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'The key element in a democracy is an informed citizenry; and that is the task of libraries.'
(Robert Cronenberger)
Abstract

**Background:** The literature identifies a perceived and measurable reduction in democratic engagement in the United Kingdom. There is a lack of research about UK libraries’ role in encouraging democratic engagement; this research seeks to provide an insight.

**Aims:** The study aimed to identify the key issues relating to democratic engagement; investigate the current ways public libraries support and encourage involvement; determine which sources of information and advice members of the public make use of and to establish how they are using them; to determine if the information and advice currently available is adequate; and to make recommendations about how library provision relating to democratic engagement might be improved.

**Methods:** A literature review was conducted in order to identify key concepts and themes. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain an insight into the current provision of public libraries in relation to democratic engagement. A mixed methods questionnaire explored library users' awareness and use of resources and opinions about the role of libraries.

**Results:** The research revealed that libraries do offer a number of resources to support and encourage democratic engagement, but that these were often not widely publicised outside libraries. The role of staff is central to libraries’ role in democratic engagement, but no formal schemes or training exists to support staff. Library users made relatively low use of some of the resources identified, which could be due to a lack of need or a lack of awareness. Some partnership work was identified, but does not focus on all groups potentially in need of support. The role of libraries in supporting and encouraging democratic engagement is significant and warrants further investigation, but may be limited by library and local council policies. The concept of the ‘neutrality’ of public libraries was a key theme, acting as a reason for libraries’ important role in supporting and encouraging democratic engagement at the same time as being a barrier to involvement.
Conclusions: Libraries play a significant role in supporting and encouraging democratic engagement, but policies need to be clarified and developed locally and nationally to formalise libraries’ role. Libraries would benefit from better promotion of their resources to increase use and impact. Investigation into potential partnerships with local and/or national bodies who also aim to improve democratic engagement would enable libraries to play a more central role. Areas of further research are recommended, including an investigation into the ideological position of libraries as politically ‘neutral’ in relation to provision of resources and support for democratic engagement.
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1. Introduction

This research seeks to provide an insight into public library services' contribution to activities and processes which foster democratic engagement. Much research has been conducted into the importance of democratic engagement by various bodies, including academics, national government and political charities, some of which have explored possible methods of increasing citizens' engagement in political and civic processes. However, little research has been conducted into the role that particular public services may play in the process, and less still into the role of libraries as providers of information, advice and space within the democratic realm. Of the literature extant, the majority of research projects and case studies have been conducted in countries other than the United Kingdom.

It is hoped that this research will encourage public library authorities in the United Kingdom to engage in discussion about their role in enabling citizens to actively participate in democratic processes, which would add value to their services and enhance their standing within local councils and national public services, in addition to providing an important service that is not readily available through other publicly available sources.

The researcher's interest in public libraries' fostering of democratic engagement arises from an awareness of a perceived lack of democratic engagement in the British public. It was hoped that this research project would identify examples of current practice nationally and internationally and as a result, make recommendations for the library authority involved in the study. The conclusions drawn from the project serve as points of recommendation for library services wishing to enhance their services for democratic engagement, and form a basis for further research into the role of public libraries in supporting and encouraging democratic engagement.

Initially, the researcher had intended to conduct the study in Sheffield and Doncaster, in order to compare two geographically close locations with considerably different population sizes, standards of library provision and levels of voter turnout in local and general elections. Unfortunately, Doncaster Libraries and Information Services declined to participate in the research.
1.1 Aim and objectives

Aim:

To establish the role of public libraries with regard to democratic engagement.

Objectives:

1. To identify the key issues relating to democratic engagement.
2. To investigate the current ways public libraries support and encourage citizen involvement in local and national democratic processes.
3. To determine which sources of information and advice members of the public make use or do not make use of, and to establish how they are using them to help them engage with local and national democratic/political events and processes.
4. To determine if members of the public find the information and advice currently available to them regarding the issues of local and national democratic processes adequate for their needs.
5. To make recommendations regarding public library provision of information and advice about local and national democratic processes and how this might be improved.

1.2 Terms Used

Democratic engagement is defined as “individual and collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern” (Tapia & Ortiz, 2010), or “individual and collective involvement in public affairs” (Norris, 2001 in Tapia & Ortiz, 2010). Synonyms include: 'political participation', 'citizen participation', 'citizen involvement', 'popular participation', 'public involvement' and 'citizen engagement'.

Purdah: The period of time from when an election is announced until after the election is held has been known as ‘purdah’ but is now more often referred to as the pre-election period.
2. Literature review

2.1 Introduction: democratic engagement

Democratic engagement is considered by many authors as the *raison d'etre* of democratic society (Tapia & Ortiz, 2010; Print, 2007; Power Inquiry, 2006; Tyckoson, 2000). The term is used interchangeably with terms such as 'political participation' (McLeod et al., 1999, in Moy & Gastil, 2006: 455), 'citizen participation', 'citizen involvement', 'popular participation', 'public involvement' and 'citizen engagement' (Demos, 2008) and has been defined as "individual and collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern" (Tapia & Ortiz, 2010), or “individual and collection involvement in public affairs” (Norris, 2001 in Tapia & Ortiz, 2010).

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (in Coleman & Gøtze, 2001: 13) identify a three-stage model of public engagement: Information, including 'passive' access to information upon demand by citizens, and 'active' measures by the government to disseminate information to citizens; consultation, in which citizens provide feedback to the government based on prior definition of areas in which the government is seeking information (e.g. public opinion surveys); and active participation, in which citizens actively take part in decision- and policy-making processes, with final decisions made by the government. Goss (2001) developed a broader model of public engagement:
Table 1: Model of public engagement taken from Goss, in Coleman & Gøtze (2001: 13).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Giving Information</th>
<th>Consultation/Listening</th>
<th>Exploring/Innovating/Visioning</th>
<th>Judging/Deciding together</th>
<th>Delegating/Supporting/Decision-making</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sign-posting</td>
<td>Surveys</td>
<td>Consultative workshops</td>
<td>Deliberative polls</td>
<td>Neighbourhood committees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaflets/newsletters</td>
<td>Focus groups</td>
<td>Visioning workshops</td>
<td>Citizens' juries</td>
<td>Town/estate plans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community profiles</td>
<td>Interactive community profiles</td>
<td>Simulations Open space events</td>
<td>Negotiation workshops</td>
<td>Tenant management organisations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback on surveys and consultation</td>
<td>Public meetings Forums</td>
<td></td>
<td>Community issue groups</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual performance reports</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Community workshops</td>
<td>Community Development Trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support/advice</td>
<td>Panels</td>
<td>Planning for real community discovery</td>
<td>Consensus conferences</td>
<td>Partnerships/contracts with communities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video/internet communication</td>
<td>Video boxes</td>
<td>Use of theatre/arts/media</td>
<td></td>
<td>Referendums/tele-voting</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.2 Democratic deficit

There has been much discussion of a 'democratic deficit' in the UK (Demos, 2008) and worldwide (Hill, 2009; Print, 2007). In the UK research has found levels of democratic engagement to be low and in decline (Hansard Society, 2009; Demos, 2008; Coleman, 2005) with the turnout from this year's general election at 65.1% of the eligible voter population:
Figure 1: General election turnout since 1945, by region (UK Political Info, 2010).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>UK</th>
<th>England</th>
<th>Wales</th>
<th>Scotland</th>
<th>N. Ireland</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>65.1</td>
<td>65.5</td>
<td>64.9</td>
<td>63.8</td>
<td>56.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>64.1</td>
<td>62.6</td>
<td>60.8</td>
<td>62.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>59.4</td>
<td>61.6</td>
<td>58.2</td>
<td>68</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>71.4</td>
<td>73.5</td>
<td>71.3</td>
<td>67.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>77.7</td>
<td>79.7</td>
<td>75.7</td>
<td>69.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>75.3</td>
<td>78.9</td>
<td>75.1</td>
<td>67</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td>72.7</td>
<td>76.1</td>
<td>72.7</td>
<td>72.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>79.4</td>
<td>76.8</td>
<td>67.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974 Oct</td>
<td>72.8</td>
<td>76.6</td>
<td>74.8</td>
<td>67.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974 Feb</td>
<td>78.8</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>69.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>77.4</td>
<td>74.1</td>
<td>76.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966</td>
<td>75.8</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>66.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1964</td>
<td>77.1</td>
<td>80.1</td>
<td>77.6</td>
<td>71.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1959</td>
<td>78.7</td>
<td>82.6</td>
<td>78.1</td>
<td>65.9</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1955</td>
<td>76.8</td>
<td>79.6</td>
<td>75.1</td>
<td>74.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>82.6</td>
<td>84.4</td>
<td>81.2</td>
<td>79.9</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>83.9</td>
<td>84.8</td>
<td>80.9</td>
<td>77.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1945</td>
<td>72.8</td>
<td>75.7</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>67.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**NB:** Elections in Great Britain are run on a constituency by constituency basis, which means verified results are not collected centrally (Electoral Commission, 2010). The above figures are indicative of trend, but exact figures vary depending on the source.

Research has been conducted into the ways in which local and national governments could improve democratic engagement, and in some countries, for example Sweden and Denmark, public libraries have been involved in related initiatives, explored later in the literature review. There appears, however, to be a lack of research and related activity regarding democratic engagement in UK public libraries.

2.3 **Indicators of democratic engagement**

A useful presentation of basic indicators of democratic engagement is provided by The Canadian Index of Wellbeing:
A number of more detailed indicators of democratic engagement are identified by CIRCLE (2002). These can be broadly divided into three categories: civic, electoral and political engagement, and include behaviour such as: active membership of groups/associations; volunteering; fund-raising for charities, community participation/problem solving; regular voting; persuading others; contributions to political parties; assisting candidates with campaigns; contacting officials; contacting print and broadcast media; protest; written petitions; boycotting and boycotting activists; email petitions; and internet engagement.

Further indicators are identified by The Hansard Society (2009), including thoughts in relation to: an interest in politics; perceived knowledge of politics; propensity to vote; discussing politics; perceived political efficacy; the present system of governing; perceived influence over decision-making at the local and national levels; reasons for not feeling influential in decision-making; and the desire to be involved in decision-making. Putnam (1995, 2000 and 2002, in Hill, 2009 and Jensen et al., 2007) also identifies voting, joining political parties and service organisations, signing
petitions, attending political events and community meetings, church attendance, and membership of unions and professional associations as signs of declining community and civic engagement. Moy & Gastil (2006) use the ‘civic voluntarism’ model by Verba, Schlozman and Brady (2005), including “formal” acts as identified by Steinberger (1984).

2.4 Reasons for democratic disengagement

A number of research projects have been conducted in order to understand public perceptions of the democratic system and explain why involvement in the democratic process is in decline. Suggested reasons include: feelings of lack of influence through formal democracy; perception of the main political parties as too similar and lacking in principle; perception of the electoral system as unequal; requirement to commit to too broad a range of policies; feelings of a lack of information or knowledge about politics; inconvenient voting procedures; feelings of alienation from society; a lack of incentive for participation; and feelings that participation will not lead to change (The Power Inquiry, 2006; Atlestam, 2004). Smith (2005) identifies a number of problems within local and national government which he perceives as reasons for disengagement, including: a lack of creativity in designing strategies for participation; organisational and professional resistance to involving the public; failure to respond to the outcomes of participation; a lack of cultural change in public authorities; a failure to create an inclusive environment for participation; and a failure to publicise opportunities for participation. Putnam (in Hill, 2009 and Jensen et al., 2007) identifies practical issues such as commuting, increasing work demands and technology as factors for declining engagement. He also considers the family to play a crucial role in the “cultivation of democratic habits”. Moy & Gastil (2006: 446) refer to the assertion by Nie et al. (1996) that education has a role to play in democratic engagement because it develops verbal proficiency and stronger social networks.

2.5 The importance of democratic engagement

Democratic participation is of unquestionable importance (Uitermark & Duyvendak, 2008: 114) and has “trans-ideological appeal” (Demos, 2008). Contemporary theorists have argued that “democracy without regular and meaningful deliberation results in poor public policy and political alienation” (Moy & Gastil, 2006: 445) and that:
“meaningful democratic dialogue is only possible if citizens are well informed and can find their way in the libraries of public domains, if they know where to turn to for information about public functions and services, and about their rights and obligations.” (Ohlin, 2001: 351)

Some see engagement as a means to a democratic end (Demos, 2008), and others see further benefits. Informed citizens are deemed to make “better citizens” (Demos, 2008; Moy & Gastil, 2006: 445; Atlestam, 2004; Delli et al. 1996), who, Delli et al. (1996) contend, are:

“more likely to participate in politics, more likely to have meaningful, stable attitudes on issues, better able to link their interests with their attitudes, more likely to choose candidates who are consistent with their own attitudes, and more likely to support democratic norms, such as extending basic civil liberties to members of unpopular groups.”

Public participation serves democratic society in many ways, seen by Tapia and Ortez (2010) to justify the implementation of initiatives to encourage it. The re-engagement of the public in formal democracy is deemed to be vital in order to sustain viable and healthy democracies (Print, 2007; Moy & Gastil, 2006: 445; Smith, 2005; Atlestam, 2004) and to avoid a number of problems including: the weakening of the mandate and legitimacy for elected governments due to low voter turnout; the weakening of political equality due to the estrangement of sections of the community; the weakening of effective dialogue between the public and councillors and MPs; the weakening of effective recruitment into politics; the rise of undemocratic political forces; the rise of a ‘quiet authoritarianism’ within government; public distrust and disillusionment (Demos, 2008; Print, 2007).

Putnam (1993, 2000, in Jensen et al., 2007) has demonstrated a link between the efficacy of government institutions and aggregate levels of community engagement. In contrast to Putnam, Tocqueville (2000 in Jensen et al., 2007: 41) suggests that only those community interactions that are political in nature deepen democracy. The importance of “deliberative political conversation”, characterised by “an openness to political conflict, the absence of conversational dominance, clear and reasonable argument and mutual comprehension” is explored by Moy and Gastil (2006).
2.6 Economic benefits of democratic engagement

Public participation is a popular concept to governments, because it has the potential to improve government efficiency and promote redistribution (Fung & Wright, 2000 in Baiocchi, 2003: 53). Higher levels of democratic engagement have been suggested to result in savings in social care through informed personal choice, savings through better oversight and increased civic productivity (Zacharzewski, 2010: 5-6). The Local Government Information Unit suggested in 2009 that, given the threat of severe reductions in public sector spending, citizens would be required to play a more collaborative role in the provision of services. This would be supported with improved levels of democratic engagement.

2.7 The coalition government

Since the 2010 General Election, resulting in a coalition between the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties, there has been a major shift in government policies. These policies are outlined in the document *The Coalition: our programme for government* (Cabinet Office, 2010), and emphasise the promotion of decentralisation and democratic engagement. In a speech given on 16 July 2010, Nick Clegg, Deputy Prime Minister and Leader of the Liberal Democrats stated that the coalition government seeks the “radical redistribution of power”, based on an “optimistic assessment of human nature and human capability”. Individual liberty, he argued, requires freedom from interference but also resources. Independence requires knowledge, health, money and skills. In order for individuals to effectively participate in the redistribution of power, 'human capability' must be at its optimum, with its foundations in knowledge. Citizens will need to be informed about and engaged with political processes and the structure and workings of the state and public services, in order to successfully make important decisions about government spending (Zacharzewski, 2010: 4).

A significant proportion of British citizens do not currently possess the required levels of knowledge and engagement to successfully participate in consultation. For example, on 1 July 2010, the coalition government launched Your Freedom, a website through which members of the public can recommend to the government which laws they think should be repealed. Shortly after its launch, the site was shut down due to high volumes of abusive and unacceptable content. The site is currently (August 2010) closed for comment. The public can view the recommendations made
and vote for those they believe would be effective, but not partake in debate about their choices.

2.8 Worldwide initiatives

The ideas as to how participation should be promoted vary between thinkers and countries (Uitermark & Duyvendak, 2008: 114) and include examples such as “participatory budgeting” in Brazil (Demos, 2008; Baiocchi, 2003). In the 1952 Presidential Election in the USA, the American Library Association took an active role in campaigns to encourage citizens to vote and provide information on candidates and issues. Preer (2008) provides an extensive historical account of how American libraries worked in partnership with national and local organisations to encourage citizen participation in the democratic process, including the provision of reading lists, books, pamphlets, discussion groups and displays.

Atuti (2008) describes Kenyan library initiatives to support and encourage democratic engagement, including a Current Awareness Service (CAS), Community Information Service (CIS) and the development of databases populated with local content. He suggests that library involvement in information provision has led to libraries becoming a significant part of democratic engagement, involved in local democracy and consultation processes.

2.9 UK initiatives

The Power Inquiry outlines 30 recommendations for local and national governments to improve democratic engagement, a number of which may relate to public libraries, either in structure, provision and services or relationship to local and national governments. These include the creation of a culture of political engagement in which it is “the norm for policy and decision-making to occur with direct input from citizens” (The Power Inquiry, 2006: 24). Recommendation 23 states that “All public bodies should be required to meet a duty of public involvement in their decision and policy-making processes” (idem: 232). It suggests that “simple consultation” is not enough to contribute to democratic engagement, and that the views of the public must clearly be taken into account in order for any ‘involvement’ to be considered valid.

Recommendation 30 is of particular relevance to public libraries, which in many local authorities already act as ‘information points’ for local council services such as housing, and points of payment for electricity cards, council tax etc. The recommendation states that:
“‘Democracy hubs’ should be established in each local authority area. These would be resource centres based in the community where people can access information and advice to navigate their way through the democratic system.” (The Power Inquiry, 2006: 254)

The Power Inquiry suggests that these 'democracy hubs' would improve democratic engagement by providing information and support and creating opportunities for communication between the public and officials and representatives. It would combat issues of disenchantment by providing a “new sense of influence for the ordinary citizen” over the policies and decisions and be able to demonstrate its impact on local and national government decision making.

Other innovations suggested to increase participation includes public meetings or hearings, community visioning, participatory theatre, standing forums, standing citizens' panels, focus groups, petitions, study circles, democracy cafés, deliberation days, democs, partnership boards, community fund regional boards, e-petitions and e-consultation (Smith, 2005).

2.10 Problems with democratic engagement and engagement initiatives

Historically, public participation has been viewed by some as a threat to levels of political competence. J.S. Mill (1806-1873) feared that increased public participation would result in collective mediocrity and a lessened ability for the government to make policy without the influence of ignorance, prejudice and narrow interests (Coleman & Gøtze, 2001: 9). Coleman & Gøtze (2001) argue, like Mill, that the presence of civic spaces for discussion in which narrow interests and prejudiced outlooks can be exposed to other, more reasoned voices, thereby broadening the terms of public debate, are the best way for this threat to be challenged. They also suggest that rather than public participation resulting in populism, it is a consequence of non-engagement; “populist solutions and illegitimate actions”, occur when people feel they are “outside the political sphere” (Coleman & Gøtze, 2001: 10).

Consultation processes are “fragile and difficult to establish and maintain” (Baiocchi, 2003: 54), a problem explored by many authors. Demos (2008) identify a problem with the concept of democratic engagement, in that policy language has a tendency to be “vague and euphemistic”, which can create difficulties when trying to ascertain the meaning of terms and the arguments
behind them. The introduction of requirements for public services to consult with the public has provoked thought on the efficacy of methods of citizen participation, which Arnstein (1969 in Demos, 2008 and Tom Wolff & Associates, 2006) presents as a ladder:

**Figure 3: 'Ladder of Citizen Participation'. Arnstein, S. (1969) in Tom Wolff & Associates (2006).**

This model is widely used in public participation initiatives; it is, for example, recommended by the International Association for Public Participation (2007).

Demos (2008) argue that short-cuts to citizen empowerment fail to bring about sustainable change, and that active citizenship requires more support, rather than less, from the state. Similarly, Coleman & Gøtze (2001: 12) emphasise the dangers of “tokenistic” online initiatives for participation. Arnstein (1969) provides a detailed background to the problems of “illusory” participation, and Madsen (2009: 11) explains the importance of “following through” any attempts to engage the public with consideration and nurturing of the debate environment. Baiocchi (2003: 54) emphasises the need for formal rules and institutional features within participatory settings. The Government has produced a Code of Practice on Consultation to guide public services in the consultation process, which sets out seven criteria for effective consultation, including recommendations as to how long councils should spend on public consultation and at what point during the planning process (HM Government, 2008).
Uitermark & Duyvendak (2008) explore the challenges of promoting meaningful participation in societies in which the governmental landscape is fragmented and destabilised as well as mediatised. They identify contrasting opinions between scholars who believe that politics has been effectively democratised because the public sphere is more accessible (Cohen & Rodgers, 1995; Hendricks & Toonen, 2001) because relevant news is brought to audiences who are better equipped to interpret the information they are presented with, and those who believe that this increased access to information and communication does not translate into better public deliberation (Zakaria, 2003 in Uitermark & Duyvendak, 2008: 118). Uitermark & Duyvendak (2008) emphasise the problem of democratic engagement in an environment in which the media acts as a source of all political information, resulting in the political sphere being influenced by “moral outrage” at attention-grabbing news stories, and the development of “policies that 'do well' in the media”.

These problems directly affect the characteristics of successful public consultation and deliberation as identified by Coleman & Gøtze (2001): access to balanced information; an open agenda; time to consider issues expansively; freedom from manipulation or coercion; a rule-based framework for discussion; participation by an inclusive sample of citizens; scope for free interaction between participants; and recognition of differences between participants, but rejection of status-based prejudice.

2.11 Youth participation

Youth participation is a common theme in the literature. Youth turnout is low in many countries, including the USA, Britain, France and Canada (Print, 2007). However, electoral engagement is only one indicator of democratic engagement (Print, 2007; Tom Wolff & Associates, 2006). Print (2007) cites a number of sources which suggest that young people do have political views, but express them in forms other to electoral voting, such as involvement in one-off demonstrations for specific issues (Power Inquiry, 2006). Research by Madsen (2009: 11) suggests that young people are more willing than older people to express their views on many topics in certain ways, such as dialogue on the internet. Suggestions have been made as to ways in which young people could be encouraged to participate in the democratic process, including e-voting through kiosks (Smith, 2005). However, research suggests that the mechanics of voting is not a critical factor in disengagement (Smith, 2005). Denver (2003: 46) argues that “these sorts of suggestions [e-voting
etc.] are merely fiddling at the edges” and that “The main reasons for the lower turnouts seen in elections at all levels since 1997 are structural and political” rather than issues of convenience.

The British government has, in the past, introduced a number of initiatives to encourage youth participation, including: Young Advisors, who show organisations how to engage young people; Young Mayors, elected representatives of young people in an area; Youth Councils, comprising of elected representatives involved in decision making processes in local authorities; UK Youth Parliament, who organise events, campaigns and influence decision makers; youth-led research; participatory budgeting; overview and scrutiny; and Young Inspectors (Improvement & Development Agency, 2010).

2.12 Communication technologies

Online participation is an area of increasing interest. Social media is employed by politicians to communicate with members of the public, as well as by individuals and groups to discuss views, plan events and petition. Jensen et al. (2007) investigate the link between online and offline participation, identifying ways in which ICT may support democratic engagement. The research concludes that internet-mediated activities are not an extension of offline activities, but serve a distinct function.

Online means of communication offer people who would not otherwise be politically engaged the opportunity to participate in the democratic process. Muhlberger (2004, in Jensen et al., 2007) suggests that online discussions of a political nature tend to attract a wider variety of demographic groups because of the anonymous nature of online communication, unconstrained by SES variables (income, occupation, education, years lived in the community), thus resulting in a greater democratisation of the political process. In contrast, Baiocchi (2003) suggests that human interaction of a political nature tends to occur between demographically similar and existing social groups, who discuss in agreement, rather than to stimulate new ideas.

Atlestam (2004), Tapia and Ortiz (2010) and Smith (2005) consider ICT as a potential barrier to democratic engagement. Library provision of computer resources are seen as potential methods to solve social inequalities brought about in part by the 'digital divide' (Atlestam, 2004). However, although often introduced to solve social problems, Tapia and Ortiz (2010) suggest that this
method is often chosen out of “hope, frustration, inadequate funding and inadequate knowledge”.

Problems with technology projects may instead lead to further engagement problems such as mistrust between governments and citizens (Smith, 2005).

In contrast, Hill (2009) views computing as a source of “social capital”. She suggests that the “social Web” facilitates communication and collaboration, thereby pushing people to “articulate their place in a new media world”. Libraries, she argues, have a key role in this process, through their potential position as an online information resource with a unique function as a source of expert guidance.

2.12.1 E-government and E-democracy

E-government initiatives seek to encourage people to find information about local government online through government websites, and online methods of communication between citizens, MPs and councillors are under development. In addition to the provision of the improvement of public services, it is concerned with “creating a climate in which people will feel more civically engaged” (Gunter, 2006: 361). It is regarded as having the potential to counter political alienation by providing direct access to elected representatives (idem: 363). Another aspect of e-government is the potential to introduce e-voting (idem: 364). However, The Power Inquiry (2006) argue that e-voting is not a practical method of voting because of practical issues such as the digital divide and security concerns, and also suggest that simply introducing another, possibly more convenient, means of voting will not have an impact on voter turnout, because convenience is not a significant reason for low voter turnout.

The success of e-government initiatives is dictated by the content of government websites, the usability of these websites and the levels at which they are used. Research by Marcella et al. (2003) indicates that the availability of parliamentary information in electronic form alone is not enough to increase levels of citizen participation. They suggest that support is needed to encourage and enable people to “access, use, and apply” the information and interact with democracy. This is connected to levels of understanding about the types of information available via the internet and how this information is organised (idem: 386). For some participants in the research, the
technology of computers themselves is a deterrent to use and support was needed to help them access government websites.

2.12.2 The digital divide

In order for online participation to be a fully successful and supportive medium for democratic engagement, people must not only be motivated but also have the necessary access to do so. There is concern that the digital divide may serve to magnify political inequalities (Jensen et al., 2007). Access to the internet makes it easier to take part in democratic processes, but an estimated 12.5 million people do not have access to the internet (Williamson, 2010.) Of those who do have access to the internet, a large proportion lack the skills to seek, locate and interpret information.

2.13 The role of libraries

A number of examples of library schemes from around the world have been identified, which suggests that many libraries perceive themselves as having a role to play in fostering democratic engagement in citizens. Eric Moon (no date, in Sparanese, A. in Lewis, A., 2008: 77) argues that in order to survive and remain relevant, libraries must choose to be “a significant thread in the social fabric, an active participant in social change or to face an inevitable passage toward irrelevance, possible extinction or an existence as some kind of grey historical relic”; a point echoed by Percival (2008). It is considered vital for libraries to serve citizens according to their needs, including the need to be informed about political and social issues.

Public libraries are widely considered central to, and a product of, modern democracy (UNESCO, 1949), supporting an informed democracy by acting as “purveyors of fact” and an arena for cultural participation (MLA, 2005). IFLA (1973 in Kranich, 2001) posits that libraries are “a democratic institution for education, culture and information”. Cronenberger (no date, in Mason, no date) states that “the key element in a democracy is an informed citizenry; and that is the task of libraries”. Madsen (2009: 10) argues that libraries can help encourage citizens to engage politically and be active in democracy and cites the Swedish project 'The library as democratic hothouse' as a strong example.

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Samek (2008: 531) lists the ways in which librarians around the world engage in “persuasion and consensus building” through efforts such as petitions, manifestos, resolutions, rallies, boycotts, alternative conference programmes, publishing, lobbying and daily information exchange, all of which are strategies to address inequities and contribute to democratic engagement and functioning democracies:

Table 2: Strategies employed by libraries to address “historical inequities” (adapted from Samek, 2008: 532). Strategies which may contribute to democratic engagement are in bold.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. Access to information</th>
<th>33. Collection development &amp; policies</th>
<th>66. Eco-friendliness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. Law reform</td>
<td>34. Petitions</td>
<td>67. Scholarships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Accessibility</td>
<td>35. Platforms</td>
<td>68. Education, LIS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Letters</td>
<td>36. Collections</td>
<td>69. School libraries, alternative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Action research</td>
<td>37. Position statements</td>
<td>70. Election guides/kits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Lobbying, government</td>
<td>40. Community studies</td>
<td>73. Seminars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. AIDS information &amp; awareness</td>
<td>41. Proclamations</td>
<td>74. Expositions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Manifestos</td>
<td>42. Conference guides &amp; sessions</td>
<td>75. Space, autonomous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Alternative action programmes</td>
<td>43. Programmes</td>
<td>76. Film</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Media relations, management of</td>
<td>44. Cooperation, international</td>
<td>77. Speeches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Apologies</td>
<td>45. Programmes for children &amp; youth</td>
<td>78. Forums</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Meeting room policies</td>
<td>46. Cooperation, multidisciplinary</td>
<td>79. Storefronts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Awards</td>
<td>47. Projects</td>
<td>80. Fundraising</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Meetings with government</td>
<td>48. Court cases</td>
<td>81. Student engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Bibliographies</td>
<td>49. Protests</td>
<td>82. Historicism</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
However, it has been argued that libraries are “simultaneously ignored and taken for granted” in their role as supporters and developers of social and information networks, in general, and with regard to their ability to nurture democratic engagement (Preer, 2001: 62). Many recommendations have been made as to the ways in which public libraries can become drivers of democratic engagement, which can be broadly divided into three areas: information provision, an arena for engagement activities and a means of communicating perspectives and concerns (Thomas & Vincent, 2009; Mason, no date). Methods include displays (Thomas & Vincent, 2009; Atuti, 2008), acting as a venue for MPs'/councillors' surgeries, holding debates and conversations, acting as “brokers” of ideas, presenting the public with choices on issues, information provision,
making material available, outreach work, networking support, promotion of active citizenship, transparent management and the advocacy of democratic values (Thomas & Vincent, 2009). The Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (2010; 2008) identifies several ways in which public libraries can contribute to the local democracy agenda and the Generic Social Outcome “Strengthening Public Life”:

- “Encouraging and supporting awareness and participation in local decision-making and wider civic and political engagement
- Building the capacity of community and voluntary groups
- Providing safe, inclusive and trusted public spaces
- Enabling community empowerment through the awareness of rights, benefits and external services
- Improving the responsiveness of services to the needs of the local community, including other stakeholders” (MLA, 2008)
- “Support democracy through access to information on how and where to vote and provide impartial information about democratic choice.
- Providing information about how people can become a councillor or get involved in other civil roles
- Provide timely displays and information on relevant issues which may inspire people to become more active in their communities.
- Host and run events during Local Democracy Week.
- Provide specific web-based initiatives such as Europe Direct Leeds, which aims to link local people with the European Union, the message being that ‘all politics is local’.” (MLA, 2010)

As aforementioned, Hill (2009: 39) suggests that libraries have a unique role to play in the physical as well as online environment, with library use increasing instead of declining following the advent of the internet, in contrast to popular belief. She suggests that the role of libraries as “organizers and keepers of information access” is a social role with the potential to build communities and support engagement, asserting the Foucauldian notion that documents help to create and negotiate social space, enabling the development of groups and discussions.
Participatory institutions may be flawed in their presence as the only place in the community in which people are able to openly discuss issues (Baiocchi, 2003). In these instances, members may feel that these events are their only opportunity to express their views, and as a result, assemblies can be unsuccessful and counterproductive. By acting as another forum for constructive debate, libraries may relieve pressure from existing assemblies.

The community 'democracy hubs' referred to by The Power Inquiry (2006: 254) were envisaged in 1920s America by William Learned, who pictured “public libraries as community information centers [sic] at the hub of creating an informed citizenry (Preer, 2008: 7). Kranich (2001) succinctly expresses the potential role of public libraries in supporting and encouraging democratic engagement, arguing that libraries provide a community commons, where people can find and express differing opinions on public questions, and arguing that through the support of trained library staff, citizens learn how to “find, evaluate and use the information essential for making decisions that affect the way we live, learn, work, and govern ourselves”.

In response to a recent article on the Comment Is Free section of the Guardian newspaper website, a librarian commented about the work he/she does to support democratic engagement:

“I helped a person who can barely read register to vote. Without me, they couldn't have participated in our democracy. I hold sessions for people to give their views on local & national government consultations because libraries are one of the few places that hold copies of physical documents and also have computers to submit an online response. The library is a meeting space for the local walking group and Neighbourhood Forum meetings as well as out of hours computer training. It's also the venue for our local councillor drop in service as well as our PCSOs and MP.” (Unknown, 2010)

This account from an individual working in the field provides practical examples of the informal work taking place in UK public libraries and gives reasons as to why libraries are suited to support and encourage democratic engagement.
2.13.1 Public library neutrality

‘Neutrality’ is a term which can be interpreted in different ways. It is defined as being “impartial or unbiased” or “having no strongly marked characteristics” (Compact Oxford English Dictionary, 2005 in Vincent, 2008: 24). There are conflicting opinions about whether or not public libraries should be neutral services (Graham, 2003). The public perception immediately identifies libraries as neutral (Vincent, 2008: 24). The position of libraries as neutral is seen as a strength; libraries act as non-judgemental places offering equity of access, through the resources they hold and the physical space they inhabit:

“Public libraries have a responsibility to create an impartial and detached physical environment. If it is a ‘gateway to knowledge’ then all the resources and services of the library must come together to create a completely impartial public face.” (Lewis, 2005)

However, a number of authors suggest that the public library service should actively promote democracy and community involvement in a political way (Kempster & Palmer, 2000; Lewis, 2008: 77; Mason, no date), which requires libraries to take a clear ideological position, rather than one of “impartiality”. Vincent (2008) suggests that the process by which information is created could never be neutral, and Phenix and de la Peña McCook (2005: 23) emphasise the ways in which library stock-buying cannot be completely neutral due to the constant necessity to prioritise some resources over others.

Graham (2003: 9) suggests that libraries have a duty to serve their communities in their role of gatekeeper of information:

“as keepers of knowledge and interpreters of information, communities look to their librarians for guidance and counsel that transcend the library’s role as simply an educator or warehouse.”

Vincent’s (2008: 24) view that disadvantaged groups may rely even more heavily on library staff’s skills in helping them access information emphasises the point that the choices library staff make about the validity and reliability of resources cannot ever be completely neutral and has become
“something of a political minefield”.

Library services often claim to be ideologically neutral. Jensen (2006 in Phenix & de la Peña McCook, 2005: 24) argues that this “claim to neutrality is illusory; there is no neutral ground on which to stand anywhere in the world”. He explores this concept in another paper, in which he states that “To take no explicit position by claiming to be neutral is also a political choice” which typically means choosing the side of the oppressor, illustrating his point with a metaphor from South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu:

“If you are in a situation where an elephant is sitting on the tail of a mouse and you say, ‘Oh no, no, no, I am neutral,’ the mouse is not going to appreciate your neutrality” (Reuters, 2004 in Jensen, 2006).

If libraries suggest they are neutral, therefore, they must also be making a political choice.

Some authors suggest that libraries should not seek to be neutral and do not believe they ever could be, for negative reasons as well as positive; Percival (2008: 233) calls the idea “preposterous”, arguing that libraries have invested energy in excluding people, especially the most needy, including “insidiously through bureaucratic joining procedures” and stock selection procedures. The political choice to be neutral may contradict the values of public libraries. Phenix and de la Peña McCook (2005) argue that the core tenets of the public library service echo those of human rights. They suggest that:

“as we carry on with our duties as public service librarians, we should keep in mind our history of human rights advocacy, and note the work we do as a continuation of the commitment to the contributions of our programs, collections, and services toward keeping an open society, a public space where democracy lives”.

Within libraries’ advocacy for human rights, intellectual freedom and social responsibilities (Phenix and de la Peña McCook, 2005), lie values which are not “impartial or unbiased” and inherently involve “strongly marked characteristics”. Libraries may not, therefore, be able to be neutral at the same time as supporting democracy and enabling citizens to participate in and engage with the
democratic process. Indeed, Graham (2003) suggests, in relation to libraries’ role as an ‘antidote to spin doctors’:

“John Berry III reveals that perhaps within the library’s own neutrality lies a hidden agenda as he proclaims that “We must loudly and proudly hail the availability of neutral, unbiased information from a source that still truly belongs to all the people and that is staffed by experts trained to help those citizens separate the important from the campaign rhetoric, industry propaganda, and political spin.”"

Lewis (2005: 138) argues that as unique public spaces, libraries “should not be measured against the practices of other organisations” and instead require “unique policies to cover the unique position they hold in society”. In these circumstances, the “tradition of civil service impartiality” (House of Commons: 2007) would need to be questioned.

2.14 Overall conclusions from the literature

Democratic engagement is widely considered vital to the proper functioning of democratic society. Without an appropriate amount of information from unbiased providers, the population is unable to make informed and intelligent decisions in elections and unable to properly articulate thoughts and desires through appropriate channels. Libraries are seen by a number of authors to be in a key position to offer support and encouragement to the public about local and national politics and government, but do not currently appear to be utilising their position to the full, which may be for a number of reasons, including the perceived ideological position of libraries as neutral, or more practical issues. Their service to the public in this respect already involves the provision of information about the democratic process, party manifestos and local and national government information, as well as serving as a non-partisan arena for debate and discussion, but these resources and services are not widely appreciated.

Libraries' ideological position as ‘neutral’ institutions makes them ideally suited to supporting and encouraging democratic engagement. Libraries' involvement in democracy is seen by many to extend beyond encouraging democratic engagement in library users, to supporting the democratic system itself. Kranich (2001) describes public libraries as “the cornerstones of liberty”, and The
Glasgow Declaration (2002) states that public libraries “help to safeguard democratic values and universal civil rights”. By fostering democratic engagement in citizens, libraries support the democratic process as a whole, enabling citizens to play a more active role in their communities and society, make informed decisions and participate more fully in the democratic process.

Further investigation into the role of libraries in democratically governed countries in general would be beneficial to the understanding of their role in fostering the democratic engagement of citizens. Further research into the reasons public libraries may be unwilling or unable to foster democratic engagement, and ways in which they could do so, is also needed, in order to better support democratic processes.
3. Methodology

3.1 Research Topic

The originally desired research scope was far larger than was practical and possible to explore given the time-frame for the research project, and saw libraries' role in democracy as a holistic topic. This included an investigation into the extent to which libraries serve as bastions of democracy, in their existence as institutions within local authorities and a national framework and the ways in which they are governed and developed in ways which reflect or do not reflect democratic processes. It also included an investigation into the impact of ideas of democracy and freedom of information on libraries and library staff and the role of e-government on democratic engagement in and through public libraries. These topics are vast in themselves, and it would be impossible to explore these adequately in the time available, so the scope of the research was reduced to focus only on the ways in which libraries support and encourage citizens to be a part of the democratic process.

3.2 Research Approach

In order to achieve the aim and objectives (see Introduction), it was decided that interviewing library staff and asking library users to complete questionnaires would be the most appropriate way to achieve these aims, because although library staff may have been able to provide information about what services, activities and information the libraries offered, it was also important to identify whether or not library users were aware of, made use of, and found resources adequate.

The research took an inductive approach, in which “an accumulation of impressions...eventually speak for themselves” (Seale, 1999: 23), and broadly follows a grounded theory approach; the findings of the research form recommendations and conclusions without the application of a hypothesis at the beginning of the research (Bryman, 2004: 10). However, a literature review was conducted, which is not advocated in grounded theory, but was necessary in order to inform the structure and content of interviews and questionnaires (idem: 11). This is a limitation of the grounded theory approach identified by Bulmer (1979 in Bryman, 2004: 406), who questions whether it is possible to suspend awareness of theories and concepts until a late stage of data
analysis. Bryman (2004: 406) suggests that it may be desirable to be aware of existing concepts in order to be able focus investigations and build upon the research of others.

It was not possible to complete all the stages of grounded theory research in their entirety and order as recommended (idem: 407), due to time constraints. For example, formal coding was not carried out immediately after each interview was conducted, but the researcher built on the research methods as they went along, through an awareness of the key themes that were emerging. More specific questions were asked and more concise definitions and explanations of concepts were given as more interviews were conducted. This pragmatic approach aimed to enable the development of a well-rounded research project which employs reliable, valid methods and explores the topic as thoroughly as possible given the scope and practical constraints.

A qualitative approach was identified as most appropriate for the interview research into current library provision, and the reasons for and against democratic engagement initiatives in public libraries, because it enables the exploration of “intricate details about phenomena such as feelings, thought processes, and emotions that are difficult to extract or learn about through more conventional research methods” (Strauss and Corbin, 1998: 11). Such in-depth exploration was not deemed practical in researching library users' opinions for reasons of time, but also because the research sought largely only to identify which sorts of library provision the library users were aware of and/or used. A small amount of qualitative data was gathered in the form of spaces in the questionnaire for respondents to answer in a little more detail about why they had the opinion they did, if they wanted to express a reason. The main content of the questionnaires was quantitative in form to give an indication of individuals' levels of democratic engagement in comparison to their use of library resources that relate to the fostering of democratic engagement.

This triangulated research aimed to provide an adequate methodology allowing for greater confidence in the findings of the research (Gilham, 2000, in Patton, 2002), due to the “broader research perspective” (Denzin, 2000, in Patton, 2002: 555) and minimisation of fault or bias (Patton, 2002: 555; Webb et al. 1966, in Seale, 1991: 53). The research generated factual information about what Sheffield Libraries provide that can be considered as a contribution to democratic engagement, a picture of the key issues surrounding libraries' involvement with democratic engagement from the perspective of library staff and library users.
The original scope of the research was intended to span two library services: Sheffield and Doncaster, partly due to convenience for the researcher, but also because they are a city and a town in close proximity but with differing levels of democratic engagement as indicated through voter turnout statistics (see Appendix I). No response was given by Doncaster Libraries and Information Services, which indicated that research may have been inconvenient for them. It was ultimately decided that time constraints limited the scale of the research to one authority.

3.3 Methods

3.3.1 Literature Review

The literature review was conducted over the course of several months prior to the collection of information through interviews and questionnaires. It gave an insight into the political and social issues surrounding the topic and case studies and examples of public libraries' activities and provision around the world, facilitating a firm grasp of the issues involved in the area of research (Robson, 2002). The main information sources were journals identified through subject databases including: LISA (Library and Information Science Abstracts); databases within the Web of Knowledge; and Emerald Management Reviews. Academic texts were consulted for some political and sociological information about the democratic process itself, and websites such as UK Political Info and local government websites were used to find information about levels of voter turnouts in Doncaster and Sheffield. The websites of organisations such as the Hansard Society and POWER, organisations aiming to increase political participation and involvement, provided information about current initiatives. Library governing bodies' websites, such as the MLA website, provided information about libraries' role in democratic engagement and current schemes.

The main themes identified were: the democratic deficit; indicators of democratic engagement; reasons for democratic disengagement; the importance of democratic engagement; the economic benefits of democratic engagement; initiatives taking place around the world; initiatives taking place specifically in the United Kingdom; problems with democratic engagement and engagement initiatives; youth participation and disengagement; the application of communication technologies; E-government; the digital divide; the role of libraries; and issues of public library neutrality within local authorities and national government. Little information was found about the specific role of libraries with regard to democratic engagement.
The literature review informed the content of interview questions, but did not generate enough information about the involvement of UK public libraries in recent or relevant projects and schemes to adequately inform the questionnaire content.

3.3.2 Interviews

Exploratory, semi-structured interviews were conducted to ascertain what relevant information and activities UK public libraries currently offer. The information gathered from the interviews informed the content of a questionnaire, which aimed to identify to what degree the information and activities were used by library visitors, and if they were considered adequate and useful.

Another strand of the interview content was aimed to identify potential limitations within library, local or central government policy which may prohibit libraries from taking part in democratic engagement activities. A second set of interviews was conducted following the collection of data from questionnaires, which built upon findings of the first set of interviews and questionnaires, and focused more closely on the emergent key themes.

The method of semi-structured interviews was chosen for a number of reasons. The structure and content of the interview questions was partly informed by the literature review and had a fairly clear focus, which supported a semi-structured approach (Bryman, 2004: 323). Although the researcher had an awareness of the key issues from research for the literature review, the method of qualitative interviewing is deemed to provide an “open ended, in-depth exploration of an aspect of life about which the interviewee has substantial experience” (Holstein and Gubrium, 2003: 312). Furthermore, a semi-structured interview format ensured that there was some kind of structure to the interviews, but at the same time allow for a degree of flexibility should the respondent be particularly knowledgeable in certain areas. This means the interviews were led to some degree by the knowledge and understanding of the interviewee and by emergent themes. This approach is recommended by Bryman (2004: 321) because it allows new, follow-up questions to be asked should unexpected key themes emerge and facilitates the introduction of new ideas to the research, at the same time as ensuring that the areas of research chosen by the interviewer are covered by the questions pre-defined in the interview guide.
3.3.3 Questionnaires

Questionnaires were chosen as the most appropriate method to investigate democratic engagement from a public perspective, to compare individuals' levels of democratic engagement with their use of relevant library resources, to identify potential differences between perceptions provision between library staff and library users, to identify any lack of awareness of the resources available and to identify gaps in provision.

The questionnaires collected a combination of qualitative and quantitative data in a mixed methods approach, which was not originally intended but deemed potentially beneficial following a piloting of the questionnaire. Offering the opportunity for library users to explain the reasons for some of their answers allowed for richer data to be collected and enabled the comparison of the views of library staff with those of library users with regard to key concepts upon analysis, alongside the collection of quantitative data to gauge individuals' levels of democratic engagement in comparison to their involvement with or awareness of relevant library services.

The first and last sections of the questionnaire were informed by existing research into democratic engagement, including a PhD thesis by Moug (2008) which provided a framework with which to identify basic levels of democratic engagement, supplemented by other sources identified in the literature review. The second section was informed by the preliminary interviews conducted with library staff, who provided information about the resources specific to their library service. The questionnaire was as short as possible to encourage and the questions were mostly closed, requiring yes/no answers, in order to encourage as many respondents as possible and make completion of the questionnaire as simple as possible, with as little support from the researcher as possible, to minimise bias. Detailed information was not vital, because the questionnaires aimed to give an idea of how aware library users are of the democratic engagement-related information and activities that the library service offers and if they make use of them, but some text boxes were included to give respondents an opportunity to give more detail if they felt it was important and to offer the opportunity for interesting or previously unconsidered themes to emerge.
3.4 Piloting

3.4.1 Interviews

The interview guide was piloted on one Masters in Librarianship student, who was able to identify areas which may need clarification, even for members of staff who may be knowledgeable about national government initiatives and democracy as a subject. The guide was adapted following the pilot to include definitions of certain themes, should prompts for the interviewees be required.

3.4.2 Questionnaires

The questionnaires were piloted on a small sample to ensure that they followed an appropriate structure and that the questions were unambiguous. Amendments were then made to ensure clarity. As a result, some changes were made, including options for ethnic or cultural background and gender, and questions were rephrased to make them clearer. Space for respondents to give opinions and thoughts was also included, adding a qualitative element to the questionnaires.

3.5 Conducting the Research

3.5.1 Interviews

Interviews were conducted in two stages; the first set of interviews were conducted to find out what Sheffield libraries do and what services are available to users to support and encourage democratic engagement, in addition to exploring what library staff thought about the role of libraries in fostering democratic engagement. Through the coding process of grounded theory, key themes emerged. These themes were explored in more detail in a second set of interviews and gaps in the research were filled. For example, preliminary interviews with library managers identified that library users asked front-line staff about the voting process; interviews were then conducted with members of front-line staff to explore how often enquiries of this nature were made.

Interviews were conducted in person in order to make communication easier and to put interviewees as at ease as possible, because the subject matter, although not sensitive in nature, may have caused a degree of wariness because of potential 'political' content. The interviews were
recorded on a digital recorder to facilitate a freer-flow of speech and so the researcher was not reliant upon memory (Bryman, 2004: 330). The interviews were then listened to several times and key points were taken from the content, which ensured a thorough examination of the interviews (idem: 330).

3.5.2 Questionnaires

One morning was spent in the central library, asking library users to participate in the research. The original intention was for library staff to circulate the questionnaires and collect them, but due to the detail involved in and length of the questionnaires, it was decided that it would be more appropriate to offer one-to-one support to participants should it be needed. The use of online surveys was discounted because of concerns about the IT literacy of potential participants and the willingness of library users to spend their limited time on the internet to respond to a questionnaire. A paper version was deemed to be more accessible and allow a wider range of library users to respond, as well as the likelihood of a larger sample response.

3.6 Samples

3.6.1 Interview sample

The sample was a small group of library staff, largely professional, who were purposively selected and identified by a member of library management as individuals who worked in particular departments that are involved in relevant areas of service provision. The number of staff who volunteered to be interviewed was lower than anticipated, and unfortunately, two of the scheduled interviews had to be cancelled at short notice, therefore only six rather than eight interviews were conducted. This was not deemed prohibitive because the aim of the method was not to generalise, which is hard to do with a small sample (Patton, 2002), but to gain an insight into what one library service currently offers, would consider offering, and the reasons for or against promoting democratic engagement.
3.6.2 Questionnaire sample

Sampling was, again, purposive, and convenience-based. Willing participants were identified on the morning of the study, which was deemed appropriate because of time constraints. The sample size was slightly lower than the anticipated target (20 responses rather than 30) because the researcher was only able to spend one morning in the library due to time constraints, but most people asked were more than willing to contribute to the study, which meant that a good amount of data was gathered in a relatively short time-frame. Although not fully representative of the British population, the purposive sample was well-balanced between genders and ages and consisted of individuals with a range of employment statuses, levels of education and methods of democratic and social engagement, which is illustrated in the following graphs:

**Graph 1: Gender**

**Graph 2: Age**
**Graph 3: Ethnic or cultural background**

- English: 18
- Polish: 1
- African: 2

**Graph 4: Employment status**

- Working (full-time)
- Working (part-time)
- Unemployed
- Self-employed
- Volunteer
- Unable to work due to illness, disability or injury
- Retired from work
- Looking after home or family
- Student
- Other
Graph 5: Education background
**Graph 6: Indicators of democratic engagement**

![Graph 6](image)

**Graph 7: Involvement in organisations, clubs and societies**

![Graph 7](image)
3.7 Verification and Validity

In addition to the aforementioned strengths of triangulated research, the use of questionnaires and interviews may strengthen the validity of the research (Robson, 2002: 175).

3.7.1 Verification and validity of interviews

All interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis, except for one which was an impromptu group interview, because this was most practical for the interviewees, who both had very similar roles and had agreed to run through their area of work together. In some ways this may have been more productive than had they been interviewed alone because ideas were generated between them, but it may have had an impact on validity. Research was conducted in the environment chosen by the interviewee, to maximise validity (Sarantakos, 2005:87), but the researcher requested that the chosen environment be as quiet as possible for the practical issues surrounding recording the interviews.

3.7.2 Verification and validity of questionnaires

Most participants filled in the questionnaires themselves in order to minimise bias, but some participants were unable to do this, so the questionnaire was read out to them and responses were recorded on their behalf. Participants were asked to read the information sheet before filling in the questionnaire, which provided information about the research topic and definitions. Any questions asked about the content of the questionnaire were met with answers based on the content of the information sheet where possible, and where not, answers were kept as similar as possible in an attempt to ensure reliability (Bryman, 2004: 28).

3.8 Ethics

The research project was identified as low risk by the department's ethics committee. The University of Sheffield’s ethical research policy was followed, ensuring that guidelines for participant safety and anonymity were observed. Participation in the project was voluntary, and interview participants were asked to read an information sheet and sign a consent form, confirming that they understood the aims and objectives of the research.
Questionnaire respondents were asked to read an information sheet and consent was implicit in completion of the questionnaire. Although the questionnaire asked for some demographic information, none of the questions were obligatory. Volunteers were informed that they could withdraw their data from the research at any time. Data was kept securely, recordings were only listened to by the researcher and transcriptions were only accessible to the researcher and the project supervisor. Recordings and transcripts will be destroyed following assignment submission and marking.

3.9 Limitations of the Methodology

As mentioned, the response rate for questionnaires was lower than ideal, and is not a representative sample of library users. Similarly, the sample for interviews is not representative of all library staff and the cancelled interviews made the sample smaller than ideal. Furthermore, the interviewees were selected by a library manager and then self-selecting, and the questionnaire respondents were chosen by the researcher and then agreed to complete the questionnaire, which means that both methods may carry a degree of response bias. The samples do, however, give an in-depth insight into key themes and areas for consideration which could form the basis for further, larger-scale research, and the samples comprised of a good cross-section of library staff and library users.

The research is limited to one authority and focuses on only a few branches and the central library, which does not allow for comparison between levels of provision, but it is hoped that the in-depth analysis of the provision of one library service, with the exploration of activities and provision in the central library and some branches, is sufficient to give meaningful insight into the democratic engagement work of libraries in that particular geographical area and potential areas for project work or service improvement. The research conducted could serve as a source of ideas for other library services.

Although interviewer bias was avoided wherever possible, it was clear to the interviewees that the researcher was approaching the research with a particular viewpoint (i.e. that libraries should actively foster democratic engagement) by virtue of a desire to conduct research in the area. The semi-structured interview question sheet was followed where appropriate in order to ensure that questions were phrased in a non-leading way.
3.10 Analysis

3.10.1 Transcription of recorded interviews

Interviews were transcribed as soon as possible following each individual interview, for two reasons: first, to spread out the transcription process over a fairly long period so as to avoid the impression that a “monumental task” of transcription must be faced (Lofland & Lofland, 1995 in Bryman, 2004: 332); and second, to allow 'constant comparison' of data and the process of conceptualisation as recommended by Glaser and Strauss (1967 in Bryman, 2004: 403). The content of most interviews was transcribed as accurately as possible in full from the recordings, but in some cases, the interviews contained irrelevant sections of speech. In those instances the portions were not transcribed, as recommended by Gerson and Horowitz (2002 in Bryman, 2004), but the recordings were kept in case any material that had not been transcribed yielded relevant information after certain themes had emerged.

3.10.2 Coding

Interview transcripts and the qualitative elements of the questionnaires were coded until the point of theoretical saturation, in line with a grounded theory approach. The terms used in coding were not based upon “preconceived standardised codes” (Bryman, 2004: 399) and the initial mental coding and “continual internal dialogue” (Strauss, 1987 in Strauss & Corbin, 1997) that occurred during the process of interviewing the first set of candidates shaped the next stage of coding; the process of close-reading and “theoretical saturation” (idem: 400).

The coding method recommended by Charmaz (2006, in Bryman, 2008) was used; first, an open coding method was used to examine, compare, conceptualise and categorise the qualitative data from the interviews and questionnaires. This generated a large number of concepts, a likely result identified (idem: 543). Second, selective coding was applied to the transcripts to create a set of core categories, including some abstract concepts such as 'neutrality', which act as the centre around which other subcategories, such as 'party politics', 'rules and policies' and 'library staff neutrality' pivot. As a result, the most common codes were emphasised and revealed the key themes emerging from the data (idem: 543). It is acknowledged that the coding reflects both the perspectives of the research participants and the social world views of the researcher.
The qualitative elements of the questionnaires were also coded using the same coding method. The data was compared with the interview data, which allowed comparison between interview transcripts and questionnaires to identify these emerging themes and commonalities or differences in the opinions and awareness of library staff and library users.

3.10.3 Quantitative analysis of questionnaires

Had a larger number of questionnaire responses been collected, it would have been necessary to use statistical analysis software such as SPSS, but due to the small, manageable size of the sample it was deemed appropriate to conduct basic quantitative analysis was carried out using spreadsheet software. Levels of democratic engagement, social engagement and use of relevant library resources were compared, and the use of relevant library resources was analysed alongside demographic details in order to ascertain any correlation and identify any potential gaps in use.

3.10.3.1 Levels of engagement

**Chart 1:** questionnaire respondents' use of library resources and levels of engagement
A simplistic grading scale was used to indicate levels of social engagement, democratic engagement and use of library resources. It was not designed to be an accurate representation of engagement levels because this would not be possible given the reductive indicators used in the questionnaire. It was instead intended for use as an indication of correlation between the values; the values themselves being nominal and allocated using the following method:

- Levels of **democratic engagement** were graded between 0 and 12. Points were allocated to each respondent for each of the indicators of democratic engagement (identified in the literature review and used in question 1 of the questionnaire) and further points were allocated for an understanding of how to vote (question 2) and the response given in questions 3 relating to attitude to voting.

- Levels of **social engagement** were graded between 0 and 25. Points were allocated to each respondent for their responses to question 4a) and 4b) relating to involvement in social and community groups or organisations. Respondents were asked to list the kind of groups they were in, and the category a group fell under related to the points allocated. For example, a community activist group would score 4, a local history group 3 and a sports team 2. It should be emphasised that the points allocated were purely for purposes of indicating high, medium and low levels of social engagement and do not reflect the social value of such groups.

- Levels of use of **library resources** were graded between 0 and 35. Points were allocated to each respondent for their responses to question 5 relating to their use of relevant library resources.

The three sets of values generated the above line chart, which demonstrates a rough correlation between levels of social and democratic engagement and use of library resources; e.g. if an individual has a high level of democratic engagement they are likely also to use more library resources relating to the democratic process and have a higher level of social engagement.
4. Key Findings

Six semi-structured interviews were conducted with library staff and managers working in the central and branch libraries, who specialised in different areas and had differing levels of expertise and understanding of the topic of democratic engagement. This resulted in the collection of information about a wide range of topics and differing opinions on key issues. The interviews followed the same broad structure, but were led to an extent by the interests and knowledge of each interviewee. The main topics of discussion in each interview are presented below:

*Table 3: Interview Summaries*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Topics of discussion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1           | • Sources of information about democratic process  
              • Cost of resources  
              • Staff training/knowledge  
              • User privacy  
              • Displays for special events e.g. Local Democracy Week  
              • Reasons for not promoting resources  
              • Barriers to implementing schemes  
              • Outreach work in schools  
              • Role of libraries in democratic engagement agenda  
              • Importance of non-partisanship/neutrality  
              • Public need for information  
              • Library as a venue for events |
| 2           | • Council websites – Help Yourself and Event Sheffield  
              • Access to details of councillors  
              • Outreach opportunities through council reception  
              • Methods of promoting online resources - barriers  
              • Accessibility of resources  
              • Ways of measuring popularity of resources  
              • Neutrality issues – decision-making processes |
| 3 | - Internet as a source of information about local democracy  
- Assembly meetings and their popularity/efficacy  
- Citizenship packages  
- Need for public to be informed about democracy  
- Role of library in democratic process  
- Library as a venue for events  
- Promotion of democratic role of library  
- BME use of libraries  
- Enquiries from public |
|---|---|
| 4 | - Informal ways libraries support democratic engagement  
- Libraries as inherently political / libraries should take a political stance  
- Guidelines and regulations for libraries  
- Core values of libraries – democracy  
- Devolved power and problems of disengaged communities  
- Staff awareness and interest in political issues  
- Public enquiries about the democratic process |
| 5 | - Library as a polling station  
- Citizenship classes  
- Rules about libraries taking part in political activities  
- Inability to promote library resources with political content  
- Use of People's Network for democratic engagement  
- Perceived lack of need for people who are not new to country  
- Library as a venue for community meetings and political groups |
| 6 | - Things that libraries would not be permitted to do  
- Barriers to putting up displays etc.  
- Promotion of resources  
- Current and potential partnerships  
- Role of library as community hub  
- Policies  
- Staff awareness of policies  
- Role of library in supporting and encouraging democratic engagement |
4.1 Analysis of key findings

A number of key themes emerged from the analysis of the interview transcripts, which focused on three main players: public libraries, local councils and the public. Many other emerging themes were interwoven around these groups. A mind-map represents these key concepts and their connections in Appendix V, which supported the process of conceptualisation and an understanding of the relationship between core themes (Orona, 1990 in Strauss & Corbin, 1997: 181).

It is apparent from the findings that Sheffield Libraries do offer resources that support democratic engagement, including leaflets, newsletters, public meetings and forums, support and advice, consultative workshops, neighbourhood committees, visioning workshops, community profiles and internet communication with citizens. These examples relate directly to those given by Coleman and Gøtze (2001). The resources take the form of access to information, relevant courses that run in some branch libraries and staff responses to enquiries. These resources, and issues surrounding them, are explored in this section.

4.1.1 The role of libraries in supporting democratic engagement

The major theme, arising from the analysis of interviews and questionnaires in the light of the points identified in the literature review, is that libraries have a potentially substantial role to play in supporting and encouraging democratic engagement. Libraries were viewed by most interviewees as key bodies in the process of democratic engagement, enabling people to access and make sense of information about the democratic process that may not be available elsewhere:

“I suppose people can't engage in the democratic process if they're not informed, and we have that function.”

“Yes. A because they've got the facilities and B because they've got that reputation of being a neutral space and where people congregate and come to and expect to get information or at least be signposted to it. And I think the public think that too, which is why they come.”
“They must have chosen the library ahead of, I don’t know, a chip shop, for a reason. There must be something about what the library is.”

A number of reasons to support the opinion that libraries have a key role to play were identified: access to and support with information, the position of libraries as 'neutral' places, their core values of equality and access to information, and libraries' position within the local council.

4.1.2 Information: access and support

As information providers, libraries are in a key position to offer the information they hold as a matter of course, for purposes of supporting citizens who wish to engage with the democratic process. Interviewees identified the following as sources of information held by the library, through the library or available through the People's Network:

- The electoral role
- Information about polling station locations (several of which are library branches)
- Information held on council and library websites such as councillor and MP contact details
- Justice and Parliament websites
- Ombudsman contact details
- Political party manifestos (available online)
- Political party leaflets and publicity (held in Local Studies library)
- European Parliament information
- Community information (through Event Sheffield and Help Yourself websites)
- Councillor and MP surgeries
- Citizenship courses
- Book stock relating to democratic process and politics
- Newspapers
- News bulletins (held in Local Studies library)
- 'Green' book group that focuses on green issues – often related to political issues

Sheffield Libraries are in the process of embedding a Qwidget in their online resources, which costs around £1,700 for an annual subscription. It is part of Enquire, “the only fully managed virtual reference collaboratively staffed 'chat' service” (John, 2010). A function of this is to facilitate online
councillor surgeries, aiming to engage with a wider audience.

Although a wide variety of resources are available, spending cuts have meant that “ordinary books have not been bought for a couple of years” for the reference library. This means that books about the political process or political parties may be in need of updating. The lending library’s collection may hold more stock that is up to date; this was not possible to ascertain in this research project and may be a question for a future research project to investigate.

Some political resources, including news bulletins such as the Sheffield Anarchist Federation’s *Fargate Speaker*, are held in the Local Studies library. It was not permitted to hold this publication in the Reference Library, but as a source of local information can be kept in Local Studies. The point was raised by one interviewee that all newspapers are politically biased in some way, but a line was drawn between the two types of information resource.

Some alternatives to libraries were identified as sources of information, for example First Point Centres and the Elections Office:

“A lot of information goes out with the council switchboard number on, so I guess they get a lot of calls about how to register to vote and that kind of thing. Then you’ve got the student population, stuff went out through the university about the election and voting.”

However, some interviewees suggested that libraries have a distinct role which may not be fulfilled by other council departments. One interviewee suggested that the public may not be able to navigate the complex structure of local and national government and look to public libraries as a source of information:

“Parliament is confusing, council is confusing, and a lot of people don’t know how it works and they don’t trust their local politicians...so where would they find that information if not at the library?”
Libraries are seen to offer more than just access to information; they also offer support to those seeking help to understand the meaning of the information available to them, which is a unique function of the library:

“...there are definitely alternatives to the library, but I don’t think they serve that function, maybe when people want a bit more depth, something more than just “how do I register to vote?”, it might be “I want to know about this Bill that’s gone through Parliament.”

4.1.3 The role of library staff

Library staff play an important part in helping people to access information such as councillor and MP contact details, as well as signposting people to the relevant council department and telling people how to register to vote, for example:

“Staff would support if people have difficulty accessing information.”

“Staff who would actively look for things for people.”

“We had a number of people come in to ask “How do I vote? How do I register? How do I fill the slip in on the day?”

A significant amount of library users make enquiries about the democratic process:

“Recently, before the last election...we had a number of people come in to ask “how do I vote? How do I register? How do I fill the slip in on the day?””

“During the brief period before the election...there were people who came in and asked those sort of questions, so I assume those questions were being asked city-wide, and I think they were being asked when I wasn’t there as well, so I think it could be quite significant.”
“...people coming in with specific questions like, who is my councillor, who is my MP, who is my Minister for x, y, z, how do I get in contact with them, how do I find out about this? Sort of direct engagement with the democratic process in this country.”

“We get asked about councillors a lot. Who is my councillor, how do I contact them? Several times a week we’ll get people asking about that.”

“I do remember now being asked about the manifestos a couple of times, if we have copies.”

Some staff mentioned that they had on occasion helped people to register to vote and told them about how the process works. It would be of interest to further investigate whether the Elections Office or national departments tell citizens about how to actually physically vote, because interviewees identified a potential gap:

“Thinking about it, does anyone ever get told you go into a booth there and you have to put a cross on there?”

Some interviewees provided anecdotes of problems people had experienced in polling stations when they had expected to be able to vote for the Prime Ministerial candidate rather than their local representative of the party. This would suggest there is a need for some form of citizen education about the British political system.

Staff also expressed the extent to which they would be able to provide information dependent on the request made:

“We’ll try and find it for them as long as it’s not racist or sexist.”

Again, further research into who decides what content is offensive and unacceptable would be beneficial in regard to this topic.
Staff training and individual levels of engagement

Staff awareness of political issues has an impact on their ability to support and encourage democratic engagement:

“...some people just aren't particularly interested. Library staff are a cross-section of the general public, so some people might not be interested in it.”

Staff are expected to have a basic level of awareness of the democratic system, or at least how to access the relevant information for any member of the public seeking information, as part of their reference training:

“Staff are trained to find information from the resources we've got, but they're not trained to or wouldn't give advice on views. Just the sources they would use to find information. [In terms of how to vote] I suppose they don't offer training but I imagine somewhere along the line it's written down so they'd do it that way...I think most of them know what to do.”

“It is something I would expect most people to know how to deal with...I would expect them to know how to find out about it, that'd be through the intranet or lifting the phone and ringing the Elections Office. The difficulty with that of course is there's a time delay in that. But I would expect staff to know about that as part of their general enquiry training.”

It is likely that a member of the public would be signposted to a useful resource should they ask for information about how to register to vote, how to physically vote, or how to contact a councillor or MP, for example.

However, if a member of the public needed information about political parties, such as manifestos, books or key websites in order to make an informed decision as to which party to vote for in an election, the information received may depend on the staff member asked and the relationship that the member of staff had with the person making the enquiry. For example, one interviewee described discussing interactive websites with regular customers who had mentioned that they did not know who they wanted to vote for, and it was recommended that they try out a website that
would help them discern which policies and parties they were most closely aligned with. It was emphasised that this was an informal way of engaging the public with political issues and was only possible on occasions when staff and library users knew each other from regular interaction.

4.1.3.2 Actively encouraging citizens to participate

A less discussed point than the role of libraries in offering access to information was that of the role of libraries in actively encouraging citizens to take part in the democratic process:

“I don't think we do enough, much at all.”

However, some active encouragement does take place between staff, and between members of staff and their regular patrons:

“I definitely think they do [have a role in encouraging people to vote, contact their MP/councillor]. And on a one-to-one basis, if I'm dealing with enquiries...I'll also say it's worth talking to your councillor or MP...I think we should be encouraging that kind of engagement.”

If this active encouragement were formalised it may enable staff to do so more confidently in the knowledge that it was permitted within library policy, and may occur more often.

4.1.4 The library as a means of communicating concerns

Despite the concerns of library staff that libraries are not allowed to take part in activities that could affect their neutrality, it has been known for libraries to host petitions about local issues, such as planning proposals and the closure of a Post Office. However, this is only something that libraries would be able to do if they were acting purely as providers of information:

“In this case it was a service for the public, and the information was here...it was for the public to sign but we weren’t taking direct control, so it was basically information. We put a notice up for the public to be aware that the petition exists for them to sign.”
Libraries are able to host petitions if the issue concerning the public did not yet involve the council, which can be problematic:

“This is always a very very difficult one, because often petitions are against council policy and we are usually instructed that where this is the case we are not allowed to host those petitions, even though they may well be a community issue which local people feel strongly about. Sometimes there may well be issues that haven’t reached the council yet, maybe petitions about the erection of a mobile telephone mast or a Tesco superstore that haven’t got to planning stage where a decision has been made, so there may be things that are quite neutral and might be things that are okay to do.”

All of the staff interviewed mentioned that some libraries are used as venues for councillors' and MPs' surgeries, which are a way for the public to communicate to the council about any issues they may have:

“We hold council surgeries. If people have complaints or issues about an area of service provision, people know how to go about it and how to complain about issues.”

“When I was at Darnall library the MP surgeries in particular were incredibly popular.”

Surgeries were seen as a good way of encouraging people to communicate with their local representative because face-to-face communication may be an effective way of breaking down “prejudice or judgement” between communities and representatives.

4.1.5 The library as 'neutral'

The concept of library 'neutrality' was fundamental to the reasons given as to why libraries play an important role in providing information and serving as a community space. Libraries are very much seen as non-judgemental places where everyone is welcome, and also as services which do not get
involved with politics:

“It’s just vital that we keep a neutrality and hold back from any kind of negative association, or any kind of association with party politics or any particular party or politician.”

“...they've got that reputation of being a neutral space...”

This causes some confusion, because interviewees often used the term 'neutral' and 'non-partisan' interchangeably.

4.1.5.1 Differentiation between 'neutral' and 'non-partisan'

There appeared to be confusion between the terms 'neutral' and 'non-partisan'. Often, interviewees would refer to libraries' role as politically 'neutral' even though the discussion was about the role libraries play in supporting equality, freedom of information and other issues which are inherently political. Upon further discussion, it became apparent that interviewees sometimes used the term 'neutral' to mean 'non-partisan', which is a different political position to 'neutral':

“Libraries need to be apolitical and out of it so they can be seen as neutral...I suppose it's showing all sides of the argument rather than not getting involved at all.”

“Whilst I do think we have a role in helping people...getting information and making informed judgements...I suppose I see us as rising above an association with party politics. But then...telling people about the democratic process is different.”

In contrast, however, one interviewee suggested that libraries are inherently political in their core values:

“In a sense it's about the core values of the library...one of the core values is freedom of speech, and information.”
“I think also it's a progressive institution, you know, with its aims and its values. I don't think it'd be too much of a stretch to say that one of the aims of libraries is to increase equality. I think that a lot of librarians would agree with that. And it has progressive values.”

The idea that libraries are unavoidably connected to a progressive political outlook is explored by Lewis in her introduction to Questioning Library Neutrality: essays from Progressive Librarian (2008) and the following chapters, which are articles taken from the Progressive Librarian journal.

4.1.5.2 Neutral space

Libraries do, however, appear to act as neutral spaces that a wide range of groups, political, community or otherwise, use as meeting and social spaces:

“We're seen as a neutral place for people to come.”

A number of staff mentioned that libraries are used as polling stations, which is a direct way in which the library buildings themselves serve a democratic purpose. It is the perceived neutrality of libraries that a member of staff identified as a reason that libraries are good places to use as polling stations:

“I don't suppose there are that many venues people may feel comfortable going to. I think it's probably quite important in some parts of town, particularly in the east of Sheffield, where there's large BME populations and a large Muslim population, that polling stations are in locations where people feel reasonably comfortable going, that are visibly neutral. I hope libraries are...I think some people would perceive libraries as being neutral and I think that does matter to BME voters who are perhaps a bit more unsure or even cynical about the democratic process.”

Maintaining neutrality was considered potentially difficult if groups with extreme views wished to
hold meetings in the library or for the library to hold content about their group:

“This is where I have the idea that libraries should take a particular stance...If the material contradicts those core values, then should the library be stocking it?...I would say I wouldn't be comfortable letting any far right material in, I think because it goes against the essential values of the library. Things that are anti-democratic as well, because democracy is a core value of the library, why should we do that? And you know, why should we let them hold groups in a library?”

“Yeah, I'm opposed to the BNP using library space, purely because of their policies. You know, if they changed their policies so that they weren't a fascist group then they'd be welcome to use the libraries, but they don't, so they can't. It's as simple as that, I think.”

4.1.5.3 Non-partisanship

There was a definite sense from the majority of staff interviewed that libraries should not align themselves with any political party:

“Libraries tend to be seen as neutral, which is where one of our strengths lies. To open up to a political party – I'm not sure it's a good idea.”

“There's no agenda. I don't think they're really aligned with any political agenda.”

“...we have to be seen as unbiased and not taking any sides.”

The content of the Event Sheffield and Help Yourself website comes both from public submissions and staff research. This makes the content inclusive and ensures that content is not just generated by the most active groups. However, the user-driven aspect of the sites mean that staff moderation is required in order to prevent offensive content being put on the sites. The need for fairness at the same time as not causing offence by including extremist material was emphasised.

The public are welcome to submit material as long as it fits the criteria for inclusion. This issue is
open to further discussion about who deems what material offensive or extremist, and to what degree extreme political views are to be given platform in local council services. In the case of library services, borderline cases or issues can be deferred to a higher power, within the local council, for scrutiny. Other issues concerning a need to 'draw the line' are discussed later.

4.1.6 Libraries' position within local council

There was a difference of opinion as to whether libraries were perceived by the public as being part of the local council, which they connected to having a potential impact on whether or not the public see them as neutral services:

“I'm sure there are some people who don't perceive libraries as neutral because they see the council stamp on them and associate or connect the two.”

“I still think libraries are viewed differently even though we have the stupid badge, we...I don't think the public necessarily view it as being linked to the council's image and to some extent I don't think the staff see themselves as being linked to the local council.”

Another concern raised was that party politics within the local council has an impact on library services and what they do or do not offer:

“I see several decisions that could have been made for the good of the service, and therefore the people of Sheffield, that have been put on hold or not made for reasons of party politics.”

This was connected to the level of interest and knowledge local councillors have about library services and whether or not they are well-informed about the role of libraries. This may have a direct impact on any schemes that libraries wish to develop with regard to democratic engagement.

The position of libraries within local council was seen by one interviewee as that of providers of
information about local council issues without judgement and association with other local council departments:

“We’re not making decisions about people’s benefits or housing, so we’re a window for the council in a positive way.”

This may serve libraries well, not only in terms of communication with the public, but also with local and national government:

“If we can provide services for people and they can make contact with their MP or their councillor then that seems like the kind of thing that could keep politicians on the side of libraries as well. It’s a function, isn’t it, an extra function. Especially for the council and the politicians that don’t see the function of libraries.”

It may be valuable, therefore, for Sheffield Libraries to assess current methods and levels of liaison between libraries and councillors before embarking on new projects.

4.1.6.1 Local council and library policies

It was suggested in every interview that the local council or library authority has rules about what libraries can and cannot do with regard to political issues:

“I don’t think there’s an issue for us to look into that. There’s very clear cut guidance as to what sort of things we can do.”

However, different staff had different levels of awareness as to what these rules specifically set out:

“I’m not sure what the policy is.”

“I’m not entirely sure about the rules or where they are. We pass things up [to council management] when we’re not sure.”

“I think the policy is probably to charge for a party meeting but I’m not certain
about that.”

“That will come under the amnesty thing. Libraries aren’t allowed to promote any party during the run up to an election. The council are not allowed to do it – us as part of the council may have that problem but only during the dates set.”

“We’ve got all kinds of guidelines, there might be something hidden in there.”

“I bet it doesn’t exist.”

“I think the unwritten rule is that we do not promote political parties at that time [purdah].”

Some staff did not believe that libraries are allowed to promote the fact that they hold information about political parties:

“We are not a political organisation so we can’t do anything like that.”

This is a barrier for staff that are uncertain about library policy and feel that they need to be careful not to cause problems, and would benefit from clarification.

One interviewee believed that libraries are prohibited from stocking any resources of a political nature, such as manifestos:

“We’re not supposed to house such information or promote such information because that’s seen as political, which is why we don’t house such information in the library, in the printed format.”

Other staff members were unsure if the library did stock party manifestos, but this was because they would immediately go to the internet to provide a library user with a link to manifestos rather than provide them with a printed copy.
Some staff may be overly cautious about dealing with 'political' issues because they are wary of reproach:

“I think they are mindful that they have to be cautious, and that things can blow up and be on the front of The Star.”

The House of Commons Library (2010) has produced guidance for civil servants and local authorities in the pre-election period for general elections and The Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity is issued under section 4 of the Local Government Act 1986. The Department for Communities and Local Government also produced a Code of recommended practice on local authority publicity. It does not prohibit local authorities from encouraging citizens to engage with the democratic process, even during the pre-election period.

It was mentioned by two interviewees that it may be beneficial in some way to look at issues on a case by case basis rather than having rigid policies:

“I think it's about looking at things on a case by case basis, rather than having a hard set of values on it.”

“More things are likely to happen if it doesn't exist. When you start making rules...it doesn't always happen.”

Existing rules and regulations may be in need of renewal:

“The premises one is quite specific about organisations using it, but I think you could probably drive a coach and horses through it in terms of contentious groups using it, like the BNP.”

Staff awareness and understanding of policy appears to have a direct impact on how staff respond to user enquiries and what resources they promote or recommend. It is therefore important for these policies, or lack thereof, to be clarified.
4.1.7 Promotion of library resources

The research finds that libraries do offer a number of resources to support and encourage democratic engagement, but that these were often not widely publicised, particularly not outside libraries themselves, which was a barrier to engaging non-users. Some methods of promotion currently used in Sheffield libraries were identified:

- Posters on notice boards in libraries
- Handouts
- Occasional displays in libraries
- Internet promotion of Help Yourself and Event Sheffield
- Other council departments recommending library services/resources
- Key rings and pens relating to special events/courses such as WEA schemes

There is an apparent lack of promotion about the resources the library has that can support and encourage the democratic process:

“We certainly don’t promote ourselves as a place to go and engage with the democratic process.”

This is perhaps something that should occur, which the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council in their Community Empowerment Discussion Paper (2009). Promotion of democratic engagement does not only include displays and promotion of stock, but also includes the elimination of barriers to access (see 4.1.10).

However, the library websites appear to be relatively well-publicised. Hyperlinks on other council websites, for example its mental health pages, as well as the distribution of leaflets and posters at local events help to promote the online databases. Outreach work also takes place through the council reception, whose staff are able to tell customers about the library's online resources.

Other library resources do not enjoy such a high profile. Current advertising tends to be based within the library on notice boards, which is either produced in-house or is provided via partners such as the Workers’ Educational Association. External publicity material may be produced with a higher budget but is subject to issues such as timely delivery, which had an impact on the
attendance for the citizenship course that ran in some library branches.

Library resources and services related to democratic engagement may go unnoticed because of a lack of active promotion. There is a sense that the library is a passive presence, that is “always here” but does not actively promote its role in the democratic process. It was acknowledged that more could and should be done to promote the role of libraries in the democratic process:

“We've not really had the chance to – two reference libraries moved together last year...so now it's all in one place. We’ve not worked out what we’re going to promote and develop.”

“I think we’ll need to try and think about how we get that going [informing people about the voting process]. I think people should think about it a bit more...we’ve not thought about it, perhaps we should think about it a bit more.”

“We might be more proactive about the democratic process in the lead-up to elections, and how the library’s role can be more proactive in encouraging people to vote.”

4.1.8 Barriers to promoting library services

A number of barriers to the promotion of libraries' role and the resources held were identified.

4.1.8.1 Time and timing

The promotion of information, displays or library events is affected by the timing of political events such as elections:

“It would have been more popular had there been a vote.”

“It comes and goes depending on the topics.”

“If we were going to have a referendum we would promote the information.”
“It’s on a backburner at the moment.”

“It depends what’s happening in Europe.”

The ability to promote resources is also limited by time constraints:

“If you want to promote you have a short time to get something together for the election...it’s about time, and getting people together to promote the information we have and put it along next to the rest of the book stock.”

Libraries’ provision of democratic information is not just relevant in the run up to elections, however:

“We need to remind people that we’re here for the rest of the year, not just during election periods.”

4.1.8.2 Staff time and interest

In order to be able to effectively promote the role of libraries, staff time and interest is required. This includes a sufficient amount of interest to volunteer to work on projects as well as the time to do so. Staff also require the time to keep up with current events:

“To be aware of the issues requires a certain amount of time to keep up, and some people don’t have the time or want to spend it doing that.”

Not all staff have the time or enthusiasm about politics to engage with it enough to effectively support, encourage and promote democratic engagement. It was suggested that if staff training was deemed an appropriate course of action, perhaps this could come from a different council department:

“We don’t run any, and I don’t know of any that exists, but I would say that that’s
something perhaps the Elections Office could take a lead on with people like us.”

4.1.8.3 Potential complaints

It was mentioned on a number of occasions that making decisions about political content was difficult and that there was a “fine line” between acceptable and unacceptable content. A concern that was raised was that if libraries were permitted to put up displays about political parties, there is the possibility that members of the public or political parties may complain:

“I think we’re open to comment about promotional equality and one person could always say “you haven’t given me the space that another person’s had” or “you haven’t given me the prominence” or “my literature is not in the right place compared to that other person”.”

Other staff expressed the concern that if the libraries were to hold information about less favourable parties such as the BNP, members of the public may be offended and make complaints. Obviously, library authorities are keen to avoid bad publicity and alienating their users, especially during a period of extreme public sector spending cuts and increased scrutiny on their service.

4.1.8.4 Neutrality

The perception of libraries as 'neutral' or 'non-partisan' as explored in 4.1.5 was identified as another barrier and is a reason given for libraries' inability to participate in open discussion about political issues.

4.1.8.5 Cost

The cost of publicity is inevitably a barrier to promoting any of the roles of the library. It was identified that there is “not really a budget” for promotion, especially given the cost of media promotion.
4.1.9 Partnerships

4.1.9.1 Existing partnerships

Some current partnership work was identified:

“Green Roofs, as part of an experiment by Groundwork, a project they're doing...They also run workshops, things for the community.”

Citizenship courses also run in a number of branch libraries, as part of a national government scheme. The course content includes information about the British political system which citizenship applicants would be expected to understand in order to pass the citizenship test.

The Workers' Educational Association were commissioned to run a course on community politics in three or four branch libraries, as part of their Community Involvement course provision that they run mainly in partnership with community organisations (Workers' Educational Association, 2009). The course described was well-attended and there are plans for further partnership work. The content was described as “purely educational” and about how the community can play a part in politics, which was not perceived as problematic by the libraries or any stakeholders.

4.1.9.2 Potential partnerships

There is potential for these partnerships to be expanded further, with groups which, although have a specific social objective (i.e. increasing voter turnout in BME populations, encouraging sustainable lifestyles and green ethics), do not have an explicit party-political allegiance:

“I think there's more like that that can be exploited, with groups like Groundwork, who are politically neutral. Also campaigning groups...trying to change how we do things.”

With regard to European Parliament information and special events or displays, there is the possibility that an MEP may help to promote the library:

“The MEP might promote something like that.”
A social media facility called a ‘Qwidget’ is being developed and added to library and other council websites, which will act as a communication tool for the public to ask questions to councillors or library staff. There is the potential for this to be trialled in schools:

“Perhaps we could do something in Democracy Week at schools...if you did it with a secondary school class you might find some interested young people.”

A small initial pilot was suggested as a way of demonstrating the value and potential use of the feature which could then be rolled out to the rest of the community.

Partnership work with other council departments or external bodies are a potential way of overcoming the barriers identified which leave libraries without the resources to lead democratic engagement projects, thus ensuring that libraries' role in supporting and encouraging democratic engagement is exploited to the benefit of the general public. Partnerships were seen as possibly the only way that libraries could do this in the circumstances they find themselves in at the moment:

“I think we can only do that though in partnership with other people who want to ensure that there is a greater turnout and a greater awareness and local and general elections, what the process is and what they have to do, so we'd have to work with Elections Offices.”

The role of libraries could be that of “conduit”, a source of information, with political parties putting pressure on Elections Offices to lead a scheme. It was not seen as libraries' role to lead such projects:

“I suppose we've not always seen it as our role to take a lead on that, however, if partners approached us about being part of a campaign to do that I think we'd jump at the chance.”

It is not clear whether it would be more effective for local or national government to lead a campaign to improve democratic engagement:
“I think maybe the initiative does need to come from national government but I think perhaps local government needs to do that because elections are more regular within local government. We only have a national election every four to give years, whereas they tend to be annual for local elections. I think also because local elections do not get the turnout that general elections tend to, then there’s more of a need for local councils to improve their democracy.”

A national scheme for improving democratic engagement in the UK was not identified in the literature search, but the Canadian government has an existing scheme, which could perhaps provide a framework for a UK adaptation (Canadian Index of Wellbeing, 2010).

4.1.10 Barriers to public use of resources relating to democratic engagement

Respondents to the questionnaire made use of some of the resources available in Sheffield libraries that relate to democratic engagement. The most popular resource identified was local information, which comes predominantly from leaflets, flyers, posters, notices and enquiries to members of staff. Also popular was information about local and/or national democracy and council services, which is provided by library staff, and the Event Sheffield website, an online resource providing information about local events, including community meetings etc. Physical resources, such as books and manifestos, are noticeably underused. This may be because any required information is available on the internet, but use of the direct.gov website and the Help Yourself website, two key websites for local and national democratic engagement, are also low.
4.1.10.1 Level of democratic engagement

One interviewee discussed the role that community assemblies have to play in the decision-making processes of libraries. For the interviewee, the level of engagement that people in the areas have has a direct impact on the success of the community assemblies, and is directly linked to social status, education background, and the political party in power:
“Over in the south-west of Sheffield where the Lib Dems are in charge, and where you have informed, educated communities, the Totleys, the Ecclesalls, the Broomhills, places like that, people will perhaps engage more with the assembly and they have made decisions, some of them have effected libraries. So, Ecclesall, have more money for children's books, that sort of thing. Over in the east, where it's all Labour, I don’t see that level of engagement with the whole process and perhaps the public engaging with how the money's spent and the decisions are made. The attendance at meetings isn't particularly good.”

The interviewee compares geographical areas with distinctly different class status, and links individuals' level of education with their level of engagement with local social and political issues. Similarly, analysis of the questionnaires indicated that there was correlation between individuals' levels of democratic engagement, social engagement and engagement with library resources relating to the democratic process (see Chart 1). This apparent link between social and democratic engagement and engagement with libraries is a topic which could be further investigated, particularly in an area such as Sheffield in which some decision making powers about library provision are devolved to communities. It is likely that the 'Big Society' will make this civic responsibility more widespread, which will have an impact on library service provision. It would therefore be of benefit to library services to consider the role of democratic engagement in communities.

4.1.10.2 Awareness of library resources

The majority of questionnaire respondents had not noticed displays in the library about Democracy Week, voting, contacting MPs or councillors, or European Parliament:
Graph 9: Awareness of displays about democratic or political issues

This suggests that such displays may not be noticed by the majority of library users and therefore may not be exploiting their potential impact. Displays may need to be more appropriately located, put up for longer periods or have more visual impact.

When asked about what resources they used (see Graph 8), it was noted that some respondents expressed that they were unaware that such resources were available through the library. This may be because the respondents had no need for such resources and therefore had no need to ask for them, but it may be of benefit for libraries to better publicise the resources they have to ensure they are used by those who need them. As identified in Chart 1, library users are likely to be among the more engaged individuals in society, and of course already use libraries, so have a higher level of awareness of what libraries have to offer with regard to democratic engagement and therefore may not need to make enquiries about it.

The issue of cost of buying and marketing services was raised several times by interviewees, indicating a barrier to public awareness. Word of mouth publicity may be the only solution to the problem of promoting free resources such as Ask a Librarian, which are able to support democratic engagement on a local level but do not have any scope to market their services (John, 2010a). Some resources may be popular without the need for high-profile publicity; the Qwidget facility that Sheffield Libraries are introducing received with over 50 chat requests in the first week, without the use of publicity (John, 2010b). This indicates a need or desire for such resources that library users became aware of in a short time, which has the potential to escalate naturally.
4.1.10.3 Demographics

It was seen as important for libraries to support people who do not have access to the internet at home to access democratic information, and also for libraries to encourage groups of people who may be disengaged with the democratic process. The BME and Muslim populations of Sheffield were identified as groups who are more likely to be “unsure” or “cynical” about the democratic process, and the population of people who are new to the country has been identified as a group likely to need more encouragement to participate in local and national democracy. As a result, any related projects have been geared towards them:

“It’s community engagement, how they want to engage with people new to the country, who aren’t familiar with the system. For us it’s education for the public. Engaging people into the system. Integration otherwise is a barrier.”

“It’s aimed at people who’ve come to Britain and want to gain citizenship, taking the UK test.”

People who are not new to the country do not appear to be perceived as a group in need of information or support in civic engagement:

“We’ve not come across a need to do anything for that part of the community.”

“No, I don’t think so [that something exists for people who aren’t new to the country who need to get to grips with the democratic process]. Maybe we should promote that sort of thing.”

It is apparent from the examples given by interviewees about experiences they have had with people born in Britain who are ignorant of parts or all of the democratic system, in addition to the literature identified about democratic disengagement and levels of voter turnout, that this demographic is in need of some degree of support and there is not a clear source of information or guidance.
4.1.10.4 Accessibility

Library resources relating to the democratic process or local information can be accessed through enquiries to staff or library websites such as Help Yourself and Event Sheffield. Links to these sites are placed on all relevant council websites. The need for staff or carers to deliver the content for individuals who need more support was emphasised.

4.1.10.5 Cost of access

Access to the Internet may be beyond the means of some members of the public because it is only free for a set length of time:

“Free [internet] access. They have to pay for prints but can look at anything for free for an hour at a time.”

This may have an impact on the public's use of the People's Network for accessing information about local or national political processes and issues, which would affect vulnerable groups such as the very poor and people who have disabilities that prevent them from reading from a computer screen. Future surveys could focus in some part on equity of access and implications of cost.

4.1.11 Research

It is not known how much democratic engagement takes place through user enquiries or the People's Network due to user privacy policies:

“We have no way of knowing what people are looking at through the People’s Network, so for all i know, they're using that to engage democratically. I suppose we could do a survey, but I don't know what kind of response you'd get to that kind of thing.”

“People can be anonymous. We don't ask why people want information.”
Such information has not been collected by Sheffield libraries, but was suggested as something that could happen through a user survey. Some doubt was expressed as to whether library users would be willing to divulge information about what they use the internet for due to reasons of privacy. However, it is a potentially interesting direction for future research, because staff expressed awareness that some users do use the internet in order to engage with the democratic process:

“When the election took place, people got on the net, found out who's won etc.”

The department responsible for the Help Yourself and Event Sheffield websites intend to survey the use of the sites in September 2010. It may be beneficial to include a question about the resources users look for on the sites relating to events or information about democratic issues.
4.2 Summary points from findings

4.2.1 The role of libraries in supporting democratic engagement

- Libraries have a potentially substantial role to play in democratic engagement and are viewed as key players in the process of democratic engagement.
- Libraries enable people to access and make sense of information that may not be available elsewhere.
- Libraries have a distinct role which may not be fulfilled by other council departments.
- Reasons that libraries have a key role to play:
  - Access to and support with information.
  - The position of libraries as 'neutral' places.
  - Libraries' core values of equality and access to information.
  - Libraries' position within the local council.

4.2.2 Information: access and support

- Sources of information were identified.
- Spending cuts resulted in restrictions on stock acquisition so resources may be in need of updating.
- Some alternatives to libraries were identified as sources of information, e.g. First Point Centres and the Elections Office.
- Libraries also offer support help to understand the meaning of information.

4.2.3 The role of library staff

- Staff play an important part in helping people to access information.
- Staff are able to signpost people to the relevant council department.
- Staff are able to tell people how to register to vote and how to vote.
- A significant amount of library users make enquiries about the democratic process.
- Staff are aware of a significant number of people who have problems understanding the democratic process.
4.2.4 Staff training and individual levels of engagement

- Staff receive basic reference training but not specifically about democratic processes and related council services
- Staff are expected to have a basic level of awareness of politics, the democratic process, local government etc.
- Staff awareness has an impact on their ability to support and encourage democratic engagement

4.2.5 Actively encouraging citizens to participate

- Some active encouragement does take place between staff and regular patrons
- Formalisation of active encouragement may enable staff to do so more confidently and more often

4.2.6 The library as a means of communicating concerns

- Libraries are able to host some petitions depending on subject and if council is implicated
- Some libraries are used as venues for councillors' and MPs' surgeries
- Surgeries are a good way of encouraging people to communicate with their local representative

4.2.7 The library as 'neutral'

- Libraries seen as non-judgemental places and do not get involved with politics
- The terms 'neutral' and 'non-partisan' are often used interchangeably
- There is a confusion between the terms 'neutral' and 'non-partisan'
- Libraries may be inherently political in their core values
- Libraries are unavoidably connected to a progressive political outlook
- Libraries are a neutral space
- Libraries act as polling stations which is perhaps beneficial due to their perceived neutrality
- Libraries are seen as non-partisan and should not align themselves with any political party
- The Event Sheffield and Help Yourself websites use public submissions in addition to staff research which requires moderation
4.2.8 Libraries' position within local council

- Difference of opinion as to if libraries were perceived by the public as part of the local council
- This has a potential impact on the neutrality of services
- Level of interest and knowledge of local councillors may have a direct impact on schemes that libraries wish to develop
- People may see libraries as a place to resolve council issues without being judged

4.2.9 Local council and library policies

- Different staff had different levels of awareness of policies and rules
- Some staff did not believe that libraries are allowed to promote library stock about politics
- Some staff may be overly cautious about dealing with 'political' issues because they are wary of reproach
- It may be beneficial in some way to look at issues on a case by case basis rather than having rigid policies
- Existing rules and regulations may be in need of renewal
- Staff awareness and understanding of policy appears to have a direct impact on how staff respond to user enquiries and what resources they promote or recommend

4.2.10 Promotion of library resources

- Some methods of promotion currently used in Sheffield libraries were identified
- There is an apparent lack of promotion about the resources the library has
- Library websites appear to be relatively well-publicised
- Current advertising tends to be based within the library on notice boards
- External publicity material may be produced with a higher budget but is subject to issues such as timely delivery
- Library resources and services related to democratic engagement may go unnoticed because of a lack of active promotion
- It is acknowledged that more could and should be done to promote the role of libraries
4.2.11 Barriers to promoting library services

- Time constraints
- Staff time and interest
- Potential complaints
- There is a “fine line” between acceptable and unacceptable content and behaviour
- Cost

4.2.12 Partnerships

- Some current partnership work was identified
- There is potential for partnerships to be expanded further with groups who have a specific social objective but do not have an explicit party-political allegiance
- Partnership work with other council departments or external bodies are a potential way of overcoming the barriers identified

4.2.13 Barriers to public use of resources relating to democratic engagement

- Respondents to the questionnaire made use of some of the resources available in Sheffield libraries that relate to democratic engagement
- Most popular resource identified was local information
- Information about local and/or national democracy and council services
- Physical materials such as books and manifestos noticeably underused
- Level of democratic engagement
- Level of engagement that people in the areas have has a direct impact on the success of the community assemblies
- Link between individuals’ level of education with their level of engagement with local social and political issues
- Awareness of library resources
- Displays may not be noticed by the majority of library users
- Some respondents expressed that they were unaware that such resources were available
4.2.14 Research

- There are plans to conduct a survey of use of Help Yourself and Event Sheffield websites in 2010
- It is not known how much democratic engagement takes place through user enquiries or the People's Network due to user privacy policies
- This could be discovered through a user survey
5. Conclusions

The study successfully achieved its aim to establish the role of public libraries with regard to democratic engagement. The literature is unanimous on this point; public libraries play an important part in supporting democracy through their provision of information, freely, to all. Other literature suggests that libraries should not only provide information, but have a duty to promote democracy. The research finds that libraries have a unique role to play within communities, serving as a place for people to engage with the democratic process and local and national democracy in ways which they would not be able to through other council services. The ideological position of libraries and their history as neutral or political is a key issue which must be discussed within library authorities before schemes to encourage and support democratic engagement can begin. Further research should investigate this in much more detail than this limited research project was able.

Library staff are central to the provision of information and support for democratic engagement; library users make regular enquiries about aspects of the democratic process which staff are able to answer based on their own knowledge or through reference enquiry skills. Staff may benefit from the introduction of a formal scheme for democratic engagement and the clarification of policies on this subject in order for them to understand their role and know what information and support they are able or unable to provide library users. Staff are currently only able to deal with enquiries based on their own knowledge and understanding, which is dependent on individual levels of engagement.

5.1 Key issues

The key issues relating to democratic engagement were identified through a thorough interdisciplinary literature review and applied in an investigation into the current ways public libraries in Sheffield support and encourage citizen involvement in local and national democratic processes.
Key issues with regard to library services’ provision were identified as:

- Access and support for users
- The role of library staff
- The ways in which libraries and staff actively encourage citizens to participate
- The library as a means of communicating concerns
- Library ‘neutrality’
- position within local council
- Promotion of library resources
- Barriers to promoting library services
- Partnerships
- Barriers to public use

5.2 Use of information and advice

The sources of information and advice members of the public make use or do not make use of were identified to a certain extent. Users make most use of resources via staff and the internet rather than print resources. It was not possible in the research conducted to fully establish how the public are using library resources to help them engage with local and national democratic/political events and processes, due to user confidentiality of the People’s Network and the limited scope of the study.

5.3 User needs

It was determined that, for the most part, members of the public find the information and advice currently available to them regarding the issues of local and national democratic processes adequate for their needs. Libraries are able to provide a good deal of information and advice for their users' needs, but that this provision would benefit from a formal structure in which to work and some form of promotion. Library staff seem to be able to support users when they make enquiries, based on their own knowledge or knowing where to locate information. However, problems may occur when staff are under the impression that rules about what they may or may not say are not as limiting as they believe. It would therefore be of benefit to include more detailed information in training packages or to clarify any issues that staff may have about the subject.
It was found that library users are likely to be among the more engaged individuals in society, and are likely to already have some understanding of the purpose of libraries, so have a higher level of awareness of what libraries have to offer with regard to democratic engagement. Democratic engagement levels in non-library users and the ways in which they could benefit from current or potential library provision with regard to democratic engagement were not investigated in this study and are areas for further research.

A democracy in which very large numbers of people actively participate, using opportunities for discussion and participation to shape the agenda of public life, is an ambitious and ideal model which may never be fully achieved (Crouch, 2004: 3). It is important, however, to strive toward that ideal in order to avoid complacency and an absence of concern with regard to the weakening of democracy (idem). As a public resource, libraries have a responsibility to inform and educate people, ensuring that people are able to participate as fully as possible in the democratic process. This research has identified some ways in which one library authority contributes to democratic engagement. The next chapter comprises of recommendations for libraries, local authorities, national government and further research.
6. Recommendations

The following recommendations are made based on the conclusions from the literature review and primary research:

6.1 Recommendations for libraries

- Clarification of existing policies and staff training about what staff may and may not do or say during the pre-election period and at other times would increase staff awareness and confidence in their role.
- Publicity (either formal or informal, by word-of-mouth, for example) about library services relating to democratic engagement would heighten public awareness that libraries are able to support and encourage democratic engagement.
- Survey about Help Yourself and Event Sheffield websites could include question/s about use of the sites for purposes relating to democratic engagement.

6.2 Recommendations for local authorities

- Clarification of existing policies and/or development of a new, specific policy would improve staff confidence in dealing with enquiries about democratic processes and political issues.
- The promotion of resources already available through the library would increase public awareness and use of libraries for the purpose of democratic engagement.
- An examination of current communication and liaison with council departments and Councillors would enable the identification of areas in need of improvement.
- An investigation into existing national or local schemes seeking to improve democratic engagement would enable the identification of potential partnerships.
- Opening up or wider promotion of existing courses related to democratic engagement may improve local democratic engagement.
6.3 Recommendations for national government

- Development and leadership of a scheme to increase levels of democratic engagement to be delivered through public services including public libraries would have a number of social and economic benefits.

6.4 Recommendations for further research

- Investigation into the position of libraries as neutral or political and whether the core values of public libraries oblige them to encourage citizens to participate in the democratic process would help to secure the role of libraries in future democratic engagement activities.
- Further identification of democratic engagement schemes and the ways libraries support these in different countries would provide a basis for a UK equivalent.
- Further investigation into the goals of national government with regard to democratic engagement would provide a clearer picture of ways in which libraries could support these goals.
- Investigation throughout the country into the policies of local councils and library authorities with regard to encouragement of democratic engagement in communities would provide a basis with which to develop schemes and partnerships with national government or external organisations. This could include research into which council departments decide what website content is offensive or unacceptable and how these decisions are made.
- A survey focusing on library users’ engagement with democracy through library resources would help to further identify the role of libraries and the ways in which they can improve their services.
- Investigation into democratic engagement levels in non-library users and the ways in which they could benefit from current or potential library provision with regard to democratic engagement could enable library services to better meet the needs of communities.
7. Achievement of objectives

Table 4: Objectives in relation to sections of research project

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Objective:</th>
<th>Included in:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To identify the key issues relating to democratic engagement.</td>
<td>2. Literature review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To investigate the current ways public libraries support and encourage citizen involvement in local and national democratic processes.</td>
<td>4.1.2 Information: access and support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To determine which sources of information and advice members of the public make use or do not make use of, and to establish how they are using them to help them engage with local and national democratic/political events and processes.</td>
<td>5.2 Use of information and advice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To determine if members of the public find the information and advice currently available to them regarding the issues of local and national democratic processes adequate for their needs.</td>
<td>5.3 User needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To make recommendations regarding public library provision of information and advice about local and national democratic processes and how this might be improved.</td>
<td>6. Recommendations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Word count: 23,012
Bibliography


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http://www.mla.gov.uk/what/policy_development/communities/Promoting_local_democracy_how_we_can_help [Accessed 26 June 2010].


Appendix I: Voter Turnout Statistics for Doncaster and Sheffield in 2010 Local and General Elections

Doncaster Turnouts: 2010 General Election (Adapted from Doncaster Council a, 2010).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Constituency</th>
<th>Turnout</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Don Valley</td>
<td>60.01%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doncaster Central</td>
<td>57.36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doncaster North</td>
<td>58.25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Average Turnout</strong></td>
<td><strong>58.54%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Doncaster Turnouts: 2010 Local Election (Adapted from Doncaster Council b, 2010).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ward</th>
<th>Turnout</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adwick</td>
<td>52.83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armthorpe</td>
<td>55.59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Askern Spa</td>
<td>59.51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balby</td>
<td>53.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bentley</td>
<td>49.64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bessacarr and Cantley</td>
<td>64.12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central</td>
<td>49.19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conisbrough and Denaby</td>
<td>53.66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edenthorpe, Kirk Sandall and Barnby Dun</td>
<td>63.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edlington and Warmsworth</td>
<td>57.76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finningley</td>
<td>67.85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great North Road</td>
<td>58.52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hatfield</td>
<td>58.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexbrough</td>
<td>52.14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rossington</td>
<td>54.21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sprotbrough</td>
<td>67.51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stainforth and Moorends</td>
<td>52.05%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thorne</td>
<td>57.65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Torne Valley</td>
<td>69.42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Town Moor</td>
<td>55.21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wheatley</td>
<td>51.09%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Average Turnout</strong></td>
<td><strong>57.31%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Sheffield Turnouts: 2010 General Election** (Adapted from Sheffield City Council, 2010a).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Constituency</th>
<th>Turnout</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Penistone and Stocksbridge</td>
<td>68.11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheffield Brightside and Hillsborough</td>
<td>57.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheffield Central</td>
<td>61.60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheffield Hallam</td>
<td>Blank</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheffield Heeley</td>
<td>62.60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheffield South East</td>
<td>61.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Average Turnout</strong></td>
<td><strong>62.06%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Sheffield Turnouts: 2010 Local Election** (Adapted from Sheffield City Council, 2010b).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ward</th>
<th>Turnout</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arbourthorne</td>
<td>54.90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beaufield and Greenhill</td>
<td>61.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beighton</td>
<td>63.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birley</td>
<td>65.50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broomhill</td>
<td>58.50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burngreave</td>
<td>55.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central</td>
<td>48.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crookes</td>
<td>73.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darnall</td>
<td>57.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dore and Totley</td>
<td>77.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Ecclesfield</td>
<td>66.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecclesall</td>
<td>73.90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Firth Park</td>
<td>52.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fulwood</td>
<td>68.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gleadless Valley</td>
<td>Blank</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graves Park</td>
<td>70.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hillsborough</td>
<td>66.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manor Castle</td>
<td>52.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mosborough</td>
<td>64.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nether Edge</td>
<td>Blank</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richmond</td>
<td>57.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shire Green and Brightside</td>
<td>54.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southey</td>
<td>52.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stannington</td>
<td>69.70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stocksbridge and Upper Don</td>
<td>68.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walkey</td>
<td>63.70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Ecclesfield</td>
<td>66.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woodhouse</td>
<td>57.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Average Turnout</strong></td>
<td><strong>62.01%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix II: Interview Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form

1. Research Project Title: Public libraries and democratic engagement (ways in which public libraries encourage citizens to be involved in democracy locally and nationally)

2. Invitation paragraph

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this.

3. What is the project’s purpose?

There has been a noticeable decline in public participation in democratic processes (for example, voting in local and general elections, contacting MPs and councillors about matters of concern, signing petitions and involvement in the decision-making processes in local councils). This project aims to identify ways in which public libraries support and encourage people to be involved in democratic processes.

4. Why have I been chosen?

Andrew Milroy has recommended you as a knowledgeable person to speak to.

5. Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep (and be asked to sign a consent form) and you can still withdraw at any time without it affecting any benefits that you are entitled to in any way. You do not have to give a reason.
6. **What will happen to me if I take part?**

You are only asked to fill in a short questionnaire, which should take no longer than 15 minutes to complete. The research will last for 6 weeks. At the end of the research the data will be analysed and conclusions will be drawn from your responses and those of other participants.

7. **What do I have to do?**

Answer as many questions in the short, structured interview as you are willing to.

8. **What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?**

There are no foreseeable risks, however you may feel uncomfortable answering certain questions, but are not obliged to answer them. All information you give will remain confidential.

9. **What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

Whilst there are no immediate benefits for those people participating in the project, it is hoped that this work will give public libraries examples and ideas of how they could do more to get members of the public to engage with democratic processes.

10. **What happens if the research study stops earlier than expected?**

This is not anticipated.

11. **What if something goes wrong?**

If you would like to make a complaint, you can contact my dissertation supervisor, Briony Birdi, at b.birdi@sheffield.ac.uk. If you feel that your complaint has not been handled to your satisfaction you can contact the University’s ‘Registrar and Secretary’.
12. Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?

All the information that we collect about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential. You will not be able to be identified in any reports or publications.

You should consult the ethics guidance on anonymity, confidentiality and data protection for advice on what information to provide to prospective participants, available at: www.shef.ac.uk/researchoffice/gov_ethics_grp/ethics/factsheets.html

13. What type of information will be sought from me and why is the collection of this information relevant for achieving the research project’s objectives?

I am seeking information about the ways in which members of the public take part in democratic processes (e.g. voting, demonstrating, contacting MPs and councillors), and the ways public libraries encourage and support this with activities and information. I will be asking you if you take part in any democratic processes with the involvement of the library or otherwise. With this information I hope to identify ways in which libraries do or could do more to encourage and support democratic involvement.

14. What will happen to the results of the research project?

The results are likely to be published in September 2010. You can obtain a copy of the published results from the Department of Information Studies, The University of Sheffield, Regent Court, Sheffield. You will not be identified in any report or publication.

15. Who is organising and funding the research?

I am organising and funding the research, through The University of Sheffield with the support of Sheffield Libraries and Archives Service.
16. Who has ethically reviewed the project?

This project has been ethically approved via The Department of Information Studies' ethics review procedure. The University’s Research Ethics Committee monitors the application and delivery of the University’s Ethics Review Procedure across the University.

17. Contact for further information

Briony Birdi, Department of Information Studies, The University of Sheffield, Sheffield.

You will be given a copy of the information sheet and, if appropriate, a signed consent form to keep. You are required to sign a consent form before you are interviewed.

Thank you for taking part in this project.
Participant Consent Form

Title of Research Project: **Public Libraries and Democratic Engagement**
Name of Researcher: Lauren Smith

Participant Identification Number for this project:  
Please initial box

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated June 2010 explaining the above research project and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I am free to decline. Contact Number of Briony Birdi (Supervisor): 0114 2222653

I understand that my responses will be kept strictly confidential. I give permission for members of the research team to have access to my anonymised responses. I understand that my name will not be linked with the research materials, and I will not be identified or identifiable in the report or reports that result from the research.

I agree for the data collected from me to be used in future research.

I agree to take part in the above research project.

________________________  _______________________  __________________
Name of Participant      Date                           Signature

________________________  _______________________  __________________
Name of Researcher       Date                           Signature

*To be signed and dated in presence of the participant*
Appendix III: Interview Guide for Semi-structured Interviews

What kind of things does the library offer that could be considered to inform or encourage democratic engagement?

**Definition:** By democratic engagement I mean the involvement of individuals or groups of people in public affairs and issues of public concern.

For example:

- making manifestos available
- displays about different parties
- special events during run up to elections
- promotions of book stock about politics or things like green energy etc.
- encouraging people to vote in local or national elections
- programmes to inform voters about parties and policies
- helping people to understand political processes
- offering advice to people who want to make a complaint to the council
- showing people how they can use the council website
- encouraging people to use technology to interact with democracy

Is the library used as a meeting place for community groups or political groups?

To what extent do you think the library is a place that people discuss what's happening in the community or the country?

Do you think there are any particular groups who use the library who are likely to be active in the community or local or national democracy?

What do you think about the role of libraries in informing or encouraging democratic engagement? (e.g. is there potential for libraries to make an impact/ should libraries do that?)

What do you think are the main barriers to libraries doing things that inform or encourage democratic engagement?

Are you aware of any rules or regulations that mean the library cannot be involved?
Appendix IV: Questionnaire

Please note: The format of the questionnaires has been altered to meet formatting requirements and does not reflect the original format.

Introduction to the Questionnaire

This questionnaire forms part of the research for an MA dissertation focusing on democratic engagement in public libraries.

The term 'democratic engagement' is used to describe the ways in which public libraries encourage citizens to be involved in democracy locally and nationally. This can include many things, such as voting in elections, contacting MPs and councillors, being part of particular campaigns, taking part in community development activities.

All the information that we collect about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential and access will be restricted to the researcher and supervisor. Some direct quotations may be included in the research write-up, but you will not be able to be identified.

By filling in this questionnaire you are giving consent to the use of the information you provide in the research.

Contacts for further information

Researcher: Lauren Smith (lip09ins@sheffield.ac.uk)

Supervisor: Briony Birdi, Department of Information Studies, The University of Sheffield, Sheffield (b.birdi@sheffield.ac.uk)
Part One: Democratic Engagement

1. Within the last five years have you (please tick any boxes that apply):

a) Been on a demonstration or protest march
b) Contacted an MP, MEP or councillor
c) Signed a petition
d) Attended a public meeting
e) Contacted a government or council department
f) Visited the direct.gov website or local council website

2. Do you know how to vote? Yes No Unsure

3. On the subject of voting (for MPs, MEPs, councillors or the Mayor) which of the following statements best applies to you? (Please tick one box)

I am not eligible to vote I vote most of the time
I never vote I always vote
I seldom vote No answer
I sometimes vote

4.a) Are you involved with any organisations, societies or clubs? Yes No Unsure

4.b) If so, what kind?

........................................................................................................................................
........................................................................................................................................
........................................................................................................................................
Part Two: Public Libraries

5. Within the last five years have you used or asked for any of the following resources through the library (please tick any boxes that apply):

a) Books about democracy (e.g. books about councils, politics, parliament etc.)
b) Manifestos
c) Information about your village/town (e.g. posters, notices etc.)
d) Contact details for an MP/MEP/councillor
e) The direct.gov website
f) The Help Yourself website
g) The Event Sheffield website
g) Information about local/national democracy or council services

6. Have you ever noticed displays in the library about Democracy Week / voting / contacting your MP or councillor / European Parliament etc.? **Yes  No  Not sure**

7.a) Do you think that the library should support or encourage local or national democracy? 
**Yes  Maybe  No  Unsure  No opinion**

7.b) Is there a reason why?
........................................................................................................................................................................
........................................................................................................................................................................
........................................................................................................................................................................

8. Is there anything you think libraries should offer that would be useful to you?
........................................................................................................................................................................
........................................................................................................................................................................
........................................................................................................................................................................
Part Three: About You

9. Your gender
   Male   Female   Rather not say

10. Your age
    18-24   25-34   35-44   45-54   55-64   Over 65   Rather not say

11. Your cultural or ethnic background (Please tick one box)
   English
   Other British
   Any other White background
   Indian
   Chinese
   Caribbean
   Any other Black background
   Irish
   Polish
   Any other mixed background
   Pakistani
   Any other Asian background
   African
   Don’t know

12. Which of these categories best applies to you? (Please tick one box)
   Working (full-time)
   Unable to work due to illness, disability or injury
   Working (part-time)
   Retired from work
   Unemployed
   Looking after the home or family
   Self-employed
   A student
   A volunteer (unpaid)
   Other - please specify

13. What is the highest level of your educational / training qualifications? (Please tick one box)
   None
   Undergraduate degree
   School level / GCSE or equivalent
   Postgraduate degree
   College level / A Level or equivalent
   Other - please specify

14. If there is anything more you would like to say, please write below:

..........................................................................................................................................

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire.
Appendix V: Mind-map of Key Coding Themes and Relationships