case, those who are keen to promote and encourage reading cannot afford to ignore the implications. Now is not the time for apathy. Booksellers have been generally pro-active in trying to attract more customers by improving the layout and atmosphere of bookshops and by having events such as author visits. Public libraries also have author visits but these sorts of events tend to get axed if money is thin on the ground.

For public libraries this is one of the main problems to overcome. It is also perhaps one of the most fundamental and crucial differences between public libraries and bookshops. While the owners of bookshops, like Waterstones, are prepared to invest large sums of money to improve and expand for the future, public libraries have been struggling to cope with a serious lack of funding and ever-diminishing resources.

“public librarians spend their time planning cutbacks, making do with less, and fighting to maintain meagre budgets which are under constant attack by governing authorities.” Berry (1985:4)

It is this lack of adequate funding and the last government’s desire to introduce market values into the public domain that have hampered attempts by public libraries to deliver the high quality service which they seek to achieve, and which cannot always be measured in tangible ways by statistical performance indicators. The main argument for moving in this direction was that it would ensure that the public services were more attuned to the need and wants of individual consumers (Kirkpatrick and Lucio, 1995). But the reality of such a drive:

“has led to the commercialisation of library services which, in turn, has caused a decline in standards as libraries entered the great issue chase.” Usherwood (1997:197)

Although libraries and bookshops may have certain things in common, at the end of the day, libraries, unlike bookshops, are not profit-seeking organisations. This difference means that it would be unjust and unreasonable to

compare the services they both offer since they have vastly different aims and objectives. As Flynn emphasises:

“Values required to run the public services are often different from those required to run a successful business.” (1990:xi)

Furthermore the public library has the capacity to touch and enrich more lives, since it exists to serve everyone, not just those who can afford to pay the spectrum of prices. So although the public library cannot hope to match or compete with a bookshop in terms of the currency of available contemporary fiction, it still has a vital duty to provide an up-to-date selection so that those who cannot afford to buy the latest hardback can at least hope to borrow it from the public library. This is especially important as bookshops do not supply the same richness and diversity of materials as libraries and some have argued that:

“The down-marketing of everything has meant that even though we have bigger and better bookshops than we’ve ever had before, in the main, they are stocking greater and greater trash. People like me have said for umpteen years, ‘If only we had bookshops everywhere, just think what would happen to the population!’, but when these bookshops came they sold Jeffrey Archer and Barbara Taylor Bradford. If these are the main type of things being sold in bookshops, the good that the book can do for society is being lessened.” Norris (1997:366)

Whereas bookshops face financial pressures to stock mainly books which they think the consumer will want to buy, libraries should have a more long term and altruistic perspective, providing the public with a wide range of fiction and seeking to promote and include the best works available.

This is important and this importance has continued to increase rather than diminish as various reports indicate a widening gap in our society between the rich and the poor. Bookshops are purely for those who can afford to buy and buy. Libraries, on the other hand, are for those who can and cannot afford to pay the rising cost of books. This democratic and intrinsic value of public services

has to be recognised and supported or there is a very real danger that we will live in a society where:

“those who possess the money and knowledge to gain access to high quality (mainly private) services will do so, while those who are less fortunate will be tarnished increasingly with the brush of ‘dependency’ and have access to the ‘basic, no frills state system.’” (Stoker 1989) in Kirkpatrick and Lucio (1995:274)

One could argue that this already happened. The situation is particularly severe for some public libraries and with cuts in budgets, the book fund has often become an easy casualty in the battle for the biggest slice of the financial cake.

In this competitive climate the importance of maintaining the currency and quality of fiction provision in public libraries cannot be taken for granted. It is an importance that everyone is not willing to acknowledge. One librarian in a major public library felt she had to convince her colleagues of the value of fiction to the public:

“I would say amongst some areas of the building, they see fiction as having a very minor role, which we don’t consider it to be here, we tend to have a bit of a fight on our hands, don’t we? It’s a bit of a hot topic, some people are very disparaging about why people want to read fiction.” (Case study 4)

Added to this is the strong belief held by some that the case for keeping fiction as current as possible is much less urgent and significant than for non-fiction materials. In a time of reduced budgets, this issue is considered by some to be rather trivial and certainly not something that should receive top priority. The crux of their argument lies in their perception of the more transient nature of non-fiction, (Dixon, 1986). Since these materials are more likely to become out-of-date and their value and usefulness depends on their currency, money, if money is available, they argue should be spent on keeping this area current. Admittedly works of fiction do not encounter the same problem: different editions may

appear but the text tends to stay substantially the same. However this fact should not prejudice those with the power to make decisions to allocate insufficient funds for purchasing fiction.

A public library, unlike a bookshop, derives its diversity and strength from collections developed and nurtured over many years. As one librarian bluntly said:

“Look at what we’ve got, we’ve got the backlist. Waterstones can’t say they’ve got a backlist. That’s really the strength of the public library, to actually exploit the wealth of material we’ve got.” (Case study 1)

However, this richness can only be preserved for future generations if a wide variety of current materials are regularly added to the present stock. Unfortunately where fiction is concerned there is always the great temptation to use William Hazlett’s comment that “Any book is new to me, until I have read it,” as a justification to cut the book fund instead of increasing it. Although this is true, it tends to apply more to the unsure and indiscriminating reader who might be quite content to try alternative titles suggested by a well-informed librarian, than to the reader who has a particular title in mind or one who has impatiently and eagerly awaited the latest novel by their favourite author to appear at their public library. As a librarian pointed out, a lack of currency:

“really does penalise the people who read widely and who read a lot of material because they are up-to-date with all the fiction as it comes out, so they need to be able to read new material. Avid readers are the ones who are penalised very heavily.”
(Case study 5)

The importance of providing current materials is not a new issue, as long ago as 1852, the trustees of the public library of the city of Boston, USA, recognised that they had to stock:

“the popular, current literature of the day, of which copies should be provided in such number that many persons, if they desire it, can be reading the same work at the same moment ... when it is living, fresh and new.” Atkinson (1981:9)

This surely is even more appropriate in our advanced technological society where there are such events as TV tie-ins and books can gain popularity and publicity overnight. All this does not mean that libraries are free to adopt a purely ‘Give ‘em what they want when they want it’ attitude but librarians need to be aware of the other issues intricately and deeply linked to the subject of the currency of fiction provision, such as range and quality, and the repercussions to the whole of the service when this is undermined or ignored.

One way forward is for public libraries and bookshops to attempt more joint ventures. This increase in co-operation and collaboration would be beneficial to both sides and could even be seen:

“as a way to improve the profile and image of books in British culture.” Norris (1997:366)

Apparently this is already occurring, according to Comedia (1993), in the form of Reading Promotion Schemes. These schemes involve public libraries and booksellers working together to fuel greater interest in new fiction and poetry. This sort of initiative should be encouraged as both sides have a vested interest in stimulating the public not only to read more, but also to read more widely. For those who enjoy reading and have been encouraged to do so from an early age, reading may appear to be an obvious, pleasurable and sometimes demanding activity, but for others, reading is something that may be more alien and it is the task of the public library, even more so than the bookshop, to demonstrate how exciting and enticing books can be. Richard Hoggart in ‘The Way We Live Now’ is not reluctant to point out that in our present society not everyone reads:

“Such a truth needs stressing today, when even highly educated people are often willing to wave goodbye to reading - for others at least - on the grounds that we are now living within the post-

Gutenberg visual revolution. Some people pass their lives without once reading a work of creative literature all the way through.” (1995:66)

Public libraries and bookshops can unite and work together to prevent this becoming more widespread, not simply because in order to prosper they rely on people still wanting to read, but because the book needs to be given greater prominence and promotion in an age which is dominated by technological advances. Computers and computer games are perceived to be exciting, new, and fun and have no difficulty in capturing the spotlight. The book by comparison has been around a long time and lacks all the showy paraphernalia, but its value remains undiminished. Unlike most of the computer games available at the moment, books:

“are a means of comprehending and experiencing and extending our world and our vision. They can exercise the imagination, they can widen our sympathies, they can issue dire and necessary warnings, they can suggest solutions to social problems...”

Foreword in Kinnell (1991:vii)

In the past public libraries and bookshops have tended to regard each other as competitors but recent findings indicate that people differentiate between books they want to buy and those which they would prefer to borrow (Worpole,1993).

Ken Worpole in ‘The Public Library and the Bookshop’ argues that libraries and bookshops share many traditions, and suggests that both can work together on such things as training schemes to “begin to develop a shared culture rather than an antagonistic one.” (1993:9). Schemes like “Well Worth Reading” which was organised by libraries and bookshops are the way forward, for bookshops and libraries have much to teach and learn from each other. As Worpole concludes:

“The world of the bookshop and the public library are drawing closer together.” (1993:10)

Both will also need to consider the changes happening in publishing and to adapt to them.

3.6 The Impact of Publishing Trends

The whole debate about currency and how it relates to book provision is to a certain extent determined by today's publishing practices:

“As overheads rise and the recession bites deeper, publishing houses have been investing in shorter print runs, with an expectation of profitability and sales within the first year. There is a much smaller ‘back catalogue’ in modern bookselling.”

Comedia (1993:44)

All this places greater pressure on librarians to purchase books before the titles go out of print. This pressure has been intensified by reduced book funds. The Library and Information Statistics Unit (LISU) annual statistics for 1996 indicated that the biggest drop in spending was in adult fiction, (Sumsion et al., 1996), this in spite of the greater diversity of product available on the market.

John Vincent identifies this trend in publishing as the business becoming:

“yet another multi-national, mass-marketing, economic force, what Murray L. Bob calls ‘the industrialisation of the book’.”

(1986:127)

This drive will mean that titles that are slow to catch on will probably be scrapped and mass publicity will be generated for the predicted best sellers. All this will mean that public libraries will receive requests for books immediately on publication, requests that the libraries will try to satisfy. Labdon (1991) has argued that this has forced librarians to regard all their purchases as urgent because they have no way of predicting demand and any delay in purchasing might result in an inability to buy that title. This situation is particularly dire for librarians who have not got enough money to purchase all the materials they want and need or who will not receive any money at all for a particular period. This is

the case with Sheffield Central Lending Library who will not be spending on adult lending materials for 1997-1998. There it was decided that since the materials fund was so small, to give priority to children's materials and information provision. This action has justifiably caused much concern. The reasons being:

“One of the big questions will be whether we will ever be able to catch up. We have experienced this before in 1990 when we didn't buy any material after, I think it was July or August ... in the following year we were able to do a certain amount of catch up on the purchasing side but ever since then, you can be dealing with people at the enquiry desk and you go to look for that and you expect to have it in normal circumstances and then you see the publication date was 1990, you know that the reason why it was missed out was because we weren't spending. I just don't think we will ever really retrieve what's happened this year.”

(Case study 5)

Obviously Sheffield is one of the extreme cases but other libraries are also faced with tough decisions when it comes to selecting stock because of reductions in book funds. Although these constraints may be lifted later, the effect on the stock remains.

Chapter 4: Costs

4.1 Book funds

The biggest factor by far to affect the currency of fiction in public libraries has to be money, or to be more accurate, lack of money. This covers diverse aspects such as, levels of funding, rising cost of materials, and events such as the recent abolition of the Net Book Agreement. The situation is made particularly acute because even though the cost of books has been growing at a rapid rate, levels of funding to public libraries have tended to decrease quite dramatically. Although the Public Libraries and Museums Act of 1964 specifies that a “comprehensive” and “efficient” public library service should be provided nationally, this definition is hard to enforce because of the many interpretations of both the terms employed. As a result, different library authorities allocate different amounts of money to the libraries under their jurisdiction. The result has often been reduced book funds for many places. A librarian said this about her library’s situation

“basically the funding for materials has decreased quite remarkably, it’s decreased with respect to actual amounts, and of course materials have increased considerably in cost, so the actual spending power has decreased greatly.” (Case study 5)

The state of things has been made worse by the fact that the situation has been allowed to disintegrate from bad to worse over the years, with those in power either not acting, or not having the capability to act, to stem the rot, until a state of crisis was reached.

Comments made during interviews reflected how frustrated librarians felt, this comment from a librarian about his library’s financial plight was by no means unique. Others made very similar points

“Book funds have been declining steadily over the years, last year it was agreed by management that something had to be

done about it, so cuts were made in other departments to put money back into the book fund. So last year against the trend the book fund actually went up, but it had been falling sharply and even now, we're only at eighty per cent of the book fund of four years ago despite having put back considerable sums last year." (Rotherham)

Once there is a decline, this will get gradually worse and even if steps are taken to stop the deterioration, often the service does not regain its former position. All this of course has drastic implications for provision of fiction in public libraries.

This decline should not be allowed to continue because the public library plays such a crucial role in most people's lives. The review of public libraries' services in England and Wales carried out by Aslib found that

"each year, more than twenty-four million adults (aged 16 or older) use public libraries, that is, about three in five out of the population." (1995:7)

One of the review's key findings was that the majority of people in this country wanted more money to be invested in public libraries for books and to enable an extension of opening hours. Aslib's

"trade-off analysis suggests that, on average, English and Welsh people would spend an extra £5 - £10 per household annually to see improvements in public library services - with more books and longer opening hours ranking high on their list of priorities." (1995:11)

All this would seem to suggest that the public value and respect their public library and would not balk at having to pay more in order to have better services. Improvements are definitely long overdue.

A recent report by The National Book Committee called 'Public Libraries and their Book funds' revealed a situation that demands urgent action.

“Over the past 10 years there has been a disturbing fall in the real purchasing value of such expenditure. Quite apart from books lost through theft or other exigencies, the report shows that cuts in spending alone have contributed heavily to the reduction of new book stocks.” (1997:2)

The authors pinpoint the worst afflicted areas as being in London and the Metropolitan districts where a quarter of new book spend has disappeared. Loss in book spend will inevitably mean a loss in range and currency of fiction provision and research has shown that currency does matter to users. Spiller argues in his book that

“The age of fiction is also a factor in use. As might be expected, user preferences are for more recently published novels. Sumsion found that 55% of loans in 20 libraries derived from books published in the previous five years (34% of the total stock); 26% of loans from the 24% of stock which was 6 - 10 years old; 11% of loans from 18% of stock 11 - 15 years old. The figures show the need for a constant supply of new titles...” (1991:155)

Spiller is not the only person to have identified the importance of having sufficient funds to maintain currency, writers like Dixon also emphasise this aspect:

“Fiction can lose topicality both in the subject written about but more in losing the publicity attendant on the publication date. Any delay in supplying fiction titles will probably mean a loss of interest on the part of the public for that title.” (1986:143)

Librarians interviewed were all too conscious of this and many expressed their frustration at not being able to provide the depth and currency they would like because of financial deprivation

“I think the one thing I would like to reiterate is what we can do and what we can't do because of budgetary constraints and it is a constant battle all the time to juggle resources.” (Case study 4)

The report by The National Book Committee adds to this grim picture

“Over the 10 year period, total expenditure on public libraries in real terms fell hardly at all. But the story for books was different. While, over the 10 years, book expenditure in cash terms rose by 56 per cent, when adjusted for general inflation it fell by 3 per cent and, when adjusted for book prices, it fell by no less than 12 per cent.” (1997:4)

One significant finding of the report was that there is evidence from the figures to suggest that libraries which allocate sufficient funds for book provision still manage to retain a high level of borrowing compared to “the pattern of decline that characterises low-spending authorities.” (1997:3)

This conclusion is not too surprising since a high quality service will continue to attract users but a decline in spending will result in a service that will not be able to adequately cater to most people’s needs and wants. Different libraries have responded to the crisis in funding in different ways, for example West Sussex Library have decided to draw up a list of new books that it hopes readers will buy and donate to the library. In return vouchers will be given which can be used to pay for things like reservations. The librarian there said

“The hit list would include mainly popular titles. The idea is that, post NBA, the market for these is more fluid and users might be able to buy books at better discounts than those available to the library service.” (1997:62)

It is a sad indictment of the times that a public library has been forced to ask readers to donate books. This action is a step nearer to the day when readers may be asked to pay for some of the material that they borrow.

4.2 The Demise of The Net Book Agreement

The demise of the Net Book Agreement (NBA) happened only relatively recently and has many consequences for public libraries. Not all those ramifications will be apparent at the time of this study. The Department of National Heritage commented on this event and made a rather simplistic assertion that:

“The effective abandonment of the NBA by the book trade may offer an opportunity for public libraries to save money, which can be spent on more books.” (1997:25)

Although this may be true, there is no guarantee that the money saved will be directed back into the book fund. They are, however, correct in stressing that libraries can opt to buy books from those who will give them the biggest discounts. This advantage has already been identified by librarians as can be seen by this comment from a librarian about the effects of the demise of the NBA:

“I think the biggest effect is the rivalry between different suppliers now, they are all offering different discounts, obviously, it’s pitting them against each other. From our point of view, it’s not made a lot of difference so far, prices have gone up as we would have expected, but we can probably get bigger discounts from suppliers now.” (Case study 3)

Other librarians, however, expressed fears about the range and quality that will not be available:

“I think the effect will be that we’ll be seeing more and more library suppliers go out of business ... The fear is with the NBA that because you’re reducing prices all the time, more literary material won’t be published but I think it’s too early to say.” (Case study 4)

Another librarian pointed out that although savings could be made, it was at a price:

“I think possibly we might have to start looking at different ways of selection because I suspect that suppliers, because they’re not necessarily going to be able to make as much money out of it, may want to stop doing approval copies which they do at the moment.” (Case study 2)

Indeed a lot of the librarians interviewed preferred to select books through the approvals system but many were being forced to go down the CD-ROM path.

The demise of the NBA might also have repercussions for first novels since there is always the possibility that booksellers will stock and sell what they know most people will buy and this will be even more the case with a free and open market. One librarian said about the effects of the abolition of the NBA:

“I don’t think we’ll fully know this for some years to come but I would hate to think that there were certain authors or poets who have fallen by the wayside because of it.” (Case study 1)

A lot of concern was also expressed for the smaller, independent and specialist bookshops. Many librarians feared that they would have difficulty surviving in the tougher, more aggressive market and one librarian compared the process to that of the bigger supermarkets gaining domination and eventually forcing local shops to close down.

In ‘Reading the Future: Public Libraries Review,’ some recommendations were put forward about bulk buying, co-operative purchasing, and adopting standard book servicing requirements. One of the libraries interviewed was part of the Central Buying Consortium. The consortium consists of eight or nine authorities who have decided to pool their resources and gain greater negotiating power. These consortia can also tackle the sensible suggestion of adopting standard book servicing requirements as the librarian there said:

“One of the good things about it is it does mean authorities can get together, if you ever talk to suppliers they will tell you how many thousands of sets of different servicing instructions

they've got, and if you talk to a binder he will also tell you about the number of different instructions. If only we sat down amongst different authorities, I'm sure a lot of us would come up with something more streamlined to suit everybody, and that's one of the things, that in pooling out resources like this, we have looked at the type of servicing we need. If everybody makes a little compromise here and there, that's how these partnerships work, but I don't think it's to the detriment of anybody at all."

(Case study 1)

Although the demise of the NBA does appear to have offered certain advantages to public libraries, other, perhaps more negative repercussions have yet to be felt.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The provision of fiction is undoubtedly an essential part of the library service and one that is in great demand. Fiction usually generates approximately 75% of all public library issues and yet it is only 44% of the total lending stock (Mann in Kinnell, 1991). Although issues for adult fiction have declined slightly, borrowing fiction is still one of the primary reasons why people choose to visit the public library. Fiction provision continues to be a source of debate and controversy as people disagree about the merits of different kinds of fiction, and various libraries display different priorities. This study has found through a short currency survey and through semi-structured interviews with professional librarians that funding reductions in the form of decreased book funds has had a major negative impact on the currency of fiction presently provided to the public. This carries future ramifications as there will be gaps in collections all over the country. It was not surprising to discover that those with the most substantial cuts were also those with the worst currency. The effects have been diverse, ranging from the most extreme where no money was allocated for adult fiction for certain periods to waiting for paperbacks to appear.

Librarians responsible for fiction are facing tough decisions as to what to buy and what to eliminate. This has given rise to accusations that libraries are now more obsessed with obtaining higher issue figures than providing the best and more literary works. Others, however, argue that a demand led policy is justified by the popularity of the material, and state that it is wrong and patronising for librarians to try and impose their notions of quality. What emerged from interviews carried for this study was that librarians seemed happier to take a relativist stance and to attempt to cater for all tastes. However the reduced book funds may mean this is an impossible and self-defeating line to take as all areas will have weak coverage. If a positive stance was taken, at least some areas would be well maintained and kept current.

Although it is beyond the scope of this study, it is recommended that future studies seek to combine views and perceptions of currency from staff and users. After all users are the people who are most directly affected and their perceptions might be very different from that of librarians. Their opinions would also provide valuable information that may help libraries decide what actions to implement. It is also recommended that bigger surveys be conducted at major public libraries in order to determine the currency of the fiction provision. Constraints in resources meant that this study could only carry out a small and limited survey.

This study has also found that changes in publishing and the booktrade mean that librarians need to adapt to the alterations. Investigations could be carried out to see the impact of using a CD-ROM system as opposed to the old approvals system. The need for co-operation between all sectors is vital especially in an age where the book may be eclipsed by modern technology. One of the statements in the Scottish Arts Council's 'Readership Report,' was that:

“The reading of literature, and quite possibly the reading habit generally, is in danger of being eroded by other, omnipresent forms of entertainment and that something must be done to ensure that the unique experience offered by a good book is recognised and sought after.” Kinnell (1991:xiii)

Public libraries and bookshops can work together to try and achieve this goal.

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Sage publications

Appendix 1:Key to Locations of Case Studies

Case studies 1 and 2 = English counties

Case studies 3, 4 and 5 = Metropolitan districts

Case study 6 = London

Appendix 2 : Interview Schedule

Funding

1. What has happened to funding in the past few years?
2. What percentage of the lending stock is fiction?
3. What percentage of the budget is allocated to buying fiction?
4. Is this adequate? Why/why not?
5. If there are cuts, what methods do you use to compensate for this?
6. What would be reduced: (a) hardbacks, (b) first novels, (c) reprints, (d) multiple copies, (e) large print editions, or (f) light fiction?
7. Does the budget for fiction stay the same every year? If not, why not?
8. Do you receive income from elsewhere?

Selection

9. Do you have a written statement about selection policy?
10. What factors influence your decision to buy or not to buy? (a) reviews, (b) price, (c) requests, (d) library suppliers, (e) best seller lists, (f) publicity, (g) other - please specify.
11. How important a factor is price?
12. What has been the effect of the abolition of the Net Book Agreement?
13. Is fiction bought centrally?
14. Are they circulated to other libraries in the area?
15. What percentage of your lending stock is new additions, per year?
16. About how many new fiction titles did you buy last year?
17. Do you buy works from new or experimental authors?
18. How current is the fiction in this library?
19. Do you have promotion schemes?
20. Does the library monitor the use of fiction?

Aims and Community

21. What is the role of this library?
22. What type of community does it serve?

The Likert Scale of Attitudes to Fiction Provision.

For each of the following statements, do you: strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree or strongly disagree?

23. Most titles 'just choose themselves'.
24. A good range of fiction - of all types - is necessary in all branches.
25. The primary purpose of fiction in the library is to attract more readers.
26. Fiction should enable people to stretch their imaginations and explore unknown experiences.
27. Supply creates demand.
28. In no way can the librarian be the historian or the arbiter of literary taste.
29. Minority tastes should have the same budget as majority tastes.

Personal

30. Tell me about your role in the management of fiction.
31. Could you tell me a bit about your educational background and/or previous work experience?
32. How old are you?
33. How long have you been working in this position?
34. Are there any other issues that you want to raise?