

**TOWER HAMLETS' IDEA STORES:
ARE THEY WORKING?**

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By

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Abstract

This piece of research is focused on the Idea Stores in Tower Hamlets, and is aimed at ascertaining their effectiveness and efficiency. The research was carried out from an inductive approach; the major themes were highlighted by the ongoing literature review. The methods of investigation used were interviews and questionnaires.

The first theme investigated is that of the future of the public library service. The ongoing lack of a clear consensus as to the function of the public library service is illustrated. The Idea Stores are found to be providing a wide range of new services to their communities, including traditional library services such as book lending.

The educational and social agendas of public libraries are then examined. Libraries are found to be ideal institutions to provide lifelong learning. The Idea Stores, in combining adult education with library services, are successfully providing a range of courses on site. They are also highly accessible and inclusive, and staff are enthusiastic about providing many services aimed at all sectors of the community.

The new style libraries are then considered. It is found that many of the traditional library services are still provided and still well used. The modern buildings and modern attitudes are found to have resulted in a more relaxed environment, which has found favour with new library users, but which has certain drawbacks for those used to more traditional libraries.

It is concluded that the Idea Stores have been successful in providing a modern library and lifelong learning service, and in increasing visitor and book loan figures. They are found to have a strong community presence, and to be carrying out a lot of work within the community. There are a number of recommendations made, including a need for provision for those wanting to study or read in a quiet area.

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

1.1 Background

The future of the public library has been the subject of a great deal of professional literature and speculative newspaper articles in recent years. The much-reported fall in lending figures and visitor numbers has led to many theories over the direction that public libraries need to take, but one proclamation that seems difficult to shake off is that of the ‘death of the public library’. Tim Coates’ ‘Who’s in charge?’ report (2004) claimed that most public libraries are no longer relevant in the 21st century, in particular with regards to opening hours, book stocks and the library building and environment. Whilst this report provoked an outcry amongst librarians, it must be noted that it is not alone in recommending changes in all aspects of public libraries. It is widely recognised that at least some degree of modernisation is required. Among the recommendations that Coates’ and other reports made is that libraries should be made welcoming, safe and accessible for all members of the community, with a wide range of books and other resources to use for their leisure, educational and all other informational needs.

Confirming that the concerns raised in Coates’ report were not new or unsubstantiated, and that library policy-makers were not unaware of the modernisation needs of public libraries, the past 10 years have seen several new developments, including Norwich’s Millennium Library, Peckham’s award-winning new Library and Hampshire’s Discovery Centres. In 1999 Tower Hamlets Borough Council launched the concept of the Idea Store. A large public consultation exercise was undertaken in order to discover what local residents really wanted out of their library service. Based on the results of this consultation, the plan behind the Idea Store was *“to create a series of bright, new buildings in local shopping areas combining lifelong learning and cultural attractions with all the services normally associated with libraries,*

from classic books to DVDs and CDs" (Tower Hamlets Borough Council, 2005).

The first Idea Store opened in Bow in May 2002 and the second in Poplar in July 2004, with the flagship Whitechapel store due to open in September 2005. Several more Idea Stores are currently in development; it is hoped that there will be seven in total. I visited the Bow Idea Store several times in the summer of 2004 whilst living nearby, and as a library user I had mixed feelings towards it, particularly with regards to the levels of book stock. I was keen to discover how the experiences of other visitors to the Idea Stores compared to mine. This study was, therefore, designed to examine the Idea Stores from the visitors' perspective, and in particular to question the extent to how the Idea Stores have fulfilled their needs and wants. It was also intended to look into the satisfaction felt by staff with the new service. Literature on the Idea Stores made it clear that social inclusion was a major priority for the Idea Stores, and I was, therefore, also keen to try to ascertain how successful they had been in improving social inclusion in its localities.

1.2 Aims and objectives

1.2.1 Aims

The overall aim of this research project was to examine the effectiveness of the Idea Stores in Tower Hamlets. The research aimed to explore the effectiveness of the Idea Stores with regards to the experiences of both visitors and staff, as well as within the wider public library arena. The research also aimed to ascertain whether or not the Idea Stores should be used as a model for new public libraries in the future.

1.2.2 Objectives

The key objectives identified from the initial review of the literature are as follows. Due to the inductive nature of this research, however, it is expected that these may change, as the ongoing literature review may reveal a wider range of current, relevant, issues relating to the Idea Stores.

1. To determine how far the results of the public consultation carried out by Tower Hamlets Council shaped the original aims and objectives of the Idea Store.
2. To determine how far the two Idea Stores currently in existence have adhered to the original aims and objectives.
3. To identify areas where staff and users are particularly satisfied or dissatisfied with the Idea Store.
4. To ascertain whether social inclusion has improved in the localities of the Idea Stores as a direct result of their existence.
5. To determine whether the Idea Store could be used as a model for public libraries in the future.

1.3 Chapter outline

Chapter 2 illustrates the methodological approaches that were deemed to be the most useful for this research project, the inductive approach and the case study approach, and then explains the reasons behind the adoption of these approaches. The chapter goes on to discuss the methods of investigation used in the research project, which were from a mostly qualitative perspective; the literature review, the questionnaire and the interviews.

Chapter 3 focuses on the central theme that was identified in the review of the literature, the future of the public library service. This future has been called into question frequently over recent years, mainly due to the continuing fall in book issues and visitor numbers. New-style libraries such as the Idea Store seem to have reversed this trend due to their modern buildings and wide range of services on offer; this chapter will examine whether they are doing enough to secure the future of the public library.

Chapter 4 discusses the role of education within public libraries, and the extent to which it is part of their remit. The Idea Stores have combined with the borough's adult and further education services to offer classes and courses on a variety of subjects, both vocational and for leisure. There have, however, been arguments that the library is not the place for such provision; this chapter aims to discover whether the Idea Stores' educational programme is proving to be successful.

Chapter 5 looks at the role that public libraries can play in tackling social exclusion. The government is eager to create a socially inclusive society, and has urged public libraries to become involved in reducing social exclusion in their communities. This chapter examines the ways in which public libraries are working to improve access to their services to all members of their communities.

Chapter 6 examines the recent trend for modern, well-designed library buildings, and the reception they have received by both those using them and by commentators. One of the main criticisms aimed at public libraries in recent years has been the poor state of the buildings that they are housed in. Many were built over a hundred years ago and therefore are no longer suitable, in either their location or their size and shape, for the services required by library visitors today. However, many of the new-style libraries have come under criticism. In particular, it is often assumed that they have pushed books to the sidelines in an attempt to provide and promote their wide range of new services. This chapter aims to discover whether or not this criticism is justified.

Chapter 2 – Methodology and methods of investigation

2.1 Introduction

This chapter will discuss the methodological approaches used for this research project, the inductive approach and the case study approach, and the reasons behind the adoption of these methodological approaches. It will also discuss the methods of investigation used in this research project, from a mostly qualitative perspective; the literature review, the questionnaire and the interviews.

2.2 Methodology

The ultimate aim in carrying out this piece of research was to gain a thorough and holistic understanding of the Idea Store as an organisation in order to ascertain its effectiveness, as well as its suitability for use as a model for public libraries in the future. There was no hypothesis to be tested through the research process; the research was, therefore, undertaken using an inductive approach. The fundamental question, “are the Idea Stores working?”, acted as the basis from which all data was gathered, and all conclusions have been drawn from this data. The use of this inductive approach allows *“categories or dimensions of analysis [to] emerge from open-ended observations as the inquirer comes to understand patterns that exist in the phenomenon being investigated”* (Patton, 2002: 56). Using the inductive approach also means that I have not imposed my own views of what the important themes or issues are from the beginning of the research process, but have instead allowed these to emerge and become clear through the collection and interpretation of the data. It has been argued that such an approach *“contributes to the depth, openness, and detail of qualitative inquiry”* (Patton, 2002: 14).

As the subject of the research is an individual organisation, the case study approach has also been employed as a research strategy. The use of such an approach is appropriate in this study, as it provides the opportunity to go into *“sufficient detail to unravel the complexities of a given situation”* (Denscombe, 2003: 31). This spotlight on one instance (or two in this case) allows for an in-depth study of a natural setting which can focus on relationships and processes. In this case, the focus is on the inter-relationships between the Idea Stores, their users, their staff and their communities, and the ways in which the Idea Stores facilitate these relationships. The case study approach also promotes the use of a variety of both research methods and data sources (Denscombe, 2003). As such, several research methods and data sources were used in this research project, and it is hoped that the resulting triangulation gives the conclusions of the research more validity.

In keeping with the inductive and case study approaches, the research project involved the collection of mainly qualitative data. Qualitative research *“is better able to deal with the intricacies of a situation and do justice to the subtleties of social life”* (Denscombe, 2003: 280), and as the project is concerned with the social roles that the Idea Stores play in their communities' lives, has more relevance than quantitative research. By using qualitative methods such as interviews and questionnaires I was able to collect rich, in-depth data about individuals' experiences of using and working in the Idea Stores, and their feelings related to these experiences. Such rich information could not be achieved using quantitative methods. However, the questionnaires also enabled me to gather useful quantitative data related to the frequency of users' visits to the Idea Stores and their local libraries, and the reasons for these visits.

2.3 Methods of investigation

2.3.1 Literature review

Busha & Harter (1980: 17) state that in order for the researcher to conduct a “*meaningful enquiry*”, there is a need for “*sound theoretical knowledge about the problem area from which the research task originated*”, which should be gained by means of a thorough review of the current literature. The initial stage of my research, therefore, consisted of an examination of the relevant literature and documentation. Preliminary research involved the reviewing of recent issues of professional journals, which enabled me to identify the themes and topics that were causing the most interest and concern to those involved in public libraries. This led me on to a more focused search of the professional literature, as well as to online forums and non-professional literature in order to gain an understanding of the views of the public. In order to gain a clear understanding of the needs and desires of people in the relevant local communities, I reviewed the results of the public consultation that was carried out by Tower Hamlets Borough Council prior to the conceptualisation of the Idea Stores. The strategy documents produced by Tower Hamlets Borough Council, outlining the aims and objectives of the Idea Stores, were also examined in order to determine how far these communities’ opinions were taken on board, as well as how far the aims and objectives have been feasible in practice.

2.3.2 Idea Store staff interviews

(See appendix 2 for a copy of the interview schedule)

Interviews were carried out with staff based in the two current Idea Stores to gauge their views on working in the Idea Stores and how successful they feel that the organisation has been. The staff members interviewed had been employed there for varying lengths of time, and were employed at a range of different levels. Interviews were an appropriate

research method to use in this case, as the research requires a depth of information based on people's experiences, emotions and feelings. The interviews were carried out in person, and face-to-face, in order to encourage more detailed responses. The interviews were semi-structured, thus allowing the interviewees to *"develop ideas and speak more widely on the issues raised by the researcher"* (Denscombe, 2003: 167).

2.3.3 Idea Store customer questionnaire

(See appendix 1 for a copy of the questionnaire)

Questionnaires were distributed to as many visitors to the Idea Stores as possible over a fixed time-span. Visitors were invited to take a questionnaire on their way into the Idea Store, fill it in at their leisure, and hand it back on their way out. The questionnaires were designed in order to produce a range of quantitative data, relating to the frequency of visits to the Idea Stores and other local libraries, and qualitative data, relating to visitors' feelings on various aspects of the Idea Stores and the services they provide.

2.3.4 Triangulation

The triangulation that has occurred in the use of a range of both research methods and data sources has allowed me to study the Idea Stores *"in a more rounded and complete fashion than would be the case had the data been drawn from just one method"*. (Denscombe, 2003: 132). It is an effective method of gaining a holistic picture of the situation. It also allows for the results of the data to be corroborated against each other, strengthening its accuracy and validity.

2.3.5 Sampling

The questionnaires were handed out to a random sample of visitors to the Idea Stores. As Denscombe (2003: 12) points out, this is a valid sampling method as “...if there are a sufficiently large number of examples selected & if their selection has genuinely been ‘at random’, then the resulting sample is likely to provide a representative cross-section of the whole”. The initial aim of this research project is to be able to generalise for users of the Idea Stores, not for the users of all public libraries, and it was, therefore, possible to distribute questionnaires to a representative selection of this population.

2.4 Limitations of the methodology

2.4.1 Idea Store staff interviews

One of the main practical limitations that I encountered with the interviews was that the Idea Stores were obviously very busy, and whilst staff were happy to be interviewed, it was clear that they did not have much time available. This meant that on each occasion I stuck fairly rigidly to the interview schedule in order not to take up too much time.

Several of the questions on the interview schedule involved a comparison between working in the Idea Store and working in other libraries in the borough. This again caused a slight problem as not all of the interviewees had worked in libraries before and, therefore, the interviews did not all provide the same amount of data.

Another problem I encountered was that, although all the interviewees volunteered to take part and were assured they would remain anonymous, I did feel that some of them were being quite careful about what they said in response to some of the questions. This could mean that potentially valuable information was not imparted in the interviews.

2.4.2 Idea Store customer questionnaire

The main limitation that I came across with the questionnaire was a practical one; that of actually encouraging people to take the time to fill it out. In one Idea Store I found that the majority of people entering the library were willing to fill out the questionnaire either there and then, or to take one to fill out during their visit and hand it back on their way out. In the other Idea Store, however, people seemed much less willing and many claimed to not have the time. I had anticipated this problem and tried to keep the questionnaire as short as possible, as I was aware that too many questions might deter some people. However, it still seemed to be too long for some people.

Further limitations of the questionnaire include the potential for poorly worded questions to cause confusion for respondents, and for questions to lead them to particular answers. However, the completed questionnaires did not reflect any such problems in this instance; the questions appear to have been understood clearly and they elicited a range of responses. This suggested that the questions were not leading respondents to answer in a particular way.

2.4.3 Sampling

My intention in using a random sampling method was to gain responses from a representative group of visitors to the Idea Store. I planned to hand out the questionnaire to as many visitors to the Idea Store as possible, without checking for age/gender/race etc. In practice however, I found that certain groups of people were more likely to agree to fill in the questionnaire than other groups. Therefore, in an effort to get as many responses as possible, it is likely that I subconsciously made more of an effort to ask those who I thought would be more willing to take part than those who I thought would probably decline. Similarly, I became aware of the ages/genders/race etc. of those who had already filled questionnaires out,

and was, therefore, aware of any 'gaps', which I may have made more of an effort to fill. As Sapsford (1999: 110) points out, "*...refusal is a problem for representative sampling, so the greater the refusal rate, the more likely the achieved sample is not to be representative of its target population*".

Therefore, it is likely that the sample was not as representative as was originally intended.

2.5 Ethical considerations

I made every attempt to adopt an ethical approach to this research project in order to protect and respect the rights of those agreeing to take part in it. Information on the research project was given to those asked to fill out the questionnaires and to potential interviewees, in order that they could make an informed decision over whether or not to participate.

The questionnaires had a tear-off cover sheet attached with information about the research project. It explained that taking part was entirely voluntary and that all responses would remain anonymous. It also gave my email address for people in case they required further information or had any questions for me after having filled in a questionnaire.

The Idea Store staff members who agreed to be interviewed were each given a participant information sheet to read and take away with them, which again reassured them that their participation was entirely voluntary and that everything they said would remain completely anonymous. They were asked to sign a participation consent form to confirm that they understood this information regarding the interview.

Chapter 3 – The future of the public library service

3.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on the central theme that was identified in the review of the literature; the future of the public library service. This future has been called into question frequently over recent years, mainly due to the continuing fall in book issues and visitor numbers. New-style libraries such as the Idea Store seem to have reversed this trend due to their modern buildings and wide range of services on offer; this chapter will examine whether they are doing enough to secure the future of the public library.

3.2 Literature review

The underlying theme of the majority of articles and reports on the subject of the future of the public library service appears to be a lack of consensus over the role of the public library. There has been a great deal of debate over whether the focus should be primarily on books, or whether libraries should branch out into non-traditional services such as adult education classes, cafés and free internet access. It would seem that this problem has been exacerbated by the disjointed way in which public libraries are governed; there are no clear standards or mission statements which libraries must adhere to, and support and funding for public libraries come from a variety of seemingly unconnected sources.

3.2.1 The role of the public library

The debate over the role and function of the public library is not a new one. Kinnell & Sturges (1996) point out that the lack of an agreed-upon definition of the role of public libraries has been at the heart of all the issues surrounding them since their very beginnings. Indeed, there was great contention over the place of fiction in the first public libraries in the 19th century. Snape (1995) gives the findings of an 1850 Parliamentary Select Committee on the subject; whilst education was an important benefit of the public library, more important was the role that it could play in maintaining social order and promoting moral values, by providing better recreational opportunities for the working classes.

The recommendations of the Select Committee's 2005 report are similar in some respects to those of the 1850 report, in that they want to see the focus placed on the recreational aspect of the public library. In particular, they recommend that books are brought back to the fore: *"We believe that the improvement of the quality, range and number of books in stock in our public libraries should be made a priority"* (House of Commons, Culture Media & Sport Committee, 2005: 20). Comedia's Borrowed Time? Report (1993: 37) also focused on the importance of books in the library, particularly in disadvantaged areas, pointing out that the most vital thing a library authority can do is to *"provide a friendly library with a good and varied book stock"*.

There are many who argue that public libraries today are about much more than just books, and who want to see the focus directed away from them. The Society of Chief Librarians, for example, believes that *"emphasis on book borrowing is a concern of the 'Victorian era' and that a library's real purpose is to provide 'access for everyone to information & knowledge', through whichever method is best"* (Dean, 2005: 26). Matarasso (1998) makes a similar point about providing a library service that is relevant to today's society.

The government's response to the 2005 Select Committee report makes it very clear that their priorities lie in the social benefits that the public library can bring to its community. These social benefits do not appear to include reading, at least, not of books. Ezard (2005d) reports that the government wants to see a shift in emphasis away from *"seeing successful book lending & the encouragement of reading as the prime goals of Britain's public library service"*, and towards *"whether libraries help governments promote their wider health, educational and social objectives"*. Rushton (2005a: 5) also asserts that the government is determined to see the library service fulfilling *"a wider community role and offering 'another means to reading' through the Internet"*. This view has obviously been held by the government for some time; it was reported in a DCMS publication in 1999 (p5) that *"Library and information services should develop their role as community resource centres, providing access to communication as well as information"*.

It has been pointed out that there is no benefit in public libraries serving as *"free bookshops"* (Ezard, 2005d), if no effort is made to also promote social and community cohesion. However, in a report commissioned by the government in response to the Select Committee's report, it is suggested that money saved by passing book selection to wholesale suppliers could *"pay for popular titles to win back book borrowers"* (Ezard, 2005e). This would suggest clear recognition by the government of the importance of book stocks to the library and its visitors.

The wider range of services that the government are keen to encourage public libraries to carry out are not seen as relevant or appropriate by some commentators. Tim Coates made clear his view that books should remain at the heart of the public library, with the publications of his damning report 'Who's in charge?' in 2004 and his charity Libri's equally damning 'From university to village hall' report in 2005. These reports claim that the public library should not be the place for many of the new functions that they have found themselves carrying out. It is argued that if the book stock is left to decline in both quality and quantity, issues will continue to fall. And if this

occurs, *“no one in government will be prepared to carry on funding the use of highly trained librarians to carry out these largely social objectives”* (Tim Coates, in Ezard, 2005d).

Whilst there is a general agreement in the literature that books are still important to the library, the tone of Coates' reports, particularly 'From university to village hall' – *“Perhaps only in this country would anyone think it was worthwhile to debate what public libraries are for. They're for books, stupid”* (Libri, 2005: 2) – is unlikely to win over many new supporters. Usherwood (2005: 17) is more balanced in his approach, acknowledging that there while there is a case for widening the appeal of libraries, he is concerned that *“too many babies are drowning in the thrown-out bathwater. What will be available for the serious reader...?”*. Comedia (1993) also assert that libraries are in danger of taking on *too wide* a range of activities, resulting in none of them being done particularly well.

It has also been argued, however, that there is a place for public libraries offering a wide range of services, provided that the focus is placed on the needs of the particular community, instead of on the proclamations from the government and other organisations about what the priorities should be. Comedia (1993: 63) assert that *“local conditions and local needs should prevail”*. They go on to say *“The library is a flexible institution that should adapt to its surroundings, and the needs of its local community, rather than follow a standard model. It is not McDonalds”* (1993: 75). Reports by the Laser Foundation (2004) and Meeson (2005) are in agreement with this premise. Jackson (1996: 32) states simply that *“...if the public library is truly to reflect the needs and interests of the community in which it is based, local people should be involved in the planning and organisation of services”*.

3.2.2 The governance of the public library

Many of the articles and reports reviewed as part of the literature search were dissatisfied with the way in which public libraries have been governed. It was suggested that the cause of the underlying problem – a lack of clear consensus over the role of the public library – is the fragmented way that different agencies are involved in its running. The Framework for the Future (2003: 19) report warns that there is “*a danger of drift and stagnation in a highly fragmented system, in which 149 library authorities run more than 3,000 public libraries*”. This report also points out the lack of national advocacy for public libraries that this fragmentation has led to, resulting in them being overlooked, especially in comparison with similar fields such as sport and the arts.

There was a ubiquitous calling for a single national body to be responsible for all aspects of the public library service. A study commissioned by the government, in response to the 2005 Select Committee’s report, recommends that a national agency take over the control of public libraries from local authorities (Ezard, 2005e). Leadbetter (2003) suggested the creation of a ‘National Library Development Agency’, while the Select Committee (House of Commons, Culture Media & Sport Committee, 2005) recommended the forming of a team, managed by the MLA, which would work closely with libraries who are under-performing in order to improve their service. The Select Committee also advocates the implementation of a set of core minimum standards that public libraries must adhere to, particularly in relation to the provision of books and other written media, as well as computers and the Internet.

3.3 Results and discussion

3.3.1 Idea Store staff interviews

The Idea Store staff that I interviewed were asked about their views on the various services provided by the Idea Stores, as well as on the service as a whole. The majority of the interviewees stated that the focus within the Idea Stores was a general one on all services offered, rather than being on one particular service, e.g. books or social objectives. Whilst this general focus was emphasised, most of the interviewees were also keen to point out the importance of books to the Idea Store.

At the same time, all of the interviewees spoke at length about the involvement of the Idea Stores with their local communities. It was explained that a lot of partnerships have been built up with local community groups and organisations, and that the Idea Stores hold a lot of events to raise awareness of issues relevant to members of their local communities.

One interviewee said simply that: *"The focus is customers"*, pointing out that whatever the customer requires is on offer at the Idea Store, whether it be books, the Internet, or DVDs. He was keen to make the point, however, that whilst many of these services were on offer at the libraries that preceded the Idea Stores, they are now able to offer far more books, computers, DVDs etc., as well as a far wider range of services.

However, there was a slight element of dissatisfaction evident in the responses of some of the interviewees. One mentioned that some of the different services now offered by the Idea Stores take longer to help customers with than others. This often resulted in some customers having to wait longer, and other customers feeling that they were taking up too much time. This resulted in frustration for the customers, as well as for staff, who often felt they were not able to provide good customer service.

Another interviewee felt that rather than there being a general focus on all aspects of the service provision within the Idea Store, there was a definite emphasis on lifelong learning, and on encouraging the community to use the Idea Store. It was felt that, as a result, the more traditional library services, such as book lending, were being “*put to one side*”. One interviewee observed that, whilst the Idea Stores offered a wide range of different services, many customers tended to just use one or two of them. For example, it was suggested that many of those who came to the Idea Store to use a computer did not usually borrow books, and vice versa.

3.3.2 Idea Store customer questionnaire

The questionnaire, given to a random sample of visitors to the Idea Stores, asked respondents what their main reasons were for visiting. All nine of the suggested reasons were found to be valid, and a further four were given using the ‘other’ option. This suggests that those visiting the Idea Stores are making use of the wide variety of services on offer. The most popular reason for visiting the Idea Stores, however, was to borrow books for leisure (See graph 1). 22% of the respondents gave this as one of the main reasons for them visiting the Idea Store. A further 10% of respondents borrowed books for study or work, and another 10% read newspapers and magazines. One of the main reasons for over 40% of those visiting the Idea Store, therefore, was to make use of traditional print-based library services.

Just over a third of respondents gave using the Internet as one of their main reasons for visiting the Idea Store; with 16% using it for leisure and 18% using it for study or work. This illustrates the importance of computers and the Internet in the lives of a large proportion of people today. The fact that more respondents use the Internet for study and work purposes than for leisure also provides a neat response to the claim made by Libri (2005: 8) that the People’s Network has simply provided “*a place for young people to develop their computer gaming skills and for older age groups to learn about email*”.

The other reasons given for visiting the Idea Stores include using the café, bringing children along to take part in activities, attending the 'older persons' mornings, and booking meeting rooms. There were not many people visiting the Idea Stores for each of these reasons at the time of the questionnaire, suggesting that these services may currently be secondary to the provision of books/newspaper and the Internet. The number and scope of different reasons given, however, illustrates the suggestion that the Idea Stores are succeeding in their aim to cater for all members of their communities in offering as wide a range of activities and services as possible.

3.4 Summary

The review of the literature has shown that, since their very inception, there has been little consensus over the role and function of the public library. The current debate questions the importance of books to the modern library service, as it is perceived that they are being increasingly marginalised. The debate also questions the relevance to the public library service of the wide range of non-traditional services on offer, many of which aim to be socially beneficial for the local community.

The results of the interviews with Idea Store staff show that they are aiming at providing a service with a large remit. They place great importance on their book stock, and at the same time some of the interviewees were almost evangelical in their enthusiasm for the community work that was carried out. However, the frustration that was felt by some staff would suggest that there are difficulties in offering such a wide variety of services, and that some service may flourish at the expense of others.

The results of the questionnaires suggest that traditional library services such as borrowing books and reading newspapers are still extremely popular and relevant in today's society. They also illustrate the need for many people to have access to information technology, and that

there are still a great many people who do not have access to it at home. It is clear from the responses to the questionnaires that people visit the Idea Stores in order to take advantage of a wide range of activities and services, many of which were not available in the libraries that preceded them. This has culminated in a huge rise in visitor numbers.

Chapter 4 – Public libraries and education

4.1 Introduction

Chapter 4 discusses the role of education within public libraries, and the extent to which it is part of their remit. The government has, in recent years, placed emphasis on the concept of 'lifelong learning', and on the potential that public libraries have in enabling their communities to engage in informal education. Tower Hamlets' Idea Stores have combined the borough's libraries with its adult and further education services, in order to offer classes and courses on a variety of subjects, both vocational and for leisure. This chapter aims to find out whether or not combining these services in this way has proved to be effective and efficient.

4.2 Literature review

The public library has traditionally been seen as a place where people can go to better themselves, without having to engage with any formal educational institutions. The original public libraries, established in the 1850s, were noted for their provision, for the working classes, of an alternative form of leisure to the public house (Snape, 1995). However, the free provision of educational resources was also a major aspect of their service, and this side of the service has continued to be seen, by some, as its most important function. The recent emphasis placed on the educational potential of public libraries has been observed by many to be a return to their original philosophy and values (Greenhalgh & Worpole, 1995). The Framework for the Future report (2003: 28) emphasises the importance of learning to public libraries, stating that they *"complement and reinforce formal learning, helping to make formal education more effective"*.

Some of the literature reviewed refers to the public library as a 'street corner university'. This relates to the open-access ethos of the public library, and the comparative exclusiveness of most formal educational institutions. As Broady-Preston & Cox (2000: 158) point out, "*The street corner university represents one possible future direction [for public libraries], one that is endorsed widely, both politically and professionally*". The government is indeed advocating the inclusion and emphasis of education on the public library agenda: "*Libraries should be the local learning place and champion of the independent learner*" (DCMS, 1999: 5). Broady-Preston & Cox (2000: 159) go on to assert that the delivery of a 'street corner university' "*represents the brightest future for the public library service*". They point out that for this to be the case, however, it is essential that great care and attention is paid to defining and delivering the service.

In designing the Idea Stores, Tower Hamlets decided to combine their adult education services with their library service. Many of the adult education sites were in a poor condition, or poorly located, which meant that they weren't being used, despite one third of the borough's adult population having no qualifications (Crace, 2004), and a large number of residents with deficiencies in basic skills (Tower Hamlets Borough Council, 2002). This partnership of services is key to the future direction of the 'street corner university'. Broady-Preston & Cox (2000: 155) suggest that "*consortiums of like-minded organisations working in partnership*", is essential for the building of a true 'street corner university'. Crace (2004) points out that building on partnerships to provide a joined-up service is an ideal solution to the problems caused by the previous situation. Course providers were in competition with each other, duplicating courses unnecessarily and wasting resources, whilst potential learners slipped through the net because it was assumed they were someone else's responsibility.

Public libraries cannot simply transform themselves into 'street corner universities overnight, however. It is pointed out by a librarian interviewed by Broady-Preston & Cox (2000: 156) that it is necessary for a huge change to take place in the way that public libraries are staffed and run: "*it's about*

actively supporting that individual, and that's a huge psychological training change – huge, ginormous, revolutionary". Comedia's 1993 report stresses the need for public libraries to clarify exactly what their educational purposes are as, like in many aspects of the public library service, there has been a lack of uniformity.

4.3 Results and discussion

4.3.1 Idea Store staff interviews

The interviewees discussed the provision of a lifelong learning service along with the widening of the range of services offered by the Idea Stores. The general view seemed to be that the provision of courses and classes on the same site as traditional and modern library services is well received by users of the Idea Stores. One interviewee pointed out that having all the services on one site is so much more convenient for the Idea Store customer. The point was also made that within the Idea Store there is more potential for people to participate in informal learning because it is so convenient. People can see the classes that take place (through moveable glass walls), and that they are full of all kinds of people, eliminating some of the fear that may have been stopping them from enrolling.

The courses and classes on offer at the Idea Stores are clearly very popular, as several of those interviewed mentioned the task of enrolling people on them, a task that obviously didn't exist in the libraries that preceded the Idea Stores. Whilst these interviewees were happy to take on this new task, they did point out that it was relatively time-consuming, which meant that there was less time available to talk to and advise customers using the other services within the Idea Store.

4.3.2 Idea Store customer questionnaire

Only 2% of those who completed the questionnaire stated that one of their main reasons for visiting the Idea Stores was to attend a class. However, it must be pointed out that the questionnaires were distributed during the summer, when there may not have been any classes running.

When asked what other services or activities they would like to see in the Idea Stores, several respondents requested learning related services. The most popular of these requests were for a quiet area to study. There were also requests for courses to be held in the evenings, and during the summer, as well as for more courses for children and for older people.

Many of those who completed the questionnaire made a point of mentioning the educational benefits of visiting the Idea Stores. Respondents were asked about why they felt the Idea Store was important to their community; educational aspects of the service make up 19% of the responses (see graph 2). Comments were also made relating to the Idea Stores promoting knowledge, making literacy available to all, and improving educational standards. Indeed, the fact that there were requests for more classes at more convenient times suggest that there are many people wishing to participate in lifelong learning in the Idea Stores.

4.4 Summary

The literature review revealed a general acceptance that education has always been, and should continue to be, a fundamental part of the public library agenda. The government has placed great emphasis on lifelong learning, and is particularly keen for public libraries to be involved in its delivery. There is support for public libraries to transform themselves into 'street corner universities'. However, it was pointed out that more definition is needed as to the exact role that libraries should play in informal education,

and that the transformation into 'street corner universities' will entail a lot of organisation and commitment.

The majority of those interviewed for the research project were very enthusiastic about the provision of a wide range of courses and classes in the Idea Store. They pointed out that by holding classes on the same site as other services, it is much more convenient for the customer. The customer who comes in to the library to borrow a book to learn Spanish can sign up to take Spanish lessons, and similarly the customer who is already signed up for a class can borrow books to aid their learning. It is likely that, because of the convenience of the location, and because it they are held in a place that customers already visit, there are many people signing up for courses that would not otherwise have done so.

The results of the questionnaires revealed that many of the visitors to the Idea Stores saw them as being very important for their community from an educational perspective. Those using the Idea Stores have welcomed the availability of lifelong learning in the same space as the library and multi-media centre, and are keen to see even more provision of this kind.

Chapter 5 – Public libraries and social inclusion

5.1 Introduction

Chapter 6 looks at the role that public libraries can play in tackling social exclusion. The government is committed to creating a socially inclusive society, and has urged that public libraries support them by providing the kinds of services and environments that promote inclusion. This chapter examines the ways in which public libraries are working to improve access to their services to all members of their communities.

5.2 Literature review

The government has made it very clear in recent years that it is committed to reducing the levels of social exclusion that are occurring around the country (ODPM, 2005). According to much of the literature, it is also keen for providers of cultural, educational and leisure services, including public libraries, to be involved by targeting their resources to “*meet the needs of communities and groups at risk of social exclusion*” (DCMS, 2001: 77). The government has made a number of suggestions for public libraries to consider in order for them to play an effective role in improving social inclusion in their communities. They should adapt and extend the range of services they offer, form partnerships within their communities, and critically assess the values and practices that have traditionally underpinned their work. It is also suggested that public libraries should extend and develop the aspect of their service that provides access to communication, by becoming community resource centres (DCMS, 1999). Train, Dalton & Elkin (2000) argue that public libraries support the educational, social and cultural development of all members of their communities, and that they are therefore an integral part of the wider social inclusion agenda.

It is suggested in the literature that public libraries, as institutions, are ideally placed to be able to improve the levels of social inclusion in their communities. In terms of accessibility, Comedia (1993: ii) argue that the public library is one of the *“most accessible and open public institutions, and often acts as a focal point for local civic life”*. The Department for Culture, Media & Sport (1999: 9) also emphasises the inclusiveness of the library building itself, it being free for anyone to enter without challenge or justification. They point out that is a place where anyone can go to spend time with other people, meaning that it can become *“a valued environment for those who are socially isolated and have little contact with others”*. Rushton (2005a: 5) also highlights the importance of the library building, pointing out that *“libraries are community buildings and should be used for other community purposes”*. She states that libraries should make the most of their great potential as *“enablers of access to digital skills and services including e-government and facilitators of measures to tackle social exclusion, to build communities and develop citizenship”*.

Long & Welch, 2003: 70) point out that libraries are cultural institutions, and that culture *“refreshes and expands the capacity of the mind and body and offers intrinsic benefits, which go a long way towards providing the rights of citizenship which in themselves encourage active and responsible citizens”*. Meeson (2005) suggests that as well as culture and creativity, public libraries provide access to information and knowledge to everyone and, in doing so in a community space, they can improve people’s quality of life. Greenhalgh & Worpole (1995: 99) make a point of comparing the financial costs of maintaining a library in an area with social inclusion problems with the costs of not supporting it, in terms of *“further community breakdown, social anomie and increased welfare provision”*. They conclude that public libraries provide an *“economic and social benefit in the wider sense”*.

Tackling social exclusion is widely recognised to be a difficult and challenging task. The Library & Information Commission (2000) point out that doing so must involve an attempt at understanding the sources of the exclusion, and at eliminating it from these sources. They also state the importance of *“reducing disparity, discrimination and disadvantage while recognising the value of diversity”*, which should provide a foundation for a more inclusive society. The Select Committee report (2005) highlights the services that public libraries are already providing that can make a difference to the social inclusion of their communities. It sees great opportunity for libraries in the way that they can help to improve literacy in both adults and children, in the provision of computer skills, and in the provision of material in different languages. It also emphasises the benefits libraries offer to their communities by providing information on education and skills training, by holding homework clubs, and by extending their opening hours to enable people to visit at evenings and weekends. The DCMS (1999: 4) agree that a *“regenerated and proactive library sector can help both individuals and communities to develop skills and confidence, and help improve social networking”*. They point out, however, that in order to benefit everyone in their communities, libraries must ensure that their services are accessible to all.

Some commentators have warned that care must be taken in the attempt to provide services and activities aimed at improving social inclusion. Vincent (2005) claims that if libraries simply market themselves as being ‘open for all’, they will not achieve the desired results. Instead it is suggested that a targeted approach is necessary; libraries must, therefore, provide specific activities aimed at specific groups. However, Long & Welch (2003: 67) warn that this may not be enough to make a difference: *“Just because the project is working with the socially excluded and delivering benefits to them does not necessarily mean it does anything to promote social inclusion”*.

One of the problems in attempting to eliminate social exclusion that has been highlighted in the literature is the difficulty in measuring it. Matarasso (1998) suggests that because there are no effective performance indicators currently in place, it is very difficult to record the social impact that public libraries can have on their communities. Also, Long & Welch (2003) point out that the understanding people have of the terms 'social inclusion' and 'social exclusion' can vary greatly, which again leads to difficulties in measuring it.

Tower Hamlets' Idea Stores were designed to be as socially inclusive as possible. Care was taken to ensure that they would be located within local shopping areas so that they would be convenient to visit, and that each store would be fully accessible for those with disabilities (Tower Hamlets Borough Council, 2002). Brown (2000: 17) argues that the concept behind the Idea Stores is one that tackles social exclusion "*head-on*" by offering a wide range of services that meet the "*learning, information and cultural needs of local people*", and by eliminating "*social and physical barriers to entry and use*".

Patterson (2001) focuses on the fact that Tower Hamlets is a borough made up of a diverse collection of ethnic communities, and that this in itself can contribute to social exclusion, particularly to those, often the elderly, who do not speak English. He points out that the Idea Stores provide, for everyone in the borough, "*opportunities for social interaction and personal well-being*". As Tower Hamlets' strategy document (2002) states, the Idea Stores are about "*getting people off estates and out of their houses to meet others and experience a wide range of activities*".

5.3 Results and findings

5.3.1 Idea Store staff interviews

Those interviewed were asked whether or not they felt that working at the Idea Store contributed to them feeling more involved in their community. They all agreed that they do have a stronger feeling of being part of the community than they did before. One interviewee explained that this was because they now have the opportunity to interact with a lot more people from the community and particularly with sectors of the community that may not have used the old libraries. Another interviewee said that as well as the public being happy with the Idea Stores, she was also much happier than she was working in the old libraries, and that she particularly enjoyed the community-based feel that the Idea Stores have.

Many of those interviewed were keen to talk about the community outreach work that the Idea Store staff carry out. Each store has dedicated staff members who go out into the community and meet with people from different groups, introducing them to the Idea Stores and finding out how they can improve on meeting their needs. It was pointed out that the Idea Stores get involved in a lot of activities within the community, and also that they hold a lot of awareness events, in partnership with other organisations, that are aimed at people from all sectors of the community.

5.3.2 Idea Store customer questionnaire

Those who filled out the questionnaire were asked about how important they felt the Idea Stores are, both to them personally and to their community as a whole. They were asked to rate their feeling towards the Idea Stores, using a scale of 1 being not at all important and 5 being very important. In relation to how important the Idea Stores are to the respondents personally, 40% chose the rating 5, very important, and a further 34% chose

the rating 4. In relation to the perceived importance of the Idea Stores to the community, 69% rated them at 5, very important.

The respondents were asked for their reasons for their rating. There were many comments relating to the good locations of the Idea Stores, and their easy accessibility. Many respondents also remarked on the welcoming, social environment, and that they are ideal places for all age groups to use, as there are plenty of activities for children as well as dedicated 'Golden hours' for the elderly. The comments were made that the Idea Stores provide vital resources for those who are unemployed or on low incomes, for example access to newspapers and the Internet for job hunting and updating skills. The IT provision was also mentioned by many of the respondents who had family and friends in other countries, as it enables them to communicate regularly. The educational benefits were also commented on by many of the respondents.

5.4 Summary

The literature review revealed that the government has, in recent years, stressed its commitment to eliminating social exclusion, and has called on the providers of educational, cultural and leisure services to be involved. As public libraries provide all of these services, they are considered to be ideally placed to help improve social inclusion in their communities. Libraries are seen as safe, neutral places that anyone can go into without being challenged, and are welcoming spaces for all members of a community.

It was shown in the literature that the services that are provided within libraries are also a key factor in tackling social exclusion. There are programmes which aim to improve pre-school children's literacy, thus preparing them for a successful school experience, as well as those aimed at adults with a range of levels of literacy and educational needs. Most libraries also get involved with projects aimed at particular sectors of their communities, particularly those sectors that are disadvantaged in some way.

This can help to make these sectors feel more involved with the community as a whole, although some of the literature warned that this is not an automatic result of such programmes.

The literature review revealed some of the ways in which the Idea Stores are tackling social exclusion in their communities. It was found that the buildings were located within busy shopping areas, thus making them easy to use on a regular basis, and that there was easy access to the buildings themselves as well as within the buildings.

The interviewees were all in agreement that working in the Idea Stores made them feel much more involved with the community, and that this was a positive outcome. The interviewees were all also keen to discuss the outreach work that was carried out as part of the regular services of the Idea Stores, and that they were frequently involved in awareness events aimed at various sectors of the community.

The majority of the respondents of the questionnaires felt strongly that the Idea Stores were important to them personally. An even greater majority of the respondents indicated that they felt the Idea Stores were important to the community as a whole. The reasons that were given for their views included the welcoming, social atmosphere of the Idea Stores, and the provision of social and educational services for all age groups and sectors of the community.

Chapter 6 – New public libraries

6.1 Introduction

This chapter examines the recent trend for modern, well-designed library buildings, and the adaptations to the traditional library services provided within them. It also looks at the reception that these new buildings have received by both those using them and by commentators. One of the main criticisms aimed at public libraries in recent years has been the poor state of the buildings that they are housed in. Many were built over a hundred years ago and, therefore, it should come as no surprise that they are no longer suitable, in either their location or their size and shape, for the services required by library visitors today. However, many of the new-style libraries have come under criticism; this chapter aims to discover whether or not it is justified.

6.2 Literature review

6.2.1 New library buildings

Much of the literature reviewed makes reference to the fact that the majority of the public library buildings in use today were built many years ago, more than a hundred years ago in some cases. It should not, therefore, be surprising that lots of these buildings are in a poor state of repair. The Audit Commission (2002) reports that over half the UK's library services use buildings that are in a poor condition.

These buildings are also becoming increasingly irrelevant for the kinds of services provided within them. As Matarasso (1998: i) states, "*We do not live in the 1960s, or even the 1930s, and we cannot depend on services shaped by the needs of those times*". The Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE)'s (2004: 14) recommendations for better public

library buildings argue that the traditional design of libraries “*can create barriers, intimidating for some and simply off putting for others, with dull official looking facades, imposing issue desks, formal layouts and uncomfortable furniture*”. The library building is seen to be an important aspect of the library experience for visitors (Comedia, 1993), and should, therefore, be as attractive, accessible, and as functional as possible (House of Commons, Culture Media & Sport Committee, 2005).

There appears to be general agreement in the literature that the poor state of repair of public library buildings is a major contributing factor to the reduction in visitor numbers, and that new or refurbished buildings may be necessary in order to reverse this trend. It is pointed out that these crumbling libraries are of a similar age to many schools in need of repair, which have received government money for refurbishment. Guy Daynes, CILIP’s head of policy, argues that money should be made similarly available for the modernisation of the public library estate (BBC Radio 4, 2005).

David Murray, the director of the London Libraries Development Agency, states that “*It is very hard to get people into buildings if they look disgusting – clean, modern and accessible buildings will always attract people*” (in Triggles, 2002). The Framework for the Future report (2003) also emphasises the point that the look and feel of libraries matters hugely to visitors and potential visitors. The fact that a great deal of planning and funding will have gone into a new public library building will raise the awareness of potential visitors that the library authority is committed to providing a modern and outstanding service. It can also be an opportunity to challenge traditional ideas of the public library service. As Dewe (in Kinnell & Sturges, 1996: 86) points out, the building of a new public library can lead people to “*...reconsider the role of a public library & to implement change & engage in experimentation*”.

The evidence from recently opened new libraries shows that many communities are indeed open to modernisation and experimentation. Ezard (2005a) reports that since Brighton's new library opened in April 2005, loans and visitor figures have tripled, and that one of Hampshire's new 'discovery centres' which opened in June 2005 has more than tripled its visitor figures. Tower Hamlets' Idea Stores have also succeeded in raising visitor and loan figures; Idea Store Bow receives 300 visitors a day for its ICT facilities alone. This is the same as the number of visitors across all services in the previous libraries (Bretton, 2005). The considerable increases in visitor numbers that have occurred can be attributed to the attractiveness of these new libraries' *"bright, light, attractive retail formats, which blend learning & leisure"* (Leadbetter, 2003: 16). Many of these new libraries have been designed to be as 'open' as possible, using glass to create an atmosphere of transparency and openness, therefore reducing any perceived barriers to entering them (Greenhalgh & Worpole 1995: 60).

It is argued that it is not just the design and layout of the new buildings that has contributed to the rise in visitors and borrowing figures, but the locations of the new libraries. Framework for the future (2003: 22) recommends that libraries should be *"conveniently located, in buildings... which open when people need them, including weekends and evenings"*. The results of Tower Hamlets Libraries' (1998) public consultation into the future of their library service found that many residents in the borough would use the library more if it could be combined with their regular shopping trip. It has been suggested in many reports (Leadbetter, 2003; Comedia, 1993; Jones, 1997; House of Commons, Culture Media & Sport Committee, 2005) that locating libraries either within or nearby shopping centres is an essential factor in the rejuvenation of the library service. Morris & Brown (2004) point out that many libraries in Australia and Singapore are located within shopping centres, and this practice has proved very popular. By the same token, the longer opening hours of these new libraries often reflect their retail positioning, making them far more convenient for those who are unable to visit during normal working hours.

There has, however, been some opposition to the building of new public libraries. Some traditionalists fear that doing so may involve the closure of some smaller branch libraries (Triggle, 2002). In particular, Tower Hamlets Borough Council has faced harsh criticism for their decision to close Whitechapel Library and build a new Idea Store in the area instead. There has been a great deal of publicity focusing on the historical importance of the library in relation to the Jewish community in the area, and the perceived mistake that is being made in closing it (Gorb, 2004; Lebrecht, 2005; Kennedy, 2005; Usherwood, 2005). This is despite an acceptance of the building being in such a poor state of repair: “...*now so battered that flakes of paint and plaster regularly fall on the readers*” (Kennedy, 2005: 7).

6.2.2 New library traditions

The review of the literature also revealed that there are many who lament the passing of the traditional, silent library full of nothing but books, housed in grand, dignified buildings (Garrod, 2004). Ciaran Gulifoyle, from the Queen’s English Society, pronounces the relaxing of the ‘no talking’ rule and the introduction of CDs and graphic novels into libraries as “*abhorrent acts*” (in The Times, 2004). Many of these traditionalists assume that the new-style libraries will place more emphasis on computers than books. Warner (2005: 23) argues that “*computers should never be thought of as replacements for books and reading books; ... libraries should not become workstations*”.

Comedia (1993: i) point out, however, that those who are dissatisfied with the modernisation of public libraries are usually nostalgic “*for a ‘world we have lost’*”. Their arguments are often based on “*memories of libraries from childhood rather than what they actually are now and could be in the future*”. Greenhalgh & Worpole are similarly dismissive of those who complain about modern libraries, asserting that they are comparing “*the present crisis-ridden state of many inner London borough services with a halcyon memory of the benign provincial library service of their childhoods*” (1995: 44).

It is argued that books are still vital to the library service; Framework for the Future (2003: 24) states that a library is only successful if it provides *“a good range of books carefully selected to meet the needs of its community”*. New style libraries such as Tower Hamlets’ Idea Stores, far from getting rid of all their books, claim that books will remain central to their services. Tower Hamlets Borough Council (1998: 1), in their report containing the results of their public consultation into the future of their library service, state that *“the library service is a book lending service first and foremost and this function must remain the heart of the service and its identity”*. In this public consultation, it was found that one of the main reasons people did not use, or were dissatisfied with their local library, was the poor selection and condition of books on offer. In response to this, Tower Hamlets Borough Council (2002) pledged in their library and lifelong learning development strategy that within the new Idea Stores, *“the stock will be renewed and enlarged over the lifetime of the strategy.”*

It is suggested by some, however, that a balance between the traditionalists and the modernists must be struck. As Garrod (2004) states, *“...public libraries cannot stand still, they have to evolve to survive”*. He admits that achieving such a balance is a difficult task, and that it may not always be possible to please everyone. Jackson (1996: 13) points out that the traditional library is such a recognisable image – as is the element of ‘libraryness’ – that what replaces it must be *“just as good and strong an image – if not better – than what was there before”*. Brown (2000: 16) discusses the various different elements that must be combined to make an ideal public library. One of these elements is *“a familiar, relaxing place which is safe, warm & well-lit, and accessible to all”*. As previously mentioned, it is widely accepted that many public library buildings are far from meeting this requirement. Brown also asserts the importance of libraries providing *“a stimulating environment, enlivened with events & activities”*. This is exactly the kind of environment that the new-style libraries are aiming at achieving. Because they are being designed and built with today’s library visitors and services in mind, they are able to achieve much more suitable facilities and

environments than those built for the very different needs and services of many years ago.

6.2.3 New library branding

There has been much discussion in the literature of the 're-branding' of new libraries. Tower Hamlets has its Idea Stores and Hampshire has its Discovery Centres. Heather Wills, the programme director of the Idea Stores, defends their decision to re-brand their libraries by saying that if the sign on the buildings still said 'library', they "*probably would not have achieved the significant results that we have*" (House of Commons, Culture Media & Sport Committee, 2005: 17). Jackson (1996: 20) concurs that the name 'public library' should not automatically be used, pointing out that it "*evokes ideas and values that, though maybe they once had relevance and a social resonance, are now outdated and don't reflect what the modern institution does or sets out to do*".

The majority of respondents in Jackson's research, however, preferred 'library' to other suggestions, as it was not always clear from other names what services were being offered. The 2005 Select Committee (House of Commons, Culture Media & Sport Committee, 2005: 17) was distressed at the potential disappearance of the name 'library', and was saddened to hear it discussed in terms of its "*negative overtones*". Rather than re-branding the library service in this way, they would prefer the improvement and modernisation of services to speak for themselves. Anne Fine (2003: 29), an advocate of old style traditional libraries, finds re-branding exercises such as this "*tiresome*", and says that renaming a library an 'Idea Store' "*simply make[s] your loyal readers like myself shudder*".

6.3 Results and findings

6.3.1 Idea Store staff interviews

Most of those interviewed mention the 'curiosity factor' that the Idea Stores have; the buildings look so different, from both the exterior and the interior, from a traditional library, that people who would not normally visit a library are drawn in to have a look around. Once inside, many of them end up joining and taking advantage of the services. One interviewee suggested that some people felt intimidated by the old traditional style libraries, particularly if they were not strong or keen readers, but that the friendly and welcoming atmosphere of the Idea Stores means that they are happy to spend time there.

One interviewee also pointed out that, simply by virtue of the buildings being modern and designed with a wide range of services in mind, the Idea Stores are extremely powerful in their ability to provide good quality service to their customers. It was explained that the relaxed atmosphere inside the buildings – the lack of restrictions on noise, mobile phones, eating etc. – also helps to emphasise the modern feeling of the service revolving around the customer, something that was not evident in the old traditional libraries. Another interviewee emphasised the flexibility of the Idea Stores, in terms of the services offered within them as well as in terms of the buildings themselves. They are mostly open plan, which means that 'zones' can be moved around if required.

The modern retail style of the Idea Stores and their high street locations were pointed out as making a real difference in terms of the partnerships that are now available. One interviewee mentioned that because of the location of the old libraries, and because the number of visitors was not particularly high, many organisations did not consider it to be worthwhile venturing into partnerships with the libraries. Now, however, because there is a significantly higher volume of people visiting the Idea Stores, and there is more space to work in, more and more organisations (such as the citizen's

advice bureau) are keen to have a presence there. These partnerships provide an additional service to the Idea Store customers, enriching their experience.

The interviewees were asked about the books within the Idea Stores, and whether they were still seen as central to the service. The majority of them felt that the Idea Stores continue to place a strong emphasis on books. One pointed out that despite the wide range of services provided in the Idea Stores, *"We've not forgotten that we've got a library side as well"*. Another interviewee felt strongly that *"books are the key and they are still important to us"*. One interviewee explained that Tower Hamlets Borough Council made £100,000 available to each Idea Store when they opened to be spent on new books, emphasising their commitment to the library side of the Idea Stores. Not all of those interviewed felt this way, however. One interviewee suggested that books had been forgotten about due to the focus placed on new services such as lifelong learning.

Most of the interviewees were aware that some customers felt there were drawbacks to the design and day-to-day running of the Idea Stores. The problem of noise was mentioned most frequently. Apparently some customers find the Idea Stores too noisy due to the lack of restrictions on talking and using mobile phones. However those interviewed agreed that it was particularly the more elderly customers who found this to be a problem, and that this was due to them being more used to the traditional library where visitors were requested to make as little noise as possible.

It was suggested that, in order to cater for as much of the community as possible, the Idea Stores have to not only consider the minority, the regular users of the old libraries, but also the majority, who did not use the libraries, and who want services delivered in a way that is most convenient to them. In providing the kind of service that the majority group wants to use, the minority group is likely to find it difficult to deal with the changes. It was stressed that the Idea Store staff are attempting to help ease the transition for these customers, for example by holding 'Golden Hours' for elderly

people, when the Idea Stores are quieter, and that people are slowly getting used to it. It was also highlighted that because the Idea Stores are open 71 hours each week, there is more opportunity for people to find a time to visit that suits them, when it is likely to be quieter, if that is what is required.

6.3.2 *Idea Store customer questionnaire*

Everyone who filled out the questionnaire said that they found it easy to use the Idea Store, suggesting that the open plan layout and 'zoning' make it simple for visitors to find their way around. There were a few suggestions made for possible improvements, however, including increasing the numbers of staff available, and improving the signage.

Those filling out the questionnaires were asked for their reasons for visiting the Idea Stores. 32% of the respondents stated that they used the Idea Stores to borrow books (22% for leisure, 10% for study or work – see Graph 1). This is comparable with the 34% who visit the library to use the Internet, suggesting that books are indeed still well used and seen as a central part of the library service within the Idea Stores.

Respondents were also asked what they would like to see more of in the Idea Stores. 35% of them were keen to see more books; this is again comparable with the 34% who would like to see more computers. Those who requested more books, however, were very specific; there were calls for more contemporary authors, more classics, books on particular subjects, and more large-print books, among others. This again suggests that the users of the Idea Stores feel strongly about the book stock, and that there is a desire to see more books available.

Respondents were asked what differences they were aware of between the old traditional libraries and the Idea Stores. 75% of the differences mentioned can be seen as positive changes, with only 25% of the responses stating negative changes, suggesting that the majority of Idea

Store visitors are more satisfied with their current service than they were with the old libraries. The most popular responses given were that the Idea Stores are more modern, more efficient and that they have greater provision of IT. However, there were an equal number of people stating that the Idea Stores are noisier than the traditional libraries were.

Respondents of the questionnaire were also asked for their opinions on the name 'Idea Store'. The overwhelming majority, 85%, said that they liked the name. Of the minority that didn't like it, however, 80% would prefer to see it reclaim the name 'library'. This would suggest that while most people relate the wide range of services provided by the Idea Store with its modern name, for some the Idea Store is still a library, despite the additional services, and it should be named as such.

6.4 Summary

The literature review revealed a heated debate between traditionalists and modernists. The traditionalists want to see libraries continuing to look and feel exactly like they did in their childhood (which in most cases was many years ago). Modernists, however, accept the fact that society has moved on since then, and that public libraries and their buildings also need to be modernised. The new style libraries have been accused of not placing enough emphasis on books, however Tower Hamlets Borough Council claim to have retained books at the heart of their Idea Stores.

Most of those concerned about the loss of the traditional libraries are aware of the poor state of many library buildings, but this does not stop them from reminiscing of the hours spent in their majestic book-lined halls, with no thoughts to how society has transformed. Society has different needs today than it did 100 years ago when a large proportion of public libraries, still in use today, were built. This change has been taken into account by the designers and library authorities behind the new style of libraries, such as Tower Hamlets' Idea Stores and Hampshire's Discovery Centres. These new

libraries have succeeded in reversing the trend for falling visitor numbers and book loans, suggesting that the teams behind them have provided the right combination of services in the right buildings, and in the right locations.

The re-branding of the new libraries has also caused some consternation in the literature. It appears to be accepted to some degree that the name 'public library' can be seen as old-fashioned and representative of the traditional, silent library. However, new alternatives such as 'Idea Stores' and 'Discovery Centres' do not appear to have found much favour, and there is a sense of regret that the name 'library' suffers from negative overtones.

The interviews revealed that the new, modern buildings that house the Idea Stores have been successful in raising the curiosity levels of passers-by sufficiently to draw them inside. Once inside, many of them go on to make use of the services on offer. Interviewees pointed out that because the buildings were designed specifically with the local communities' needs in mind, they are able to offer an extremely wide range of services; there should be something for everyone.

The majority of the interviewees felt passionately that despite the wider range of services that the Idea Stores are now offering, books are still central to the service as a whole, and that this is reflected in the funding allocated to the book stock when each Idea Store is opened. There was also a strong feeling, however, that this is not necessarily the case, and that books have been sidelined in the emphasis on newer services.

Interviewees did highlight, however, the problems that are connected with providing a modern service in a modern building. The open plan design of the interiors of the Idea Stores, along with the relaxing of rules on talking and using mobile phones, has increased the noise levels dramatically, particularly when there are a lot of young people inside. Whilst this kind of atmosphere is comfortable for many of the Idea Stores' visitors, especially for children and young people, the Idea Store staff have found that older people in particular are finding it difficult to adjust to this new environment.

The questionnaires revealed that the majority of visitors to the Idea Stores found them extremely easy to use and find their way around. The majority of respondents also found the differences between the Idea Stores and the old libraries to be mainly positive ones, for example that they were more efficient. There was, however, a significant proportion of respondents mentioning the problem of noise. As this was also mentioned by many of the interviewees, this would appear to be an issue that needs some attention.

The results of the questionnaires showed that as many people are still visiting the Idea Stores to borrow books as to use the Internet and computing facilities. There were also many requests for more books on particular subjects and from particular genres. This suggests that there may be a need for more funding, and more attention, to be paid to the book stocks.

On the subject of the name of the Idea Stores, the majority of the respondents were happy with the name, although out of those who were not, the majority would prefer them to have retained the name 'library'. This is in keeping with the opinions of many of those reviewed in the literature.

Chapter 7 – Conclusions and recommendations

7.1 Introduction

The aim of this research project was to ascertain the effectiveness of Tower Hamlets' Idea Stores, by reviewing the literature, interviewing Idea Store staff and inviting visitors to the Idea Stores to fill in questionnaires. The original objectives of the research were the result of initial readings, and focused mainly on the public consultation carried out by Tower Hamlets Borough Council on the future of their library services, their ensuing strategy documents and the Idea Stores themselves. An ongoing review of the literature, however, revealed a range of issues relating the Idea Stores to the wider public library arena. These issues were: the future of the public library service; public libraries and education; public libraries and social inclusion; and new public libraries. Due to the inductive nature of this research project these issues were used, in place of some of the original objectives, to shape this document.

7.2 Conclusions

7.2.1 The future of the public library service

This chapter focused on the various issues surrounding the future of the public library service, including the role and function of the public library, and the manner in which it should be governed. The review of the literature revealed a general agreement that the way the public library service is currently run is far too fragmented to be effective, and that some form of national body is required to take control. It is hoped that this would ensure that guidelines are adhered to, and bring poorer-performing libraries up to the same level as those that are achieving better results.

The function of the public library was revealed to be something that has been subject to debate since they first came into being in the 1850s. The fact that the Idea Stores have increased the range of services on offer to their communities has meant that they have been subject to criticism by those who assume they are placing less emphasis on their books and too much on new community-based services.

The majority of the Idea Store staff interviewed felt very strongly that whilst there was a definite emphasis on community involvement, books still remained at the heart of their service. It was argued that their commitment to books was illustrated by the amount of funding made available for new books by the borough council. There was a feeling from other interviewees, however, that the critics were right, that the educational and community services offered by the Idea Stores had flourished at the expense of the books. The most popular reason given by those who filled out the questionnaires for visiting the Idea Stores was borrowing books for leisure, although the respondents gave a wide range of services and activities that they also accessed at the Idea Stores.

It is suggested, therefore, that although the Idea Stores now offer a much wider range of services than traditional libraries, people do still want to borrow books, and the Idea Stores are committed to offering them a good range and selection. It is also clear that the Idea Stores are equally committed to providing a wide range of services to their communities, and that local residents appreciate and are taking advantage of them. In this respect, it would appear that visitors to the Idea Stores are satisfied with the service provided, whether they taking advantage of the books, computers, or any other service.

7.2.2 Public libraries and education

The low levels of educational achievement in Tower Hamlets, along with poor enrolment figures at local further education institutions, have resulted in the Idea Stores' amalgamation of adult education and library services. The government, keen to emphasise the importance of lifelong learning, has encouraged libraries to provide opportunities for their communities to participate in informal education. The staff members I spoke to felt that the provision of classes and courses in the Idea Stores was a very positive move, and that they were proving to be very popular. It was suggested that because they were held on the same site as so many other services, people saw the classes as being much more convenient. Also, because they could see the classes taking place, there were fewer barriers in place, and people could see that it was people just like them taking part.

The educational benefits of the Idea Stores were mentioned by many of the questionnaire respondents. Although not many of the respondents actually gave 'attending a class' as a reason for them visiting the Idea Stores, there were many requests for classes at different times and on different subjects, as well as for dedicated quiet study areas.

It would appear, therefore, that the amalgamation of adult education services with library services has been successful in the Idea Stores. It has made it much more convenient, and less intimidating, for people to take part in informal education. Visitors to the Idea Stores appreciate that they have an educational benefit as well as fulfilling leisure needs.

7.2.3 Public libraries and social inclusion

The government has enlisted the help of public libraries in attempting to reduce the levels of social exclusion. It is argued that libraries are perfectly placed to do this, as they are seen by most people as safe, neutral, and welcoming places that anyone can spend time in. The Idea Stores have made great efforts to ensure that they are located as conveniently as possible for the majority of those living in their communities, and that they are accessible to all. They are also committed to providing a variety of services to all sectors of their communities, from holding awareness events to various outreach projects. The provision of lifelong learning and free Internet access also means that all members of the community have equal access to education and communication, which can help to erase the feeling of exclusion from society.

The Idea Store staff that I interviewed were all very happy with the community-based feel that they felt the Idea Stores have, and were very enthusiastic about the outreach and other community work that was carried out. The questionnaires revealed that the vast majority of people visiting the Idea Stores consider them to be very important to the community as a whole. A wide variety of reasons were cited for this opinion, including the welcoming atmosphere and social space of the Idea Stores, and the provision made for all age groups, as well as the educational benefits.

The research suggests, therefore, that the Idea Stores are fully committed to reducing social exclusion in their localities, and that many services and activities have been put in place to enable this. It is noted in the literature review that measuring social inclusion is problematic, therefore it is difficult to say conclusively whether they have been successful so far. However, the comments on the questionnaires would suggest that the Idea Stores have an important presence in the community, and are appreciated for the wide range of services that are available to everyone.

7.2.4 New public libraries

The Idea Stores in Tower Hamlets are among several libraries opened in recent years whose innovative designs have caused consternation amongst commentators. It was pointed out by interviewees, however, that the design of the new buildings themselves have succeeded in raising curiosity levels in the community, meaning that people who wouldn't normally go into a library go in to see what's going on, and often end up taking advantage of the services. The results seem to speak for themselves; despite continuing reports of falling visitor numbers and book loans, these figures have been tripled in Hampshire's Discovery Centres and Tower Hamlets' Idea Stores.

There has been concern expressed that the traditional library ethos and services would be forgotten about in the rush to provide electronic services and cafés. However, these new libraries claim to place as much emphasis on books as they do their newer, non-traditional services. The majority of interviewees supported this claim. The questionnaire revealed that as many people use the Idea Stores to borrow books as to use the Internet. There were many requests for more books on particular subjects or from certain genres.

There was also great concern for the loss of 'libraryness' in the move from traditional library buildings to modern new ones. It is argued, however, that the relaxing of rules within the new libraries contributes to the comfortable, relaxing atmosphere that is enjoyed by many people, particularly those who never used traditional libraries. It was made clear, however, from both the interviews and the questionnaires, that those who did use the traditional libraries, particularly the elderly, find the noise levels in the Idea Stores to be problematic.

The research suggests that new style libraries like the Idea Stores have successfully managed to retain old customers while recruiting many new ones. They are providing a modern range of services, in modern buildings, while at the same time continuing to lend books; a service that is still seen as the central function of the library service.

7.3 *Suggestions to the Idea Stores*

The research reveals that the Idea Stores in Tower Hamlets appear to be efficient and effective in their provision of a library and lifelong learning service to their communities. However, there are several issues that were highlighted by the research as possible needing some attention. These include the book stocks, and the noise levels.

Most of the staff who were interviewed stated that books remained a central function of the Idea Stores, and a large proportion of those who completed questionnaires used the Idea Stores to borrow books, both for leisure and for study or work. However, there was concern from some of those interviewed that books were sidelined in favour of other services, and that staff often didn't have time to tidy shelves as other services kept them so busy. This, coupled with the requests from Idea Stores visitors for more books, and for books on a wide range of subjects, from different authors and different genres, would suggest that the book stocks are in need of attention. More time should be made available for staff to re-shelve books and tidy the shelves so that books can be found easily, and a larger proportion of the budget is required to increase the amount and range of books available.

The relaxing of rules relating to talking, eating, using mobile phones, and so on have resulted in a comfortable, relaxed atmosphere in the Idea Stores. Children and young people, many of whom did not use the traditional libraries, have particularly welcomed this type of environment. Several people commented on the questionnaire that the Idea Stores provided young people

with a wide range to things to do as an alternative to hanging around on the streets, and that young people seemed to enjoy spending time there. However, the increase of young people, coupled with the modern open plan layout of the Idea Stores, has led to much higher noise levels than some visitors would like. The noise was commented on by both interviewees who were aware of it being a problem as well as by visitors to the Idea Stores. One interviewee suggested that visitors need to get used to the new environment, and make use of quieter times of the day or week when there were less young people there, if required. However, there were also several requests on the questionnaires for quiet study areas, which would suggest that it is not just the elderly who have a problem with the noise. The emphasis on lifelong learning means that there is likely to be a large number of people wishing to use the Idea Stores to study. It is suggested, therefore, that provision is made for quiet 'zones', where people could study without too much disturbance from noise or the general bustle of the other communal areas.

7.4 *Suggestions to the public library service*

It would appear, from the research, that the Idea Stores have succeeded in fulfilling the needs and desires of their communities. They are modern, well-designed buildings located near to shops and other facilities, they are open later and longer, and they provide a wide range of activities, including traditional library services such as book lending. They have succeeded in increasing visitor numbers and book loans, and the majority of visitors feel that they are important, both to them personally and to their community.

It is suggested, therefore, that the Idea Store is an excellent model for new public libraries in the future. However, what is intrinsic to the success of the Idea Stores is that they are responsive to the needs of the community; the concept was a result of the public consultation, and suggestions from the community are welcomed and acted upon. This, then, is the aspect of the

Idea Stores that is recommended to other library authorities; any new library that is built should be shaped around the needs and desires of the community, and efforts must be made to make the community feel involved and take ownership of their libraries.

7.5 *Recommendations for future research*

Due to the time constraints of this research project it has not been possible to examine all aspects of the Idea Stores in detail; further research into their effectiveness is recommended. It would be useful to look more closely at the subject of social inclusion; the community and outreach work that is carried out could be examined in more depth, and those participating interviewed to discover whether they gain a sense of inclusion in their community. It would also be interesting to look more specifically at those accessing the Idea Stores to see if they are representative of the community as a whole and if not, how this could be resolved.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Idea Store customer questionnaire

Male/Female:..... Age: Under 16 35-49
 17-24 50-64
 25-34 65 and over

1. How often do you visit the Idea Store?

3-4 times a week 1-2 times a month
 1-2 times a week Less often

2. When do you usually visit the Idea Store?

Weekends Evenings
 Weekdays

3. What are your main reasons for visiting the Idea Store?
 (Please tick as many as are relevant)

<input type="checkbox"/>	To borrow books for leisure
<input type="checkbox"/>	To borrow books for study/work
<input type="checkbox"/>	To borrow CDs/DVDs/games
<input type="checkbox"/>	To read newspapers/magazines
<input type="checkbox"/>	To study
<input type="checkbox"/>	To use the Internet for leisure
<input type="checkbox"/>	To use the Internet for study/work
<input type="checkbox"/>	To attend a class
<input type="checkbox"/>	To attend an event
<input type="checkbox"/>	Other (please give details)

4. How often did you visit your local library before the Idea Store was built?

3-4 times a week 3-4 times a year
 1-2 times a week Never
 1-2 times a month (If never, please go to question 8)

5. When did you usually visit it?

Weekends Evenings
 Weekdays

6. What were your main reasons for using it?
 (Please tick as many as are relevant)

<input type="checkbox"/>	To borrow books for leisure
<input type="checkbox"/>	To borrow books for study/work
<input type="checkbox"/>	To borrow CDs/DVDs/games
<input type="checkbox"/>	To read newspapers/magazines
<input type="checkbox"/>	To study
<input type="checkbox"/>	To use the Internet for leisure
<input type="checkbox"/>	To use the Internet for study/work
<input type="checkbox"/>	To attend a class
<input type="checkbox"/>	To attend an event
<input type="checkbox"/>	Other (please give details)

7. What are the main differences you have noticed between the library and the Idea Store?.....

8. Is there anything you would prefer there to be more or less of in the Idea Store? (e.g. more/less computers, more/less books, more/less DVDs).....

9. If so, please give further details (e.g. more books on a particular subject or in a particular language, more computers with particular applications, more courses on particular skills/activities)

10. Are there any other services or activities that you think the Idea Store should offer?.....

11. Do you find the Idea Store easy to use?

Yes/No

12. If no, how could it be made easier to use?.....
.....
.....

13. Do you like the name 'Idea Store'?

Yes/No

14. If no, what would you prefer it to be called?
.....
.....
.....

15. Do you normally visit the Idea Store:

Alone With family
With friends

16. How important do you feel that the Idea Store is to you personally?
Please circle a number on the scale, with 1 as not at all important and 5 as very important.

Not at all important 1 2 3 4 5 Very important

17. Please give the reasons for your answer.....
.....
.....

18. How important do you feel that the Idea Store is to your community?
Please circle a number on the scale, with 1 as not at all important and 5 as very important.

Not at all important 1 2 3 4 5 Very important

19. Please give the reasons for your answer
.....
.....
.....

Appendix 2 – Idea Store staff interview schedule

Role within the library/Idea Store

1. Did you work in a library/learning centre in Tower Hamlets prior to working in the Idea Store? (If no, go to question 5)
2. If so, what did your job in the library/learning centre involve?
3. How has your job changed since moving to the Idea Store?

Quality of library services within library/Idea Store

4. Do you feel that the Idea Store gives the same quality of service as the library/learning centre that you worked in? Or has the quality of service improved?
5. Has a focus been placed on a particular service area since the Idea Store opened? For example, Internet resources or book stocks?
6. Do you feel that there is enough importance placed on the book stocks in the Idea Store? Should there be more? Or less?

Community focus of/within library/Idea Store

7. Do you feel that the library service is more focused on meeting the needs of the community since the development of the Idea Store?
8. If so, why do you think this is?
9. Do you personally feel more involved in the community than you did previously?
10. If so, why do you think this is?

Users of library/Idea Store

11. Are there any noticeable differences between the types of customers that used the library/learning centre and those that use the Idea Store, e.g. age, economic & social background?

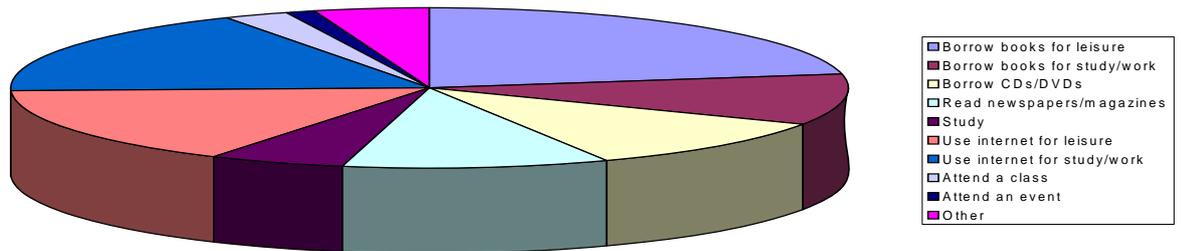
12. Is there a noticeable difference in the type of services that customers used the library/learning centre for and those that they use the Idea Store for?

13. Do you think that users of library services are generally satisfied with the Idea Store?

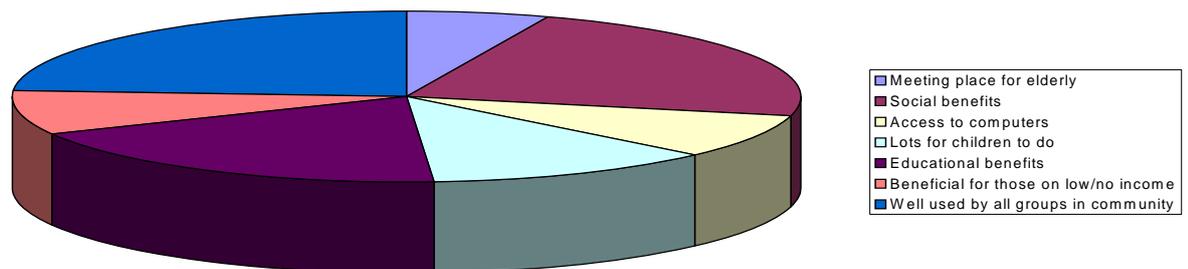
14. Have you had any compliments, complaints or suggestions from customers regarding the Idea Store?

Appendix 3 – Charts and graphs

Graph 1: Reasons for visiting the Idea Store



Graph 2: Why the Idea Store is important to the community



Graph 3: Differences between the Idea Stores and traditional libraries

