

# The Vital Link

## An Evaluation Report

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## Executive summary

### Introduction

The Vital Link: reader development and basic skills was an initiative that was funded via an award from the second year of the DCMS/Wolfson Public Libraries Challenge Fund (September 2001 to September 2002). Over a twelve-month period, nine local authorities worked as a consortium, representing four English regions (the East of England, London, the North West and Yorkshire and the Humber). This consortium was managed by a project management group comprising representatives of the National Literacy Trust, the National Reading Campaign, The Reading Agency (formerly Well Worth Reading) and two independent coordinators.

### Aims and objectives

The overall aim of The Vital Link was to link adult literacy and libraries, and within that aim there were six overall objectives:

- 1. To develop a major partnership programme harnessing libraries' reader development work to support adults trying to improve their literacy skills.*
- 2. To inspire, support and motivate emergent adult readers and recruit new 'hard to reach' learners.*
- 3. To establish effective links between the library service and the adult basic education sector.*
- 4. To identify, evaluate and articulate the unique contribution libraries' reader development work can make to the Government's plans to improve basic literacy skills.*
- 5. To research, implement and disseminate replicable local models at regional and national level.*
- 6. To provide a range of support strategies and materials collections during and following the programme.*

## Project evaluation

The evaluation of the initiative was conducted by a team from Sheffield University, from the Centre for the Public Library and Information in Society (CPLIS) in the Department of Information Studies, and the School of Education.

The evaluation aimed to assess the impact of library support and reader development approaches on:

- ❑ Increasing adult learners' confidence and enjoyment of reading
- ❑ Motivating people to improve their basic skills
- ❑ Supporting progression to other learning opportunities
- ❑ Building the capacity of libraries to support basic skills development (for example through staff training, more appropriate stock collections and ICT provision)
- ❑ Developing integration of library support into basic skills provision.

## Methodology

The main elements of the methodology for the formative evaluation of The Vital Link combined the social audit approach previously developed in the Department of Information Studies at the University of Sheffield, with techniques used by the Department of Education in evaluations of literacy initiatives.

**Quantitative evaluation:** Two questionnaire surveys were designed to estimate the impact on participants' confidence in using literacy, a participant profile and a participant questionnaire. The profile and the first questionnaire were distributed to learners shortly after their entry into a basic skills programme, and the second questionnaire was distributed to the same participants towards the end of the course.

**Qualitative evaluation:** The main element of the methodology was the social audit. The intention of this is to provide a framework to enable professionals and policy makers to come to an informed judgment about the value and

impact of public libraries and reader development on people who are seeking to attain basic skills. The evaluative approach was to crosscheck the views and perceptions of selected stakeholders in order to determine to what extent these objectives had been achieved.

### **Summary of evaluation findings**

The overall impact of The Vital Link was difficult to measure, as there were considerable variations between the individual projects developed in the nine participating local authorities. In the limited time available it was rarely possible to identify more than intermediate outcomes but three key themes emerged from the data:

- The role of the public library in basic skills education
- Partnerships
- Reader development and the reading experience.

### **The role of the public library in basic skills education**

The data suggested that the acceptance of the role of the public library in basic skills education was widespread, but not universal.

The public library was recognised to be an appropriate venue for basic skills education, although this was more in terms of its comfortable environment than its provision of resources. A notable outcome of The Vital Link was that as a result of the library's involvement in basic skills education, participants had become more aware of the services and resources available to them, and more familiar with the library staff.

### **Partnerships**

Each library service participating in The Vital Link had developed a partnership (or partnerships) with the basic skills sector. The effectiveness of these partnerships varied, largely because the allocation of resources to the initiative

varied from library service to library service, and because participating staff from both library and basic skills sectors were not able to devote equal time to their development. Overall, those partnerships developed were mutually beneficial, as considerable resources and experience had been shared.

A warning was frequently made by representatives of both the library and basic skills sectors that library staff should recognise that their role is not to provide basic skills training, but to focus on the provision of resources and support to basic skills learners and their tutors.

### **Reader development**

The incorporation of reader development practice to The Vital Link was the most problematic element of the initiative. Some parties suggested that library staff and basic skills staff did not understand the concept of reader development, and not all staff believed in its relevance to adult basic skills education. In addition, because of the limited timescale of the project, many participants believed that reader development could only become part of the initiative when working partnerships with the basic skills sector - and therefore with the students themselves - had been established.

Despite these difficulties, the data revealed many examples of ways in which reader development could be used to enhance basic skills education, for example in encouraging self-direction and self-confidence. It was also felt that reader development could become part of the infrastructure of basic skills education.

### **The reading experience**

Although it would be inaccurate to suggest that as a direct result of The Vital Link all participants were reading more, or that all changes could be solely

attributed to one course, there was nonetheless some qualitative and quantitative evidence that real benefits had been experienced.

## Recommendations

- **Library staff**  
All library staff should be aware of basic skills work taking place within their organisation, and senior managers should make every effort to ensure that both internal and external training programmes are available to all staff.
- **The target group**  
The public library service should develop strategies in order to reach adults with basic skills needs:
  - To know their individual needs
  - To develop ways of meeting these needs
  - To focus on actual needs, rather than perceived.
- **Basic skills resources**  
Stock selection should be used as an exercise to widen the reading choices available to adults with basic skills needs.  
Resources should be provided to reflect the needs and interests of the local community.  
Resources should be selected according to basic skills criteria in order to set a quality standard.
- **Partnerships**  
For partnerships to be sustained, staff at all levels should commit their time and resources not only to the funded period of a project, but to the period beyond. Cross-sectoral training should take place in order to share knowledge and to raise awareness of partners' working practices.
- **The publishing sector**  
The following recommendations are made to the publishing sector:
  - That reading levels are standardised across all imprints.
  - That the appearance of Basic Skills texts does not stigmatise.
  - That all basic skills texts are mainstream and accessible in subject and content.
- **Reader development and basic skills**  
A recommendation is made to the basic skills sector that the basic skills Core Curriculum be amended to include a focus on reading for pleasure and reader development.

Reader development should be recognised as an appropriate means of encouraging adults with basic skills needs to enjoy reading and to extend their reading choices.

## **Conclusion**

Prior to The Vital Link, there appeared to be an obvious relationship between public libraries and the adult basic skills sector, but this had not been practicably demonstrated. This initiative explored ways in which this relationship could become more tangible, investigating ways in which staff from both sectors could work together with a common aim. In doing so, considerable progress was made in beginning to reach the target group, and a significant body of transferable knowledge acquired.

# 1. Introduction

This report contains the findings of the evaluation of the value and impact of 'The Vital Link: Reader Development and basic skills', an initiative that was funded via an award from the second and final year of the DCMS Wolfson Public Libraries Challenge Fund (September 2001 to September 2002).

## 1.1 Project participants

Over a twelve-month period, nine library services, representing four English regions<sup>1</sup>, worked as a consortium<sup>2</sup>:

- |                                      |                    |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------|
| 1. Barking and Dagenham <sup>3</sup> | 6. Norfolk         |
| 2. Bedfordshire                      | 7. North Yorkshire |
| 3. Doncaster                         | 8. Sutton          |
| 4. Essex                             | 9. Wandsworth.     |
| 5. Knowsley                          |                    |

This consortium was managed by a project management group comprising representatives of the National Literacy Trust, The National Reading Campaign, The Reading Agency (formerly Well Worth Reading) and two independent coordinators<sup>4</sup>. Additional project partners were as follows:

- The Basic Skills Agency
- Books for Students
- London Libraries Development Agency (working with the London Boroughs of Barking and Dagenham, Sutton and Wandsworth).

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<sup>1</sup> Four regions: East of England, London, North West, and Yorkshire and the Humber.

<sup>2</sup> Each library service appointed a key contact: see Appendix A

<sup>3</sup> Due to their late start on the project, Barking and Dagenham chose to be omitted from the quantitative evaluation and the overall social audit.

<sup>4</sup> All members of the project management group are named in Appendix A

## 1.2 Project aim and objectives

The overall aim of the Vital Link initiative was to link adult literacy and libraries, and within that aim there were six overall objectives:

7. *'To develop a major partnership programme harnessing libraries' reader development work to support adults trying to improve their literacy skills.*
8. *To inspire, support and motivate emergent adult readers and recruit new 'hard to reach' learners.*
9. *To establish effective links between the library service and the adult basic education sector.*
10. *To identify, evaluate and articulate the unique contribution libraries' reader development work can make to the Government's plans to improve basic literacy skills.*
11. *To research, implement and disseminate replicable local models at regional and national level*
12. *To provide a range of support strategies and materials collections during and following the programme.'*

## 1.3 The target group: emergent readers

The Vital Link website suggests that the public library service:

*'...has enormous untapped potential for helping the fifth of the adult population who have problems with reading and writing.'* (National Literacy Trust, 2001)

The main target group of the initiative is taken from this 20% of the population, and can be described using the term 'emergent readers'. Participants were aged 16 years and over, and were one or all of the following:

- Adults with a reading age between 9 years and 14 years of age (this relates to level 1 and lower level 2 of the national standards for basic skills).
- Functionally literate readers, who need to build enjoyment and confidence and simply practise their newly acquired reading skills.
- Adults who may lack experience as readers and in discussing and sharing reading experiences.

#### **1.4 Library staff**

Library staff from each of the nine participating local authorities took part in the development and delivery of the Vital Link initiative. It was anticipated that this involvement would result in their increased awareness of the needs of the basic skills sector, and the creation of sustainable partnerships with this sector.

#### **1.5 The basic skills sector**

Basic skills tutors and managers were involved in the initiative by providing support and expertise to the participating library services. In return, it was hoped that they would benefit from cross-sectoral partnerships and increased access to resources.

## 1.6 Dissemination

It was intended that the dissemination of practice and outcomes of the Vital Link initiative would be conducted at local, regional and national levels via:

- Updates from local projects to regional and national networks
- Training programmes delivered via regional networks
- The National Literacy Trust website<sup>5</sup>
- An email discussion group<sup>6</sup>
- A reading promotion available regionally and nationally - *First Choice*
- A toolkit for future basic skills provision
- A national conference - to be held after the originally funded period
- Evaluation outcomes (see 1.5).

## 1.7 Evaluation

In 2001 the National Literacy Trust asked the University of Sheffield to undertake the evaluation of the *Vital Link* project. This evaluation involved two departments at the University, namely the School of Education and the Centre for the Public Library and Information in Society (CePLIS), in the Department of Information Studies. The joint Project Heads were Bob Usherwood and Greg Brooks, and the Researcher was Briony Train.

For the objectives of the evaluation, see Section 4.

N.B. All quotations included within this report are anonymous, although for ease of reference the terms 'Library staff', 'Project manager', 'Partner' and 'Participant' have been used to indicate whether the comments originated from the participating library authorities, the members of the project management group, the basic skills partner organisations or the course participants.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/vitallink.htm>

## 2. Methodology

The findings presented in this report are a reflection of data collected from the eight local authorities participating in the evaluation of the Vital Link initiative. It would therefore be inappropriate to make generalisations about the value and impact of partnership work between the library and basic skills sectors based on the data. However, it is nonetheless possible to make 'modest speculations on the likely applicability of findings to other situations under similar, but not identical, conditions.' (Patton, 1987:168). The data could therefore be viewed as an indicator that a project with a similar methodology, conducted under similar conditions, would be equally effective.

The main elements of the methodology for the formative evaluation of the Vital Link initiative combined the social audit approach previously developed in the Department of Information Studies (Linley and Usherwood, 1998; Toyne and Usherwood, 2002) with techniques used by the School of Education in evaluations of literacy initiatives (Brooks et al, 2002).

### 2.1 Literature review

A literature review of subject areas relevant to the Vital Link initiative was undertaken at an early stage of the evaluation. This included an investigation of the following areas:

- The chronology of the development of adult basic skills provision:
  - Terminology used
  - Definitions of key terms such as literacy, basic skills, functional literacy, social and life skills.
- Basic skills provision and the library service, in particular 1975-98
  - The library as a potential barrier to learning
  - Social inclusion

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<sup>6</sup> [vitalink@lists.literacytrust.org.uk](mailto:vitalink@lists.literacytrust.org.uk)

- Learning materials
- Outreach work
- Partnership
- Sustainability.
- Examples of previous research
  - Research methodologies
  - Comparative research findings.

In addition to the literature review, an ongoing literature survey has been conducted, with relevant materials supporting the overall project evaluation.

## **2.2 Quantitative evaluation: participant profile and questionnaire**

The impact of The Vital Link on participants' literacy skills were not measured directly. This would have required every learner to take a reading test and undertake a writing task both near the beginning of a programme and towards its end (or after a fixed time period where provision is open ended). Because of the skills level of many learners, the reading test would have to be administered individually, and in order to obtain a reliable estimate of reading level the test would need to take 30-45 minutes per learner. This would take a large amount of a test administrators' time and therefore be very expensive. Moreover, suitable reading tests exist only for Levels 1 and 2, and many of the learners contacted during the evaluation of the Vital Link were within Entry level (see Appendix B). Although a writing task is easy to devise and can be administered to groups of learners, it is more expensive to score, and recent evidence suggests that average progress in writing is slight (Brooks et al, 2001a). Finally, many learners may be deterred from participating by being faced with a 'test' early in their programme.

The approach taken by the evaluation team was therefore more indirect. Two questionnaire surveys were designed to estimate the impact on participants' confidence in using literacy, a participant profile and a participant questionnaire (see Appendix G). The profile and first questionnaire were pre-

coded and distributed to learners shortly after their entry into a basic skills programme, and the second questionnaire was distributed *to the same participants* towards the end of the course (or after a fixed time period where provision was open-ended). The questions used for both questionnaires were identical, although the second also asked respondents or their tutors to note the number of course hours attended between completion of the pre and post questionnaires. The two instruments aimed to obtain the following data:

- **Participant profile:** Background information on participants, i.e. date of birth, gender, first spoken language, educational qualifications, previous experience of basic skills course.
  
- **Participant questionnaire:** Brief quantitative questionnaire containing eleven items, all pre-coded. These were designed to take only a few minutes to complete, either with or without the assistance of a tutor or librarian. The response scale included one of the following series of options:
  - *Not at all confident*
  - *Not very confident*
  - *Fairly confident*
  - *Very confident.*
  
  - Strongly disagree
  - Disagree
  - Agree
  - Strongly agree.

In order to allow statistical analysis by computer, each learner was allocated an identifier code, a number which was entered on all three instruments . The results were analysed to see whether there were any statistically significant changes in learner's average self-ratings. This was done both overall and against the background variables featured in the Participant Profile.

### 2.2.1 Participants' characteristics

208 basic skills students completed the participant profile and first questionnaire. Unfortunately, just 64 - or 30.8% - of the 208 students completed the second questionnaire. There could be two possible reasons for this low return:

- In each case, the surveys were distributed at one session only, so if students were not present at that particular session they would be unable to complete it.
- Many students were no longer attending courses at the time at which the second questionnaire was distributed.

The findings of both questionnaires are presented in Section 7.4.

The information concerning the characteristics of the 208 basic skills students who completed the participant profile is presented below (Figure 1, and see Appendix G). The figures represent actual numbers of participants, rather than percentages.

As Figure 1 illustrates, the sample group was heavily female-oriented, as 69% of respondents who stated their gender were female. The majority (142, or 75% of 189) were born between 1950 and 1979. Just 38 (18% of 206) of respondents did not have English as their first language. Perhaps the most notable characteristic of the respondents is that more than half of the group (53% of 202) had educational qualifications, although many of those with qualifications higher than GCSE/O Level were the ESOL respondents who had obtained qualifications in their own language. As the percentage is so high for a project aiming to reach the 'emergent reader', there must be some doubt as to whether all questionnaire respondents belonged to the target group. As an objective of The Vital Link was to reach new audiences ('to recruit new 'hard

to reach' learners'<sup>7</sup>), it is also of interest that 133 respondents (63% of 192) stated that they had previously participated in a basic skills course. Finally, 145 (71% of 205) had used a library within the past two years.

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<sup>7</sup> Well Worth Reading (2001)

**Figure 1. Characteristics of adult basic skills students**

Question	Data frequency		Subtotal	Missing
<b>Gender</b>	Male	59	190	18
	Female	131		
<b>Decade of birth</b>	1920-39	10	189	19
	1940-49	20		
	1950-59	44		
	1960-69	51		
	1970-79	47		
	1980-89	17		
<b>Is English your 1<sup>st</sup> language?</b>	Yes	168	206	2
	No	38		
<b>Occupational status</b>	Employed/self-employed	59	207	1
	In full-time education	10		
	Looking after home/family	69		
	Sick/disabled	22		
	Unemployed	47		
<b>Educational qualifications</b>	None	94	202	6
	CSE/GCSE/Olevel	42		
	A-Level or above	40		
	Any FE qualification/NVQ	26		
<b>Educational qualifications (2)</b>	Without qualifications	94	202	6
	With qualifications	108		
<b>Have you ever been on a basic skills course?</b>	Yes	133	192	16
	No	59		
<b>How long since you took a course of any sort?</b>	Less than 2 years	141	199	9
	2-5 years	13		
	6-10 years	23		
	Over 10 years	22		
<b>Before course, how long since you used a library?</b>	Less than 2 years	145	205	3
	2-5 years	20		
	6-10 years	4		
	Over 10 years	12		
	Have never used a library	24		

### 2.3 Social audit

Statistics are only one part of the reality of the library and any meaningful demonstration of its value must go beyond simplistic quantification.

The main element of the evaluation methodology was the social audit (See Figure 2), a technique previously used by the University of Sheffield's Department of Information Studies (Linley and Usherwood 1998, Toyne and Usherwood 2002). The intention is to provide a framework to enable professionals and policy makers to come to an informed judgement about the value and impact of public libraries and reader development on people who are seeking to attain basic skills.

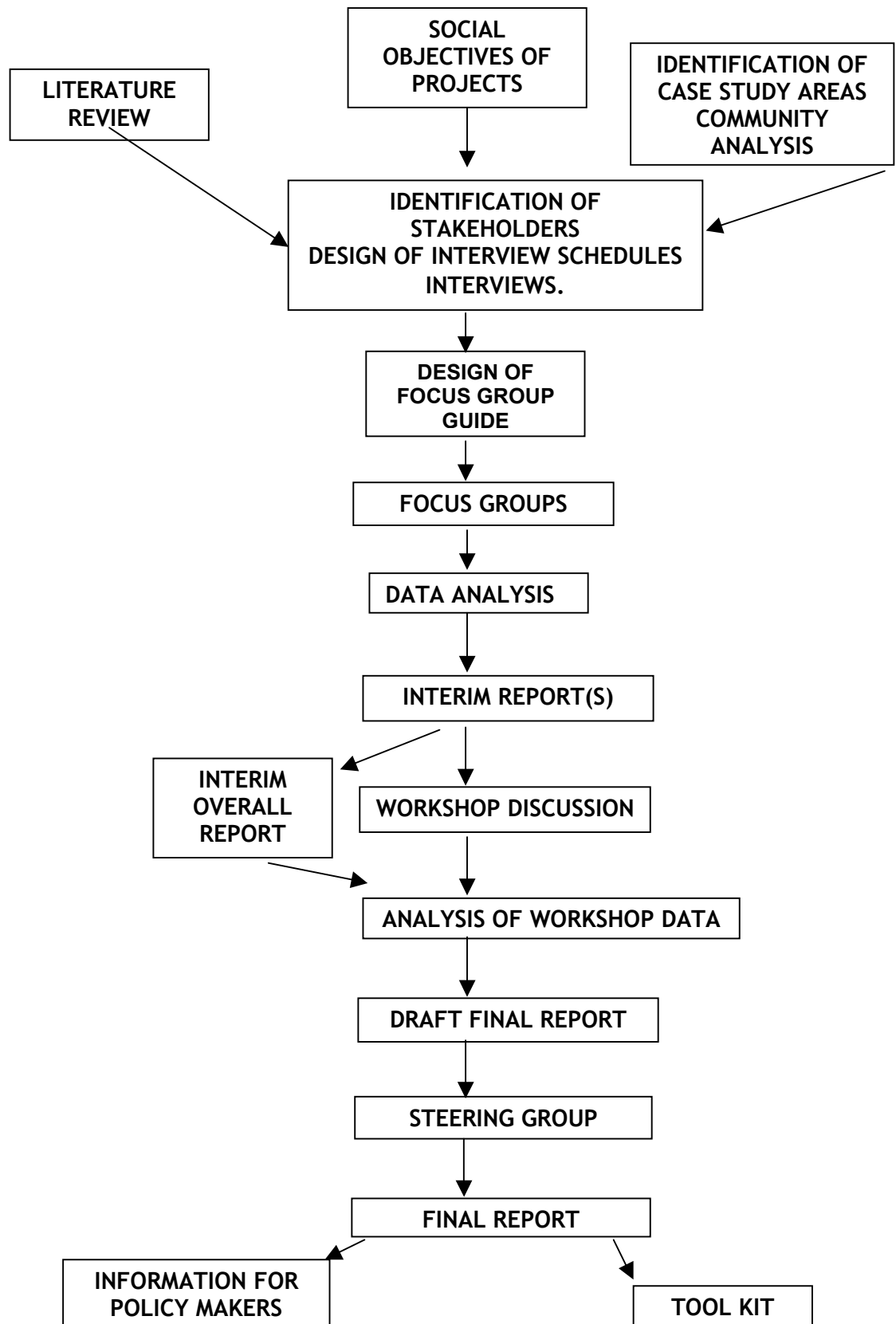
The 'starting point for any social audit process is to identify and clarify the values against which the activities of the business or other type of organisation are to be judged' (Zadek and Evans, 1993). In this project, the starting point was the stated objectives of the *Vital Link* project, as cited in the original project proposal (see 1.2).

The evaluative approach was to crosscheck the views and perceptions of selected stakeholders in order to determine to what extent these objectives had been achieved. The key stakeholders for this project were identified in the original proposal as:

- Adult basic skills students
- Library staff
- Basic skills tutors and managers
- Members of the project management group.

Previous work conducted by the University of Sheffield in the field has indicated that the extent to which the public library service fulfils its social and other objectives depends, to some degree, on how the service and the local authority are managed, and also on some other factors outside the immediate control of library staff. Those factors which have been identified as helping or hindering the attainment of social objectives included the following:

Figure 2. The Vital Link: Overview Of The Social Audit



- Resources
- Marketing and awareness of the service
- Library rules and culture
- Organisational structure
- Staff attitudes.

An additional factor which tended to be beyond the control of professionals was the location of the library. To some extent all factors are evident in the evaluation of the Vital Link project.

### **2.3.1 Focus groups**

As part of the social audit, at least one focus group was conducted between May and July 2002 within each of the eight local authorities participating in the evaluation of the Vital Link initiative. These groups included a sample of basic skills course participants, and in order to obtain a higher level of participation, all took place during or as a replacement of the usual session. As the selection of focus group members was entirely random, they inevitably included participants of all age groups, of a wide range of reading abilities, and both users and non-users of their local public library service. The project researcher conducted each of these focus groups. In all but one case a basic skills tutor was present (but silent), in order to ensure that the participants were comfortable to talk openly to a 'stranger'. Issues discussed during these sessions included the following:

- ❑ Use of the public library service
- ❑ Suggested changes to the library service
- ❑ New knowledge of services

- Views of the First Choice or other titles used as part of basic skills courses
- Changes in reading habits.

The research instruments used for the focus groups were designed with reference to the overall project objectives (see Section 1.2). Holding focus groups allowed data to be obtained from a larger number of respondents and for people to develop their original responses after they heard other people's views (Patton, 1990). All of the focus groups were audio recorded.

### **2.3.2 Project interviews**

In order to obtain data from all key stakeholders in the Vital Link initiative, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the following:

#### **First interviews (February-March 2002):**

- 1 representative from each of the 9 library services (February-March 2002)
- 5 representatives of the project management group (February-March 2002).

#### **Second interviews (June-July 2002):**

- 15 library staff in total from the 8 local authorities participating in the evaluation (June-July)
- 9 representatives of the basic skills sector from the 8 local authorities participating in the evaluation (June-July)
- 5 representatives of the project management group(July).

#### **First interviews**

To obtain data concerning the impact of the project at a midpoint stage, two series of non-recorded telephone interviews were conducted with 5 representatives of the project management team, and 1 representative from each of the 9 participating local authorities. The objectives of these interviews

were to inform the project evaluation and to give individuals an opportunity to give their views of the project to date. Each interviewee had been sent by email a list of potential areas for discussion, i.e.

- ❑ The original project objectives
- ❑ Individual objectives of each partner
- ❑ Perceived successes/difficulties of the project to date
- ❑ Anticipated successes/difficulties of the remaining period
- ❑ Project sustainability.

Although the interviews were informal, a written record was kept of any comments that were felt to inform the evaluation or overall progress of the project. A semi-structured interview schedule was used to obtain relevant qualitative data. (see Appendix F).

### **Second interviews**

The second series of interviews took place between June and July 2002. Areas for discussion included the following:

- ❑ The library service
- ❑ Awareness and involvement of library staff
- ❑ Basic skills and reader development
- ❑ Partnerships between basic skills and library sectors.

A second semi-structured interview was conducted by telephone with each of the members of the project management group, to determine their perceptions of the impact of The Vital Link. Areas for discussion included the following:

- ❑ Project objectives, successes and difficulties
- ❑ Awareness and involvement of library staff
- ❑ The library service and basic skills
- ❑ Reader development
- ❑ Partnerships with the basic skills sector.

All of the above interviews were audio recorded, and later transcribed by the project researcher. All interview schedules are included as Appendix F.

### **Post-Audit Workshop**

Three major themes emerged from the data:

- Reader development and basic skills
- Cross-sectoral partnerships
- The Public library service - its basic skills provision.

These were discussed in a post-audit workshop as a means of refining the individual audit findings and informing the overall project evaluation. The 31 workshop participants included all members of the project management and evaluation teams, library staff and/or basic skills tutors from each of the nine participating local authorities. In addition, eleven invited delegates attended from a wide range of relevant organisations.

N.B. For a full list of delegates, see Appendix H.

The additional data collecting during this workshop have been used to inform this final report.

### 3. Literature review

The Basic Skills Agency defined the term 'basic skills' as:

*'the ability to read, write and speak in English and use mathematics at a level necessary to function and progress at work and in society in general.'* (Basic Skills Agency, 2001a)

As part of the Moser Report (1999), the Office of National Statistics produced measurements for three categories of literacy (Department for Education and Employment, 1999 - The Moser Report, Annex), namely:

- Prose literacy - understanding information from printed text
- Document literacy - understanding information from other printed documents e.g. transport timetable
- Quantitative literacy - making arithmetic calculations from numbers in print e.g. bank interest rates in a promotional leaflet (Carey et al, 1997).

#### 3.1 Functional literacy

Coleman (1981) defined 'functional literacy' as the ability to read, to understand reading materials, and to write to a level sufficient for everyday purposes. Zapata (1994) later described it as 'a process which enables the individuals to participate in social development and change.' Johnston (1996) supported these definitions, but also suggested that those who are aiming to be 'functionally literate' are also concerned with 'life skills, they now need basic skills and knowledge to get through life' (7).

#### 3.2 Social and life skills

The term 'social skills', sometimes referred to as 'coping' or 'survival' skills, describes those personal qualities necessary to interact successfully with other

human beings in formal and informal situations (Bramley, 1991). To possess 'life skills' means to be able to perform simple manual tasks, for example to use a telephone, or to understand and process the type of information which the average citizen receives each day.

The collective term 'social and life skills' can refer to a range of subjects and abilities, all of which are supposed to support and enhance the daily life of an individual. The rapid growth in unemployment in the Western World in the late 1970s and 1980s resulted in the development of a number of educational programmes to support the unemployed, and Bramley suggested that those colleges offering such programmes frequently regarded adult basic education and social skills as closely related, even complementary, subject areas.

Critical theorists challenge the belief that becoming literate will by itself effect dramatic change in the lives of previously marginalised citizens. They believe that education should not only teach content but should also educate learners about the political and social inequalities that may previously have prevented them from being academically successful (Degener, *in* National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy, 2001).

### **3.3 Adult basic education (ABE)**

The literature suggests that the term 'adult basic education' (ABE) describes those academic skills considered necessary for an individual to function 'with any degree of confidence in society' (Bramley, 1991). It usually includes all aspects of literacy (reading, writing, spelling and handwriting) and basic numeracy (addition, subtraction, multiplication and division). However, it is also often used to cover all aspects of adult basic education, i.e. social and life skills.

### 3.4 Adult basic skills provision: the context

Until the 1960s it was generally assumed that the introduction of a compulsory education system had eliminated illiteracy in the Western world. However, in the 1960s in the US and the early 1970s in the UK it became apparent that this was not the case, and adult literacy campaigns in Britain and the United States were launched as a direct result of this concern (Bramley, 1991, vi).

In May 1974, the British Association of Settlements (British Association of Settlements, 1974) published a campaign document: 'A right to read: action for a literate Britain', and suggested that the number of adults with reading difficulties in England and Wales was far higher than 2,000,000, the figure cited by Schonell in 1945 and repeatedly quoted for many years afterwards.

Today, it is often suggested that the problem has worsened considerably since the 1970s, and in the past 10 years the media have reported that as many as seven million British adults are currently illiterate or innumerate. Indeed, Sir Claus Moser, chairman of the Basic Skills Agency, and chair of the Government basic skills working group in 1999, concluded in his report (Department for Education and Employment, 1999) that in 1999 approximately 20% of adults - i.e. between six and seven million people - have more or less serious problems with basic skills. (For more detail on adult literacy and numeracy levels based on national surveys, see Brooks et al. (2001a, 16-23)).

It is important to note that this 'group' of people with basic skills difficulties is a disparate group, and can only be viewed as such: each person has his or her individual learning needs and individual abilities. It is for this reason that the basic skills sector has frequently referred to the 'spiky profile' of the basic skills learner (WEA, 2002):

*'How many of you have heard of the "spiky profile"? Most of us are good at some things and not so good at others. For example, how often do you hear people say, "Oh, I'm hopeless at spelling" or maths, or "I never*

*know where to put the comma", etc. This is known as a "spiky profile", or in other words, good at certain things and needing help with others.'*

Alan Wells, Director of the Basic Skills Agency, suggested that literacy survey data were often misinterpreted, and that claims made that millions of people are completely illiterate and/or innumerate were inaccurate. He was reported in the national press (Kingston, 2001) to have said:

*'It's not true that one in five adults cannot read or write or use numbers... In all of my years involved in adult literacy and numeracy the number of absolute non-readers I've met could be counted on the fingers of one hand.'*

Whatever the actual level of literacy may be, the Moser report undoubtedly further encouraged the present Labour administration to address the issue of adult basic skills. The extent to which opportunities are publicised will inevitably be influenced by the degree of support provided by the current Government. Since coming to office in 1997, the Government has focused first on schools (with the national literacy and numeracy strategies) and then on adult learning, particularly basic literacy and numeracy. In 1998 Sir Claus Moser was commissioned to produce a report on how 'to tackle the vast basic skills problem in this country' (see above).

Many of the key recommendations of the Moser Report have been implemented (National Literacy Trust, 2001). For example, the proposal to develop a basic skills strategy for adults and a unit to oversee its implementation has resulted in the creation of the Adult Basic Skills Strategy Unit. The Unit produced 'Skills for Life', a national strategy for improving adults' literacy and numeracy (Department for Education and Employment, 2001). The first of the '25 steps to a better Britain' as highlighted in Labour's election manifesto, the stated aim of the strategy was to improve the literacy and numeracy of 750,000 adults with low skills by 2004.

### 3.4.1 Students and assessment

The first adult basic education programmes were developed largely for those who, for a variety of reasons, had been unable to complete their programme of 'compulsory' education. However, these early programmes have gradually been extended to include courses suitable for ethnic minority groups, the physically or mentally disabled, and those who have experienced a change in their occupational status, i.e. the unemployed and the retired (Bramley, 1991).

Peck and Kling (1977) questioned the tendency in the Seventies to assess literacy not in terms of standardised reading tests but in terms of an evaluation of progress towards functional literacy. They commented that this appeared at first to be a valid means of testing, but asked the question 'are we sacrificing standards of who is literate in an effort to include more of the population on the 'literate' side of the column of figures?' And on the subject of previous reading tests, they asked 'do these not already form some sort of standard?' (681-2)

However, these concerns are not widely reflected in later commentary. The US National Adult Literacy Survey in 1992 aimed to investigate the level of adults' English literacy, based not on a standardised reading test, but 'on their performance across a wide array of tasks that reflect the types of materials and demands they encounter in their daily lives' (Kirsch et al, 1992).

Despite this recent concentration on 'life skills', adult literacy and numeracy in the UK is still assessed for formal training purposes according to the National Qualifications Framework. These standards are divided into three levels: Entry Level, Level 1 and Level 2 (Basic Skills Agency, 2001b).

Although Hamilton (2000) observed that the advantage of the Curriculum is that it provides 'clear guidelines on learning objectives in literacy and language and of setting realistic levels of achievement', she also commented that a potential danger of such a document is that it may, if rigidly applied to

teaching practice, reduce 'innovation, development and change'. In order to avoid this, she suggested that a staff programme should be developed to run in tandem with the distribution and promotion of the curriculum, in order 'to equip practitioners to use it reflectively and creatively.'

### **3.4.2 Employment trends**

The US National Adult Literacy Survey (Kirsch et al, 1992) unsurprisingly reported that individuals demonstrating higher levels of literacy were more likely to be employed than those without such skills. Similarly, five years later the Basic Skills Agency's study of the impact of poor basic skills on the lives of 37 year olds (Bynner and Parsons, 1997), concluded that those with poor numeracy and literacy skills are likely to be unemployed or in low income jobs, and will have few opportunities for promotion or work-based training. However, it did propose that students with poor basic skills enrolled on further education courses were more likely to succeed if they systematically received professional support (Basic Skills Agency, 1997).

This was confirmed by the Dearing and Kennedy enquiries of the same year (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997 and Further Education Funding Council, 1997). Kennedy, for example, stated that the success of recent policies to increase involvement and attainment in learning programmes had been evident largely in cases where learners had previously achieved and were continuing to do so. The Fryer report (1997) concluded that those who miss education opportunities after school are also likely to miss training opportunities at work. This document listed a number of factors reducing the likelihood of participation in lifelong learning: limited qualifications or skills, poverty, low status and low self- esteem.

### 3.5 Adult basic skills and the public library service

Redfern stated in 1975 that the 'justification for the involvement of libraries in any plans to combat illiteracy seems so obvious that one risks banality.'

Many policy documents have included reference to the role of public library services in supporting those with learning difficulties. The 1980 report of the Library Association on community information suggested that libraries should be involved in providing explanation, advice, practical support and possibly even in acting as mediators where necessary (Section 1.1). The North West Division of the Association of Assistant Librarians' 1989 policy statement included the following statement (Association of Assistant Librarians, 1989, 166):

*'The library has a particularly important role in introducing people with mental handicap to an environment that places a premium on communication and everyday human contact...this is perhaps the most useful of the library's social function for this group.'*

There are many examples of public library authorities' groundbreaking work in this area, for example a project developed by Leicestershire in the late 1980s, funded by the Joseph Rowntree Memorial Trust and the ALBSU [Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit]and undertaken by Book Trust (an educational charity devoted to encouraging reading). A primary objective of this project was to identify reading materials (in all formats) for the mentally handicapped (Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit, 1986).

The Corbett report (Department of Education and Science, 1978) noted that in the three years since its current research project had begun, the provision for literacy students by the public library service had grown to be second in importance only to housebound readers' services as a priority area for disadvantaged readers. However, the publication of the Corbett report coincided with a sharp cut in public expenditure in Britain. Services to

disadvantaged groups in society were regarded by many libraries as 'luxuries in times of financial stringency' (Bramley, 1979).

These financial restrictions continued throughout the 1980s, coupled with that which Webster (1999) described as an 'inexorable shift away from public towards private provision of goods and services throughout society.' The very concept of the public library was even called into question, as the Adam Smith Institute, a government think-tank, suggested that libraries were 'an unjust tax levied disproportionately on the poorer sections of society (who use libraries least)' (Webster, 1999).

These issues were still unresolved by the beginning of the following decade, and some critics claimed that services to 'disadvantaged groups' were not yet adequate. Bramley (1991) noted that some public librarians felt that their professional responsibilities were to the reading adult community, and not to those who could not yet read (52). He also suggested that the provision of services and materials to those with learning needs had been a largely neglected aspect of general public library practice. He provided two possible reasons for this 'overall picture of apathy' (58):

- Low usage of ABE collections: 'There has been a tendency for some libraries to...assume that students will come forward, find the material and borrow it without any encouragement or assistance.'
- Public expenditure cuts beginning in the 1980s, and limited funds subsequently being allocated to 'more vocal users than ABE students.'

The 1997 Fryer Report 'Learning in the twenty-first century', was commissioned by the Department for Education and Employment in the first year of the administration of the new Labour Government. This report recognised the role of the library and the librarian as learning providers. However, the Library and Information Commission response to the document (Fisher, 1998) suggested that the Fryer Report failed to acknowledge the wider

contribution that the library can make to the lifelong learning of all members of the local community.

### **3.5.1 The library as a barrier to learning?**

Research has identified a number of issues that can prevent the public library from being effective in its basic skills support.

Although Guinchard (1999) reported that literacy learners do not usually hesitate to approach library staff for help in locating material or in obtaining general information, other studies have suggested that the opposite is true. Guinchard referred to a number of authors who propose that adults with low literacy skills often choose to hide their difficulties, avoiding asking for help for fear of criticism or 'stigmatization' (Martini & Page, 1996, Brez & Taylor, 1997, Beder, 1991).

Similarly, Hull (2000) reported that the library can often fail to support learning, simply because 'using any library, paper-based or electronic, requires well-developed skills in both literacy and numeracy.' As a direct result of this, she suggested that those with low literacy and numeracy skills 'are ill-at-ease in the environment and likely to avoid such interactions if possible' (3).

Adult literacy learners in focus group interviews with Vancouver Public Library staff reported that they felt uncomfortable in libraries, perceived staff as unapproachable, and found the arrangement of and access to materials very difficult (Quigley, Kripps & Firth, 1994, *in* Guinchard, 1999).

### **3.5.2 Sustainability**

In 1981 Coleman reported that 'the response of libraries to the needs of adult literacy was...widespread, but in the main it was a superficial response, the momentum of which was not maintained once the public spotlight on literacy

was dimmed' (Coleman, 1981). She suggested two possible reasons for this limited action:

- *'[librarians] have not thought seriously about why people want or need to learn to read and write.'* (18)
- *The level of partnership between libraries and local literacy agencies tended only to be 'at a fairly superficial level.'* (19)

Twenty years later, Raven (2001) raised the same issue, in an article that examined the current significance of basic skills as part of the Labour government's policy to increase social inclusion. As Raven warned, 'no matter how startlingly successful the work they [library basic skills projects] support, there is always concern at what is going to happen when the funding dries up.'

### **3.6 Staff training**

'A language for life' (the Bullock Report) provided a comprehensive survey of English teaching in England and Wales. The Bullock Committee found that the teaching of English was not regarded as equally important in all training colleges. They felt that very little attention was devoted to giving prospective teachers the training necessary to teach literacy skills (Committee of Inquiry into Reading and the Use of English, 1975).

The observations of the Bullock Report did not bring any apparent improvements in the training of English teachers. The Report of the Kingman Committee also expressed concern over the little amount of training given to those teaching English in British schools (Department of Education and Science, 1988). The document contained some revealing statistics regarding, for example, the low qualifications of English teachers, and recommended that those teaching English language skills were given proper education and training.

### 3.6.1 Public library staff training

Coleman (1981) reported that in a survey of 36 English public library authorities, only 16 reported that they engaged in any kind of adult literacy staff training, yet she suggested:

*'...training is crucial for staff at all levels so that they are sensitive to and able to recognise the problem, are aware of and able to explain the provision which the library service makes, and are knowledgeable about other agency provision.'* (19)

Butler (1988) reported on a research project conducted for the British Library in which both enquirers and learners were asked in interviews to comment on the current provision of 'educational guidance' services. She stated that 'many' librarians felt that the training they received in this area was inadequate (111), and gave examples of comments made:

*'...the professional training of librarians is too narrow...'*

*'...that's the original function of the library, the education of the ordinary people...I think we've got away from that in a way, we concentrate on business a lot, we concentrate on recreation a lot, and the people in the middle we don't seem to reach.'* (112)

At the beginning of the following decade Bramley (1991) argued that although there had been isolated examples of libraries successfully coordinating ABE provision, this did not necessarily justify librarians moving away from their traditional work, i.e. the 'collection, display and exploitation' of reading materials (70). He also suggested that those training adults with basic skills needs should be fully trained themselves, and that college-based education programmes should be used to do so.

However, he conceded that library staff should participate in training programmes intended to enhance the provision of adult basic skills library services, and that an important element of such a programme should be

concerned with reacting correctly to those with learning difficulties. 'This will mean emphasising that it is essential not to show amusement or embarrassment at any unusual behaviour.' (180).

Allred noted in 1998 that one third of public library authorities in the UK had trained members of their staff in 'some elements of educational guidance'.

### 3.7 Adult literacy learning materials

Many have criticised the quality and range of materials available to adult basic skills learners. Redfern (1975) states that those on the market in the 1970s served only to increase the class divide, with 'contrived family situations, totally incredible characters whose language is stilted and whose behaviour is dull.' (112). She proposed that materials should be selected that present information 'in terms that the adult can appreciate' (112), i.e. including appropriate subject areas such as finding employment, overcoming community problems, discovering how to use and maintain household appliances or learning to drive. She also asked wryly, 'Can librarians indeed accept the argument that the books that people want are the ones that are good for them?' (89) Indeed, she suggested that a key role of each librarian is to 'provide the compensatory material which will help each individual to surmount his own particular disadvantage, while hoping that in the long term a changing society will remove the disadvantage.' (87-8).

Following the 1974 Library Association conference (Library Association, 1975), which discussed the problems facing adult literacy students in the context of the part which libraries could play in the growing campaign, the Library Association published an annotated bibliography for literacy students: *New readers start here* (Redfern, 1975). This stimulated a response from those working in the adult literacy field which, in turn, resulted in the Library Association inviting the Adult Literacy Resource Agency (ALRA) to revise the list and produce a second edition, with subsequent updates via the ALRA newsletter. The ALRA then issued 'Guidelines for publishers in producing

reading material for adults with reading and writing difficulties' (Adult Literacy Resource Agency, 1976), although Bramley (1991) suggests that the reaction of the publishers to this text was 'non-committal'.

In 1980 Armour reported that the literacy campaigns of the 1970s had 'given rise to a wider concern about material for second-chance education in general (7). Despite a certain degree of progress made since the previous decade, she suggested that '...a great deal that is promoted by publishers as being suitable for adults turned out, on investigation, to be abysmal' (7).

Bramley (1991) provided detailed information for the selection of adult basic education materials (89-106), including a brief consideration of the validity of 'readability formulae' (93).

### **3.8 Outreach work**

Redfern (1975) suggested that librarians should be prepared 'to go to places where they may not be welcome' (91), and should make themselves known both to individuals and also to potential partner organisations such as social services, housing, education and social security departments, promoting the services offered by the local library service.

However, she warned that the reader who has been encouraged by the outreach librarian to visit his or her local library may be quickly discouraged if the library environment is unfriendly or unappealing. She suggested that the space available should be used as creatively and imaginatively as possible, both in terms of display and in-house activities. 'The outreach librarian can only be as successful as the library will allow.' (94)

Coleman (1981) recommended that librarians should only develop the service they provide if they have a thorough knowledge of the community they intend to serve, and that 'the character of communities varies and the nature of the library services offered to communities should vary accordingly (71).

### 3.9 Partnership and collaboration

A number of authors have referred to the importance of developing partnerships with other agencies to support the lifelong learning process. Such partnerships could include Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs), Learning and Enterprise Councils (LECs), Further Education, open learning centres and educational guidance networks (Allred, 1998).

McCook (1992) proposed that the advantage to the learners of working partnerships between librarians and literacy educators was that the skills of literacy educators could be harnessed in the neutral library environment. 'The supportive reinforcement of materials and individuals willing to provide one-on-one assistance articulates well with programs developed by adult educators.'

In addition, McCook suggested that such partnerships result in a more successful response to the learners' needs, and that the challenge of providing such a response 'can be met by creative and innovative professionals from both backgrounds.'

The 1997 Fryer report, commissioned by the Department for Education and Employment, stated that educational programmes had a significant role to play in the development of sustainable partnerships between local businesses and community-based initiatives, local authorities and learning providers (Section 2.15).

Today, the National Literacy Trust is focusing attention on promoting reading to adults through the National Reading Campaign as a way of complementing and supporting the basic skills agenda. A key part of its basic skills agenda is to encourage libraries and basic skills project coordinators to work together in sustainable partnerships, and the current 'Vital Link' project is a model for such collaboration.

### 3.10 Examples of research in the field

Mendoza (in National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy, 2001, xii) suggested that research findings disseminated in a field such as basic skills - in which students by definition find printed information difficult to understand and process - must not only be academically rigorous but must also be user-friendly and easily transferable to all parties. However, he(?) reported an urgent need to conduct research specifically designed to improve adult basic skills, conducted by adult literacy researchers, rather than by social science researchers who produce basic skills findings as a by-product, rather than as the intended outcome, of their research.

Writing from a Canadian perspective, Guinchard (1999) suggested that there was a lack of formal research in the field of adult literacy. For example, she commented that the Directory of Canadian Adult Literacy Research in English, compiled in 1998, contained only two studies conducted since 1994 that examined literacy and libraries.

#### 3.10.1 Evidence of increased performance

Degener suggested that 'research that looks at the individual success of students...may provide policymakers with...measures of success' (in X, 57-8).

However, Beder (1998) reviewed a large number of research studies and found insufficient data to suggest that learners in adult basic education programmes increased in either confidence or skills as a result of their participation.

Imel (in Speights, D. in National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy, 2001, 17) investigated reasons why the attendance rates at basic literacy classes were frequently low, and suggested as a result that programmes should be redesigned using the principles of adult, rather than young person's education. In other words, learners should be involved in planning and implementing learning activities', their self-direction should be

'cultivated' and their experiences should be drawn on as a resource for the educators: 'adults' own *life tasks and problems* are often what lead them to programs...so they provide a *reservoir for learning*'.

Similarly, Degener (in National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy, 2001, 26) observed that there was much debate in the field of adult education as to how programmes could best serve their students. She commented that some educators and researchers believed that adult education programmes 'should reflect a critical pedagogy', i.e. should provide services that are designed according to the needs and desires of the participants. Others felt, however, that a non-critical programme, one that concentrated solely on the acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills, would 'help to rectify the marginalized positions of the students who are enrolled'.

### **3.10.2 Recent research**

The Basic Skills Agency recently commissioned the National Foundation for Education Research (NFER) to investigate the progress made by adults in mainstream basic skills education in England and Wales, and to discover the factors determining performance. In this project, learners were tested before and after a basic skills course of approximately 20 weeks. Most students had a reading level similar to a child aged nine years, were poorly qualified but had previously attended basic skills classes.

The study found that between tests students made a small but 'statistically significant' improvement in reading, and where tutors had qualified teacher status, progress was greater. Furthermore, those students who attended more classes had made the most progress. A key recommendation was for literacy teaching to place more emphasis on teaching methods specific to literacy than on the 'general principles of teaching' (Brooks et al, 2001).

The findings of this research were questioned by the National Organisation for Adult Learning (NIACE), which proposed that the claims made by Brooks et al

that regular attendance and intensive provision are related to progress in literacy were not upheld by the findings. The NIACE claimed that the evidence provided in the NFER document in fact shows 'no consistent trend linking more tuition hours with more progress' (Hamilton, 2001).

It seems that researchers have not yet reached a consensus of opinion as to a suitable means of assessing the impact of basic skills programmes on learners, either in terms of levels of confidence or educational attainment.

### **3.10.3 Research methodologies**

The growing use of 'socially inclusive' methodologies such as the social audit method adopted by Linley and Usherwood (1998) illustrates that researchers are beginning to acknowledge that decisions made on the basis of community-based research will be of greater concern and relevance to both stakeholders and citizens only if all are represented and involved in the process. The 'quality' element of such research aims therefore to be more comprehensive, wider-reaching than the more traditional research methodology that would perhaps only consider the views of those parties more 'directly' involved in the process under examination.

### **3.10.4 Comparative research**

Although it is not always feasible to compare practice in different countries, as each has different conditions that may affect the findings, the report 'Adult literacy in Britain' suggests that, in common with the US, UK performance is notable both at the higher and lower ends of the literacy scale. For example, only Sweden and the US report higher prose literacy levels with the highly literate students, whereas in terms of the lower levels of literacy, Britain performs relatively badly, as does the US, Canada and Switzerland (Office for National Statistics, 1997).

Although authors have noted similarities between basic skills services in libraries in Britain and the United States - even if only that provision in both is inconsistent - it has been suggested that there is a notable difference in the level of contribution of the two national library associations. Bramley (1991), for example, observed that the American Library Association's (ALA) 'Coalition for Literacy' was viewed by many as one of the most significant adult literacy campaigns, whereas the British Library Association, he felt, had provided less evident and less consistent support.

## 4. Evaluation findings: introduction

Before presenting the evaluation findings, it is appropriate to make a point regarding the data as a whole. The evaluation team was asked to look at nine very different local authorities. The second phase of DCMS/Wolfson funding from which the Vital Link benefited was targeted specifically at partnership projects, either pre-existing or planned partnerships between library services and, in many cases, a wide range of external agencies.

The evaluation of The Vital Link aimed<sup>8</sup> to assess the impact of library support and reader development approaches on:

- Increasing adult learners' confidence and enjoyment of reading
- Motivating people to improve their basic skills
- Supporting progression to other learning opportunities
- Building the capacity of libraries to support basic skills development (for example through staff training, more appropriate stock collections and ICT provision)
- Developing integration of library support into basic skills provision.

The overall intention of the evaluation was to provide a framework to enable professionals and policy makers to come to an informed judgement about the value and impact of public libraries and reader development on people who are seeking to attain basic skills.

To evaluate the impact and effectiveness of such an initiative evidently requires investigation of its impact on all parties, both as individual bodies and as participants in the overall project, asking questions such as the following:

- How were the partnerships or regional networks put into practice?
- How have they developed?

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<sup>8</sup> Usherwood, R. (2001)

- What benefits have been derived from such participation?
- How will the partnerships be sustained?

These are all legitimate questions, but how is impact measured using the same method for all, when the common features are so difficult to find? The project researcher visited eight of the nine participating local authorities, and found that there were many differences between the individual projects, differences that were not immediately apparent in the originally stated aims and objectives of each one. A researcher can examine these overall aims and objectives of the initiative, and check if the individual projects have achieved all of these.

However, if one local authority has not worked with the target group 'emergent adult readers' - as specified in the original project application<sup>9</sup> - but has instead introduced a group of non-emergent readers to the services available to them at the library, has provided them with a place in which they can feel comfortable and unintimidated, and a wide range of resources that they know how to find and can enjoy in their own time, would it be reasonable to suggest that the project had not been effective, had not made an impact?

These differences should be borne in mind when considering the findings of the qualitative evaluation of the Vital Link as a transferable model for ways in which public libraries can support basic skills practice: comparisons are difficult, and should be cautiously made.

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<sup>9</sup> Well Worth Reading (2001)

## 5. The Role of the Public Library in basic skills Education

*'[The] justification for the involvement of libraries in any plans to combat illiteracy seems so obvious that one risks banality.'* (Redfern, 1975)

The above comment, made at the height of the previous major literacy campaign in the UK, expresses an absolute conviction that the public library service has a clear role to play in the promotion and support of adult literacy education. However, even today this role is not universally accepted, either by basic skills students or by library staff. Students have admitted to feeling uncomfortable in libraries, finding access to materials difficult and certain staff unhelpful (Quigley, Kripps & Firth, 1994, *in* Guinchard, 1999). Staff have argued that their professional responsibilities were to the reading community, and not to those who could not yet read (Bramley, 1991).

An objective of an initiative such as The Vital Link is to break down such barriers, and to increase understanding on the part of library staff and students of the role of the public library service in basic skills education. This chapter will investigate the extent to which this occurred during the funded period of the project, by presenting the views of the basic skills learners, their tutors and the library staff.

### 5.1 The library as a venue

Six of the eight library services participating in the evaluation held basic skills courses in the library buildings themselves. Students participating in the focus groups were asked if it was important to them that they met in the library.

In all but one case, respondents said that the library was the most suitable venue, although their reasons for this varied from combining a visit with borrowing books, to having a safe and comfortable environment that was being provided by the library for the purposes of their course, but could in effect be held anywhere:

*'Yes...because it's nice, and you can go, and get your books and search for the things you want.'*

*A: '...it's more private'*

*B: 'Yeah, it's a lot quieter, isn't it?'*

*A: 'It's always closed when we're in.'*

*[Interviewer: And do you like that?]*

*A: 'Yeah, definitely.'*

*'I think it matters that it's closed for us so we can come and use it.'*

*'I think it's nice, it's a nice safe place.'*

*'It matters that it's here.'*

This last respondent also said that she would prefer the course to take place in the library than the neighbouring College of Further Education,

*'...because I think it's [the library is] more aimed towards books than computers...'*

One library representative, who organised basic skills sessions in a room within the library building, felt that the library as a venue was extremely important:

*'...just by coming along each week, it's certainly made them [the learners] more aware of what the library has...the very fact that they're coming in, and having to walk the entire length of the lending library, it makes them aware of what's there. And now that we've got our collections, we've got three display bays, they're actually walking past them as well...So as they're walking in they're seeing those, whereas before they might not have got much further than the counter.'*

Two library staff involved in the Vital Link project gave their conflicting views of the use of the library as a venue from which to deliver basic skills education, views that effectively summarise the continuing difficulty in determining the role of the public library service in this area:

*A: 'I can see a big role for the library in accommodating a class...so that they actually come with a tutor and then it's sort of become part and parcel.'*

*B: 'But then on the other hand do we want to do that? Because you've then firmly associated the library in people's minds as being part of the educational process, but if they drop out of that but still want to carry on using the library have you in fact put them off the library experiences?...I thought one of the things was, you were catching perhaps long-term truants or...non-attenders, who were disenchanted with the whole education thing, and the idea was that a library was different, going into the library wasn't the same as going to your local college.'*

Two tutors cited specific social benefits of the use of the library as a venue for basic skills courses, and repeated the idea of the safe, neutral environment in which participants could learn without inhibitions. The second example is particularly interesting, as it demonstrates that the library can be used in order to increase access, to break down barriers in a community in which many different ethnic communities co-exist:

*'I think you want that secure environment, and I think it's a lovely welcoming...environment full of facilities, isn't it? ...It's just a whole environment that's conducive to learning...I think that libraries now have just become so resourceful, in every sense of the word.'*

*'I think it's really important [that the course is here]. We've had a good relationship with the library for a number of years...the college is situated in...an area associated with a place where a lot of the ethnic minorities...live, so if people come from those minorities then the college is a place where they feel quite comfortable coming to. But for other people, it can perhaps be a barrier. So...nearly 50% of the classes we run are actually off-site, so they're in various community locations...And so obviously the library in that respect is a neutral venue, if you like. I think that coming to a library is a socially acceptable thing to do...'*

A similar point was made by a library representative, who also felt that the library could be a more appropriate venue than a college:

*'...the people are put off going through the doors of [name of college] which is quite modern: some people were finding it a bit flash, basically! And there was a feeling that somewhere more out in the community might be a bit more friendly, more acceptable.'*

## 5.2 Participants' use of the library

Of the 190 basic skills students who stated their gender on the participant profile (see section 2.2), 131 were female. Focus groups also contained a majority of female participants, and it is therefore not surprising that a primary reason for using libraries was to accompany children:

*'I go with the children for books.'*

*'I come with the kids, [at] weekends.'*

In some cases students were borrowing books for themselves as well:

*'myself and my daughter use the library...to get out children's books; I use it myself for personal reading.'*

However, the majority of focus group participants who were also parents used the public library in order to take their young children.

Other reasons for which focus group participants used their local public libraries included finding local events information, finding financial information, finding information on hobbies and interests, and having a quiet place to do coursework or to read. Examples of their comments are as follows:

*'I use the libraries for the Which? Magazines, for looking at the Guardian, especially if you can't get hold of one when the old ladies have taken ten copies each!'*

*'...things like the job sheets...the Council leaflets, what's going on in the community.'*

*'When I'm looking for different things, animals or birds or different things I've seen now when I'm out with the dogs. The staff here are very good, they'll find anything for you, if you can describe what it looks like!'*

*'[I use the library] mostly to do my essay work, and...going into the Internet to get information on subjects that you can't get information on in books.'*

*'...I love the people, and I love the staff, and I love the library, because it's such an interesting place. It gives me a break from just having to sit at home and watch TV.'*

### **5.3 Participants' views of the library staff**

On the whole, participants were satisfied with the service and support they received from the library staff, and in many cases they were more than satisfied. This is obviously very important to many of the learners who may have previously had a difficult experience with staff in public offices. One woman said:

*'I mean if you're coming to a place that's got a hostile environment, because the staff are hostile to you, you wouldn't use it.'*

When asked if she had had such an experience, she said:

*'Yes...not particularly in libraries, but other - most places.'*

Others gave the following views:

*'I don't borrow many books, but the staff are friendly and you can always ask. A lot of people really need that...not to say 'well I'm sorry mate I can't help you today', they don't want that.'*

*'The staff are very good in all the libraries.'*

*'There isn't any perception that they're a backward-looking organisation who should be using quill pens and old books and coffee-stained tables, they do seem very forward looking.'*

Some participants felt that the library staff were helpful in terms of providing information:

*'It can be difficult to find things...the staff do help you.'*

*'The staff don't just point you in the direction, they actually take you to the books you're looking for, which is quite good.'*

However, not all experiences were as positive. One participant with Cerebral Palsy and, therefore, certain speech difficulties, felt that the library staff he had encountered had not been particularly patient in meeting his needs:

*'I used to go to X library but now I go to Y, I like Y...they're more helpful in Y...Because I have difficulty talking clearly, and they let me talk to them. At X library they say 'oh, come back [at another time], they don't help me very well...'*

Other comments referred to a need for specific staff to provide a service to them, as basic skills learners:

*'...they should put more people...who know how to help people...I know they have got a lot of people to deal with, but I think we need them to deal with people who need help...'*

#### **5.4 Raised awareness of the library service**

Based on the data obtained from focus groups with basic skills learners, it would seem that a major advantage of the library's involvement in students' basic skills education has been that they became far more aware of the services available to them. They were more familiar with the librarians, with the resources available to them, particularly the online library catalogue and the Internet. To illustrate this, the following example can be used of three participants who, when asked *'Is there anything that you have found out about the library that you didn't know before doing this course?'*, gave the following responses:

*'That the librarians are human!...I didn't know about the list on the computer, that was one thing I didn't know.'*

*'Same here, and I didn't know about the Internet, or the list on the computer...I've learned on the course...rather than walking around you can look on the computer, it's much easier.'*

*'I have...I might have read something about 'you can go on the Internet', but I mean when you see it, well you realise...you can find where the book is in the library, I mean I didn't know they'd got things like that, I thought you just sort of trawled the shelves...'*

Basic skills and library staff had also observed this increased awareness on the part of the students, particularly in cases where the library had been used as the venue for the basic skills sessions. Again, this awareness was generally in terms of the range of services available to them from the public library service:

*'The catalogue, certainly, and I think just the range of resources that we have...we had this sort of tour round...just pointing out things and the range of resources that we have, and I was quite surprised at how little people knew of exactly what we have, the different formats, the range of reference material, the Internet, the IT, so yes, I think just an awareness of what libraries are about in the 21<sup>st</sup> century!' [Library Staff]*

*'I would say definitely yes, I think the familiarisation and just...going and using different bits of information, yes, being made aware of the other things they can borrow besides books.' [Tutor]*

*'...I don't think that they realised that there was such a range of resources available to them through the library. A lot of people see the library as a place for books and where you have to be able to read, and read well: we know that that's not true, but who's told them before?' [Tutor]*

This second tutor had recognised the need for libraries to market their resources, but library staff also commented on the importance of promoting the 'newer' services:

*A lot of them didn't know about...the fact that they could use one library and take items back to a different library. Also the computer facilities that we've got here, they did not know about that at all, which doesn't say much for our marketing, does it?*

A final point to make here is that The Vital Link was a learning experience for tutors and library staff as well as basic skills students, who through working with other local agencies had increased their knowledge of the service and the staff:

*'...I think that was a surprise to me, Vital Link was the beginnings of me really considering 'what is it that a librarian does?'...I'm much more aware of it*

*now...they're obviously committed, aren't they [the library staff], to what they're doing, with a passion for books and reading?' [Tutor]*

*'We have a lot of facilities available for tutors...but it's been very clear through the work we've done so far that a lot of the tutors are just not aware of just what is available to them...with the students and the tutors visiting the library, it's not only the students' awareness that's increased, but it's the tutors' awareness as well, which is really quite important.' [Library staff]*

*'I have to admit, when I went into the college, I had a lot of misconceptions about what I thought basic skills needs were...these people are very intelligent people, that they can't read or can't write doesn't make them stupid. That's something you really need to get across to the staff.' [Library staff]*

## 5.5 Suggested changes to the public library service

Each of the parties involved in the evaluation was asked to give his or her suggested improvements to the public library service in its provision to basic skills learners.

Although each tutor was generally positive about the partnership developed with the library service, and felt that tangible benefits were beginning to be felt by all parties, comments were made regarding the public library service as a whole and its failure to meet the needs of all basic skills learners. One interviewee, asked if she felt that public libraries were meeting such needs, gave the following response:

*'I think I'd have to say 'no'...I think a generalisation is that libraries are associated with books, so if somebody's having difficulties with their reading and writing, then they're not going to venture into a library, and...if they haven't got research skills, then they're not going to come in and try and find something out. And most basic skills students are embarrassed about their situation, so they're not going to come in necessarily and ask...and I think it's about encouraging them to learn what's acceptable, and what we all do, strategies we all use...if your reading skills and your skills in terms of finding things are not very good, then the library is a very daunting place...'*

Library staff were equally aware that many of the buildings in which they worked were daunting to those who were unfamiliar with the service they provided:

*'If you're not a reader, it's a very scary place, because there are zillions of books, there are important looking people sitting behind huge great desks, we need to find ways of making it easier not just for basic skills students but for anyone who's slightly scared of this place...'*

This librarian felt that one possible means of breaking down these barriers was to consult the target group itself:

*'I'm sure if we were to sit down and brainstorm it...with a representative selection of the students themselves...the obvious people to ask are the*

*students...if they don't come to the library, why don't they come? Give them a safe environment in which they can speak frankly and honestly about why they're not readers or why they're not library users, and then be seen to listen to them, and at least put some of their ideas into practice.'*

Before developing specific resources for the target group, a second librarian was convinced that the priority for all library services should be to incorporate basic skills into the systems and policy of the service as a whole:

*'...the number of services that still don't even mention basic skills in their Annual Library Plans, I'm ashamed to say...there's still this kind of 'oh, well basic skills is a collection we have in the corner', we don't actually think about our policy...and then you've got people at the other end of the continuum where it's actually Council policy...and they're seriously looking at what they do to support their communities, that they know what the needs are, they've got the figures, they've looked at where they are...where the service needs to be provided, and it's not the central library, in most cases.'*

### **5.5.1 Outreach work**

Interviewed in March 2002, three library staff commented on the difficulty of conducting outreach work with the basic skills sector. In one local authority one partner - an organisation to support the resettlement of offenders - wanted to conduct all work with the target group on its own territory, rather than in the library building, but as the librarian commented:

*'...they [the target group] should be integrated into Society - that's the whole point!'*

Two further interviewees reported similar difficulties:

*'The problem we are having is getting people back through the doors.'*

*'It has been a lot harder getting people than I had thought it would be. The real barrier has been recognising the people and them expressing their need.'*

Nonetheless, the picture of outreach work is not entirely negative, and progress was undoubtedly being made, even if change was minimal at this early stage of the project. One respondent, for example, referred to a presentation

she had been asked to give concerning *Vital Link* at a regional cross-sectoral conference on lifelong learning.

During an interview conducted in June 2002, one basic skills tutor, asked how she felt that the service could be made more accessible to such a group, referred to the need for library staff to conduct more outreach work:

*'I think it's about going out into the community and raising awareness...you've got to go out and tell people...and it's making links with all sorts of social groups...it's just finding that way in.'*

Similarly, a second tutor felt that outreach work would be helpful, not only in terms of reaching the students, but to contact the tutors themselves:

*'You can take a step back, because there aren't many basic skills tutors that come into the library, so perhaps the library needs to go out to them. [How?] By being involved in partnerships, doing what some of the libraries already do, the specialist librarians going out and involving themselves in community projects. And that is the most effective way, and getting to know the community group...and eventually getting them into the library.'*

However, a third tutor warned that there was a need to recognise that where outreach work was used simply to raise awareness, it did not necessarily result in a higher level of student recruitment:

*'...this is...a problem across the board with basic skills, getting people a) to admit and b) to actually be prepared to come forward for the provision...It's about us going out into the community, however...there's still this gap between raising awareness and actually encouraging people into [courses].'*

## 5.5.2 Identification

One tutor felt that outreach work was important, but that a further issue to be considered was that of identification. She recognised that the library staff with whom she had developed a partnership had worked extremely hard to reach out to the basic skills students within the local community, but that people's enthusiasm did not necessarily lead to their presence in the library:

*'We're realising that it's going to be an awfully tough enterprise, because [the librarian] has done flyers, [she] has done an awful lot of preparation work, has even talked to people who were madly enthusiastic, but it's literally getting those people through the door, and then you've got to get those people to gel as a group, haven't you?...we're just somehow not reaching the people that the Government wanted us to go out and reach, we're just not really doing it quite yet, so we've got to rethink and come up with some new ideas.'*

Discussing these possible new ideas, tutors raised the issue of identification, an issue of equal concern to library staff. All recognised that those people with basic skills needs who were sufficiently motivated to learn would probably already be 'in the system', would already be attending courses. Those who were not would have developed over time a series of 'coping strategies', ways in which they could hide their difficulties, and would consequently feel that they had no need to attend a course, as they had coped to date.

The tutor cited above suggested that methods of reaching these people must be more creative than traditional outreach methods:

*'I think we're just going to have to think further and further out into the community...to find other people...there may be a way in through Social Services, there may be all sorts of things going on that is a way in, to meet people, and...it's then a question of gaining somebody's confidence, isn't it?'*

She and other tutors referred to three issues that concerned all potential basic skills students, issues that could be translated into the following questions:

- *Will attending the course affect my credibility?*
- *Will it be worthwhile?*

- *Will I enjoy it?*

Bearing these in mind could help to more effectively reach the basic skills community.

### 5.5.3 Library charges

Library charges for overdue loans were an obvious barrier to some participants. One participant had been very concerned when she had come into the library to return a book borrowed as part of her course, and she had been presented with a fine. However, when the librarian realised that she was participating in the basic skills course that was being run in the library building, the fine was removed. Speaking in a focus group, the participant said to the interviewer:

*'when I explained who'd given it to me, it didn't matter.'*

In other library services, library staff confirmed that they had addressed this issue by offering longer loan periods and waiving fines, by offering a more flexible service overall:

*'I think that we could look at things like being more lenient with the amount of time that books can be borrowed, because somebody with basic skills needs will perhaps take more than three weeks. You can renew the book, but I think we need to be a little more flexible and that is difficult within the system, to be able to waive fines...If a basic skills learner comes in and they're taking mainstream material, you wouldn't know maybe that they were a basic skills student and be able to say to them 'you're alright, it's ok this time'. I think that could be a stumbling block, I'd like more flexibility there.'*

### 5.5.4 Signage

A number of the learners were concerned that signs in libraries were not sufficiently clear, not only in terms of signs above subject areas, but more general signs for information services and even toilets. Their comments included, for example:

*'I do think every library, when people come in, there should be a map on the wall to show people where to go. And you should get a little copy so people can pick it up...More people don't know where thing is, don't want to lumber the staff, can you show me things, saying here or there or there or there...'*

*'I think that if you went into [x] library, you would think that you could ask the staff who were checking the books in and out, where would I find a Which magazine? Then you're directed down to another panel of desks, where its' 'Information', and I don't think they have got above their heads, you know, a sign...'*

*'Well you would think you could ask any member of staff, but then they would say 'well you have to go over there and ask them'!'*

Library staff recognised that the signage they used could be significantly improved:

*'...I know that the signing in here is very poor, the signing on the shelves...we know that it is really out of date, not the best colours, I don't think nowadays capital letters are recommended for easy reading, and they're all capital letters.'*

This member of staff had participated in the City and Guilds 9281 basic skills course, and as a result she had learned that certain type fonts were more suitable than others when designing signs:

*'Since doing this course...we've been told about a particular font to use that is much better for people who are struggling to read, the Comic Sans font...and I think that if we could use that font for our notices and perhaps for some of our headings that would be very helpful.'*

A second library representative recognised the importance of using clearly legible signage, and was using Vital Link funding in order to develop more appropriate signs for his library:

*'..when we started it was just a thing that we were going to try out, it didn't have any status if you like, so...there's just a bit of paper with the heading printed on, so it's as basic and makeshift as it can be...but we've got some designs which are ok...we've got our Graphics Department at County Hall, I gave them a brief for what I wanted.'*

### 5.5.5 Noise in libraries

An issue that was raised during three separate focus groups without the interviewer's prompting was that of noise in libraries. Did the participants feel comfortable in the library environment? Should libraries encourage readers to be quiet while using the service? Here, opinion was divided. Two people said that they felt slightly uncomfortable in the library environment, particularly when taking their children:

*'I think generally when I walk into the library you still get the impression that this is a place where: shh!! And with the children and that, it's a bit difficult.'*

*'...when I go into the children's library...they've got the crayons and what have you, and there might be some people reading, but you still get the impression that you have to be quiet!...you just get the impression that in libraries you have to keep the children under control.'*

Others felt that it would help them to concentrate on their reading if there was a specific quiet area in the library:

*'I think...there should be somebody telling people to be quiet...there are people talking.'*

*'You do need a quiet area.'*

*'When I was on the Internet, there was some children in the library, which were particularly disruptive. It used to be like this quiet place, so that's frustrating and annoying, and made you less concentrating on what you're doing.'*

A fourth participant agreed, saying that this affected her ability to concentrate:

*'I'd agree with that, yeah, and when you're trying to look up things and there's all little kids going around screaming and shouting, it's really annoying when you're trying to look things up and they're around, you lose concentration on what you're doing.'*

Suggestions participants offered to change this situation were, for example, to set the computers in an annex, a separate part of the library, and to have 'basic rules of behaviour for children when they come.'

### 5.5.6 Location and display of basic skills stock

In recent years, particularly with the growth in popularity of reader development, librarians have been required to spend perhaps more time than before on display, aiming to increase book issues using displays of multiple copies and face-out display, choosing the most prominent location for dumpbins and face-out shelving. But was display as high a priority to the focus group participants?

The clearly stated objective of two library services regarding the display of basic skills stock was to ensure that materials were easy to locate as a collection, and that individual titles were straightforward to find. One interviewee referred to the 'trefoil symbol' that was used on each basic skills title, whether fiction or non-fiction, 'so that materials can be accessed without the learners having to read a word', and in order to lead participants to the basic skills 'area', in which are stocked both learning resources ('grammar, dictionaries, etc.') and fiction ('including poetry'). In addition, each stock item carries the slogan 'Read on and on and on'.

In the second authority, a similar idea was developed to display all basic skills stock in one location:

*'Regardless of fiction or non-fiction subject matter, they are all shelved at the same point, including tapes, so people can find it easily. The idea was to have it all in one unit for the learners, but this also made it much easier for cataloguing.'*

Explaining this last point, the interviewee said that when the authority had purchased new basic skills materials for the project that had to be processed at

the library headquarters, all stock was given the same classification number so that the participants could use it as quickly as possible:

*'In order to get it back relatively quickly - we felt mean having so little stock available for the group - we put on the 375.425 basic skills classification plus the first three letters of the author's name.'*

For participants, it was understandably important that they were able to easily locate basic skills stock when they entered the library building:

*'When you come through the door, it's all there, and that's important.'*  
[Participant]

*'...the minute you walk in, there is no focal space, there is no focal point of 'excuse me, I'm new here', it's all self-directed...there is no information that tells me anywhere what to do.'* [Tutor]

Another participant felt that it was equally important that individual titles should be as visible, and accessible, as possible. She described the display of 'face-out' books as follows:

*'When you can see them like that, you know, you're quite inquisitive, and you can see what's inside.'*

Others, including one basic skills tutor, gave similar views:

*'I am more attracted to the cover.'*

*'I think it's the curiosity, though, in me...if it's got something that gives me good curiosity, then I'll probably read it to see basically what the story is about, then I think about whether or not they're boring.'*

*'you're looking at picking up the book as a hedonistic, pleasurable exercise...and I think, as long as it's in their hands and they're opening it, then they can start to make decisions about reading the back cover blurb, that sort of thing...'* [Tutor]

A third commented that she particularly liked it when the librarians made themed displays of books from different cultures:

*'I know you haven't got much space but I like the cultural aspects when you do - what is it? - Black novelists' displays or, you know, Chinese stuff, I'm interested in culture...'*

Some mothers participating in focus groups explained that they did not choose books for themselves from the library as they did not want to leave their children unattended to go and choose their own books. As one woman remarked:

*'...you just get the impression that in libraries you have to keep the children under control.'*

One tutor suggested that a separate department should be created to house all basic skills materials, with a member of staff specifically assigned to support this user group, although she recognised the potential difficulty of doing this:

*'...it would be nice for people here to be able to now go into the library...and find their books...Just having this separate section would be very useful...it's very difficult because people who don't read very much, they're quite often a bit defensive about it anyway, so it's very hard...we could say, let's have a special area and have a librarian there all the time to help, but people don't always want that...'*

Some interviewees felt that the main issue to consider was not only whether or not to develop a separate collection, but where and how to display such materials:

*'I think the way they [the other library staff] display materials that are suitable for these people is inadequate...[it] is shoved up the back, on the back stairs. At first when I first came it was over in the corner, and what I've actually done is separate what I call the learning materials from the fiction...I've separated...what is seen as the learning resources from the reading matter, and I've tried to put it as near to the fiction as it could be. It's not ideally placed, everybody in the library knows that, the library managers know that...'* [Library staff]

The same library representative also felt that it was inappropriate to 'badge' basic skills materials in an obvious manner, as it could embarrass readers:

*'I don't like this 'return to learn' style on the front of the books. I think that's derogatory. You get young people, parents perhaps with an 8, 9, 10 year old child, and he gets a book out with...'return to learn' on it...it's almost categorising him, and I don't like that at all. I think they should come in and pick up a book and I think that his book should look exactly the same as your book.'*

One tutor commented on the wider issue of joining adult and young people's collections in order to help parents to choose their own books, and to potentially increase usage of the adult collection by people with basic skills needs:

*'If you can get them into libraries with their children, sometimes that's where you can get a lot of people...I think one of the problems with [name] library is that they've got the children's section and then they've got the adult section right at the other side of the library. It would be perhaps nice to have them closer together so that you can watch your children whilst you're looking for a book together.'*

She specifically referred to a student in one of her classes, a young mother who felt that her own use of the library materials was restricted by her child:

*'Because people like Louise, who would really like to use the library, can't, because she's got quite young children, and she wouldn't want to leave them in that area on their own and go and look for her books. I think that's probably quite a big thing really, because a lot of people, with young children...they're quite a good target actually, [library staff should be] finding a way of having adult books near the children's books, that they can access together easily.'*

However, one participant in a second local authority gave this view of his local library's display of a selection of adult fiction in the children's section:

*'The...books in [my library], they're actually over the far side among the children's, just on the end of the children's section...given that they were devised for adults, perhaps the placing is a little bit odd.'*

## 5.6 Summary

The data suggested that the acceptance of the role of the public library in basic skills education was widespread, but not universal.

The public library was recognised by many to be an appropriate venue for basic skills education, although this was more in terms of its comfortable environment than its provision of resources. Many participants used the library other than for attending basic skills courses, although in a number of cases this was to accompany their children rather than to select their own reading materials.

A notable outcome of The Vital Link was that as a result of the library's involvement in basic skills education, participants had become more aware of the services and resources available to them, and more familiar with the library staff.

Suggested changes to the public library service from both participants and members of staff were to conduct more proactive and creative outreach work, to be aware of potential barriers such as library charges, inadequate signage and appropriate location and display of basic skills stock.

All data indicated the importance to the target group of creating in each public library as accessible and welcoming an environment as possible.

## 6. Partnerships

*'Partnerships result in a more successful response to the learners' needs', and the challenge of providing such a response 'can be met by creative and innovative professionals from both backgrounds'. [Adapted from McCook, 1992]*

The primary objective of The Vital Link was to develop a 'major partnership programme' involving both the public library and basic skills sectors. The literature supports the importance of developing partnerships with other agencies to support the lifelong learning process and to combine expertise and resources (Allred, 1998 and McCook, 1992).

### 6.1 The impact of partnerships developed to March 2002

By March 2002, all library service representatives were working in partnership with the basic skills sector. The extent to which these partnerships had developed, however, varied considerably from authority to authority.

In three cases, interviewees reported specific benefits that had been derived from the partnerships developed for The Vital Link, that such partnerships had actively supported and enhanced the basic skills work of their authority. At the beginning of the project one interviewee had been concerned that the two reading groups she had set up were reaching ESOL [English as a Second Language] participants rather than basic skills participants in general, and as such the project criteria were not being adequately met. She therefore contacted a basic skills tutor in a local college for help in recruiting new learners, and as a result they had been able to develop three working groups, one mainly for ESOL participants and two others. As the interviewee commented:

*'The relationship with the [basic skills] tutors is good...when I was initially concerned that we were not meeting the project criteria, they gave their full support...'*

In a second local authority, a basic skills service had been offered to members of the public prior to the *Vital Link* project. However, as the project funding facilitated the appointment of a basic skills Manager, whose post 'was set up to try to coordinate the libraries and the colleges to share good practice on a county-wide basis', the interviewee reported:

*'Whereas I had previously developed a working partnership with one of the local colleges, [name] has developed more sustainable partnerships because of her knowledge of the sector.'*

Similarly, a third suggested that the new working relationship between the basic skills and library sectors was mutually beneficial:

*'It [Vital Link] has opened a lot of doors with the college, has created a better atmosphere, and we now have a much more fluid exchange of ideas.'*

Library staff in this third local authority were in the process of organising a shared resources collection, so for example the *First Choice* titles would be loaned to the local College of Further Education to provide an on-site collection for the basic skills learners.

Despite these positive reports, library staff also experienced difficulties in developing or sustaining partnerships with basic skills agencies and staff. For example, one interviewee said that the tutor appointed to run the group for one of the authority's *Vital Link* projects was leaving the project, and a member of the library staff would have to replace her in order for the group to continue:

*'The [name] project that's funding her wants her to pull out, as it's a very informal group, and they think that there are not enough people attending it. So I am going to have a meeting with [tutor] to see how it can be run after Easter. The time commitment's difficult...'*

Fortunately, during the evaluation interview in March 2002 the librarian reported that the originally perceived difficulties had been resolved, and that

the library staff had simply misunderstood the extent to which the basic skills tutors had already begun to work on the project, and had begun to promote it to their learners.

Staff from another library service had remarked that they found the partnership difficult when those from external agencies failed to understand the constraints they were working within, for example in terms of deadlines additional to their *Vital Link* work or library suppliers they were obliged to use:

*'It's frustrating when others are not used to the library way of working.'*

In March 2002 two library services were planning to cancel one of the projects they had been developing for *Vital Link*. These cancellations were due largely to external factors such as transport or accommodation difficulties, and it is encouraging that in at least one case the library staff expected to continue to develop the relevant partnerships with the basic skills sector:

*'We have stopped working on this project as far as Vital Link is concerned because we knew we were not going to be able to meet any of the requirements of the evaluation...timescale, quantity of people...but we are still working with them, and looking at doing another project...'*

## 6.2 The overall impact of the partnerships

Of the library staff interviewed in June and July 2002, only one reported that she had received no input from the local Further Education college or basic skills education provider:

*'I haven't had any input from them, or what I would call help.'*

The interviewee believed that the reason for this lack of input was not necessarily due to a lack of interest, but was more likely to be because the basic skills tutors were simply overworked, and their time over-committed:

*'I just think they're too busy, I think they can't cope, their rotas go down...for every tutor or member of staff they have, each hour is delegated to training or whatever, so they can't just say 'oh yes, we'll come and help you do that'...'*

Nonetheless, she felt that it would have benefited from a stronger presence on the part of the basic skills sector:

*'I would have liked them to come along...the only time they came along was in Adult Learners' Week...if they'd come in a bit more...there would have been a presence there from the college all the time, and I think you need a bit more presence...[the two tutors] are trying, but there's not been any what I'd call work input or help or anything like that...so I do think there could be a closer liaison.'*

The manager of this respondent was also interviewed for the evaluation, and she confirmed the difficulties that they had experienced in developing a mutually effective partnership:

*'...it perhaps hasn't been quite as good as we would have liked. Most of the events that [name] has set up, she's got the audience by her own efforts, of going and meeting with training providers and other providers of basic skills training, rather than our actual partnership.'*

Additional difficulties reported by library staff were less comprehensive, although still significant. For example, two library representatives had been concerned by the length of time it had taken both parties to understand the objectives of the other:

*'I would like to have seen the partnership side up and running and the understanding there a lot quicker; it took a lot of time to actually understand what the college was saying, and for the college to understand what we were saying...'*

A second issue that was raised by two library staff within the same local authority was that they felt that the qualifications-oriented basic skills Curriculum had restricted their partnership with the college:

*'...I think that was something that maybe we hadn't appreciated...that what they were able to offer us has not quite fitted in with how we saw things from the library perspective...it's actually been a little bit restrictive, because they've got to get a qualification...some recognised piece of paper at the end of it, which has meant that it perhaps hasn't been as 'free and easy' as we would maybe have wanted.'*

Fortunately, there were many other more positive examples, and both library staff and basic skills tutors were able to report that they had developed mutually beneficial partnerships with local colleges. Even where partnerships had existed prior to the Vital Link project, participants felt that the initiative had 'added value' to these links:

*'...although we work across the road from one another we've never actually got together before...tutors have been over here [to the library], to have a look round...and talk about Vital Link...some of the other things we're doing, awareness raising in basic skills we've done for the library service, we're just a lot more involved...the very fact that the project's developed the relationship, I think that's been a real help.' [Tutor]*

*'...it's given us a really big insight into what the tutors actually do...how the adult education service is set up and the sort of drivers they've got that actually push their agenda. I think certainly the college staff have got a far greater understanding of what the library service is all about*

*as well, the sort of resources we've got and the fact that we can offer support to people with basic skills needs...' [Library staff]*

*'The library has always been there for us, we've always taken classes in and just shown them the library, and we have had a good relationship with the library, but we've never had one person like we've got with [name] at the moment, so this is a new thing.' [Tutor]*

In a number of cases, the links made as a result of the Vital Link project stretched far beyond the original point of contact, and had resulted in raised awareness on the part of many staff:

*'I've been very lucky with [name of tutor], she's very supportive...and very happy to give me free run of them [the students]...the tutors always stay with me, because it's important that they know what I'm doing, so that they can follow it up. I haven't had any problems...I've tried to involve them in what I've been doing.'*

*'We've made a very good connection here...[name of tutor] is particularly keen, she's the basic skills Coordinator there, and so she's talking with her opposite numbers at the other centres, and the idea is to try and get them together...and then we sort of discuss...a common approach.'*

*'...of course it all worked like clockwork because they [the tutors] had all been briefed by [name of basic skills Coordinator], and so they were expecting contact, and when the contact came generally it was picked up very quickly.'*

Two of the above comments refer to specific basic skills Coordinators or Managers. These posts had not been created in each of the nine authorities, but where they were present the benefits were evident. A first point of contact and a mediator between the library and basic skills sectors, the role can be described as follows:

*'Our adult education department appointed a basic skills Manager...so that was very helpful, because rather than having to approach all the other colleges, we had somebody who had a coordinating role across the county, who meets ABE [Adult Basic Education] coordinators periodically, so [she] could flag up to colleges what the project was about, gave it her support...she was a very positive ambassador for the project...we don't have her background, or her knowledge of the*

*colleges...she's advised us on things like timing, on who to contact, all this sort of thing, and that's been really invaluable...'*

### **6.2.1 Shared resources**

Further evidence of the impact of the cross-sectoral partnerships can be found in the sharing of resources. In a number of cases, library collections of basic skills materials had been made available to neighbouring colleges in order to increase their often limited resources:

*'The one thing they're beginning to learn...is that we have access to all these huge resources that they don't, because I mean when I've gone into their learning centre up there [at the college], I was quite appalled.'* [Library staff]

*'...we've got a lot of these dumpbins around, and we get them with our books of the month, so what we want to do is to make some headers and put them in to community centres and colleges, and any books that we're throwing out.'* [Library staff]

However, it would be inaccurate to suggest that the colleges were the only beneficiaries of shared resources. Library services also benefited in terms of increased library usage:

*'...we had quite a few more resources than the [name] college, and it is a partnership now, our resources are being used in the college...before, it was like basic skills were at the community college, you came into the library just to renew your books, so we've changed that...the books are actually going out, and the basic skills [learners] are coming into the library.'*

*'...with the courses that we hope to run here obviously we get a benefit out of it in so much that we're encouraging new people into the library.'*

As well as pooling materials, libraries and colleges shared expertise, with the result that partnerships were richer:

*'It has worked really well...prior to this project we hadn't really had that much contact with the college, and we'd always felt that we were*

*sort of in competition with them in some ways...but now we plan different things together, it's made a real difference.'* [Library staff]

*'They're [the college is] providing a tutor to do the course, but we will be supplying some of our expertise to help them...there's this rapport now between us and the college...'* [Library staff]

*'I think it's an ongoing partnership...we in the basic skills sector are not supporting those people [the students] when they're not in a class. So one of the ways would be to go to a library.'* [Tutor]

### 6.3 Partnerships within the library sector

In addition to external partnerships developed with the basic skills sector, library staff also reported that the *Vital Link* project had enhanced their working relationships with each other, and that in some cases colleagues were being enthusiastic, committed and supportive:

*'I wouldn't be as far forward, wouldn't have been able to complete it without the staff - for example, the person who does my publicity materials has been a brick...I go to staff meetings and ask for volunteers, and they are all volunteering...I have had the full support of everyone.'*

*'I have now stepped back, and am leaving the staff to get on with it...in terms of advantages for the staff, the project is an excellent confidence builder, and this will obviously increase the likelihood of sustainability.'*

Some library staff commented on the necessity to include colleagues from other libraries within the local authority in the work of the *Vital Link*:

*'The way I look at it is that all the branches have got to be engaged with it, they've got to take their own decisions, they've got to go out and find what people want.'*

However, such inclusion was not always straightforward. For example, one branch had developed its basic skills resources collection as a result of *Vital Link* funding, and felt that other branches simply expected a replica collection to be delivered to them, a collection that would meet the local need. As the

librarian of the first branch explained, this was not satisfactory, as stock selection in this difficult and often under-represented area of publishing required considerable skills, skills that should be acquired by all staff:

*'We would try and insist on people coming here [to look at their collection], but a lot of people wanted things delivered in a box to them, but...I think they've got to come here and talk to [the librarian], and talk it through...they've got to see what's available, and that some of it isn't very attractive, that some of it's hard to get hold of, and this is worth having multiple copies of...'*

Although three London boroughs are participating in the *Vital Link* project, it is interesting that one interviewee felt that the inter-London partnerships were no different from any other authority-based partnership:

*'We are three very different groups, and are not able to support each other because we are working with such disparate groups.'*

#### **6.4 Appropriate roles in a cross-sectoral partnership**

During their first interview with the project evaluator in March 2002, members of the project management group commented on the role of library staff in delivering a service to a basic skills target group. One suggested that the *Vital Link* project was facilitating the development of partnerships between the library and basic skills sectors:

*'We've made the link between libraries and basic skills...Librarians are talking to basic skills providers: this is immediately raising awareness.'*

A second felt that it was significant that the authorities had begun the *Vital Link* project at very different stages in terms of their basic skills work and their development of relevant partnerships:

*'It's noticeable in which authorities the partnerships were there already, and in which authorities basic skills was already a priority.'*

The same project manager also referred to the difference between those library services in which members of staff were genuinely interested in developing their basic skills service provision, and those in which they felt obliged 'to do something in this area'.

However much basic skills work is delivered by library authorities, three project managers warned that library staff should recognise that their role is not to provide basic skills training. It is not necessary to be trained in basic skills education - for example by taking the 9281 City and Guilds basic skills course - but instead staff could more usefully focus on the provision of resources and support to basic skills learners and tutors:

*'Librarians have to be careful about what their role is: they're not basic skills providers.'* [Project manager]

*'...the guidelines about who's doing what as far as the basic skills and the library side of things goes I think has become a little bit blurred.'* [Library staff]

Two project managers and one librarian felt that certain *Vital Link* authorities had been concentrating too much on acquiring basic skills experience, rather than accepting their role as librarians:

*' [Librarians]...provide instead a welcoming space, have an understanding of the issues, are a motivator: they have to be able to provide resources...without prejudice...Librarians run the risk of trying to make themselves basic skills providers, but they are facilitators...are an access point...[they] need to have awareness training rather than basic skills training. Some are taking basic skills qualifications, which is great, but they can potentially go too far down the road, and not apply it to [their work].'* Project manager]

*'...[we're] not talking about librarians becoming basic skills tutors, but becoming important sign posters. The library is a welcoming resource.'* [Project manager]

*'I think there are elements of 9281 which I would like to take forward and incorporate into a core of frontline library staff...but there are many elements which I would play down, or other things I would bring*

*on board, for example the library element, and how the library can support adults with basic skills needs, as part of the mainstream offering.’ [Library staff]*

One project manager, with experience of basic skills education, made a general comment regarding the potential difficulty of developing sustainable partnerships between librarians and basic skills tutors, namely that:

*‘Basic skills workers - the majority part-time staff - barely see each other, so the infrastructure doesn’t encourage partnerships within basic skills, let alone with librarians. The sector is extremely under-funded.’*

In addition to developing cross-sectoral partnerships, a project involving nine local authorities clearly provides an opportunity for regional partnerships to be developed or embedded. Three of the *Vital Link* authorities are London boroughs, selected by the London Libraries Development Agency (LLDA), and the Director of the LLDA regarded such partnerships as a crucial element of the overall project:

*‘I was not interested in doing it in just one borough: the regional approach was essential...we selected three boroughs that were all at very different stages in their basic skills work...we are doing it to pilot a regional way of working, exploring how those 3 [boroughs] can develop exemplars for basic skills.’*

In addition, he suggested that each of the nine authorities’ desire or incentive to develop partnerships via the *Vital Link* project was not necessarily the same:

*‘Some of the other authorities don’t see the project in the same way...[name of authority] is self-sufficient, doesn’t necessarily need partnerships. A County Council or London borough, however, needs money and financial partnerships.’*

## **6.5 Continuity and sustainability of partnerships**

To a certain extent, the evaluation of the *Vital Link* initiative was able to investigate the longitudinal impact of the project over time: as the evaluation

began at an early stage of the project, it was possible to compare sets of data collected at different times. One area in which this has been particularly effective is in the investigation of the potential of the partnerships to be sustained.

In both the March and July interviews, members of the project management team and library staff were asked to comment on the potential sustainability of *Vital Link*, to state whether they felt that the work of the project would continue after the originally funded period.

### **6.5.1 Views of the project managers: The Vital Link as a model**

In March 2002, all project managers felt that there was great potential for *Vital Link* to be sustained after September 2002 both within the participating authorities and at a national level:

*'...hopefully most authorities will carry on after the project.'*

*'I can't see any reason for them to stop talking.' [i.e. basic skills tutors and librarians]*

*'The projects will be sustained - if there is the willingness plus the money.'*

*'There is huge potential for something good to come out of it: if only 40% of the projects do what they said they were going to, the 40% could inform others.'*

At the same time, doubts were expressed as to the authorities' capacity and even commitment to sustain the work carried out during the period of *Vital Link*:

*'Within each authority someone will be responsible for social inclusion...whether this [basic skills work] will become part of their job after the project or not I don't know.'*

*'We've made the link between libraries and basic skills...They're all trying to do their best...but this probably needs to go further, with the basic skills tutors being more aware of what libraries can offer.'*

*'It's good that they [the authorities] have managed to make partnerships - but are they sustainable? This depends on agencies such as the BSA [Basic Skills Agency] sticking around, the Learning Skills Council...whether they'll be there in for example four years' time, I don't know.'*

As stated in Section 1.2, one of the primary objectives of the project was to develop a sustainable, transferable model that could subsequently be applied to other public library authorities to enable them to support basic skills service delivery. However, it was suggested by the project managers that not all authorities were equally committed to producing such a model, and that this disparity had remained throughout the initiative. This was not a criticism of individual members of library staff, merely an awareness that the allocation of resources to The Vital Link varied from authority to authority:

*'That commitment was written in from the beginning of the projects. Some of the projects employed a full-time development worker...another might have seconded such and such for a day a week to do it. So it's a difference in commitment from the beginning of the project, rather than something that developed over the length of the project.'*

The same project manager suggested that this level of commitment had been reflected in the outputs of the participating library services:

*'If you look at all the nine projects in general, and you look at how much time each project had got somebody working on that, it's quite obvious that the one project that I know of that had somebody working on it full time came up with the best results.'*

Although there was no evidence to support or deny this view, it was also suggested that where a library service had committed more staff resources to The Vital Link, there was more likely to have been sustainable change:

*'[In these library authorities] they [the individual projects] developed more quickly and they got things moving. They tended to get more people involved in terms of not just participants, but other members of staff. I think there's also an element of embedding things in to the library...a cultural change.'*

However, it was not found to be necessarily the case that where library services had committed less initial resources to the project that the staff themselves had showed less commitment:

*'We can think about people in [one authority] where time was limited, so they were giving up their own time to deliver various things during the project.'*

These varying levels of resources and management commitment, and consequent outputs, led two project managers to suggest that the approach developed as a result of The Vital Link could not necessarily be used as an immediately transferable model:

*'If some projects in Vital Link do work as models but go to somewhere else without support, will they be able to enact them?'*

*'...to show whether one project worked better than another is a bit unfair in such a short space of time: some didn't get going until after Christmas, some didn't get going until even later. So it's unfair to compare them. You can compare their actual management skills and time committed to it, but to actually say that one project worked better than another and was a model is a bit difficult.'*

A key theme to emerge from the observations made by all project managers is that a longer working period would have been beneficial to support future service development in this area:

*'In the long term, it's exactly the right approach, but it's going to require quite a bit of path finding.'*

*'...for many [authorities] it's taken so long to set up links.'*

*'With this project, we are taking the first tentative steps...there is lots of attention being placed on the project, but everybody knows that literacy takes time.'*

Interviews conducted in July 2002 revealed that project managers were still concerned by the length of time library staff had required to develop partnerships, but they felt that the will was present on both sides to sustain the links beyond the funded period:

*'In some cases they [the partnerships] have come through as an obvious benefit. They [both library staff and basic skills tutors] want them to continue, they want to keep working together.'*

*'I think it's going to be down to the individual...partnerships both at a strategic and a practical level were mentioned as successes by most people [at the final national Vital Link meeting on 15.07.02], they did feel that they were worth sustaining.'*

The second interviewee felt that although there was a will to sustain the partnerships on the part of the basic skills tutors, it was as yet unclear to what extent they could be involved, bearing in mind their limited time and resources, and the fact that they were undergoing considerable organisational change:

*'...there is an enormous amount of change going on at the moment in the basic skills sector...'*

A third suggested that a common problem of partnerships developed between library services and external agencies was that the library staff were not always sufficiently proactive, and that in order to continue the work of The Vital Link it would be necessary to adopt - and sustain - a more strategic approach:

*'It is often difficult for librarians to manage a partnership to their benefit, without feeling 'grateful' for someone paying attention to them! Library authorities often don't have the confidence to go out there and say what they're about. They have got to be proactive, and have to sustain that proactivity. It's no good just sending out leaflets,*

*they have to open up conversations too, have to see that it's strategic to be present at planning or cross-sectoral meetings.'*

The fourth interviewee felt that a potential difficulty in sustaining partnerships was that there was no way of guaranteeing that replacement staff from either sector would be as effective as the original team:

*'...if the replacement was a mousy person, it would be difficult. We're foolish if we ever think that we can run it without the human element.'*

The final interviewee believed that the partnerships would be sustained, not because of an understanding of the need to do so, rather because basic skills were a key focus of the Government agenda:

*'They don't all see that it's a common purpose for the library service.'*

It is worth noting that a key focus of the Vital Link toolkit, produced by the project management team as a key outcome of the initiative (see Section 1.4), is to provide support to library staff developing partnerships with the basic skills sector:

*'...some librarians have found it difficult to get the initial partnerships going, so we've built it into the toolkit: it's all pretty new to libraries, so we're creating a model for them to follow. Then they're not reinventing the wheel.'* [Project manager]

### **6.5.2 Views of the library staff**

Three library staff interviewed in March 2002 felt that their *Vital Link* work would be particularly difficult to sustain as there was a lack of continuity in terms of the people they were reaching:

*'[There is] one group in the Central Library, with eight in the group. Despite that, attendance tends to be four (although not always the same four!). There are two people who are pretty regular attenders...The problems are that we are only meeting the learners once a week, and this is not always the same people.'*

*'The problem we are having is getting people back through the doors.'*

*'Sustainability is another problem, getting people to get engaged...On the whole, it's two steps forward, one step back.'*

Sustaining a basic skills partnership inevitably depends not only on the continuity of students, but also on the continuity of staff. Staff within both the library and basic skills sectors are frequently expected to move to different areas of the profession, and furthermore basic skills staff often work irregular, part-time hours that can not necessarily be matched to the working hours of the library service:

*'...there's such a lot of it that seems to be personality-driven, you get somebody who's as enthusiastic as you are, and they leave and move on, and then either the next person isn't, or because they're new to the job...perhaps they feel...they haven't the time to spend with you...'*  
*[Library staff]*

Despite these difficulties, library staff reported throughout the project that they could see a future for their basic skills work, could see ways in which the *Vital Link* project would have a future:

*'The Department of Community Education is interested in rolling out the [name] model - we are looking into funding.'*

*'On the positive side, we have strengthened our relationship with the colleges...this will be sustained, hopefully, in that: there will be future library use...there are twelve library staff being trained in the area.'*

*'We are looking to identify what works and are using the good ideas to build on for the future.'*

### **6.5.3 Views of the basic skills tutors**

Evidently, in order for partnerships to be sustained, all parties must be equally committed and convinced of their value to their organisation: did the project partners, the basic skills tutors, share the views of the library staff and the project managers?

It was encouraging that all tutors interviewed in June-July 2002 stated that they fully intended to continue the partnership with the library service, although the extent to which these links had been planned varied considerably. One tutor, for example, was convinced that the partnership would be sustained, but was not able to provide more detail:

*'...whatever happens to Vital link, the link between [the college] and [name] library will continue beyond.'*

A second felt that money was the greatest barrier to be removed before an effective, sustainable partnership could be developed:

*'...the problem is that in the bid, there is no money for a tutor...so I'm just coming over [to the library]...there's no money to pay a tutor.'*

In addition, this tutor remarked that this problem was increased by the fact that the Vital Link project within her local authority had not reached particularly high numbers of students:

*'the other problem is that because of the low numbers...we've had three today, and we had one last week...we always get at least one or two, but we were hoping for five or six or seven or eight... if we had higher numbers we could run it as a class and pay a tutor...we've not done enrolment or official classes and registers, I've just been coming over since about March.'*

Four further tutors described plans to develop future classes in order to sustain partnerships begun during the year:

*'...we are hoping to keep it running...to run an evening class, 'Brush up your reading skills', actually in the library, and that will be run as an actual class, funded by our college funding.'*

*'...what we're going to do now is find a way of carrying on the partnership in a way that would benefit both of us...from now on I'll be in [name] library every Monday morning with [name of librarian],*

*because we're going to make a real positive drive to get a creative writing group going.'*

*'One of the things that came up when [name of librarian] was here was the idea of a reading group...and one or two of the people from this class thought that this was a really good idea. They might take that further, and in fact some people from here [the basic skills class] may then go to the library and have their...reading groups there, which would be nice.'*

*'I've asked the Development Worker to consult with [name of librarian] to look at putting on something for the more mature library users in the summer, and also I'm looking at the possibility of running a part-time basic skills workshop...all year, in [name of library], so we can continue the link...'*

## **6.5 Summary**

Each library service participating in The Vital Link had developed a partnership (or partnerships) with the basic skills sector. The effectiveness of these partnerships varied, largely because the basic skills staff were not always able to devote time to their development. Overall, those partnerships developed were mutually beneficial, as considerable resources and experience had been shared.

A warning was frequently made by representatives of both the library and basic skills sectors that library staff should recognise that their role is not to provide basic skills training, but to focus on the provision of resources and support to basic skills learners and their tutors.

Despite initial doubts, it was largely felt that partnerships would be sustained beyond the funded period of The Vital Link. However, many participants felt that a longer working period would have been beneficial to embed partnerships and to support future basic skills service development.

One of the project objectives to develop a sustainable, transferable model for ways in which public libraries can support basic skills delivery. It was suggested

that this was not a feasible outcome of The Vital Link, a brief initiative to which the nine participating library services were not equally able to allocate time and staff resources.

## 7. Reader development and the reading experience

The Vital Link was funded by the DCMS/Wolfson Public Libraries Challenge Fund for reader development, and as such, reader development should have been a major focus of the initiative. One of the six objectives of the project, stated on the original application, was:

*'To identify, evaluate and articulate the unique contribution libraries' reader development work can make to the Government's plans to improve adult basic literacy skills.'* (Well Worth Reading, 2001)

The evaluation of The Vital Link therefore investigated the extent to which reader development practice was incorporated in the project. This investigation was conducted as part of the interviews with project managers, library staff and basic skills tutors.

### 7.1 Library staff perceptions

In March 2002, library staff from each of the nine services participating in The Vital Link had clearly thought about ways in which they hoped to introduce the concept of reader development to their work with the basic skills target group.

However, at this mid-point of the project just five interviewees were able to state that they had begun to use basic skills sessions to discuss books and reading using, in four cases, the proposed *First Choice* promotional titles - and additional relevant stock - as tools.

Part of the *First Choice* pilot period was to allocate titles to each authority that they would trial with basic skills participants, to assess their reaction to the texts, and therefore, it was hoped, the appropriateness of the books to such a promotion. Although almost all authorities reported that they found it difficult to meet the originally proposed deadline for this activity, effort was made to introduce the participants to the books:

*'We want to talk to students now, so we will be showing groups of learners the sort of materials we have. Some have already said that they like science fiction, so we will get some graphic novels.'*

*'The [name] project is doing work with the ABC book sheets (short stories), and we are buying another collection of non-fiction, and are going to look at how we get the students to use the stock.'*

*'...we have had a couple of sessions where learners have been invited to pick up a book to see why they've picked it up, what they've liked, and then to report back to the group.'*

*'I took six [of the ten allocated titles] along, couldn't find the other four, but chose others at random from the rest of the list [the First Choice selected booklist]...I started by explaining that I wanted them to pick them up, not to worry about reading them from cover to cover...we had a discussion about books, why people read and didn't read...we looked at the book covers.'*

*'I took Read Routes<sup>10</sup> leaflets to the group...got a discussion going about reading to children...We all noticed a strong contrast between the books on that leaflet and the covers on the [First Choice] books I brought along...they thought that the ones of the [Read Routes] leaflet were more attractive...asked Why can't adult books be designed in the same way?'*

One library service, in which a *Vital Link* project was working with younger people with basic skills needs, organised 'SMART' ['Saturday Mornings Are Really Terrific'] activity sessions outside the library, but always returned to re-focus the participants' attention on books and reading:

*'We spend the last half hour coming back to the library and selecting books to take away...We have quizzes, and are basically encouraging library use.'*

In another authority, the work carried out by the library staff was directly linked to the taught basic skills programme, and the reader development

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<sup>10</sup> Read Routes is a London-based project developed by the London Libraries Development Agency in partnership with all 33 London boroughs, with funding from the DCMS/Wolfson Public Libraries Challenge Fund.

element of the programme was therefore designed to widen the range of materials relevant to the interests of each participant:

*'[The reader development element of the project will be brought in through] working on personal projects: before, the learners, were doing the Popular Culture element of the [basic skills] course, now we're going to try and widen the range of materials that are relevant to their particular project.'*

One interviewee was concerned that the level to which other authorities had incorporated reader development in their individual projects was not consistently high:

*'Looking at the overall project, the line between adult basic skills and reader development is 'interesting'! In [name of authority] we are looking to promote reading in a way that's fun and attractive.'*

## **7.2 Project managers' perceptions**

Interviewed in March 2002, two of the five members of the project management group expressed particular concern that the reader development element of the *Vital Link* project had not yet been incorporated in to each of the nine authorities' projects, and therefore that the project was not fulfilling its original objective.

For these two interviewees, although the nine authorities had begun in earnest to increase their awareness of basic skills work, the project as a whole lacked a reader development perspective:

*'What's questionable in this project is the 'extra activities', the reader development activities.'*

*'I don't think reader development has been as strong an element as it should have been.'*

Suggestions were made that the term 'reader development' was not necessarily understood by all participants, even that its importance to the project was not particularly evident in the original application:

*'Although the term is bandied around, it can be bent to a lot of activities. It's [the project is] more about developing your library service [than reader development]. Reader development has some specifics - the reader-centred approach...reader development wasn't there [hardly] at all in the original bid, but there's more in now than there was in September. Those projects that are more 'skimpy' on reader development were already agreed before the project began.'* [March 2002]

*'It has been hard work trying to get them [the library staff] to recognise what reader development is in this context; there's a growing awareness of what it is, though.'* [July 2002]

The project manager who made the second comment (above) suggested that this lack of understanding of the nature of reader development had even been damaging to the project:

*'The perception...has been wrong, in some cases even patronising. On the whole this has been an unsaid thing, but there is a perception.'*

*She added that although reader development practices had been introduced to many library services in the UK in recent years, a widespread understanding of its value to those services had not yet been achieved:*

*'There are quite a few...[library services]...who don't believe in reader development at all. They tend to be from authorities with good issuing figures, who aren't being creative because they feel they don't need to be.'*

This partner also felt that a possible problem with a project that aimed to combine reader development and basic skills work was that librarians could be so concerned about offending the target group that their work would be hindered:

*'...there are a lot of assumptions that librarians make about basic skills learners, assumptions that they need nannying. This affects the reader development side: there is a reluctance to say that although the reading skills may be less, our learners could manage x or y. Not being able to read fluently doesn't stop you enjoying, discussing what a book's about, just because you can't read...so they [library staff] can have a protective attitude: there is a worry of making somebody feel as if they were lacking in something, but this is in fact stopping somebody dealing with that lack.'*

One interviewee suggested that library staff would perhaps feel obliged to devote more time to the basic skills element of *Vital Link* than the reader development element, as:

*'...it's different with basic skills, as there's more pressure on libraries because of Lifelong Learning to deliver.'*

### **7.3 Reader development in adult basic skills education**

#### **7.3.1 Understanding the term**

In the evaluation of an initiative whose target group is the emergent reader, it is important to state the difference between the terms 'reading development' and 'reader development'. The former focuses on the acquisition of reading skills in an educational environment, whereas the latter moves away from education, towards self-direction, where the individual, and not the teacher, directs the 'development'.

A definition of the concept of reader development that is widely used in the public library sector is as follows:

*'...active intervention to open up reading choices, increase readers' enjoyment and offer opportunities to share their reading experiences.'*  
(Van Riel, 1998)

The target group of *The Vital Link*, as stated in the funding application, was the 'emergent readers'. The above definition implies that the recipient of

reader development techniques is already a reader, is someone who possesses sufficient reading skills to be in a position to pursue and direct his or her reading interests. If The Vital Link were to create an effective model for the use of reader development in basic skills education, it would seem reasonable to suggest that those who were not 'emergent readers' would not be a suitable target group. This hypothesis was supported by the views of project managers and library staff:

*'They [participants] have to have some literacy skills, you can't fool yourself that somebody's going to want to really think hard about books if they can't read a sentence, that could actually have a worse effect. But for somebody who's actually realising that there could be some pleasure to be had from this, then in a way they really do deserve some help and support.'* [Project manager]

*'Reader development implies that you've got to be a reader first...'* [Library staff]

### **7.3.2 Reader development and the target group**

One of the difficulties of incorporating a reader development focus to the work of each of the nine library services participating in The Vital Link was that the target group was not reached in every case. In one library service in particular none of the participants were able to read, and the member of library staff responsible for the group felt that reader development was entirely inappropriate for his work:

*'Reader development implies that you've got to be a reader first, and not one of these people can read!'*

Does it follow that as the target group had not been reached, this individual project had failed to use any reader development methods? Although the participants were unable to read at all fluently, they attended regular sessions in the library as part of their ASDAN course, they were introduced by the library staff to a wide range of illustrated reading materials, and they had

begun to choose their own basic texts according to their interests. As a colleague from the same library service asked:

*'[This group] is not emergent readers, but people have clearly benefited from that contact, and in a very specific way, so who are we to say that it wasn't right to do that, to carry the project out in that way?'*

### **7.3.3 The effectiveness of reader development in basic skills education**

Although no other library service was working with a group with such low literacy levels, it would not be accurate to suggest that all other participants were 'emergent readers'. Did interviewees feel that the reader development approach was suited to the Vital Link participants? As would be expected, members of the project management team advocated the use of reader development techniques:

*'More than any other kind of promotion, this group needs reader development.'* [Project manager]

*'Reader development would have been a good tool [for this project]: if you want to get people in to books, that's the only way to do it...[It's] no good just giving them the nice books, they have to know what to do with them, how to enjoy them.'* [Project manager]

*'I do think that it's a very useful tool for basic skills education, for introducing people to books and the pleasure of reading.'* [Project manager]

*Library staff were generally positive, although one felt that basic skills learners were not interested in reading for pleasure, but planned to read for more 'functional' reasons:*

*'...the majority of people don't go into basic skills...because they want to read fiction; they need to be able to send a letter into school for their kids...they need to fill in forms, they need to open a bank account. There are 101 reasons why they do it, but it isn't to be able to read 'Sense and Sensibility!''*

However, a second regarded reader development as vital, as it moved beyond functional literacy to focus on the pleasure of reading:

*'I think a lot of them had just read what they needed to do, for their lives, basically, filling in forms, and getting information, but not for pleasure...that's been a big part of the project once we've got their confidence, because in the end the first step was 'give it a try, it might not be that bad, you might actually enjoy having a read.'*

A librarian who did not feel that reader development would be at all helpful to the group with which he was involved expressed a second negative viewpoint:

*'Reader development sits very uneasily within basic skills, because one of the points of reader development is the idea of people sharing their reading with other people. Now if you're a basic skills person the last thing you want to do is to in any way share knowledge on that front really, until you're very confident, and then you can do so.'*

In response to this comment, however, it could be argued that although there is an aspect of reader development work that creates opportunities for people to share their reading experiences with one another - for example through book discussion groups - the main focus of reader development is undeniably the reader him or herself. All professional intervention - in this case the intervention of the library staff and basic skills tutors - should focus on the choices of the individual reader, and not on the group as a whole. As one project manager stated:

*'...if we take reader development as being 'reader-centred'...that's a more helpful way of looking at it, I would say.'*

Other library staff gave a wide range of reasons for which reader development was entirely appropriate for use with the target group, examples of which are listed below.

Reader development:

- Facilitates self-direction
- Is removed from the educational framework

- Can increase participants' self-confidence
- Can engage and motivate.

One interviewee underlined the importance of self-direction when reading skills are limited:

*'If they struggle to read, they want to read what they want to read, what they're interested in, they don't want to read something that we're saying 'here, take this and read it because it's part of the project''.*

A second believed that reader development was a particularly useful tool to use with adults with literacy problems, as it moves away from traditional education, and for many, a difficult childhood experience:

*'...they're not children, they don't need me to tell them what they like, what they don't like, they're perfectly capable. These are adults who lead complex lives, they have jobs, they have families, they have the same problems that you and I have, the only thing they don't do as much as we do is read, they don't read for pleasure.'*

Others suggested that reader development was particularly appropriate for the target group, as it could help people to become more self-confident:

*'I think it is [appropriate], because they [participants] can give their viewpoint...in terms of giving people the confidence...it gives people that choice...in a safe sort of situation, where they're not feeling intimidated or worried.'*

*'From the student's point of view it gives them something that allows them to connect with other people. In the first group I worked with, we had a lady who read a book, and her daughter read it, and they discussed it together, and that was something she'd never done before. In terms of her own self-confidence, it was really quite huge.'*

*A further way in which reader development can help basic skills students and tutors is to encourage motivation:*

*'I think it's a really creative way [of working with the target group], because what it does is provide tutors with a really important resource*

*to both engage and motivate the students, and I think that whole area of motivation is one that's really important.'*

#### **7.3.4 Reader development in the basic skills Core Curriculum**

Evidently, when considering the role of reader development in basic skills education it is insufficient to be convinced of its value in theory: to what extent had reader development been accepted by the basic skills sector, to what extent could it become part of the delivery of basic skills education?

One project manager warned that although reader development techniques could be extremely valuable to basic skills work, tutors, who tended to feel obliged to closely follow the basic skills Curriculum, had not previously adopted the approach:

*'This [reader development] has not been a natural part of the provision in the past, nor has reading for enjoyment...The Curriculum is good, but this is important too. Reader development-type activities are down to the confidence of tutors.'*

However, she felt that impact of The Vital Link was sufficient that all parties were now more aware of the potential value of reader development:

*'...there has been a wide recognition of a need in this area and of the potential for it [reader development]; there has been a really beneficial learning curve on all fronts to do with what you could do with reader development.'*

She continued, adding that encouraging reading for pleasure would introduce a new element to the teaching programme:

*'The emphasis in the past has been on getting students writing and reading other students' work, rather than reading for pleasure...There is a certain defensiveness about the Curriculum, but it doesn't need to be restrictive.'*

*'...Isn't it more natural for a tutor to be talking about reader development than a librarian?...it's what tutors perhaps should be doing, but it can be incredibly enhanced by what a librarian's got to*

*bring to it, because a tutor might not have as much knowledge of all the books available.'*

In July 2002, one librarian gave the following very full report of the way in which reader development had been accepted by local basic skills tutors as a valuable addition to their delivery of the Core Curriculum:

*'The tutors say very clearly that they're keen to do it because it's important that the students do listening, talking, writing, reading, understanding what's being read, and in terms of the Core Curriculum, then we...have shown very clearly that it's [reader development is] integral to the Core Curriculum, it's not an add-on. And the tutors are very clearly responding to that...I remember talking to one of the tutors at one of the colleges about what happens to them when they leave, you know, if you've just learned to read, what happens next? What happens next if you've learned to read but you've never actually chosen a book for yourself, or you're never experienced reading for pleasure? And I think if you can open it up to people who are at that level, it's hugely significant.'*

In order for cross-sectoral reader development work to advance further and become part of the infrastructure of basic skills education, it would be necessary for all parties to be trained in reader development techniques and practice:

*'Everybody needed training in this area, interactive training where they learned how the activities work [in practice]. It's no good giving people bright ideas, but it's a question of taking people through it.'* [Project manager]

*'It has been hard work trying to get them to recognise what reader development is in this context...If they're [staff are] working with emergent readers, then the key thing is to be focusing on reader development activity. And if you're doing that...you need to have staff who are confident to promote those books...that's probably where more central support and guidance would help.'* [Library staff]

*'They [librarians] must have an understanding that it [reader development] doesn't have to be complicated, so the training [the programme that emerges as an outcome of The Vital Link] will be in there as much for the librarians as for the basic skills trainers.'*

## 7.4 The reading experience: the participant questionnaire

The objective of the questionnaire was to investigate over time the impact on the learners of participation in the various basic skills courses that were delivered as part of The Vital Link. The eleven items are listed below (see Appendix G for complete copy of questionnaire):

*Items 1-7 options:*

*Not at all confident/not very confident/fairly confident/very confident.*

1. *When I think about going to the library, I feel...*
2. *When I think about doing some reading, I feel...*
3. *When I think about choosing a book, I feel...*
4. *When I think about doing some writing, I feel...*
5. *When I think about filling in a form, I feel...*
6. *When I think about my spelling, I feel...*
7. *When I think about using a computer, I feel...*

*Items 8-11 options:*

*Strongly disagree/disagree/agree/strongly agree.*

8. *I enjoy reading*
9. *I enjoy using a library to find things out*
10. *I prefer watching television to reading*
11. *I find reading difficult.*

The questionnaire was based on long experience with attitude surveys within the research team, especially at school level (for example Gorman *et al.*, 1988, 1991; Brooks *et al.*, 1997) but also with the adaptation of such instruments for adults (especially Brooks *et al.*, 2002). The first six items were designed to capture participants' levels of self-confidence on some representative literacy tasks and then, through the re-administration after a period of participation,

any growth in confidence associated with participation<sup>11</sup>. The other four items were designed to provide a snapshot of participants' attitudes to reading. As is usual in the development of attitude questionnaires, half the attitude items were phrased positively, the rest negatively. The four items were chosen because they have repeatedly been among the most revealing within much longer questionnaires used at school level. In the case of these items, the re-administration was designed to reveal any significant changes in attitudes. The questionnaire in this project was kept to 11 items because any greater length might well have dissuaded participants not only from answering it, but also perhaps from participating.

On the first seven of the eleven items common to both the pre and post questionnaires, participants were asked to rate their self-confidence on a four-point scale, ranging from 'Not at all confident' to 'Very confident'. On the other four items, participants were asked to rate their agreement with statements about enjoyment of different aspects of reading. The dependent variable on all items was any change in ratings between the two occasions. Mean figures were calculated for responses to both the first and second questionnaires. Although this was a rather small sample, the results are shown in Figure 3. In the rows showing scores for several items combined, the means shown are the arithmetic means of the individual items.

The original participant questionnaire received 208 responses, but as explained in section 2.2.1 the response rate to the second was relatively low, and a sample of 64 participants is too small from which to infer more widely. The data presented below are therefore simply an indication of the confidence changes in a group of 64 people, and should be interpreted as such.

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<sup>11</sup> Because this project was not a controlled experiment, causation could not have been proved, only correlation.

**Figure 3: Results from participant questionnaires, self-rating items**

Question	Sample size	Pre		Post		Change
		mean	(s.d.)	mean	(s.d.)	mean
1	64	3.10	(0.88)	3.27	(0.77)	0.17
2	62	2.90	(0.97)	3.10	(0.90)	0.20
3	64	2.92	(1.13)	3.11	(0.82)	0.19
4	61	2.70	(0.97)	2.84	(0.90)	0.14
5	63	2.35	(1.06)	2.44	(1.03)	0.09
6	62	2.29	(1.03)	2.31	(1.12)	0.02
7	61	2.41	(1.10)	2.46	(1.09)	0.05
8	64	2.94	(0.87)	3.16	(0.62)	0.22
9	60	3.0	(0.82)	3.15	(0.71)	0.15
10	62	2.84	(1.03)	2.77	(0.80)	-0.07
11	64	2.33	(1.05)	2.36	(0.98)	0.03

Key: mean = average score; s.d. = standard deviation.

**Note:** The sample size for the overall difference was low because only people who responded to both questionnaires were counted.

A t-test<sup>12</sup> was conducted for each question in order to investigate the significance of the difference, to determine whether it would be possible to say that the attendance of a basic skills group was likely to be the factor affecting an altered rating.

For example, from the list of mean figures, although the ratings for most participants had not altered, there appeared to be a very small change that could indicate that some respondents felt slightly more confident about their reading and perhaps enjoyed reading slightly more when they completed the second questionnaire.

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<sup>12</sup> The t-test assesses whether the means of two groups, or related samples of scores, are statistically different from each other. This analysis is appropriate whenever you want to compare the means of two groups.

In each case, however, the t-tests found that the changes were not statistically significant. This means that these data do not prove that the participation in a basic skills course had increased respondents' confidence in, or enjoyment of, reading.

It is feasible to suggest that change did not generally occur because of the limited timescale available for the project: the average length of time between the completion of the two questionnaires was just three months, or an average number of 14.2 hours of sessions attended. This point was supported by a project manager, who stated in an interview conducted at the end of the initiative:

*'It's something that we've discussed from the start: how you actually measure people's increase in literacy skills is going to be impossible in such a short space of time.'*

The small final sample was undoubtedly the major block to finding any significant differences. No instrument can ever be guaranteed to work, but significant findings would have been much more likely to emerge with a longer instrument and/or a larger sample, especially the latter. On the other hand, a longer gap between pre and post administration would probably have made little difference (though in the case of a performance instrument, e.g. a reading test, it almost certainly would). It is important to remember that absence of evidence is not evidence of absence - there may well have been real changes in the participants' confidence and attitudes, but the small sample size would have prevented these showing up.

In order to determine the impact of participation on participants it is also important to refer to the primary data collected for the evaluation of The Vital Link, the qualitative findings of the social audit.

## 7.5 The reading experience: general comments

In addition to the two participant questionnaires, the focus groups investigated longitudinal changes in students' reading habits and reading confidence.

Although it would be inaccurate to suggest that as a direct result of The Vital Link project all participants were reading more and more widely than before, or that all changes could be solely attributed to a course, or session, or reading group, there is nevertheless some evidence that real benefits have been experienced.

For example, when participants were asked if they thought that they were now reading more widely than they had before their participation in the basic skills session, their responses included the following:

*'Yes, of the people in this class that's undoubtedly so.'*

*'I read a little bit more than I did before.'*

*'Yes, sometimes, you know, I pick them up and probably wouldn't have picked them up before.'*

*'Before this [course], I wouldn't have looked at them [the First Choice books].'*

A further participant, when other members of her group were being offered books to take home and read for the next session, rather encouragingly asked the librarian:

*'Unfortunately, I shall be on holiday next time. Can I take the books anyway?'*

Five library staff and one tutor - representing six separate basic skills groups - commented on perceived changes in participants' reading habits. The general response was that a certain degree of change could be noted (considerable change in two cases), although participants had not yet necessarily begun to

select books outside the selections they had been offered as part of The Vital Link:

*'Sometimes, but mainly into the books that have been a part of the First Choice, but I hope that with the books that we're bringing in over the next couple of weeks that will extend...we've got them indefinitely...so I would have no problem with them taking them home, if they promise to bring them back!'* [Library staff]

*'Not yet. I think...if we'd had a more structured programme of reader development they would probably feel more confident to take other things on.'* [Library staff]

*'...when I presented the books that we were asked to review people have taken them...I don't think that they would necessarily have even thought of taking them for themselves.'* [Library staff]

*'I would think so, yes, because you get people reading more biographies and things, and funnily enough, I think the teenage section as well, because basically there's quite a huge difference between the child's and the adult's, but teenage are like a collection where they've got all sorts of things...a link in between the children's and adults.'* [library staff]

*'I think the readers have gained confidence in their ability, because it is a group where there are some with low self-esteem...and we've spent quite a bit of time building that up, and they're now quite a cohesive group, and I think from that they're more willing to explore. So yes, they are beginning to read more widely...they are actually reading and evidencing their reading, perhaps, which is not something they've done before, which builds confidence.'* [Tutor]

*'Oh I do think they are, yes I do. Everything I do, every session, I've identified lots and lots of basic skills type books...so I do identify them and make sure I talk about books as well...two [participants] had joined the week before, and the three joined yesterday, so we've seen an increase in membership as well.'* [Library staff]

When asked if they felt that the participants would sustain their newly acquired reading habit, two interviewees were hopeful:

*'I hope that if they've got into the library habit by coming down to the library that they will continue to do so, now that they find the staff are helpful...'* [Library staff]

*'Yes, definitely Josephine, she's a good example...Maud as well...she's started to read those Open Doors series...it's got her into reading regularly, which I don't think she was doing before. The very fact that she's coming every week, or every few weeks anyway, it's encouraging her to borrow books.'* [Library staff]

Others had actively thought of ways in which to help the participants to keep reading:

*'I think that...looking for exit strategies as well, if there's a way of forming a book chain or something like that, that will keep them going.'* [Library staff]

*'...by just talking about the books that are available, and thinking about why they're [the participants are] choosing books. I think all of us need occasionally somebody to recommend a book or to have a choice put before us, and it's nice for somebody either to find you an author or a particular book that you haven't heard of. I certainly rely on friends and the press to sort of take me in a different direction occasionally, and I think that's what we should be encouraging students to do.'* [Tutor]

## **7.6 Summary**

### **Reader development**

The incorporation of reader development practice to The Vital Link was the most problematic element of the initiative. Some parties suggested that library staff and basic skills staff did not understand the concept of reader development, and not all staff believed in its relevance to adult basic skills education. In addition, because of the limited timescale of the project, many participants believed that reader development could only become part of the initiative when working partnerships with the basic skills sector - and therefore with the students themselves - had been established.

Despite these difficulties, the data revealed many examples of ways in which reader development could be used to enhance basic skills education, for example in encouraging self-direction and self-confidence. It was also felt that reader development could become part of the infrastructure of basic skills education.

### **The reading experience**

Although the total number of respondents to both the pre and post questionnaires was relatively small, statistical analysis suggested that participation in The Vital Link had resulted in a slight increase in reading confidence and confidence using the public library service.

The qualitative evaluation also investigated changes in reading habits and reading confidence. Although it would be inaccurate to suggest that as a direct result of The Vital Link all participants were reading more, or that all changes could be solely attributed to one course, there was nonetheless some evidence that real benefits had been experienced.

For example, it was observed that participants were reading more widely than they had been before participation in a basic skills course, and others were likely to continue to read for pleasure after participation.

## 8. The First Choice promotion

A key element of The Vital Link project was the development of a national reading promotion for new and less confident adult readers, and stock was trialled with basic skills learners by each of the participating library services. This stock was selected according to criteria adapted from a model developed by Essex County Council (criteria for both fiction and non-fiction titles included as Appendix E). Each library service was initially given ten titles to trial, but some staff have used the criteria to select and trial other material either in addition to or as a replacement of the ten. As a result, a total of more than 150 titles was trialled across the nine participating local authorities.

Bearing in mind that this was a pilot collection of materials, using new stock selection criteria, and that the number of titles given to each participating group was relatively small, it is understandable that some of the titles were felt to be inappropriate. It is also important to note that most titles were only trialled once with each of the courses run within the authorities, so the preferences of a particular group - or even of an individual within that group - will not necessarily be the same as those of another.

The evaluation of this element of The Vital Link initiative must include not only an investigation of the views of the titles themselves, but also a reaction to the exercise itself. As the following data reveal, there are a number of examples of both participants and staff which illustrate that even though a title or collection of titles may not have been felt to have been appropriate, the response to the exercise itself was still positive.

This section investigates the participants' response to the materials selected:

- What did the participants think of the selection of books they had been given by the library staff - which were the most and least interesting or useful, and what would they have liked to see as alternative choices?

- What sort of books did they want to read, in terms of content and format?
- Have their reading habits changed as a result of the course - are they making new choices, are they reading a different amount?

The reaction of the basic skills tutors and the library staff to the overall impact of the collections on the participants is also included as section 8.4.

### **8.1 The participants' response**

Overall, participants enjoyed the experience of being presented with new, attractive books, and appreciated the opportunity to choose one or more to take home and have a look at. In this respect the exercise was similar to the 'brown bag' reader development exercise frequently used by public library staff, during which a library user is given an additional book that has been concealed in a paper bag until it is issued. When the books are returned, library staff have often reported that although many customers claim not to have enjoyed the 'surprise' book, they are still keen to try the exercise again and again: it is the experience that mattered above all.

Nonetheless, The Vital Link was a reader development initiative, and as such aimed to address the reading needs of the individuals, to bring the books to the readers, to widen their choices and promote reading for pleasure. In this respect it was of interest to the evaluation team to investigate participants' reactions to the selection, their response to the overall experience and the variety of texts provided. It is interesting that most participants were satisfied with the variety of books available, as in many cases there would only have been a selection of ten titles per group:

*'Some of the books have been really brilliant, some of them.'*

*'There were all different sorts, you got crime fiction, love stories.'*

*'Variety, they've got the variety...any sort of things, variety, that's it.'*

*'Some are horror, some are romance, some are science fiction, some are action - we've enjoyed that.'*

*'They should certainly have avoided the horror books.'*

*'I wouldn't say there was something for everybody....some of the people who would struggle didn't find it was for them.'*

*'Bit of a mixed bag, I think.'*

Some participants referred to specific texts that they or their neighbours had seen or read:

*'I brought this one back, the Real Life one [on JFK], and that was good, because I was 17 when he got shot, and I remember it.'*

*'Graham did 'The Bridges of Madison County', which he really enjoyed, and he saw the film afterwards.'*

*'Well I've read the 'Tuppence to cross the Mersey', that was a good book, you know [describes the plot], I enjoyed it.'*

*Interviewer: Is that the sort of book you wouldn't have read before*

*'Yes it is, not 'til I noticed it here.'*

*'I liked the TV books, and the ones about round the world [travel/geography books].'*

*'...there's the first Harry Potter, which one of our people took out, and he told us he was really enjoying it...he actually wrote up a list of words that he was puzzled over. He's not a British citizen, he's from Kenya, he's an asylum seeker, so sometimes he doesn't quite understand all the expressions.'*

*'One of the books on the trial was 'What to feed your toddler', and nobody's actually got a toddler!'*

A poetry book that was offered to one group had the following reception:

A: *'I didn't like the poetry book, which was a waste of time. And you didn't like that, did you [to neighbour]?'  
B: 'No, I didn't...I don't like poetry...'  
A: 'A lot of it didn't rhyme, but I suppose it doesn't these days! I do like it to rhyme. I didn't like the fact that it didn't have capital letters...it didn't look right...'  
C: 'Well, I flicked through it, in different sections, to try and find something that rhymed, that I fancied, but...'*

It was particularly noticeable in three groups that participants - whose ages varied considerably - did not like reading books with a large amount of bad language or explicit sex scenes. A possible interpretation of this is that participants resented their time and considerable effort being wasted reading such material:

*'One of them - it wasn't what I expected, but it was full of sex! I think the book should have had a warning on it.'*

The following three people found the language contained in the book 'Billy Elliott' very unappealing:

A: *'Billy Elliott - everybody hated it, it went down like a lead balloon!'  
B: 'It was the dialect, the Geordie, and the swearwords.'  
A: 'I couldn't get on with the book at all...the bad language...I think some people found Billy Elliott very offensive...I thought the book was actually rubbish.'  
B: 'You get someone else's manner of speaking, don't you? It isn't always so easily picked up [i.e. by the reader].'*

In a group in which the majority of members were in respite care and had severe learning difficulties, the carer had used the books selected by the library staff to aid the group's work towards the 'popular culture' module of the ASDAN<sup>13</sup> programme. Speaking to the group and the interviewer, she explained the importance of the library staff's help in selecting appropriate materials:

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<sup>13</sup> ASDAN (Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network) is an approved awarding body offering a number of programmes and qualifications to develop life skills, from Key Stage 3 through to adult life, from preparatory to Entry Level through to Key Skills at level 4.

*'The books helped us a lot on our course, didn't they? We were able to look through and find pictures of things that you could tell me about, for example some of you wanted to tell me about the different sports that you wanted to watch. If I'd just come with a list, then I most likely would have missed something.'*

## 8.2 The importance of presentation

The way in which books are produced was very important to many of the focus group participants. Many comments were made in the focus groups regarding the following:

- The clarity and size of the text
- The text background
- The use of illustrations
- The book cover.

When discussing the books that had been brought in for her group, one participant felt that the selection was not of particular interest to her:

*'...the books that were brought in for us to look at...I wouldn't have looked at them: I think I go for books with, like, a good cover on them, something with colour in, with pictures in, that's what I go for.'*

Although her neighbour's response to this was 'It has to have a good storyline for me', this participant repeated her view concerning the book's appearance:

*'I am more attracted to the cover.'*

Three of the following comments were made during a focus group that followed a session in which participants had compared different book covers for the same book, a Western title written by a local author.

*'I've seen different books. Sometimes it's the printing that puts me off, the colours. If it's too small, or like if it's too joined together, it puts me off. I like a plain background, that makes it a lot easier.'*

*'I'm not being funny, but look how small it is on that one...[picks up '101 Poems']. If it was a little bit bigger, and the printing a lot bolder...it's a lot better, that one [picks up the Dorling Kindersley 'How to feed your toddler'].'*

*'...some books were published in Dublin by Irish writers [the Open Doors series]. They seemed to be quite good, and they were quite well set out....they were well illustrated, and they're very clear print.'*

*'The illustrations are very nice. The first time I saw it when I picked it up, I said if only they made all books the same: the printing's nice, the colours are nice, and if one person can publish them like that they all can!'*

### **8.3 The target group**

The first point to make here is that although The Vital Link target group was emergent readers, many people that have been successfully reached by the individual projects had a lower reading ability. It would therefore follow that some people would find the First Choice titles too demanding. This should not necessarily be interpreted as projects having been any less effective, but it may only be that methods and resources were adjusted as the project progressed.

One participant, when asked for his view of the books in the collection, said:

*'I wouldn't say there was something for everybody. The thing was, he [the librarian visiting the class] was looking at emergent readers, he wasn't looking at the bottom level, and some people who really I felt perhaps would like something a little bit easier, something to get them started reading rather than people who were moving on...Some of the people who would struggle didn't find it was for them...It would have been nice to have some lower levels as well.'*

A second, who felt that she was of a lower reading level than other participants in her group, said of the *Open Doors*<sup>14</sup> book she had been given to read at the previous session:

*'I don't think it was difficult so much, but it's the concentration...I can read but only for ten minutes.'*

She said to the librarian leading the group:

*'I'd like to have some of those books with tapes, so if I get tired I can look at the words at the same time.'*

She was then given a Penguin book with tape from the library collection, and was very enthusiastic, saying:

*'I think I'll definitely be starting that tonight, that'll be easy for me.'*

During a subsequent discussion of reading choices, this participant stated that she used to enjoy the 'choose your own adventure' books, where at the end of a short section the reader chooses from a range of options how he or she would like the plot to develop:

*'I would like some of those choice adventure books, I find them interesting...they're easier to read, in short paragraphs...You don't have to read them from start to finish.'*

When the librarian replied that this type of book tended to be aimed at the younger reader, she replied:

*'Oh, I don't mind, I often read books from the children's department, well, they're more for teenagers really, I'd say.'*

For a number of other focus group participants, the length of texts was very important when choosing something to read.

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<sup>14</sup> The Open Door series, New Island Books

Talking about the book 'Amanda's Wedding', one said:

*'Amanda's Wedding hasn't actually had any takers...it's a lot to wade through.'*

In a third class, one participant spoke on behalf of a fellow group member who had been unable to attend the focus group, who was recovering from a stroke and had difficulty reading longer texts:

*'Alison's not here this week, but she finds concentration very difficult, so could there be short stories? I think that would be good for all sorts of people...there was just one short story book [i.e. in the selection given to the group]...She said 'I don't like reading a lot, because I can't remember.'*

A member of library staff from the same local authority had heard similar comments from the students, and was attempting to change the stock selection accordingly:

*'We have tried now to put in short stories, because some of the students have had accidents, and have got no memory, and what they read they need to read in one sitting. One of the girls there said to me 'I read it and I enjoy it while I'm reading it, but once I've finished it, I can't remember what I read.' But she says 'I still like reading, because at the time I enjoy it.'*

#### **8.4 Staff perceptions of the impact of the First Choice materials**

*'I think that this was much needed...they [the project managers] really needed to look at the quality of resources...this is a focus for quality.'* [Tutor]

Overall, both library staff and basic skills tutors felt that the introduction of new, specifically-targeted reading materials to the participants had been an effective exercise, and an enjoyable experience.

#### 8.4.1 Variety of texts available

From the data collected, it would appear that participants were generally more satisfied with the range of titles available than the library staff and basic skills tutors:

*'I think it was just the variety: some that you might not immediately think of as being basic skills, but I think they're all interesting, and they would appeal to a variety of readers.'* [Library staff]

*'I think that it's certainly got them something a bit different, expanding their reading tastes, hopefully...'* [Library staff]

*'...it's been prescriptive in that we've been asked to look at 8 to 10 books, so we've had to push them a little bit...'* [Library staff]

*'...some of them [the participants] didn't like the choice of books, it's very narrow, the subject matter's narrow...'* [Library staff]

*'Something they like is the TV tie-in books, because it's something they recognise...it's familiarity.'* [Library staff]

*'I don't know if they've been inspired [by the collection], I think it was the range perhaps, but then again it's always difficult to estimate, because you don't really know what the students think about.'* [Tutor]

*'It just seems strange, when you're looking at a hard-to-reach target group, it just seemed a strange collection of books.'* [Tutor]

Where it was felt that the number of allocated titles was insufficient, the project allowed library staff to incorporate additional titles from existing or new stock, provided that they met the selection criteria:

*'...we're also trying to encourage them [the participants] to look at things for themselves, and so we're arranging for some other books to come in, and that will extend that again, because if there are things that come in on the approvals that they really like we can get them to do reviews, and that will then feed in to First Choice.'* [Library staff]

#### 8.4.2 Suitability of materials for the target group

In providing reading materials to an adult basic skills group, it is clearly vital that the books are at an appropriate reading level, but also that the subject matter is suitable for an adult audience. It is inevitable that books that specifically target teenage - or younger- readers will be regarded as patronising. All members of staff were therefore asked to consider whether they felt that the material was appropriate to participants' reading level and interests:

*'They're a bit hard for our group...all of the books, really, were too difficult for Gillian's level. I think if there had been a couple of, say, Gatehouse books or something similar in there, it might have been better for her - and others.'* [Library staff]

*'I am really working with a real cross-section...from 18 to 60 [years old]...I don't think there's anything much there for the older person at all.'* [Library staff]

*'They're very adult, and they're certainly not in any way patronising...all that is excellent...you're dealing with quite sophisticated people...it's quite hard to have something that is adult and sophisticated, but still simple enough language to be accessible...this has got to be a move in the right direction!'*  
*Interviewer: In what way are these books non-patronising?*  
*'I think it's the care over the subject matter, and the authors...are going to appeal to quite a lot of people. Also, they look attractive, don't they?'* [Tutor]

Other library staff noted this importance of providing suitably 'adult' material:

*'I think in general it's [the collection has] been well received. The tutors were very impressed with the Open Doors series, in terms of the presentation of it and the subject matter and the level.'* [Library staff]

One interviewee described how she felt that her group had been negatively influenced by one of her colleagues, thereby demonstrating the need for sensitivity when introducing books to the target group:

*'...the only one [book in the selection] that really seemed to get a negative was 'A Hundred Bullets', which was a graphic novel. Unfortunately, when we had our first meeting at [the library], everybody had a guided tour of the library, and the person that was guiding them showed them the graphic novels and said that they were really good for teenagers. And when I got the review back for [the book], it was 'It's not for me, they're for teenagers', and I think that's been influenced by that first discussion. So we need to just watch how we promote them in future!' [Library staff]*

A tutor made an interesting point regarding the distribution of titles to the groups, suggesting that from her point of view it would have been a more effective exercise if the library staff had waited until the group members knew each other reasonably well and were more comfortable with each other before introducing the books:

*'...if you're coming to develop the reading skills and suddenly you're faced with books...at what point do you bring them in? So if they now had the opportunity to be actively choosing books, as a group they are comfortable with each other, then these new titles I would feel as if they had some ownership of them, it would be a much more productive exercise.' [Tutor]*

## 8.5 Summary

Although it would appear that the stock trial exercise was generally effective, and that many participants benefited from the experience of reading new and attractively presented materials, it must be acknowledged that it is difficult to present a common response to the titles themselves, as most books were only given to one basic skills group. Within this group, it was likely that only one person would read one particular title.

Clearly, the purpose of the exercise was to develop a promotion of appropriate titles to be enjoyed by all emergent readers, and to select as wide a range of materials as possible. The evaluation team recognises that The Vital Link project had a very limited timescale available for the trialling period. It also recognises that as reader development is reader-centred, it was essential to provide Vital Link participants with an element of choice: no reader development exercise should 'prescribe' a text without the involvement of the reader.

It would therefore have been entirely inappropriate to allocate specific texts to individuals, however it would perhaps have been a more valuable exercise to have trialled the same texts with multiple readers. No two basic skills groups will contain the same reading levels and interests, just as all readers have different interests and needs. With more participants than titles, it would have been highly probable that, given the opportunity, more than one reader would have chosen the same text. This would have increased the amount of data available with which to evaluate the exercise.

## 9. Management issues

### 9.1 Project management: the effect of the timescale

The extent to which the objectives of a project are achieved can depend, to a degree, on the way in which the overall initiative is managed. This section investigates the effect of the overall structure of The Vital Link, the role of the project management group and those factors perceived to have affected the achievement of the objectives.

One member of the project management team questioned the authorities' abilities to successfully manage project-based work, yet conceded:

*'For a lot of libraries, this is the first project they have done. It's inevitable that the project management skills etc. are not there. And timescales are different in libraries [than in the private sector].'*

Two further project managers suggested that management difficulties were increased for all parties by the limited time available in which to complete the project:

*'It's too short a time: everyone acknowledges that Wolfson is too short. It doesn't happen overnight, nothing can, when you're going for socially excluded people. It should be two to three years, to get the systems sorted out.'*

*'It's a very tight time scheme in terms of the promotion, with very severe deadlines.'*

Similarly, a fourth interviewee commented on the time authorities had required to begin to work with their target groups:

*'It's an operational problem...I had the impression that libraries would be working with specific groups, but for many it's taken so long to set up the links...A lot of time has been spent making the initial contacts.'*

Further interesting comments were made concerning the target groups selected by the nine authorities, for example:

*'The authorities have tended to go for the hard-to-reach groups, rather than the emergent readers. This is making life hard for themselves.'*

*'The groups we are reaching are such difficult groups to reach...and with such a wide range of people involved.'*

One member of the project management team felt that as an additional result of the limited project timescale, there had been less ongoing consultation of the authority representatives than was perhaps desirable:

*'Sometimes we [the project management team] have been forced to make decisions without consulting [the authorities] as much as we would have liked...We as a management team have to make decisions, so within the timescale...We have tried to take the best advice we can get.'*

A number of library staff felt that they would have preferred to have been given more time not only to develop partnerships, but for each element of the project:

*'Time is a very big factor, the running time that we've got, the project time, but also the time available within a week for me to actually work on it...I did find it a bit cramped to do it in 17.5 hours, and being available at times when you need to be available to make it work.'*

*'Managing the timescales for the stock promotion has also been very difficult...squashed into very tight timescales.'*

*'There was insufficient time given to create publicity materials, and to create awareness of the project, to get participants on board...what we really needed was a longer period...and to try and coincide with the college holidays as well. When they can't get into college, it would provide continuity of some sort of learning...I didn't have time to knock on those doors and get them in...I feel that I could have done that if I'd spent more time before.'*

However, two library staff suggested that a longer timescale would not necessarily reduce the problems encountered, even that having a series of deadlines could be helpful in providing an incentive to deliver the work:

*'[With a different timescale] the problem might not be any less, as the problem is that everyone is reaching a very different set of people.'*

*'One of my objectives is to reach 24 students by the end of the project...I will have to work hard to achieve that, but it has galvanised me!'*

## **9.2 Project management: the role of the coordinators**

The management of the *Vital Link* project is such that two Coordinators were appointed to support the day-to-day management of the project. Each also had a particular role to fulfil, based on his prior experience, i.e. one oversaw the reader development and financial management, and the other was responsible for the evaluation and basic skills elements of the project. Each member of library staff interviewed for the evaluation was asked to give his or her opinion of the role of the two project coordinators, and the impact each had on the work of the nine participating authorities.

Two respondents felt that the contact they had with the coordinators tended to be when they had failed to deliver a piece of work on time:

*'Their role seems to be chasing us up about things!...At times...it feels as though it's [the work is] being demanded: send this, send that.'*

*'It would seem that the contact I have with them is because I haven't done something or haven't done it quick enough!'*

However, a third acknowledged:

*'...it's helpful, because they keep us on our toes!'*

A second problem was underlined by further interviewees, who felt that there were perhaps too many people involved in the management of the project:

*'[There are a] lot of people to be answerable to in this project.'*

*'What I would change is having less people to report to. There just seem to be so many people to keep happy... and it would be nice if we could spend some of that time getting...more people to the group, really.'*

One interviewee referred to a similar project management issue, whereby she had been annoyed to discover that on one occasion a coordinator had contacted the principal basic skills contact within the authority regarding a difficult aspect of the project, 'without my knowledge'. This respondent felt that it would have been more appropriate if the coordinator had first contacted the relevant library staff. The same interviewee suggested that on another occasion a coordinator had failed to appreciate that the library staff would be more likely than they were to understand the reading needs and interests of the target group within their own authority:

*'...they'll engage with the books relevant to them, not those we want them to engage with.'*

### **9.2.1 Communication**

A further management issue that was raised by three library staff was that of communication. Interviewees felt that insufficient communication throughout the project was due to a lack of overall management support:

*'I think that for a lot of the authorities...there doesn't seem to have been a lot of support...for the first three months, it felt like being in a national project, but being on my own...I was expecting that...we would get some sort of overview of what's going on, and that they [the coordinators] would be acting as some sort of clearing house for passing on good ideas and for supporting all of us, but I don't think that's really worked.'*

Project managers also reported that they had found it difficult to communicate regularly with library staff. As one manager acknowledged:

*'Communication usually is a problem within a project, especially ones where you're working on a nationwide basis and people are doing disparate things. It's a problem within organisations...we had difficulties with communication as well, especially in the early stages, getting people to respond to us.'*

Measures had been taken to facilitate communication not only between the project coordinators and individual library services, but between all project managers and all participating library staff. As a project manager explained:

*'It came out [communication] as one of the issues to be discussed at the first national meeting, so we as the management group decided to do something about it, and set up better structures and procedures.'*

However, it was the view of one interviewee that these measures had been insufficient:

*'I know the Vital Link news was set up to address the communication issue, but I don't think it worked in the way that I would like it to, because it's just snippets, and the snippets are not really in any context, and they don't give you anything that you could actually pick up and learn from...communication is a key issue, very definitely.'*

Despite these concerns, four respondents commented that they had directly benefited from the overall project management, and more specifically from the input of either one or both of the coordinators:

*'The two [coordinators] came to the authority when we were planning the November day. Both went to the college to have a look, which was useful.'*

*'[One of the coordinators] helps with the [basic skills] training outlines, these can be used for training your staff... [the other coordinator] has spoken with the local people who are involved in the project second-hand. He has been useful, giving us reader development techniques.'*

*'[One of the coordinators] has ideas for reader development which will come in handy afterwards [i.e. at a later stage of the project]. [The other coordinator] has a solid basic skills background, is good on the basic skills teaching side.'*

*'[One of the coordinators] phones on a regular basis, is very accessible, his knowledge of reader development is very helpful. [The other coordinator] is there for us too.'*

### **9.3 Project objectives**

#### **9.3.1 Project managers**

In March 2002, a clear message to emerge from the project management team was that The Vital Link had begun to meet the objectives as outlined in the original funding application:

*'We're well on the way with most of them.'*

*'It's an ambitious project and we're doing pretty well.'*

*'To varying degrees, we have met them.'*

However, two interviewees referred to the ambitious nature of the project remit, suggesting that there remained a considerable amount of work to be done before the end of the funded period:

*'The active promotion has only just started...'*

*'There's a long list of things to try to do: we've certainly begun to do them.'*

One project manager suggested that the participating authorities were 'confused about the objectives', and did not necessarily appreciate that a key project aim was to experiment with different approaches to basic skills work, some of which would inevitably be less successful than others. In other words, the project was a learning experience, and it was unrealistic to expect the perfect model to have been developed by September 2002:

*'One of the original intentions of the project was to trial different models in different regions. They [the authorities] were going in knowing that some things weren't going to work: the authorities knew this when they entered the project.'*

*'[We must remember that] it's as much about what doesn't work as what does work.'*

Other respondents underlined this difference in the degree of progress from one authority to another:

*'The level of achievement is variable throughout the authorities. Some are well ahead of the game. My impression is that authorities such as [X and Y] have gelled [with basic skills tutors], others less so.'*

*'...some [authorities] are further along in terms of the national objectives.'*

In July 2002, towards the end of the funded period, project managers felt that this difference between local projects had not disappeared. Their stated reasons for this were that projects were more likely to be effective with hard work, strong partnerships and senior management support:

*'They are a very disparate group, there are some [local projects] that work, some that don't.'*

*'Some have, some haven't. This goes back to those who have grafted, have met their objectives. If you have the right people in place, then it will work.'*

*'We have made a good stab at it, but inevitably some authorities have been more successful than others. This has emphasised the strengths of those who had made good contacts, who had good local contacts beforehand.'*

*'You have to have the set-up by which it's built in from up above, that it has the status within the authority. You can't leave it to just one person. A lot of them have done that, have had the awareness raising, but you also need someone there who is proactive, and the project needs endorsement from the senior level.'*

Encouragingly, it was felt that despite varying degrees of progress or attainment, all authorities shared the same objectives:

*'What's good is that they [the authorities] seem to have merged in their aims.'*

Project managers were also asked to comment on their anticipated outcomes of The Vital Link, in other words to state what they thought would be achieved by the end of the originally funded period. Their comments were varied, referring to potential systems, models and partnerships:

*'It's so intensive given the period of funding, but we will get systems that any authority could implement, e.g. cataloguing, enrolling [library membership], signage etc., i.e. the fundamental things that with a slight adjustment could be helpful.'*

*'It's about awareness, support, delivery.'*

*'...we will be able to get certain models, certain ways forward.'*

*'We are doing it to pilot a regional way of working...exploring how those 3 [London boroughs] can develop exemplars for basic skills.'*

*'Some will have gained, some will have caught up, or will have improved [by the end of the project].'*

*'We will have brought out issues relating to how partners relate to each other.'*

Warnings were also made that it was necessary to be realistic when considering the final outcomes of *Vital Link*, as the project was both ambitious and brief:

*'It's a very hard task, and I can see [that] the local projects are struggling. You can see in the end that they will be delighted that one person has come along...We gave ourselves a very wide brief, and we can't hope to produce huge numbers at the end.'*

*'The librarians have to be very careful about knowing what they're capable of achieving [i.e. within the constraints of the project]'*

*'The Basic Skills Agency etc. want to see gains in literacy levels...but this isn't possible [within the timescale]: ultimately, this project can be a huge sort of catalyst.'*

Despite these concerns, it was felt in July 2002 that significant progress had been made in achieving the project objectives:

*'If you had asked me six months ago, I would have said no, but as people have progressed we are on target.'*

*'[I am] feeling a lot more positive about the project than I have done for a while, I can see that there has been movement. There has been a change in perspective, they have learned different approaches to working in this area, on the whole, although I know that this can't happen overnight. Certain authorities have put the time in and thought about it, and are even starting to find the solutions to the problems.'*

### **9.3.2 Library staff**

In March 2002, library staff responses were equally mixed as to whether the objectives of The Vital Link were realistic and attainable within the timescale.

One respondent clearly stated that the project remit was too wide, and that there was not a specific enough target group:

*'The basic problem with this project...is that the bid has bitten off more than it can chew.'*

A second was concerned that there was a tension between the statistics she felt were expected outcomes of the project management team and the fact that the realistic outcomes could not 'fit such restrictive templates':

*'It's a rather inexact science at the delivery end.'*

However, a third suggested that in spite of initial difficulties:

*'They are realistic long-term objectives, and we hope to use whatever we get out of working on this project in the future.'*

Asked to consider the project objectives for a second time in July 2002, library staff felt that considerable progress had been made, although they anticipated that for all objectives to be achieved, work should extend beyond the funded period:

*'I would like to think that the people that are coming would feel happy about coming were we not here, that they would continue to use the library now that they know who works here and what we have to offer.'*  
Interviewer: *'Do you feel confident that they will?'*  
*'Yes, I'm fairly sure they will, some more regularly than others.'*

*'...we are looking at a sort of exit strategy already, and there are some new posts being developed in the authority...there's the new senior librarian for access and inclusion, so there will actually be somebody else like myself involved in this sort of area of work.'*

Library staff provided many examples of ways in which they believed that their individual projects had contributed to the overall achievement of the objectives of The Vital Link, for example:

#### **The target group**

- Identification of adults with basic skills needs
- Library membership for new basic skills library users

#### **Staffing issues**

- Staff awareness training
- The creation of new posts to support basic skills work
- The creation of effective, sustainable partnerships with the basic skills sector

#### **Resources and promotion**

- An assessment of the value of existing and new resources
- A greater awareness of available resources
- Creation of additional basic skills collections within the local authority

- Effective promotion of basic skills and general library stock.

#### **9.4 Summary**

The main issue raised by library staff and project managers was that the timescale for The Vital Link was too brief. It was felt that this had a negative effect on the development of partnerships, and on the delivery of project outputs such as The First Choice promotion.

The overall project coordination was perceived as effective, although library staff noted a lack of communication between the project management team and individual authorities, and project managers also reported that they had found it difficult to communicate regularly with library staff. Measures had been taken to facilitate communication between the above parties and between all parties involved in the initiative.

The data indicated that the objectives of the project had largely been achieved, although there were felt to be varying degrees of progress or attainment between individual authorities.

## **10. Conclusions and recommendations**

Throughout the evaluation of The Vital Link, representatives of all interested parties raised a number of issues of particular concern to them. From these data, three key themes emerged:

1. The public library service - its basic skills provision
2. Cross-sectoral partnerships
3. Reader development and basic skills.

These themes were presented in Sections 5-9 of this report, but are listed here in order to illustrate the impact of the initiative, and to point to transferable methods of future work between the library and basic skills sectors.

### **10.1 The public library service: its basic skills provision**

The findings revealed that representative of all parties consulted for the evaluation felt that the public library service had a vital role to play in basic skills education. It was suggested that public libraries have a duty to reach both 'non-readers' and new audiences within their community, and also that they should address the Lifelong Learning agenda. Moreover, as the public library is financed by public funds, each citizen has a right to benefit from its services.

#### **Intervention**

Many opinions - often conflicting - were expressed as to the extent to which the public library service should intervene in basic skills education. The following definitions of 'intervention' were provided:

- The public library supports all existing basic skills groups
- The public library identifies and reaches out to adults with basic skills needs

- ❑ The public library provides effective signposting, library-based events to support basic skills education, and flexible service provision (charges, loan periods)
- ❑ The public library provides ongoing support to basic skills students and tutors.

In order to provide a well-informed service, it is recommended that all library staff should be aware of basic skills work taking place within their organisation, and that senior managers should make every effort to ensure that both internal and external training programmes are available to all staff.

### **The target group**

The evaluation demonstrated that many library staff found it difficult to locate emergent readers, and the target group of the project therefore expanded exponentially to include others in need of basic skills support.

It is therefore recommended that the public library service develops strategies in order to effectively reach all adults with basic skills needs:

- ❑ To know their individual needs
- ❑ To develop ways of meeting these needs
- ❑ To focus on actual needs, rather than perceived.

It is also recommended that library staff should work together to create a service that provides a comfortable and welcoming environment in which people of all reading levels can easily locate the materials they are looking for.

### **The provision of basic skills resources**

The focus group findings illustrated that the First Choice promotion was an effective exercise to trial basic skills resources with the target group. The activity raised a number of issues pertaining to the provision and suitability of such resources, and three recommendations are therefore made:

- That stock selection is used as an exercise to widen the reading choices available to adults with basic skills needs.
- That resources are provided to reflect the needs and interests of the local community.
- That resources are selected according to basic skills criteria in order to set a quality standard.

## **10.2 Cross sectoral partnerships**

The findings of the evaluation demonstrated that the target group could not be effectively reached until cross-sectoral partnerships had been developed. The data revealed a number of elements which, when combined, would create a highly effective working partnership between the public library and basic skills sectors.

Firstly, each partner must have a clear understanding of his or her role in the partnership, however minor. He or she must then understand the needs of all other partners, must have with them a shared agenda. All partners should be equally committed to the project, and equally willing to adapt as required.

Senior managers should, in turn, appoint sufficient staff resources to the delivery of a basic skills service in the library, and to the creation of partnerships beyond the library.

The data emphasised the importance of communication between all parties involved in a project. Regular meetings should therefore take place to reflect on progress and information should be cascaded to all stakeholders.

Both senior management and regional support are necessary in order for projects to be embedded in the culture of an organisation, and for work to be continued.

It is recommended that for partnerships to be sustained, staff at all levels should commit their time and resources not only to the funded period of a project, but to the period beyond. Cross-sectoral training should take place in order to share knowledge and to raise awareness of partners' working practices.

### **Project timescale**

The main management issue raised by participants was that the project timescale was too brief. It is firstly recommended that future funded projects in this area have a longer timescale, possibly to include a preliminary research and partnership development phase, and a second phase during which to deliver the project. The evaluation team also recommends that project managers investigate the possibility of developing shared activities without additional funding, by redirecting funds and resources.

### **The publishing sector**

Focus groups participants and library and basic skills staff frequently described a lack of relevant and appealing materials published with an awareness of the less confident reader, and felt that there was no standard reading level or format of texts produced for the reader with basic skills needs.

The evaluation team therefore suggests that the public library service makes the following recommendations to the publishing sector:

- That publishers recognise that emergent readers are a potential audience for a more mainstream approach to the publishing of relevant and appealing fiction and non-fiction titles: that titles are published with an awareness of the less confident adult reader.
- That all texts are accessible in presentation, subject and content, e.g. as per the Open Door series (New Island Books).
- That the appearance of basic skills texts does not stigmatise.
- That reading levels are standardised across all imprints that produce books specifically for the reader with basic skills needs.

### 10.3 Reader development and basic skills

The Vital Link initiative investigated ways in which reader development could play an active role in adult basic skills education. Although a focus on reading for pleasure does not tend to be a standard part of basic skills courses, this project demonstrated that tutors would be prepared to include such modules in the future. It was agreed that elements of the basic skills National Curriculum could be enhanced by the techniques of reader development. A considerable amount of work remains to be done before reader development is included as part of the basic skills Core Curriculum, yet this is not an impossibility.

It is therefore recommended to the basic skills sector that the basic skills Core Curriculum is amended to include a focus on reading for pleasure and reader development.

Used correctly, reader development focuses on the needs of the individual reader, offering support and choice to facilitate self-direction. Although a certain level of literacy is normally required in order to participate in reader development activities, it can be an appropriate tool for emergent readers and their tutors, in order:

- ❑ To convey passion
- ❑ To develop the capacity to motivate, engage readers
- ❑ To create a comfortable, non-threatening environment.

The evaluation findings revealed that the 'reader-centred approach' can be a useful tool in adult basic skills education, particularly as the 'learner-centred' approach has long been a key element of the delivery of such education. Library staff and basic skills tutors should be aware of ways in which this tool can be used, and should support the creation of an infrastructure through which reader development techniques can be effectively transferred to the basic skills sector. In addition, training programmes must include staff from

both library and basic skills sectors, in order to create environments in which reading for pleasure is promoted.

**Reader development:**

- Can be conducted alone or as a shared activity
- Has the potential to include others
- Can instil in participants a sense of ownership/self-learning
- Can bridge the gap between formal and self-directed education.
- Is entirely reader-centred.

Reader development should therefore be recognised as an appropriate means of encouraging adults with basic skills needs to enjoy reading and to extend their reading choices.

**10.4 In conclusion**

Prior to The Vital Link, there appeared to be an obvious relationship between public libraries and the adult basic skills sector, but this had not been practicably demonstrated. This initiative explored ways in which this relationship could become more tangible, investigating ways in which staff from both sectors could work together with a common aim. In doing so, considerable progress was made in beginning to reach the target group, and a significant body of transferable knowledge acquired.

*'I think there's an enormous amount more to be done in this area, but I do think that this has made a pretty strong start, and we've learned a lot from the things that have proved quite difficult.'* [Project manager]

*'It's not easy, and I can see why authorities shy away from it...but I think it's about seeing what pilots like The Vital Link can do...we've got the project money, we can do the outreach, we can get the staff in, and we can see what really works, given a certain set of replicable conditions...it won't work in every place, but there will be areas where we can use that knowledge.'* [Library staff]

*'We've tackled an awful lot at once...but it's probably made everybody realise that it's not a homogenous group...and that there are going to be different ways of working with different groups...but I would certainly want this challenge to be sustained.'* [Project manager]

*'...people who come through the [library] door are readers, and they take the book away and they read it, and you don't often hear about the impact on them. But with these [basic skills] people, that one book has at least in some cases marked a real turning point in their reading lives.'* [Library staff]

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