

In with the new – out with the elderly?
An investigation into how initiatives to make public libraries
more youth-friendly have affected older users.

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Abstract

This dissertation examines what impact the new libraries envisioned in modernising reports like *Framework for the Future* have had on how older people think about and use their library service. Four recently-built and highly-praised libraries serving a variety of communities were chosen as case studies. Managers of each library were interviewed and two focus group discussions were held with elderly people in each community – one of library users and one in a pre-existing social group. A qualitative analysis was undertaken of the results.

When discussing the library building itself, participants did not agree with current arguments for building libraries in town centres. Many preferred to use a local library that better suited their weekly routine and had more friendly staff. They thought staff had been successful in making their library safe and fully accessible. Users liked the more bright and spacious design of modern libraries.

Reactions to the library's collections were mixed. Contrary to negative stereotypes about the needs of older people, readers in the focus groups liked a broad range of genres. While the majority could find the books they wanted, a significant number did not think their needs were being met. Although the problem has been recognised by librarians, it has not been addressed by many recent reformers. All but three participants did not borrow audio-visual material for themselves, and very few used their library's computers. Some participants were concerned at the increased prominence of these resources, but most accepted them as necessary if the library is to maintain the interest of younger generations.

70% of all focus group members approved of the more relaxed and welcoming ambience of modern libraries. The others were irritated by disruption caused by the increased numbers of young people who had been attracted into their library. While some people thought it was desirable to introduce features from modern bookshops like cafés and lounge areas, most thought that they would be too noisy and would not necessarily lead to increased usage of the library's other services. Users and staff agree that separate areas for different activities are important, especially a space set aside for

quiet reading. All focus group members stated that friendly relations with knowledgeable staff members greatly enhanced their perceptions of the library, an aspect of the library service frequently overlooked by modernisers.

All focus group members agreed that libraries should reach out to all sections of their local community, facilitate community activities and publicise community information. Like some writers in this area they thought not enough was being done for older people, who like others can benefit greatly from stimulation and encouragement. They thought the library should attract new users by promoting its traditional roles of educating and informing, rather introducing social facilities already available elsewhere.

Overall, the focus group members in this study approved of most of the innovations in their new libraries. Some were concerned that the modern features were attracting young people who were not using the library for its traditional purpose and were disturbing other users. Most appear to have accepted the changes as necessary if libraries are to remain relevant in the modern world. However, this study revealed that more research needs to be carried out, by academics and by library staff, into what older people want from their libraries in order to stop inadequate assumptions being made about their needs and expectations.

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1 Introduction

I got my first library ticket when I was five, and I've been coming to take out books ever since.

Oh, yes I come to the library most weeks. I like to read books to take me out of myself. It's a nice place to come, especially when the staff know you like they do here.

These comments made by participants in this study illustrate the important role public libraries play in the lives of many elderly people. This study aims to discover how initiatives to make public libraries more youth-friendly have affected how older people think about their library and if these changes have led them to use library services differently.

1.1 Background and Context

Recent statistics show that the elderly are British public libraries' largest user group. A survey in 1998 found that people over the age of 55 accounted for 36% of all library visits and 34% of all borrowing (Bohme and Spiller, 1999). In comparison, children under the age of 14 made 17% of visits.

The proportion of elderly people in the British population has continued to increase in recent years. Census figures from 2001 show 21% of the British population are aged 60 and over, compared to those under 16 who make up 20% (National Statistics, 2002). This was the first time the elderly have outnumbered children, but the difference is likely to become more pronounced in the future. This trend implies that in coming years older people will make up an even larger proportion of library users.

However, in recent years local and national guidelines on the improvements needed in public libraries have concentrated on creating environments that capture and maintain the interest of young people. For example, the Audit Commission's *Building Better Library Services* (2002) recommended that libraries should become more welcoming by adopting features of large book shops, such as lounge areas, coffee shops and even playing music. The recent report published by the Department for Culture,

Media and Sport, *Framework for the Future* (DCMS, 2003), states libraries should take up national strategies to support children's learning and bring under-privileged young people into the library, but makes no explicit mention of the information needs of the elderly. It even criticises libraries for continuing to cater for the needs of elderly users by having a book stock that had "greater appeal amongst older readers" (DCMS, 2003:20). This implies the preferences of the elderly are somehow less important than those of the rest of the population.

In many cases, if the needs of the elderly are mentioned at all, it is in a cursory fashion, for example noting that their main concerns are "physical problems" (Coleman, 1981:36). Again this lessens the importance of the elderly by assuming their needs are one-dimensional.

Greenhalgh et al. (1995) stressed that people have firm perceptions of what they think the library should be and how being there should feel. Linley and Usherwood (1998) found that older people often feel a strong sense of loyalty to their library. These ideas imply that any change to their library is likely to be particularly strongly felt by the elderly. Indeed, Bryson and Usherwood (2003) raised important concerns that some of the measures implemented in new libraries may have alienated some older users. Changes to both the physical and psychological environment were noted as causing unfavourable reactions. For example, they reported that new glass walls at the Norwich and Norfolk Millennium Library made some elderly people feel unsafe, while others felt intimidated by the increased presence of large groups of teenagers.

1.2 Aims and Objectives

In the light of recent trends, and modernisers' apparent lack of consideration for the elderly, it was felt important to examine the expectations and perceptions older people have regarding their new library and the quality of service they receive there.

Therefore the main objectives of this study are:

- to investigate how recent initiatives to make physical environments and service delivery in public libraries more youth-friendly have affected older users' perceptions of the quality of provision, ambience and user-friendliness of their library
- to establish priorities for ensuring the public library becomes and remains as welcoming and useful for older people as for teenagers and children

In order to investigate how library authorities' current focus on young people has impacted on older users' perceptions of their library service, this dissertation will address the following research questions:

- whether changes in the location and design of the library building have altered older people's perceptions of the nature of the library
- whether the elderly feel welcome, comfortable and safe when using the library
- whether the library's collections and services meet the needs and expectations of older users
- how older users feel about the ambience of their library, and whether the new facilities have affected this atmosphere
- what features of libraries are seen as important by older users
- whether older people think libraries are meeting their needs and those of the wider community
- whether existing literature and practical guidelines on how libraries should be modernised accurately reflect what older users say they need and expect from their library service

1.3 Case studies

Four libraries were chosen as case studies for this project. They were all either praised in *Framework for the Future* or commended in recent Public Library Building Awards. Such praise indicates they have successfully implemented the government's

vision of making libraries more youth-friendly. Therefore, these studies should offer valuable insights into whether there is any tension between the new developments and the expectations and perceptions of the elderly regarding the ‘feel’ of the library and of the quality of service they receive.

The four libraries selected were:

- Brixworth library which serves a small, rural Northamptonshire village
- Bournemouth Central library, a large town centre library
- Stratford library, which is situated in a London borough
- Washington Millennium Centre library, which is located in a housing estate on the outskirts of a small town

Further information about these libraries and the communities they serve can be found in Appendix 1.

1.4 Defining Old Age

It is recognised that definitions of old age are somewhat problematic. Different organisations and research reports use different criteria. Morgan and Kunkel (1998) explain that people can be grouped according to their chronological age, which tends to be over-simplistic, or by their functional age, which can have negative connotations by defining older people by their physical limitations. Coleman et al (1993:14) argue that these restrictive methods of defining old age tend to reinforce negative stereotypes of elderly people as “inflexible [and] conformist”. Instead, Morgan and Kunkel (1998:10) suggest using ‘life stages’, which are “broad categories that encompass role changes, physical changes and societal and self-definitions of transition”.

This study takes the last approach. It defines old age as the stage in a person’s life when he or she has retired from full-time employment, and roughly corresponds to the chronological age group of 60 and over. As Phillipson et al (2001) argue, retirement marks the start of an important phase in a person’s life, which allows them to devote more time to their own interests.

Use of this wide definition acknowledges that people in this group have different values, interests and experiences and may enter this new life stage at different ages. It does not, as some methods do, categorise old people by perceived physical or mental limitations. Another justification for choosing this broad approach is the practical reason that it was not possible to select membership of the research focus groups by nominal age limits. Instead, these groups consisted of people who attended clubs and activities for retired people.

1.5 Chapter Outline

Chapter Two of this report discusses the methodology of this study and outlines its qualitative approach. It explains why focus groups and staff interviews were used to carry out the research and how the evidence was analysed.

The next four chapters address the main research topics. Each chapter examines one theme and follows the same pattern:

- a brief literature review of relevant current library and sociological texts
- a results section summarising the data obtained on that topic from the focus groups and staff interviews
- a discussion section comparing the research results with the current literature to establish whether existing theories of how older people feel about new libraries are correct
- a summary

The first theme, covered in Chapter Three, is the library building itself – its location in the community it serves, whether elderly people feel safe there and their responses to the new interior design. Chapter Four presents older people's opinions of their library's printed and audio-visual collections and IT facilities and discusses whether new libraries have achieved the right balance in stocking different resources for different ages of users. In Chapter Five, older people's views of the ambience of the new libraries are considered – what they think of the introduction of coffee shops and lounge areas, the role staff play in creating a pleasant atmosphere and if older people think having more young people around the building has changed the feel of their

library. Chapter Six discusses whether the elderly think that the new libraries achieve their aim of serving the wider community – whether libraries reach out to socially excluded people, including isolated older people, and whether they believe libraries are doing all they can to provide community activities and community information to older people.

Finally, in the conclusions in Chapter Seven, the results of this study are drawn together to give an assessment of whether the older people questions approved of the changes evident in their new libraries. It suggests steps managers could take to ensure their library meets the needs and expectations of older people and indicates what further research is required in this area.

2 Methodology

2.1 Methodological Approach

Relatively little research has been carried out into what older people think of the new style of libraries, so it was decided to use an inductive approach to this project. This is explained by May (1997:30) as a process where “research comes before theory and we seek to generate theoretical propositions on social life from our data.” One of its main features is that the initial analysis of data may lead to new and unexpected avenues of enquiry (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). This would be an advantage in this study, where opinions are sought on a new subject. In this case, analysis of older people’s opinions of modern libraries could suggest new theories about what libraries should do to make older users feel welcome, leading in turn to practical recommendations based on these new ideas.

Reference to existing research is nonetheless of great importance in helping to frame the topics to be addressed in new research. No interpretation exists on its own, but is influenced by the researcher’s knowledge of existing theories and explanations (May, 1997). Strauss and Corbin (1990:42) make a convincing case that familiarity with this material is far from being a prejudicial hindrance to research, but “sensitises you to what is going on with the phenomenon you are studying”.

Therefore, efforts have been made to examine previous literature about library use by the elderly, as well as external factors that may affect their library experience. Recent reports stressing the need for the reform of public libraries were compared to existing sociological and library literature to establish whether they took sufficient account of the needs of the elderly. In this way, the literature review provided a useful background to drawing conclusions about how elderly people feel about modern libraries.

2.2 Qualitative Approach

Qualitative approaches have been shown to be the most suitable methods for studying and understanding interactions from the perspective of the people concerned (eg. Finch, 1990; Slater, 1990; Gorman and Clayton, 1997). Finch (1990:130) argues that by seeking to listen to the voices of the participants in a naturalistic way, the qualitative approach allows researchers to understand situations “as far as possible from the perspective and context of the actors taking part”. In a library context, this is supported by Gorman and Clayton (1997:34) who state that qualitative analysis is particularly appropriate for investigating the “social nature of information agencies.”

As each person’s reactions and opinions are unique, it was felt that a statistical analysis of the data was not appropriate. Additionally, it is not possible to quantify individuals’ responses when their explanations are not straight forward and their reasoning may not seem logical (Silverman, 2000). Therefore qualitative research methods were chosen to reflect the complicated or sometimes ambiguous nature of people’s reactions to places and experiences.

2.2.1 Focus groups

The larger part of the research consisted of a qualitative analysis of respondents’ reactions to the service they receive and their perceptions of the overall fee’ of their library. Focus groups were used to investigate these reactions and perceptions in some depth. Two focus groups were undertaken for each of the four libraries in the study – one group of library users and one local social group, who may or may not be regular library users.

In the Brixworth and Washington Millennium Centre libraries, the user groups consisted of classes that used the library as both a meeting place and a resource - a computer class and a writers’ group respectively. In each case, being small libraries, these were the only groups of older people that used the library regularly. In Bournemouth and Stratford local staff helped arrange opportunities to speak to small

groups of users in the absence of regular activities involving gatherings of elderly people.

The social groups were organised using lists of local clubs for older people. Brixworth village's internet site lists the Evergreen club as a social club for the elderly, and as it meets in a residential home near the library it was thought likely that the members might have visited the library recently. In Washington, the St Michael's Pensioners Club was chosen because it is held in a building on the other side of the car park from the library – again it was hoped that proximity to the library might indicate higher chances of usage. The day clubs in Bournemouth and Stratford were chosen in consultation with local Age Concern co-ordinators. All these groups contained a mixture of library users and non-users who gave a variety of responses to the library.

A total of 40 people took part in the focus group discussions. The following table shows the number of participants in each group:

	<i>Library Users Group</i>	<i>Social Group</i>
Bournemouth Central Library	4	6
Brixworth Library	4	5
Stratford Library	6	5
Washington Millennium Centre Library	5	5

The use of questionnaires was considered for this study, but they are better suited to testing existing hypotheses with a limited range of responses (May, 1997). As this study wanted to discover a wide variety of responses to a relatively new phenomenon, they were not used.

In contrast, Slater (1990:113) explains that the discussions that take place in focus groups allow a variety of opinions to be revealed, where “themes emerge and are developed participatively and freely.” This interaction between participants is a key feature of focus groups. The discussions conducted in the course of this study confirmed Morgan's (1998) argument that participants are often interested in how others respond to

the same question, and will start discussions amongst themselves sharing common experiences or explaining differing views in some depth.

If conducted well, focus groups can consist of a discussion that “follows the participants’ interests” (Morgan, 1998:55). Participants may not need so much prompting from an interviewer, which could be an advantage if he or she is not familiar with their values or points of view, as was the case in this project. In addition, as Clayton and Gorman (1997) argue, if the right atmosphere is created within the group, opinions can be heard from people who might otherwise be unwilling to speak without peer support. Therefore focus groups have a distinct advantage over one-on-one interviews, where some individuals may feel wary of expressing their views.

It is recognised that there are some potential difficulties in conducting focus groups. One of the main concerns is that the discussion could be dominated and perhaps led off-course by a few forceful voices (Gorman and Clayton, 1997). Even if all participants contribute equally, the point of view of the individual can get lost in the dynamics of the group discussion (Slater, 1990). Therefore, efforts were made to encourage all members of the focus groups to speak by addressing questions to particular individuals and using positive body language towards quieter participants. To keep the group focussed on the research topics, the discussion was led by the researcher using a pre-planned list of broad questions. This created the necessary boundaries for the discussion. However, if new lines of thought were raised by the participants they were examined thoroughly within the group.

2.2.2 Interviews with staff members

The second part of the research consisted of interviews with a manager in each of the four libraries to establish how they believe they are serving elderly users. Writers like Gillham (2000) explain that interviews tend to be more structured, with the aim of eliciting pre-determined sets of data. As staff were asked for specific factual information, not emotional responses, it was thought appropriate to use structured interviews. Interviewees were free to offer information on related topics, but efforts were made to keep to the prescribed schedule.

As with focus groups, it was realised that the behaviour of the interviewer had an effect on the course of the interview. Gillham (2000) rightly points out that the interviewer's body language can have an impact on how the interviewee feels and therefore how they respond to questions. For example, it is important to maintain a neutral facial expression so as not to reveal prejudices, while nodding encouragement can indicate further explanations are welcome.

2.3 Research Tools

2.3.1 Focus group questions

A schedule of five questions was developed for the focus groups. A copy of this schedule can be seen in Appendix 2. The questions were broad and open-ended, in an effort to try to generate the most discussion, as recommended by writers such as Morgan (1998) and Silverman (2000). They were deliberately kept short and jargon-free. Krueger (1998) recommends taking these steps to ensure all respondents can understand the questions easily and do not feel pressured to answer in a particular way.

The various research topics were spread through the questions, to be drawn together thematically in later analysis. It was hoped that participants would address the research topics in their answers, however, if they did not arise in general discussion, they were brought up using prompts. Gillham (2000) explains that prompts are a useful way of getting participants to expand their responses. In the course of the focus groups, it was found they often triggered memories or new lines of thought if the participants had initially expressed few opinions on a particular question.

The first three questions were meant to encourage a discussion of reactions to the new library:

1. What do you like to do when you go to the library?
2. What do you think of the new library? What do you like the most? What do you like the least?
3. How does it compare to the old library?

The topic of the library as a physical building was addressed by prompts about the new design, access, layout, and location (question 2) and how they compare to the old library (question 3). The book stock and multimedia facilities were discussed by asking about what people did in the library (question 1), whether people left after choosing a book or spent more time (question 1), whether they used the computers (question 1), whether they liked the new facilities (question 2) and whether they compared favourably with the old library (question 3). Reactions to the ambience were gauged by asking whether participants felt comfortable spending time in the library (question 1), what they thought of the staff attitudes and general ‘feel’ of the library (question 2) and how these had changed from the old library (question 3). Attitudes to the library as a community space were revealed by prompts about library use (question 1), the services available (question 2), and new displays (question 3).

Question four, “If you had designed the library, what would it be like?” gave the participants an opportunity to talk about any issues that were important to them, which the interviewer had not raised. The prompts for this question could have covered all the above topics of access, layout, stock, IT, multimedia, staff, ambience and community space if required. This question was designed to give further insights into the needs and expectations of elderly users that might not be met at present.

The last question, “Is there anything else you would like to say about the new library?” gave the participants a final chance to discuss any aspect of the library that had not fitted in to one of the previous questions. It was thought important to include this unstructured opportunity to speak, because it was likely that focus group members might wish to make comments on subjects that had not been anticipated by the interviewer.

2.3.2 Staff interviews

The aims of the staff interviews were to identify features of the library’s facilities, services and general ambience with regard to the needs of the elderly, and also any recent developments focussed towards teenagers and children. It was hoped that their explanations of policy decisions could be compared to existing literature on this topic. The schedule of questions can be found in Appendix 2.

By beginning with quite general questions it was hoped that the interviewee would feel at ease and gradually answer more detailed questions, as recommended by Gillham (2000). Questions one, two and three helped identify the changes put in place in the new library. These changes included not only the physical building, but also any new services or new stock. The most and least successful features from a staff point of view could then be compared against the features most and least liked by the users.

Questions four and nine addressed the balance between trying to attract the young while continuing to serve the elderly. The responses could and did range over issues of stock, facilities, ambience and the library as a community space.

Questions five and six focussed specifically on the needs of older users and if the managers believed they were being met. They would be compared to answers from the focus groups to see what older people thought of the library's efforts. Answers to questions seven and eight would reveal if the elderly had been kept involved throughout the design and evaluation processes.

Finally, question ten asked if there was anything else the staff member wished to add about their library that had not been mentioned before. As with the focus groups, it was considered important to offer the interviewee the opportunity to bring up issues that did not fall within the limits of previous questions or that needed further explanation.

2.3.3 List of statements

In order to address the broader issue of modernising public libraries, participants of all types were asked to react to a list of six statements. These can be found in Appendix 2. For the most part they were drawn from comments made in recent government, Audit Commission or 'think tank' reports on the subject of reforming public libraries. The aim of discussing these statements, based on reports encouraging libraries to focus on young people, was to see if they were supported by older people as well.

The statements were given to the focus groups and the managers in order to obtain a comparison between the opinions of service providers and of service receivers. It was thought there may be differences between managers who are aware of wider trends (and are responsible for applying them) and users who are more concerned with the facilities and ambience of their local library. Respondents were asked to state whether they agreed or disagreed with the statements, and then to explain their choice. Again, prompts were used to try and address the research topics in more detail if the discussions lapsed.

Statement one, “Libraries are places: their look and feel still matter to people”, was drawn from *Framework for the Future* (DCMS, 2003:22). This encouraged discussion of topics such as the ambience of the library and its use as a community space. Statement two, “This library has the right mix of a variety of books, music and videos”, was an effort to see if older people were taking up the new opportunities to borrow multimedia items, and if they had been affected by moves to make stock more youth-friendly.

The third and fourth statements, “The needs and preferences of all age groups of users are given equal importance” and “It’s good to see so many young people in the library”, were based on demands in reports such as *Overdue* (Leadbeater, 2003) and *Framework for the Future* for libraries to concentrate their efforts on programmes and stock to attract younger users. This would reveal if older people were still valued members of the library with adequate resources for their needs. They were also intended to reveal if there were any conflicting demands between the needs of older and younger users.

Statement five, “People don’t go to the library for books” was adapted from a quote by Charles Leadbeater that people didn’t go to the library for books, but for “going on the internet, or taking out CDs or simply meeting people” (BBC, 2003:2). This addressed the research topics of book and multimedia usage, the ambience of the library and whether it was a community space.

The final statement, “The library experience is improved by introducing lounge areas and coffee shops” was indicative of the argument in *Building Better Library*

Services (Audit Commission, 2002) that these features were necessary to attract younger users and revitalise the library. Discussions on this question covered the library building, its ambience and its place in the community.

2.4 Ethical Considerations

As with any research that involves the questioning and citing of people's opinions, serious consideration was given to ethical issues. Clayton and Gorman (1997) rightly stress that this is especially important for qualitative research, where the interviewer has created a certain level of trust with interviewees in order to discover personal information and points of view. May (1997) makes it clear that interviewees must always be made aware of the purpose of the research and that data gained from them must only be used for that stated purpose.

To that end all interviewees and focus group members were informed of the purely academic purpose of the research project and asked if their contributions could be cited. As regards interviews with staff, permission was sought from the staff member and their manager to include their responses. Permission was sought from all participants to record their comments, on the understanding that individuals would remain un-named, but would be identified as members of a particular focus group or staff at a particular library.¹

2.5 Limitations and Successes

2.5.1 Limitations

The main limitations of this research related to the focus groups. The small scope of this study made it possible to visit only four libraries and conduct only two focus

¹ In results sections of this report, quotations from the focus groups are identified by a code consisting of an abbreviation of the location and whether they were a library users group or a social group. Each participant is also allocated a letter of the alphabet. Thus an individual from the Bournemouth library users group is BournLibA, while someone from the Stratford social group is StratSocA.

groups for each library. Efforts were made to choose libraries covering a variety of social and economic conditions, however with only four examples a great range was not possible.

One issue which this study was unable to pursue was the library and information needs of elders in ethnic minorities, especially women. It is widely recognised that different cultures have different information needs – in particular it has been noted that it is sometimes very difficult for women from some backgrounds to come forward into the community, making them very isolated (eg. Coleman, 1981; Hoy, 1984; Kendall, 1996; Payne, 1998). A few focus group members did raise the issue of provision of non-English language material, and participants in one group were concerned that their library did not do enough to encourage women from other cultures to use the library's resources. Unfortunately, the necessarily limited scope of this research meant these issues could not be investigated in the depth they warrant. Consequently, it is important for further studies to be made of whether the new libraries do reach out to people from ethnic minorities.

Another important consideration is that the vast majority of the focus groups were comprised of independent people who could travel to their library or meeting place and were active enough to attend regularly. This means that the issue of the needs of housebound or less independent people was not fully addressed. Research has shown that this group of people have specific but frequently overlooked needs (eg. Lucas, 1993; Kendall, 1996). Unfortunately, the limited timescale of this study meant it was not possible to investigate whether the new style of libraries is suited to provide a high quality service to less mobile readers.

The focus groups did not include many lapsed library users. Within the non-library focus groups, people tended either to use the library fairly regularly or not at all. Most had visited the new library at some point, but some simply said they don't read books so the library was irrelevant to them. This is interesting in itself, because it shows the new features of the library had not managed to attract them. However, this study would have benefited from people who no longer went to the new library.

Finally, some problems emerged from using pre-existing groups. They proved Morgan's (1998) claim that existing relationships continue into the structure of the discussion. This meant that those who were usually quiet tended to remain quiet and let others do much of the talking. Efforts were made to include these people in the discussion and encourage them when they did speak, however, the discussion did sometimes become dominated by certain individuals. This could perhaps have been lessened with greater experience on the part of the interviewer.

2.5.2 Successes

Nevertheless, the use of focus groups was found to be generally very successful. They contained people from a variety of social and economic backgrounds and included people who used the library for a variety of purposes. Even non-users had strong ideas on what libraries should be like. The wide range of interests and information needs showed that elderly people expect many different things from their library. While several common themes did become clear, the variety of past experiences within the groups ensured that many differing views about new libraries emerged.

The relaxed atmosphere that came about from the familiar surroundings meant that the conversations flowed freely and little prompting or guiding was needed from the researcher. There were often differing views as to the success of some of the changes in the library, but because the focus group members knew each other well, they listened to each other carefully and felt free to give their own opinions. This led to very productive sessions where the reasons behind people's judgements were fully explained.

The staff interviews were also very helpful in providing a valuable link between theories gleaned from the literature review and the practical implementation of those concepts. The staff were frequently refreshingly frank about the less successful features of their library as well as the more popular ones. This may have been due to the open-ended questions which left the interviewees free to take the discussion in any direction that was important to them, or the anonymity offered.

2.6 Summary

An inductive approach was undertaken to progress from the primary data of people's reactions to their library to new theories about whether recent reforms have served the needs of the elderly. A literature review of relevant modernising reports and existing sociological and library theories, combined with staff interviews, provided a valuable framework in which to place the primary data.

As this project sought to analyse people's perceptions and emotional responses to the new libraries, it was decided that a qualitative approach was most suitable. By conducting research through focus groups, participants were able to express their opinions in their own words. The friendly and familiar nature of the focus groups led to frank and often revealing exchanges. Participants explained their thoughts fully without feeling threatened by the outsider researcher. While the focus groups were not necessarily fully representative of the opinions of all elderly people, they did include people from a reasonable range of backgrounds and interests. They raised important points to help illuminate many of the issues of what older people think of their new library.

3 The Library as a Building

3.1 Introduction

Bournemouth's new Central Library is based in a bold, light, open, modern building. (DCMS, 2003:14)

These are the opening words of the chapter in *Framework for the Future* dedicated to 'The Position of Libraries' and they show that the government places much importance on the design of new libraries. It aims to combat the findings of the Audit Commission (2003:6) that people are increasingly unwilling to use libraries that have "official looking facades, formal layouts and uncomfortable furniture". Inspectors also reported that libraries in one third of English authorities were poorly located to suit the needs of the local population.

As the physical characteristics of libraries are an important aspect of the ideas put forward in *Framework for the Future*, this chapter examines older people's reactions to the new buildings that have been constructed in their communities. It will discuss their opinions of the location of the new library, whether they feel safe going there and what they think of its internal design.

3.2 Literature Review

Framework for the Future responded to the Audit Commission's criticisms by suggesting libraries follow the example of Bournemouth Central library and the Norfolk and Norwich Millennium library in creating open plan spaces that can be used for a variety of purposes. However, beyond advocating bright colour schemes and zones for different activities, the report offers little guidance on building libraries that feel safe and are convenient for their users to reach.

The location of libraries within their communities has been much debated. Glancey (2000) argued that during the 1970s and 1980s they were "buried [...] in

multi-purpose civic centres, to deny them their special role on the urban stage”. Like Greenhalgh et al (1995) and the writers of *Framework for the Future*, he approved of the modern trend of building libraries in the commercial heart of towns, because this raises their profile and brings in more visitors. However, this does lead to doubts about whether new libraries will simply be buried in commercial buildings rather than civic ones.

The library’s location must be convenient for local transport links. A recent MORI (2002:12) report found, not unsurprisingly, that people tended not to go to the library “if getting there or parking nearby is inconvenient.” This is likely to be particularly important to the elderly.

Dowler (1996:119) noted that regular users come to associate their library with a sense of “comfort and security”. This suggests that changes to that environment, such as a new location may affect those feelings of safety. There is some debate whether older people have a greater fear of crime than the rest of society. Killias and Clerici (2000) argue that people who feel alone, especially older people, tend to perceive a greater risk of crime. However, Chadee and Ditton (2003) state that older people are not inherently fearful, but rather it depends on each person’s life experiences. Nevertheless, it is clear that all possible efforts should be made to ensure that the library surroundings are as free from risk as possible.

The ease of access around the building is another aspect of library design that is particularly important for older people. Of course, not all older people are frail and facilities for the elderly should not be restricted to perceived physical limitations. Nevertheless, it is important for libraries to consider all the needs of their older users. The Disability Discrimination Act of 1995 forces managers of public buildings to “make ‘reasonable adjustments’ to the physical features of the premises to overcome physical barriers to access” (National Disability Council, 1999 cited in McCaskill and Goulding, 2001). These should include ramps or lifts as well as stairs, suitable heights for tables and chairs, plenty of space between aisles and doors which are easy to open (Fisher, 2001; McCaskill and Goulding, 2001). People with limited vision require good lighting and clear signage.

Architectural texts argue that a building's design has an important effect on users' perceptions of the organisation housed there (eg. Lawson, 2001; Markus and Cameron, 2002). They state that particular designs become associated with specific services and people who use the service develop a strong attachment to the design. Therefore, a new design could change users' reactions to the service as a whole.

Greenhalgh et al (1995:53) contend that these arguments apply to library designs because "they express much about the changing use, function and status of public libraries." They make a convincing case that the imposing nature of older buildings portrayed qualities of "enlightenment, learning [and] knowledge" while having fewer internal walls and more glass conveys the idea that newer libraries are more open and inclusive (Greenhalgh et al, 1995:58). If older people are accustomed to the former values, changes to architecture and décor are likely to have a considerable effect on their perceptions of the library service.

Changes to library buildings are likely to be felt keenly by regular users, because they often associate the library with their hobbies and their enjoyment of reading. As Rizzo (2002) states, library patrons have a strong "sense of being, belonging and ownership". This means designers of new libraries face a difficult dilemma of incorporating modern values of openness and inclusion, but not alienating older users accustomed to the older buildings.

3.3 Results

3.3.1 The library's location within its town or village

All library staff believed it was important for libraries to occupy a central position in the community they serve. Brixworth library is in the centre of the village. The manager said:

The site of such a prominent building opposite the village's shopping centre attracts people.

He explained that the library's benefactors insisted on this prominence as one of their conditions. Brixworth users agreed that it was good to have the library so clearly visible, but also said that they would probably use the library wherever it was sited, because they came especially for the computer classes. In contrast, members of the Brixworth social group lived in a residential home 200 yards from the library, but only one person used the library.

One of the few problems mentioned by staff at the Washington Millennium Centre library was that it was in a run down housing estate, while the library it replaced was on the high street. They had noticed a drop in visitors, which they attributed to people not wanting to walk the extra distance. One staff member said:

I would like to put it on wheels and wheel it on to the place it was before [...] When we start tucking ourselves away, people have to start making the effort to find us, whereas if you're on the main street you might get passers-by who think maybe I'll have a look in there.

37% of library users stated that transport was an important issue related to the library's location. The Brixworth users group illustrates the special circumstances of rural libraries in that two people lived within walking distance of the library, while the other three drove in from nearby villages. This indicates that elderly people without cars are limited to their own village, but those who are independently mobile are prepared to travel considerable distances if the library offers the services they want.

Users in Washington and Stratford said they had no transport problems because they lived only about ten minutes' bus ride away. One of the surprising findings was that many of the focus group members in Washington and Stratford often travelled large distances in the course of a day. Good local transport meant they could go to several libraries within quite a wide radius of their homes. For example, two people in the Washington social group chose not to use the Millennium Centre, but went to the town centre library because it was close to their supermarket. This trend was especially noticeable in Stratford, where all members of the users group and the three library patrons in the social group were familiar with at least one other library in the borough. They chose which library to use according to their weekly routines and which library had the best selection of the type of stock they wanted to use that day.

However, members of both Bournemouth groups said that they faced a long journey to get to the central library. One social group participant said he used his branch library because:

I don't drive, I couldn't really go down to the Bournemouth library to shop and get books because I couldn't carry them. (BournSocD)

This prompted the following suggestion, which received favourable comments from the rest of the group:

Do you think it would be better, instead of building one big library, to have five smaller ones? Then you could have them at your doorstep instead of having to go a mile and a half. (BournSocC)

3.3.2 Security and safety

Staff at Brixworth, Washington and Stratford said they had experienced problems with groups of children congregating inside and outside the new libraries and worrying other users.

The Brixworth manager said that for a year after opening the library was:
under siege almost from large groups of youths leaving lots of mess outside.

He thought that, as in other rural villages, there was little for teenagers to do and the library was just the new place to go. He said measures like installing CCTV and hiring security guards were largely unsuccessful at deterring the children and many older people were unwilling to come to the library, especially in the evenings. He thought that the problem had largely gone once the novelty of it being a new building had worn off.

In fact, all of the Brixworth library group and most of the social group said they did not feel at all threatened by seeing groups of children at the library. Two social group participants were worried that the children were sometimes rude and might try to block their path. Neither had experienced any problems, but their concerns were strongly held.

The situations at Stratford and Washington are a little different because they actively encouraged teenagers to use the library. The manager at Stratford said they

faced serious problems because they attracted so many teenagers that:

You would literally have fifty or sixty teenagers, very noisy, very loud, very aggressive and nobody liked walking past them.

He said the situation arose because:

We hadn't thought about how they're going to use us, what's going to happen when they abuse us.

Control was regained after they employed staff who could relate better with teenagers. This could explain the fact that only one focus group member thought that Stratford did not always seem completely safe.

Washington staff said children waiting for events at the community centre would:
congregate outside [...] swearing, smoking and [older users] wouldn't come past.

They worked with community centre staff to keep the children in another part of the complex until the library had closed, which they believed had solved the problem. Neither regular users nor the social group, whose meetings took place in the same complex, said they had ever felt threatened. In fact, one lady said:

*Oh no. They're quite friendly really. Once I was going through to the café and I dropped my bags and one nice boy asked if he could help pick everything up.
(WashSocC)*

Staff at Bournemouth Library did not think security had been a problem there and none of the focus group participants reported feeling unsafe, either in the library or its surroundings.

3.3.3 Design and layout of the building

In general, staff, users and non-users approved of the designs of their new libraries. All the staff said the new libraries were much lighter and more spacious than the old buildings, which were often unsuited to the range of services they wanted to provide.

As expected, staff at each location believed their buildings complied with new legislation and were now fully accessible for people with disabilities. Bournemouth and Stratford have lifts to reach upper floors and all four libraries have automatic doors so

that anyone with disabilities can move around the library easily. However, staff did recognise that when the lifts break down it leaves people who cannot use the stairs without access to the main areas of shelving on the upper floors.

Interestingly, no focus group member volunteered an opinion about physical access around the library. However, once prompted, they offered positive reactions. For example, Stratford and Bournemouth users said that they thought the lifts were a good idea.

There was a marked split in reactions to the new interior designs between focus groups. Users at the smaller libraries at Brixworth and Washington were generally positive:

It really is very nice - light and airy. (BrixLibB)

Yes, it's lovely and modern. Libraries were always dark, dingy places weren't they? But now, I think it's excellent. (BrixLibC)

I think it's good. It's so light and colourful. (WashLibB)

They seem to have space for everything in here don't they? The old one was so small. (WashLibD)

However, users at the larger libraries expressed a variety of opinions on the new designs. Two of the Bournemouth library group, and the three people from the social group who had been to the library said the entrance foyer was a little off-putting:

It's a bit cold looking. It seems a waste of space to have the bottom like that, instead of having it full of lovely books. (BournLibB)

One person in the Stratford library group and two from the social group disliked the new design.

I'd like to go back to the old library. When I went there I knew I could go straight away to the books I wanted [...] It seemed easier that it does here. They say it's better, but I really don't know. (StratLibE)

[The entrance is] confusing. You want to go in and see books straight away. (StratSocA)

It's the size of it. I don't like the way the books are set out [...] If you want to ask a question you have to go upstairs, but you can't take a book out up there, you have to go downstairs. (StratSocB)

However, other members of the focus groups said that the new designs did not make much difference to them. The following statements are indicative of the two main arguments used in Bournemouth and Stratford:

It's a library though isn't it? If you know it's a library, then you know there are going to be books in there. So you just walk past the rest. (BournLibD)

It's immaterial to me, because I don't stay around. I pick my books and go. (StratSocC)

Perhaps because they were aware that Bournemouth has a high proportion of elderly people, staff there seem to have gone to special lengths to make sure the interior design and furniture were suitable for older people. As well as choosing a colour scheme that made it easy to distinguish between the different reading zones, information points and exits, the manager explained that they sent different designs of chairs to local residential homes and:

We got people to sit in them and say how easy they found it, could they get out of it, is it the right height for you. People took it very seriously and they were very helpful giving their feedback.

3.4 Discussion

The reactions of the various focus groups to the location and design of the four new libraries were somewhat mixed. Responses were mostly positive, although some questioned the location of the libraries in their towns and others disliked the more extreme architectural features.

Focus group members seemed fairly equivocal about the need to have libraries in prominent locations. Staff at Washington thought they had lost visitors from not being on that area's main shopping street and the Brixworth staff member believed his library had gained from being opposite the village shops. However, Brixworth non-users still did not go to the new library, while Washington users said the location made little difference to them.

Current thinking (eg. Greenhalgh et al, 1995; Glancey, 2000; *Framework for the Future*) holds that libraries should be part of large shopping complexes in town centres. This investigation found that many elderly people prefer to go to the library as part of

their usual routine of local shopping, and so are more likely to use local branch libraries than large central ones.

An unexpected finding was that many elderly people reliant on public transport as well as those with access to private cars travelled considerable distances in the course of their day and often used several different libraries. This suggests that a library's location is important not because of its prominence, but its convenience. Also, the library's services are more important than location – people are prepared to travel to use the services they want, but if they do not want those services they will not go in, no matter how prominent the building.

The fact that three of the four libraries experienced troubles with groups of teenagers suggests that not enough thought has been given to the effect of putting a library into a new part of the town. *Framework for the Future* states that libraries should be prominent in their communities, but the authors seem not to have realised the consequences of having more people congregating there. The experiences of Brixworth and Washington libraries shows that managers must give careful consideration to dealing with the curious, or bored, people who treat the building as just the latest place to gather. As the Stratford manager admitted:

I don't think anyone thought about what happens when youngsters come in for the first time in their lives.

Staff at Brixworth, Stratford and Washington spoke about groups of children loitering at the library entrance, but they seem to have solved any issues of security in the library and its surroundings. Only two of the focus group participants admitted to ever feeling threatened. This appears to confirm Chadee and Ditton's (2003) view that old age does not inevitably makes people more scared of crime. It suggests that older people do not require greater levels of security than the rest of the public, and if staff can create a generally safe environment, then older people will come back to the library relatively quickly.

However, it should be noted that the focus groups in these locations contained no lapsed users, which means they did not include people who left the library because they did not feel safe. It could be said that many retired people visit the library during school

hours, which limits how often they share the library with groups of young people. However, they still come into contact with children at weekends and during school holidays. It is therefore significant that no regular users could remember ever feeling threatened in any of the libraries.

As was expected in the wake of the Disability Discrimination Act, planners at all libraries had given careful thought to how to make the buildings accessible to all users. The fact that no focus group member volunteered any complaints suggests that designers of the four libraries have been so successful in making buildings fully accessible that this is no longer an issue for older users.

However, reactions to the interior design of the four libraries were mixed. Responses to the two smaller libraries tended to be more positive than the two larger buildings, but this could be just because Brixworth and Washington Millennium Centre libraries were fairly conservative and had few design 'features'. In general, the complaints about Bournemouth and Stratford libraries were that the entrance foyers contained no signs of books or the layout was confusing. This seems to support the theories of Greenhalgh et al (1995) and Lawson (2001) that people associate certain services with particular environments – the simple fact of not having books visible in the entrance foyer changes people's perception of the library as a whole. However, the majority of users at Bournemouth and Stratford either actively liked or had no strong opinions on the new design.

80% of the focus group members were happy that the new libraries were light and spacious, and thought this was a great improvement on the older style buildings. This is one aspect of the libraries envisioned in *Framework for the Future* that appeals to older users as well as younger ones.

However, one theme emerged that may cause modernisers some concern – while some library users were enthusiastic about the new design, 48% gave fairly non-committal answers, like "It's quite nice", or "Well, it's better than the old one, I suppose". Six people said they were not bothered about the design because they only came for the books, nothing else. This implies that older users tolerated the changes without necessarily forming strong opinions about them.

It would be wrong for library planners to accept the general and sometimes vague views of older people at face value – rather, efforts should be made to actively find out which aspects of the design they like or dislike. Only then will it be possible to design a library that older people will like, not just one they will tolerate.

3.5 Summary

Much has been written about placing libraries in prominent locations, like large shopping centres, but this study found that elderly people tend to use libraries that are convenient for them, whether prominent or not. For example, focus group members stated a preference for a short walk or bus trip to their local branch than a longer journey to the town centre. Even those prepared to travel will use the library that best suits their routine or needs rather than a supposedly superior new library.

Designers of the four libraries studied appear to have satisfied older people's needs for an easily accessible building and layout. However, sufficient forethought seems not to have been given to whether encouraging children to linger at the library would have an adverse effect on older people's feelings of safety. Fortunately, staff were able to solve the problems that arose and there seems to have been little long-lasting effect.

It was discovered that the majority of older people questioned either liked, or had no strong opinion about the interior decoration and layout of the new libraries. The few who disliked the new foyers and busy interiors supported those writers who argue that people develop a strong attachment to buildings as representative of the services offered in them. However, it should give planners some pause for thought that most of the elderly people questioned seemed to tolerate the changes, rather than actively liking them. This suggests that more work could be done in taking pro-active steps to find out precisely what older people do and do not want from their libraries – rather than just assuming they will be uncomplaining about whatever is decided.

Overall there was a firm belief that a library's design and location are of secondary importance to the quality of its collections, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

4 The Library's Collections and IT Facilities

4.1 Introduction

Libraries and books are synonymous in the minds of most library users. A library cannot claim to be a success unless it has a good range of books carefully selected to meet the needs of its community. (DCMS, 2003:24)

As this quotation shows, the authors of *Framework for the Future* recognise that stocking a wide selection of books and promoting reading are still core functions of public libraries. Nevertheless, other media such as CDs, videos and DVDs are becoming increasingly popular. In 2001 audio-visual materials accounted for 9% of all issues in British public libraries, an increase of almost half from 6% of issues in 1996 (LISU, 2002). The introduction of the People's Network computers providing free internet access has also had a significant impact on how people use the library. Libraries face a difficult challenge in meeting user demands for such a wide range of resources.

This chapter presents older people's assessment of the collections of each of the four libraries studied. Firstly, it discusses whether they think the book collections are adequate for their purposes, followed by their reactions to audio-visual material such as CDs, videos and DVDs and to the presence of computers in the library. Finally, there is discussion of whether or not older people think their new libraries have achieved the right balance of these different resources and meet the needs of users of all ages.

4.2 Literature Review

Framework for the Future states that reading is important for two main reasons – for pleasure and for education. It says national schemes are a good way of attracting publicity to books and reading, but only gives examples of programmes aimed at young children, teenagers and adults with poor literacy. It makes no mention of older people, either broadening the interests of existing readers or encouraging those who may not be used to reading for pleasure.

The Audit Commission's (2002) report stated that 56% of the libraries inspected did not have an adequate quantity and range of books. However, their main criticism was that "often stock is significantly biased towards older people" (Audit Commission, 2002:5). This is perhaps not surprising, considering that people over 55 constitute 36% of library users (Bohme and Spiller, 1999).

As sociologists stress, it is wrong to assume all older people have the same needs and interests (eg. Coleman et al, 1993; Morgan and Kunkel, 1998). In a forceful essay, Scrutton (1990:13) explains that negative stereotypes of the elderly "subtly undermine their personal value and worth, [...] prevent them achieving their potential and deny them equal opportunities."

Unfortunately, some libraries still base their services for the elderly on perceived physical and mental limitations – rather than catering for the majority of older people who are active and independent (Kleiman, 1995). For example, Lucas (1993) found that only 20% of the elderly people he surveyed borrowed large print books, but this is commonly regarded as the main format of reading material for older people. Assumptions are also made that older people only read a narrow range of books (Kendall, 1996).

The literature reveals concerns that the needs of the elderly are often given much less attention than those of other age groups. Writers from Dee (1987) onwards have encouraged librarians to treat older people just as much as individuals as they do younger people. The fact that authors still have to argue this point suggests that few librarians have taken heed of their message.

Street (1994:28) discovered that few libraries asked older readers what they wanted, most just offered services that are "perceived as being required". The problem is compounded by the fact that many older people tend not to voice their complaints for fear of either making trouble or causing the whole service to be scaled back (Todd, 1984; Linley and Usherwood, 1998). Sadly, this neglect occurs despite reading having been shown to be of great benefit to elderly people. Parkkinen (1990:16) worked as a librarian in a nursing home and her compassionate article shows that reading offers an

escape from the sometimes confusing, lonely or depressing reality of old age by “expanding the limits of the mind and escaping from the self”.

Parkkinen’s thoughts were confirmed in Rane-Szostak and Herth’s (1995:100) study, which found that people who read for pleasure were “rarely lonely”. They claim that older people who can obtain reading material to suit their interests and educational level reported a more positive outlook and felt less isolated. This could perhaps be explained by the sociological theory that as people age they place more value on the activities that brought them most pleasure in the past (Morgan and Kunkel, 1998). Therefore, someone who has always enjoying reading books will continue to place great importance on having access to an interesting selection of books.

Walters (1995) believes passionately that the purpose of the public library is to inspire people of all ages by introducing them to a variety of imaginative fiction. He makes the convincing case that if the collection becomes predictable and unchallenging, readers will become bored and leave the library. Kleiman (1995:33) agrees and argues that it is not enough to have interesting books on the shelves – libraries must develop reading programmes that “create excitement and mental stimulation”. He makes the valid point that librarians go to some length to design imaginative reading events and groups for children and teenagers, but do very little for older users.

Older people’s need for good non-fiction collections should not be over-looked. As Kendall (1996) stresses, contrary to the perception that old people cannot learn, self-education is one of the main reasons many elderly people use the library. Writers such as Kleiman (1995), argue that older people today are better educated, more active and have broader interests, which implies that libraries’ collections must be very varied in order to meet the needs of the elderly.

Framework for the Future states that the free internet access provided by the People’s Network plays a vital part in contributing to the library’s educational role. It admits that “older people are amongst those currently less inclined to experience the opportunities and benefits offered by online services” (DCMS, 2003:35), but offers no suggestion as to how they can be persuaded to learn about the internet. As with reading

programmes, the schemes praised in the report are aimed primarily at under-privileged children and the unemployed.

Laguna and Babcock's (1997) study revealed that older people experienced more 'computer anxiety' than young adults. They were uncomfortable using computers, took longer to carry out actions and made more wrong decisions, which added to their unease. However, Cody et al (1999) found that if training is carried out correctly, older people are enthusiastic internet users. They concluded that as long as classes begin from a simple base and tutors are very supportive, older people learn relatively easily. In fact, many librarians who held beginners IT courses have reported great success in attracting older people. For example, the classes organised by Burwell (2001) at the Chicago Public Library were so popular that staff were temporarily overwhelmed. She said her students particularly wanted to learn how to "email their children, grandchildren and friends" (Burwell, 2001:42).

4.3 Results

4.3.1 Traditional Collections – Books, Magazines and Newspapers

Despite the rise of computers and the internet, staff at all four libraries continued to place great emphasis on their printed collections. Staff at Bournemouth and Brixworth said their respective Private Finance Initiative (PFI) partnership and charitable benefactor had given them extra money to stock their new libraries with an increased quantity and range of books. Staff at Brixworth thought their wider range had:

attracted people from surrounding villages that we didn't get before.

The Bournemouth manager said they carried out much consultation and the larger budget allowed them to

actually purchase what people had asked for, and to experiment.

However, Stratford and Washington staff said their collections budgets were reduced after the library's opening, which meant the range is not as wide as they want.

The Stratford manager said:

Generally, I think most elders think we don't have as many books on the shelf, which I don't think we have, as the old library [...] We now rotate the stock, so there's probably new stock or different stock on the shelves than there used to be. Whereas the impact is that - oh, we haven't actually got that much.

When staff members at the four libraries were asked what collections or services were specifically aimed at older people, they all said they provided large-print and audio books. Only Bournemouth staff recognised that not all works are available in these formats, which results in their holdings lacking variety of genres and of individual titles. She said the collection of talking books was:

more skewed towards a non-fiction base. [But even then, the lack of variety means] men who maybe only want to read non-fiction, they've quickly read through all the war books and history books.

In common with the majority of the staff questioned, this manager assumes that services for older people should consist mainly of large-print books in certain genres. Only the Stratford manager took a wider view:

But, that's a mass generalisation saying that everyone who's over 60 either needs glasses or can't read completely, so we offer them story tapes. You think, hang on, there's probably loads of them who will actually want, I don't know, 'Skateboarding for Elders' or something.

In fact, the responses of focus group members showed there was a wide variation in the types of books that older people want to read – not all of which were catered for by the four libraries. The following table indicates the genres preferred by members of all the focus groups.

	<i>Library Users Group</i>	<i>Readers in Social Group</i>
Bournemouth Central Library	romance, war stories	autobiography, classic novels, gardening, history, travel, thrillers
Brixworth Library	a variety of books from all genres	romance
Stratford Library	cookery, crime, engineering, foreign newspapers, history, watch-making, westerns	biography, cinema, foreign newspapers, history, war stories
Washington Millennium Centre Library	novels, poetry, plays, travel	history, historical romance, travel

Not everyone felt the library had an adequate collection of books in the areas that interested them. The people in the Bournemouth library group conformed most to the stereotypical view of older readers, and they were satisfied with the range at the Central Library. However, the readers in the social group were less happy. The men who liked thrillers and autobiographies said they had read all the available titles. Another lamented:

I have to get the large-print now, because of my eyes [...] But there isn't really the choice. For one large-print you get about ten ordinary books. (BournSocA)

The Brixworth users said their reading was not limited to specific genres, they just liked to look along the shelves for something interesting. They thought there was a good range of books to choose from. The one regular library user in the Brixworth social group thought the library had a fairly good range of historical romances, but thought she would soon have to start reading the same books again.

The collection at Stratford library received mixed reactions from people in the users group and the social group. While four people thought it was sufficient, five had very negative views. One user believed it did not have enough Asian language books, while another thought there was not enough stock rotation because he had already read all the crime novels. The former engineer who was learning watch-making wanted practical manuals. He believed it was wrong to dispose of books just because they had not been borrowed for a few months:

I would pick up books on clocks and watches if there are some , but they're not being printed any more [...] Books are being thrown away and it's a crying shame, because you can't get back the info. (StratLibD)

Two people in the social group also did not think the library had enough variety. One said very simply:

No. I don't like it. I don't go there because they've got no history books. (StratSocD)

Members of the writers' group at Washington library wanted a wide variety of novels, plays and poetry, but the collection did not have enough depth.

I find it a bit disconcerting that if I'm looking for a particular new novel that's not there and I discover the sort of mediocre Jeffrey Archer type novel and three copies of it altogether on the shelf. (WashLibE)

Library users at all the locations were prepared to counter perceived shortcomings in the collections at the four libraries by asking staff to order books from other branches.

I like history books, but they've only got the Tudors and Victorians here. I've been starting to find out about the Georgians and all the Wars of the Roses. So I have to ask them to get them in from the other places around here. (WashSocA)

I've got a friend who goes to Stratford, but she often says "I can't find anything up here." [...] So I bring her to this library here and if they haven't got it, we'll order it in for her. (StratSocB)

Two members of the Bournemouth social group who had previously used local branch libraries (although not the central library) had stopped using them because of the poor selection. They were prepared to pay to get a wider variety of reading material – one went to a local charity shop while another subscribed to the Reader's Digest.

4.3.2 Audio-Visual Collections – CDs, Videos and DVDs

Staff in all four locations said that a large part of the stock budget for their new libraries was spent on improving the audio-visual collections. For example, the Brixworth manager said:

We didn't have very much music on CD, so we expanded on that. We also introduced videos and DVDs for hire.

The Bournemouth manager said they had made a conscious decision to:

keep a broad depth and range of music rather than just concentrating on something that's going to attract young people.

Staff at Washington were the only ones to recognise that audio-visual collections become obsolete rapidly:

We had videos and CDs, but unfortunately they never got topped up, so all the people that borrowed them had had them all.

This meant most users of this part of the collection chose to go to the larger library in the town centre or local video shops, which have more up-to-date collections.

No focus group members said their main reason for going to the library was to borrow CDs, videos or DVDs for themselves. One library user from Bournemouth and

two from Brixworth said they occasionally borrowed videos, but:

You could count it on the fingers of one hand. (BrixLibA)

In contrast, ten people said that when they took their grandchildren to the library, the children would usually borrow audio-visual material as well as books. The following comment was typical:

I bring my grandchildren in and when they've chosen their books they always want to look around the videos. (BournLibB)

4.3.3 Computers and the Internet

All four libraries had invested heavily in the installation of People's Network computers. Staff generally believed that the new technology appealed to all age groups. For example, the Bournemouth staff member said:

Although it's heavily used by students, it's also well-used by older people, including email where perhaps they're contacting their families abroad or getting photos of their grandchildren.

Staff at the Washington Millennium Centre library thought the computers were the most important improvement in the new library. They said:

Initially the older ones didn't use them, but because it's in the main body of the library [...] they ended up coming to check their emails - all age groups. And they would help each other because they were all learning at the same time.

All libraries offered beginners' courses on how to use the computers, and staff said they had been very popular amongst older people. The Brixworth manager said:

Older people are getting to grips with [the computers]. The taster sessions that Chris has run attracted for the most part older people who wanted to find out what it was all about.

Despite these enthusiastic reports, evidence from the focus groups was less positive. All but five participants across the focus groups did believe it was necessary to have internet computers in the library. However, they thought they were mostly for young people – apart from those in the Brixworth class, only four people said they used their library's computers. The following comments are typical of those heard in every

group:

*Oh, I'm too old for all of that. I wouldn't know how to turn them on!
(WashSocD)*

*[Computers are] no good to anybody. At my age I can't commit to computers or anything. I'm a bit too old for that. You can do it, but I don't want to know.
(StratSocD)*

The Stratford library group had a lively debate about whether older people wanted to learn to use the computers.

It's way beyond me. I've got to be honest. (StratLibC)

I check my emails, because I've got sons living abroad. (StratLibD)

Yes, but many of the old people in here, they are not computer literate. Most are uneducated. (StratLibA)

I don't think so! When my sons went away, one year ago, they taught me how to email. Now I do it every day. (StratLibD)

*But some people are lazy. They say, "Oh, I'm too old to learn anything."
(StratLibA)*

I have a good mind, I like to learn. (StratLibD)

*Yes, I'm 80 and I'm still working. I just don't have the need for computers.
(StratLibC)*

4.3.4 The Balance between Different Age Groups and Different Resources

Staff at all the libraries except Stratford believed their collections were equally appealing to all age groups. For example, the Bournemouth manager said that they tried to have as broad a range of titles as possible in every aspect of their stock, including books, magazines, newspapers and music. She added:

We were keen to get young people in to the library because they were an under-represented group at the old library [...] But I would not want to lose the older users as well.

Staff recognised that libraries can no longer just focus on lending books. For example, Brixworth staff said:

Videos and DVDs are all that some people go for, especially at the weekends. But most people will take just books or a mixture of books and videos and music. That's what you want really.

Staff at Washington highlighted the different ways people of different ages use the library:

I think a lot of people come into the library to use the computers who never borrow books [...] But I do have to say for certain age groups books are still their priority.

The member of staff at Stratford was candid about the lack of provision for the elderly. He explained that Newham Council's priority is to focus on the needs of the borough's predominately young population. As he said:

Although there is an over 50s provision in there, it seems the weakest of all the policy thrusts. In the end the big policy is to get to the younger ones. [...] I do think the elders would then be left till last - with a thought that all they want is a basic library service, which we're providing.

He made the important point that, while most libraries have specific staff to manage and promote the children and teenage sections:

Elders seem to be forgotten about as a non-purchasing power if you like [...] It's assumed they will like the same things as everyone else. [...] If you said, "We'll get some library staff who will devote their time to getting services to the over 60s" - I wouldn't think there are too many services with that kind of provision.

No focus group members said they felt that older people were not catered for, however 32% remarked that their library's stock and facilities did seem to be aimed more at young people. Their responses were often based on the relative priorities they thought the library gave to books and computers.

Almost all the participants thought books were the most important part of the library, apart from two people in the Stratford library group who thought computers were now more important. People in this group said:

I think they're doing more for the younger people than the older ones. They are putting too much emphasis on computers. That doesn't help the creativity of a person. They need to have more literature. (StratLibA)

Oh no, I think computers are the most important things, because of all the new technologies coming very fast all over the world. If people get more chance to go and learn about it, then that's the most important [...] As long as you still have enough books and papers. (StratLibB)

Even members of the Stratford social group, who rarely went to the library said:

I think they're tending to look more after the younger people, because a lot of the books have been taken off the shelf. I think that's sad. (StratSocB)

Focus group members in the other locations thought their library achieved a good balance between attracting young people and satisfying the older users. Many people were pleased that there were good children's collections, because they thought a major role of public libraries was to encourage children to read and to help them learn.

I think it's very good for the children to be able to come here. It encourages them to come in and look at the books, which if you weren't introduced to it at school probably you wouldn't think about it so much. (BrixLibC)

I don't go, it doesn't interest me, but I know my grandchildren go and they've read so many books, and gone on the internet too. Now they know more than me about all sorts of things! (WashSocC)

4.4 Discussion

Evidence from the focus groups shows that many older people place a high value on reading. Respondents who said they enjoyed reading tended to stay with a fairly narrow range of genres. This is in accordance with Morgan and Kunkel's (1998) theory that the elderly prefer to stay with their existing interests, not necessarily seeking out new experiences. It could also explain why many librarians do not devote much time or resources to providing a range of services to elderly people, because they assume their reading habits are limited and unchanging. However, this is an example of the discrimination described by Scrutton (1990).

One of the most intriguing aspects of this study was the broad range of interests shown across all the focus groups. Respondents certainly did not conform to the usual stereotype of only wanting romances and military histories. Writers who criticise libraries for treating older people as a homogeneous group make a valid point. Unfortunately, readers who had less common interests found it difficult to satisfy their needs, as did thirteen people who were actively seeking to take advantage of their retirement and broaden their knowledge. This again shows that the negative assumptions about older people's reading habits are wrong and that writers such as

Kleiman (1995) and Walters (1995) are right to urge libraries to organise activities and programmes to stimulate and challenge older readers.

The authors of *Framework for the Future* had the laudable aims of increasing the quality of junior collections, but they do not appear to consider the equally important need to have a varied and up-to-date adult collection. The short-comings of the new libraries were highlighted by the five people from Bournemouth, Stratford and Washington who preferred to get books from charity shops, saying they had a better range of titles.

Even if the funding was not sustained, staff at all four locations had an increased budget to stock their libraries, and it appears much of the money was spent on improving the audio-visual collections. This was important to help the libraries meet their objectives of bringing in non-readers. However, only three focus group members said they ever used these resources themselves. Indeed, participants often cited the increased CD and DVD displays as evidence that the library was targeting its services more towards young people than the elderly.

Responses to questions about these resources showed that older people did not expect the library to look after adults only, but to reach out to children too. The fact that a quarter of focus group participants brought their grandchildren to the library and supervised them as they borrowed books and audio-visual material shows they have a vested interest in ensuring that the library caters equally for all ages.

It was perhaps to be expected that staff would give positive reports that the People's Network computers were used by people of all ages. However, the increased presence of computers in the four libraries was not met with unanimous approval by members of the focus groups. The vast majority of participants seemed to confirm the views of Laguna and Babcock (1997) that anxiety about using new technology prevents many older people from learning to use the internet. As younger generations are more accustomed to using computers, these levels of anxiety will probably decrease over time, but at present a significant proportion of older users simply ignore the computers in their library.

84% of the people who did not use computers themselves still thought it was important to have the internet available for children to use, because, like the authors of *Framework for the Future*, they believed that it helped in their education. Nevertheless, they were concerned at computers having such a prominent place in the library. Firstly, they believed children should be reading books, because this made them think independently. Secondly, they said they had no use for computers, so it made them feel a little over-looked. Many of the negative responses to the question of equal provision for all ages were based on perceptions that too many children came in to play on the computers. These important concerns are not addressed in *Framework for the Future*, or in much of the literature.

However, the more positive arguments of Cody et al (1999) and Burwell (2001) were supported by evidence from the eight focus group participants who are computer literate that those who make the effort to learn reap great benefits. This supports arguments made in *Framework for the Future* that the People's Network is a key platform for information provision in libraries. However, the report does not really outline how to overcome the perceived barriers to the new technology. The very negative reaction of some focus group members shows this will be a difficult task to achieve.

As predicted by writers such as Todd (1984) and Street (1994), as well as by staff at Stratford library, most of the focus group members seemed to be resigned to the changes they saw, rather than enthusiastic about the new collections.

Most of the people who commented on poor provision for adults thought this was balanced by improved services for young people. They were happy to see others borrowing DVDs and using computers even if they felt excluded from those activities. As one participant said:

They've got to modernise haven't they? The computer is with us. We're not going to lose it, so we might as well accept it. (BournLibD)

This is hardly enthusiastic praise, but neither is it a negative comment, so presumably staff would not feel any pressure to change their services to better suit the

needs of the elderly. The Stratford manager had anticipated this attitude:

The elders are a non-vocal group really [...] They come here, I wouldn't say satisfied with the services, but they still come here. The assumption is they're satisfied.

This passive acceptance of change has serious implications for the implementation of the suggestions in *Framework for the Future*. If elderly people are prepared to ignore developments that do not impact on their use of the library, then this could be taken as a sign of approval, even if they feel excluded from those innovations. Equally, if they do not complain about drops in the standard of the services they do use, then the authorities may assume they are content and will not try to improve those services. Libraries should instead be actively seeking to involve older people in reader development programmes and in helping them use the new technologies.

4.5 Summary

Framework for the Future places continuing emphasis on the important role libraries play in encouraging reading. However, it does not explicitly discuss the continuing needs of those who have developed their reading interests, including elderly readers. As many writers in this area highlight, older people tend not to be treated as individuals and their expectations of the library service are perceived to be quite low. However, the people in this study confounded this negative stereotype. They enjoyed books on a very wide range of subjects and they wanted their library to have as great a variety as possible. Unfortunately, 32% felt that their library's book stock was not adequate for their needs.

92% of participants did not borrow audio-visual resources themselves, but most seemed to think they were a valuable part of the library's collection. This was either because their grandchildren used them or because they were accepted as an unavoidable feature of modern life. The same accepting attitude prevailed in relation to the increased numbers of computers in the new libraries. 20% of the older people questioned used the internet and thought it was of great benefit, however most were reluctant to learn how to use the new technology.

The increasing prominence given to new media seemed to fuel participants' perceptions that their new library was trying attract young people rather than cater for the needs of the elderly. While some disapproved, the majority seemed prepared to accept this as necessary. This resigned acceptance could lead modernisers to think that the elderly will welcome the developments suggested reports like *Framework for the Future*. However, the findings of this study show that many older people think the quality of the book collection has dropped, while the other services are irrelevant to their needs.

The following chapter will examine whether this is true for the other main change envisaged in *Framework for the Future* – that of making the ambience of the library more open and in some ways more like modern bookshops.

5 The Library's Ambience

5.1 Introduction

Ambience, or atmosphere, is defined by Sannwald (1998:200) as “the conscious designing of space to create certain effects in users [and is] directly related to the feeling that people have about an organisation.” Dowler (1996:120) argues that it can “influence human behaviour” and provoke emotional responses. This suggests that people’s reactions to libraries are based on more than rational evaluations of the building and its collections.

This chapter attempts to assess how the new environments envisioned by reformers make older people feel about modern libraries. It enquires whether older people have noticed a change in the ambience of modern libraries, and if they approve of those changes. It then assesses the role staff play in influencing older people’s perceptions of the library’s ambience. Thirdly, it looks at attempts to make modern libraries feel more like bookshops by introducing facilities like cafés and lounge areas, and it asks participants what effect these have had on the atmosphere in their library. Lastly, as the reforms proposed in *Framework for the Future* are aimed at bringing more children into the library, this chapter asks if older library users think the feel of their library has been changed by having more young people around the building.

5.2 Literature Review

A recent report commissioned by the Audit Commission (2002) found that many people did not use public libraries because they felt intimidated by the old-fashioned ambience. In order to tackle these negative perceptions, it recommended that libraries introduce features used by successful modern bookshops, including lounge areas, cafés and bright and activity-filled areas for children and teenagers. The report also wanted library managers to encourage staff to be more lenient and more sensitive to the needs of all users.

These ideas to try to make libraries more open and welcoming were taken up by the authors of *Framework for the Future*, which says the atmosphere and image of libraries must be revitalised to “catch the public imagination” (DCMS, 2003:17).

This recent desire to change the ambience of public libraries has been hotly debated. Greenhalgh et al (1995:66) argue that the challenge libraries face is to lose their reputation for having a “dusty, archaic, forbidding” atmosphere while keeping their unique respectability and authority. One of the current theories of how to bring this change about is to follow the example of large chain bookshops. Advocates of this strategy base their arguments on an apparent public perception that modern bookshops are better than public libraries at creating a library-type environment (eg. Coffman, 1998; Cartwright, 2001). As early as 1993, Worpole argued that libraries had much to learn from bookshops in order to achieve a “compelling, comfortable and eye-catching informality” (Worpole, 1993:8).

Proponents of learning from bookshops say that libraries need to take urgent steps to attract more children and middle-aged people. Sannwald (1998:211) argues that librarians need to “understand what makes a retail space exciting and fun to visit” by having features like lounge areas where people relax while reading their books and designated zones for the different activities that take place in the library. MacLeod (1998:97) takes a simplistic view that coffee shops make libraries seem “cool” to young people who used to find them boring. He argues that they can be unobtrusive and create a new space in the library building that is not bound by the library’s rules. None of these writers consider if these innovations will attract elderly people, or how existing users might react to these fundamental changes to their library.

Other writers disagree with these proposals. Raymond (1998) points out that book superstores pay for their ‘superior’ ambience by not offering reference services or educational support and by cutting back on staff training. He says this makes it difficult for customers to find non-mainstream books and means relations with staff are not as friendly or supportive as in libraries. Benjamin (2001) reported on the rise of user groups, often including elderly people, who fight to keep their library’s traditional atmosphere intact.

It is widely acknowledged that staff play a key role in establishing a library's ambience (eg. Walters, 1995; Raymond, 1998; Kneale, 2000, cited in Kneale and MacLeHose, 2000). As Green (1994:19) states, they have a "pervasive, all-embracing influence on other factors." However, a recent study found that non-users have negative views of librarians, and that young people especially thought that staff were too strict (MORI, 2002). *Framework for the Future* acknowledges that it is not enough to just make physical changes to the library building, but that "success will depend on the outlook, skills and attitudes of the library workforce" (DCMS, 2003:16).

Coffman (1998) argues that if libraries follow the example of bookshops and eliminate much of the behind-the-scenes work like cataloguing, they can release more staff to sit in the reading rooms and answer users' questions – thereby improving customer service. Other writers maintain that a commercial system should not be brought into libraries because it produces employees who do not know the stock well enough to provide a good service to readers (Raymond, 1998; Kneale, 2000, cited in Kneale and MacLeHose, 2000). Raymond (1998:41) gives the plausible, but somewhat idealistic, reason that shop employees care only about their wages, while librarians care about helping readers: "I have never seen a reference librarian behave rudely. Instead, I have witnessed innumerable examples when the librarian seemed more interested in the subject than the patron." Walters (1995) makes the important point that librarians need more than good interpersonal skills, they must also have a good knowledge of all genres of books and be able stimulate a love of reading. He makes a credible argument that by doing this, libraries can create exciting atmospheres to help reassert their influence with young and old.

5.3 Results

5.3.1 How the ambience of the new library compares to that of the old library

The changes made in the four new libraries seem to have been largely successful. 70% of focus group members thought the ambience in their new library was an improvement. The following quotations illustrate the type of comments made in every

group:

Oh, it's much better now. When I was young it was always dark and fusty with people always saying, "Shhh!" You didn't want to stay for long in a place like that. (BrixSocD)

Years ago you were a swot if you went to the library. I loved it, but not many children went voluntarily - not where I lived anyway. But now I think it's much more open. And that's so much better. (WashLibA)

But, despite the predominance of these positive remarks, twelve people did not fully approve of the more relaxed atmosphere. Two were definitely disapproving:

I think it's changed for the worse. You should be quiet in a library. When I was a teenager and if I was running about I'd be put outside. But now you've got kids running around the place. (BournLibD)

I don't go in the Stratford library. I don't like the feel of the place. It's got no books - it's just a computer house. And they can't control the kids in there any more. (StratSocD)

Others were prepared to accept the changes as a necessary part of modernisation.

It's nothing like it was. People do raise their voices now. It's in line with current life now, isn't it? You can't freeze yourself in time. (BournLibA)

You've got to go forward in some ways. You can't expect to go into a library and have it quiet nowadays. I suppose that's life, as they say. (StratLibC)

Yet, perhaps the most revealing result was that even though the non-users questioned approved of the new informal atmosphere, none thought it would make them want to use their new library.

5.3.2 The effect of introducing features of modern bookshops

Opinions were divided about the effect of introducing features common in large modern bookshops, such as lounge areas and coffee shops.

Staff thought that, in principle, these were positive developments. Members of staff at the Washington Millennium Centre library were most enthusiastic about the

changes suggested in *Framework for the Future*.

I think we tried to copy the bookshops [...] It's all to do with selling really. It's not enough to put the books on the shelves with the spines. It's making them more attractive. [As for cafés,] we should have been in the forefront - we should have done that before the bookshops.

However, staff members were also concerned with the practicalities of implementing these measures. For example, the manager at Bournemouth said:

I wouldn't want a coffee shop actually in the library, partly because I want all the library space for library functions and more seating. Obviously you need to be careful that what's going on in them is not going to disrupt other people.

Focus group members gave these innovations only mild approval. Nine people disagreed with the idea of bringing new facilities into the library at all. Their comments included:

Not interested. It's a library, not a coffee shop. (StratSocD)

It's not something I'm bothered about. I'd sooner they put the money into books than a coffee shop. The thing is there should be no eating or drinking in the library. (BournLibB)

However, the rest of the participants had a more balanced view. Ten people supported the idea whole-heartedly and 21 expressed guarded approval. The following exchange from the Washington library group was typical of the views expressed in other discussions:

I would like to see the library adopting a high-street approach and have a coffee bar in them. You couldn't take a book from here and go and have a coffee, and you couldn't have a browse and coffee in here. You couldn't do the two things as you can in some of the bigger bookshops. (WashLibE)

All the whirring and noise people make... I still want one area in the library where I can sit for some peace and quiet. You can't read when there's all that racket. (WashLibD)

But you can still get that by going to a different library. So you're getting the option. (WashLibB)

5.3.3 The importance of library staff

Despite these somewhat mixed views on the ambience of the new libraries, managers and users all thought that library staff were vital in creating a welcoming atmosphere. As the Stratford manager said:

I think what's more important is the staff - more important than the building. I think you can get away with a grotty building if you've got staff who care and people see interaction. With this place, it was the finest, brightest modern building, but in the first year [...] it was noticeable that we weren't in control and that scared people away.

Even though members of the focus groups believed that the books were the most important part of the library, they recognised that staff played a key role in creating a favourable impression on library users.

The people are so friendly and ever so helpful. They really make it a nice place. (BrixLibC)

The staff have a lot to do with getting over this "Shhh" business. (WashLibE)

It depends on the staff. The staff here are friendly and if you want help, then it's easy to ask them and you can get anything. (StratLibD)

People who used smaller libraries often formed strong links with staff members, which contributed to their positive views of the library.

Oh, they all know me in there! She's very good. She knows I like these history books, so she looks them out for me. I had five new ones waiting for me this afternoon. (WashSocA)

The staff in my branch are very friendly. They've been there a long while and I'm very used to them. They know what I want and they help me order it in if they don't have a copy there. I think the staff [at Stratford library] are quite a bit younger and they change about quite a bit. (StratSocB)

The following comments from the Bournemouth library group show that poor relationships with staff can cloud users' perceptions of the whole library:

In the new one, you don't really see the reception area. It's over in one corner, so you don't really see the people. You don't really come into contact with them. (BournLibA)

Yes, that's why I prefer my local library. You get to know the faces don't you? But in here you see different faces every day. It's a combination of the atmosphere as you walk in - but the staff make all the difference. (BournLibB)

5.3.4 The effect of having more children in the library

A key aim of *Framework for the Future* is to create an environment that encourages more young people to use the library. It was therefore considered important to investigate what older people thought about this.

Focus group participants were divided as to whether they were prepared to accept additional noise and disruption from having more young people in the library. There was no noticeable difference between members from library and social groups or between the different locations. Approximately two thirds of the people questioned expressed views similar to the following remarks:

Often you come in and see them [ie. children] on the computers downstairs. Sometimes they have to ask them to be quiet. But that's fair enough isn't it? It's part of their education. (BrixLibB)

[Noise] doesn't bother me. If it's drawing in more people to read books, then I'd say, "Yes, splendid!" - because I believe in education. (StratLibC)

Oh, I think it's good that they let kids go in and make a little bit of noise nowadays. It's good to think that they're going in there at all. I've never heard of anybody being upset at seeing more young faces in there. They'd brighten the place up. (WashSocE)

The rest of the participants thought having more children had changed the atmosphere in the library for the worse:

You do get a lot of children making noise, which is all wrong because you get people studying. I asked the staff about it one day but she couldn't do anything about it because she said they've got to interact. (StratSocB)

When I go to any library, I like to sit quietly. I don't like people talking to each other. So many young people come over [to the computers], they're talking to each other and their mobile phones are ringing most of the time. (StratLibA)

30% of all focus group members thought that children made too much noise, but most said this applied to all libraries nowadays.

The designs of all four libraries have tried to allow for these more negative views by creating separate spaces for different activities. For example, the staff member at

Brixworth said:

While it's open plan, there are discrete areas. The children's area is as separate as we can make it from the adult. It's off the adult fiction area, so we've got the quieter area over the other side for the non-fiction people to sit and look at reference books or magazines.

All focus group members approved of this zoning of the library. The following comments are typical of the views expressed in each group.

I went in there and there seems to be a place for everything. They had the colourful room for the kids, but then the rest of it was quiet for the people sitting down and reading their books or doing their work. It seemed to work really well. (BournSocC)

A lot of them have quiet sections which are designated, where you don't have children running about and things like that, which is useful if you're doing that kind of studying. (WashLibC)

5.4 Discussion

All focus group participants said they had noticed changes in the ambience of the new libraries and 70% thought the changes had been positive. Even members of the social groups who had rarely been inside the libraries in question were aware that the stereotypical silence and strict rules no longer prevailed. These opinions seem to justify claims in recent government reports that people prefer the more open and inclusive ambience in modern libraries, compared to the regimented former atmospheres.

However, the fact that 30% of focus group members did not completely approve suggests that the new, more relaxed, atmosphere does not suit all elderly people. This is a significant number, and it shows that the reforms advocated by writers like Coffman (1998) and Sannwald (1998) do not address what older people want from their libraries. 25% recognised that some modernisation was necessary to attract younger generations. The refusal of 5% of respondents to countenance changes suggests that Greenhalgh et al (1995) are right to state that nostalgia for imagined happier times plays an important part in some people's reactions to change. It is likely, therefore, that these people would oppose any changes to the library.

Members of the focus groups were also not convinced that the introduction of features of modern bookshops would enhance the feel of their library. Almost a quarter strongly disagreed with installing coffee shops or lounge areas, largely because they were too noisy. These concerns were shared by library staff. They refute MacLeod's (1998) case that coffee shops can blend unobtrusively with other library facilities.

Slightly over half the people questioned accept extra disruption provided the library has quieter areas that they can use for reading or studying. This is remarkably similar to the focus groups' attitudes to the new IT provision. It suggests that, although many of the recent innovations are not actively welcomed by the majority of older users, as long as they can continue to use the library in the ways they are used to, they do not mind what happens in the rest of the building. However wrongly, this could be interpreted by authorities as permission to change the library's ambience to suit younger people, under the impression that older people's expectations of the library are very low and need not be considered.

Another key finding was that the library users in this study valued their relationships with members of staff very highly. Their comments showed that Raymond (1998) and Kneale (2000) were right to state that library users value the expert knowledge as well as the friendliness of library staff, and disagreed with Coffman's (1998) theory that people just want efficiency.

Interestingly, it tended to be people from the larger libraries who made less favourable comments about their relationships with library staff and were also the most dissatisfied with the new ambience. This is in line with the argument of writers like Green (1994) that staff play a vital role in creating good perceptions of the library service. It also suggests that managers changed must ensure that staff endeavour to get to know their elderly users and offer help on an individual basis. This is especially true for bigger libraries, where greater numbers can make personal service difficult.

The fact that two thirds of the participants in this study thought it was good that libraries were changing their ambience to attract more young people shows that they approve of the broad aims of reports such as *Framework for the Future*. They seemed to accept accompanying noise as long as it did not distract them too much. In fact most of

the people who approved of the changes wished libraries had been as relaxed and vibrant when they were younger. This was equally true of current library users and people who had not used a library since they left school.

5.5 Summary

Modernisers argue that public libraries need to implement changes to revitalise their ambience and attract more young people – going from being thought of as oppressive and rule-bound to seeming more welcoming and vibrant. Most of the focus group members agreed modernisation is required, and 70% approved of the more relaxed ambience in their new library. Non-users seemed pleased that the feel of libraries had changed, although this was not enough to make them want to join.

Current suggestions involve following the example set by modern bookshops and bringing in different zones for new activities, lounge areas and coffee shops. Echoing current debates in the literature, such innovations as coffee shops and lounge areas were thought of as mixed blessings, in that some people thought they made libraries seem more informal, but they were also likely to disturb other users. Staff shared these views and also had concerns about the practicalities of maintaining these facilities properly. Contrary to writers who suggest staff should behave more like shop employees, participants believed that their perceptions of the library were greatly enhanced by friendly and knowledgeable staff. The few people who did not feel well-served by the staff tended to have more negative views of the library's atmosphere.

As with other innovations, even if they did not whole-heartedly approve of the new ambience, the older people questioned seemed to accept it as necessary progress. As long as their own library activities were not affected, they believed it was good for the library to take steps to attract new people to use its services. This aim of being more inclusive and providing services to all the community will be discussed in the next chapter.

6 The Library as a Place for the Community

6.1 Introduction

One of the key conclusions of *Framework for the Future* is that if the different elements of the public library – the physical environment, the holdings and the ambience – are well managed, then the library should become an institution that meets the wider needs of the community. If the library is welcoming and well resourced, then it can move from lending books and providing free internet access towards fostering social inclusion and strengthening community awareness.

This chapter examines whether older people think their new libraries should be reaching out to all sections of the community. It discusses whether libraries are effective in this role, whether they offer adequate community-based activities for the elderly and whether they are successful providers of community information to older people.

6.2 Literature Review

It is clear that the government places great importance on the library's civic role. *Framework for the Future* (DCMS, 2003:38) calls libraries “public anchors for neighbourhoods and for communities” and says that the key strength of libraries is that “they offer neutral welcoming community space and support active citizenship” (DCMS, 2003:6). Considering the centrality of ‘community’ to this vision, it is perhaps surprising that Audit Commission (2002) appears not to take it into account in its Best Value Reviews.

Framework for the Future recognises that people who dislike reading and those facing social exclusion “may find libraries distant or even intimidating places rather than seeing them as symbols of community” (DCMS, 2003:40). However, very little direction is given on how libraries should rectify the problem beyond telling library authorities to “review the needs of the community they serve” (DCMS, 2003: 42).

Leadbeater (2003) believes libraries can only run successful social inclusion, lifelong learning and community information projects if they are co-ordinated and resourced by a national body. He argues that the current piecemeal approach where the library works with a variety of local organisations and government and council departments has led to its perceived marginalisation.

Much literature in this area agrees with the government's vision that libraries are valuable community spaces. For example, Greenhalgh et al (1995) state that libraries are one of the few public places that provide a combination of private and communal space. This means that people feel comfortable going there alone, which they acknowledge is important for people from ethnic minorities, but also applies to elderly people.

Other writers argue that is not enough to have a passive attitude to welcoming people. Rather, libraries must go into the community and capture the attention of the public. Harris (2003) states that libraries should encourage the individuals who seek the libraries' neutral atmosphere to interact with each other. He believes this means libraries can and should be used to build relationships between socially excluded people in a safe environment.

However, Miller (1999) makes a convincing case that turning libraries into imitations of popular bookshops just to bring more 'customers' into the library may not achieve wider social goals, because the bookshops' activities to attract only certain profiles of purchasers. Miller (1999:387) raises the intriguing point that small independent bookshops are in fact winning customers back from the larger chains by stressing their "vital connections to a local community".

Glancey (2000) argues that well-designed libraries can be central to regenerating not just the physical space of a town but also the collective spirits of its citizens, calling Peckham library "a civic palace, an enjoyable plaything and a monument to renewed civic pride." He writes that everybody is welcome there, including "the poor, homeless and lonely [who] feel snug in the company of others". His somewhat extravagant article says the library sparked the imagination of young and middle-aged people, but makes no

mention of older people's attitude to the new style of library, whose reactions may not have been so positive.

As regards the provision of civic and community information to the public, *Framework for the Future* focuses almost exclusively on 'digital citizenship' – in other words, the internet. The report rightly claims that the People's Network has opened up a wealth of community and civic information to library users. However, it may be questioned whether steps to place government and council information online are based on simplicity for the recipients or for the providers, especially considering that people like the elderly who most need this information are likely to be inexperienced computer users.

Kendall and Wilkinson (1998:297) approve of attempts to use the internet to create "an almost seamless information service" made up of links between local organisations. However, they claim libraries have not realised the full potential of the People's Network, largely due to the lack of technical expertise of staff and users. This echoes Greenhalgh et al (1995:128) who state that when it comes to online services users and staff increasingly need "information about where to find the right information". These arguments indicate that traditional methods of disseminating information should not be abandoned.

While many of the government's suggestions for running community events are rather lacking in practical detail, especially where the elderly are concerned, librarianship literature has many examples of writers sharing their experience of successful projects. Speak (1991) describes a scheme where librarians took books, audio tapes and pictures into Age Concern day centres to run reminiscence sessions. She believed this scheme succeeded because it stimulated their imaginations and memories, and enabled quieter people either to join in the activities or to talk privately to the librarian about their interests. Likewise, Hoy (1984) praises a scheme of Library Clubs aimed at helping elderly people develop new interests. He reports that they were very enthusiastic to take up this opportunity to learn, and he was particularly pleased that the programme attracted people from ethnic minorities who used the sessions to learn more about British culture. In both cases, the group work made isolated people feel involved and made them more active. This is in line with the theories of sociologists

like Morgan and Kunkel (1998) that older people benefit from working in group situations. They found that they enjoyed working with others and sharing their insights and abilities.

It should be noted that many writers have exposed the conflict that exists between libraries striving for statistical usage targets and trying to foster community feeling. Greenhalgh et al (1995) point out that libraries' social value has received less attention than book issue figures because it is not easily quantifiable.

6.3 Results

6.3.1 A building for all the community

Unsurprisingly, all respondents whether staff, users or non-users believed that the library should be a place that all members of the community felt comfortable using. The main areas of contention were whether their library was meeting its full potential for being inclusive, and whether suggested features of coffee bars and sofas would help it achieve the goal of being a social hub for the community.

Staff at Bournemouth was positive about their library being an important community building. The manager was pleased that:

now it's seen as a social space. Sometimes when you hear people in town talking of the library as a meeting point, then that's good.

She explained that the library was built in a PFI partnership to be a key element of a new shopping complex to regenerate part of the town. However, the tenants in the complex did not work together to promote the library as part of a day out in Bournemouth's commercial centre. This may explain the opinions of Bournemouth library users that Central library was friendly, but that their branch libraries were better suited to fostering community spirit. This was because they preferred the personal relationships possible in branch libraries and they thought older people would not go into town regularly for meetings. One said:

The library is very good in some ways. But it is so big, and there are so many people, that you don't really feel you belong. (BournLibC)

The Brixworth and Washington Millennium Centre libraries were both built to be an integral part of their local community centre, and it was noticeable that this had an effect on how staff and users saw the library's role in the community. Washington staff said the most important change in their new library was sharing their building with a well-run and popular community centre.

I would say it was one of the first multi-purpose centres that was built, with all these agencies working together [...] You see people coming in with other activities going on. There are some who just drop in anyway, and hopefully they'll end up taking a book. But that's not the main objective now.

Similar sentiments were expressed by the Brixworth manager:

There are other facilities in the building which attract all ages, I think everyone has benefited from that. We get customers because people come in for their coffee, and the coffee shop gets customers because they've come in to the library. It's the building as a whole that pulls them in.

Brixworth's case is perhaps special in that it was made possible by a large donation from a private charitable organisation on condition that the library be a resource for the whole village. The staff member noted that the charity had "some quite firm views" on promoting the library as a place for local children to study together, but he did not believe that this had excluded other social groups. Nevertheless, it appears the social inclusion fostered by the foundation did not extend to Brixworth's elderly residents, as neither staff nor users mentioned activities aimed at older people.

Library users in Brixworth and Washington remarked on the effect of having the library in the same building as other community facilities. All the Brixworth users thought the new library was a more valuable part of the community than the old one had been:

Before it was just a little hut. I think it's important to have it as part of the community centre. (BrixLibA)

It's good for the children. It helps keeps them off the streets when its holiday time. (BrixLibD)

But you also get other people coming in for the council information or the coffee shop don't you? (BrixLibC)

However, Washington library users had noticed that not many people actually crossed the divide and come from the community centre into the library:

They tend to stay in their allocated areas, not sort of wandering about. There still seems to be a sort of division. The library's in here and the rest is the community centre over there. [At a recent gala day] everybody was flowing through that way [...] it was very difficult to get people into what we had here. (WashLibB)

This separation was confirmed by the Washington social group. This group meets every Wednesday in a building 50 yards from the library, yet only one person used it regularly and two had never even looked inside. A similar situation was noticed at the Brixworth non-library group, where the two people who went to the café in the community centre did not cross into the library.

Members of the Washington library group debated whether the library was doing all it could to reach out to all sections of the community, but especially isolated elderly people:

The library has a very important function, I think, for people who are isolated. Getting them along, getting them out of their own homes I think would be absolutely brilliant. In years gone by I think the churches fulfilled that function to some extent, but they don't now. (WashLibA)

There's still a mobile library isn't there? (WashLibD)

But that's not the same thing. It's interacting with other people isn't it? (WashLibA)

I think that's why old people are just vegetating [...] They should be going into their house and reaching them and getting them involved. (WashLibC)

The discussion then moved to the needs of people from ethnic minorities:

The women in the ethnic minorities don't seem to have a voice at all. Maybe there should be somewhere they can go out and meet other women. I think the library would be a good place if they felt that learning our culture was good for them. (WashLibC)

They're the ones they should be targeting really, aren't they? I mean the likes of us who come in and use it regularly would come in anyway. You want to bring in new people. You want to make it accessible for everybody. (WashLibA)

Focus groups were divided about whether features like lounge areas and coffee shops would transform libraries into popular social spaces for the whole community.

Members of the social groups tended to believe a café would provide a welcoming space for people who felt isolated:

Yes, it's lovely in there isn't it? You often see people just sitting by themselves having a cup of tea. I suppose it's good for people to get them out of their houses. (BrixSocC)

Yes, it's a good idea. A lot of pensioners suffer from loneliness. I'm a pensioner, single and I can't afford to go and sit in the pub. So having tea and coffee is good. People can sit in there in summer and winter. (StratSocA)

However, each group contained one or two people who could not be induced to go to the library even with cheap coffee and easy chairs.

Library users were less convinced, with 47% saying that having a coffee shop ran contrary to the aim of the public library, which was to educate and promote reading.

The following comments are indicative of their views:

Everyone would be on top of you. It would be a commercial venture, that's not right in a library. (StratLibA)

Coming in just for a cup of coffee is rather against the idea of the library service isn't it? It's nothing to do with the library service. If you want a cup of coffee you can go to a café. (BournLibA)

They were not convinced that the people who came to enjoy a hot drink would progress to using the library. The following exchange from Bournemouth between a library user and non-user was typical of those heard in every social focus group:

I think it's good for the younger people who've grown up with that sort of thing. But us older ones don't want it in there. (BournSocC)

Oh, I don't know - I'll go anywhere for a cup of tea! (BournSocD)

See what I mean, you'll get all the old ones going in for a kip! That doesn't mean they'll go in and read the books though does it? (BournSocC)

Stratford library had made special efforts to attract non-users and encourage library regulars to use more of its services. The manager believed lounge areas with comfortable seating had led to more people reading for longer in the library. However, this might merely be encouraging existing users to read on the premises rather than adapting to the library as a social space or enticing non-readers into the building.

Stratford library has gone even further in providing new facilities for the community and installed satellite televisions. Staff admitted there had been some trouble with children turning the volume up too high and arguing over which channel to watch. On the whole though, they were considered a success because older people came in to watch the news channels and people could come to watch sporting events if they felt uncomfortable doing so in local pubs.

Regular users of Stratford library thought the televisions were a good idea as long as they were tuned to the news channels, as this was compatible with the library's educational role, but they did not approve of MTV being played on the televisions in the teenage areas. No-one in any of the other focus groups thought there should be televisions in libraries, even if they showed news. The following exchange typifies the comments made in each group:

That would be awful. They would make so much noise and distract other people. (WashSocC)

Young people watch too much television these days anyway. You should be encouraging them to read books, not watch more TV. (WashSocD)

6.3.2 Community activities

When it came to asking whether the new libraries were good at providing facilities for community based activities for the elderly, the responses were quite disappointing.

Every focus group agreed that children's programmes were generally done very well and drew families from all over their community. The ten people who brought their grandchildren to the library said they were pleased to see the imaginative displays in the children's section. However, compared to the large range of children's story times, homework clubs and activity days mentioned by staff at all libraries, there was very little being done to bring adults together in the library. The Stratford staff member said they occasionally worked with external agencies for particular projects, for example a BBC project about collecting wartime memories. Low staffing levels made long term community projects almost impossible. Members of the Brixworth computer group enjoyed their Learn Direct classes and thought the library was an excellent place for learning.

It's very handy for us to get here. And there's no pressure on us to learn at a particular speed. The staff here can take their time teaching us, and there's no need to stop at the bell like you did at school. (BrixLibD)

Even the groups that used their respective libraries to hold sessions had some complaints. The writers' group at Washington rented a meeting room at the library and thought it was a good place for their classes because of the literary atmosphere, but they found it hard to get the variety of resources they wanted. One of the Bournemouth users organised local University of the Third Age meetings and said staff were helpful in distributing leaflets, but that they couldn't really bring any classes to the library because space was not made available for them.

Almost half of the people in the non-library focus groups said they had favourable memories of community activities that used to take place in libraries, and thought they should be resurrected if the new institutions wanted to foster community spirit.

I learnt to play chess at a library when I was younger. Why don't they do things like that - teaching children, and adults for that matter, quiet hobbies like chess? It stimulates the mind. You could have all sorts of classes and clubs in here. (StratSocA)

My old library used to have classes. They had classes in the evenings for all kinds of things. If you were working, you could still come in and get some education. If you want people to come in together and better themselves, you should do some more of that. (StratSocE)

I remember coming to hear the MP speak and do surgeries in the library. That was really good for the community. They should do that now. (BournSocA)

6.3.3 Community information

Only staff at Bournemouth volunteered that they had extensive community information resources:

We have Pensions Direct which is an information service for older people. They do drop in sessions here and that's something we're very keen on in this library. The idea is that we get all sort of different organisations using us as community outreach.

People who used their library as source of community information had only good things to say about it:

I also go there to find out about what's going on in and what I should be doing. It's very important for things like that. (BournLibA)

You can come in and look on the computer and look at what's going on in Northamptonshire. It's handy to have events that are published. (BrixLibB)

It's a good place where people can go to find things out easily. Yes, you can go down to the town hall, but I went there and I was waiting for two hours. Now, they use the libraries as information outposts. You can find out everything that's happening in Stratford and Newham. It's a splendid idea. (StratLibE)

I also find it handy for keeping tabs on the local council - I'm a nosy beggar! (WashLibA)

The problem is that of forty focus group participants, these four people were the only ones who said they used the library for finding out community information. Once they had raised the subject, some others then remembered that libraries might have those kinds of resources. But the vast majority, especially amongst non-users, were surprised that the library had so much to offer.

6.4 Discussion

The focus groups were unanimous that all people should be made to feel welcome to use the library and that it was a key part of the community. Library modernisers may be heartened by the fact that even non-users believed new libraries were places that everybody felt at ease. However, when they were asked if libraries could do more to attract people who felt socially isolated, or whose backgrounds did not make them natural library users, the range of suggestions offered indicates that the measures proposed in *Framework for the Future* are not adequate.

The managers responsible for the Brixworth and Washington Millennium Centre libraries maintained that the other activities taking place in their respective community centres were enticing more people into the library. However, these focus groups suggest that few non-users detour into the library. This raises doubts about the government's

assumptions that libraries can reach disadvantaged non-users simply by being in close proximity to community centres.

The effectiveness of another key government claim was also disputed – that features such as coffee shops and lounge areas will turn libraries into much wanted social spaces. Non-users generally approved of having a café on the premises but said they would use it only for refreshment, not necessarily to use new services. Only two non-users had used a library café, and none of the others thought they would use it in conjunction with the rest of the library. This throws doubt on claims in *Framework for the Future*, and by writers such as Greenhalgh et al (1995), Harris (2003) and Leadbeater (2003) that the library is a place that naturally attracts socially excluded people, such as the isolated elderly.

A third of library users were worried that any influx of people might disrupt those who used the library to study. Users in Stratford and Bournemouth were particularly hostile to the idea. This may be because their libraries are not in a multi-purpose building, so they are not as used to seeing non-users in ‘their’ space. This could indicate a fear of change, or be a sign that smaller communities are more conducive to efforts to build community links. There is nonetheless a conflict between wanting the library to reach more sections of society and trying to keep existing users happy. This conflict is not mentioned in the government literature – which appears to assume that what appeals to non-users will only add to the satisfaction of users.

Some users were wary of the consequences of the library spending its limited resources on becoming a social place. They believed it is more important to attract people to the library by improving provision of traditional services, rather than adding new facilities. This can be explained by the overwhelming views of users that the books and education are the most important aspects of the library. 22% of focus group members felt strongly that commercial ventures should not take place in the library – their fears seemed to be confirmed by the somewhat cynical views of staff at Washington and Stratford that senior managers approved of cafés more for their income potential than their inclusiveness.

The community-based activities suggested in the focus groups such as classes and lectures were imaginative and in keeping with the library's traditional educational role. In this way they are more in line with the arguments of Hoy (1984) and Streak (1991) that elderly people are keen to learn and to broaden their interests through library-based group activities. Their suggestions could be effective ways of using the library's resources and its reputation for encouraging learning to help foster community activities. This would help all age groups but especially the elderly, who as Morgan and Kunkel (1998) state, benefit enormously from taking part in group activities.

It was surprising to hear about these activities from people who were not necessarily regular library users, rather than being told about them by staff or finding them in reports on the future of modern libraries. Comments made by Stratford staff that these extra activities could not be organised because of limited resources seem to support Leadbeater's (2003) case that a national funding scheme is required. A major flaw of *Framework for the Future* is that offers very little guidance on designing or funding activities that reach out to older people.

The point made by Greenhalgh et al (1995) and Kendall and Wilkinson (1998), that the internet is not properly exploited is valid, as only one person mentioned using it for community information. However, the problem seems to be more serious than just the internet. The provision of community information is of particular importance to older people, who require much community and civic information about their changing circumstances (Morgan and Kunkel, 1998), but only 10% of focus group members used the library for this purpose. Focus group members believed that the main problem was a lack of publicity from the library. Two of the people who used the library for local information only discovered they could do so by chance, and the other members of their focus group were surprised that the library offered the service at all. Nevertheless, the people who were familiar with this service thought the information held in the library was very comprehensive and could lead to older people becoming more involved in local activities.

6.5 Summary

All focus group members agreed that the library should be a welcoming space for all sections of the community. They thought that the new libraries were trying, and to a large extent, achieving this goal. However doubts were raised whether libraries were doing all they could to reach out to socially excluded people such as older people from ethnic minorities and the housebound elderly.

There was considerable difference of opinion over whether installing features such as cafés and lounge areas would actually lead to more elderly people using the libraries books and other resources. Some of the users and most of the non-users thought lonely people would benefit from a friendly café in the library's non-threatening environment, but the consensus was that library funding should not be spent on such facilities.

Focus group members drew the reasonable conclusion that libraries can foster feelings of community by improving the delivery of their traditional roles of educating and informing – rather than becoming de facto coffee shops and drop-in centres. St Lifer's (2001:62) statement that "If patrons think 'library equal community', will they ever again think that 'library equals book'?" seems particularly relevant in this case as it seems that most elderly people still think libraries equal books. The elderly people questioned in this study share the government's view that libraries should attract new people, but they think this should be done by promoting and extending more traditional services rather than installing new ones.

7 Conclusions

This concluding section starts by addressing each of the research questions posed in the Introduction, then discusses the implications of the results of this investigation for the future development of improved services for older people in public libraries. Finally, recommendations are made for future research to assist in implementing appropriate improvements.

7.1 Research Conclusions

Firstly, it must be said that the old people questioned in the course of this study had generally favourable impressions of their new libraries. However, as expected, views differed on some aspects of them.

Focus group participants were not convinced that libraries should be built in town centres. Modernisers argue that this makes them more relevant to the lives of young people, but many older people in this study still preferred to use their local branch. In some cases this is because they have limited transport options, but many also valued the personal relationships they have developed with staff. Convenience, familiarity and good service were found to over-ride other considerations such as modern building design and facilities.

Library users seem to have been very happy with most of the features of the design of their new libraries. They said changes to make the buildings more spacious and light and the ambiance less strict made libraries much more pleasant. Even people who did not use the library were aware of these changes and supported them.

The overwhelming majority of participants felt safe around their library. They did not seem to have an especially great fear of crime, as had been suggested in some literature. Staff in each location have worked to create a secure space by dividing the space into separate areas for different age groups and different activities. This is in accord with the recommendations in *Framework for the Future*, and older users certainly

approved of these measures. However, when people are segregated in this way, it raises questions about the library's inclusiveness.

When discussing the stock of reading material available, focus group members were found not to conform to stereotypical categories. They had a broad range of interests that was not always supported by their library, especially in large print and talking books. On one level this shows that librarians need to take a much wider view of the needs of older people. However, it also reveals that modernisers have not paid enough attention to book provision for adults in general. It is commendable that steps have been taken to make children's collections more lively and challenging, but the same must be done for the adults' section. This is a point that has been made previously by many librarians, but has evidently not been acted upon.

In an effort to attract more non-readers into the library, many authorities have bought more audio-visual material and invested in providing free internet access. Even though very few focus group members used these services themselves, they appreciated the reasons behind their introduction. Many encourage their grandchildren to use libraries and are well aware of the popularity of CDs, videos, DVDs and computers with the young.

Almost all the participants in this study were glad to see the demise of the old silent and rule-bound library atmosphere. They agreed that this made libraries more attractive to young and old alike. This shows that the basic premise of reports like *Framework for the Future* - that libraries should be unthreatening – applies to older people as well as children.

Staff attitudes were found to play a crucial role in forming older people's perceptions of their library. It was discovered that many people preferred to go to smaller branch libraries rather than larger ones in the town centre because they felt more able to develop friendly relations with staff in their local library. Helpful and supportive staff were found to be an important factor in helping older people adjust successfully to the many changes in their new library.

However, one of the themes to emerge from the data was that a significant proportion of participants gave only guarded approval of the extreme nature of this change in ambience. A recent report from Resource (2003:15) on modern public libraries mentions conflicts of “quiet versus noise, order versus mess”— and it seems many older people are resigned to the increasing dominance of noise and mess. Many accepted that some concessions to the pace and volume of modern life are necessary if libraries are to capture the attention of young people. As one focus group member said;

Us old ones have had our day. You've got to let the young ones have their chance. Let them do what they think is right. (WashSocC)

However, as numbers of elderly in the population increase, it should not be acceptable to assume that if they do not complain, their needs do not warrant attention. Many believe it is very important that separate zones be set aside for people, like them, who wished to read or study in peace. This was true for all the libraries studied, not just those with a higher proportion of younger users.

While most older users were happy to see the library offering a range of services, there was a significant number who believed the balance had swung too far in favour of attracting people who do not use the library for its traditional function of promoting reading and education. They do not approve of reforms that place so much emphasis on recreational activities like surfing the internet or meeting people in cafés. Members of the social groups agreed that having somewhere comfortable to sit and meet friends would be nice. Nevertheless, modernisers would be disappointed to learn that the cafés attached to the libraries studied had not enticed the non-users questioned to use the services in the rest of the building.

Older people seem to have been overlooked when allocating library resources to facilitate reader development and other types of group activities. Existing literature shows that elderly, especially those who are socially isolated, benefit enormously from taking part in group discussions and group projects. Computer courses have proved popular in all the libraries studied, but this was the extent of organised activities aimed at older people. Reformers place much emphasis on getting children involved in library-based activities, but do not address the needs of the elderly. Bearing in mind that numbers of elderly in the population are increasing, more resources should be made

available to allow library staff to carry out long-term projects aimed at engaging and stimulating older people. In addition, some participants felt that people in ethnic minorities, particularly the elderly, were isolated and special efforts should be made to involve them in suitable outreach activities.

In summary, this investigation has shown that the majority of older people surveyed do not disapprove of modernisation. It also revealed that, although the elderly feel that recent reforms have changed the ambience of their libraries, the changes can be accepted and are not sufficient to have a great impact on how older people use the library.

Many reformers have not explicitly discussed the needs of the elderly. However, it has been shown that two of their common shortcomings are the lack of attention paid to the variety of material in adults' sections and the absence of organised activities for older people. Thus, they appear to assume older people have low expectations of what their library can do for them, and do not seek to raise these expectations. Modernisers should take heed of writers who demonstrate that the elderly benefit as much from stimulation and encouragement to broaden their interests as young people.

The most common piece of advice participants wanted to give library staff was to do more to promote their libraries. Several people said they only heard about the new services by chance or by word of mouth, which they thought was unacceptable.

Some people don't know about anything here [...] You have to go and tell your friends, then they will realise there is something good going on there.
(StratLibE)

They should advertise themselves more and tell people about all the good things they are doing in here. There should be something about it in the local paper. (BrixLibC)

These comments show that Greenhalgh et al (1995) were right to argue that there is much affection for the idea of libraries as places for enjoyment and education for all. The old people questioned in the course of this study still thought of their new libraries with this same affection and wanted other people to share in the pleasure they got from visiting the library. As one library user said:

The library is one of the best public services in this country. Quite superb.

7.2 Implications for Public Library Managers

- Statistics should be collected of how older people use the library – both in terms of the kinds of material borrowed and which other services are used. Efforts should be made to ask what older people want from their library, rather than relying on conventional stereotypes.
- There should be staff on duty who are recognised as a regular point of contact for older library users. Having a few library staff who older users can get to know and become friendly with will help ensure that they receive the personal service they value so highly. This is especially important in larger libraries where greater numbers of users mean relations with staff tend to be more impersonal.
- There should be a staff member responsible for organising and publicising activities aimed at older people. They should encourage reader development projects and support older users in learning how to use the new technology in the library. They should co-ordinate their projects with outside agencies and local organisations for the elderly.
- There should be active promotion within the library of the new range of services. This may encourage elderly users to make more use of services like audio-visual materials, computers and cafés.
- There should be active promotion of the library's services and facilities within the local community to encourage non-users to visit. This could include well-publicised activity days, newsletters delivered to local households or promotional articles in local newspapers. Special efforts should be made to contact those who may feel marginalised from mainstream society, particularly isolated or housebound elderly people and those from ethnic minorities.

7.3 Recommendations for Future Research

- Once more detailed statistics are available on how elderly people use the new libraries, further research should be carried out into what older users want from their library. This could indicate how libraries can improve the services they offer to older people.
- There should be a review of the effectiveness of promoting modern libraries to elderly people. This should assess if libraries are successful in attracting non-users and encouraging older visitors to use more of the library's services.
- More research needs to be done on whether modern libraries are doing all they can to reach out to elderly people from ethnic minorities and meet their information needs.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Case Study Libraries and Community Profiles

Bournemouth Central Library

Bournemouth Central Library opened in 2002. Visitor numbers have doubled and book issues have risen by 10% since opening (DCMS, 2003). It has a large foyer on the ground floor, which also has an entrance to a coffee shop. Stairs, escalators and a lift lead to the first floor which has all the library's collections, except the Local Studies library which is on the second floor. Construction was funded by a Private Finance Initiative (PFI) with Information Resources (Bournemouth) Ltd., which undertook to build the library and manage its infrastructure for a thirty year period.

Framework for the Future (DCMS, 2003:14) praises Bournemouth Central Library for being "light but quiet and so an excellent place for learning [with] people coming into the library use it for study in the broadest sense of the word." It goes on to claim that the library is "already starting to change the town. [...] Investment in the public space is creating the backdrop for economic growth." It has also been nominated in the large new building category in the 2003 Public Library Building Awards (PLG, 2003).

Bournemouth has a population of 163,400, with people over the age of 60 making up 26.2% of this total. Bournemouth has relatively high levels of disposable income and only 1.6% of the population are registered as belonging to an ethnic group other than 'White British' (Bournemouth Borough Council, 2002).

Brixworth Library

Brixworth library opened in 1999 and is run by the Northamptonshire County Council. The manager said that in the year 2002-3 the library had 4,398 registered borrowers and that the number of active borrowers had risen by 47% from the previous year. The library's collections and six internet computers are in an open plan space on the ground floor. A flight of stairs leads up to a computer suite on the mezzanine floor. It shares the Brixworth Community Centre with a coffee shop and community room managed by the Brixworth Christian Fellowship and an information office staffed by the Daventry District Council. The manager of the library explained that the new complex was made possible by a £1 million donation from a local charitable foundation, which wanted to provide a space where Brixworth children could come together to study using a wide range of up-to-date resources.

In 2001 Brixworth library won the Public Library Building Award for best small new library. The judges praised it for having "a good range of services and facilities in an architecturally distinctive building" (PLG, 2001:141). They added that it was an "inviting public building which has rapidly become a focus of local activity."

Brixworth is a small, rural village six miles to the north of Northampton with a population of slightly over 6,000 people. It is a relatively affluent area with very little ethnic diversity, as over 98% of the local population are registered as 'White British' (National Statistics, 2003a).

Stratford Library

Stratford Library opened in 2000. The manager said that in the past year the library had approximately 550,000 visitors and issued just over 420,000 books. The ground floor houses the audio-visual collections and areas for children and teenagers, as well as a side entrance to the neighbouring café. Stairs and a lift lead to the first floor which has the adult's collections, computers and study areas.

In 2001 Stratford library won the Public Library Building Award for best large new library. Judges “fell in love with its colour and vitality [and called it] a whole new era in libraries” (PLG, 2001:140). They remarked on its success in creating “a ‘teenage youth club’ feel” downstairs while having quiet areas upstairs.

Stratford library is situated in the London borough of Newham. 26.2% of the population in this borough is under the age of 16, compared to 9% over the age of 65 (National Statistics, 2002). It is an area with high ethnic diversity. The main ethnic groups are White (40%), Asian (33%) and Black (22%) (National Statistics, 2003b). The library manager said the borough suffered from high unemployment and this led to problems of social deprivation.

Washington Millennium Centre Library

This library is administered by the Sunderland City Council. It is contained in one open plan room on the ground floor level. The library is part of the Millennium Centre, which is owned by a trust that provides facilities for activities and classes for all sections of the Washington community, for example old people and young families, but concentrates especially on children and teenagers. As well as activity rooms, the centre also has a café and games room.

The Millennium Centre's motto is 'A centre at the heart of the community'. *Framework for the Future* cites it as an example of how the library can play a key role in providing services to fight social exclusion and help rebuild community spirit.

Washington is a small town five miles to the west of Sunderland. 17% of the local population is over the age of 60, compared to 21% under the age of 16 (National Statistics, 2003c). , This part of Washington suffers from high unemployment and, in the words of the manager of this library, has always been "an area that's always bit a bit deprived and a bit rough as well."

Appendix 2: Focus Group and Interview Schedules

Focus Group Schedule

My name is Kathleen Lockett and I am a student at Sheffield University. I am doing a research project on new libraries and I would like to hear your opinions about this library.

Whatever you tell me will only be used for my dissertation and will not be passed on for any other political or financial purposes.

Would you allow me to quote what you say in my dissertation? None of your names will be used in my report – you will remain anonymous, but I will identify the comment as coming from this focus group. Do you mind if I record our discussion so I can quote your comments accurately?

Do you have any questions before we begin?

- 1) What do you like to do when you go to the library?

Prompts: Do you just take books of the shelf and leave, or do you sit and read? Do you use the computers? Do you feel comfortable spending time in the library? Has this changed from what you used to do in the old library?

- 2) What do you think of the new library? What do you like the most? What do you like the least?

Prompts: What do you think of: the access, layout and decor; the facilities and services available; staff attitudes; the general atmosphere and 'feel' of the library?

- 3) How does it compare to the old library?

Prompts: Have you noticed a change in ambience, services or displays? Are there more computers? Do you think there is more of a youth focus?

[Show the list of statements]

Please read these six statements and then tell me whether you agree or disagree with them. Please explain your reasons for your choice.

- 4) If you had designed the library, what would it be like?

Prompts: access, layout, furniture, decor, special services, book stock, mix of other media, instructions to staff.

- 5) Is there anything else you would like to say about the new library?

Staff Interview Schedule

My name is Kathleen Lockett and I am a student at Sheffield University. I am doing a research project on new libraries and I would like to talk to you about some of the changes made in this new library.

Whatever you tell me will only be used for my dissertation and will not be passed on for any other political or financial purposes.

Would you allow me to quote what you say in my report? Your names will not be used in my report – you will remain anonymous, but I will identify the comment as being made by staff at this library. Do you mind if I record our discussion so I can quote your comments accurately?

Do you have any questions before we begin?

- 1) Generally, what do you think have been the major changes from the old library?
- 2) Which changes have been the most successful?
- 3) Which changes have been the least successful?
- 4) Which group of users have been the main beneficiaries of the changes in the new library?
- 5) What services and facilities do you offer that are specifically aimed at meeting the needs and expectations of the elderly?
- 6) What steps have you taken to make older people feel welcome and safe in the library?
- 7) What consultation did you carry out to find out how the library could meet the needs and expectations of the elderly?
- 8) Have you had any subsequent feedback? If so, what have older people said about the library?
- 9) Have there been any difficulties in trying to provide services and facilities that meet the needs of the elderly as well as those of children and young people? Please explain.

[Show the list of statements]

Please read these six statements and then tell me whether you agree or disagree with them. Please explain your reasons for your choice.

- 10) Is there anything else you would like to say about this library and how it caters for older users?

List of Statements

Please read the following statements and say whether you agree or disagree with them. Then please explain why you made that choice.

Libraries are places: their look and feel still matter to people.

This library has the right mix of a variety of books, music and videos.

The needs and preferences of all age groups of users are given equal importance.

It's good to see so many young people in the library.

People don't go to the library for books.

The library experience is improved by introducing lounge areas and coffee shops.