



Commentary

Newcastle Libraries' Evaluation Strategy: Evidence Based Practice in Challenging Times

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Challenging Times

In the last twelve years, Newcastle Libraries has undergone a significant period of organizational change. This commentary describes how evidence based practice has informed and focused these developments.

Newcastle Libraries is the statutory public library service for the city of Newcastle upon Tyne in the northeast of England. In 2002, the service began a wide ranging modernization program, and by 2009, it was recognized as a leading exemplar in its field with a large, newly built destination City Library, seventeen satellite branches, a mobile library, and a home delivery service. In 2010, the election of a new national government transformed the political and financial landscape in which public libraries operate, precipitating further reinvention

and accelerating the need for innovative service delivery models, multi-functional library spaces, and new ways of working.

In 2014, Newcastle's organizational structure reflects these developments. Four years of public sector budget cuts and a revolutionary shift in user behaviour brought about by the ascendancy of the networked information landscape have challenged the service to reinvent itself as invisible intermediary, memory institution, learning centre, and community resource (Brophy, 2008, p. 8). Some core services have disappeared and been replaced by new services, such as the Business and Intellectual Property Centre. After the adoption of a hybrid model, library services in the City Library and several branches share premises with complementary organizations, such as social housing, adult education, and youth employment support providers.

In brief summary, this may seem like a reversal of fortunes, but in a period of widespread national library closures, it could have been a great deal worse. The Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) have calculated that 201 U.K. library service points were lost in financial year 2011–12 with a further 74 closing in 2012–13. Another 411 buildings and 80 mobiles are “currently reported as either likely to be closed or passed to volunteers or have been closed/left council control from 1/4/13 to 31/3/14” (“Reasons”).

In Newcastle, the comparative preservation of services has been achieved through resilient leadership, an energetic political and public advocacy program, and a solid foundation of service delivery. This relative survival is also due in part to the organization’s implementation of a dedicated evaluation strategy, the proactive collection and use of evidence demonstrating impact, and the libraries’ willingness to respond to this evidence (within the constraints of budget and capacity) when determining how the service can and should evolve.

Types of Evidence

Today, the types of evidence that Newcastle collects—like the buildings it inhabits—reflect both the political and financial demands on the sector and the wider societal and informational zeitgeist. The way that Newcastle thinks about and uses evidence is innovative and multi-faceted. Standard quantitative measures (% computer usage, library memberships, books and e-book issues, and visits) still play a part, but these are supplemented by client-specific statistics, such as numbers of people attending work clubs or requesting assistance with online job search or social housing platforms.

Recording the types of support patrons currently seek in public libraries builds a picture of the social uses of library

buildings, which is of academic interest to information professionals. It also enables library managers and advocacy groups to demonstrate to stakeholders (and in the case of Newcastle’s close neighbours, Gateshead Libraries, to the local media; see Proctor 2014 in the reference list) the economic value of libraries as trusted information providers experiencing an increasing demand for assisted services.

To complement this quantitative data, Newcastle collects visual and multimedia evidence, including photographic records of exhibitions, launches, installations, and celebratory events, that is used to illustrate promotional materials, such as the quarterly “Page Turner” brochure and the “Annual Guide.” The organization is active on social media, promoting events and campaigns via blogs, Facebook, and twitter. As a result, it creates a digital record of the breadth of its operations and the way that it interacts with service users.

The libraries record in-depth, qualitative evidence by means of a bespoke Evaluation Toolkit devised and implemented in 2011–12 and used to collect, store, and present rich, explicit evidence of impact. This evidence includes general trends and preferences, quotes and comments from users, empirical evidence (where staff provide feedback of their observations), and reactions and responses to library services. The evidence is discussed further in the article “Rich Emotive, Evidence of Impact” (Cole, 2014).

Partnership work and the delivery of discrete, externally funded projects demand an additional layer of rigorous data collection and reporting. Here, the primary focus is the “use value” of the resource, i.e., “the favourable consequences” of using the “information products or service” (Tenopir, 2013, p. 271). In Newcastle, the European Regional Development Fund-funded Business and Intellectual Property Centre and the Chartered Institute of Library and

Information Professionals Information Literacy Group-backed Go Digital Newcastle digital inclusion project maintain case studies, financial risk registers, and qualitative and quantitative research outputs to demonstrate to stakeholders the benefits to small and medium sized enterprises and digitally excluded residents of interacting with their services.

The toolkit's use of open-ended questions captures evidence pertaining to the function and value of "library space as a service . . . for cultural events (poetry readings, book launchings, displays of artwork . . .)" (DeLong, 2008, para. 5). In 2013–14, users' opinions, including "simple praise or complaints" of events and the spaces in which they were delivered, were used to support decision making by instigating specific courses of action (e.g., adjusting the room temperature) and informing general approaches, such as liaising with the library café to reduce noise pollution (Tenopir, 2013, p. 272).

Evidence in Practice

In times of change, the way an organization approaches evidence collection and use becomes even more crucial. In the last five years, evidence based practice has had radical implications for Newcastle Libraries by informing decisions over areas of expansion (where evidence has been used to secure external project funding that adds value to the service), and, inevitably, contraction. Difficult decisions over library closures were based on stark ROI calculations (visits and issues against building and staffing costs) and the physical distance of one library from the next.

The Evaluation Toolkit has enabled Newcastle to take a structured, integrated, and user-focused approach to evidence collection by following the principles

outlined by Brettle (2014): "specify the outcomes you are measuring, so that you know what evidence you need to collect . . . [and] be aware of your stakeholders so that you can ensure you collect evidence that is important and relevant to each" (para. 2). Newcastle's primary stakeholders are its users (actual and potential), parent organization (Newcastle City Council), funders, staff, staff representatives, managers, and national bodies and advocacy groups—each of whom has a different perception of the libraries' quality.

For the service user, quality often means exceeding expectations and delivering satisfaction. To help achieve this outcome, the toolkit asks questions that invite critical feedback from library users that is utilised in future planning. In 2012–13, parents attending story time sessions were asked to suggest improvements and indicate other activities they would like to see. Responses were aggregated and analyzed as a word cloud that highlighted the terms *toddlers* and *more*. This data indicated a demand for increased provision for under-five's and led to the development of Little Bears story and rhyme sessions that were rolled across the service.

The current volatility of the U.K. public library sector means that effective practice is sometimes as rudimentary as survival, and survival depends (at least in part) on the ability to prove value to the parent organization. In practice, this means alignment with "wider organisational objectives and priorities" and asserting the library's significance within the overall structure (Grant, Sen, & Spring, 2013, para. 15). Newcastle's toolkit achieves the former by linking harvested data (at the collection stage) with the City Council's four key performance priorities. The toolkit achieves the latter by collecting "'explicit' measures of value that come directly from testimonials" and that are used to support accreditation in areas such

as Customer Service Excellence (Tenopir, 2013, p. 271).

With in-house resources scarce, public libraries are increasingly reliant on external funding, and the relationship between evidence and practice in this area is particularly complex. For the potential funder, quality often translates as evidence of need, originality, and value for money (Poll & te Boekhorst, 2008, p. 20). A library's ability to demonstrate such characteristics determines whether or not a grant or bursary is awarded. Thus, practice (the types of projects or services the library is able to deliver) is arguably determined by the cache of evidence it holds. Once in delivery, the project itself is expected to "actively contribute to the building of an evidence base that both supports decision-making and is actively deployed in practice" (Hall, 2011, p. 12).

For the sponsoring government department for libraries (currently Culture, Media and Sport), quality is measured in terms of value for money and the extent to which an organization supports government policy and meets the service standards it prescribes for the sector. In Newcastle, this manifests as tailoring service delivery and collecting evidence pertaining to "reading and informal learning," "access to digital skills and services," and social inclusion (Bawden, Petuchovaite, and Vilar, 2005, p. 459). It also requires active and visible participation in national initiatives such as the Society of Chief Librarians' Universal Offers; the Go ON UK campaign for digital skills; Access to Research and the Reading Agency's Books on Prescription scheme—all of which help to raise the public profile of the service.

With 2015 approaching, U.K. public libraries are neither comfortable nor secure, and each raft of budget cuts requires further reinvention. In Newcastle, at least for the present, the library service remains largely intact, even managing to

maintain its Customer Service Excellence accreditation due in part to its conscious placement of the "needs of existing and potential customers . . . at the heart of planning" (D. Fay, personal communication, October 28, 2014). In these immensely challenging times, library services must be savvy and stakeholder conscious. They must adapt to survive, and the ways in which they approach the collection and proactive use of evidence to inform practice is key to this survival.

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