

Added Extras:
**An Investigation into the Impact of Public Library
Group Activities on the Lives of Older Adults**

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Abstract

Quality of life, well being and life satisfaction have become common phrases within Government literature. Social policy stresses the potential for social isolation in old age and pushes for initiatives to counter its negative impacts. There exists a growing body of research literature which explores such concepts as 'successful ageing', 'positive ageing' and 'active ageing'. Within this, some commentators have stressed that engagement in social activities can have a positive effect on the well being of older adults. The local library is one place where opportunities to participate have long been available. It has the potential to combine leisure and education for older adults which are two needs highlighted in Government policy. With this context in mind, the aim of this study is to investigate organised library activities and explore their impact on the lives of 'older adults'.

Accordingly, an interpretative methodology was adopted and incorporated the collection of relevant qualitative data. The nature of this dissertation lent itself to a qualitative method. Using an exploratory and inductive approach, personal perspectives were gathered from both group participants and group organisers. Observation of participants within the context of the group activity also took place. Conclusions were drawn systematically from the data.

The results demonstrated that group initiatives provided by the library service impact on the lives of older adults in a number of ways. All participants stressed their enjoyment of the sessions and this was an overriding theme. Both group participants and those involved in their organisation emphasised the social nature of group activities and highlighted this as particularly beneficial. In addition, a supportive peer network, the sharing of information and the gaining of personal confidence added to participants' overall satisfaction with group activities.

Each group meeting is a significant social event. It provides valuable opportunities to meet friends, to form new acquaintances and to pursue new and challenging interests. The library venue also plays an important role within this; an informal atmosphere, a warm welcome and friendly staff being equally as important to participants. It is clear that group organisers are valued members of the groups and not just facilitators.

Finally, this study comments on the difficulty of measuring this impact. Participants are obviously enjoying the sessions and the data shows that they do have a valuable effect. Such advantages however are often subjective and difficult to measure. The true value of group activities only really becomes apparent through the words of participants and those involved in running them. Although relatively small in terms of numbers, this study concludes that organised library group activities are a valuable part of the library service and integral to the broader concept of providing education and leisure opportunities within our increasingly ageing society.

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Chapter One: Background to Enquiry

1.1 Introduction

“Everyone, including older people, has the right to participate and continue throughout their lives having meaningful relationships and roles” (Social Exclusion Unit, 2006:8).

Taken from the Government paper “A Sure Start to Later Life”, this quotation emphasises the importance of belonging to something and the benefits that this can bring. Whilst pushing for “...independence, dignity and choice” across all Government services, it is acknowledged that these alone are “...not enough if we want to improve the quality of life of older people...” (Social Exclusion Unit, 2006:8).

“Quality of life” has become something of a theme throughout recent Government documentation. For example, “improving the quality of life for children, young people, families at risk and older people” forms one of the shared priorities agreed by central and local Government (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2006). A recent Healthcare Commission paper highlights how society’s expectations of old age have changed. Whilst living longer we also “...expect to be able to continue to live active lives” (Healthcare Commission, 2006:4). Finally, at local level, authorities have been required to develop strategies that promote “...the economic, environmental and social well being of their areas...” (Framework for the Future, 2003:41).

The importance of improving ‘quality of life’ and ‘well being’ is therefore apparent throughout Government policy. In part, this is due to awareness of our ageing population. “There is a higher proportion of older people in the community than ever before” and as such more pressure is being placed on health and social care services (Healthcare Commission, 2006:4). Leisure

services such as libraries can however, also play an important role in the promotion of well being and good quality of life.

Framework for the Future describes libraries as "...shared spaces in which people can choose from any number of activities" (2003:12). The "...combination of community and choice" is particularly emphasised as an aspect of the service that "...makes libraries so special" (Framework for the Future, 2003:12). An ever increasing variety of core services are being offered to users. In addition to this, many libraries offer opportunities to participate and get involved with informal group activities. It is this aspect of the library service that this dissertation aims to explore.

1.2 Aims of the Research

From personal experience it has been noted how much enjoyment can be gained from being part of a group activity such as a listening or reading group. As has been shown, a key part of both the central and local government agenda aims to improve the quality of life of older adults. The principal aim of this dissertation is therefore to explore library group activities and investigate qualitatively what impact, if any, they have on the lives of older adults.

1.2.1 Objectives

It is hoped that this research will demonstrate how participants value such groups and specifically what they feel is gained by participation. This data will be complemented by the views of group organisers who have also been asked to comment on the importance they place on group activity, what they hope participants will gain by attendance and their plans for the future. Finally, it is hoped that this investigation will demonstrate the importance of providing opportunities to participate as one aspect of the library service.

1.3 Older Adults and Government Policy

Since Labour came to power in 1997 a key policy aim has been to tackle social exclusion. In four reports, commissioned to investigate the impact of Government policy, positive outcomes are highlighted across varying age ranges. With regard to older people, success is noted in tackling exclusion related to age, for example, by helping those who have suffered exclusion due to the loss of income associated with retirement (Social Exclusion Unit, 2004).

However, despite such improvements it is acknowledged that there is still much to do. Examples can also be found within the literature where policies have been judged critically (Bauld et al. 2005, Kidger 2005, Horgan 2005). Although it is stressed that the Government's focus on education and employment is making some headway in tackling social exclusion, vital points are missed. A failure to acknowledge the complex social barriers that exist in society is one such issue. Even if social exclusion is tackled effectively, those affected may not necessarily gain inclusion as a given result.

The issue of social isolation and loneliness amongst older adults is one aspect of this agenda that has been recently highlighted in the report "A Sure Start to Later Life" (Social Exclusion Unit, 2006). Within this report it is stated that "one in four persons aged 80 and over" are excluded from social relationships (Social Exclusion Unit, 2006:21). The definition given for social exclusion is as follows;

 "...an experience characterised by deprivation and the lack of access to social networks, activities and services that results in a poor quality of life" (Social Exclusion Unit, 2006:18).

The report goes on to discuss the reasons for such exclusion, noting how key life events such as bereavement or retirement "...can lead to [a] loss of role and loss of participation" (Social Exclusion Unit, 2006:12). As such, it is concluded that quality of life is compromised.

"Social isolation affects about one million older people, and has a severe impact on people's quality of life in older age" (Social Exclusion Unit, 2006:54).

Tackling isolation and loneliness however only forms part of the wider Government aim to promote an active, healthy life in older age. The National Service Framework for Older People (Department of Health, 2001:2) stresses that "retirement is no longer seen as preparation for decline". Retirement now "encompasses new ideas like the third age, the grey pound...and increased volunteering (Department of Health, 2001:2). Rather than representing a "...period of increasing dependency..." it is emphasised that "degenerative disease, disability and ill health are not an inevitable consequence of ageing" (Department of Health, 2001:107). In line with this, one standard of the framework specifically aims to promote health and active ageing in older age.

An ageing population and changing attitudes towards ageing has implications not only for care services but also for those that provide learning and leisure opportunities. "Living Well in Later Life", a report produced by the Healthcare Commission (2006:65) has recognised this in its review and covers "...the spectrum of services and opportunities that contribute towards the well being and independence of older people...". In line with previous reports it stresses the need for partnership working "to draw [initiatives] together into co-ordinated strategies to improve well being" (Healthcare Commission, 2006:65).

Although emphasising that responsibility for "...keeping active and participating in society..." ultimately lies with the individual, the need for central and local Government to "remove the barriers that can inhibit

participation by older people” is acknowledged (Department for Work and Pensions, 2005:30). “Framework for the Future” (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2003:12) too stresses the need to “...find local solutions for national policy priorities” whilst the report, “Opportunity Age – Meeting the Challenges of Ageing in the 21st Century” has as one of its targets,

“to ensure that older people have access to opportunities locally, such as learning, leisure and volunteering”.

(Department for Work and Pensions, 2005:30).

1.4 Opportunities to Participate

As described by Davies, the local library is one such place where opportunities to participate have long been available.

“...the arrangement of fiestas, festivals and exhibitions; the conduct of classes, contests, lectures, and exhibitions...and all similar activities not primarily concerned with books are now carried on by public libraries” (Davies, 1974:1).

Examples of the social use of libraries can be found throughout their history and its importance today is often reflected in the design of internal space. As “places of social contact and connection...” (Bundy, 2005:159) it is important to provide a built environment that “...enables[s] people and groups to establish relationships, carry on conversations [and] exchange ideas...” (Bryson et al., 2003:57). Libraries are places that “...are open to all, offer safe, welcoming space and support active citizenship” (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2003:14). This perception is however not shared by all. To some non-users libraries can be potentially imposing buildings that have their own barriers. For example, data gathered from the Millennium Library and Stratford by Bryson, Usherwood and Proctor (2003:54) suggests

that "...older library users [can] feel 'marginalized' by the emphasis on the young". As such, it is important that initiatives provided by the library reflect the diversity that is found within the communities they serve.

Conversely, stereotyping stakeholders should also be avoided. A comment made in the 'Friends of Libraries Australia Survey' illustrates this point.

"Our staff are very helpful and understanding of senior issues. This is an organisational 'culture' rather than a deliberate program" (Bundy, 2005:164)

Bundy asserts that "the one thing that seniors have in common is that they are all different" (2005:158). As emphasised previously, it is not inevitable that the health of older adults will decline after retirement and therefore opportunities to continue learning, broaden interests and network with friends are just as important. Many libraries do provide additional services in which library users can get involved. An example of this can be seen within Gloucestershire. In a report produced by the Social Inclusion Development Officer, it is stated that a library club for housebound older adults "...currently provide[s] 24.5 hours of purposeful activity per month" (Middleton, 2003:2). Data gathered from participants showed that the club allowed housebound library users "...a rare opportunity to meet their peers" and that "...they regarded it as enhancing their quality of life" (Middleton, 2003:4).

The nature of such opportunities is vast and varied. Activities offered can range from a chance to discuss recently read books, local history lectures, to informal classes teaching basic information technology skills. With each session offered impacting on participants in different ways. For example, for some, belonging to a group will help to widen social networks.

Schwirtlich (2005:14), when discussing the Australian 'Libraries Building Communities (LBC) Project', asserts that "...public libraries play a crucial role in building social capital..." by providing a connection to the community...". Data gathered from library users includes the statement, "...libraries provide

an environment for interacting with other community members...” (Schwirtlich, 2005:14) A similar conclusion was formed by Matarasso (1998) when researching the social impact of eighteen library projects. An “inevitable consequence” of joining an activity provided by the library “...is an extension of their social circle” (Matarasso, 1998:16). Joining a group and interacting with other participants naturally widens a person’s social circle. It may also strengthen their connection with the community in which they live. As such, Bryson, Usherwood and Proctor’s description of the library as “...a place to form relationships” seems apt (2003:55).

In addition to this, activities may provide users with information and skills. Suaiden asserts that “...it is only those people with access to information and knowledge” that will “have the best opportunities to improve their quality of life...” (2003:380). As such, advocates of ‘Lifelong Learning’ have asserted that participation in learning and the ability to make an informed decision is “...linked to economic, social and personal benefits” (CILIP, 2006). Kendall emphasises that the information required by older adults will be as varied as that needed by other cross-sectors (1996). Opportunities to learn, develop and participate should, and often do, form an important part of a library service.

“...older adults may be interested in using their increased leisure time for educational, intellectual and creative self-development” (Kendall, 1996:17).

It is clear that public libraries offer a wide variety of opportunities for participation. Such initiatives can provide access to new social networks, provide connections to the community and disseminate information and skills. Being able to demonstrate the importance of such services, is however, not always an easy task.

1.5 Measuring the Impact

“Improving the quality of life for children, young, people, families at risk and older people” is a priority shared by both the central and local Government (Museums, Libraries and Archives Council, 2005:1). It is one of seven shared priorities that form the ‘Impact Measures’. These measures are intended to complement the ‘Public Library Service Standards’ that are used to assess the performance of library authorities (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2006). ‘Impact Measures’ have “...been selected to show the contribution that libraries make to their communities” (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2006). To contribute towards achieving the above shared priority “...in the context of their community profile”, most authorities would be expected to provide a range of services (Museums, Libraries and Archives Council, 2005:3). Suggested initiatives include offering services to residential homes, opportunities for reader interaction and “services to other groups intended to improve their quality of life...” (Museums, Libraries and Archives Council, 2005:3).

Measuring the impact of services such as reading and listening groups must always have been something of a challenge, as most data gathered will surely be qualitative in nature. Although the number of participants may indicate that a group is well attended, it does not reflect the benefits that participants may feel are gained by participation. In their discussion of impact and performance measurement in public library services, Curtis and Dean state that,

“we do need to tread the line between ensuring that we have good enough information driven by an embedded performance management culture and going down the easy measurement route” (2003:93).

Macnaught (2004:97) emphasises that it is important for libraries to demonstrate “how they address those shared priorities” in order to be able to show “key decision-makers in local government” what services can offer.

Knowing a service or group activity is improving the quality of life for its participants is not enough. With increasing competition for resources, the benefits of initiatives must also often be proven if funding is to be secured.

Chapter Two: 'Ageing Well' – A Review of the Literature

2.1 Introduction

A review of the literature presents 'ageing well' as a multi-faceted and complex concept. It reveals a great deal of debate regarding its definition. This is somewhat reflected in the many different titles it has been given. "Positive ageing", "healthy ageing", "active ageing", "productive ageing" and "successful ageing" are all noted within the literature by Chong et al. (2006:244). Each title reflects the author's own interpretation of the concept according to their research. For some it encapsulates an individual's evaluation of their health. For others it refers to a level of participation in and contribution to the local community. Financial circumstances may also impact on how a person perceives their quality of life. Interpretations of data differ and consequently definitions of 'ageing well'. However, it is important not to generalise either the process of ageing or 'ageing well'. As Woodrow notes, "...individuals will inevitably present exceptions to these theories" (2002:97).

2.2 A Picture of Ageing

The drive towards initiatives that improve the quality of life for older adults is seen throughout policy documents produced by both central and local Government. Cattan et al. assert that these initiatives, "...have renewed interest in the influence of the 'social world'..." and the impact of society on the "...experience of ageing and later life" (2005:358). Through interviews with care providers, Russell and Schofield found that isolation was indeed "...a widespread and significant problem among older people generally and their own clients in particular" (1999:77). Retirement, loss of partner, loss of friends and ill health are all stated as "...factors which reduce opportunities for social interaction" (Russell & Schofield, 1999:72). Scambler et al. note

the consistent reporting in the literature of “loneliness and social isolation” as being “...common in people who are very old” (222:412). Whilst Andersson, although acknowledging “data is less frequent” writes, “...it seems as if there is an increase of loneliness in the highest age groups, from approximately age 75 and up” (1998:267). As such “...loneliness, isolation and social neglect are some of the most prevalent stereotypes of older age” (Scambler et al., 2000:407).

Whilst emphasising the need for initiatives to provide support for those who are experiencing social isolation or loneliness, researchers acknowledge that the meaning of these terms and their relationship to each other, are often open to debate. “Loneliness is a concept that has been interpreted in a variety of ways...” and “there is no universal definition of the term” (Scambler et al., 2000:207-8). Scambler et al. state that it “...is often seen as the subjective counterpart to the objective measure of social isolation...” (2000:407). As such, social isolation is “...often described as an objective state that is linked to the subjective concept of loneliness...” (Scambler et al., 2000:409). Those who have minimal opportunities for social contact with others may experience loneliness, whilst those experiencing loneliness might find that social isolation is to blame. When asked to define ‘social isolation’, Russell and Schofield noted that the definitions given by care practitioners “...began with some reference to an ‘objective state of having minimal contact’ (1999:77). It was noted however that “...such an objective definition was not sufficient” (Russell & Schofield, 1999:77). The difficulty in defining either term is a common theme found within the literature.

Questions also arise regarding the nature of the relationship between the two concepts. Despite their often being thought of as interrelated phenomena, “...no direct link between isolation and loneliness has been established...” (Russell & Schofield, 1999:74). It is stated that the “...body of research based knowledge on which to draw...is at best inconclusive...” (Russell & Schofield, 1999:74). As such it is difficult to use as a research tool when assessing the needs of older adults “...in relation to social isolation” (Russell & Schofield, 1999:74). In addition to this, Victor et al. note that

“...loneliness has often been subsumed under depression, anxiety or social isolation” and consequently not recognised “...as a distinct problem” (2005a:65).

The complex nature of both concepts and how they interrelate is reflected by discussion in the literature. Scambler et al. assert, “living in a larger household size does not ‘prevent’ feelings of loneliness nor isolation” (2000:412). A person may be surrounded by friends and family and still experience loneliness. Andersson too emphasises the complexity of loneliness and social isolation, stating that “it is well established that a person who lives alone may either experience loneliness or not...” (1998:265). As such, Victor et al. conclude that “the diversity of the experience of loneliness and its causes needs to be recognised in future research” (2005b:372).

Whilst commentators may disagree on a definition of social isolation and loneliness, they do agree that both can impact negatively on the lives of those who experience them. As such, tackling social isolation and loneliness has been “...increasingly recognised in international policy and in some national health strategies” (Cattan et al., 2005:41). Examples, such as the Healthcare Commission paper ‘Living Well in Later Life,’ have already been discussed in Chapter One. The wish within such policy documents to reduce social isolation and loneliness amongst older adults has however done little to dispel the stereotypical image of ageing as a time of loneliness and decline. Woodrow notes how the study of physiological decline can “...encourage stereotyping of older people as being malfunctional...” (Woodrow, 2002:2). However, this can be “...avoided by remembering that most older people are healthy” (Woodrow, 2002:2).

2.3 The View of Older Adults

Contrary to the picture that is often painted of ageing, “[a] longer life can be welcome as an opportunity to fulfil as yet unmet aspirations” (Chong et al., 2006:243). Although tempering this with the warning that “...it may also be a burden, especially for individuals who are unprepared”, Chong et al. highlight a side to growing older that is rarely portrayed (2006:243). As noted previously, it is not inevitable that old age will bring either a decline in health or circumstances. Older adults may still wish to play an active role in their community, desire to learn new skills and continue to socialise. Conversely, they may not wish to do any of these things. Pinquart and Sörensen (2000:187), in their meta-analysis of different influences on well being in later-life, assert “...increased risk for losses in health and competence, social networks and income suggest that older people should have lower levels of subjective well being...”. Despite this, an analysis of 286 empirical studies showed that “...contrary to expectations, subjective well being does not decrease with old age” (Pinquart & Sörensen, 2000:187). ‘Subjective well being’ is defined by Pinquart and Sörensen as “...positive evaluation of one’s life associated with good feelings”, although it is acknowledged that this is open to interpretation; “in gerontology, there are several ways to assess subjective well being” (2000:187).

Whilst for some ageing may unfortunately represent a time of loneliness and isolation, this is not the case for all for all older adults, at least not all of the time. Attitudes towards ageing and concepts of ‘ageing well’ are individual and subjective. In accordance with this viewpoint, Phelan et al. assert that “older adults’ definition of successful ageing is multi-dimensional, encompassing physical, functional, psychological and social health” (2004:211).

2.4 The importance of Social Contact

Opportunities to maintain a social network and make new acquaintances is emphasised as an important aspect of 'ageing well'. Victor et al. assert that,

“the absence of social relationship...low levels of social engagement and social participation , are likely to have a detrimental influence upon the quality of life of older people...” (2005b:358).

Findlay goes further, stating that “social isolation is emerging as one of the major issues facing the industrialised world...” due to “...the adverse effect it can have on health and well being” (2003:647). Thus, the maintenance of social networks is believed to make a positive contribution to a person's quality of life.

It is however difficult to ascertain a precise picture of the prevalence of loneliness amongst older adults. Scambler et al. note that “most estimates suggest that the majority of older people (i.e. those aged 65 years and over) are neither lonely nor socially isolated” (2000:408). However, it is acknowledged that “the stigmatisation of loneliness may make people unwilling to identify themselves as lonely...” (Scambler et al., 2000:408). Data collected by Victor et al. in their examination of loneliness amongst older people in Great Britain found that almost one-third of the 999 participants interviewed felt “sometimes lonely” (2005b:368). Despite assertions therefore that “...severe loneliness has been remarkably stable” over recent decades, it is clear that older adults may still suffer sporadically from isolation (Scambler et al., 2000:368).

The importance of friendship is specifically emphasised in the literature. Hartup and Stevens, in their discussion of friendships and adaptation, state that “having friends is correlated with a sense of well being across the life span...” (1997:355). Friendship is variously described throughout the literature as providing support at stressful times such as retirement,

bereavement and ill-health, it is also seen as a source of information and guidance. Stevens notes that "...in later life friends are often sought for companionship" (2001:184). As such, through social policy, friendship has been highlighted as important for "self-identity", "self-esteem" and meeting "...the need of the individual to give and receive emotional support" (Wenger, 1990:166).

In reality, making new friends and maintaining contact with established networks is not always so easy to do. Stevens notes that "...friendship is a type of relationship that can become difficult to sustain as people age" (2001:184). Problems of ill-health and mobility can impact on a person's physical capacity to sustain friendship ties. There can also be problems of transport and location. Additionally, not everyone wants or feels able to make new friends or sustain established contacts. Some people may "...prefer to maintain interaction with their closest relationships, for example, close family and friends..." (Stevens, 2001:185). They may also be pleased to let some friendships lapse that have become difficult or stressful. Blieszner and Adams write that if "late-life friendship" was evaluated only by what is found within the literature "...the tendency would be to conclude that old people rarely have problems with friends" (1998:223). However, they do acknowledge that in 20 of the friendships they explored, the main "...problem was that the friends did not cross paths frequently anymore" (Blieszner & Adams, 1998:232).

In order to provide opportunities for those who are experiencing social isolation, specific interventions have taken place. Stevens writes about the impact of an educational programme on friendship enrichment for older women that was developed and implemented in the Netherlands during the 1990s (Stevens, 2001). Its aim was to "...promote well being and reduce loneliness" through "empowerment" (Stevens, 2001:183). Participants were helped to "...clarify their needs in friendship, analyse their current social network, set goals in friendship and develop strategies to achieve goals" (Stevens, 2001:183). In the conclusion, Stevens asserts that "...there was a

dramatic decrease in the percentage of women that were very lonely from 45% to 15%” (2001:193). However, it is noted that participants were self-selected and as such the programme was liable to attract “socially active lonely women” (Stevens, 2001:198).

Within the literature, as with loneliness and social isolation, it is emphasised that friendship is a difficult phenomenon to define and measure. Bankoff, in an examination of the effects of social support on the well being of women who had been widowed for less than three years, writes that the role of “...such support is important but complex” (1998:827). It depends on the individual. Friendship can have many different meanings and manifestations. Most agree, however that positive social contact does have a good impact on the lives of older adults. “...Research has consistently demonstrated the importance of social and family relationships in the definition of a ‘good quality of life’...” (Sambler et al., 2000:407). One way in which older adults can maintain social contact with their peers and make new acquaintances, is through participation in organised activities.

2.5 Participation and Well being

The notion that engagement in social activities can have a positive impact on the well being of older adults is discussed throughout the literature. Activity theory is an example of this. This theory argues that “...activity reinforces elders’ self-esteem and as a result, their life satisfaction...” (Litwin & Shiovitz-Ezra, 2006:227). Its proponents assert that “...greater participation in an active lifestyle is an antidote to the loss of ‘productive’ roles that follows the transition to retirement” (Silverstein & Parker, 2002:528). Despite challenging the stereotypes of old age however, Woodrow asserts that it may be “...criticized on several points” (2002:95). Its idealism is emphasised, that in reality ill health may prevent some older adults from maintaining activity levels and also the fact that it is a western perspective and “may not apply to all cultures” (Woodrow, 2002:95). Despite such criticism, engagement in

activity has become associated with the concept of 'ageing well'. This is shown by social policy which promotes the provision of opportunities for older adults to participate and engage with their community.

Cattan et al. in their review of health promotion interventions targeting social isolation and loneliness found "...clear evidence that a few interventions are effective" (2005:58). Effective interventions were found to be mainly of group format, targeting "specific groups of people" and involve "...some form of educational or training input" (Cattan et al., 2005:58). Silverstein and Parker speculate on the benefits that such interventions can provide. Namely,

"...by providing a sense of purpose...improving psychological efficiency through added exercise and enhancing social interaction by linking active individuals to friends and acquaintances..." (Silverstein & Parker, 2002:545).

Although stating that these are only suggestive comments and in need of further research, their exploration of quality of life and leisure activities amongst the "oldest old" in Sweden did show that, "those who raised their level of activities were more prone to making positive evaluations of how their life situations had changed during the preceding decade" (Silverstein & Parker, 2002:544). Those who had minimal weekly contact with family members, suffered bereavement and experienced a "decline in functional health" were found to benefit most from increased participation in activities (Silverstein & Parker, 2002:544).

Increased participation has therefore been seen by some commentators to impact positively on the lives of older adults. Evidence for this link has however been disputed. Cattan et al. state that "a lack of evidence has resulted in the effectiveness of interventions being contested" (2002:42). Within a review of "the empirical literature" Findlay writes that "...there is a belief that interventions can counteract social isolation and its adverse effects on older people, but the research evidence in support of this belief is almost non-existent" (2003:655). Litwin and Shiovitz-Ezra assert "...the lack of

unequivocal empirical backing for activity theory requires renewed scrutiny of its original assumptions” (2006:227). As such, new dimensions to the debate have emerged.

It is argued that it is not engagement in activities alone that improves quality of life, but rather the quality of the relationships found through such participation (Litwin & Shiovitz-Ezra, 2006). Litwin and Shiovitz-Ezra, in their exploration of the association between activity and well being in later life, found that “...when the quality of social relationships was taken into account, the amount of activity had no independent effect on the respondents’ well being” (2006:255). It was the quality of the social relationships that “...emerged as the most influential variable in the association between activity and well being” (Litwin & Shiovitz-Ezra, 2006:255). They do acknowledge however, that the survey used to collect the data was not designed specifically to test the activity theory and that the results are context based and therefore difficult to generalise (Litwin & Shiovitz-Ezra, 2006).

Despite this, the argument for high quality social contact rather than high quantity is reflected in Bankoff’s study of the effects of “social support” on the well being of women widowed for less than three years. Bankoff argued that the “...assumption operating in the literature...that the more support the widow receives...the better off she is bound to be” was in reality “highly questionable” (1983:828). Results showed that “...being able to talk about their important personal problems with their network associates...” was an important factor for participants (Bankoff, 1983:832) . It was also “...apparent that quantity of support is not necessarily predictive of effectiveness” (Bankoff, 1983:832). Although the two studies are distinctly different and therefore difficult to compare, it is interesting to note the repetition of this finding.

Another dimension to the debate regarding participation in activity and well being is concerned with context. Sinding and Gray note parallels between successful ageing and “spunky survivorship”, a “contemporary subject position made available to women in the years after a breast cancer diagnosis” (2004:147).

It is argued that in the context of today's marketing strategies aimed at capitalising on the 'grey pound', that "...older people are led to understand that being active will contribute to their care, well being, visibility and inclusion within public worlds" (Sinding & Grey, 2004:150). The reality behind the image may be very different.

"Critics of both 'successful aging' and (what we are calling) 'spunky survivorship' have pointed to the economic and political interests these discourses support" (Sinding & Gray, 2004:149).

Sinding and Gray assert that older adults, and women who have survived breast cancer, can become "...isolated by a dominant discourse that does not admit loneliness, frailty or need" (Sinding & Gray, 2004:158). By constantly emphasising the benefits of 'being involved' and 'joining in', society may be isolating further those who struggle to or cannot participate.

2.6 Conclusion

A review of the literature shows much debate surrounding the concept of 'ageing well'. Whilst social policy highlights the negative impacts of loneliness and social isolation amongst older adults, it must be remembered that this is not an inevitable consequence of ageing. As such, some commentators have emphasised more positive aspects of retirement and directly challenge the stereotypes of old age. A continued wish to take on new challenges and enlarge social contacts is one part of this. However, the link between active participation and well being amongst older adults has also shown conflicting support. Some argue that it is not the amount of activity that is important but the quality of relationships that are formed during participation that impacts on well being. As a result, Litwin and Shiovitz-Ezra conclude that "...well being in later life is less a result of what older people do, but rather of who with and how they feel about them" (2006:231). Alongside this are problems surrounding the definition and measurement of terms.

'Loneliness', 'isolation' and 'friendship' are all in their own ways difficult to define and difficult to quantify, but each plays its own role in the debate surrounding the concept of 'ageing well'.

Chapter Three: Methodology

This chapter will outline the methodology underpinning this research. It will look at methods of data collection, question structure and data recording. It will begin by looking at the broader qualitative context.

3.1 Qualitative Research

In order to examine the central research question; ‘what is the impact of library group activities on the lives of older adults?’ it will be necessary to explore the perspectives of participants in their group context. Given the potentially complex nature of relationships found within such groups it would be impossible to break them down into component parts and analyse them according to traditional positivist beliefs. As such, an interpretative methodology will be followed involving the collection of qualitative, rather than quantitative, data. The behaviour and perspectives of participants are studied together within their empirical context.

The nature of this dissertation lends itself well to a qualitative approach. Using an exploratory and inductive approach, personal perspectives will be gathered from both group participants and group organisers. Conclusions will then be drawn systematically from the data.

In his description of induction, Seale (1999:23) states that the researcher relies “on an accumulation of impressions...which eventually speak for themselves”.

3.2 Grounded Theory

Grounded theory is an example of the inductive approach. Corbin, (in Somekh & Lewin eds, 2005:49) describes it as “an integrated theoretical formulation that gives understanding about how persons or organisations or communities experience and respond to events that occur”. Given that the central theme of this dissertation is to explore the extent to which group activities impact on the lives of older adults, it is a methodology that would appear to be particularly suitable. Corbin warns however, that “grounded theory is a method in flux and a method that has different meaning to different people” (in Somekh & Lewin eds, 2005:50).

Key elements of grounded theory are theoretical sampling and theoretical saturation. Seale asserts that;

“such sampling involves choosing cases to study, people to interview, settings to observe, with a view to finding things that might challenge the limitations of the existing theory” (Seale, 1999:92).

As such, there is an inherent bias within the process due to the researcher choosing individuals to interview based on what they can add to an emerging theory. Given this, it would seem that the process is potentially limitless. However, this is prevented by the concept of theoretical saturation. Corbin (in Somekh & Lewin eds, 2005:51) describes theoretical saturation as being the point when “no new concepts or further properties or dimensions of existing concepts emerge from the data”.

Grounded theory is therefore described as an important stepping stone to “achieving the more general aim of supporting claims with credible evidence” (Seale, 1999:88).

3.2.1 Limitations

Whilst highlighting the value of grounded theory it is also important to acknowledge its potential limitations. Seale warns that the theories developed in this way are “in the first instance ‘substantive’ – they explain the immediate phenomenon of interest to the research” (1999:97). Given the size of the sample, it is inevitable that theories generated from this research will be specific to the context within which they are found. As such, no attempt is made to generalise the findings to the broader population.

Secondly, within theoretical sampling, individuals and groups are selected “...according to their (expected) level of new insights for the developing theory” (Flick, 2006:126). A number of existing library groups have been identified that will form the basis of focus groups and complementary data will be gathered from group organisers. However, Flick asserts that “decisions about choosing and putting together empirical material are made in the process of collecting and interpreting the data” (2006:125). Given the time limitation placed upon this research this was just not practical. In order to ensure that organisers had sufficient time to inform their participants, a number of groups and individuals were contacted prior to data collection taking place.

3.3 Data Collection Methods

In order to be able to compare and contrast participant opinions and perspectives a mixture of methods of investigation will be used.

3.3.1 Observation

The data gathered via observation is rich. It helps the researcher to understand different behaviours, and in some cases discover 'hidden' aspects to the investigation that were not foreseen. In this case, observation took place within group activities already established within the library.

Carrying on the inductive approach outlined above, the degree of structure involved in the observation was relatively open and flexible. This is not to say that preparation did not take place. The follow aspects of observation were considered;

Setting –

Mason asserts that before observation takes pace it is useful to ask “how far the setting, as a physical space, encapsulates everything that you are interested in” (2002:88). In answer to this question, each group represented a miniature community with its own complex set of relationships. Data collection concentrated on noting the verbal and non-verbal interactions taking place between participants.

Selectivity & Perspective –

Rejecting the view that it is “possible to produce a full and neutral account of a setting or set of interactions” Mason notes that the researcher must “work out how to tackle the questions of selectivity and perspective in observation” (2002:90). The researcher must have some sense of what they are looking for in the setting and be conscious of how this informs what they have observed and found to be of relevance. As such, data collection focused on capturing the “actions and interactions” of the participants in each group (Flick, 2006: 283).

Participation versus Non-Participation –

Given the relatively small time span over which observation took place and the nature of the group activities, full participation was not possible. However, it was equally as difficult to rule out any form of interaction with the group. With regard to this dilemma Mason advises that the researcher should keep their status, whether participant or non-participant, always in mind and “continue to consider how it might shape [the] data” (2002:92).

Data collection –

Data collection throughout this dissertation has followed a qualitative format and been, to a certain extent, flexible. However, prior to observation taking place it was necessary to decide how observation data would be recorded. In order to limit interference with the natural group dynamics, it was decided not to use an audio tape-recording. Data recording therefore took the form of written field notes made after the event. These were viewed as “raw data which is gradually built up into a data set” (Mason, 2002:99).

Limitations of Observation

Mason warns that at times, the collection of data via observation can seem to be quite vague and unstructured;

“[the] researcher may be forming impressions and developing interpretations on the basis of a more variable and sometimes less tangible range of interfaces with the social world” (2002:97/7).

In addition to this, it is important to reflect on how the presence of the researcher can influence the group. Observation is described by Flick as an “...attempt to observe events as they naturally occur” (2006:219). As stated above, it was not always possible to be completely detached from the group during the observed activity. It therefore should be acknowledged that to a

certain extent observation may have naturally “influence[d] the observed” (Flick, 2006:219).

3.3.2 Focus Groups

Given consent, focus groups were formed from the participants of the groups observed. Focus groups are different in nature to group interviews. Morgan states that “the reliance is on interaction within the group, based on topics that are supplied by the researcher” (1997:2). This, less formal qualitative method therefore lent itself well to the collection of data that forms the basis of this dissertation. The following issues were considered;

Strangers or Acquaintances –

In his discussion of focus groups Morgan notes that despite ‘rules of thumb’ indicating that the use of “homogeneous strangers as participants” is often preferred, this may not always be the most suitable option (1997:38). In this case it was unlikely that group participants would be strangers. Rather than seeing this as a disadvantage however, it was decided that participants would feel more comfortable talking to a stranger in a familiar setting.

Sample –

As stated previously (3.2 Grounded Theory) participants were selected via theoretical sampling as opposed to random sampling. The reason for this preference is outlined by Morgan;

“a randomly sampled group is unlikely to hold a shared perspective on the research topic and may not even be able to generate meaningful discussions” (1997:35).

As such, participants were all members of group initiatives organised by Derbyshire Library Service. Three listening groups, a local history

group and a computer skills session are represented within the study and formed the basis of five focus groups.

Structure –

Focus groups followed a semi-structured format. Standardisation was maintained by the same topics being covered within each group, but the approach followed Morgan's "funnel-based interview" method. As such, the interview began with a general question that emphasises "free discussion", then moved towards "a more structured discussion of specific questions" (Morgan, 1997:41). However, it was necessary to make some changes to the interview questions and this is discussed further at the end of the chapter.

Data Collection –

Interviews were recorded using an audio tape-recorder and transcribed. Following a grounded theory approach the data was then analysed as each interview took place.

Limitations of Focus Groups:

The data gathered via focus groups is rich and often extensive. Flick notes in particular the problems of highlighting the responses of individual speakers when participants may all be speaking in parallel (2006). To a certain extent this was acknowledged as an issue. In responding to certain questions participants did at times talk all at once. Although making transcription a little more difficult, it was felt that to ask participants to speak only one at a time or repeat their comments would inhibit the discussion. As such, responses will be presented as a mix of individual comments and conversations, highlighting different speakers.

3.3.3 Individual Interviews

In order to complement the data gathered from group participants and investigate the secondary objective of this dissertation, group organisers were also interviewed.

Sample –

Using the method of grounded theory, participants were selected who it was believed could bring a new perspective to the central research question. Conclusions were formulated through analysis of both the data from individual interviews and focus groups. In his discussion of such interviews and focus groups, Morgan states that “a crucial question is whether the two methods produce similar data” (1997:11). If data does differ then issues of validity are raised.

As focus groups were formed from group participants and individual interviews took place with group organisers, it is acknowledged that the data gathered could not be the same. However, it is hoped that the two data sets complement each other and help to broaden the investigation of the central research question.

Structure -

Following a qualitative interviewing style, interviews did not follow a rigid format but were flexible in nature. “Too much attention on asking ‘the right’ questions in ‘the right’ order can result in a peculiar social dynamic which can be...unsatisfactory” (Morgan, 2002:67). This is not to imply that no preparation took place. A balance was therefore sought between a structured and unstructured style. As Morgan warns, whilst flexible in nature, the interviewer must ensure that they do generate relevant data (2002). Consistency was maintained throughout by asking each interviewee the same set of questions.

Data Collection –

Audio tape-recordings were made of all individual interviews and transcriptions made.

Limitations of individual interviews:

As discussed above, the balance between gathering relevant data and delivering a fluid interview is difficult to achieve and needed careful consideration.

With all three methods of data collection it was important to keep in mind the following aspect of qualitative research;

“A major challenge for interpretivist approaches centres on the question of how you can be sure you are not simply inventing data, or misrepresenting your research participants’ perspectives” (Morgan, 19997:76).

3.3.4 Literature Review

As well as personal perspectives gathered through observation and interviewing, data was also drawn from the existing literature. Flick states that it is naïve to believe that the researcher will find an area of social research that has nothing published on it (Flick, 2006). He asserts,

“...not everything has been researched, but almost everything you want to research will probably connect with an existing, neighbouring field” (Flick, 2006:58).

In accordance with this the literature review focused on the following key areas:

Social isolation,
Loneliness,
Friendship,
Participation.

The information gathered in this way was used to provide a context for statements made within the discussion of the results. It will show how observations and data gathered from participants fits within the existing literature and once again help to “ground” the emerging theory (Flick, 2006:62).

3.4 Interview Questions

It was important to ask questions that would facilitate the collection of data necessary for the systematic building of theories. It was also necessary to consider the impact that each question may have on those being interviewed. The following aspects were therefore considered;

Question Order

In order for those taking part to feel comfortable with the interview and not worry about giving ‘wrong’ answers it was necessary to put participants at ease. As such, the aims and objectives of the research were explained to all participants. Additionally, it was stressed that participants were not obliged to answer any questions they did not feel at ease with.

Questions were then put to each focus group exploring the benefits of the library as a venue and the importance of activity groups as part of the library service. It was hoped that these questions would focus the participants on thinking about the group that they are part of and provide data for the secondary aspect of this research.

Key questions followed, exploring aspects of the activities that participants enjoyed and what they felt is personally gained by being part of a group.

Lastly, groups were asked what they would highlight as the most important benefits if they were recommending the group to a friend. It was hoped that this question would again clarify what participants felt that they gained from being part of a group and allow those who had not managed to contribute earlier in the discussion another chance to speak.

Questions put to group organisers followed a similar pattern in terms of topic. Interviewees were asked about what they hoped participants will gain from attending such groups. Additionally, in order to investigate the secondary aspect of this project, group organisers were asked for their thoughts on the importance of such groups within the service, the benefits for the library and how they are able to highlight the success of the group. Individual interviews finished with a discussion of how such groups hope to develop in the future.

Wording and Composition

With regard to the content of topic questions Morgan warns that “learning what the participants think is important and should be built into the data collection itself – not left to the analyst’s post hoc speculation” (1997:62).

After the initial focus group and group interview had taken place, the wording of questions was altered slightly according to how easily they had been answered. For example, it was decided that the final question regarding how participants would recommend their group to a friend was too ambiguous; it was therefore decided to clarify this question by asking what participants would highlight as the most important aspects.

In terms of the group organiser interviews it was decided after the first interview had taken place to insert an additional question regarding the importance of such groups to the overall library service.

Chapter Four: Results

4.1 Derbyshire Library Service

The Government Office for the East Midlands (2003) describes Derbyshire as “...a large county stretching from the River Trent in the south of the county to parts in the north which are within commuting distance of Manchester and Sheffield”. It has a population of around 960,000 (Government Office of the East Midlands, 2003). The geography of the area is a mix of both rural and urban spaces.

Derbyshire Library Service forms part of Derbyshire County Council's Cultural and Community Services. The service has a total of 46 branch libraries and 13 mobile libraries (Derbyshire County Council, 2006). Based in both rural and urban areas, the libraries provide services for people of all ages, from babies to older adults (Derbyshire County Council, 2006). Of particular interest to this study are the organised activities that are run by library staff and held within the libraries themselves.

Listening Groups, described by the Library Service as “bookchat reading groups for people with visual impairments” are an example of an organised activity (Derbyshire County Council, 2006). This is an opportunity for visually impaired readers to meet and discuss recently read books. Participants are provided with selected titles, often chosen by the group themselves, as books on tape. The group then gets together, approximately once per month, to share their opinions. Refreshments are provided for the group and participants may also take advantage of a community bus service.

Computer buddies is an activity that has recently been organised by the Library Service. Based within library ‘Learning and Training Centres’, this is an opportunity for those who wish to gain computer skills to practice and seek advice. There are “...five Learning and Training Centres based at the library in major towns across the county” and each are well equipped,

“...friendly and relaxed places...” (Derbyshire County Council, 2006). Both library staff and volunteer tutors are on hand to offer support and each person works at their own pace. Participants practice a variety of skills from ‘surfing’ the internet to using programs such as Microsoft Word and Excel. The group meets once per week, although not all members attend every week.

A Local History Group meets approximately once per month. “Housed in a historic listed building” participants share “...a great enthusiasm for local history” (Derbyshire County Council, 2006). Each month a speaker is invited to address the group and the opportunity is given for discussion. Refreshments are provided and participants are able to share their thoughts and ideas. For those who wish to pursue topics highlighted by the workshops, resources are ideally placed within the library downstairs.

Although only a small sample of the activities that are provided by Derbyshire Library Service, these are the groups from which data was gathered for this study.

4.2 Structure of Results

Analysis of the data revealed a number of themes that were present in many of the focus groups. As such, the results will be organised by theme, each section containing a mixture of quotations from both group participants and group organisers.

Comments will be emphasised by use of italics. After each quotation will be a summary label, highlighting the author of the quote (GP = Group Participant, GO = Group Organiser or GV = Group Volunteer). Group Participants will also be given a focus group number.

“Quotation....”

(GP/1) or (GO/2)

Some of the results will be presented in the format of conversations as it was felt in certain cases this would help the data flow and make it easier to read. Each new speaker is highlighted by an indented new line.

4.3 Results

The following collated views represent 3 Listening Groups, 1 Local History Group and 1 Computer Buddies group. A total of 43 participants (including group members, group organisers and group volunteers) took part in this study, forming the basis of five focus groups and six individual interviews.

For completeness each point made is illustrated by all associated comments made by participants.

Although participants were not specifically asked for their age, information gathered from group organisers and observation of the groups confirms that the majority of participants are 'older adults'.

4.3.1 Enjoyment

Both group participants and group organisers remarked on how much they enjoyed being involved in the organised group activities. Reasons given for this varied, ranging from the opportunity to try something new and discuss common interests, to the replacement of lost activities and hobbies. Some participants also noted how taking part in these activities had led to other opportunities, such involvement in day trips, a chance to volunteer themselves and other personal projects.

"I think it brings like minded people together..."

(GP/1)

"It's been an experience..."

(GP/2)

"I think the principle is right. I enjoy coming and I only wish a few more men [would attend]. I am aware of being a thorn amongst all the roses"

(GP/3)

"...I look forward to coming today anyway, you can find out about different tapes and meet people we get to know"

(GP/4)

"Do look forward to it"

(GP/4)

"Now and again today, this meeting, falls on the same Monday as a shopping trip but I never have to think 'which one am I going to?', I automatically... 'Yes I'm coming here' and cancel the shopping trip. So although I can't explain it all, I know it makes me, I mean I must enjoy coming to do that"

(GP/4)

"And it's anticipation because you don't know what they're going to tell you, so you're quite looking forward to it because it could be something you've never heard about before"

(GP/5)

"...you get to have a general interest but you get to learn a lot more because it introduces you to different places you wouldn't have thought of..."

(GP/5)

"Using your brains, learning"

(GP/5)

“...it speaks for itself, the amount of people that come and how they go away chatting...”

(GP/5)

Being able to discuss ideas and share opinions was also emphasised as a particular highlight of group meetings by participants and organisers alike.

“It’s nice to hear other people’s opinions too...”

“Definitely, yes, you can contrast a lot can’t you?”

“We don’t all agree like we do today. We step on each other’s toes, can’t we, opinion wise”

(GP/1)

“...It’s the loan of the tape and then discussing them, it gives you more of an interest, you know, other peoples points of view”

(GP/3)

“Everybody’s point of view differs doesn’t it, we don’t all think the same, but it’s really interesting”

(GP/3)

“And I think we do agree to disagree don’t we, this is very important I think, that we do disagree over things but in an amicable way”

(GP/4)

“I think the best discussion comes when you get half the people who don’t like it and half the people that do, you get really good discussion, if everybody likes it then there’s less to say really”

(GO/4)

“We have discussed absolutely every subject under the sun and it’s not just a case of them coming and sitting and moaning about their ailments, we have none of that, occasionally someone will say ‘oh, I’m having a bad day’ but that soon passes...”

(GO/6)

“...I sat there one day and we were having this really in depth discussion, and I sat there and thought, ‘where has this come from?’ because it was all related to the book that we’d started off reading but it sparks off...we’ve got quite a mix now of ages and male and female, there are so many different views and people aren’t afraid to say ‘well I don’t think that’ or ‘oh that’s rubbish’ and we’re quite into discussions”

(GO/6)

Feeling comfortable enough to voice opinions or learn new skills without worrying about ‘making a mistake’ was particularly emphasised by a number of participants as key to their enjoyment of the sessions.

“You’re comfortable with each other”

(GP/1)

“Because no-one’s going to shoot you for you’re [opinion]. You don’t feel like you must agree”

(GP/1)

“You feel like you can learn by your own mistakes without feeling stupid”

(GP/2)

“Because we’re allowed to speak our minds, because [Group Organiser] doesn’t mind”

(GP/3)

“Speak your mind”

(GP/4)

Some participants remarked on how involvement with the group had led to other interests and opportunities.

“It opens up new topics, you know, some things that you might feel you want to follow up”

(GP/5)

“I recommended some of the speakers to our group at church so lots more people have heard about places and things of interest in the area”

(GP/5)

“...we’re trying to work out how we’re going to go and see it now because neither of us drive”

(GP/5)

When asked what they would highlight when recommending the group to a friend, group participants emphasised the enjoyment that they feel being part of the group.

“I should say, ‘I really enjoy it and look forward to it and I’m sure you will, come and try it”

(GP/1)

“...the tapes...it’s very interesting, sometimes you don’t like them and I’m always very forthright saying whether I like them or not, but generally speaking that’s something, it’s like a box of chocolates, you wonder what you’re gonna pick this week, its really very very good”

(GP/3)

Group organisers were asked what they hoped participants would gain by attending the sessions. Their answers often complemented those given by participants, for example, by emphasising the session as an opportunity to try new things, learn new skills and open up new horizons.

“...to encourage people to try maybe new things, listening or reading things that they wouldn't normally listen to and that certainly happens”

(GO/1)

“I want them to enjoy the sessions and I want them to feel more part of the computer world, funny way of saying it I suppose but a lot of them have said that when they are watching television say, it'll be www dot this or whatever site, they don't know what on earth it is but now they do and they'll go online and look at cars or holidays or something that was before out of their reach”

(GO/2)

“...It also widens their horizons to a certain extent, it does when you listen to books that you perhaps otherwise wouldn't listen to and gives them new interests...”

(GO/4)

“Well, I think an interest in their own history, their personal history, so perhaps their families or their locality. I think...[is] very fortunate because the centre is preserved...I think this will be saved and kept if people are interested in it and to be proud of Derbyshire really because it has so much history, stately homes etc...”

(GO/5)

“Well, I hope it gives them a chance to explore the reading materials...which is the basis of a reading group...it’s made them more adventurous with the materials they read, against their wills sometimes but they have tried different things...”

(GO/6)

“...because the people who came originally were mainly people who had books delivered out to them so they were actually able to come into the library as they had done in the past. I think that’s a big thing, if you’ve got somebody who has always enjoyed reading, always been a library user, suddenly can’t get in, now you’re giving them the opportunity to actually come into the library”

(GO/6)

4.3.2 Social Contact

As data collection progressed it became clear that each meeting was also a social event.

“We had read ‘A Small Taste of Italy’ for today and I was planning on getting some amaretto biscuits and a bottle of Italian wine, I thought of Cornetto ice creams seeing as it was hot but I thought that might not work...we like to do things like that every now and then...”

(GO/6)

As well as enjoying the activities themselves, participants value the social contact they facilitate. Group participants emphasised the opportunity the sessions give to meet new people and chat socially.

“Well, just meeting people, people you don’t see from day to day”

(GP/1)

“Conversations you can have”

(GP/2)

“You can make more friends, acquaintances like”

*“Yes, that’s right; I mean there’s a different set
sometimes here from this”*

(GP/2)

*“But I think mixing, when one is deprived of so many activities that we
previously engaged in, I think it’s lovely to have friends...”*

(GP/3)

“And we meet on the bus don’t we, coming and going?”

(GP/4)

*“You once said, a lot of the things that we’ve had you’ve not
particularly liked yourself but you still like coming to see other people”*

“Yes...other people”

(GP/4)

“Social side more than anything”

(GP/5)

Such views often reflected those given by group organisers when asked what they hoped participants would gain by attending the sessions.

*“...the social aspect of it, the exchange of views, you know, the
friendships that are made”*

(GO/1)

*“I think they gain company, I think a lot them enjoy the company side
of it, meeting new people who are doing similar things themselves...”*

(GO/2)

"I think for this particular group, for the people who mostly are housebound and certainly visually impaired, it's the social activity as much as anything. I think they just really enjoy coming and having a good natter and sometimes we can go way off the subject, but it doesn't really matter. But they have all got that common ground which we can always return to." (GO/3)

"For me, I think it's the social aspect which is as important as anything else. Just people saying, 'I really look forward to coming' and you know, 'it's so nice to get out'...of course the housebound service is wonderful taking books into people's homes but it's another reason for them not to get out because they don't need to get out...where as here they've made the effort, hopefully they're made to feel welcome and they can just relax for an hour or so, just sit and have a bit of a laugh"

(GO/3)

"I think it's important socially, I think that's probably the most important factor for the people who come to this group, it's a chance to get together and meet other people socially, obviously in the context of a book chat group..."

(GO/4)

"I do think for this group particularly, perhaps for one or two of them, it's more a social event than a book chat group but I'm not sure that there is anything particularly wrong with that"

(GO/4)

"...I think people gain quite a bit in that kind of way, they plan a trip to go and see a place that has been spoken about..."

(GO/5)

“...it’s the socialisation, it’s actually coming in out of their own homes and meeting other people in a similar position to themselves, and also getting into the library, because they are all bookworms, they all really like books, so they like the chance to actually come into the library as well and occasionally select the books themselves...and it gets them out of their four walls and they get to talk to other people”

(GO/6)

For some participants, it was this aspect of the group that they would recommend to friends.

“The friendliness”

(GP/2)

“The friendliness of it, the complete friendliness”

(GP/3)

“...I said to her ‘it’s good because we’re all of a same mind and the talking books, you know and it’s company and it’s different [to] going to some other places that you might go to regularly”

(GP/4)

Some participants emphasised the social isolation that a person with a visual impairment may feel. Being part of a group such as a listening group has helped to alleviate that isolation. Participants also noted the importance of belonging to a group where everyone else understands their difficulties.

“...well speaking for myself and probably for many others, we don’t get out all that often, partly because of age and partly because one relies on other people to go anywhere unfamiliar. Since my guide dog died, I’m not fit enough to have another one, I can go for days without speaking to anyone except my wife...it’s nice to get out, to have a purpose, just a social meeting wouldn’t be the same”

(GP/3)

“Well, we all suffer from the same thing, sight problems, so everyone understands how the other one feels...and I think they’ve given us a very good service, extremely good service...and I’ll continue to recommend it to people with partial sight”

(GP/3)

“Well, we’re all of a similar vain really, we all need the books on tape for one reason or another and so it’s nice to meet as a group that understands that and that we can all enjoy at the same level”

(GP/4)

“I think this point that we ought to make is that disability often leads to loneliness, certainly from the point of view of visual impairment, you do suffer from loneliness a lot because you can’t go off and speak to people, you depend on them coming to speak to you so when we meet round here...we’re all together...the social side I think is perhaps the most important [Group Organiser]?”

(GP/4)

Finally, for some participants there was a further social benefit gained from attendance at an activity. Participants found that they were now able to keep in contact with family and friends who have moved abroad, via their computers. They also note how they now feel part of the ‘computer world’ and can share this interest with other members of their family.

“When you come home you don’t feel left out at home with your grandchildren...”

(GP/2)

“...I can even get in touch with New Zealand”

(GP/2)

“...we get Australia”

(GP/2)

“...they sent some photographs and I managed to [print] them up on the printer...I would never have believed I could do that, it were like a foreign language to me”

(GP/2)

4.3.3 Confidence

Some participants remarked on the personal confidence they had gained from being part of a group. One participant commented on the confidence she now feels in discussing books with other members of the group, as well as family.

“I tend to feel more confident now, I mean I’ve read all my life sort of thing or listened to tapes...and I would discuss them with my family because they started me listening to things really...”

(GP/1)

This too has been noted by group organisers.

“Some people don’t contribute at first, you know, and then you do realise that they are starting to contribute more. I don’t think I’ve really experienced it ever going the other way, where they have stopped contributing so, even people who don’t come from the background where you’d talk about books do seem to gain that confidence to do so” (GO/1)

Growing in confidence was emphasised particularly by those learning a new skill. One participant raised this issue with the other members of the focus group.

“But do you find as you’ve grown older you sort of lose your confidence? and if you’re in your own peer group it does help”

(GP/2)

“You don’t always remember next week what you’ve done today, you know, I find, easy to forget things”

(GP/2)

“It’s just like breathing to them [grandchildren], but to us it’s, you know it’s a magic box isn’t it?”

(GP/2)

“I’m always frightened of putting other people’s work out, if I touch a wrong one, I’m always frightened of wrecking somebody else’s, of wiping it out”

(GP/2)

However, support from other members of the group, organisers and volunteers have often helped to dispel these fears, and participants have grown in confidence.

“...I think as you go on you can help one another as well”

(GP/2)

“It does give you a lot more courage”

(GP/2)

“I think when you’ve worked with computers at work as I used to, but you’ve used one area, the area that concerned you with the work, we can do anything now, it grows, your experience”

(GP/2)

“...I dusted them for five years and I dare not turn one on, they absolutely terrified me and then of course after two or three lessons, it gave me confidence and then I came here...somebody said ‘try the library’ and I’m really enjoying it...”

(GP/2)

“From my end, watching these people come, I see self-esteem and confidence grow, once they’ve got that they’re well on their way, teaching themselves, and amongst themselves, speaking to the one next to them, one will help the other, if not, shout up, there’s no embarrassment it there?”

(GV/2)

“...if you’ve not used micro-fiche or CD Roms etc, you’ve got to sum up the courage to come and ask, because you think ‘oh, I won’t get this the first time and someone will have to show me 2 or 3 times,’ but if there is a network of people that you can talk to about it, that’s a good idea”

(GO/5)

When asked what they enjoyed most about the activity, the importance of personal achievement became clear. Group organisers also explained how some participants have been able to complete more formal courses because of the confidence they have gained within the group.

“Some of them have gone back to courses that are more formal because they’ve got the confidence from here. Some of them are using...us as a back up for the formal course, so they’ll bring their homework away and they’ll come and use the learning materials they’ve been given on the other course to back it up here, so they’re going over, their enforcing what they’ve already done”

(GO/2)

“In some ways it’s helped people to stay with courses that they wouldn’t bother with or it’s made them want to do courses that they wouldn’t have done before. It’s made them feel less silly and more able to focus on a more formal course”

(GO/2)

This is reflected in comments made by participants themselves.

"...the course we took, was it ten weeks? It wouldn't have meant anything much to us until we come here and practised it"

(GP/2)

"...because to start off with everything was a battle, you can't take the information in, and then when you come in here you can re-do what you've done in the course, it just helps with your memory to go on and then things start then sinking in"

(GP/2)

For some participants, attending the group has enabled them to become tutors themselves.

"Coming here on a Monday will give me confidence to help people on a Tuesday. With the encouragement of [group leader]"

(GP/2)

4.3.4 Information

Whilst enjoying the different activities for their own sake, participants are also gaining information. This could relate to leisure interests, for example looking at holiday destinations or places to visit on the internet.

"You can go onto the internet, you can have a laugh, you can go on all these sites that you don't think and you know, 'I wonder what that one is' and er, information actually, they give you a lot of information"

(GP/2)

Or, as the following example shows, discussing what time a radio programme is aired. Referring to a Radio 4 dramatised production based on Lindsey Davis' Falco novels, this discussion demonstrates how participants share information with other members of the group.

"Do you like Lindsey Davis?"

"Yes I do. Yes, that's my Friday morning"

"That half an hour goes so quickly, I've read the book but I still listen"

"And when's that?"

"That's on Radio 4"

"So if I put Radio 4 on early in the morning I shall be alright...will I?"

"Oh yes, except when the cricket appears, yes that's annoying, you have got to try and get it onto FM...that's not easy"

(GP/1)

Participants also appreciate the suggestions that group organisers and volunteers can make regarding reading choices.

"And [Group Volunteer] is really good at suggesting Books on Tape in addition to the ones that we hand out"

(GO/3)

Ideas can even be gained for other groups, unrelated to the library.

"I notice quite a few of these people here are also members of the local history society and so this adds to our knowledge of the local area and give us ideas perhaps for the speaker programme...to add a few extra things to the sort of meetings we have"

(GP/5)

“I recommended some of the speakers to our group at church so lots more people have heard about places and things of interest in the area”

(GP/5)

If participants wish to do so, personal difficulties may also be raised with group leaders or other members of the group, who can often provide practical advice and support.

“Similar problems and we discuss things sometimes”

(GP/3)

“As an onlooker I’ve picked up that quite often it’s a chance to share, they all share their problems...”

(GV/3)

“Because they’ve all got common problems and [Group Organiser] can help because you know the sort of technical things, things that are available to help...you do get a lot of information don’t you?”

(GV/3)

“Explain for us, yes”

(GP/3)

Sometimes advice also comes from guest speakers.

“And we had a lady from the DAB and she talked about various gadgets that were available to help people so that was useful, we do occasionally get people to come in and talk to us...”

(GO/3)

Group organisers too noted how information and support flows between members of the groups and how valuable this can be.

“And actually quite useful information like, somebody will use the RNIB or Calibre and they’ll encourage somebody else to access that, somebody perhaps who’s just losing their sight, they’ll encourage them to access those services which they may well have been told about but their social worker or whatever, but if somebody whose using them can do it, they can say ‘this is really good’, or benefits or anything like that, or you know, who to contact, that sort of exchange of information...you realise that is happening as well”

(GO/1)

“...both information on other books and then just purely social chat. We have a [section] when they have a cup of tea in the middle of the session where they can have a little bit of a chat...”

(GO/4)

“...we do get recommendations, people will recommend titles that they think we should listen to as a group, or they’ll discuss between themselves what they’ve liked or what they’ve not liked, so it does have quite a lot of spin offs. One member of the group particularly will ask us sort of related questions, we often have one of the computers here on the internet so that we can always look up various factors, things which come up...so it does lead on to other things”

(GO/4)

“It’s like a self help group in a way...”

(GO/6)

“...there are more practical everyday solutions to problems because we tend to pick up people that have just perhaps been diagnosed as partially sighted or...registered...and I think that’s a good way of getting these people integrated because when someone is first diagnosed with a sight problem or registered there is a real loss of confidence, especially mobility, you know, come out and about, so I think that gives people encouragement just seeing people that have gone through what they are going through...”

(GO/6)

In the case of one group activity, being informed was emphasised as an essential part of its remit.

“I think it is to be informed really and to get the feeling for the breadth of the history that there is around them and to preserve it and to make sure that the town doesn’t change too much or that things get knocked down...so, I think it’s a sense of the value of where you live really”

(GO/5)

4.3.5 The Library as a Venue

One question put to participants asked specifically about the library as a venue for their activity and what, if anything, they felt it brought to their enjoyment of the session. As an introduction to this, although not explicitly asked, a few participants did mention the potential fears of joining a group activity.

“I started coming because I was persuaded to and...I was a bit ambivalent about it at first, not shy, but I wasn’t sure what to expect, particularly as I had never read much fiction, except the classics”

(GP/1)

“That was me, when I first came here. When [Group Organiser] came down to see me... I said ‘I don’t know, can I give you a couple of days?’...”

(GP/1)

“Probably a bit shy at making the effort...if they came one time they would realise, it’s just the shyness coming for the first time...”

(GP/3)

“...one or two people have said to me, ‘well I don’t really like to mix”

(GO/3)

“Not mixing can become a habit actually, you get stuck in your own rut and you think ‘oh no, they won’t want me or I can’t be bothered””

(GP/3)

At the same time, participants also acknowledged the need to try new things.

“You do have to give things a try don’t you?”

(GP/1)

“It’s no good sitting back and saying, oh well I’m not bothered about going, you’ve got to make yourself go”

(GP/1)

“And I think, you know, the people I mentioned who were a bit wary about coming, they say they don’t mix, I think, like you say, if they did come once or twice I’m sure they would enjoy it”

(GO/1)

Group activities such as these are not for everyone, it was clear however that those who had been persuaded to attend did often find they enjoyed it, and decide to come again. This may be due in part to the positive atmosphere that is created by those running the groups. The importance of a relaxed and informal atmosphere was emphasised by each focus group.

“Cup of tea and a biscuit?”

“That relaxes us first doesn’t it, then we get into the flow”

(GP/1)

“...it’s nice not to have to think, ‘I’ve got to go this week, I’ve got to go this week’ if you’re on holiday or you’re not well, you know, you don’t feel under pressure...”

(GP/2)

“Well, dare I say it, I look forward to [Group Organiser’s] delicious biscuits!”

(GP/3)

“We look forward to [Group Organiser’s] lovely smile and a very hearty welcome and the other members of staff, we think they’re all lovely...”

(GP/3)

“It all contributes to a very warm atmosphere”

(GP/3)

In one group in particular, it was the informality of the session that they would emphasise to friends.

“Well, it’s so informal”

(GP/2)

“No pressure, because some people, old people, they don’t like to come because they think ‘oh, it’s like a class that teach you’, but no, it’s nice, an informal gathering really”

(GP/2)

“...I’ve found the informality is what draws people”

(GO/2)

Participants also emphasised the friendliness and helpfulness of staff.

“We’re very fortunate...to have this library, because what you haven’t got you can get it, and it’s not even a central library, really, is it?”

(GP/1)

“I think it’s the small things, [volunteer tutor] came along when I was struggling with that thing on my computer and he just strode right up and put it right, I mean you forget these things at my age so...”

(GP/2)

“I like coming here...this fella’s [pointing to a volunteer tutor] a big help, I can’t remember everything and he puts me right”

(GP/2)

“And the staff in the library are particularly helpful, they’re really lovely, so I mean that is a plus...” (GP/3)

“And of course, I’ve known [Group Volunteer] for years but not the same as I do now because as you come in, you don’t always meet the same people on, the same staff...”

(GP/4)

The library, its facilities and resources was felt by some participants to be the 'right place' to hold such activities. For example, having the library and its resources available has helped those participants who wish to pursue interests further. It also enables staff to utilise the library catalogue and the internet to answer questions raised by the groups.

"I think it's the proper place for this activity...but perhaps it ought to be recognised in the library world that suitable places for people who use audio tapes and want to discuss their interests in books, that it should be part of the provision of the library and not something that's added because of demand as an afterthought"

(GP/4)

"I think you've illustrated the architecture of the building needs to be one where...we'd be much better if we were sitting in a circle rather than on a long table because we'd all be closer together if we were in a circle...those of use who are visually impaired, some of you are out of our territory almost because we don't know who's over there, but I think if you are in a circle it might be a bit easier..."

(GP/4)

"...we've got the internet where you can look up quite a lot of family history and then Derbyshire's Peakland Heritage Website and Picture the Past so we've had introductions to those websites from the people who compiled them. We've also got Derbyshire directories and quite a lot of the census fiche downstairs on microfilm, so if people become interested they can expand their interest, we can also lead them to Matlock where they have got better resources, so I think the library does provide a good venue and the entrance to information, a first stage."

(GO/5)

“There are not many venues that are open all day for such long periods of time where you feel relaxed, normally you go to the Bank and you’ve got a job and you come out again...you can stay as long as you like so people become familiar with it”

(GO/5)

In some cases participants measured the success of the group by its popularity.

“People are inviting friends all the time, it’s growing, in fact last time the room was jammed full...it’s getting very popular”

(GP/5)

However, it was also emphasised that for some of the activities, a larger group might detract from the enjoyment of the session.

“...if more people attended and it got much bigger, that would, in some way detract from it, but if more people came, possibly set up a second group, perhaps sharing the load from [Group Organiser’s] point of view with other librarians”. “You know I would think the facilities are there for more than one group”

(GP/3)

“...I don’t think I would really like to run a group that’s bigger than twelve because it loses, it wouldn’t be easy to chat. Even as it is I know there are one or two who find it difficult to hear everybody, so I’m conscious that they’re not joining in as much as they could do...”

(GO/3)

Group organisers were also asked what they felt the library could offer as a venue. They emphasised the central place that the library occupies within the community, the resources it has on hand, the anonymity of the building and issues of accessibility.

“...libraries are good in that they are sort of anonymous and people have ownership of them in the way that, in a similar way to community education facilities, but I think they have even more sense of being part of the community”

(GO/1)

“...I think particularly for that generation that I’m dealing with there, libraries were always sort of part of the community that they accessed, that they were always there even if they weren’t necessarily going to be borrowers, they sort of grew up with the notion that they were there, so it is a sort of non-threatening accessible venue”

(GO/1)

“From our point of view it’s good in that it is getting us involved in the community I support, so, it’s a two way thing”

(GO/1)

“...the demographic of people who have turned up to it, I think the library is a suitable venue for them”

(GO/1)

“It does mean that we’ve got access to resources that we wouldn’t have elsewhere, basically the library catalogue, because we’re always running in and out...to have a look at things, whether we have got something in stock or whether it’s available on tape so that we can get it for them...so it’s got that advantage, all the resources of the library...”

(GO/4)

“Of course it’s also got to be a room that’s accessible to wheelchair users, we’ve got the disabled toilet here as well so...you have got to bear various aspects in mind when thinking about accessibility, but yes, I think having resources like the library catalogue behind you is a real plus”

(GO/4)

They also noted the importance of creating a relaxed informal atmosphere and the benefits this can bring.

“...many times they’ve said this to me, they’ve either thought about trying computers through a formal course or they’ve tried a formal course with a certificate at the end, but that isn’t what they want. They want somebody there just to say, ‘how do you literally move a mouse or whatever’...without feeling silly”

(GO/2)

Conversely, libraries may also have inherent barriers that prevent people from using their services. This too was emphasised by staff.

“...I know they are threatening to some people who don’t traditionally access them; they can be threatening a building like this...”

(GO/1)

“The down side of it is...that it is associated with reading and perhaps a less sort of, a venue that wasn’t associated with that, say if you ran it in a pub you might get an entirely different clientele or something, that’s the other side of it”

(GO/1)

4.3.6 Measuring the Impact

Participants clearly value the activities that are organised by the library service. Their value, as part of an overall library service, was also emphasised by staff.

“...that sort of outreach work into the community is...really valuable and I get a sense of real appreciation from the people who would be isolated otherwise”

(GO/1)

“Being able to provide transport for them is a big plus because they just wouldn’t be able to get here otherwise and you are aware of people who would come to a lot more things if they had [transport], you know, occasionally we fetch people to events in the evening because they just don’t get to things”

(GO/1)

“To organise something regularly like that it’s very useful socially for them and as I say, they do sort of make friends with one another outside of the group really”. “I mean some of them knew one another before and it’s a way they’ve managed to get in touch with one another again...they may have known one another in a different phase of their lives, and...they’re in touch again now”

(GO/1)

“I do think it’s a very important bit, it’s quite a small thing, but I do think it’s part [of] our social inclusion sort of agenda really and I wouldn’t want to see it ended, obviously, financially we are under quite a lot of threat but I mean there is quite a big commitment in Derbyshire to sort of sustain things like this...”

(GO/1)

“...I do see the work with older people and disadvantaged people as strategic for libraries really and sometimes I think it’s almost like it’s an add on that side of it because it’s all got to be high profile...and it’s almost like the small things that we do are carried on at the back...whereas I see it as quite central to the work that we do, but that’s where I’m coming from, I work in the public sector because that’s what I’m interested in”

(GO/1)

“...I think it’s because it includes the whole community it tends to bring people who wouldn’t normally be using the library for computers, [!] hope it directs the service out there and encourages them to come in”

(GO/2)

“You might get a brownie point for doing it but that’s certainly not why I started it, I thought it would be nice for people with so many book groups. Book groups have become so popular that these people wouldn’t be able to join in a normal book group, so to have their own special group is important”

(GO/3)

“Even though it’s the small quantities of people...even if the numbers seem small, the enjoyment is a lot more than that”

(GO/3)

“Oh absolutely yes, I mean there’s a lot of awareness these days about social exclusion, social inclusion, whichever way you like to look at it and groups or individuals who are excluded for all sorts of reasons and it’s very much part of our remit to try and reach out and provide them with what they want, what they would like, so although it’s only a very small part of it, but it’s got value”

(GO/4)

“Yes I do, I think if you were able to actually attend a group you’d see how much pleasure people get from it and the friendships that have formed over the last six years with our group, you would see that it is really valuable. I would fight tooth and nail to keep it there”

(GO/6)

In turn, the library can also gain by promoting itself as a valuable part of the local community.

“I think it...makes us feel more central to the community and as if we are reaching out to people more, rather than being this [building]...sort of thing, because of the job that I do I am more out in the community doing that sort of thing but I think that’s important to take services out to people who can’t get to them, so I think it’s an important part of that”

(GO/1)

“Well we can promote, I know one or two [participants] feel that books are the most important things and I would agree, but I think IT has opened up a huge information source and so we can promote that here and the resources we have at Matlock and at Chesterfield so that people go and use them. It’s no use having them if they are not used, so we can open up peoples eyes to the wide world really, of local history but they can do research for themselves...”

(GO/5)

“We’ve certainly pleased existing customers and kept them coming, I think we’ve got a few new users. I think increasingly the role of the library is this as well as books and just general computer use. I think because it’s giving to the community, it’s offering the community another thread I suppose”

(GO/2)

Despite this, as noted in Chapter One, measuring the impact of activities such as listening groups, local history groups and computer groups can be difficult. In order to ascertain group organisers' views on this, they were asked how they measure the success of the groups they run. The following points were made.

"We're not terribly good at evaluating stuff in libraries... it does tend to be a bit qualitative and sort of anecdotal really, so yes, I mean it does come down to being 'a good thing' through your perception of it really. Yes, you can talk about numbers... somewhere like this you are not going to get those quantities of people but you make quite a big difference to individuals"

(GO/1)

"I don't have any sort of evaluation at all, we just feel that a session's gone well and we usually do, there's usually a nice feel about the thing but beyond that no. It's a gut feeling"

(GO/3)

"We do break down whether people have gained something from it creatively, socially and whether they've learned a new skill, that kind of thing, so we do look at that and if this kind of activity is not doing that then we're not going to continue and do something else"

(GO/5)

"...now I judge it by when the group's together because they're all smiling, you don't see any glum faces, we've got photographs over the years and the one thing that jumps out at you every time is that everybody looks happy and they're not photos that have been posed for, they're photos that we take at different events, try to catch people off guard...and that's one thing that really jumps out at you, that they all always look happy..."

(GO/6)

Chapter Five: Discussion

Victor et al. assert that "...at the oldest ages, the social context and the physical environment exert a more potent influence upon the experience of old age than intrinsic genetic or biological factors (2005b:358). The data gathered within this study clearly demonstrate that the 'social context' and the 'physical environment' do impact on those who participate in organised group activities.

Despite the fact that not all groups meet for the same purpose, there is a distinct consistency within the comments made by participants. This may be due in part to the general nature of the questions asked. At the most basic level, all participants are members of a group activity organised by the library service. As such, each participant was able to comment on the personal effect of such participation.

As previously demonstrated within the review of the literature, it is argued by some that increased participation does impact positively on the lives of older adults. As such, opportunities to participate have been linked to notions of 'ageing well' and 'successful ageing' found within Government documentation. This study cannot draw conclusions on how participants feel their involvement within a group initiative has contributed to their overall notion of 'ageing'. Indeed, this was not its intention. It does however demonstrate that the groups within this research do have a positive impact on the lives of participants.

5.1 Enjoyment

The most basic aim is for participants to enjoy being involved in these activities. Group organisers also hoped that in running the sessions they were providing opportunities to try new things, expand reading choices, learn

new skills and share these interests with other group members. The positive comments made by participants' show how successfully these aims are met.

The data shows obvious enjoyment of being able to share common interests with others. Participants look forward to each session; they anticipate learning something new and appreciate the opportunity provided to expand interests. As such, they are enthusiastic about the activities and take pleasure in attendance.

The importance of being able to discuss ideas and share thoughts was additionally emphasised by group members, as was feeling able to voice opinions without fear. Such comments show how comfortable participants feel in their environment and how much this contributes to their enjoyment of the session. Litwin and Shiovitz-Ezra, in their study of the association between participation in activities and well being assert that "...it may not be the feedback derived from activity per se that is responsible for the well being outcome, but rather the quality of the social relationships that accompany activity, particularly informal activity" (2006:227). The data in this study supports this claim. Although participants clearly enjoy taking part in the activities, this enjoyment is enhanced and facilitated by the relationships formed with other members of the group.

5.2 Social Contact

Each time a group meets it is also a social event. When questioned about their enjoyment of the session and what they feel is gained by from it, participants emphasised the social nature of group meetings. They provide an opportunity to mix with different people, form new acquaintances and friendships, as well as 'catch up' with other members of the group. Group organisers too stressed the social benefits of being involved in a group activity. For many, this was felt to be the most important benefit for participants.

There is agreement within the literature that isolation "...has detrimental effects on the health and quality of life of older people" (Russell & Schofield, 1999:72). Dykstra et al. state that "demographic reality tells us that the older people become, the more likely they are to experience the loss of age peers" (2005:727). As such, organised activities being provided by the library service are clear opportunities for older adults to counteract the potential loss of social interaction. Andersson asserts that "network building is concerned with creating new opportunities for contact when the existing opportunities are limited (1998:271). Whilst, it is not inevitable that all older adults will experience social isolation, comments made by participants within this study emphasise the negative effects it can have. Two group members were keen to stress the social isolation that a person with a visual impairment can experience, and how difficult it can be to maintain social networks. Being part of a group activity, such as a listening group, has helped to alleviate this isolation. Participants specifically emphasised how important it was for them to meet up with acquaintances that understand and empathise with their own difficulties.

However, both group organisers and participants stressed that the shared interest of the activity gave a common ground and purpose. Whilst stating that they would highlight the social nature of the group to a friend, one participant commented that a purely social event would not hold the same attraction. This is in line with what Cattan et al. found in their study of effective health promotion interventions (2005). "...Group interventions with a focused educational input" were found to be amongst the most successful interventions (Cattan et al., 2005:57). Although participants enjoy the activities for their own sake, they also provide a common ground which underpins the session and facilitates further benefits.

Finally, for some group members there was an additional impact of participating in an organised activity. Comments made by those learning computer skills revealed how they were now able to keep in contact with family and friends via e-mail. Some participants also commented on common interests they shared with members of their families, such as

grandchildren. In addition to the social networks created within the group, participants were also expanding the ways in which they were able to communicate with family and friends.

Victor et al (2005a:63) state that “a key element of current thinking on the promotion of quality of life in older age relates to notions of social engagement and social inclusion”. The data in this study clearly demonstrates that the participants in these activities benefit from the social relationships formed with other members of the group. It also demonstrates how the skills acquired can facilitate increased social contact with external acquaintances.

5.3 Confidence

Silverstein and Parker (2002:545) note how “activities may improve well being by providing a sense of purpose...”. As discussed above, common ground and a comfortable atmosphere both add to participants’ enjoyment of an activity. Moreover, it may also give them the confidence to join in with the discussion. One participant emphasised that she now felt more confident in discussing books with other members of the group. Understandably, not all new members feel able to contribute to a group discussion, but those involved in running the sessions have noted how this can change with time.

Those participants learning a new skill noted in particular the importance of gaining confidence. Not always being able to remember everything that you have learned and feeling afraid of doing something wrong were both emphasised as contributors to a general lack of confidence. However, support from group peers as well as organisers and volunteers has helped to dispel such feelings and allowed confidence to grow.

A positive learning environment in which participants feel supported by those around them allows difficulties to be raised without fear or embarrassment. The group provides a network of support. Such support from friends in

addition to family can "...reinforce self-esteem and self-image and one's outlook on life in general" (Wenger, 1985:21/22). For some participants it has given them the confidence to complete more formal courses and become volunteer tutors themselves.

5.4 Information

The gaining of information is another impact of being involved in a group activity. Group organisers explained that for some participants this information is leisure based and often relates to personal interests. For example, participants gaining computer skills enjoy being able to explore websites and pursue interests further. However, the association between technology and the well being of older adults has been disputed. Dickinson and Gregor (2006) assert that despite technology being "...presented as a panacea for the support needs of the ageing population," there is "...no evidence that computer use improves well being among older adults" (2006:744). In reality, improvements in well being are thought to be a consequence of the session itself and "interaction with other learners" (Dickinson & Gregor, 2006:748). As such, it is the social contact that an organised activity can facilitate, in addition to the skills that are acquired, that contributes to the well being of participants. The data in this study supports this assertion. As noted previously, participants value the skills they are learning but also stress the support they receive from tutors and other members of the group. Both contribute to their enjoyment of the activity.

Members of the group can also be sources of information. This is demonstrated in the data by discussion of a radio programme, with one participant recommending it to another and giving details of what time it is aired. Additionally, reading suggestions made by group volunteers and organisers are welcomed by participants.

Finally, group peers can provide practical advice and support in times of difficulty. Duke et al. (2002:367) assert that “adjustment to illness is a major problem for many older adults”. They emphasise how “...older adults are often faced with the challenge of maintaining activity and well being under difficult circumstances” (Duke et al., 2002:367). The data in this study demonstrates how group members support each other. Participants, especially those within listening groups, emphasised how members of the group can experience similar problems. This shared understanding offers a network of support amongst participants and can sometimes provide practical advice. The sharing of such information was also noted by those involved in running the groups. Group organisers emphasised the value of this support, particularly peer support, and the positive impact that it can have.

Finally, ideas and information can be gained for other outside interests and hobbies. Participants noted how involvement in a group activity such as a Local History Group had ‘sparked off’ ideas and encouraged them to pursue personal projects. Group organisers too noted how some participants had been inspired by a session and how library resources were then able to support them pursue this.

5.5 The Library as a Venue

The physical environment of the library clearly made an impact on each group and played its own role in producing the benefits noted above. Woodrow (2002:99) notes how “...aspects of the physical environment all have a role to play in people’s psychological well being...”. Organised activities are not for everyone and comments made by participants illustrate how ‘mixing’ and ‘joining’ can be difficult. Some participants were unsure what to expect of such groups. One participant too commented how ‘not socialising’ can become something of a habit.

With all this in mind, it is important for the library to create as welcoming an atmosphere as possible to help reduce potential barriers to attendance. Group organisers emphasised the importance of creating a relaxed informal atmosphere and comments made by participants show the success with which this is achieved. Participants commented on the informal mood of the session, the welcome they receive and the warm atmosphere of the group. They also commented on the helpfulness and friendliness of staff. For some, it was these aspects of the group that they would specifically recommend to friends.

Bryson et al. (2003:57) assert that “the library is at any one time a meeting place, a learning resource, and a comfortable and relaxing public space”. Conversely, libraries may still have inherent barriers that prevent people from using their services. This too was emphasised by group organisers. It was specifically noted that libraries can have an academic association and as such, may not appeal to all.

However, with regard to using the library as a venue for these activities, group organisers highlighted the benefits that it could provide. The anonymity of the building and its historic place within the community were emphasised. The accessible facilities that libraries can provide were also noted. Additionally, library resources such as the catalogue and internet facilities were stressed as useful in answering participants' questions. As such each library is offering, “...an array of resources that enable people and groups to establish relationships, carry on conversations, exchange ideas and engage the life of the mind” (Bryson et al., 2003:57).

Final Conclusions

5.6 The Impact of Library Group Activities

The principal aim of this study was to explore library group activities and investigate qualitatively what impact, if any, they have on the lives of older adults. It was hoped that the conclusions reached would demonstrate how participants value such groups and their importance as one part of the library service. Through observation of groups, talking to participants and group organisers it is clear that participants do benefit from participation. When asked if organised group initiatives are a valuable part of the library service, participants overwhelmingly responded 'yes'.

Specifically emphasised are the social benefits that such groups can provide. For group organisers, it was often the social nature of the groups that was stressed as especially important to participants. However the sharing of information, the informal support, the skills that are gained and the confidence that may grow were also stressed by participants and those involved with running sessions. Each of these impacts emerged repeatedly throughout the data both in comments made by participants and those running the initiatives.

Participants' enjoyment of meetings and the social nature of groups were particularly evident to an observer. Enjoyment is reflected in the laughter and smiles of participants. Participants chat socially to other members of the group both before and after the session. Moreover, on more than one occasion participants were inclined to linger at the end of sessions to carry on conversations with other members of the group as well as group organisers.

Underlying these positive impacts and often facilitating them is the library as a venue. The informal atmosphere, the warm welcome, the helpfulness and friendliness of staff were all emphasised by participants. Group organisers have created positive learning environments, welcoming discussion spaces and are themselves important members of the group. However, the overriding impression when observing the groups and talking to participants is one of enjoyment. Each group meeting is a significant social event. It provides valuable opportunities to meet friends, to form new acquaintances and to pursue new and challenging interests.

As such, group organisers were keen to stress that although a relatively small part of the service in terms of numbers, such groups are truly valuable to those who attend them. Group organisers clearly care about the groups and their participants. This is reflected in all their comments and their plans for the future.

“I’d like to do some sort of cross-generational work, using that group as a basis and some of the other groups as well...”

(GO/1)

“...perhaps try and connect with the other groups, use video conferencing...”

(GO/1)

“...I would like to see more buddying sessions across the county”

(GO/2)

“Maybe be on radio or something like that, because we’ve got two radio stations near by and...if we could persuade those to come along and talk to people that would be quite interesting, because they’ve got interesting memories...”

(GO/5)

“The one thing we would like to do is to go to the theatre and be able to go back stage...that’s one thing that we’d like to do”

(GO/6)

5.7 Measuring the Impact

Group organisers commented how much of their evaluation of the activity comes down to an intangible perception that the activity is a positive part of the service. Participants are obviously enjoying the sessions and the data shows that they do have a valuable effect. However, such gains are often subjective and difficult to measure. The true value of group activities only really becomes apparent through the words of participants and those involved in running them.

Although relatively small in terms of numbers, this study concludes that organised library group activities are a valuable part of the library service and integral to the broad concept of providing education and leisure opportunities within our increasingly ageing society.

“...now I judge it by when the group’s together because they’re all smiling, you don’t see any glum faces”

(GO/6)

5.8 Study Limitations

Overall this study achieved its central aim of exploring the impact of organised library group activities. Whilst capturing the perceptions and feelings of group participants, the conclusions are specific to those participants and are not representative of society in general. However, each focus group did produce remarkably similar responses. As such, it is possible that participants of other such groups may also experience comparable benefits.

An additional issue relates to the nature of the groups represented within the study. All groups meet within the library, are organised by library staff and are attended mainly by 'older adults'. However, the activities undertaken within them differed. This could potentially have led to many different responses. For some questions, specifically relating to what participants enjoyed most about the activity, it did make comparisons difficult. Despite this, common themes emerged from each group. This is perhaps due to the focus of the study being concerned with the context of the activity, rather than the activity itself.

5.9 Areas of Further Research

The varied nature of the groups highlighted above does reveal an opportunity for further study. Research could be undertaken to look specifically at different organised library activities and their individual impact. This would provide an opportunity to compare and contrast data in order to explore such impacts in greater depth.

A potential area for additional research was also highlighted by Derbyshire Library Service at the beginning of this study. It was suggested that in addition to investigating the impact of library group initiatives, further research could also explore the geographical make up of each area represented.

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Appendix One

Focus Group Topics

This is a list of the topics that were put to focus group participants. Depending on the nature of the group, the order in which the questions were asked may have altered. These questions are the final draft and were subject to some changes as outlined in section 3.4.

- What do you feel about the library as a venue for this activity?
- Does it add anything to your enjoyment of the session?
- Do you feel that groups such as this are a valuable part of the library service?
- What do you enjoy most about this activity?
- What do you feel you have personally gained from being part of this group?
- If you were recommending this group to a friend what would you highlight as the most important benefits?

Additional sub-questions were put to the group as thought necessary by the researcher.

Appendix Two

Individual Interview Questions

This is a list of the questions that were put to group organisers during individual interviews. The order in which the questions were may have varied slightly in each interview. Again, these questions were subject to change during the course of the research as outlined in section 3.4.

- What were your reasons for organising this group?
- Did you specifically try to target 'older adults'?
- Do you feel that the library as a venue adds anything to the success of the activity?
- What do you hope participants will gain from attending these sessions?
- What do you feel are the most important benefits of being part of this group?
- What do you feel the library gains from running this kind of activity?
- How can you measure the success of the service?
- What are your hopes for the future of such sessions?

Sub-questions were also put to group organisers. Depending on the answers given, some questions were not asked.

Word Count – 18,428
