

Young People and Public Libraries in Ireland: Issues and Opportunities

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Young People and Public Libraries in Ireland: Issues and Opportunities

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The authors of this report are:

**Dr. Bríd McGrath, Dr. Margaret Rogers and
Professor Robbie Gilligan**, Children's Research Centre,
Trinity College, Dublin
(www.tcd.ie/childrensresearchcentre).

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Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs
Department of Health and Children

Hawkins House

Hawkins Street

Dublin 2

Tel: +353 (0)1 635 4000

Fax: +353 (0)1 674 3223

E-mail: omc@health.gov.ie

Web: www.omcya.ie

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**Dr. Bríd McGrath, Dr. Margaret Rogers and
Professor Robbie Gilligan,**
Children's Research Centre, Trinity College, Dublin



Executive Summary

The responses to this survey on young people's use of and views on public libraries in Ireland demonstrate that public libraries provide a wide range of services to young adults, but these are unevenly distributed throughout the country and, indeed, within library authorities. Innovative and attractive services have been provided and more are planned. Many services, however, are limited by lack of space, paucity of training for library staff, the absence of any dedicated young adults' librarians and a low level of knowledge of, and interest in, libraries on the part of teenagers, as well as competition with their other activities.

Nevertheless, half of the library authorities surveyed in this study report an increase in use by teenagers and a positive response to good quality services where they are provided. The library authorities recognise the need to change services to provide better and more relevant services to teenagers and the direction of future developments were generally agreed as:

- to develop library services and resources for teenagers;
- to provide appropriate and dedicated spaces, staffed by young adults' librarians;
- to provide a separate budget allocation for young people's book fund;
- to develop study facilities and homework clubs;
- to provide greater online services and support;
- to develop closer collaboration between schools and public libraries, and school libraries where they exist.

The survey showed a lack of overall planning of services for teenagers, with main findings as follows:

- 28% of library authorities kept no records of the number of their teenage members.
- 34% of library authorities had no specific objectives for teenagers in their library development programmes.
- Only 10% of library authorities had included stock for teenagers in formal collection development policies.
- 55% of library authorities estimated that less than 10% of their public space was allocated to children and young people.
- No library authority employed a young adults' librarian.
- Librarians identified the need for tailored child protection policies and procedures relevant to library services and the need for child protection training for library staff.
- 45% of library authorities had no staff with any training in working with young people; no authority had trained all of its staff in working with teenagers.
- 83% of library authorities had no formal budgetary allocation for stock for young people.
- Despite these limitations, public library authorities provided a wide range of services to young adults, including books, Internet access, music CDs and DVDs. The responses demonstrate an awareness of the recreational and educational needs of young adults and a desire to meet them.
- 62% of library authorities had seen an increase in teenage membership over the last 5 years.
- 14% of library authorities would like to employ a young adults' librarian.
- More than half the library authorities surveyed had consulted young people about their services and stock; however, only a quarter had continuous systems for consulting young adults about their services.
- Almost half the library authorities surveyed intended to develop dedicated space for teenagers in new or refurbished libraries.
- Librarians believed that competition from other activities and lack of knowledge about library services are significant barriers to teenagers' use of libraries.
- Librarians also believed that lack of space was the most significant limitation on providing services for teenagers, followed by lack of staff and lack of staff training.



1 INTRODUCTION

Following a public competition in late 2006, the Children's Research Centre in Trinity College, Dublin was commissioned by the Office of the Minister for Children to undertake a study into public library provision for young people aged 13-17 in Ireland. Fieldwork was completed between April and November 2007. A major focus of the study was to be young people's views and opinions on public library services. This approach is in line with Government policy in relation to consulting children and young people in order to promote their participation in policy-making in Irish society. The realisation of this commitment is the responsibility of the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA) and it is being achieved through consultative and participative fora, such as Dáil na nÓg, Comhairle na nÓg and the Children and Young People's Forum, and also through the commissioning of research on a range of topics, such as recreation (De Róiste and Dinneen, 2005), and the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (OMC, 2005). This study represents another important initiative in this regard and is the first time such a study has been undertaken – the consultation of young people about their views on public library services in Ireland.

The aim of the research, as outlined in the tender brief, was to *'investigate young people's (13-17 years of age) opinions and perceptions of current library services, as well as to obtain their ideas for creating a public library that would appeal to their age group'*.

The objectives, as specified in the tender request, were:

1. To examine the current provision of library services for young people in Ireland.
2. To examine young people's attitudes towards and experience of public library services, including:
 - i. *Barriers to using the public library services* – what are the barriers, both psychological and physical, that prevent young people from using public library services in Ireland? What can be done to overcome these barriers?
 - ii. *Motivations and benefits* – what do young people want from public library services? What are young people's reading and information needs?
3. To examine national and/or international best practice in the promotion and development of library services among young people.
4. To make recommendations for developing public libraries to meet the needs of young people.

The study takes place within the wider policy context of library development in Ireland (Department of the Environment and Local Government, 1998; NESF, 2007) and the 2007 National Recreation Policy for Young People, *Teenspace* (OMC, 2007). Adolescence is a time when young people gain increased autonomy, particularly in relation to recreational pursuits. It is also a time when their educational demands diversify and increase, and when independent access to information in relation to a wide range of topics becomes important to them. Libraries have an important role to play in the development of the 'knowledge society' (see www.taoiseach.gov.ie for e-Government policy) as both providers and managers of increasingly extensive and complex streams of information (Qvortrup, 2007). Consequently, public library services are a potentially valuable resource. Accessing the views and experiences of young people in relation to barriers and incentives to library use is therefore both timely and informative.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Public libraries have been a familiar feature of the Irish cultural and community landscape for over 150 years. As the Library Council or An Chomhairle Leabharlanna (2006) states: *'Their purpose is to provide access to the world of the imagination; to the cultural memory of communities and society at large, and to sources of information and knowledge.'*

In Ireland, public libraries are funded through a combination of Exchequer and Local Authority monies, with capital programmes, such as new builds or refurbishment, coming from Central Government funds. According to 2009 figures from An Chomhairle Leabharlanna, the estimated expenditure on public libraries in 2008 was €130.5 million, or €30.78 per capita (see www.librarycouncil.ie/public/index.shtml). Library authorities spent an estimated €14.8 million on stocking public libraries with books and other materials in 2008. Since 1999, the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government has provided €91.9 million (as at December 2007) in capital grants for the construction and leasing of new buildings, automation, transport and the stocking and fitting out of new and refurbished libraries.

Public libraries perform a valuable community service, democratising access to reading, information and learning, and act as a 'shop window' for local authority services. They provide a focal point for community and intergenerational contact, and enable access to learning and an ever-expanding range of information for a wide constituency through an increasingly broad and varied range of media (Bundy, 2006).

Libraries have always catered for children and families, as well as for individual readers of all ages. But they have frequently struggled to maintain the interest of young people and young adults, from teenagers to those in their early 20s. It is often at this age that usage shows a sharp decline and this is reflected in the experience of public libraries nationally and internationally (Define Research and Insight, 2006). In many ways, this is not surprising. A study undertaken of services and resources for children and young adults in Washington DC found that *'although nearly a fourth of library patrons are teenagers, public libraries traditionally have devoted less of their space, personnel and financial resources to services for teenagers than to any other age group'* (NCES, 1995, p. 357).

A research study undertaken in the UK in 2006 looked at the future development of libraries to attract users in the 14-35 year-old age bracket and found that *'the way libraries develop must take into account the needs and expectations of the groups who most underutilise the services, whilst obviously also accounting for the full range of library user needs'* (Define Research and Insight, 2006, p. 9).

Internationally, there is a recognition that reconceptualising public libraries might mean moving away from the traditional mode of library operation, which is characterised by a culture of silence, to seeing them as venues for, or even components of, a 'cultural hub', providing a range of learning, informational and cultural activity, including options for quiet reading among other activities (An Chomhairle Leabharlanna, 2006; Department of Culture, Media and Sport [UK], 1999). Indeed, the notion of 'reaching beyond the walls' – in terms both of outreach programmes, but also 'virtual' spaces and experiences – is increasingly being seen as part of the future configuration of library services (The Reading Agency, 2004).

Within communities, both urban and rural, public libraries have the potential to promote and effectively engage with the notions of active citizenship and social inclusion (An Chomhairle Leabharlanna, 2006).

Therefore, it is important to locate public libraries within a context of wider service provision, complementary social and cultural resources, and partnerships which can work together to enhance the learning, participative and cultural experience of young people (Walter *et al*, 2005).

Use of public libraries by young people

Libraries have traditionally been key providers of information and material for education, leisure and cultural pursuits, functioning as a gateway to the world of knowledge (Department of the Environment and Local Government, 1998), with book provision as the cornerstone of their services. While libraries increasingly provide a wider and more diverse range of formats, reading remains their central focus. Reading is of wide-ranging value to society, promoting education, independence, equality and health (Hicks, 2003). International research shows that reading continues to be important in young people's lives, but increasingly includes a wider range of media than books alone. The 2007 American Harris Poll found that the major reason young people gave for visiting libraries was to borrow books for personal use (78%), for school assignments (67%), to read on the premises or to use the library website for information, research or recreation (34%), or to 'hang out' with friends (18%) (Harris Interactive, 2007).

In the Irish context, it has been found that the highest percentage of people who had ever been library members (88%) was in the 15-19 year-old age bracket (An Chomhairle Leabharlanna, 2004). This was similar to usage rates found in Northern Ireland (Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure [NI], 2002) and compares well with international figures (OCLC¹, 2006). However, the *Public Library Users Survey (PLUS) 2007* found that young adults aged 15-34 were under-represented among library users (An Chomhairle Leabharlanna, 2007).

In recent years, many public libraries, particularly larger branches in urban areas, have increasingly promoted libraries as places for teenagers to 'hang out', responding to the needs and interests of young people. As reported in the 2007 National Recreation Policy, *Teenspace*, 'The larger public libraries have dedicated "teen zones" with sofas, CD-listening posts, free Internet access and multimedia and music collections. The availability of these services can draw young people into accessing literature, as well as information relevant to their needs. Public libraries have also undertaken innovative projects such as drama and drumming workshops, specifically aimed at young people' (OMC, 2007, p. 63).

Library collections for young people

Access to a range of contemporary media was cited as one of the things most likely to entice young people to visit libraries (Department of the Environment and Local Government, 1998), as well as upgrading the information and communications technology (ICT) infrastructure. Many of these innovations have been developed as confirmed by the 2003 Public Library Users Survey, which also found that improving the library collection (e.g. having more CDs and DVDs) would convince young people to make more use of public libraries (An Chomhairle Leabharlanna, 2004). Creation of specialised collections – including items appealing to young people's interests (e.g. music, sport, films, fashion, performance) and materials such as magazines, comics and young adult literature – has been noted to result in higher usage by young people (Blanes, 2005). Matching services and materials to young people's changing interests and developmental needs has been identified as important if libraries are to maintain relevance for them as users (International Book Committee and International Publishing Association, 1992). As Bakken (2007, pp. 6-7) notes: 'Young people have been given low priority, although my own experience suggests that to reach them requires no great effort. All it takes is enough interesting books or other media and an open, honest approach to young people.'

¹ The Online Computer Library Centre (OCLC) is a non-profit, membership, computer library service and research organisation dedicated to the public purposes of furthering access to the world's information and reducing the rate of rise of library costs.

Specialised staffing for young people

Although there has been little evaluation of the role of specialist teen or young adults' librarians, evidence points to the value of dedicated staff with understanding of young people and their interests (Jenkins, 2000; Clancey, 2007). Where young adults' librarians have been employed, negative impressions of library staff appear less prevalent and library collections have been found to be more reflective of young people's interests and tastes (Willett, 1995). Useful guides and resource materials on how to best serve young people have also been produced (e.g. Anderson, 2005; Jones *et al.*, 2004 and 2006; Dodds, 2003).

Public libraries and schools

The relationships and synergy between public and school libraries or other specialist resources have also been highlighted. Libraries in Ireland have a long history of linking with and supporting school-based initiatives, especially at primary school level. One such example was the administration of a 'book grant' to the Primary School Library Scheme.² Schools also avail of block loans of materials to supplement their class libraries. This relationship helps to connect young people with libraries and highlights the relevance and potential value of library usage to them (Department of the Environment and Local Government, 1998). However, links with second-level schools are less well developed (Haslett, 2002). Professional librarians are only employed in a minority of second-level schools, either under the Junior Certificate Schools Programme (JCSP) Demonstration Library Project (CDVEC, 2006)³ or in a small number of private schools.

Branching Out: A New Public Library Service, the 1998 report by the Department of the Environment and Local Government, made several recommendations in relation to cooperation between public libraries and schools, such as developing greater links between the Department of Education and Science and An Chomhairle Leabharlanna (The Library Council) and, at local level, working with Transition Year teachers to promote information skills.

In many countries, dual-use libraries, serving both schools and the wider community, have been developed (Haycock, 2006; McNichol, 2003). International studies have shown the benefits to be gained, in terms of educational attainment and lifelong learning, from developing both school libraries and closer links between public libraries and schools (Lance, 1994; Lonsdale, 2003; UNESCO, 2000). The potential benefits of sharing and using public library information resources by schools have also been highlighted by Henefer (2007, p. 64): *'There is a clear need to create a more robust cooperative relationship between secondary schools and the public libraries in order to enhance the information worlds of all young people in Ireland.'*

Barriers to library use

Barriers to library use may be both physical and psychological, or a mixture of both. Physical barriers have been found to include issues such as distance and transport, competition from other services and attractions, and limited opening hours; psychological barriers include an association with study, silence or boredom, a stereotype of library staff as unwelcoming and a lack of family tradition of using library services (Coradini, 2006; Lynch, 2007). Library buildings can be perceived as boring or intimidating, and young people internationally have cited the lack of interesting

² This service was funded by a grant from the Department of Education and Science, specifically to support the development of collections in primary school libraries. The level of support was calculated based on the number of pupils in each school. The grant was €4.52 per pupil in 2008. This scheme was abolished, however, in the 2009 Budget. It is hoped that this budget cut will not be permanent.

³ The Junior Certificate Schools Programme Demonstration Library Project began in 1996 with 21 secondary schools in disadvantaged areas and will be expanded to a total of 50 schools. This project has been extended to 30 schools.

material as a disincentive to using libraries (OCLC, 2006). An increasing range of contemporary media, entertainment and information sources available to young people, frequently in their own homes, has also been identified as a barrier (Thorhauge, 2006).

Other recurrent themes highlighted as barriers to library use include a negative attitude to young people's presence in libraries, the need for library staff to be more user-friendly and open to providing support to children and young people (Jones *et al*, 2006) and the need for the same standards of care to be applied to all users of the library, whether young or old (CILIP, 2002). Library staff themselves may be reluctant to engage or work with children or young people, citing a lack of training in dealing with these age groups as an issue (McNichol, 2007).

While the barriers to use vary, for teenagers in particular issues such as a place to meet, availability of music and a space to be able to talk or engage in discussion (activities not traditionally associated with public libraries) were key elements identified by users as barriers or reasons not to use the service (Whelan and Costello, 2002). Initiatives to cater for these kinds of needs require vision, flexibility, resourcing and specialised training for key staff.

Factors that encourage library use

Good internal design can have a significant impact on library use, as well as enabling staff to manage the diverse needs and behaviours of a range of users and age groups (Clancey, 2007). Standards of design and layout in modern Irish libraries have improved dramatically in recent years and a number of them have received international architectural and design awards (e.g. CILIP Public Library Building Awards in 2007). Creating spaces that provide access to a range of materials – including magazines, computers, study space, CDs and DVDs and listening posts – across a spectrum of ages has been shown to generate interest among young people. Arranging material by genre or identifying material of interest to young people (e.g. by means of special stickers on book spines) can also increase the use of stock (Sissons, 1997). Involving young people in the planning and delivery of library services (e.g. as reviewers) or in planning purchases can ensure that their interests and needs are addressed and has been found to play a key role in attracting their peers to the library (Massachusetts Library Association, Youth Services Section, 2005).

Young people read both above and below their age group, using both young people's and adult materials. Locating 'teen zones' close to other materials of interest, such as music, magazines, DVDs and computers, allows young people to access a range of materials and to make the transition to full library use (Sissons, 1997). *Branching Out: Future Directions*, the 2008 report on public library services by the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, prioritises giving 'greater attention to teenagers and young adults with the provision of areas in the library dedicated to teenagers, which are comfortable and teenage-focused'.

Promotion of library services

Libraries have traditionally been modest in marketing and promoting their services. As discussed above, in terms of young people in particular, libraries are in competition with a host of other attractions – recreational, cultural and educational (De Róiste and Dinneen, 2005). Internationally, it has been argued that lack of evaluation and research has undermined libraries' ability to highlight their value, relevance and effectiveness (OCLC, 2006). Many libraries have now embraced the Internet and social networking sites in order to promote their services and link or connect with younger users. Among an increasing plethora of information and knowledge sources, the challenge for libraries is 'to clearly define and market their relevant place in that infosphere – their services and collections, both physical and virtual' (OCLC, 2006, p. 6).



3 METHODOLOGY

The present study aimed to assess the level of provision for young people in Irish public library services and to ascertain the views of young people on issues and opportunities affecting them. To this end, two sets of key informants were identified: young people aged 13-17 years and library staff from all 32 City and County public library services. Following a literature review, the research design for the study was finalised and included the following elements:

- a questionnaire survey of existing library provision;
- identification of examples of good practice, nationally and internationally, including site visits;
- focus group discussion with groups of young people, reflecting the diversity of young people in Ireland today;
- short individual questionnaires completed by focus group participants;
- meetings with library personnel.

Ethical approval was secured through the Research Ethics Approval Committee of the Children's Research Centre, Trinity College, Dublin, and the research was carried out in compliance with the Centre's ethical guidelines.

Survey of public library provision for young people

A 43-item survey instrument was designed to examine the current public library provision for young people in Ireland and distributed to all 32 City and County public libraries and their branch networks. The questionnaire asked about youth membership, library services, staffing, stock, budget allocations, training, future plans and perceived barriers to young people's use of public libraries. Prior to initiating the fieldwork (which took place between March and November 2007), an explanatory briefing was circulated to all Directors of Services with responsibilities for libraries in each local authority. The survey was initially piloted with two services before electronic circulation to the wider sample group.

The survey achieved a 91% response rate, which is an excellent result for this type of qualitative research. The data from the returned questionnaires were entered into a spreadsheet, using the AppleWorks® software to tabulate responses and calculate statistics.

In addition to the library survey, two meetings were held with library personnel: one with the Library Association Youth Group and the other with school librarians from the Junior Certificate Schools Programme (JCSP) Demonstration Library Project.

Young people's participation in focus groups

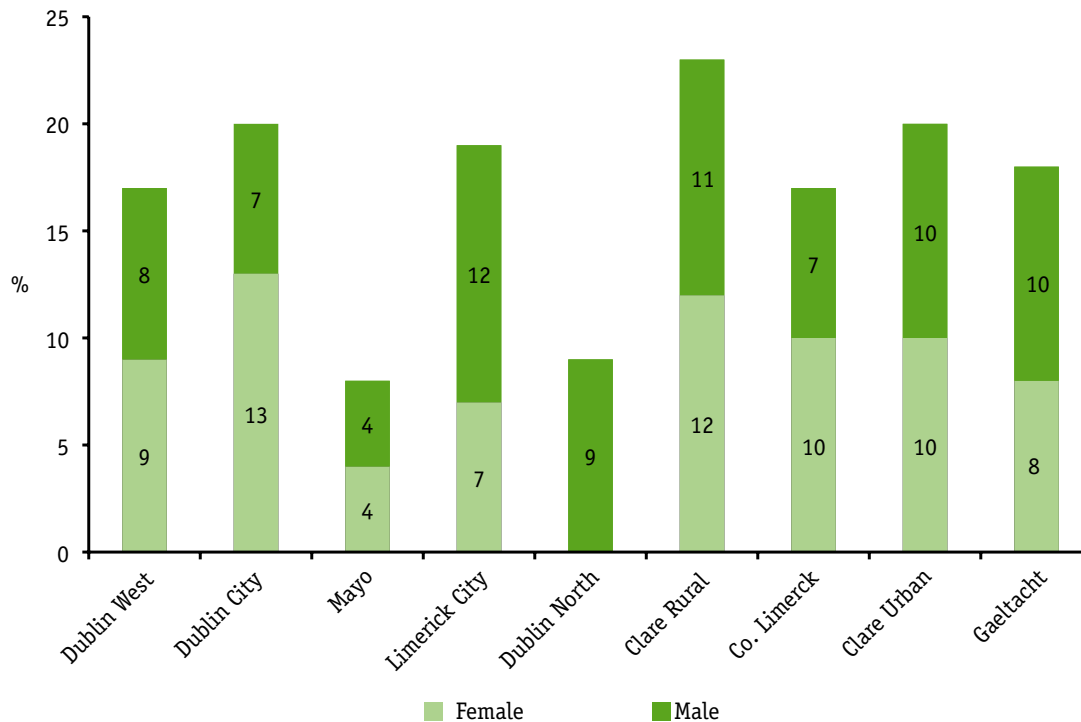
Consultation with young people, aged 13-17, was facilitated through focus groups. The focus group methodology was chosen and designed by the research team as the most effective qualitative research strategy to access a diverse and inclusive range of views and experiences of young people in contemporary Ireland over a short period of time and in multiple locations.

There are advantages to using focus groups for this type of consultation and with this age group since young people may often feel more empowered and confident when responding within a group and the support offered by a group can encourage individuals to greater openness (Vaughn *et al*, 1996). In addition, not everyone is required to answer every question, preventing sparse or foreshortened interviews (Hennessy and Heary, 2005). While focus groups as a method may pose dilemmas when dealing with sensitive issues and the likelihood of personal disclosure in a group setting (Hill *et al*, 1996), such issues did not arise in this study since the subject matter was not of a personal, sensitive or controversial nature.

A balance of gender, mix of ages (within the prescribed range), urban/rural locations and diverse socio-economic background was sought in the focus groups, as well as representation from specific populations, such as the Traveller community, young immigrants or young people born in Ireland

of non-national parents, young people with disabilities and Irish speakers (see Figure 1). Particular emphasis was placed on accessing young people who might be considered 'hard to reach' or who might underutilise library services, while also maintaining a balance of linking with young people through mainstream universal services. Recruitment was organised with the cooperation of secondary schools, youth services, Comhairle na nÓg structures and library personnel, with positive responses received from all groups.

Figure 1: Focus groups, by location and gender (%)



Overall, 154 young people were consulted in 9 locations through the focus group process. They were facilitated either jointly by two researchers from the Children's Research Centre or by one researcher in collaboration with a supervising adult in the selected venue. In all cases, materials informing the young people of the purpose and operation of the study were devised and forwarded in advance for distribution to potential participants. Once agreement to host focus groups had been secured, information leaflets and consent forms were forwarded to the supervising adults for distribution. Consent was sought and obtained from each young person participating and from parents and/or the responsible adult for the group as a whole.⁴ In all cases, a supervising adult (e.g. a teacher, youth leaders) was present during the focus group discussions, in keeping with the study's ethical approval. This was considered appropriate since these were adults with whom the young people had an existing relationship, but who were not involved in the provision of library services.

The focus groups ranged in size from small groups of 8 participants to school classes of up to 24 students. The sample of young people consulted was diverse, with participants coming from many strands of social, cultural and economic contemporary Irish life. A gender balance of 48% female to 52% male was achieved. While the great majority of the participants were white Irish (91%), including 10 members of the Traveller community, a further 14 (9%) were of other nationalities. Focus group responses were recorded on flip-charts and in contemporaneous field notes, which were subsequently collated and thematically analysed.

⁴ The option for parental/guardian consent was included in the consent forms, but as the organisation or agency who arranged contact with the young people had obtained parental consent for young people to participate in organised programmes, their consent as supervising adults was considered adequate (given the nature of the topic) by the researchers and the ethical approval process.

Focus group topic guides were used to explore general perceptions of:

- public libraries;
- services provided or desired;
- space and décor;
- library stock;
- information needs;
- barriers to library usage;
- skills and training for library staff.

Each participant was also asked to complete a short questionnaire indicating library membership, usage and staff attitudes.

Reported data from the focus groups are generally presented in this report as the agreed group response. Individual contributions, where used, are indicated. Individual responses from the young people's questionnaires are indicated as 'individual response'.

Site visits

Site visits were undertaken to 8 library branches in Ireland and to 2 in Washington State, USA⁵, specifically to see their provision for young people. They included both large and small branches in urban, suburban and rural settings. Branches visited were:

- Ashbourne Library, Co. Meath;
- Bishopstown Library, Co. Cork;
- Blanchardstown Library, Fingal, Co. Dublin;
- Cork City Library;
- Lady Lane Library, Waterford;
- Milford Library, Co. Donegal;
- Tory Tops Library, Ballyphehane, Co. Cork;
- Watch House Cross Community Library, Limerick;
- Bellevue City Library, King County Library System, Washington State, USA;
- Woodinville Community Library, King County Library System, Washington State, USA.

In addition, contact was made with informants and subject experts in Ireland, France, the UK and USA. Fieldwork for the study was carried out between March and November 2007.

⁵ King County Library services were visited in the course of a private trip to the USA by one of the research team. This case study is included as an example of international good practice.

4 MAIN FINDINGS

Public library provision for young people in Ireland

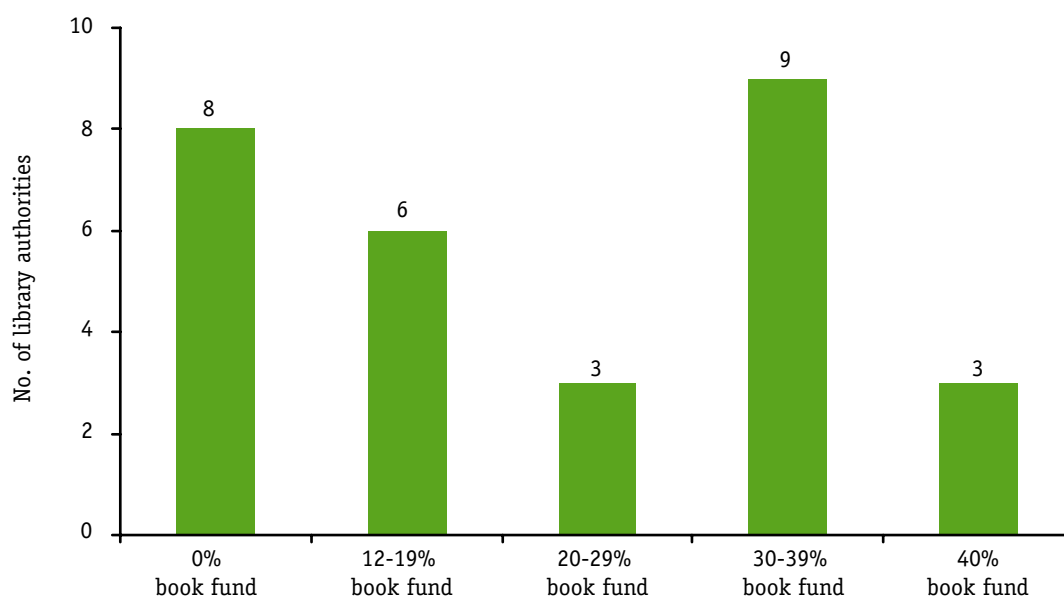
Survey responses and site visits showed many examples of good practice, innovation and responsiveness in terms of responding to young people's priorities and interests. However, gaps were also revealed in service provision for young people. This was evident in relation to data collection, staffing, collection planning and development, budget allocation, space, stock and services. Significantly, it emerged that public library authorities in Ireland have no agreed definition of 'young people' and that more than 25% do not keep statistics on teenagers' membership.

In terms of planning to meet the needs of young people as a distinct user group, the majority of library development programmes grouped children and young people together, placing the greatest emphasis on children under the age of 12. Two-thirds of the library authorities reported one or more specific objectives in relation to young people, with the most comprehensive statement of objectives coming from Cork City Library (which has a dedicated children and young people's librarian post). The plans of 4 library authorities did not include any objectives in relation to young people specifically.

Budgets

The 'book fund' is the purchasing element of any library's budget to buy stock (books). As Figure 2 shows, 8 library authorities out of the total of 29 who answered the question reported having no formal plan for the allocation of their book fund. Of the 21 library authorities with a formal budgetary allocation, 3 reported a commitment of 40% of their book fund for children and young people; 9 had committed 30-39%; 3 had committed 20-29%; and 6 had committed 12-19%. Only 5 library authorities reported making a specific budgetary allocation for teenagers, ranging from a high of 17.5% to a low of 3.5%. 24 library authorities reported that they do not pre-allocate a portion of their budget for their youth collection. However, one of these authorities, prompted by the survey, did a special calculation which revealed that it had spent 2.2% of its 2006 budget on stock for young people (this example may not, of course, be typical of the remainder). Generally, these findings suggest that budgetary allocation for young people is quite arbitrary and that pre-allocation can result in a higher proportion of spending on youth collections.⁶

Figure 2: % of budget pre-allocated to children and teenagers (book fund)



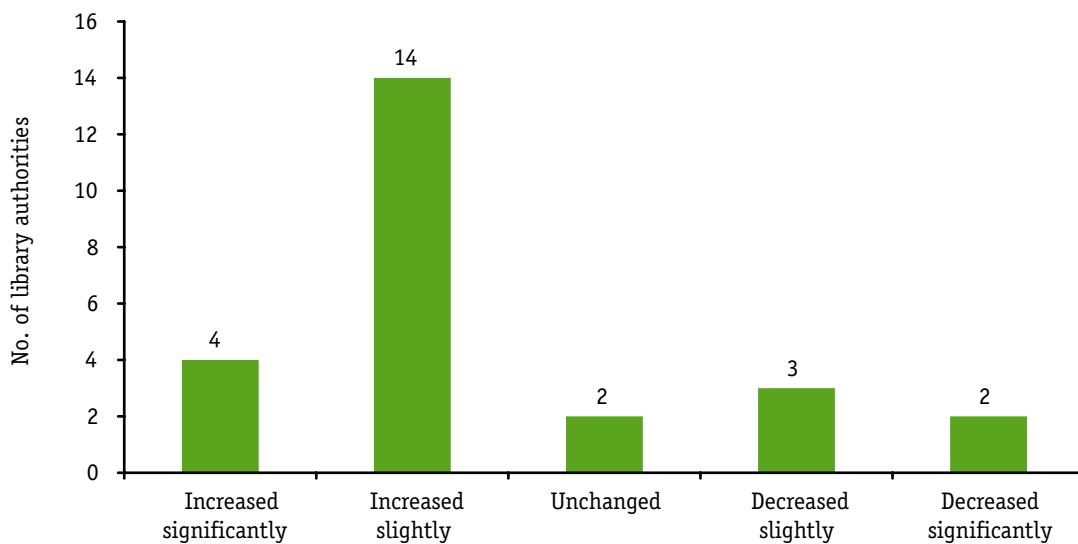
⁶ The survey responses did not indicate whether the Primary School Book Grant was included in these allocations, therefore the actual local authority budget expended may be lower in some cases.

However, as noted by some respondents, teenagers read both above and below their age group and have free access to all material in the adult lending and reference collections. Therefore, the smaller allocations may not be as significant for them as for younger age groups. Nevertheless, it is likely that low or non-existent budget allocations for young people result in less extensive youth-specific stock.

Library membership among young people

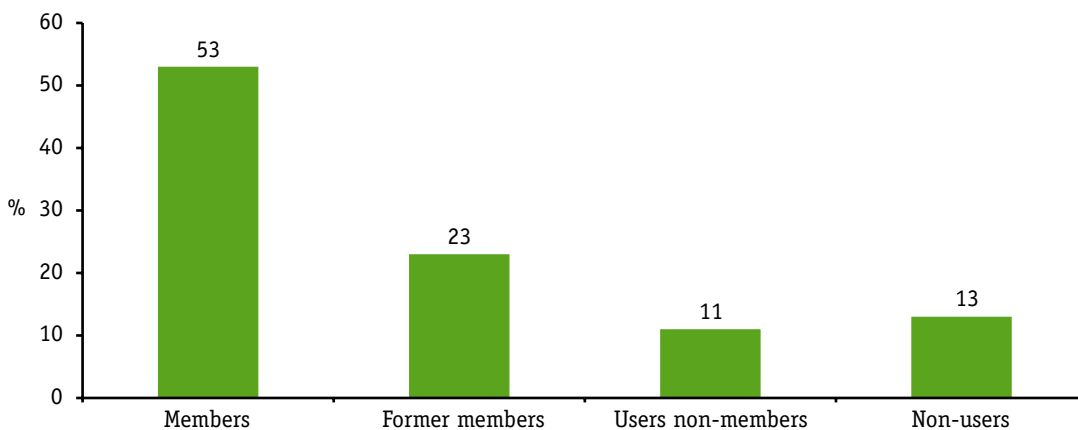
It was not possible to accurately track young people's membership of public libraries or their patterns of usage because, as noted above, young people (aged 13-17) are not recorded as a distinct cohort of service user. Nevertheless, almost three-quarters of the library authorities answering this question reported an increase in teenager membership over the last 5 years, with the majority (14) reporting a slight increase (see Figure 3). Only 5 library authorities reported a decrease in teenage membership.

Figure 3: Changes in teenager membership of libraries, 2002-2007



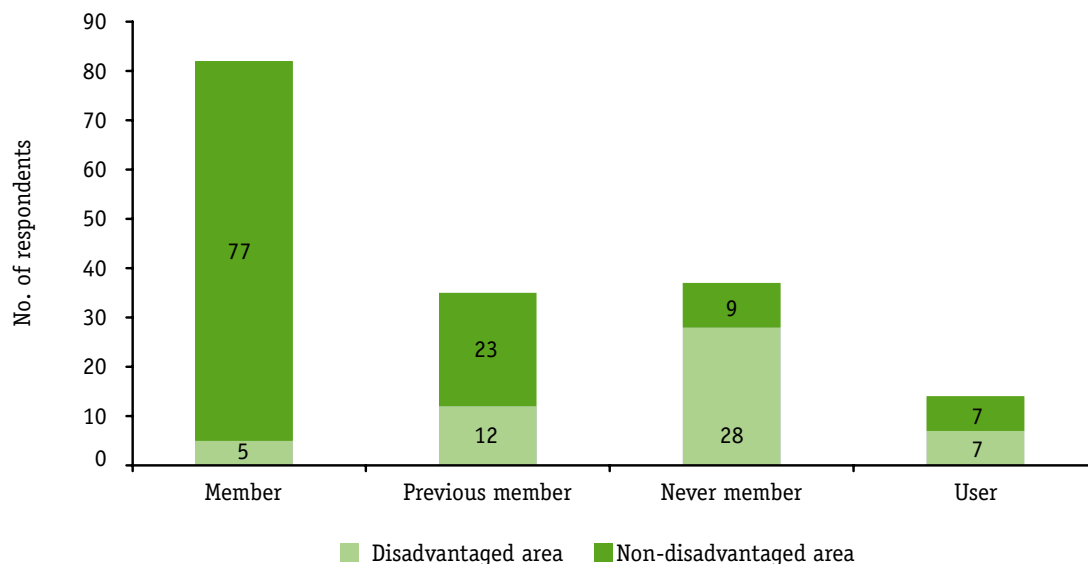
Of the 154 young people who participated in the study, 82 (53%) were currently library members; a further 35 (23%) had previously been members, mostly when in primary school; 17 young people (11%) who were non-members reported using public libraries, primarily to study or to use the computers; and 20 young people (13%) had never used a public library (see Figure 4). Many of the young people were regular library users, with 37% having used a library in the previous month and 24% having used one in the previous 6 months.

Figure 4: Membership profile (%)



A striking difference emerged in membership profile between young people from disadvantaged areas and those from other areas (see Figure 5). Of a total of 45 respondents from disadvantaged areas⁷, just 5 (12%) were current library members and while a more substantial number had been members as children, the proportion was substantially less than those from non-disadvantaged backgrounds. Equally, the percentage of young people from disadvantaged areas who had never been library members was more than 4 times higher than their peers from non-disadvantaged areas. This suggests a need to promote library access and usage proactively in such areas.

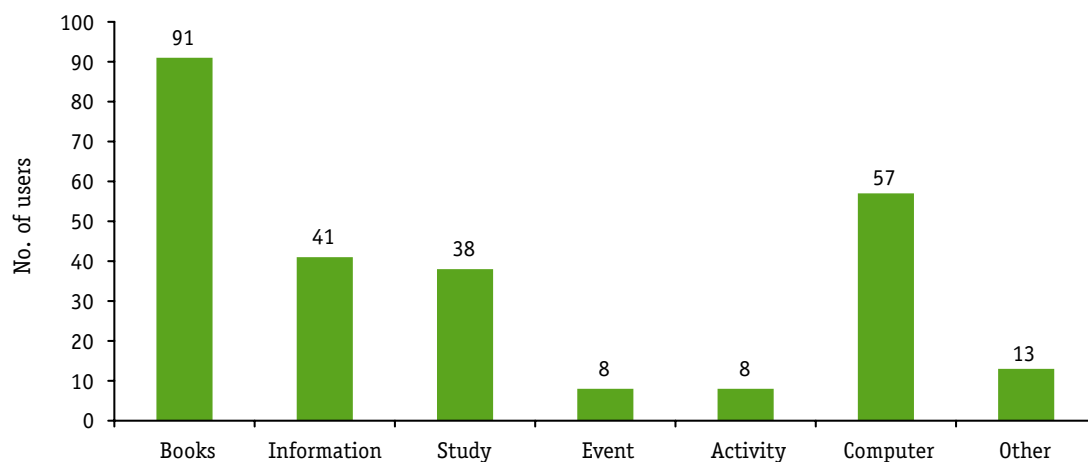
Figure 5: Membership profile, by disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged areas



Library services used by young people

Of the 135 young people who responded to the question asking them what they used public libraries for, predictably, *borrowing books* was by far the most popular service (91 people or 67%) (see Figure 6). *Using computers* (57 or 42%) was next, followed by *accessing information* (41 or 30%) and using the local library as *a place to study* (38 or 28%). Attendance at events or activities were the lowest categories of usage: 8 young people reported attending a one-off meeting in their local library, while a further 8 attended an event (e.g. a music workshop or Book Week). These low attendance figures may indicate a lack of interest or it may suggest that events or activities relevant to young people are simply either not often offered or not sufficiently publicised.

Figure 6: Library services used by young people



⁷ Disadvantaged areas were identified as those included in the RAPID (Revitalising Areas by Planning Investment and Development) Programme.

The library collection for young people

Just half of the library authorities surveyed reported having formal written collection development policies that guide their spending on books and other materials. Only 3 of these library authorities included specific plans for young people's stock, while 2 others had provisions for children and young people combined. One respondent noted: *'The collection consists of young adult fiction in a range of genres and some adult fiction titles of interest to this user group are also included. Graphic novels are also included in this collection. Non-fiction, ranging from curriculum specific texts to general topic-based non-fiction, is also included in the collection. A range of material on DVD and video is also available and these items cover popular films and curriculum-based topics. Music in CD format is also available'* (Library Authority 30).

In the majority of library authorities, young people's collections are displayed separately from adult and children's sections. Some libraries shelve books by more specific age ranges: *'We have observed that children tend to read outside their specific age group, so 10-12 year-old children want to select and read the books in the Young Adult section. By the time they are 13 and 14 years of age, they want to select titles from the Adult lending library'* (Library Authority 8).

Young people expressed an interest in a wide range of text and new media materials. Magazines and graphic novels, as well as conventional books, were favoured. Having up-to-date and relevant stock was seen as a priority: *'Sometimes the books are ancient, like from the '90s, and I think they should get new ones'* (Individual response, Focus Group 5) and *'CDs, DVDs and magazines; more computers (free) and access to Internet sites, such as Bebo. Games as well as books (PC games and board games)'* (Focus Group 2).

Fewer than half of the library authorities surveyed provided magazines for young people; only 5 libraries reported providing magazines in all their branches. One library reported having to cancel subscriptions to magazines for young adults due to budgetary constraints.

A number of libraries reported providing special collections of interest to teenagers. These included material for people with limited literacy or 'easy reading books' (5 libraries), graphic novels (4 libraries), foreign languages (3 libraries) and local history for both recreational use and school projects (1 library), while 15 libraries provided study aids.

Some libraries specifically encouraged youth organisations to meet in the library; for example, 5 libraries provided homework clubs and others had board games (including chess) and scheduled times for popular computer games.

Young people also saw public libraries as sites and sources of popular culture, as well as artistic materials and experience. Music in various forms was ranked highly: *'Music room, pianos, guitars and classes, choir, singing lessons'* (Focus Group 4).

All the focus groups mentioned wanting access to CDs to borrow, the facility to download music from the Internet and the option simply to listen to music in the library. To be able to 'try out' CDs in the library first before spending scarce resources on purchasing or downloading them was suggested. Many young people would like to see workshops provided by the library relating to learning, writing or performing music, as well as workshops on creative writing and drama.

The availability of DVDs, playstations or PC games was also mentioned as desirable facilities to have in libraries. A number of young people expressed interest in film clubs or possibly combined book-and-film clubs.

Examples of good practice

- **Ashbourne Library** in Co. Meath provides a CD listening post.
- **Watch House Cross Community Library** in Limerick has a language laboratory and a sound-proofed music practice room, equipped with electric guitars and amplifiers.
- **Blanchardstown Library** in Fingal, Co. Dublin, has CD-ROM and access to on-line databases, such as Grove Music and Grove Art.
- The Children and Young People's Executive Librarians of **Cork City Library** organised a series of song-writing workshops.
- Ten young singer/song-writers who participated in song-writing workshops with Cork musician John Spillane showcased their talents in the 'Star Teen Concert', hosted in **Bishopstown Library**, Co. Cork, in April 2007.

Space, layout and décor

A relatively small amount of public library space is allocated specifically for young people's stock and services. While more space is available in newer library buildings, half the library authorities surveyed estimated that less than 10% of their space was allocated to stock and services specifically for young people. All public areas of libraries are, of course, available to every reader and teenagers may – and do – freely use all the public space.

There was no shortage of suggestions for the kinds of environment that young people proposed libraries could, and should, present to attract their age group. They emphasized a desire for comfort, relaxation and refreshments, and spaces where they could meet other young people. Comments such as '*being allowed to talk (quietly)*' and '*more comfortable furniture*' were also common. Suggestions from one focus group summarise the views of most participants: '*Yes, comfy armchairs and beanbags, table – big tables. Brightly furnished, but not distracting. A laminator. Artwork by young people. School books available on the shelves. Plenty of sitting room – couches that go all the way around. A separate area for exam students. More computers, with comfy chairs and headphones*' (Focus Group 4).

Examples of good practice

- All library branches visited had dedicated signed areas for young people, with collections of young adult reading materials, including books, graphic novels and magazines.
- Many were comfortably and colourfully furnished, with displays of posters and leaflets of interest to young people.
- Many also had specific CD and DVD collections or were adjacent to the general adult CD and DVD areas.

Facilities and amenities

Alongside dedicated young adult areas, teenagers have access to the full public library collection of books and magazines, music, audio-books, DVDs and the Internet (with some restrictions for their protection). They can also avail themselves of reference services (answering queries) and reading space. Where provided, they can avail of listening posts, noticeboards, book clubs, creative writing groups, exhibition space, study space or meeting rooms, and photocopying facilities.

Examples of good practice

- **Lady Lane Library** in Waterford provides a scanner and photocopying machine, as well as a coffee/tea machine.
- In the USA, food or drink is not provided in the **King County Library System**, but patrons are free to bring refreshments in with them. This has not proved to be problematic. For some programmes, such as 'Pizza and Pages' (a teen book club), pizza or other snacks are provided.

On-line resources

Young people can access an increasing range of free on-line resources through the Internet in public libraries, such as *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (including the children and student editions), *The Irish Times* digital archive, CredoRef and Grove. These are very valuable assets to teenagers for educational and leisure activities. Librarians welcome the increasing capacity of the Internet as an attractive and powerful facility for their users. The top three reasons given by young people for their use of the Internet were reported as school project work, leisure and e-mail.

Library authorities responding to the survey indicated that they are increasingly developing dedicated collections of special interest to young people. However, these, like other non-virtual resources, are often only provided in the larger branches and are therefore less available to teenagers in rural areas. On the other hand, Donegal's pioneering 'Taobh Tíre' project to serve rural areas has had a strong commitment to young people in that county.

Examples of good practice

- Many library branches, notably larger and newer premises such as **Watch House Cross Community Library** in Limerick and **Blanchardstown Library** in Fingal, Co. Dublin, had extensive ICT suites, with 20-30 PCs provided as well as projectors, webcams and Internet access, available both for training purposes and general usage.
- Playstations, equipped with headphones, are also available in some libraries.
- **Tipperary** and **Waterford City** Libraries have specific sections for teenagers on their websites.
- 6 other library authorities plan to include teen zones in their refurbished premises.
- Teenagers formed more than one quarter of web users in **Wexford County Libraries** in 2006.
- In the USA, Internet access is widely available throughout the **King County Library System**.⁸ Some branches have laptop computers that can be borrowed for use within the library. Under 17s have access to the Internet in 'safe search' mode, with limited filtering. Access to social networking sites, such as MySpace or Facebook, is freely available. In fact, the library itself has a page on MySpace, linked to the library website (www.kcls.org). Monthly 'gaming' sessions using Playstations, X-Box and Nintendo DS are held in a number of branches. The teen page on the library website promotes events for young people and provides an on-line 'Ask a librarian' resource.

⁸ The King County Library System covers a geographic area of 2,134 square miles within Washington State. Its 43 branch libraries serve a population of 1.8 million people in rural, urban and suburban settings. Its annual budget in 2007 amounted to US\$20.5 million.

Services to schools

All library authorities provide services to primary schools, facilitating class visits, authors' readings and other events, and administer the Department of Education book grant for primary schools (there is no comparable grant for secondary schools).⁹ All libraries provide services to school students directly through resource materials for projects, including local history resources, providing study space and facilitating class tours and visits. More than two-thirds of the library authorities reported providing other additional services, such as work experience for students, resources including block loans for teachers, authors' visits or IT support. Events were also organised by libraries, such as exhibitions and workshops in local studies, study skills, drama, creative writing, history and arts and crafts. Many also reported providing advice to teachers who were developing or managing school libraries.

From the reports of a number of library authorities, it is clear that successful engagement between libraries and secondary schools requires strong commitment on both sides. One library authority reported that an innovative study skills programme it had developed had been discontinued due to lack of interest from schools.

Membership patterns and young participants' comments indicate that the transition to second-level schooling is clearly a time when library membership declines. One young person commented on this: *'I think more links should be set up with secondary schools. Primary schools have strong links with local libraries and therefore primary school children regularly attend outside school. They have the highest attendance'* (Individual response, Focus Group 8).

Findings in the present study suggest that such links with secondary schools seem to be particularly needed in areas of disadvantage, where levels of library use are especially low and where issues of poor literacy, limited access to ICT and early school-leaving may be prevalent (see Figure 5). Stronger links between secondary schools and libraries may help to mitigate some of these problems and harness the important resources of public libraries for such communities.

Examples of good practice

- **Ashbourne Library**, Co. Meath, runs a Post-Primary School Library Service Scheme, ordering and processing books for post-primary schools. It stocked multiple copies of study guides relating to Leaving Certificate subjects, which were heavily used.
- **Blanchardstown Library** in Fingal, Co. Dublin, provides a project and study-oriented reference section for children and young people.

Libraries as sources of information

The study confirmed that young people have a clear need for a wide range of information and they see libraries as a key resource to provide this. Suggestions for the kinds of information young people would like to see provided ranged from generic local or social information (e.g. gig guides and youth noticeboards) to targeted information on health, education or social issues. Young people were well aware that libraries provide information through many means, including books, multimedia sources, the Internet, posters or leaflets, as well as directly through library staff.

Some issues raised by the young people participating in the focus groups point to wider needs for information and support among young people. The respondents expressed a wish for *'not just leaflets'* but people and services to turn to when life is stressful or when young people are confronted with issues and experiences that cause them concern. Having someone to talk to was raised repeatedly as a resource young people would welcome.

⁹ Library authorities provide a book buying service for primary schools. This service is funded by a grant from the Department of Education and Science, based on the number of pupils in each school. The funding is specifically to help develop collections in each primary school library.

Clearly, library staff cannot be expected to have a comprehensive range of specialist skills and knowledge across the spectrum of health, education and social support required by young people. These are more appropriately found within the wider realm of professional services to children and adolescents. Perhaps, however, as some groups suggested, having trained or professional staff on hand in libraries on a sessional or consultancy basis is something that could be considered and achieved through collaboration or links between libraries and local primary health services, education or training services.

While the public library is not the only source of information for young people, the provision of information seems to be a key role, which has value both in itself and as a means to attract and retain young people as library users. However, given the constraints confronting many libraries in terms of staffing, space and training (particularly small branch libraries), making such a service available might present a substantial challenge.

Staffing and staff training

No library authority had appointed a dedicated teen or young adults' librarian post and more than half had no staff member with specific responsibility for young people. Just one in 5 library authorities had staff with special responsibility for services to children. Most of these also dealt with schools or combined responsibility for children and young people with other duties, such as branch management, local studies or information technology. Initiatives targeting young people appear to be largely reliant on motivated individuals or local factors, rather than being policy-driven.

No library authority reported providing training for all staff in working with young people. Almost half had no staff members with any such training and two-thirds considered lack of staff training as a barrier to providing services to young people. However, few such training opportunities are currently available in Ireland.

The young people in the focus groups expressed clear views in relation to the skills and training they felt library staff required in order to work with them effectively. Having training in working with young people and a knowledge of their interests was noted in all groups. Some examples of specific knowledge and skills young people prioritised were '*Computer skills to help young people on computers*', '*Interpersonal skills, so you can approach them with problems, etc.*' and '*More aware of young people's issues*' (Focus Group 4).

Examples of good practice

- **Cork City Library** currently has the only whole-time equivalent Executive Librarian post dedicated to children and young people's services.
- In the USA **King County Library System**¹⁰, dedicated Teen Librarian posts are allocated to all libraries, either on a full- or part-time basis, with some covering up to 3 branches. Teen Librarians are responsible for ensuring the availability of stock and materials appropriate for teenagers and they coordinate and deliver specific programmes for teen library users. In addition, they have ongoing contact with schools within their catchment area and visit regularly to promote library use.

¹⁰ The King County Library System covers a geographic area of 2,134 square miles within Washington State. Its 43 branch libraries serve a population of 1.8 million people in rural, urban and suburban settings. Its annual budget in 2007 amounted to US\$20.5 million.

Child protection

At the time of data collection, just 4 library authorities reported having formal child protection policies in place, while a further 12 reported having draft policies or said that they were working on developing policies. Only one library authority reported that its entire staff had received child protection training. Half of the authorities had no staff with any training in child protection and a further 12 authorities had some staff with training.

In June 2008, however, in compliance with Government policy on the implementation of *Children First: National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children* (Department of Health and Children, 1999), the Local Government Management Services Board developed and distributed a template and guidelines for the development of child protection policies and procedures to all local authorities.

Perceptions and attitudes

Young people's perceptions of public libraries

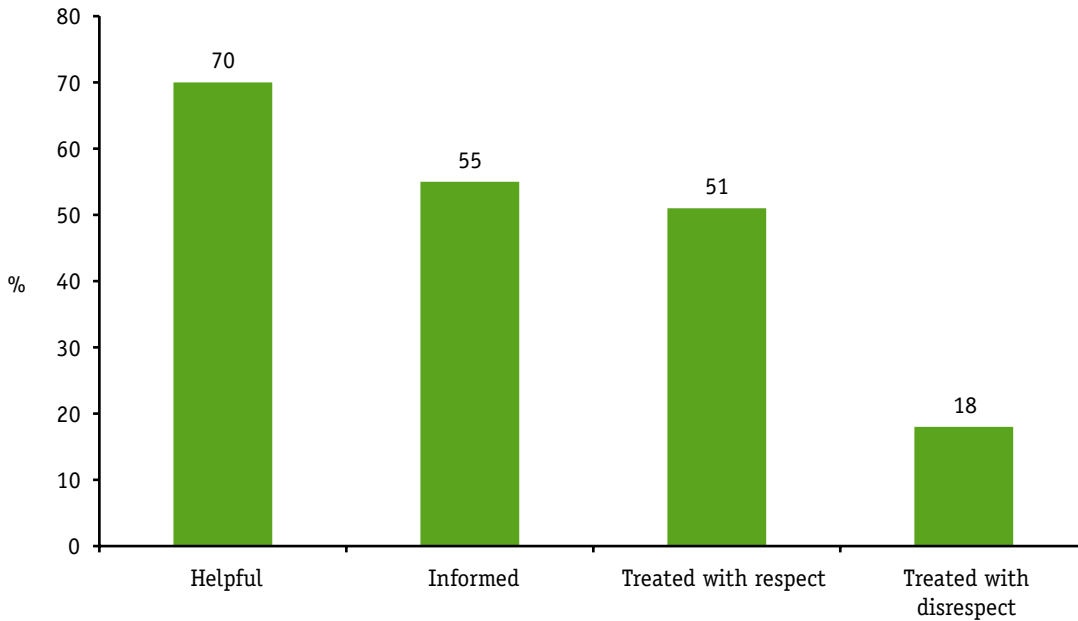
The study was tasked to investigate young people's (aged 13-17) opinions and perceptions of public library services in Ireland. To this end, focus group participants were asked *'What do you think of when you think of public libraries – what images come to mind?'*

Predictably, *books, reading, quiet* and *silence* were common responses, as were *computers* and/or *the Internet*. Libraries were frequently associated with older people and younger children. They were seen as places in which *to study*. Other impressions reported included that libraries were *dark, damp*, had *uncomfortable chairs* and had *a funny smell* (the latter noted by 3 individual groups in different locations). The word *boring* featured in all but one group: *'Daoine a bíonn i gconaí ag rá 'sshhh!'* [*'People who are always saying ssshh!'*] (Individual response, Focus Group 10) and *'Books, quiet, boring, computers, studying, information, reading, old people, College students, foreign students learning English or about Ireland'* (Focus Group 1).

These brief impressions typify the contrasting perceptions and attitudes held by young people. Libraries are seen both as a resource for reading, study and Internet use *and*, simultaneously, as boring, silent spaces, primarily for older people and younger children. Only one group described them as comfortable, while many, as noted above, stressed their lack of comfort, specifically in relation to seating. Some young people reported experiencing libraries as dark, drab and functional, rather than stimulating and inviting. Despite this, 82 young people (53%) consulted were current library members and 57 of those (70%) were regular library users, presumably finding them useful and relevant. Encouragingly, 84 participants (54%) indicated that they would be interested in being involved in advising public libraries on services for young people.

Attitudes to young people

Young people's perception of library staff was, for the most part, positive (see Figure 7). Overall, 108 of the participants (70%), who were either members, former members or library users, responded positively to being asked if they found librarians *'helpful or unhelpful'*. 75 participants (55%) said librarians were *'informed'*, while 69 participants (51%) felt they were always *'treated with respect'*, although some indicated that this was confined to some rather than all staff they encountered. Only 18% reported feeling that they were *'treated with disrespect'*.

Figure 7: Young people's experience of library staff (%)

The specific expectations of library staff raised by the participants can be summarised as:

- young people being treated with respect and with a more positive attitude;
- being less strict (on the matter of silence in particular);
- not regarding young people with suspicion or not being treated and spoken to as 'only a kid'.

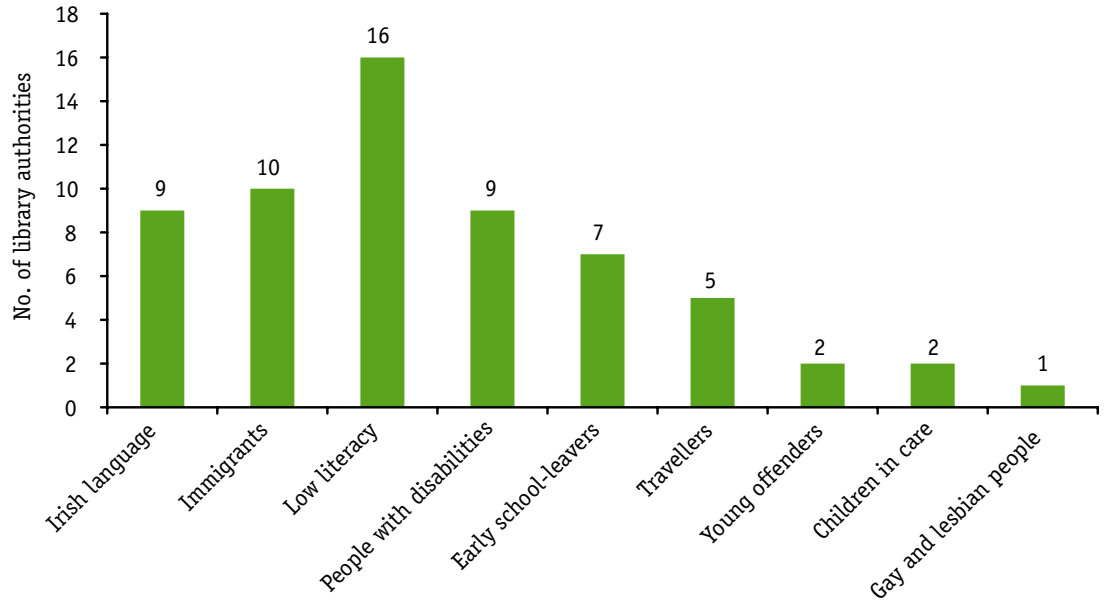
One group summarised many of the feelings and opinions expressed by saying that library staff *'need to be able to talk to young people as if they are people that have privilege and not as if it's "only a kid, tell him he needs a parent to do whatever". They should treat young kids like they treat adults'* (Focus Group 5).

Catering for diverse populations

The young people in the study demonstrated a high level of awareness of diverse and varied needs and interests across the population, including the needs of people with disabilities, people whose first language is not English and people from different ethnic backgrounds. Issues such as access, sign language, and signs and materials in Braille were also mentioned. Some of the comments on this topic were: *'They know you're a Traveller and have a different attitude. Staff should have training to work with Travellers'* (Focus Group 6); *'They should have more ramps and electric doors'* and *'Yes, because we don't think it is fair for foreign people to come to the library and not be able to find any books in a different language. I also think that on the computers there should be a choice of what language it should be in'* (Focus Group 9).

The survey results indicate that, of the 32 library authorities surveyed, some are providing services to a wide variety of minority groups of young people (see Figure 8). Half of them (16) provide services to young people with low literacy and 7 provide services to early school-leavers; about one-third provide services to immigrants and a similar proportion offer services to young people with disabilities and to Irish language speakers. (Meath has opened a new branch in the Gaeltacht (Irish-speaking) community of Rath Cairn, with 20% of its stock in Irish, although 5 other counties with Gaeltacht communities did not mention specifically the provision of services to young Irish speakers.) One-sixth of library authorities (5) indicated that they provide services to Travellers; 2 make specific provision for young offenders and for young people in care; and a single library authority reported providing specific services to young gay and lesbian people.

Figure 8: Library services to minority groups

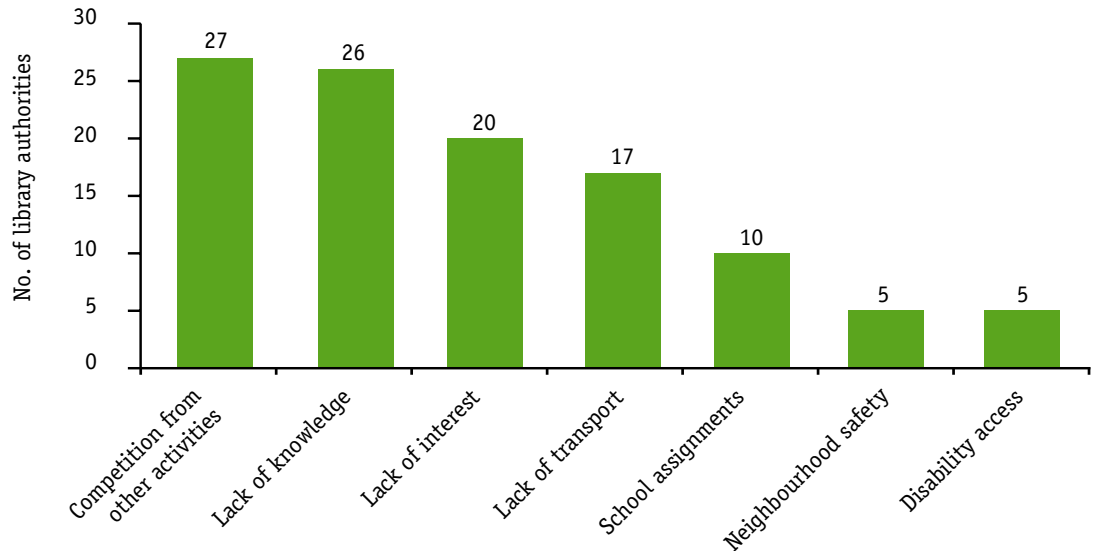


Barriers to use of public libraries by young people

Librarians' perceptions of barriers to use

Librarians overwhelmingly cited competition from young people's other activities and a lack of knowledge of library services as barriers to use by young people, followed by a lack of interest in libraries (see Figure 9). This coincides with the findings of the American survey by Eakin (2003). Overall, 17 library authorities (60%) reported lack of transport as a barrier to library use, with one respondent commenting, *'Many young people are bussed home or collected by parents from school, which militates against public library use within the current opening hours'* (Library Authority 31). While neighbourhood safety was not seen as a significant issue (only 5 libraries cited it), other issues mentioned included limited opening hours, teenagers' lack of time due to, for example, school assignments and exam pressure. Interestingly, exam pressure is one of the significant factors influencing library use, with many libraries reporting a difficulty in meeting the demand for study space, especially at exam times. Most library branches are accessible to people with disabilities, so access was generally not reported as a problem except in a few older branches (5 out of the total sample of 32).

Figure 9: Library authorities' perceptions of barriers to use



All libraries reported promoting their services and events in order to attract young people, particularly through schools, national events (e.g. Children's Book Festival, Science Week, Library Week and Seachtain na nGaeilge) and local activities. They also use local media, posters and some window displays, teen days and *'advertising events in all the local meeting places, cafés and venues used by teenagers'* (Library Authority 3).

Despite such promotion, many commented that the library was just *'not seen as relevant or cool'* and was *'not on teenagers' radar'*. The view was also expressed that teenagers were less likely to use libraries if there was no family tradition of usage.

Young people's perceptions of barriers to use

All of the focus groups felt that libraries could, and should, do more to encourage usage by young people. At no time was a view expressed that libraries were irrelevant or not of value to young people, although the word *'boring'* did feature frequently in comments.

However, many of the impressions young people expressed at the outset (see *'Perceptions and attitudes'*, p. 24) were echoed when asked what would discourage or prevent them using the library. Restrictions on talking, eating, access to the popular social networking website Bebo and generally not being seen as 'cool' and being 'not allowed' to do things that are otherwise seen as normal practice in young people's lives – all these (and more) were cited as barriers to library use. Comments from various of the focus groups illustrate these points: *'You have to be quiet'*; *'You are not allowed to talk, not allowed to eat'*; *'Daoine ag rá go bhfuil sé un-cool!'* [*'People saying it's uncool!'*]; *'It's too quiet, too boring'*; *'You are not allowed on Bebo if you are a child'*.

Many young people expressed a desire for more extensive opening hours, such as during school lunch time, later in the evenings and at weekends.

Librarians' perceptions of barriers to providing better services

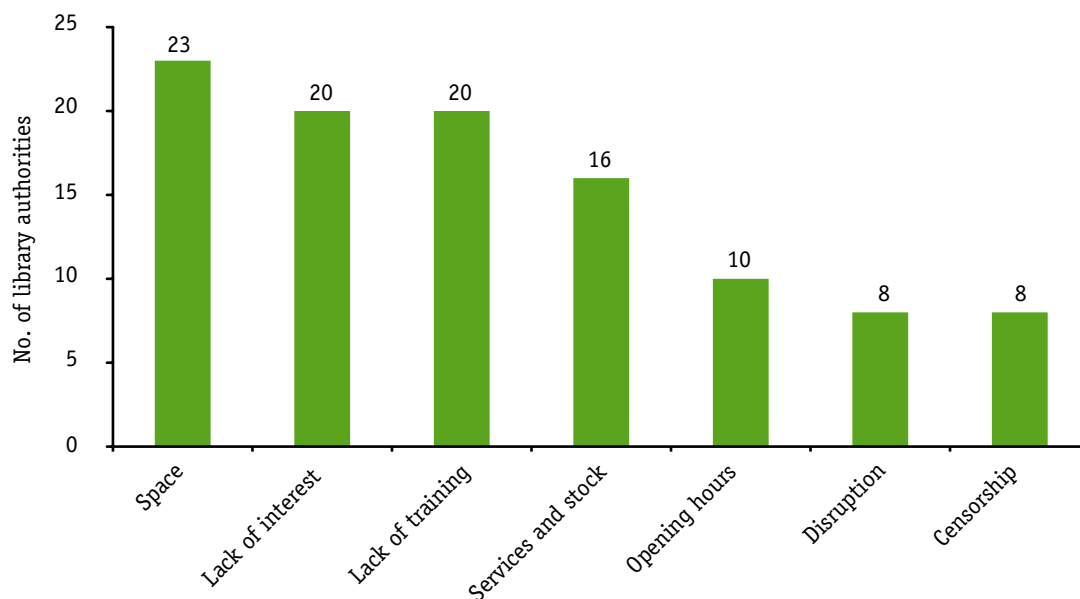
More than three-quarters of library authorities (23 or 79%) cited lack of space as the most significant factor limiting their capacity to provide better services (see *Figure 10*). In older buildings, limited or inflexible space makes it difficult to provide services to the desired standard. Where new libraries or refurbishment of older branches are planned, half of the authorities stated that they intended to develop 'teen zones' or dedicated spaces for teenagers.

After lack of space, the next most cited barriers were lack of staff and lack of training in providing services for teenagers, with 20 library authorities mentioning each of these reasons.

More than half the library authorities (16 or 55%) felt that their services and stock were too limited in terms of serving young people. This is partly because, unlike other age groups, there tends to be a quicker turnover in the types of books and authors young adults read. This is partly influenced by fashion, but also by the fact that young people's literature is frequently targeted at quite narrow age bands. Libraries are not generally equipped for that level of turnover, although their limited book funds and lack of a pre-allocated budget for youth collections may also play a part.

Finally, one third of library authorities felt that their opening hours limited their ability to provide services (several of these, it should be noted, have a relatively high proportion of part-time branches).

Figure 10: Librarians' perceived barriers to providing better services



One respondent noted that *'libraries [are] not providing what young people want/expect from the service. As a service, we tend to lose the participation of this age group 13-17 for a variety of reasons, primarily, I feel, because the current provisions are not attractive to them'* (Library Authority 24).

Another response from a large library authority listed a number of problems perceived by both libraries and teenagers: *'Poor physical infrastructure in older branch libraries. Inadequate collections and services. Not enough PCs. Too many rules. Out-dated décor. Staff attitudes. Preconceived expectations. Negative stereotyping of library staff. Negative library staff attitudes to young people. Opening hours. [Teenagers] not feeling welcome'* (Library Authority 8).

Example of good practice

A report undertaken on behalf of the **King County Library System's** Teen Programmes in March 2007 found that meeting the needs of young people and managing their presence in public libraries is not without challenge (Klima, 2007). It concluded that approaches to working with young people needed to be integrated into a cohesive framework, which included:

- staff training in relation to dealing with young people and developing 'cultural competence' in relation to their interests;
- guidelines for behaviour and 'scripts' to enable staff to deal effectively with problem behaviour;
- teen areas and facilities that enable teenagers to do project work in groups, socialise with friends and just 'hang out'.

Consultation with young people

More than half of the library authorities surveyed reported having consulted young adults about their services, 7 about stock and 6 when developing new libraries or their strategic plans. However, fewer than one in 6 library authorities reported involving young people in running services: 2 through their involvement in reading groups, one in book selection and one in running the annual Children's Book Festival. No library authority involved teenagers in running core services. Three authorities, however, reported facilitating students in work placement in Transition Year or as part of their involvement in Gaisce – The President's Award (for young people, aged 15-25, who undertake personal development challenges in a range of social settings).

In parallel with the present study, Cork City Library was initiating a city-wide consultation with young people in relation to the design of the planned new City Library premises, involving young people in designing and undertaking a questionnaire survey. International experience shows that in certain countries, such as the USA, young people work as volunteers in libraries. In other countries, they are involved in Teen Advisory Boards and in the recruitment of young adults' librarians.

Although many library authorities in Ireland believe that a major external barrier to young people's use of the library was lack of interest or knowledge, surprisingly little communication occurs between local libraries and second-level schools – a key contact point for this age range of 13-17 years. The Youth Library Group Network reported that links with primary schools were well established, but contact with secondary schools was more problematic and difficult. This was cited as being due to the complexity of the school timetable and the lack of one identified link person or teacher (as opposed to the class teacher relationship in primary schools).

Example of good practice

- When staff in **Ashbourne Library** in Co. Meath and **Tory Tops Library** in Co. Cork involved young people from local secondary schools in selecting and purchasing stock, it was reported to have had a noticeably positive impact on levels of library usage by teenagers.

Future plans

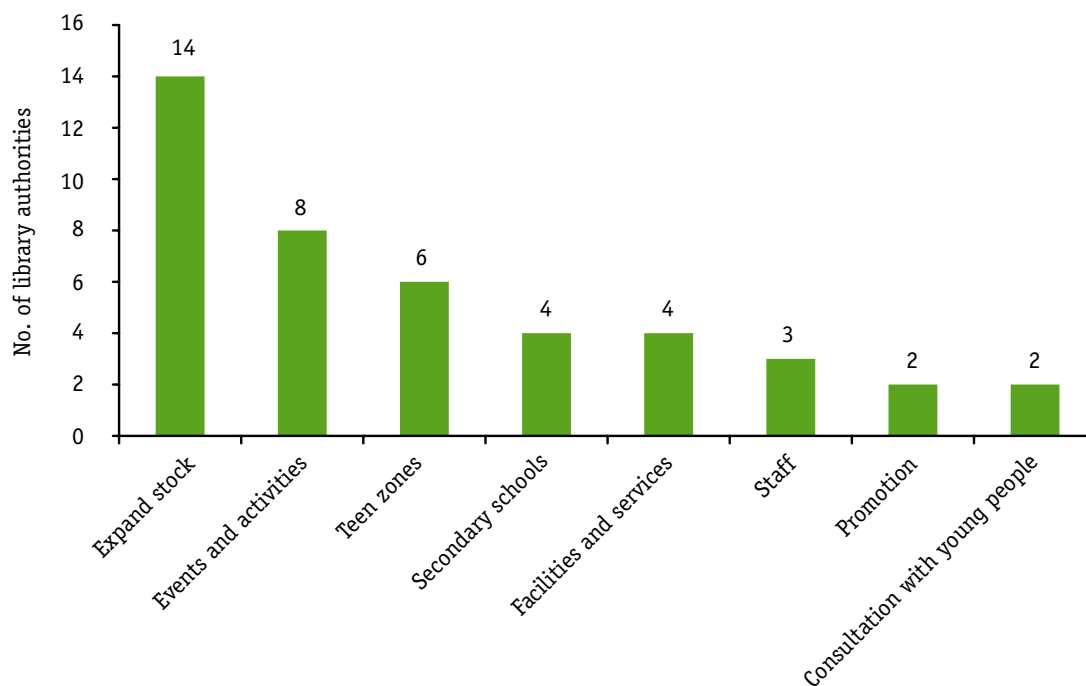
Nearly half of the library authorities reported having plans to develop facilities and services for young people in the future as they refurbish or build new premises (*see Figure 11*). These plans include creating teen zones or spaces in libraries that would offer young people a range of facilities including improved music CD and DVD collections and IT resources, comfortable seating and space to 'chill out'. Among the new services to be provided are music activities, book and film clubs. Several of the library authorities plan to arrange more activities and events, such as visits from authors and book festivals. Working more closely with secondary schools was also mentioned, with plans to develop study spaces and facilitate homework support.

Library authorities also wanted to undertake greater liaison with youth services and outreach, including cooperating with youth organisations to encourage them to use the library for events and meetings. One Cork County branch is developing a young people's collection in a local youth café.

Four library authorities would like to appoint a teen or young adults' librarian and many reported that they would like to see their facilities used creatively for young people, including teaching information literacy skills and expanding the service to teenagers with poor literacy skills in order to encourage self-esteem and confidence-building.

Several authorities identified the need for greater promotion of library services: *'We need to make them aware of what is available on their doorstep or via the Internet and get the library on to their radar as the first place they would go for information, help with projects or leisure resources'* (Library Authority 6).

Figure 11: Library authorities' plans for future service developments for young people



Young people also had suggestions for improved provision: *'We would like to see more computers in the public libraries. We would also like to see more study desks because there is not enough in the library, so you have to study at home, which is very distracting. We would like to see more modern DVDs and CDs in the library. We would like to see books in different languages because it is not fair for foreign students because they won't be able to understand other languages'* (Focus Group 9).

Summary

Both the survey responses and the site visits revealed that innovative and attractive library services have been provided for young people in a number of branches and more are planned. Overall, 18 library authorities reported a perceived increase in young people's membership over the past 5 years – 'perceived' because the absence of a consistent system of recording young people's usage makes this difficult to quantify. Findings from the consultation process indicate that membership declines during the teenage years, with young people being active library members while in primary school, but lapsing as they get older.

The provision of library services for young people was found to be uneven across the country and many young people indicated that some libraries are not providing offerings that they find attractive or relevant. In many areas, librarians noted that service provision for young people is constrained by, for example, the lack of space, paucity of training for library staff and the absence of any dedicated young adults' librarians. The lack of a clear policy framework has effectively rendered many young people invisible within the library service as a whole, resulting in poor data collection, variable provision and a lack of focused planning in relation to budgets, stock, staffing and staff training.

Many newer or refurbished library premises have created and stocked spaces that are 'youth friendly' and responsive to young people's needs and interests. However, in many cases the existing infrastructure in terms of space, stock and amenities caters poorly for young people as a distinct cohort of library user.

Among the young people consulted, there was wide agreement on what kinds of space, services and facilities they would like to see on offer. Typically, these were described as *comfortable, colourful, bright* and *welcoming* facilities, equipped with a wide range of *contemporary reading and multimedia offerings*. Most importantly, they identified the knowledge, skills and attitudes they would see as helpful for library staff, including knowledge and awareness of young people's interests and young people being accorded parity of esteem with other library users. The importance of library staff having the skills and training to respond effectively and sympathetically to young people as library users was particularly emphasized.

Perhaps one of the most positive findings of this study was that over half of the sample of young people (84 participants or 54%) would be willing to be involved in advising public libraries on how to enhance facilities and services for young people.



CONCLUSIONS

This study examined public library provision for young people aged 13-17 years in Ireland and sought the views and opinions of young people themselves. All 32 city and county library authorities were surveyed and 91% responded. In addition, 154 young people participated in focus group discussions. The combined findings bring to light a range of issues, many of them common to both the library services and the young participants, which highlight opportunities and obstacles relating to young people's use of public library services.

The findings indicate that while there are examples of good practice, in general, young people as a specific user group have not been prioritised in public library provision. There is a lack of coherence and consistency throughout the system and an absence of a clear policy focus on young people as a target group. For example, findings suggest that services for children under 12 have a high priority, but that a lower level of attention has been given to teenagers. Fundamentally, there is a need to identify and define young people as a distinct cohort of library user. This could then give rise to standardised data collection and allow for the systematic gathering of data on usage by young people in order to plan for and evaluate library services more effectively for them.

Membership and usage

Young people's use of public libraries in Ireland *appears* to be high and to compare well with international patterns. This is the view of the library authorities, although it must be stressed that there are no accurate figures for young people's membership of public libraries because neither age definitions nor data collection systems are universally shared across the system. Since reliable data on usage by young people specifically is not available, it is difficult to quantify usage accurately.

Of the young people who participated in the present study, 53% reported currently being library members and 76% had been members previously, generally when in primary school. Among the members, 37% reported visiting a library in the previous month. Among the study sample, membership was significantly lower in areas of socio-economic disadvantage (as per the RAPID definition). It is also important to note that membership itself does not measure usage and findings here indicate that non-members also make use of library services. For example, 19 young people (12% of participants) reported using public libraries although they were not members.

The role of public libraries

The public library system represents an important public physical and social space that serves cultural, civic and educational functions. While undoubtedly its core function is to provide access to books and reading, there is ample scope to widen the brief of libraries in support of that core function by, for example, introducing creative arts workshops or literacy programmes as has been done in many instances. Recognising that the scale and scope of libraries differs significantly across the country, there does seem considerable potential for greater alignment and integration of the youth-related work of libraries with that of other services for young people, including:

- formal and informal education;
- health promotion;
- integration of minorities;
- information and communications technology (ICT);
- literacy promotion;
- media;
- public information;
- recreation;
- the arts;
- youth work.

In line with best practice internationally in similar cultural, civic and educational institutions, libraries in Ireland can provide additional services and facilities that fit well with their core function, such as the hosting of cultural events and the provision of facilities such as cafés. The newly developed civic and cultural centre, The Source, in Thurles, Co. Tipperary, represents just such an example of integrated library, arts and cultural facilities.

Looking to the future role and contribution of libraries, it is, of course, necessary to consider the wider social and commercial environment within which libraries must operate and compete. In the case of young users, there are many commercial offerings now available in the field of leisure that challenge libraries to define a distinctive role for themselves.

Barriers to young people's use of library services

The study was asked to identify barriers to young people's use of public libraries, both physical and psychological. These were clearly articulated through the consultation process and included both perceived and actual physical deficits in:

- allocated (if not dedicated) space;
- attractive décor and comfortable furnishings;
- adequate provision of ICT equipment and more extensive on-line access;
- reading material and other media of specific interest and cultural relevance to young people;
- the provision of refreshments.

Psychological barriers centred on perceptions among some teenage respondents of not being made to feel welcome or not being accorded equal status, respect and priority as adults or indeed younger children. A perception of libraries as *'boring'* and *'uncool'* was also evident among some groups.

Factors motivating young people's use of library services

Young people had a very clear vision of the type of library services they want. Factors that would motivate young people to use libraries more extensively were identified, including:

- more provision of recreational reading and multimedia material of interest to their age group;
- greater participation and involvement in the planning and running of libraries;
- access to creative pursuits, such as creative writing and music-based activities;
- the availability of school text books and study supports;
- the opportunity to 'hang out' with friends in a comfortable and youth-friendly public space.

KEY ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

Physical infrastructure of the library system

While there are a number of library branches that occupy impressive state-of-the-art facilities, these generally are still the exception. Many branches have premises which, by today's standards, do not constitute an attractive offering. Space may often be limited for presentation of books or other materials, for reading on site or for the hosting of events. The design of libraries is critical to their attractiveness – both the building and its collections should engage all users. Teenagers, who enjoy 'hanging out' with friends, should be drawn to the library as an ideal place to do this, albeit within the context of the library's primary function as a source of reading material, information and a quiet space for reading or study. In order for this to happen, there is a need to renew the physical accommodation of library branches. This should aim to provide facilities that are well-designed, attractive, well-lit and geared to reflecting best practice in the presentation of stock and the hosting of cultural events.

Attractive, well-designed premises are certainly important as part of any strategy for making libraries user-friendly for young people, as well as for creating adaptable and manageable spaces that can accommodate the diversity of public library users. While it is recognised that library development and renovation frequently does not happen from a 'green field' starting point, the findings suggest a number of ways in which young people's needs and interests could be better accommodated if taken into consideration at the planning and design stage.

Staffing

Findings indicate that current staffing provision within the public library system does not include staff specifically allocated to serve the needs of young people. Evidence from the site visits strongly supports the effectiveness of such provision, with examples of initiatives in both Ireland (Cork City Library) and the USA (King County Library System). Dedicated staff would enable libraries to respond more effectively to young people as an important segment of their target population, as well as to minority groups within the youth population. In addition, it would facilitate the integration of public library offerings more effectively with public policy on provision for young people more generally and enable them to match best practice in this field internationally.

Library staff training

From the evidence available, there would seem to be shortcomings in the level of training in the present pool of library staff in relation to serving the specific needs of young users. Of particular note was the inadequate level of training reported in relation to child (and youth) protection. The development and circulation of child protection guidelines and procedures in June 2008 to all local authorities by the Local Government Management Services Board was a welcome development. However, training is an essential component in developing staff competence and confidence in this area, especially in light of the amount of policy effort and emphasis devoted to sensitising relevant child and youth-serving staff across the public sector – see, for example, *Children First* (OMCYA, 1999/2009) and *Teenspace* (OMC, 2007). Given the evidence on the negative stereotyping of young people that may occur in the media (Devlin, 2006), it is also important that training offers staff the opportunity to review perceptions, attitudes and practices at a personal or system level that may impact on their capacity to relate to young people in a mutually satisfying way.

Renewal and expansion of stock

Both young people and library staff identified the need for more contemporary stock and a wider range of formats, such as magazines, music CDs, DVDs and computer games. The condition of existing stock was also commented upon, indicating that steps need to be taken to renew and replace items on a regular basis. In areas where young people had been consulted and involved in the selection and purchase of stock (e.g. in Ashbourne Library, Co. Meath, and Tory Tops Library, Co. Cork), significant improvements in library usage and satisfaction were reported.

Information

Listening to the young people in this study, one feature that they seemed to seek in libraries (or elsewhere) was access to high-quality information on areas of concern that may arise in their lives. Libraries may be a very important reference point for people wanting information about options and channels for seeking 'deeper' information and expertise. Youth Information Centres, a dedicated youth information service¹¹, provide a high-quality, specialist information service for

¹¹ Youth Information Centres (YICs) provide a free, confidential information service to young people and those who work with them on a wide range of subjects, including careers, education, employment matters, rights and entitlements, leisure, sport, travel and European opportunities. The national youth information network currently comprises 30 Youth Information Centres, which are mainly funded by the Youth Affairs Section of the Department of Education and Science (see www.youthinformation.ie).

young people, but are less widely available than public libraries. There would seem to be scope for greater cooperation between Youth Information Centres and libraries. Jointly planned programmes or events could have mutual benefits, building on the expertise and resources of both services. Youth Information Centres are well placed to act as a resource to public library staff. Both could act as referral points for young people to each other and to a range of other sources and services.

Few libraries provided a dedicated noticeboard for teenagers and only 2 library authorities were found to have sections on their websites for teenagers (neither providing much information on local activities and services). Such relatively simple innovations could do much to add to the relevance and attractiveness of public libraries for young people.

Engagement with young people

Findings support the proposition that young people should be regarded as a distinct category of user by the public library system, having a designated budget and staff with expertise and assigned responsibility for the service provided to them. Teenagers' *perceptions*, demonstrated in this and other surveys, that libraries do not have material of interest to them presents a marketing challenge.

The library services may wish to consider the following possible steps:

- The development of specialist posts and/or defined responsibility within existing posts to work specifically with young people.
- The establishment of youth reference groups or advisory committees and other consultative mechanisms to ensure that libraries remain attuned to the shifting preferences and priorities of young users.
- The opening-up of some part-time posts or work experience opportunities for young people as assistants in the library service. While this will require careful planning, it seems that this single measure has huge potential for enhancing mutual awareness and understanding between library services and younger people.
- Close liaison and cooperation between schools and libraries, possibly including the development of dual-use libraries to serve schools and the public.

Scope for innovation in the digital age

The digital revolution provides huge new opportunities for libraries in serving their public. Electronic services to young users must be a central part of any developmental strategy for libraries. Importantly, too, on-line resources can reduce geographical, if not economic, disadvantage in terms of access to and uptake of library offerings. Electronic resources in libraries have the potential to provide extended quality services for both local and remote users. Moreover, they have a special value to immigrants, providing services in their own languages, to students seeking material for projects and to those without independent transport.



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**Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs
Department of Health and Children**

**Hawkins House
Hawkins Street
Dublin 2**

Tel: +353 (0)1 635 4000

Fax: +353 (0)1 674 3223

E-mail: omc@health.gov.ie

Web: www.omcya.ie