

Community Consultation and Collection Development Policies in Medium-Sized New Zealand Public Libraries

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This study considers how selected New Zealand public libraries engage in public consultation as part of collection development policy formulation by investigating the consultative methods used by a sample of library managers during the formulation and application of their collection development policies. Five public libraries in the North Island of New Zealand participated in the investigation. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with each of the study participants. The collection development policy documents from each library provided additional sources of data. The data were analysed according to a set of coding themes developed for the project. The results indicate that New Zealand public libraries practising responsive collection management demonstrate the following characteristics: (1) the collection development policy has been formulated as a result of research

into client needs and wants; (2) this research uses a variety of community consultation and data analysis techniques; and (3) research into community and customer needs is ongoing. The investigation also shows that managers employ a limited range of consultation techniques, which needs to be broadened in order to collect more robust data about client and community needs. Furthermore, public library collection development policies, where they actually exist, are dated, outmoded and little used. The study suggests that public library managers should make greater use of library surveys and focus groups as a means of collecting consultative data from their clients. It also suggests that managers can create more robust, consultation-based collection development policies using community needs analysis techniques as an integral part of the process.

Introduction

This study investigates the way in which local public libraries in New Zealand engage in public consultation as part of the collection development policy formulation process. There is a variety of ways by which public libraries can directly involve their clients, and the wider community, in the collection development policy-making process. The aim of this study is to investigate the consultative methods used by a sample of New Zealand public library managers during the formulation and application of their collection development policies.

The provision of public library services in New Zealand is the provenance of local authorities, but it is not a mandated activity. Rather, such provision is regarded as a core activity because of the contribution public libraries make to the wellbeing of their communities. Within this rather flexible framework, the New Zealand Local Government Act 2002, which passed into law on 1 July 2003, requires that local authorities obtain the views of their constituents during the course of the decision-making process (Part 6, Subpart 78: Community views in relation to decisions). As managers in a local government environment, public librarians would thus seem obliged to seek the views of their clients and stakeholders when making de-

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cisions about the provision of public library services.

Formal, written library policies are statements about decisions the library has made in relation to functions it performs or services it provides. Clayton and Gorman (2001, 17) describe a collection development policy as: '...a statement of general collection-building principles which delineates the purpose and content of a collection in terms relevant to both external and internal audiences'. The authors stress that a collection development policy should be a flexible, constantly evolving document.

Background literature

There is a paucity of New Zealand literature about either collection development policies or the role of community consultation in policy formulation. However, the *Standards for New Zealand Public Libraries* (LIANZA 2002) clearly specify the responsibilities of the public library manager in regard to collection development policy preparation and strategic planning activities. Here the library manager is advised to undertake short- and long-term planning activities, with one component of this planning being 'an assessment of community needs...' (Section A.2.9).

By contrast, there is a wealth of international literature on policy formulation and the role of community involvement in this process, ranging from Evans' (2005) standard text on collection management to numerous journals articles on community consultation and on the policy formulation process. Very few of these writings, however, make a clear *apologia* for community involvement in the collection development policy formulation process. This may be one reason for the results that emerge from this study of New Zealand public libraries – there are few models to emulate, and no one has taken on the role of champion for this particular view. Just two examples from the literature give a flavour of what is available on this topic.

Biblarz *et al.* (2001) outline the technique of community needs analysis. They describe user needs assessment as

...a process of using one or more techniques to collect and analyse data regarding library users or potential users. Specifically, the data collected will be directly or indirectly related to the needs, in the broadest sense, of users, or clients, for information in all formats.

However, these authors do not establish a direct relationship between community analysis and the process of formulating collection development policies.

Another example comes from the UK, where community consultation by local authorities is mandated by central government legislation. Morris and Barron's research (1998) sought to discover which techniques had been used by librarians in 183 library authorities to consult their user populations. The authors also surveyed respondents about the context for that consultation, and asked their opinions about the benefits and/or disadvantages of each method. The authors conclude that British librarians should consider using multiple methods of ongoing consultation with their users, but again they do not single out policy formulation as a key area for such consultation.

The investigation

Partly as a result of this dearth of literature making a clear connection between community consultation and the policy development process, the following questions arose. First, what consultative processes are used by public libraries during the formulation and application of collection development policies? Second, how are client needs reflected in the formulation and application process of public library collection development policies?

To collect data relevant to these issues, the interview guide for the study consisted of the following specific questions:

1. What types of community consultation techniques have been used by the library to obtain information about clients and the community?
 - Why were these particular techniques chosen?
 - How effective were these techniques in obtaining information about client and community needs?
 - What were the benefits and drawbacks for the library of the particular techniques employed?
2. Was the information gathered about clients and the community used in the formulation of a written collection development policy?
 - If so, what mechanisms were used to incorporate the information gathered into the policy document?
 - If not, was the information gathered used in unwritten collection development policies and procedures? If so, in what ways was the information used?

Table 1. Study Sites in the Lower North Island, New Zealand

Library	Council	Population
Feilding Public Library	Manawatu District Council http://www.mdc.govt.nz/	28,600
Horowhenua Library Trust	Horowhenua District Council http://www.horowhenua.govt.nz/	30,000
Palmerston North City Library	Palmerston North City Council http://www.pncc.govt.nz/	72,033
Porirua City Library	Porirua City Council http://www.pcc.govt.nz/	49,800
Wanganui District Library	Wanganui District Council http://www.wanganui.govt.nz	43,269

3. From the library's perspective, did any benefits accrue from the consultation process that were not directly related to the formulation of collection development policies?
 - If so, what were those benefits?

4. Does the library have an ongoing commitment to monitor community needs, and to regularly review its collection development policies?
 - If so, what type of ongoing consultation does the library intend to engage in?
 - If so, how frequently, and in what ways, will the collection development policies be reviewed?
 - If not, does the library intend to review its collection development policies in other ways?

Methodology

The sample population consisted of managers from medium-sized public libraries in the lower North Island of New Zealand. The specific sites selected for the study are listed in Table 1.

Data were collected through in-depth, conversational interviews by the principal author with each of the study participants. The collection development policy documents from each participant's library (where available) provided an additional source of data. The data were analysed according to a set of coding themes developed for the project; these themes initially were based on the research questions that had served as an interview guide, which then evolved during the coding process.

Findings

For the purposes of this study, 'community consultative techniques' were defined as those which involve librarians in direct interaction with clients and the community in order to discover their needs and wants. The techniques used by the participants in this study were:

- User surveys
- Focus groups
- Formal committees
- Liaison with schools
- Liaison with tertiary education providers
- Liaison with community groups
- Liaison with the Maori population
- Staff feedback
- Comments and complaints procedures
- Professional observations.

This wide range of consultative techniques enabled collection of both in-depth and broadly based data in situations where consultation tends to be ad hoc and informal.

Purposes of Community Consultation

According to the participants, in general terms, community consultative methods were used in their institutions for the following purposes:

- To give clients a voice
- As a way of contributing to community well-being
- To fulfil statutory obligations to the Maori population
- To create goodwill in the community
- To increase understanding about the role of the library in the community.

The ways in which each particular method fulfilled these purposes is outlined in more detail below.

Study participants' understood 'user surveys' to be written survey questionnaires handed to clients visiting the library. Most participants had made use of this consultation technique, although not necessarily for collection-related purposes. Participants cited two reasons, in particular, for

carrying out surveys: (1) internal, to enable staff to find out what clients think about the library; and (2) external, as a means of ensuring ongoing support from the institution's funding provider. As two participants stated,

'...We have run informal surveys and we've asked people what they like and what they don't like about the library.'

'Politically...it can be very strong...because it does confirm that you're doing the right thing.'

Focus groups are another consultative technique used by most of the study participants, although, as was the case with user surveys, this was not necessarily for collection management purposes.

In a similar way to user surveys, focus groups were used to find out '...primarily, what people want from the library...not necessarily the library collections...' Focus groups had been held with both current library clients and with individuals who were not currently using the library.

All of the study participants' institutions liaised with the schools in their community, although some felt their links were stronger than others. Participants liaised with schools for the purpose of supporting the school curriculum, and in order to work in conjunction with schools to promote a lifelong 'love of reading' among children.

When discussing their relationships with other local education providers, the participants referred to formal education providers, such as universities and polytechnics, as well as to providers of less formal courses, such as community learning centres. Participants liaised with tertiary education institutions for differing purposes. Some participants did so in order to be able to support the programmes being taught:

'There's quite a number of private training providers in this district...we do have good links with all of those, and try and work together, certainly to establish what the needs of people doing private training are....'

Other participants, with one exception, supported the needs of tertiary students in the community in a more general, less focused way.

When discussing liaison with community groups, participants described their consultation with special interest groups, with different ethnic groups, and also with agencies supporting government programmes. Consultation occurred to fulfil

a variety of collection development purposes. For example, several participants had collaborated with ethnic groups in the community in order to establish collections of non-English language materials in the library:

'We've got quite a large Chinese and Japanese population...so we're starting a small collection of books in Asian languages.'

Another participant had taken the opportunity to address the local branch of 'Federated Farmers' with the aim of increasing that group's understanding of the role that the library played in the community. A third institution had developed a relationship with special-interest groups in order to advance mutual goals:

'Co-operation and assistance to the historical societies in the district, to make their collections better known and more accessible, is an important factor in ensuring local history is preserved.'

In one community the library manager was working with the local office of the Ministry of Education, with groups of parents and caregivers, and with a research team from the local university on a project to address the problem of poor literacy among children from lower socio-economic groups in the community.

All participants considered consultation with the Maori population to be an important part of the library's role in the community. This is probably partly because local government in New Zealand has a formal obligation to involve Maoris in decision-making. Consultation with Maoris was used mainly for the purpose of developing collections of Maori-interest materials, although one participant also acknowledged that meeting the general information needs of Maoris is also a responsibility for the library.

Most participants had facilitated bicultural liaison in their institutions through the establishment of a dedicated staff position. In addition, other participants felt that it was important to ensure there was a good proportion of Maori on the library staff:

'I've got...senior Maori staff who belong to both the local *iwi*...have good links with their own *hapu* within their *iwi*...have credibility in their culture....'

Yet another participant made use of the parent institution's bicultural liaison framework:

'...The council has a *marae* consultative committee and they're regularly asked what they feel about the library....'

All participants made extensive use of staff feedback mechanisms as a way of gathering information about library client needs. Feedback received from staff directly informed the libraries' materials purchasing and collection building decisions. Participants also regarded it as an important method for fostering goodwill in the community.

The comments and complaints procedures operating within participants' institutions were of both a formal and an informal nature. Comments and complaints from library users might be expressed either verbally or in writing, but were handled more formally than was the case with the day-to-day interactions that occur between library staff and clients.

Participants relied to a considerable extent on their own professional observations and judgments as a source of information about their communities and their clients. One reason for this may be the length of service of the managers interviewed, many with up to 20 years' experience in their current positions.

Observations by library managers about their clients were used to provide a backdrop for collection-building decisions, with managers referring to 'big use', 'average use', 'limited use', etc. as relevant selection criteria.

Professional judgment was also used to explain the behaviour patterns of groups of people in the community:

'...There are two main groups of people in society at the moment...the time rich and the time poor....'

'Teenagers are historically light users of libraries....'

Advantages of community consultation

For the study participants, the main advantages of community consultative methods were that they:

- Provide valuable feedback
- Create goodwill
- Can be informal
- Provide immediately-available information
- Involve personal contact with clients.

The main advantage of user surveys for the participants was that they provided valuable feedback: '...you get really good backups for what you're doing....' Surveys could also give clients the opportunity to comment about aspects of the library service, and to put forward suggestions for services or activities they would like the library to provide. Surveys also helped the library staff with planning for future collections: for example, one institution included a survey question about whether respondents had purchased a DVD player, or were thinking of purchasing one.

All participants agreed that the focus group technique had numerous advantages. First, the technique allowed groups of people to be selected who were representative of the diversity of the library community. Also, non-users could be targeted by this method:

'...We had one group interested in children's services... and one group of general people, as diverse as we could think of....'

'...We had a group of people who I know were not borrowers....'

Further, people who were known to have a genuine interest in library services could be chosen to participate in focus groups, and these groups need not necessarily be formally structured: '...at a couple of branches we ran groups of regular users, just talking to them....' For one participant a similar view applied to trustees, in that the perceived advantage of working with library trustees was that they were a well-informed and library-conscious group of people.

The main advantage of schools' liaison for the participants was that it created a personal link between the public library and the school: '...they know the people they're dealing with....'

The main advantage of participants' liaison with tertiary institutions seemed to lie in the fact that it enabled each institution to define clearly its role with regard to the other. This definition of roles gave the participants a basis for developing their collection policies. For example, on the subject of the provision of library resources in electronic format, one participant commented:

'...We're looking at electronic resources at the moment... and we're talking to the polytech and the university... about what they do and about what we do....'

The advantages to participants of consulting with a wide variety of community groups were that it helped to build goodwill towards the library in the community, and that it could also provide valuable feedback for the library's collection development activities.

The advantages for study participants of undertaking Maori liaison were: it enabled the library to better meet Maori information needs; and it created goodwill for the library in the Maori community.

The advantages of staff feedback as a consultation technique were that it occurred as a matter of course in everyday library activity, and that it operated informally:

'...Being a small community, the staff are talking to the public all the time....'

'...Everybody who works with collection management works on the desk...getting feedback about collections, hearing enquiries, generating informal feedback....'

This type of informal consultation was also used as a means of identifying the needs of groups who might otherwise be difficult to reach, such as teenagers:

'...Our summer reading programme – we've got a youth component, and that's a really good way to get their input and feedback...'

Some participants were also able to use the feedback they received from their branch librarians as a way of obtaining information about the types of materials that would best meet the needs of the smaller communities. In the smaller institutions participating in this study comments and complaints might be presented in a relatively informal way:

'...If I buy the wrong stuff, people are going to complain... and I'm going to find out about that pretty quickly....'

The larger institutions sought comments about library collections through the use of suggestion boxes or an interactive website:

'...We've got...a feedback box in the children's area, and we've got feedback forms on the Website...there are ways that people can feed...we do get letters and notes....'

The advantage of professional observation as a direct information-gathering technique is that the judgment of experienced professionals is likely to be highly valid (Gorman and Clayton 2005). In the case of this investigation such judgments could also provide valuable insights into sectors of the community about which it would otherwise be difficult to obtain information, for example, non-users of the library:

'...Lots of the non-users are people who know perfectly well that the library is here, but don't need it regularly....'

'...There's an overriding viewpoint that libraries are a good idea, and people think they should have them, but apart from until they actually want something, there's not a lot of interest in using it....'

Disadvantages of community consultation techniques

The main drawbacks to community consultation identified by the study participants were that they:

- Are costly
- Can be time-consuming
- Are reliant on good communication skills
- Are difficult to analyse or codify.

The main disadvantage of user surveys for the participants, particularly for those who did not carry them out regularly, was their cost. By cost participants meant staff time, and also the cost of outside professional advice and assistance. Some participants expressed doubt that they would be granted funding from their parent institution for the purpose of carrying out a survey. Typical comments were:

'...We can't really afford to do a serious survey....'

'...We can't do surveys...we just don't have the time....'

Other disadvantages of surveys raised by participants were: that it is extremely difficult to survey non-users; that it is difficult to ensure statistical validity; that the percentage of returns is often low; that the public sometimes have difficulty in interpreting the meaning of questions; and, that members of the public often do not like to be critical about library services.

Although participants acknowledged that focus groups could be successful, they were also aware of the drawbacks of the technique. These drawbacks included difficulties in organizing representative groups of people:

'...the concern I've got...finding the right groups of people to do the consultation with...'

Participants also felt that the technique requires an outside facilitator:

'...I think you need somebody very skilled to run it...'

The difficulty of encouraging people who are not library users to participate in focus groups was illustrated by one of the participants. This library manager had the experience of people who had been invited to a focus group simply not at the designated time, despite the incentive of supper being provided.

Some participants felt that focus groups may be an ineffective technique because they do not yield clear quantitative data, and because the information gathered is not valuable enough to warrant the effort involved:

'...we didn't feel that we got sufficient breadth of data to get a good picture...'

Also, many participants were uneasy about the possibility of focus groups being captured by the most vocal sectors in the community:

'I'm worried about the risk of skewing the collection in one direction because there's a pressure group and they're loud enough to skew it...'

A generally ambivalent attitude among the study participants towards the value of library committees was articulated by one of the library managers:

'...it's a bit like friends of the library...it's good to have but you don't want them taking over the library...'

The main disadvantage to schools liaison seemed to be that it is reliant on mutual co-operation to work successfully:

'...it's reliant on whether you've got good teaching staff who're prepared to communicate...'

The main drawback to liaison with tertiary education providers is that, as with schools, it requires goodwill on both sides to operate effectively.

A disadvantage to establishing relationships with community groups is that sometimes the library cannot meet that group's expectations of it. One participant, speaking about the local business association, remarked:

'...we could say 'we're going to offer a service to business', but the materials budget simply won't stretch to that...'

One drawback to the staff feedback technique is that it can be difficult to ensure that processes are in place to record formally the daily interactions of staff with clients, and then to ensure that these are incorporated into collection development practices.

A problem with comments and complaints procedures, raised by several participants, is that the most articulate clients are likely to make their views known, whereas other clients don't speak up:

'...we do have a group of clients, who are generally white, middle class to high income, who are fairly vocal about what they want and when they want it, but they are only about 30% of the population, and the other 70% aren't making a lot of noise...'

A possible disadvantage to the study participants' reliance on professional judgment is that this judgement may be used as the sole justification for current practices and procedures. Professional judgment ideally needs to be moderated through information gathered by community consultation techniques.

Frequency of use

The study participants use some community consultative methods only irregularly, while others are in continuous use.

Only one participant's institution regularly carried out user surveys:

'I've been here ten years, and we would have done at least four in that time...we're due to do another one...'

Another participant commented:

'Collection-based ones are rarely held...'

Focus groups were not being regularly used as a community consultation technique by any of the study participants, although some felt that, on reflection, it was a technique they could use more frequently:

'...it would be good to establish a more formal structure of regular review...'

'... [it's] something we're going to want to get into, at least in the next 18 months...'

One participant, however, did not see any advantage in regular use of the method:

'...we don't continue to do it...I'm not sure that you would get significant changes by doing it every year...'

For most participants, consultation with schools occurs continuously:

'...definitely lots of school visits...and the mobile goes out to lower decile schools...'

'...our children's librarian would visit the schools probably more than any small town children's librarian I know of...'

For those institutions with established links with tertiary education providers, consultation occurs on a regular basis, although perhaps not as frequently as with schools.

For most participants, consultation with a wide variety of community groups took place on a regular basis:

'...we've got strong alliances...with ESOL tutors. We've also got links with the jazz club and with people who're involved in radio stations...People with an interest in health...'

Participants achieved regular staff feedback through informal and formal staff meetings and, in the larger institutions, through formal monthly reports by staff supervisors

Role of community consultation techniques in informing collection development policies

The role played by community consultation in the formulation of collection development policies can be summarized in broad terms as follows:

- To directly inform collection building and purchasing decisions
- To help define the role of the institution in the community
- To help define the institution's strategic focus.

The contribution that each technique can make towards the formulation and application of collection development policies was explored in more detail with the participants.

Despite the significant drawbacks of user surveys, it emerges from this research that those which question respondents about library collections can play a valuable role in collection management, even if this information is used to support informal collection development decisions only. Surveys that are carried out regularly help to identify trends about what clients require from the library.

Ideally, the role of user surveys in library collection planning is stated in the institution's formal collection development policy, as is the case for one of the study participants:

'The...library carries out a biannual user survey and results from this also feed into buying policies.'

Study participants did not elaborate on the link between data from focus groups and the formulation and application of collection development policies. However, there seemed to be an undercurrent of opinion that if focus groups were to become a regular feature of a library's community consultation programme, their potential to gather information of benefit to collection development activities could be more fully realised.

The role that consultation with schools plays in their libraries' collection development policies was clearly stated by the study participants. In every institution, the children's librarian undertook purchasing of materials for the children's section of the library. The frequent contact that these librarians have with the schools informs the collection development decisions they make.

The role of supporting 'educational' goals was also specified in the participants' formal collection development policies:

'Our policy is to provide a high quality collection of books which can be read for interest or to supplement material provided by the schools.'

In this research it is apparent that, for most study participants, the efforts being made to liaise with schools are an example of successful community consultation practice.

Most participants could quite clearly articulate the way in which consultation with tertiary education providers influences their collection development policies. One formal policy statement reads thus:

'We acknowledge services offered by other libraries...and where they are able to adequately meet demands, our service is appropriately modified or scaled down'.

All of the participant consultation with community groups yielded information that was of direct relevance to both formal and informal collection development policies. The desirability of consultation was formally stated in one policy document:

'...selectors are encouraged...to liaise with relevant interest groups in the community'.

For those participants with formal collection development policies, a commitment to meeting Maori client needs is usually clearly stated:

'Collections recording the collective memory and heritage of local Maori are a critical factor in service to the Maori residents of our district'.

The importance of staff feedback in determining the direction of collection development was emphasized by all participants, and formed part of both formal and informal policies:

'...for me to buy in isolation would be foolish, because I don't see the public as much as my staff do...'

'All staff work regularly with the public and the library's collections, answer requests for information, and receive comments from users. In this way, deficiencies in the collection quickly come to light and changes in demand can be met...'

As is the case with staff feedback procedures, the information received through the libraries' comments and complaints mechanisms can have a direct influence on collection development policies, as these two statements from formal policy documents show:

Regular fiction readers are well informed, and often ask for new titles before they reach the shops. Because of this, the library tries to buy all titles by established fiction authors....

Selectors are encouraged to make use of borrowers' expertise and suggestions for purchase....

The way in which professional judgment is used to support informal collection development policy decisions can be illustrated by two interview examples. One participant had decided to expand the library's 'bestseller' collection, because '...our observation would be that borrowers expect immediate gratification...'. Another participant's formal collection development policy document makes a general statement about collection-building principles, which is based on the 'general knowledge' of every public library professional: 'Library users have different attitudes, tastes and beliefs. This diversity should be reflected in the library's collections wherever possible...'

Conclusions

What emerges from this study is that New Zealand public libraries practising responsive collection management demonstrate the following characteristics:

- The library's collection development policy has been formulated as a result of research into what the library's community and client base need and want from the library's collections
- This research has been undertaken using a variety of community consultation and data analysis techniques
- Research into community and customer needs is ongoing, to ensure that the library's collection management practices remain responsive to those needs.

At the same time, it is clear from this investigation that public library managers employ a limited range of consultation techniques, and that this needs to be broadened in order to collect more robust and higher quality data about the needs of their communities and clients. In particular, more attention needs to be given to two important consultative methods: library surveys (of both users and non-users) and focus groups.

Furthermore, this study has shown that public library collection development policies, where they actually exist, are dated, outmoded and little used.

Therefore, it is incumbent upon library managers to either create such policies where they do not exist, or revitalise those that do exist – in both cases using community needs analysis techniques as an integral part of the process.

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