

social impact audit

August 2002

FOR THE SOUTH WEST MUSEUMS LIBRARIES & ARCHIVES COUNCIL

Executive Summary

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INTRODUCTION

The study was initiated by South West Museums, Libraries & Archives Council and was funded by Resource. The research was designed and undertaken by the Centre for Public Libraries and Information in Society (CPLIS) at the University of Sheffield. It developed the methodology used in their previous social audit of public library services in Newcastle and Somerset, and sought to familiarise service professionals with the techniques involved. The present study involved staff in eight organizations, drawn from archive, library and museum services in the South West.

PROJECT AIMS, OUTPUTS, & OUTCOMES

The aim of the study was to assess the collaborative impact of archives, libraries and museums in terms of promoting social cohesion, fostering social inclusion and encouraging lifelong learning. Specifically it sought to:

- Illuminate where and how museums, archives, and libraries made an impact.
- Develop an approach to this evaluation, which would be useful to colleagues in other parts of the UK.
- Inform the lifelong learning agendas of the participating organizations.
- Stimulate innovative thinking about meeting social purpose and priorities.
- Lead to further cross sector working.

The following outputs and outcomes were anticipated:

Outputs

- A Do-It-Yourself social impact audit technique and an analysis of its strengths and weaknesses.
- Workshops and summative seminars to build confidence in using the model.
- A succinct report on the work undertaken and the results of the social impact audits.
- Publications in appropriate academic and professional journals.

Outcomes

- Service managers with experience and confidence in undertaking social impact audits in their sector.
- Service managers with a clearer picture of how their service impacts on individuals and local communities.

- Ideas on how to develop services more effectively to engage with target groups and meet social objectives.
- A knowledge base to enable stakeholders to assess performance and benchmark improvements regarding the social impact of archives, libraries, and museum services.

Eight institutions, a combination of museums, archives and libraries in the region, elected to participate. Each studied a particular project or aspect of service provision, which they felt had significant local community effects.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology explores the social consequences of service objectives on select groups of stakeholders. The rich, qualitative data that are returned through interviews and focus groups involving users, non-users and other stakeholders creates a tool to fine-tune institutional policy and illuminate strengths and weaknesses not normally obtainable through quantitative approaches.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

Although the results were modest and there were variations between projects, the data show that museums, archives, and libraries do have a social impact. In addition the project demonstrates that the social audit technique enables the development of a framework for an informed value judgement. In the time available it was rarely possible to identify more than intermediate outcomes but nevertheless, five broad themes emerged from the reports of the individual service audits

Learning

A contribution to learning was identifiable in all eight of the projects studied, although none of the services had identified learning in their specific project objectives. Focus group participants identified both formal and informal learning through their use of museums, libraries and archives.

Community Identity & Social Cohesion

Respondents clearly perceived the services as providing resources for building social capital. The institutional buildings were perceived as local landmarks and sources of civic pride, places to meet and to spend leisure time. Archives offered opportunities for newly arrived members of a community to put down roots. Museums held reminders of shared societal events and aided in the construction of communal memory. Libraries were seen as a hub for information about local service provision.

Economic Value

The data suggest that cultural institutions contribute economic value in a community. The tourism industry was seen as a beneficiary of the work undertaken by museums and archives. Respondents were aware that libraries offered resources for networking, business information, and skills development.

Equity & Access

Issues of physical, sensory, intellectual, psychological, and financial access were raised by the focus groups in all eight services. Overall the attitude of most of the professionals was one that reflected awareness of and engagement with their service's particular strengths and weaknesses.

Management Issues

How a public-sector cultural service is managed can significantly affect overall social outcomes. The following issues emerged as particularly important:

Awareness & Marketing

This subject was raised by focus groups in all eight services as an area that needed significant attention.

Service Image

The image of the service was important to both users and providers. The perception of these services as "leisure services" was identified as a factor in service provision, organisational structuring, and allocation of funding.

Facilities: Location, Access, and Aesthetics

The data indicate that buildings can have a significant effect on social impact. The sense of "place", and the provision of comfort and access was an important issue for respondents.

The Social Audit Training Experience

According to the responses from the staff involved in the project, the entire audit process created a satisfactory level of confidence in working with qualitative data techniques, and specifically in conducting focus groups. All of the services encountered problems with the time constraints of the study (10 months). Some also found the initial recruitment of focus group participants difficult and time consuming. Several respondents encountered problems in synthesizing and analysing the results using the guidelines that the research team provided. Overall, however, respondents did feel that the process allowed them to obtain a richer form of data that they could bring to bear in demonstrating the impact of their work to their governing authorities and funders. Some mentioned that

this project created situations for further work with their users.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study identified five issues that need to be considered by public museums, libraries and archives:

- Services must increase the regularity of two-way conversations with the public (e.g. regular social audits). There must be an asking, listening and acting on stakeholder's interests through outcome-based evaluations.
- There needs to be an awareness of the significance of initial conditions for programmes. In other words, social objectives must be clear, relevant, strategic (this means taking a long term view, with a consideration of the ultimate consequences), and respecting of stakeholder's interests (including the staff who must provide the service).
- Social impact auditing must build trust through honest, open, and accessible execution. The relationship between social objectives and stakeholder's interests are made visible through a system of outcome-based evaluative techniques, including the social impact audit technique explored in this project.
- Services must be willing to act and follow-through, adjusting their objectives, and finding new and creative routes to producing their final services. Expectations are increased in the public when a dialogue is conducted rather than a monologue.
- And finally, an increase in financial and human resources is required to establish in the capabilities to conduct outcome-based assessment.

CONCLUSION

The study shows that archives, libraries and museums create opportunities for people to engage with others in a shared space, proffering the raw materials for education and the crafting of social capital that can help bind communities together. The social audit process offers a tool for listening to stakeholders and informing policy makers. Qualitative data, obtained via social audits are valid evidence and should be used by professionals and policy makers to inform and improve the management of cultural organizations.

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The Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries

This report can be obtained from the South West Museums Libraries and Archives Council in alternative formats

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