



Library and Information Service

# Community Consultation

Focus Groups - Rossendale  
November 2004

## **1 Executive Summary**

The County Library and Information Service in Rossendale is delivered through a network of libraries across the district, including a trailer library and mobile library. Questions were raised at a community group meeting about the closure of both Rawtenstall and Haslingden libraries every Wednesday afternoon.

To test out these questions and explore libraries as the subject in more detail it was decided to conduct a series of focus groups with various sub-groups. Five focus groups were conducted in total covering two with staff, two with users and one with non-users. Lancashire County Council's research and strategy manager facilitated these groups during November 2004.

To make the best use possible of the discussion groups the scope of the research was broadened to explore how the service could improve generally, making opening hours an integral part of this broader research.

The research provides the evidence to confirm what managers already suspected: that more in the way of effective, targeted marketing needs to be done to change the public perception of libraries. The process also gave staff in libraries the opportunity to contribute to the decision making process in a practical and constructive way.

The research gives the management team in Rossendale a flavour of public opinion on the specific issues around opening hours. This, combined with wider consultation through the press, will inform the decision making process.

## **2 Introduction**

The issue of library opening hours in Rossendale, specifically the fact that both Rawtenstall and Haslingden libraries close on Wednesdays, was raised at a meeting of community representatives in Rossendale and brought to the attention of the Leader of the County Council. This in turn was passed onto the portfolio holder, the head of lifelong learning, and the county library manager. As a result the divisional librarian, Julie Bell, was asked to undertake public and staff consultation prior to any decisions being made.

Following discussions with colleagues at Institute of Public Finance, it was concluded that the best way to do this was by holding a series of focus groups with staff, users and non-users. Mike Walker, research and strategy manager in the Corporate Communications Group was approached and worked in partnership with Ann Marsh, performance manager of the County Library Service, to manage the focus groups. Fieldwork was undertaken during November 2004.

## **3 Background**

Rossendale is served by a network of 6 static libraries, a trailer library which serves Helmshore and Edenfield, and a mobile library. The two main libraries – Rawtenstall and Haslingden – are closed on Wednesday afternoons, though Rawtenstall does open on Wednesday mornings. Late nights at both libraries are Monday and Tuesday when they are open until 7.30pm. Late night and half-day opening policies were established for operational reasons when Rossendale libraries were managed from Blackburn.

There are also issues at two smaller branch libraries, Waterfoot and Crawshawbooth, where new branch managers have identified opening hours which do not appear to reflect the needs of the local community.

## **4 Research Objectives**

Taking the advice from Mike Walker, the objective of the research was widened from not just considering opening hours, but to finding out how libraries in the area can best meet the needs of their customers by improving or changing the service. This enabled opening hours to be placed in the wider context of libraries and extracted the most value from this piece of research.

## 5 Methodology

It was agreed that initially five focus groups would be set up:

- **Rawtenstall staff** – facilitated by Mike Walker (shadowed by Ann Marsh);
- **Haslingden staff** – facilitated by Ann Marsh;
- **Rawtenstall users** - facilitated by Mike Walker (shadowed by Ann Marsh);
- **Haslingden users**– facilitated by Ann Marsh; and
- **Non-users** - facilitated by Mike Walker (shadowed by Ann Marsh)

Staff from Rawtenstall, Haslingden, Crawshawbooth and Waterfoot libraries were invited to participate in one or other of the focus groups. Staff from Accrington were deployed to run the libraries in order to give as wide a range of staff as possible the opportunity to contribute. Thirteen staff attended the discussion at Rawtenstall and four staff attended at Haslingden.

Local staff knowledge was used to invite users of Rawtenstall and Haslingden to the respective groups. Users were invited who would provide a cross-section of customers. Invites were by letter, resulting in four people attending the Rawtenstall session, and eleven people attending at Haslingden.

Non-user recruitment was done by the Corporate Communications Group from the County Council's Life in Lancashire residents' panel. Initial contact was by telephone, followed by a letter of invitation. In accordance with Lancashire County Council research practice, each non-user attendee was paid a £20 honorarium to cover their time and travelling expenses. All nine invitees attended the group in Rawtenstall.

Each facilitated group discussion lasted between one and one and a half hours, with time at the end of each session for questions. A discussion guide for each type of focus group was designed by Mike Walker and used to steer the meetings.

## 6 Understanding Qualitative Findings

Qualitative research deals with the why and how people take various actions or hold various perceptions. Two of the key strengths of qualitative research are that it allows topics to be explored in detail and enables us to test the strength of people's opinion. However, it needs to be remembered that qualitative research does not allow conclusions to be drawn about either the

extent to which something is happening or percentages of residents who have certain attitudes and opinions.

Qualitative research is designed to be illustrative, rather than providing statistically representative data. Participants may hold views based on incorrect information; these perceptions are reported here. There is also sometimes a tendency for qualitative discussions to elicit critical views. It is important to remember that the views expressed do not always represent the views of the groups as a whole, although normally these are representative of at least a significant minority.

## **7 Findings**

### **Staff focus groups**

The discussions with staff began by exploring their perceptions of what library users thought about the service, what was good, what was not so good. They were then asked to discuss aspects of the service they themselves felt positive about and what would improve things for them. The discussions then moved onto opening times in particular, the way in which any changes could be communicated and the impact any changes in opening hours would have for both staff and the public

Issues generally hinged around communication, or lack of it. This manifests itself in a number of ways:

- Staff are perceived as being competent by their customers but obviously lack confidence in their own abilities – this applies specifically to IT skills re the People’s Network.
- They do not feel that the communication from managers is adequate to equip them to communicate effectively with customers about some issues – their confidence is diminished because they don’t know, or aren’t told.
- Team meetings would help them to share experiences of what they do well and gain confidence in their own abilities.
- There is a gap in their knowledge of selection procedures and contracts etc – a training issue – but again if they claim they don’t know something they can’t be expected to understand why something is so and defend it to customers.

### **User focus groups**

The format for users was similar – what are the good and bad points of the service, how would you improve the service, more focused discussion around opening hours, and how should any changes be communicated.

The same message was loud and clear from both groups:

- As a service we fail miserably to market our product effectively.
- There was a lack of awareness of the work done through schools, which is a concern given the amount of time and effort put into that aspect of the service.
- The library should be a community resource and marketed accordingly.
- District councillors should be mobilised.
- The involvement of staff in projects linked to the local community could potentially motivate them, increase their confidence and heighten the profile of the library locally.

### **Non-user focus group**

This group began by considering how they perceive the library service – what words and images does the word ‘library’ conjure up. Personification was used to explore what kind of person would a library be. Moving on from their perceptions of the service, the group looked at what the library actually does offer, what they thought ought to improve or change, opening hours specifically, and communication of change.

To this group of non-users, the library is seen as being a down at heel, shabby round the edges, older kind of person. Someone who is quiet, but knowledgeable about books. A serious kind of person, who is a bit lonely. Libraries still have a serious image problem.

To improve the service, the group made the following suggestions:

- Consider using volunteers
- Develop community use of the library – for local people, by local people
- Make staff more accessible, minimise barriers such as desks etc
- Develop relationships with local councillors

## Opening hours

Staff recognised the anomalies of Wednesday closing and late night opening at the beginning of the week at both Rawtenstall and Haslingden. Suggestions from staff were as follows:

- Open Wednesday afternoon at Rawtenstall either by re-arranging staffing levels/re-distributing resources from the trailer or closing Tuesday afternoon
- Consider just opening People's Network
- Make evening openings at Rawtenstall different to Haslingden – Monday and Thursday were the preferred option
- Open Waterfoot on Saturday morning with hours from Tuesday evening
- At Crawshawbooth user feedback suggests that Saturday opening would generate more use than a full day on Tuesday – straight swap of hours from Tuesday (5.30 to 7.00pm and 9.30 to 10.00am) to Saturday (10 – 12pm) - some staffing cost and implications.

Users and non-users were vocal in their criticism of late night opening to only 7.30pm. They felt strongly that for late night opening to be of benefit to the community then at the earliest 8.30 pm should be the closing time.

There was agreement that half-day closing was an outdated concept, and certainly Rawtenstall and Haslingden closing on the same day was something that needed to be addressed.

There was mild interest in the prospect of Sunday opening with some non-users feeling that it would be an ideal opportunity to promote libraries as a family venue.

## 8 Summary and Recommendations

The focus groups have given an insight into how the library service is perceived by the community it serves, and have indicated where improvements could be made.

The main findings are that there are communication issues to be addressed within the service with staff, and in marketing the service to the wider community. The Library Service is perceived as a community resource that is not being exploited to its full potential. Issues including opening hours, community involvement and general communications need to be addressed in order to make libraries relevant to current and potential users.

The main recommendations are:

### **Staff**

- Two-way communication is the key to any improvement from the staff's perspective. This will build staff confidence and create a shared responsibility to make improvements.
- The problems vocalised by staff hold no surprises and most are in the process of being addressed by divisional management – staff meetings, communications, team building. Some issues are well within the staff's own power to address if they worked as a team. The perceived skill inadequacy around the People's Network is perhaps something that would benefit from wider discussion. Having potentially raised expectations by discussing these concerns, now is the time to take action and to show action is being taken on these issues.
- The security of staff and property was high on the agenda when talking about both Haslingden library and the trailer; one suggestion was to consider seasonal opening for the trailer. Again the problem at Haslingden with youth nuisance is well documented and in the process of being addressed by divisional managers. The sense of overload might be partially resolved once the juvenile nuisance problem is sorted – it might be an idea to consider each initiative in isolation and see if there are any ways in which the work can be minimised or shared. Again action needs to be demonstrable to staff.
- Revision and/or reduction of the trailer library's opening hours – the anomaly of three late nights for very little output when the two major libraries in the Division only open two was mentioned on several occasions.
- Continue to engage with staff in the development of the library service in Rossendale to make use of their insight and maintain the momentum started by these discussions.

### **Users**

- Work with the community to make the service a true community resource. Activities and events at the library should reinforce the parochial nature of the library and its part and relevance to the local community.
- Improve marketing of the library to increase awareness of the facilities available and promote events.



- Promote the service to children of all ages. Ensure that the communications done through schools effectively reaches the target audiences.

### **Non-users**

- Challenge the current image of libraries with this group. The perceptions can be challenged by highlighting the range of services that are available and the events that take place, and make changes, particularly at Rawtenstall library, to the interior and exterior to ensure it is seen as modern and forward-looking.
- Remove physical barriers eg desks from the libraries or allow staff more opportunity to roam the library to help customers.
- Develop mutually beneficial relationships, for example with the Rossendale Free Press and new business developments (eg Asda).
- Work with the community to make the service a true community resource. Create a market for community events before charging for them.

### **Opening hours**

- Consider changing the pattern of late nights so that Thursday is a late night in at least one of the two libraries. Consider later opening on late nights; 8pm is recommended as an earliest closing time.
- Consider opening Rawtenstall full day Wednesday, closing Tuesday afternoon if absolutely necessary, though no afternoon closure would be preferable.
- Review trailer opening hours and take action.
- Seek local opinion regarding Waterfoot and Crawshawbooth opening hours since there were no strong feelings expressed by members of the focus groups.
- There should be a trial of Sunday opening, possibly at Rawtenstall initially. Any opening should be supported with visible benefits for attendees, possibly around a small number of themes
- Any changes or new openings should be supported by appropriate communications activity targeted at discrete groups.