



Research Project

Listening to our communities



Report on Listening Focus Groups

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1. ABOUT THE PROJECT AND THE FOCUS GROUPS

“Lothian Lugs” project is a collaboration between West Lothian Libraries and Heriot Watt University. The project is supported by the Carnegie UK Trust Engaging Libraries programme which seeks to “*facilitate partnerships between public libraries and researchers, and spark people’s curiosity around topics that are relevant and interesting to them*”. “Research” in this context refers to the type of work carried out by Universities and other organisations trying to discover knowledge and solutions across a wide range of areas, such as science, health, social issues and the environment.

As part of the project, IBP working alongside the Lothian Lugs team undertook a programme of focus group discussions in June 2021 (both virtual and face-to-face) which explored what people might want from libraries in the future. We also took the opportunity to explore what research themes would be of most interest to people to help inform the Lothian Lugs ‘*Borrow a Researcher*’ event programme.

The detail of these groups was as follows:

- A focus group, conducted remotely by Zoom, on Tuesday 1st June, involving 11 adults in the 65+ age group.
- A focus group, conducted remotely by Zoom, on Thursday 3rd June, involving 7 adults in the 18-64 age group.
- A face-to-face focus group with 3 young people taking part in the More Choices, More Chances programme in Livingston.
- A focus group conducted remotely using Cisco WebEx, on Monday 21st June, involving 15 S2 pupils at St Margaret’s Academy in Livingston.
- A focus group conducted remotely using Cisco WebEx, on Monday 22nd June, involving 22 S2 pupils at St Margaret’s Academy in Livingston.

Overall, 58 people overall took part in the focus group sessions. The “adult” groups were recruited via the initial survey that had been conducted, whereby respondents were invited to express an interest in taking part in such a group; they reflected a spread of genders and locations across West Lothian. The other groups were enabled by the teaching staff at St. Margaret’s Academy and the More Choices, More Chances Keyworkers.

An overall Topic Guide was prepared to guide the adult groups, and this is included as Appendix 1 to this report. A separate topic guide was prepared for the young person's groups, which is included as Appendix 2. In each case, the topic guide was drawn on as appropriate in different ways for the different groups.

2. WHAT DO PEOPLE VALUE ABOUT LIBRARIES?

The illustrative comments below highlight the key themes in relation to the things that people valued about their libraries and these things are then summarised below.

“Going to the library makes my week. It’s an important part of my social calendar”

“Libraries are a place of silence. You don’t feel the need to talk to people when you go to the library”

“Libraries have always been a window into the idea of “escape””

“Libraries are places that people feel really belong to the community”

“I took my children on visits to the library and now do the same with my grandchildren. They are places where you can do things as a family”

“I like the e-books and now you get e-talking books as well. This has been great during lockdown.”

“I love the serendipity of browsing”

“The library closing would be a big fear for me””

“Help to overcome digital poverty”

“Libraries support people’s mental health by getting them out and about”

“Children prefer physical books”

“Libraries are non-hierarchical spaces, which is important for people that don’t have much money”

“Libraries are the hub of a community”

People across the demographic groups already place considerable value on their libraries and often expressed a fear of losing their libraries to closure, even when they may only be occasional users of them.

Sometimes the reason for this is a functional one - usually the ability to borrow books but also use of facilities such as PCs for learning purposes or to carry out necessary functions where people do not have the necessary devices otherwise available to them. Some people recognised that, for areas of particular interest, libraries (at least, some libraries) had resources and information that was not easily available elsewhere (e.g. online).

More commonly, and especially for older demographics, a visit to the library is of value in itself, giving people a chance to get out and about and to engage with others. These people value the serendipity of a visit to the library, potentially leaving with a book they hadn't thought of before or having had a quiet conversation with someone they hadn't previously met. Across the age groups, staff interaction was greatly valued, particularly in helping to guide people as to areas of interest and how they could make the most of their time in the library, whether for book borrowing or wider research purposes.

For some, the library is something that they can do (for free) with their families, allowing them to have an enjoyable family day out; again, the support of staff in helping people to have a positive experience was noted.

For those young people that used libraries, they valued access to a quiet space, where they can get away from things.

People across the board particularly valued the idea of libraries as egalitarian spaces that are "for everyone", with people's activities and learning not being constrained by finances or a feeling that the library was not "for them".

One point that was very clear in the discussions was that people either felt that they did not really have great awareness of what their library was like, or what went in in it. On occasion, people had incorrect assumptions about libraries (for example, not recognising the existing range of activities offered in addition to book borrowing).

3. WHAT PREVENTS PEOPLE ENGAGING MORE WITH THEIR LIBRARIES?

The focus groups explored what currently prevents people engaging with libraries. An illustrative set of comments is highlighted below, and the key themes are explored thereafter.

“If I am being honest, I feel intimidated by the traditional idea of a library”

“New technology and social media has definitely had an impact on whether people use the library”

“There are lots of additional services available, but people probably don’t make the most of them”

“Nowadays they are having to compete with Amazon and with Google Books”

“Many people have a Kindle and jump between that and physical books”

“I think of libraries as boring places that are always empty and don’t really engage young people”

“Why borrow music when I can easily get it online”

“Book clubs are difficult to maintain with a limited number of books available”

“I have the impression of libraries as empty and quiet spaces with little going on”

There was a clear recognition in the focus group discussions that libraries were competing for people’s scarce time and that, for a variety of reasons, they were not always winning this competition. Sometimes this was down to specific issues to do with the range of books available for borrowing so that, over time, some library users had begun to lose interest. For some established library users this reflected a view that stock was not refreshed as often as they would like. For some younger people, there was a perception that library borrowing stock would not have the sorts of things they may be interested in (graphic novels and anime being cited as examples).

As noted previously, there was also a sense that people were not aware of, or not yet engaged by, the range of other activities that take place in libraries. In part, this was because these were seen as being promoted in quite a “traditional” way and without an overall, engaging brand identity.

Competition in relation to libraries’ “traditional” role is seen as making them less relevant in terms of that role - many people that might previously have borrowed books or music from the library now go elsewhere for this, whether this is low-cost e-books and free written content online, or streaming services / free music content on sites such as YouTube.

In a wider sense, libraries may have a perception problem in that many people do not see them as offering an experience in which they are interested; some of this experience may be real but some of it may also be down to libraries getting over the message about the range of opportunities already afforded by libraries. Across the groups, there was a significant number of people that saw libraries as “traditional”, “quiet” spaces, which they found to be somewhat alienating.

There was a clear sense that people would like to see libraries modernising and reinventing what they offer and how they offer it in the future, which led into the discussion of the desired “library of the future” which is reported on in the following section.

4. WHAT SHOULD THE LIBRARY OF THE FUTURE BE LIKE?

The focus group discussions went on to explore participants' desires for the "library of the future". Again, the range of responses is illustrated in the comments below and the key themes are summarised thereafter.



The focus group discussions tell suggested that libraries should be:

INDIVIDUAL places when people want this but also **SOCIAL** places where people can go to meet people.

STIMULATING places that encourage people to learn new things and also try out new things, including volunteering.

VIBRANT places where there is always something going on.

Places that allow for **A DAY OUT**, especially with family and friends, with a changing range of activities and events of interest being on offer.

Places that are **UNIQUE TO EACH INDIVIDUAL COMMUNITY**, as reflected in the set up and activities that take place there.

Functionally, libraries should be places that offer **SOMETHING DIFFERENT**. The specifics of this might vary by demographics or individual preference; some people might want access to faster PCs or gaming machines; others might want to be able to read original source material about their local heritage that they can't get elsewhere.

Libraries should also be about **EQUITY AND FAIRNESS**, giving opportunities to everyone, especially in a time when digital exclusion and social isolation are becoming increasing problems.

Taken together, these aspirations led to a number of participants to describe their preferred library of the future as a form of **COMMUNITY HUB**.

All of this means looking at the design of libraries, the facilities that they offer and the range of activities that take place, as well as how these are communicated.

In terms of the facilities and physical design issue, participants very often suggested a café or café-like facility. This was driven not just by a desire for refreshments but by the way in which such a facility helped to foster the concept of community and of people coming together.

Participants also spoke of libraries as affording space for things like galleries, exhibitions and separate learning and play spaces. The desire was most commonly for a physical design that would allow for a range of **distinctive** spaces within an overall library building.

The communications point is equally important; the feedback given strongly suggests a need for comprehensive rebranding of the concept of what a library is for and the sorts of experiences it can offer - the sorts of words that participants used to describe this identity included things like “warm”, “inclusive”, “vibrant”, “Welcoming”, “cool”, “intriguing”.

There are things that can be done now to respond to these aspirations and those involved in designing and delivering library services (and the specific facilities within them) need to build the above thinking into what they do.

5. ENGAGING RESEARCH

When we asked focus group participants about the academic research topics they might be interested in, there were some common themes:

- People are interested in the future of **TOWNS AND HIGH STREETS**; they know that high streets were under pressure anyway and that this has been made worse by the pandemic, and they are interested in how high streets can thrive and again become an asset to their community.
- An interest in issues to do with **MENTAL HEALTH** was also common. Again, this reflected people's concerns about the mental health impacts of the pandemic, but they were also interested in some of the specific research topics that Heriot-Watt University is involved in, such as brain ageing.
- People are interested in the **ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE CHANGE** and especially how this affects their day-to-day life in relation to issues such as self-sufficiency and sustainable homes.
- **FAKE NEWS** was highlighted as an issue in several different ways. Older participants expressed an interest in the politics and constitution of Scotland and the UK but sometimes felt they lacked clear and objective information about this. Young people were very concerned by conspiracy theories and misinformation online. In each case, people wanted to be equipped with the knowledge and skills to make decisions for themselves as to the credibility of different sources.
- **TECHNOLOGIES OF THE FUTURE** were also referenced by some participants, who were interested in things like Robotics and Artificial Intelligence, and how these things might society, and their individual lives, in the future.

People were looking for activities that were distinctive - something different and unique that they would not normally have access to. They were keen to have interesting and different people presenting and delivering these activities and to have activities in which they could engage interactively, rather than just sitting back and listening to people or reading material.

There was a perceived need for human input to these activities and participants wanted to have access to what might be called “engaging experts” who had both subject knowledge and an ability to bring this to life for people in an entertaining and informative manner.

Reflecting the previous comments about how people would like to see libraries, these sorts of activities (that could be both stimulating and entertaining) were just the sort of thing that people wanted to see take place in libraries and, Covid restrictions permitting, they saw local community libraries being important venues for a programme of activities (which they wanted to see taking place across West Lothian).

However, they also felt that some activities could be delivered on more of an “outreach” basis where people come together and that there should also be a mix of online and face-to-face sessions, including live activities that people could access by Zoom or similar.

Participants pointed out how important it would be for the range of activities to be promoted widely and they mentioned a range of suggestions for this including: social media promotion; use of libraries themselves, information within settings such as doctors and dentists, information within supermarkets, and use of any other Council communications channels that were available.

APPENDIX 1: ADULT GROUPS TOPIC GUIDE

- Introductions
- Libraries in the Future - exploratory discussion:

Who should libraries be for? Why?

Imagine you are the Head of Libraries and you are trying to “sell” the idea of a library to a group of young people - what would you say?

Imagine you are on Dragon’s Den and are looking for funding to improve your local library? What would be your “pitch”? What would you invest in? What benefits would this have?

- Libraries in the Future - specific follow-up discussion questions:
 - What do people like about libraries?
 - What could be better?
 - What would encourage people to engage with libraries?
- Engaging Research
 - What topics would be of interest?
 - Prompt in relation to the following?
 - Brain ageing quiz/activities
 - Climate change demos
 - Building a house of the future
 - Pandemic spread - how it works
 - Mental health activities
 - What style and format should the activities take?
 - Why are these most interesting?
 - How might the programme of events be delivered?
 - How should these activities be promoted?

APPENDIX 2: YOUNG PERSON'S GROUPS TOPIC GUIDE

Introductions - each individual to say whether they use public libraries and what for

Participants asked to write down positive words or phrases about libraries (anonymous) - Facilitator to collect and discuss with group

Participants asked to write down reasons why they do not visit libraries (anonymous) - Facilitator to collect and discuss with group

Discuss: What kind of things do you like doing with your time generally? What is it about those things that you like?

Discuss: What type of activities or resources would encourage you to visit libraries?

Final round up question about academic research and selecting subjects most interested in hearing more about.