

The right 'man' for the job? The role of empathy in community librarianship

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Summary of selected preliminary findings

Workshop participants are advised that the following paper contains an edited summary of selected preliminary research observations, which are being disseminated to provide a basis for discussion at the event. The research project will not be completed until February 2008, as such, data analysis and synthesis is ongoing. This paper therefore does not include all data or definitive conclusions from the research, and is NOT FOR GENERAL PUBLICATION. The researchers would appreciate your discretion. All participants will be provided with a copy of the full and final report when published.

There follows a brief preliminary report (with evidence) of our research under three key headings which will form the basis of our discussion during the workshop.

We would welcome your general feedback and responses to the report, and any additional themes that you may have identified.

You may wish to consider the following in more detail in preparation for the workshop discussion. These points are covered, to a lesser or greater extent, in the data which follows, but we would also appreciate reflections on your own experience:

- Issues surrounding the demographic profile of public library staff and the implications for empathic public library services and meeting the social inclusion agenda
- The resistance to cultural change in libraries and what this means for the future development of the service
- The existence of cultural prejudices in public services and the identification of 'worthy' and 'non-worthy' users
- Defining social exclusion and what it means for public services
- Redefining contemporary community librarianship and it's relationship to political agendas



- The relationship between community librarianship and traditional ideas of the profession
- The development of a generic skills base and relevant recruitment, training and staff development
- The role of partnership working, community volunteers and implications for the profession of librarianship
- The way forward for community librarianship.

Introduction to the research

The project has been designed to investigate public library staff attitudes towards social inclusion policy and disadvantaged groups in society and to test the relationships between staffs own ethnicity, social, cultural and professional background and their capacity to make an effective, empathic contribution to social inclusion objectives.

Aims and objectives

The study considers the impact of staff attitudes on the effectiveness of public libraries' contribution to social inclusion policy and objectives. Questions include whether or not an individual's ethnicity and social and cultural background can be a key driver in maintaining a positive attitude towards community librarianship. The appropriateness of organizational structures and recruitment policies are also considered, particularly with reference to the professional/non-professional hierarchical structure within librarianship. The project investigates the extent to which an inclusive organization facilitates an inclusive public service, and to which the ability to empathise through personal experience motivates the proactive and successful community librarian. A selection of existing social inclusion initiatives, including their organization, management, delivery and effectiveness are also being profiled, providing a contemporary picture of the public library contribution to social inclusion policy, and recommendations for the future of community librarianship.

The overall aim is to investigate public library staff attitudes towards the concept of social inclusion. The objectives are:

- To investigate public library staff attitudes towards social inclusion policy

- To investigate public library staff attitudes towards disadvantaged groups in society
- To compare attitudes to the above variables by staff at different levels of the organizational structure
- To compare attitudes to the above variables by staff in different geographic regions
- To profile current actions and initiatives within the social inclusion agenda and to identify to what extent they differ according to socio-economic/geographic region.

Recommendations will be made concerning:

- Appropriate staff recruitment and selection
- Staff training and professional development
- A best practice approach to social inclusion initiatives, from a local and national perspective.

Research methodology

A variety of research methods have been/are being used throughout the project. This paper presents an edited selection of key preliminary research findings from the following data collection exercises:

National survey

A postal survey was conducted in Autumn 2006, during which 1100 questionnaires were distributed to a stratified sample of 90 public library authorities (PLAs) in total (within and across the nine English regions) in batches of 10, 15 and 20. The regional allocation of questionnaires was based on the number of PLAs in each region, and a range of PLA 'types' were selected. The questionnaires were addressed to Head of Service or Library Manager for local distribution to staff at all levels of the organisation. A total of 453 completed questionnaires were returned, giving a response rate of 41%.

The specific aims and objectives of the survey were to provide a statistical profile of staff demographics in terms of gender; age; ethnic group; highest educational qualification; secondary education experience (including cultural diversity; denomination; educational performance); region; length of time in public library service; type of authority; CILIP membership and category; and current role. Other objectives include:

Quantitative measures of professional empathy exploring:

- Staff attitudes towards the community role for the public library
- Staff attitudes towards socially excluded groups
- Staff attitudes towards professional roles and responsibilities in addressing exclusion.

To achieve this aim, the *Professional Empathy* measure was developed, including the following individual scales:

- Genuine Empathy (GE)
- Sympathetic Tendency (ST)
- Simulated Empathy (SE)
- Social Identity (SI)
- Service Values (SV)
- Professional Ethics (PE)

Each scale contains five statements to which respondents had to identify the extent to which they agreed with each statement using the following five-point scale: 'strongly disagree' (1), 'disagree' (2), 'undecided' (3), 'agree' (4), 'strongly agree' (5). The individual scales were intended to measure professional empathy from *individual*, *societal* and *professional* perspectives.

Individual perspective: The GE and ST scales were designed to measure respondents' capacity to both empathise and sympathise on an individual, interpersonal level. Genuine Empathy is explored in terms of the respondents' ability to empathise via personal experience and vicarious knowledge and understanding of another person's circumstances. The Sympathetic Tendency scale uses the concept of sympathy as a literal expression of concern or compassion under given circumstances, irrespective of one's own experience.

Societal perspective: The impacts of societal influences upon expressions of empathy were explored using the SE and SI scales. Simulated Empathy is explored as a conscious decision or action, i.e. to deliberately imagine oneself in another person's position. Societal influences upon such action include a perceived social obligation to show empathic concern, image projection and the interpersonal perceptions and reactions of others. Issues such as social and political consciousness are further explored using the Social Identity scale, including perceptions of community, equality and diversity.

Professional perspective: The SV and PE scales were designed to explore the relationship between organisational values and objectives as perceived by respondents, and their own individual professional values, identity and ethics, i.e. providing a public service and being a Professional. This helps us to gauge a sense of professional priorities amongst participants, and helps to address the

general research aims and objectives regarding the appropriateness and value of professional hierarchies in meeting social inclusion objectives.

Overall reliability of Professional Empathy instrument

The instrument did not produce the reliable scales that were expected. Of the 6 proposed scales, reliability tests showed us that we could only create 3 sufficiently reliable scales (*), using reduced numbers of items. The Social Identity scale is shown to be the most robust of the proposed scales, with 4 of the original items reflecting the same attribute.

Proposed scale	Reliability
Genuine Empathy (all 5 items)	.51
Sympathetic tendency (all 5 items)	.50
*Simulated empathy (2 items)	.60
*Social identity (4 items)	.66
*Service values (2 items)	.61
Professional ethics (all 5 items)	.45

Figure i

Table to show Cronbach's alpha of reliability for each of the 6 scales produced for the research instrument.

N.B. Cronbach's alpha of reliability ranges from 0 to 1. A good level of reliability is 0.7 or more, although an outcome of 0.6-0.7 is acceptable.

Additional background information was also collected on the (quantifiable) extent to which socially excluded groups are being targeted within responding authorities; brief coverage (quantifiable) of the ways in which exclusion is being addressed; and respondents' awareness of national social inclusion policy.

The survey was the first primary data collection exercise and is being used to provide a statistical 'snapshot' of current thought and activity in this area. The exercise was used as a scoping study to provide a theoretical framework for the project, which has a predominantly qualitative methodological structure.

Focus groups with frontline staff and Interviews with senior managers

In follow-up to the survey, qualitative fieldwork was undertaken during Spring-Summer 2007 in order to build upon the inferences drawn from statistical data already collected. The qualitative approach employed has been used to investigate in greater detail:

- The extent of staff participation (including willingness to become involved) in social inclusion policy implementation



- The effects of internal politics, including communication, training and ‘professional inclusion’ upon attitudes towards social inclusion policy, testing the theory that an inclusive organisation facilitates an inclusive service
- The impact of national Government social inclusion policy and agenda on current practice
- Which excluded groups staff feel that the library service particularly targets and how
- Which groups staff feel that the service particularly ‘lets down’ and how
- Future plans for social inclusion at a local level

This was achieved via a series of focus groups with frontline staff and interviews with senior managers. One focus group was planned in each English region (nine in total), and front-line staff were invited to attend via postings on relevant email discussion lists, regional organisations and service heads/managers. Six focus groups took place: three sessions in the North West, South East and South West were cancelled due to low participant numbers. Volunteers were telephone interviewed as an alternative to the planned focus group sessions. A total number of 33 took part, and the average focus group duration was 1 hour and 20 minutes. The same semi-structured questions were asked in each session, all of which were recorded and fully transcribed.

Telephone interviews were undertaken with senior managers, using the same semi-structured research instrument used in the focus group sessions to provide comparable data. A total of ten interviews were conducted, again across the nine English regions. All were recorded and fully transcribed.

All participants were ensured complete confidentiality and anonymity, and are not named in person or by public library authority. Verbatim quotations from focus group and interview transcripts are presented in data analysis, and are identified by region and job title in case of interviewees.

Research findings

An edited summary of preliminary research findings is presented below, under three key headings which will form the basis of our discussion during the workshop. These include:

- **Empathy and cultural representation**
- **Social inclusion and community librarianship**
- **Skills, partnerships and professional identity**

1 Empathy and cultural representation

When considering the role of empathy and cultural representation amongst staff in public services, it is important to establish a demographic profile of the case under consideration. The gender ratio for the survey sample of public library staff in England is 79.2% female and 20.8% male. The predominant age group is 46-55, with 43.3% of the sample falling in to this category. A further 67 respondents (14.8%) are aged 56-65. Only 16.8% of the sample is aged 35 or less, with a mere 14 respondents (3.1%) in the aged 16-25 category. In terms of age and gender, the sample therefore is predominantly female and what we can describe as 'middle-aged'.

Gender

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid male	94	20.8	20.8	20.8
female	359	79.2	79.2	100.0
Total	453	100.0	100.0	

Table 1

Age

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid 16-25	14	3.1	3.1	3.1
26-35	62	13.7	13.7	16.8
36-45	114	25.2	25.2	41.9
46-55	196	43.3	43.3	85.2
56-65	67	14.8	14.8	100.0
Total	453	100.0	100.0	

Table 2

The largest ethnic grouping is 'White British', with a huge 89.6% of the sample falling in to this category. The second largest ethnic grouping with 10 members (2.2%) is 'White other'. A range of ethnic groups are represented, including 'Indian', 'Black Caribbean' and 'Chinese', but only in very small numbers.

Ethnic group

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Indian	6	1.3	1.3	1.3
Pakistani	1	.2	.2	1.5
Black Caribbean	6	1.3	1.3	2.9
Black African	3	.7	.7	3.5
White British	406	89.6	89.6	93.2



White Irish	9	2.0	2.0	95.1
White other	10	2.2	2.2	97.4
White and Black Caribbean	1	.2	.2	97.6
White and Black African	2	.4	.4	98.0
White and Asian	1	.2	.2	98.2
Other dual backgrounds	1	.2	.2	98.5
Chinese	3	.7	.7	99.1
Other	4	.9	.9	100.0
Total	453	100.0	100.0	

Table 3

With respect to gender, age and ethnicity, the sample is therefore strikingly homogenous. The most frequent gender/age/ethnicity grouping was 'female + 46-55 + White-British', with 148 respondents selecting this combination, meaning that 32.7% of the sample fall in to a female White-British middle-aged category.

The survey sample also suggests a highly qualified occupational grouping, more than a third of whom (37.3%) are educated to postgraduate level (98 respondents with a postgraduate Certificate/Diploma, 70 with a Masters Degree and 1 PhD holder). A further 136 respondents (30%) are educated to degree level.

Highest educational qualification

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid GCSE/O Level/CSE	46	10.2	10.2	10.2
A Level/NVQ	63	13.9	13.9	24.1
HND/Cert	16	3.5	3.5	27.6
Degree	136	30.0	30.0	57.6
Postgraduate Cert/Dip	98	21.6	21.6	79.2
Masters degree	70	15.5	15.5	94.7
Doctorate	1	.2	.2	94.9
Other	23	5.1	5.1	100.0
Total	453	100.0	100.0	

Table 4

Respondents were also asked to describe their secondary (11-16) education experience, with reference to the pupil and staff profile of their school(s) attended, the denomination predominantly associated with their secondary education, and their school's educational performance. The aim of this section was to gather information regarding respondents' cultural and social background and experiences. The concept of social class is difficult to define, and traditional measures of social class as a concept were considered to be too ambiguous

within the context of this research. It was decided therefore that the cultural experience of respondents during their formative years would be a more effective investigation.

76.8% of the sample described the pupil and staff profile of their school(s) as *culturally homogenous* (i.e. groups of people with similar ethnic, social, cultural and religious backgrounds). 76 respondents (16.8%) described the same profile as *culturally diverse* (i.e. groups of people with differing ethnic, social, cultural and religious backgrounds), and 29 respondents (6.4%) were 'undecided' on this question. Educational denomination is a little more varied, with 48.3% describing their secondary education experience as *dominated by one faith*, and 43.7% as *largely secular*. 227 respondents (50.1%) describe their school's educational performance as 'good' and 119 respondents (26.3%) describe the same as 'excellent', suggesting that the majority of respondents attended achieving schools.

Educational profile

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Culturally homogenous	348	76.8	76.8	76.8
Culturally diverse	76	16.8	16.8	93.6
Undecided	29	6.4	6.4	100.0
Total	453	100.0	100.0	

Table 5

Educational denomination

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Dominated by one faith	219	48.3	48.3	48.3
Largely secular	198	43.7	43.7	92.1
Undecided	36	7.9	7.9	100.0
Total	453	100.0	100.0	

Table 6

Educational performance

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Poor	17	3.8	3.8	3.8
Average	79	17.4	17.4	21.2
Good	227	50.1	50.1	71.3
Excellent	119	26.3	26.3	97.6
Undecided	11	2.4	2.4	100.0
Total	453	100.0	100.0	

Table 7

The most frequent secondary education experience grouping was ‘culturally homogenous + dominated by one faith + good’, with 90 respondents selecting this combination, suggesting that nearly one fifth of the sample (19.9%) had a culturally and socially homogenous and academically successful formative educational experience.

Homogeneity of survey sample

Focus group and interview respondents were asked to comment on the homogeneity of our survey sample, and to discuss whether or not this raises issues for the provision of socially inclusive public library services. Participants tended to focus on the ethnicity aspect of cultural representation (rather than gender, age or social class), and were mostly in agreement that the survey sample was an accurate depiction of public library staff demographics. The general perception was that staff profiles in individual authorities reflected that of the communities they serve, and that generally, authorities seemed to have a ‘make do’ attitude towards equal opportunities and cultural diversity in the workplace:

“I can only speak for the library service and that is 100% white, reasonably middle class, quite diverse in age and over-whelmingly female” (West Midlands FG)

“Back in the early eighties I went to a racism awareness course where we were memorably described as the white highlands... and it’s not changed an awful lot since then... I would say that the ethnic minorities in [authority] are in single percentage figures... in the library staff, because we’re such a small staff role... we’ve got one part-time library assistant who is Asian, so it probably is representative percentage-wise... but it does mean that yes our image is affected” (North East FG)

“... we have a member of staff with a hearing impairment who seems to be held up as a shining example of equal opps” (East of England FG)

Participants were divided on whether or not such a homogenous workforce had implications for the delivery of socially inclusive services, with opinion shaped by personal identity and experience. Defensive comments were made by certain respondents, who claimed that staff are capable of empathy irrespective of their own cultural background, and that the ability to deliver socially inclusive services is dependant upon skill and personality traits rather than identity. One member of the London group considered the predominance of the baby-boom age group to be a valuable thing, as the liberal ideas of the 1960s produced a more compassionate generation than the Thatcherite 1980s!

“...you don’t have to be the same to have empathy in a given situation” (West Midlands FG)

“I’m inclined to say yes it should [present issues], but I’m not so sure in practice, as long as the white middle aged women are open minded and good at their job. To say that it raises issues suggests that they’re not good at their job really, but again some are better than others” (South East FG)

“It’s also somewhat negatively assuming that white-British middle aged women are not capable of being socially inclusive, which isn’t necessarily correct. It’s the skills they have that matter” (North West FG)

“Also our generation, we were quite right on at an impressionable age weren’t we? The sort of way that the Thatcherite generation weren’t, they were told that society was irrelevant and there was no such thing as community. You know I’m not sure it’s a bad thing [demographic profile]” (London FG)

“... in our defence I would say that pretty much all of the ladies that I have met and had the privilege to work with have been fantastically welcoming, open-minded, flexible... its easy to throw the charge against us that we’re all middle-aged middle class white women but I’m sorry I can’t help that... I do what I’m doing and I try to do it as well as I can” (East of England FG)

Those who disagreed thought the homogenous profile would have a negative impact from a user perspective, particularly in terms of the first impressions of a library service that people may have. There was an assumption that people may have a sense of ‘not belonging’ if their profile differed from an all-white female middle-aged environment. One participant in the North West group observed that members of vulnerable and traditionally disadvantaged groups place a greater degree of trust in people they can recognise as familiar:

“It does have an impact though, those first impressions can turn someone round and right back out of the door. Even in a small library, if it’s quiet and it’s just you and one or two members of staff that you don’t immediately relate to, it will feel strange and put you off, particularly if you don’t go in to libraries on a regular basis. There’s no denying that staff have the experience and you couldn’t ask them for more, but there’s no denying that at that initial point of contact you may be excluding people because they feel uncomfortable or whatever” (London FG)

“... people coming in want to see people like them in the library don’t they? Otherwise they assume it’s only a place for white middle-aged middle class women!” (East of England FG)

“In my own experience of doing reader development work with disadvantaged community groups, they are far more responsive to people whom they trust to be from their own world, with the same accent, the same colloquialisms, somebody they can relate to... Most of these projects are about building confidence, and there needs to be that element of trust. I’m not saying that the stereotypical white female middle class librarian wouldn’t be able to do my job as well as I can, but I think they would have to work at it a bit harder to get over that initial barrier” (North West FG)

“... you don’t get a second chance to make a first impression as the saying goes... but to overcome that you need staff with the right people skills” (London: Development Manager)

Recruitment and retention issues

It was noted that staff demographics are entirely symptomatic of the recruitment processes employed by libraries and the type of applicants they receive, which have traditionally been female. It was felt in particular that central recruitment policies do not give individual libraries the freedom to recruit appropriate people:

“It’s also down to the people who apply for jobs in libraries... maybe we’ve got to be more proactive to encourage those people to apply, but it does tend to be overwhelmingly white middle class women who apply for library jobs” (North East FG)

“... we’ve got targets for recruitment to match the local profile but we’re a long way from achieving it, particularly disability and ethnic minority... which has got a lot to do with the way our staff are recruited, which is out of our hands and done centrally, through Manpower, which from our point of view is very unsuccessful in terms of social inclusion, and just generally really” (East of England FG)

There are significant issues with staff turnover in public libraries, which seemingly go from one extreme to another. Participants explained that a certain category of staff (older and female) has low turnover, whilst the turnover amongst younger staff members, particularly casual and part-time staff, is significantly higher. Although it was agreed that the younger profile benefits the image of the service, the high turnover affects consistency and continuity. Factors such as low pay and motivation affect the decision to leave:

“...we probably don’t meet the age and culture profile of the whole of the city though... I would say that three quarters of the staff are probably white... I would say it’s half and half male and female but we know that that’s unusual... there are a few young members of staff but because of the way that libraries work in general, there is little movement in staff turnover, so people are there for years and years!” (West Midlands FG)

“...the other thing we have is a very low staff turnover, so when people join us as young white middle class people, they become middle-aged middle class staff! It does mean that trying to change the profile of staff is almost impossible because nobody leaves” (North East FG)

“...because we’re open four nights a week we have a lot of evening staff, casuals and part-timers, weekend staff, a lot of them are students so they know that they can get better wages in Tesco... or they think it’s a cushy job, finish their degree and go” (North East FG)

“We have quite a lot of younger people coming through, with different ethnic backgrounds, although our staff turnover at assistant level is quite high. We have a lot of students who move on quite quickly, but it’s probably good for the image of the service” (North West FG)

The general image and public perception of the library service also has an impact on recruitment. Some participants observed that in occupational terms, the service has a ‘nice and cosy’ image which attracts females looking for part-time work and a secondary family income. Although it was also noted that libraries are beginning to shake off this image with the recruitment of young graduates, there is also a belief that the more driven young people are difficult to retain because of low pay and status:

“It’s a historical thing of it not being a man’s job, and also a lot of people are put off by the money. The perception that it’s a nice little part-time job for women, with the main bread-winner, the man, off earning the real money” (Yorkshire FG)

“We’ve got quite a few young staff who have applied in the last 12 months. I think up to about three or four years ago when we restructured it was still definitely ‘oh I need a part-time I’m in my

forties let's apply to the library' sort of thing, but now we're getting college graduates coming in, we've got quite a lot of staff in their twenties with a degree" (East Midlands FG)

The East Midlands region was the only one not to conform to the demographic profile presented by survey data, as the staff demographics in participating authorities reflected the BME population of the region, with city authorities in particular having effective recruitment policies to ensure adequate community representation:

"...within the community libraries we have quite a lot of library assistants that represent the communities, especially because we need the language skills... people come in and they want to join and they don't speak English, you have to have somebody there who will speak the language that is probably the community language of that area... 80% of the community in [locality] is Gujarati speaking" (East Midlands FG)

Many participants from a range of regions reported increased numbers of 'younger' staff and notably more (again younger) *male* staff members, although this was not quantified in any way. An increase in twenty-something graduates from a range of academic disciplines in library assistant posts was noted: as one participant commented, libraries are increasingly seen as a viable option for graduates who are undecided on their career path. One London authority commented on an increased effort to ensure community representation by working directly with BME communities themselves, and without compromising recruitment policy and procedures:

"...one of the things that we're doing in [authority] is there's obviously lots of community groups, Chinese and Nepalese women's groups and so on... what I'm trying to do, because of my contacts with those groups is to set up to visits to libraries and work experience specifically for those groups and also I can let them know when jobs are being advertised... that's one way of hopefully trying to increase the number of applicants that we get from ethnic minority groups in libraries without being favouritist in the actual search" (London FG)

Empathy in practice

Having considered the cultural profile of our sample and public library services as a whole, the next objective was to discuss empathy in practice, and consider the real-world relationship between staff's own cultural identity and their capacity to empathise.

Scores on the *Professional Empathy* measure suggest that the predominantly white middle-aged female survey sample, and the lack of diversity in cultural representation amongst staff, is not necessarily an issue. For example, looking at the responses to the five items originally proposed to the Simulated Empathy scale, the picture below emerges.

The five items of the original **Simulated Empathy** scale were:



SE1 When I watch a film, I find it difficult to put myself in the place of one or more of the characters (-)

SE2 In social situations, I make a conscious effort to understand the feelings and experiences of others

SE3 I get very involved with the feelings of a character in a novel

SE4 I feel obliged to express compassion for those suffering disadvantage and/or distress

SE5 It isn't important that other people consider me to be sensitive and responsive to their circumstances (-)

Summary of cumulative responses to SE scale

	SE1 (-)		SE2		SE3		SE4		SE5 (-)	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Strongly disagree	35	7.7	1	0.2	8	1.8	12	2.6	59	13
Disagree	300	66.2	9	2	62	13.7	194	42.8	288	63.6
Undecided	79	17.4	31	6.8	69	15.2	104	23	64	14.1
Agree	37	8.2	361	79.7	258	57	126	27.8	37	8.2
Strongly agree	2	0.4	51	11.3	56	12.4	17	3.8	5	1.1
MEAN SCORE	3.7		4.0		3.6		2.9		3.8	

Table 9

The simulated empathy scale has encouraged slightly lower responses to the sympathetic tendency scale in measuring respondents' attitudes towards others and their perceptions of their own interpersonal skills. SE1 and SE3 explore respondents' responses to fictional and dramatic experiences in seeking to differentiate between genuine and simulated empathic behaviour. 66.2% disagree and 7.7% strongly disagree with SE1 '*When I watch a film, I find it difficult to put myself in the place of one or more of the characters*', whilst 57% agree and 12.4% strongly agree with SE3 '*I get very involved with the feelings of a character in a novel*', which suggests significant simulated empathy tendencies in non-interpersonal situations.

If we look at SE2 '*In social situations, I make a conscious effort to understand the feelings and experiences of others*' responses suggest that the majority of the sample are able to maintain simulated empathy skills in social interactions, as 79.7% agree and 11.3% strongly agree with this statement. The statement recognizes the 'conscious effort' associated with cognitive empathy rather than emotional intuitive responses, thus helping to reinforce the distinction between genuine and simulated empathy.

SE4 takes this a stage further with the statement '*I feel obliged to express compassion for those suffering disadvantage and/or distress*'. Respondents

however score lower on this item (the lowest of the SE scale) with 42.8% disagreeing with the statement. Sympathetic Tendency scores illustrate a capacity to express compassion, so we can assume that respondents are rejecting the idea of feeling obligated to do so. ST5 *'It isn't important that other people consider me to be sensitive and responsive to their circumstances'* tests the role of image projection in simulated empathy, and again respondents score higher this time with 63.6% disagreeing and 13% strongly disagreeing.

Again, we can look at the five items originally under the heading of the **Social Identity** scale:

SI1 Community has no real value in modern society (-)

SI2 Individuals are responsible for their own successes, failures and position in life

SI3 Every citizen has the right to equal access and opportunity

SI4 Members of culturally diverse communities have a lot to offer one another

SI5 Thriving societies should not be expected to support those vulnerable and at risk from less secure environments (-)

Summary of cumulative responses to SI scale

	SI1 (-)		SI2		SI3		SI4		SI5 (-)	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Strongly disagree	231	51	10	2.2	4	0.9	1	0.2	140	30.9
Disagree	186	41.1	163	36	4	0.9	5	1.1	244	53.9
Undecided	22	4.9	130	28.7	7	1.5	38	8.4	48	10.6
Agree	13	2.9	122	26.9	188	41.5	274	60.5	18	4
Strongly agree	1	0.2	28	6.2	250	55.2	135	29.8	3	0.7
MEAN SCORES	4.4		3.0		4.5		4.2		4.1	

Table 10

This scale was included to compare empathic and sympathetic tendencies against attitudes towards society, diversity and equality. When seeking to define professional empathy within a public service environment, particularly within the context of social inclusion policy, it was considered appropriate to include an exploration of attitudes towards society in general. The SI scale has encouraged the highest scores of the Professional Empathy measure, demonstrating a significant social conscience amongst the sample.

51% strongly disagree with SI1 *'Community has no real value in modern society'*, and a further 41.1% disagree with this statement. Similarly a significant number (55.2%) strongly agree with SI3 *'Every citizen has the right to equal access and opportunity'*, with 41.5% of respondents agreeing. The only relatively contested item on the SI scale is SI 2 *'Individuals are responsible for their own successes,*

failures and position in life'. It was decided to include this item as a positive statement within the SI measure, as social inclusion policy is concerned with empowering individuals within traditionally disadvantaged groups. As 36% of respondents have chosen to disagree with this statement within an otherwise highly scored scale, it may have been interpreted more negatively by the sample. This is again evidenced by the relatively high proportion of respondents (28.7%) who remained 'undecided'.

Professional Empathy and relationship to demographic characteristics of respondents

In order to see if there were significant differences in Professional Empathy between subgroups in the sample, a range of statistical tests were undertaken. For these tests, we selected only the three reliable scales (Simulated Empathy, Social Identity, Service Values).

- **Gender** - An independent samples t-test indicated that there were significant differences between male and female responses to 2 of the 3 scales, i.e. service values and simulated empathy (but not social identity), with female respondents scoring higher than male respondents.
- **Age** – A Spearman's nonparametric rank correlation test indicated that older respondents were significantly less likely than younger respondents to show simulated empathy.
- **CILIP membership** – An independent samples t-test showed that CILIP members were significantly more likely to score higher on the social identity scale than non-members (CILIP members mean score = 4.36, non-CILIP members = 4.23).
- **Length of time in service** - Correlation tests indicated that respondents with longer tenure or who were older were significantly less likely to show simulated empathy. Partial correlations controlling for either tenure or age revealed that age was the most important factor out of the two i.e. it does not matter how long you have been in employment, it is how old you are.
- **Role in organization** - We recoded our sample into 3 groups (Frontline (136) versus Team Leader / Middle Management (222) versus Senior Management / Head of Service (61) and one-way ANOVA analysis (n= 419) showed:
 - Senior Management /HOS score significantly higher than the Frontline staff on social identity.
 - Senior Management /HOS score significantly higher than the Frontline staff on service values.

- There were no significant differences on simulated empathy.
- **Ethnic group** - We recoded our sample into two groups – White British (90% of sample) versus Non-white (10%) of sample. T-test showed no difference between the two groups on the four scales. This is probably not particularly indicative as the non-White sample is so small.
- **Educational denomination** - T-tests showed no significant difference on the three scales between those who went to a culturally homogeneous school (77%) with those who went to a culturally diverse school (17%). The majority of the sample did not experience diversity at school but this may be because most of the sample were middle-aged and hence forty or so years ago, the population would not have been as diverse as today.

There is some tension between the Professional Empathy survey scores (and respondents own relatively high assessment of their own sympathetic and empathic tendencies), and comments made during focus group and interview sessions. When asked if they had experienced any opposition to the provision of socially inclusive services, respondents in every focus group described a certain 'low level resistance' amongst some (usually described as 'older') staff members. Although described as low level, the frequency with which the topic was raised within and across groups is a little disconcerting. It is worth noting however that many respondents described it as a resistance to change rather than to social inclusion policy per se, with particular reference to cultural changes in libraries such as the large scale introduction of IT and the internet:

"I think with any kind of service it can depend on the person, like somebody said earlier, people will adopt new practices and some people won't let go of the old ones" (North East FG)

"There is a lot of low level antagonism... for example there was a lot towards the introduction of IT, and it's still there" (Yorkshire FG)

"Most of the staff are quite willing, you do have the one or two, you know, who try to be difficult because they're used to the traditional concept of the library being a quiet place... it was the same when computers came in" (East Midlands FG)

"The only opposition I can think of to something that is aimed particularly at the socially excluded is the free access to the internet... central library has 120-30 PCs which is free to everyone... the only opposition I can think of is low level mumbblings about the internet access, because we get so many users with poor English skills, or none at all... they come up to the counter and just bark 'internet' at us which gets a certain degree of resentment... I wouldn't say it's out and out opposition as such, it's more sort of cynicism" (West Midlands FG)

There were some positive comments regarding library staffs' capacity to embrace change however, and it was accepted that some resistance to change is inevitable in any organization:



“... what is lucky about the people that do work in public libraries... in the main people are empathic... they're open to new ideas... yes we've still got dinosaurs but there are dinosaurs wherever you work and I think in the main library staff are open to change... if you think how far we've come in the last fifteen years it's amazing. I can't believe how much everything has moved on and it's the same staff taking the new ideas forward” (West Midlands FG)

“The grumbings are inevitable, but everybody comes round eventually... we have a fantastic group of people working for us who take whatever's thrown at them” (North East: Senior Library Manager)

Respondents reinforced the idea that any resistance is linked to cultural changes and a re-thinking surrounding what kind of space a public library should be. Some 'old school' members of staff were described as traditionalists, who rejected new concepts and ideas in the first instance, but were beginning to embrace and take forward ideas:

“It is the modernisation that causes tension and it has to be well managed... we brought in that people would be allowed to use mobile phones and have discrete drinks and snacks, because people come in for whole days, but we had a huge backlash against that... we had to take down all negative notices, no 'do nots'... it had to be very carefully managed with meetings with operations staff... but diversity no, they're just another customer” (London FG)

“Some of our older members of staff have been a little unsettled by the changing culture of the service in general, IT [internet access] is still a huge cross to bear for some of them, but I wouldn't say that's because of the people we may be targeting, it's more about their own perceptions of what a library should be” (North West FG)

“...it's not diversity that's the issue its introducing new ways of doing things... we've got a senior management that has been there for a long time and suppressed any new ideas and they're a bit resentful of change... I keep getting 'well that won't happen', 'you won't be able to do that'... but then it does and it motivates other people to come up with ideas... I'm not sure whether the cultural change has happened but we're certainly moving towards it” (London FG)

Respondents defended this resistance to change adopted by older colleagues, stating that such attitudes were influenced by a lack of security, stability and confidence in public library services and their position within them:

“...it's because they don't understand what the future holds, what will change next, it's all so unpredictable. There's constant restructures, job changes, lack of promotion but more and more individual responsibility. Are libraries even going to be here in 10 to 20 years? When people don't know, they cling to what they've got and do know.” (Yorkshire FG)

“I think it is the change element rather than what it's for... it just comes across as another directive as in 'we are doing this and that from Monday', and its not because we're targeting a specific group it's because it's another change” (East Midlands FG)

“The phenomenal rate of change has to carefully managed... you get blasé about it, but it can be quite distressing for people who have been with us for a long time” (South East: Head of Service)

“It's the uncertainty... really I'm too old to care” (East of England FG)



Despite claims of low-level resistance *not* directed towards social inclusion policy or excluded groups themselves, respondents did reveal evidence of antagonism towards certain initiatives and a wide range of groups within the social inclusion agenda. When giving details, respondents would invariably refer to ‘older members of staff’. Comments reflect prejudices towards certain groups, and a worrying distinction between deserving and non-deserving users of public library services:

“Would you want your council tax to go up to pay more for libraries to train people to do these things [work with disaffected children and young people]... should that not be done by, I don’t know, parents at home, things like that... Because it always seems to be the bad ones that get the attention and money spent on them... not the good child that comes in, who’s nice, gets on with things, asks for help and is genuinely a nice child” (North East FG)

“I have had problems with LGBT issues from staff and users... if the gay collection is very in your face the users get a bit uptight... I was aware of one member of staff who would carefully move the pink paper... I once worked in a library that put Gay Times in a brown envelope, that was three or four years ago, I don’t know if they do it now... but there are still pockets of resistance on occasion.” (East of England FG)

“We’ve had issues over providing women-only desks for female Muslim users... we’ve had to keep a record of how many male and female members of staff are working on each desk at any time... it gets silly” (West Midlands FG)

In some cases staff members have not been averse to voicing or demonstrating their opposition, both to colleagues and users themselves:

“...we’ve still got the power tricks from staff... shouting out really loud that a user has a fine, which for some cultures or age groups is a huge embarrassment, especially for people who are feeling insecure about how they’re perceived, like asylum seekers or refugees.” (Yorkshire FG)

“Somebody actually said to me [with reference to ESOL provision] ‘well if they’ve been here 30 years and haven’t bothered to learn the language then why should we bother?’ What do you do?” (East Midlands FG)

“A couple of years ago we had a change to the membership criteria, so you could join without producing any form of ID, and we had a lot of opposition to that! Some of the staff were not at all happy about that because they said ‘oh but we’ll be getting all the rough sleepers coming in and they’ll be stealing the books’... somebody else pointed out that in fact we’ve always had books stolen or ‘lost’, and that’s not by rough sleepers it’s people with permanent names and addresses, so that’s gone ahead and it’s been very successful but there was a lot of opposition from some of the slightly older library staff” (West Midlands FG)

It was felt that, in order to overcome this hostility and some of the related insecurities shared by staff members, a greater sense of inclusion was required with reference to policy design and implementation, which would in turn encourage a greater understanding and appreciation of the social inclusion agenda:



“I have to admit that I’ve heard some quite dodgy comments behind the scenes... about whether we should be providing services for non-rate payers, things like that... if we were more involved in policy decisions there would be less negativity. Instructions from on high will always prompt people to be negative and defensive” (Yorkshire FG)

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2 Social inclusion and community librarianship

The project has been designed to investigate further such levels of appreciation and understanding of social inclusion policy and objectives. Survey respondents were asked to identify the extent to which they are aware of current national policy and debate concerning social exclusion, and their appreciation of the role of public libraries in meeting social inclusion aims and objectives. The majority claim to be partly aware of national social exclusion policy and debate (57.6%); 36.4% claim to be very aware, 3.3% not aware at all and 2.6% undecided. Of those claiming to be very aware, the majority are CILIP members in middle management roles. 10 of the 15 respondents with no awareness are frontline staff.

Awareness of national policy

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Yes very	165	36.4	36.4	36.4
Yes partly	261	57.6	57.6	94.0
No not at all	15	3.3	3.3	97.4
Undecided	12	2.6	2.6	100.0
Total	453	100.0	100.0	

Table 11

Reassuringly higher proportions of respondents claim to be *very* appreciative of the role of public libraries in meeting social inclusion aims and objectives (68.7%), with 28.5% *partly* appreciative.

Appreciation of public library role

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Yes very	311	68.7	68.7	68.7
Yes partly	129	28.5	28.5	97.1
No not at all	2	.4	.4	97.6
Undecided	11	2.4	2.4	100.0
Total	453	100.0	100.0	

Table 12

Statistical tests were undertaken to ascertain whether there was any relationship between our participants' empathy scale scores (i.e. simulated empathy, social identity and service values) and their responses to the above two questions:

- One-way ANOVA analyses indicated that those who were more aware of current policy and debate had greater social identity and service values (although there was no difference on simulated empathy).



- One-way ANOVA analyses indicated that those who were very appreciative of the role of public libraries scored significantly higher on all three empathy scales than those who were only partly appreciative.

The focus group and interview sessions were used to further explore levels of social inclusion awareness and engagement amongst research participants. Conversations with front-line staff have revealed extremely low levels of awareness and engagement with social inclusion policy amongst this staff grouping, both in terms of the wider political agenda, and how policy is interpreted and administered at micro local level. There is also a certain contradiction at play with respect to front-line staff: many respondents described this group as the most important facilitators of social inclusion in their role of providing the day-to-day and face-to-face service. They were also described however as the least important staff grouping in terms of needing to know and understand policy and related political objectives:

“I’d call it a general acceptance rather than awareness, they know that policies and objectives are ‘out there’ but will be happy to accept guidance from above rather than get to grips with the actual policies” (South East FG)

“I don’t think front-line staff do [need to be aware of policy] because their prime role is to serve the customer at the counter and the most important thing is how they treat that customer, not what bit of paper is saying that they should” (North East FG)

“There will be decisions made to target particular groups or to provide a particular resource or service, and they would understand why we’re doing that but not how the decision was made... But then I’m not sure that I would expect them to be, it’s the ability to deliver that is most important for front-line staff” (North West FG)

“... the awareness amongst authority chiefs and frontline delivery staff is very different. Chiefs are more aware of actual policies and political frameworks, delivery staff more aware of how it works on the ground” (North West: Head of Service)

The reasons cited for such low levels of engagement with policy amongst front-line staff included a lack of communication and transparency within individual authorities, and a working culture that dictates certain roles and responsibilities within and across organisational hierarchies, i.e. some front-line respondents did not think it was ‘their job’:

“I think most staff are aware of our need to promote services to the socially excluded – but they probably do not have any real knowledge of the policy behind it. We do not meet together enough to talk about it.” (South West FG)

“I think the policy problem is that some of them are written in such an obscure language sometimes... I would say... city council is not exactly transparent... you know what you’re supposed to do, and what you’re aiming to do but you might not be able to recite the policy document” (West Midlands FG)

“We probably do know about social inclusion but when you start talking about policy, because of our position, it tends to be senior management who deal with policy-making in our area anyway”
(West Midlands FG)

Communication and dissemination methods in particular are considered to be superficial and ineffective, with little attention paid to documents if and when they are circulated:

“For me I think that management pretend, or like to think that front-line staff are aware, but in terms of detailed knowledge, I would say not so much in reality. Things are cascaded round, but whether they are taken in by staff to the extent of having detailed knowledge, I don't know, which begs the question, should they have detailed knowledge anyway? Do they need it?” (Yorkshire FG)

“...generally what we try to stress is not the official drivers but just that everyone should be treated equally no matter what they look like... I'm not sure they know that there is a social inclusion policy and that's really as far as it goes for our staff. Occasionally we get a bulletin handed on from on high talking about the official guidance... we take probably about as much notice of it as we do of anything else!” (North East FG)

It was observed that some staff however engage more than others, particularly those who are motivated, curious and perhaps more career orientated:

“I would say some are some aren't... there are the ones who take direction from above, do what they're told to do and get on with it... and then there are the ones who want to know why they're doing things, and ask questions and then that motivates them even more” (East Midlands FG)

Some authorities are taking positive steps to engage front-line staff and establish a culture of awareness amongst new and existing employees, for example via briefing sessions concerning local and national government objectives. Other methods include testing levels of awareness and engagement at the point of recruitment, and the creation of specific posts within authorities, whereby staff within those roles deliver training and communicate and disseminate ideas:

“...we have had what we call staff awareness sessions and that's really to bring everybody up to speed with where we fit in to the local government agenda, and where the local government fits in to the national government agenda” (North East FG)

“...new staff are always pretty much aware because they won't actually get an interview... there's always a question about equal opportunities and how this relates to the community in [authority] on the application form, and there's always a question about how the library services relate to the community, especially harder to reach groups... so they're questions that they actually have to answer in their application and in the interview, so we tend to get some good applications.” (East Midlands FG)

“In my authority yes [front-line staff are aware], and my title is access and inclusion, so personally if they weren't I'd be failing in my job! We do rounds of what we call diversity training and there is a requirement for all staff to attend” (London FG)

When conducting qualitative fieldwork it became clear that there is a striking misunderstanding of social inclusion policy, and a lack of conceptual clarity over what social *exclusion* actually means as a political reference. There is considerable confusion and blurring between social inclusion and other social and public policy remits including community cohesion, racial equality, disability discrimination, sexual equality and other anti-discrimination objectives. It was felt that more high profile legislation such as the DDA generated higher levels of awareness and engagement through necessity:

“I think access is the one that most staff are aware of really... access to premises particularly... the other year when DDA came in, person after person after person rang me up about access and the legislation coming in, so we ended up *having* to understand the nitty gritty of the policy, otherwise I'd be standing there saying “I don't know about that” when people expect me to know, and you've got to be able to answer people's complaints.” (Yorkshire FG)

It was also noticeable that there is too much literal interpretation of the single word 'excluded' that is not linked to social exclusion as a political concept. Non-library users were frequently referred to as excluded for example within the context of our discussion, which demonstrates a lack of clarity in some cases concerning what social exclusion actually means:

“...there are a few groups that we target, as well as traditional library users, I think we have to not forget about those because they could become an excluded group!” (North East FG)

“Do you not find that most libraries run their lifelong learning classes during the day... most libraries are open at night time but we don't run classes then... in that case are workers not an excluded group?” (North East FG)

There was some evidence of what social exclusion means in practice (or an understanding thereof), and how library services could effectively be used to address the issue. Participants in the North West and East of England regions for example talked of disadvantaged neighbourhoods within their authorities, and the need to reconsider the delivery of services for these communities via outreach initiatives and partnership working. Other regions referred to projects and campaigns that relate directly to the social inclusion remit by targeting the unemployed and basic skills needs. The BBC RaW campaign for example was frequently quoted:

“We've had a number of projects for the unemployed running... Bounce Back to Work comes to mind and one that's recently emerged called Fifty and not Out... which seems to be running along much the same line of getting people back in to work” (East of England FG)

The influence of political climate and local government culture has a strong impact on interpretations of and responses to social inclusion policy within public libraries, and this was explored in great depth during our qualitative fieldwork. Library staff are highly conscious of the political circumstances in which they operate, and this can encourage a certain cynicism or apprehension when

thinking about their contribution to social inclusion objectives. Short-term funding and questionable council motives are key issues:

“...a lot of the work with refugees and asylum seekers especially is such a political football so much that funding will change as to which way the wind blows that week... in relation to the media, politicians... and that affects you and all your partners... they're all dealing in the same area but there's a lot of short-termism” (East Midlands FG)

“I think [authority] is always national... as it appears to me... it should be more local but it's always chasing money, so tries to do anything that it can to meet any national objectives to get an extra half a star or more money” (West Midlands FG)

“...if the political situation changes, the library service may be committed but the politics may change... whether the council changes, whether the funding changes, whether the four star status changes... if we fail we lose four star status, then we lose money and don't have the resources to get it back” (East Midlands FG)

It was felt that equality and inclusion agendas are too easily manipulated in order to achieve targets. This forms some explanation for the theoretical blurring between social inclusion policy and other equality-based agendas, and serves to encourage higher levels of cynicism amongst staff:

“The need to tie in to the county council's plan [is]... about equality really in most aspects so you can hang these things on to it... I sometimes look at ours and think they've twisted that around to make that fit in there... 'give me the money'” (East of England FG)

“We're regularly touted as the council's beacon of social inclusion, but this service has run for over 25 years quietly and efficiently... it annoys me to suddenly be rebranded as something we're not” (Yorkshire: Mobile Library Service Manager)

Linked to this respondents described a certain 'ticking boxes and jumping hoops' culture within local government, which makes public library staff suspicious of organisational motivation in meeting the social inclusion agenda. There is a sense that authority chiefs create a superficial and cosmetic atmosphere for staff, particularly when correlating inclusion objectives to service standards and awards:

“And many a time, you know you've got charter mark people coming round and stuff like that, and it feels very cosmetic for the front-line staff, and it is like something out of a comedy or out of Kafka... you've got people wandering round and papers everywhere and checking boxes... it doesn't mean anything... it doesn't mean the service is any better, it just means you're presenting it as if it is better” (Yorkshire FG)

“...we've got inspectors in the authority at the moment and I keep getting phone calls saying 'what are you doing for over-50 African-Caribbeans, please ring the chief with evidence and photographs by one o'clock today' so the authority gets a sniffy couple of sentences then you have to produce the targeted stuff as well” (London FG)

“...we suffer a bit from fad-ism... buzz words [relating to the political agenda]... [we’re] driven by local authority and their golden thread or flavour of the month... it feels like hoop jumping, and can seem too transitory and superficial to staff” (London FG)

This feeds in to staffs’ perceptions of their service delivery on an operational level, for example with stock collections. It is felt that a ‘tick box’ approach is impairing the appropriateness of some stock decisions, in what one participant described as ‘policy for policy’s sake’. This in turn is encouraging negativity towards what is perceived to be overt political correctness:

“...when I first went to [branch library] which was five and a half years ago, we had a very small collection of books in Hindi and Punjabi, and four and half years later, those books were still sitting in exactly the same place without a date stamp in them because nobody had taken any of them out... Somebody had said at some point ‘you need to have these books’, and so they appeared... I’d spent four years saying we need to take these books somewhere where they’ll issue, it’s just a horrific waste of material, and it took four years to get them shifted because nobody listens to us.” (Yorkshire FG)

“I think it’s when councils or libraries have these mad cap, well not mad cap because we’re not allowed to say that, but you know these short term funding projects that it goes astray... if they stopped looking at these short term little pockets of activity... and silly political correctness... we had gay and lesbian fiction, now it’s gay, lesbian, bisexual, transvestite... could they add any more initials? You know does it matter? A good book is a good book, does it matter if it’s written by or aimed at a gay person or lesbian?” (West Midlands FG)

“You lose track of what you can say and what you can’t say... who we’re targeting this week... it becomes a political minefield and you forget that public libraries have been inclusive since their inception... they are by definition” (London: Library Service Manager)

This ‘tick box’ approach has serious implications for the practical relevance and appropriateness of service decisions and staff attitudes towards the governance of their services, their own morale and levels of engagement. The general consensus seemed to be that genuine community librarianship is becoming lost in a culture of political pressure and that social inclusion objectives are increasingly regarded as ‘add on’ responsibilities. The futility of the tick-box agenda is a major concern:

“The trouble is though we have as I say a very mono-cultural profile but every now and again somebody somewhere will say ‘what are we doing for ethnic minorities?’, and the answer is ‘nothing’... so in the way that local government works we have to do something... but we haven’t got any ethnic minorities, so we might be prepared if any ever turn up but our training will be twenty years out of date!” (North East FG)

“... given the responsibilities of local government and the need for agencies to be politically responsive... [some of the] targets or directives we receive are unrealistic and irrelevant to our service” (London: Development Manager)

Along with negative staff reactions to the political culture of local government, bureaucratic structures are creating logistical issues on an operational level for

the social inclusion offer from public libraries. Examples given by respondents include inconsistency from one authority to another within given regions, and the frustrating committee bureaucracy of individual authorities which affects decision making processes:

“... with [authority] libraries we’ve gone in to ward and constituency libraries, so if your library is in a particular constituency you might get better services, more funding to pay for books and staffing, and the next constituency depends on what they consider to be important” (West Midlands FG)

“...everything has to go to committee to committee, one meeting after another, passed down and agreed by xyz... BUT everything takes forever. So it takes 5 years to get rid of a non-issue collection because no one individual can make a decision” (Yorkshire FG)

On an organisational level, respondents from every region commented on the impact of frequent restructuring within authorities, including insecurity and low morale amongst staff, and a lack of service consistency and sustainability:

“...uncertainty at local level with regards to funding, staff shortages and restructuring always get in the way when working for local government” (South East FG)

“We’ve changed directives so many times we don’t know who we are... recreation and leisure... education and libraries...” (North East FG)

“... what is hard is that we have too much restructuring and organisation which takes away all logic... we could be running sustainable [socially inclusive] services but we have constant changes and settling in periods, all of which has a negative effect on the straight-forward delivery” (East of England FG)

One respondent did however report significant benefits of restructuring within the social inclusion context:

“We’ve benefited from moving departments because Regeneration and Culture for the past six years have got Beacon status for working with hard to reach groups... so with us joining that department, it puts the onus on libraries sustaining that as a service” (East Midlands FG)

Having considered the organizational culture of public libraries and its impact upon staff attitudes towards the social inclusion agenda, we are also interested in exploring levels of inclusion within libraries themselves, and the relationship between this and social inclusion practice. Our discussions have revealed that there is still a hierarchical system in place across the regions, particularly with respect to approaching social inclusion and the design of relevant services. Front-line staff in particular feel that there is poor communication and consultation, which encourages a lack of front-line confidence in presenting ideas and being proactive. Respondents spoke of a certain ‘brick wall syndrome’ linked to the bureaucratic structures outlined above; ideas become lost in committee systems causing staff to become disillusioned:

“Picking up on the point of being proactive... often it’s the case that people are proactive but then they’re stopped from going too far... they’re brought back in to line with what management wants”
(North East FG)

“It’s true that there is a lack of commitment, ideas and action from front-line staff, but on one hand people think, ‘well what’s the point? You can voice things but they have to be voiced to a system that is receptive to the voice, otherwise...’ (Yorkshire FG)

“I feel that we’re not particularly encouraged to come up with ideas... I remember a few years ago suggesting that because the facilities in central library are quite poor for people with visual impairments... I suggested approaching an organisation that could help to assess us... and an acknowledgement of my email was as far as that went” (West Midlands FG)

The maintenance and prevalence of hierarchical structures is preserving on some level a ‘them and us’ culture within public libraries, which is perhaps a little depressing for a twenty-first century public service:

“There’s a lot of good intention there from front-line staff...some fall short of that intention but I think that’s inevitable... I think some members of front-line staff suffer from feelings of inadequacy partly because of this top down mentality and a lack of involvement” (Yorkshire FG)

“You can put ideas forward for certain things and very occasionally an idea will be taken forward by the management team and discussed there, and you might even be invited to present it but there is a kind of communication gulf between the people actually delivering the service and the managers who stay in their offices... which might be a central library thing, because there are so many people, and senior managers are not involved in the delivery of services in any way at all...” (West Midlands FG)

“We went to the Framework [for the Future] training and people were saying ‘yeah but we’re understaffed, we don’t have the basics’... and the answer was ‘oh yes but my job is hard as a manger too’... but you [managers] get the acknowledgement, and you get it financially too... And it’s good that the job is challenging, but we need more than the occasional pat on the back, we need to be part of the development of the library... and to get paid more of course!” (Yorkshire FG)

Senior Managers upheld the view that responsibility and ownership of service design and evaluation is predominantly held by management teams:

“Currently the planning of services is the responsibility of library managers under the direction of the libraries management team... all staff are involved in the delivery of these services... lead managers are responsible for evaluating and reposting to the management team” (West Midlands: Head of Service)

The lack of inclusion and consultation was a real issue for respondents. This is especially true for front-line staff, and the apparent contradiction within their roles mentioned previously. Some felt that their knowledge of library users and communities in providing day-to-day services was not fully taken advantage of, and not adequately translated into policy and service design:

“Do management listen enough to staff working on the front-line hearing the complaints and the moans of the people that come in? I think we tend to compose solutions that are meant to be



community-led, but I don't see much evidence of that, we decide to have a reading group to attract a certain type of people rather than them coming to us and saying they want a reading group. I don't feel like the staff on the front-line are listened to when they say 'Mr so and so said such and such', these people aren't vociferous enough to fill in forms which seems to be the only way to get management's attention. Paperwork paperwork paperwork!" (North East FG)

"... sometimes we will approach particular groups of front-line staff if we're in the planning stage of something to see what their take on it might be, particularly if its something that will be based in a certain area... but I fear there are probably a lot of projects that come from higher up and don't get the I suppose multi-layered input" (East of England FG)

"I'm not sure results of the evaluation are communicated either, so you might deliver the service but you've no idea where it came from or what's happened to it afterwards!" (East of England FG)

"Where is that structure for consulting front-line staff... It's just 'today this happens' and you don't know where it's come from, yet we're the people the customers see... According to them we're responsible for everything little thing that goes on... But at the end of the day I have agreed to work for the public library and I am agreeing to these policies by proxy, and that's were the frustration comes in. Once I've signed the contract I become the face of these policies, but then I think, 'hold on a minute, nobody asked me'" (Yorkshire FG)

Staff once again recognised themselves that being, or rather feeling, more included would be beneficial to the service:

"It's like the perfect customer service mission, you'll only have good customer service if you've got happy enthusiastic staff. The *right* staff. Social inclusion comes from a happy environment... social inclusion also means including us!" (Yorkshire FG)

3 Skills, partnerships and professional identity

In considering the role of empathy in community librarianship, we have also been investigating the key skills and characteristics identified with the provision of socially inclusive public services, and how this relates to the profession of librarianship, its traditional structures, training and identity.

- **Involvement in delivery of social inclusion services.** One-way ANOVA analyses showed that those involved most closely with the delivery of social inclusion services scored higher on all three empathic scales (i.e. simulated empathy, social identity and service values). This is encouraging; however it is difficult to know if this increased empathy developed because these individuals were working in social inclusion, or whether they were chosen to work in the field of social inclusion because they were felt to be more empathic.
- **Desire to be involved in social inclusion provision.** One-way ANOVA analyses showed that those who appeared to be significantly more empathic (as indicated by their scores on all three of the above scales) wanted to be more involved in SI service provision. This would seem to suggest that the more empathic people are, the more likely they are to become involved in SI initiatives at work.

Focus group and interview respondents were asked to name the skills required to deliver socially inclusive services: invariably responses included generic transferable skills involving communication, creativity and problem solving, and interpersonal traits and characteristics such as patience, enthusiasm and friendliness. Interestingly, given our discussion on levels of policy awareness, an understanding of the social inclusion political agenda was also considered to be essential:

“In no particular order: open mindedness, flexibility, lateral thinking, ability to network, partnership working, interest in languages and communication, knowledge of relevant legislation, statutory requirements, case law, ability to educate & train staff (& users), marketing skills, understanding of demographics & statistics, persistence.” (South West FG)

“Sensitivity, flexibility, awareness, understanding of the culture, problems, difficulties faced by the group, training and reinforcement, the support of a caring organization, ability to take action or make decisions to ensure that the person’s needs are fully met” (West Midlands: Head of Service)

“Communication... listening skills... awareness of social policy” (North West: Head of Service)

The skills required to deliver socially inclusive services were described as advanced customer care skills, and there was an assumption that all library staff should and do possess these skills, irrespective of their community role:

“...its hard to get staff with all the skills that you might require, it’s difficult to get the language skills for example, but you need someone with the ability to deal with people with developing English language skills, and some cultural and even religious background knowledge... ultimately its customer care skills with add ons that you need, because I think most people would accept that if they’re coming in to a service they won’t necessarily have access to somebody that can speak their language, just somebody who is *sympathetic* and willing to help them” (East Midlands FG)

“To be approachable, compassionate, friendly but professional, which I think library staff are. You wouldn’t put yourself out there to work with the public otherwise. You have to be” (North West FG)

However, when discussing work with traditionally excluded groups and communities, it became apparent that a little more than advanced customer care skills may be required, and that not all (existing) library staff considered themselves to be suitably trained or qualified for the role. This was particularly evident during conversations about working with children from disadvantaged areas, or disaffected young people, which encourages indifference from staff and other library users towards this group, and in more serious cases towards the social inclusion agenda as a whole:

“We have had a massive problem with children in one particular branch library... all I hear is ‘oh we had to get the police last night... this happened on Monday... this happened on Tuesday’... Thursday was my late night last week there and I didn’t have a problem, we didn’t have many kids in, maybe there was something else going on in the area I don’t know but I must admit, when I left on Monday I did have to call the street wardens [community support officers] in because they were just horrendous” (North East FG)

“... after a couple of bad experiences with young people recently... after last Saturday I was ready to come in here and tell you exactly what I thought of social inclusion... but I’ve come down to earth a little bit since then” (East of England FG)

“We’ve just opened another teenage library [14-19] and again that was about managing change... bean bags!... and you know it comes round again and again... now that had to be managed in terms of acceptance from the rest of the staff and the rest of the customers... we had to tell some customers to come in at two in the afternoon when they [young people] wouldn’t be there” (London FG)

There were some examples (thankfully!) of positive working with young people:

“We’ve got a new library in one of the most troubled housing estates in [locality]... they’ve set up a homework group with a lot of the problem children and that’s been hugely successful... it’s a new building, they feel as if they own it, it’s their library whereas the old one wasn’t” (West Midlands FG)

There was however significant evidence of role strain and conflict within our discussions when referring to working with other groups. Social problems linked to exclusion such as mental health issues, drug abuse and alcoholism are causing concern for public library staff, who do not feel qualified to respond



appropriately, or feel that it is necessarily their responsibility to do so despite working in a public service:

“... we're all aware of physical disabilities but mental health issues cause us problems because we're not trained for that... some of the people that we go to see you can be quite frightened by them and you're in their home... but we have to get on with it, otherwise they wouldn't have a library service, tomorrow they'll be OK with you again” (West Midlands FG)

“It's not considered by management... we're now open on Sundays with skeleton staff, just four library staff and no caretaker... we said what happens if we get a drunk, because normally you'd get the caretaker to deal with them... 'oh well perhaps if two of you tackle them'... and I thought oh great, two middle aged ladies can tackle a drunk, super, thanks very much” (West Midlands FG)

“There is a question to what extent is it our job? I mean yes, we're working in a public service you're going to get a bit of that, but you're not a youth worker, you're not a social worker, so down which road do you go?” (North East FG)

Despite feeling that certain aspects of the social inclusion remit are not necessarily 'their job', respondents recognised that the changing culture and role of public libraries will mean more of this type of work in the future, as a direct result of changing demographics amongst library users, and service developments causing job re-evaluation. It was noted that increased outreach and community roles will be necessary in order to justify continued staff numbers and employment:

“...the excluded groups may form a huge part of our membership in the future because people who traditionally came to libraries in the past, they're buying books, you know? It's quite easy to go in to Waterstones and buy a book, they're nice and new as well... and they're the people who are disappearing from libraries to be replaced by asylum seekers and the homeless, people see it as a community centre” (North East FG)

“...in the future this is going to be more and more what they're going to have to do with getting self-issue in and that kind of thing in [authority], so we have to justify the number of staff we have. If we want to keep the same number of staff then we have to be more proactive about getting out there and getting in touch with the community ourselves as opposed to waiting in our library for them to come to us. So that's hopefully the future perspective of what the front-line staff are going to be doing, much more community work and running services like that” (London FG)

This presents ongoing issues for library authorities and their existing staff, concerning the resistance to change already discussed. There is seemingly a difference between 'older' and 'younger' staff members in their propensity to adapt to change, or retreat to 'comfort zones'. This presents the theory that, within the empathy dynamic, some people have a natural aptitude to relate to communities and groups, which can't necessarily be defined as a set of skills, or be achieved via training and development:

“...the older front line staff members will stay in their comfort zones, but I don't know if this is through choice or necessity... whether they think it's not their place, or whether they don't want it to be their place” (South East FG)

“... our younger staff just seem to be so much more pragmatic in approaching certain situations [with excluded groups]... they know what modern life is like, their from the community, they went to school with some of our young parents... they have a much better handle on things” (East Of England: Library and Customer Services Manager)

“So much depends on individual staff though doesn't it... we've got a branch in [locality] which is a deprived area with a lot of unemployment, drug abuse yada yada yada... and they have a lot of problems with people coming in, trashing the library and one staff member after another there has gone off on sick leave with stress... and the only one that's there now, she's very sparkly, she's very bright... she's like the character in Shameless, I can't remember her name [Fiona]... but Lucy is just the type who will say to those young people 'right settle down and get on with what you want to do if you want to stay'... she can relate to them, she's got that gift, and if we lost her we'd be back to people going off with stress every six months” (North East FG)

With reference to the perceived problems with children and young people, perhaps understandably, younger staff seem more able to engage with them on an empathic level:

“... in the evenings we tend to get quite a lot of trouble with younger teenagers, because we're assuming they have nowhere else to go and they get bored and agitated...generally a lot of them come round eventually because we have a lot of younger staff in this particular library, to the point where they probably don't respect you as such but they can identify with you because you're being friendly and on their terms, first name terms, things like that” (East of England FG)

With respect to role strain and the subsequent training/experience dilemma, respondents were extremely appreciative and respectful of the benefits gained from working with other agencies and drawing upon the skills of other sectors working in the social inclusion arena. Sectors mentioned in this context include the youth service, adult education, police and probationary services, the Red Cross, health workers and family learning practitioners. The success of partnership-based approaches encourages a new perspective and provides the required balance between existing provision and what can be realistically achieved by public libraries:

“I suppose sometimes the staff are not trained to do that kind of work. I was in a library in Scotland where they actually brought in a youth worker because of the troubles they had with young people and that helped the library staff to do their job but also to help with that problem, and then once that was resolved she was able to step back, because she had those skills... so I suppose it's just somewhere between training and inclination and how far you think you can go” (North East FG)

“There's some work going on with young refugee women with children, and young disadvantaged teenage mums... reading groups with the little ones trying to get mums to use the library... we have health visitor sessions in the library and that's how we get them in, and we're also working with the police... the youth service and young offenders team” (East Midlands FG)

“We’re doing quite a bit of work with travellers which is a result of having a restructuring in the county council, so we’re working much more closely with adult education and family learning service... we’ve just had a very successful project in [locality], a boxing project where we had the young men in researching their boxing which is apparently a huge thing for that community... they produced a book and were really excited about it... that’s resulted in more site visits across the county, and after school groups with traveller children using the IT suite... we’re hoping to really achieve something with them” (East of England FG)

“...we’ve got a pretty good idea from working with partners, because if you can get your partners to understand library and information services to the point where they can actually make a logical link... because we’ve got the red cross, refugee action, adult education... all working together with us” (East Midlands FG)

Other successful examples of partnership working with external agencies include the Surestart initiative, which helps to effectively target traditionally hard-to-reach groups. Cross-sectoral and inter-library working has also proved to be beneficial in providing joined-up thinking and seamless library provision:

“I do a lot of work with Surestart and we have very similar objectives to meet, so it’s an extremely useful partnership for us and a good way to reach hard to reach groups” (North West FG)

“I’m trying to get local authorities to agree to sign prisoners up to libraries before they leave prison... the reason being that they do actually become library users in prison, maybe for the first time... and we don’t want to lose that... but once they leave they tend to leave it all behind them, so I want them to go out with a library card and a leaflet in their hands, and maybe an appointment with a learning buddy... marrying it up is the bit with family learning, trying to educate them to take their kids to the library and tell them what goes on there. I think bringing those two things together could bring in that group of library users that haven’t been in before, I hope so anyway” (North East FG)

“...working as a consortium [on WTYL] has been really informative, and finding out what other authorities have been doing has been really good” (North East FG)

“We had another guy from prison... he pitched up at membership and put down his address as Bedford prison... the girl on membership slightly panicked... we have instant tickets where you don’t need any proof of ID, so she rang me in the office... I rang the prison, he’d been discharged, we gave him his instant ticket, put him on the internet and he did a search for accommodation that night. What better socially inclusive library service can you have? But the message had been got there because we have a prison library, and when I spoke to my colleague there she had done all the work, done all the selling that the library service is a good place to go” (London FG)

Working with specialist partners, other sectors and perhaps more significantly *volunteers* also helps to establish a ‘common core’ between library services, staff and users, and provide effective examples of genuine empathy in practice, which help to overcome cultural gaps between established library staff and community groups. Gaining the help of community volunteers for example helps to overcome issues surrounding trust and language barriers, and working in partnership with other agencies provides transitional benefits for users:

“...Mesa [youth volunteer] helped us with BME women’s groups and having her along with me when we had coffee mornings and stuff, just so she could be an extra person to chat to the women... we had an interpreter who came with us but it was nice to have a member of library staff who could chat to the group” (North East FG)

“It also benefits the community when people come in and see different people working there... its easier for them if they don’t speak English, or are refugees themselves, its easier for them to see other people and think OK, they’re not white, or traditionally white English” (East Midlands FG)

Respondents also commented on the operational benefits to the service of working with community volunteers, particularly from language and collection development perspectives:

“It helps to work with the communities themselves... we’ve been very fortunate in having some of Chinese community members catalogue our Chinese collection in English and Mandarin, so things like that help enormously” (East of England FG)

“...at the moment we’ve got a Polish volunteer at central and she’s really starting to sort things out, looking at the stock. It’s interesting in [authority] because we’ve got the older post-war Polish community and then there is this quite big gap before a new Polish community, which is creating some really interesting dynamics. Part of the benefits of working with communities themselves and volunteers is not just to get them working on assistant duties but actually looking at the service critically and looking at our stock, making suggestions and making sure they improve and develop” (East Midlands FG)

Staff themselves can benefit enormously from working alongside community volunteers in terms of learning about different cultures and overcoming any prejudices or uncertainties that may exist. One respondent in the East Midlands region commented on the interpersonal benefits for staff of working with refugee volunteers as part of the Welcome to Your Library project:

“And to hear especially the stories of refugees and asylum seekers [from WTYL volunteers]... for staff it really broke down a lot of those, not prejudices but the fact that they [library staff] didn’t really know what the difference between a refugee and an asylum seeker was, or what the processes they went through was, or their experiences in getting to that point... so a real major important area was for the staff really with people interacting, and in terms of the service that’s really benefited us, for communicating with people” (East Midlands FG)

Within the social inclusion context, this presents some interesting questions for public library authorities about established structures and practices within the profession, particularly with regards to professional qualifications, recruitment strategies and the traditional concept of the librarian. Respondents were asked to discuss the relevance of the traditional professional/non-professional structure for the twenty-first century public library. It would appear that authorities have different policies regarding the professional bar and appointment of qualified librarians for specific posts. It was felt in many cases that there had been a gradual flattening of the traditional professional hierarchy, and a considerable amount of work assimilation has already occurred in the mainstream service:

“...that hierarchical distinction doesn’t really exist in [authority] any more, it did once upon a time, a lot of people are doing jobs, non-qualified staff, that a few years ago would only ever have been done by qualified staff” (North East FG)

“From the opposite side of the coin, we don’t have that many library assistants around either so you know it’s all very well saying ‘this is not my job, I’m not doing that, that’s not a professional task’, but if you don’t do it then it aint going to get done” (North East FG)

Some respondents defended quite strongly the position of the professional librarian, and their relevance to the contemporary public library service. Arguments ‘for’ included a need for professional standards and accountability; the needs for specific training with regards to senior service management, finance, marketing and traditional skills such as subject knowledge, stock selection and cataloguing; the professional staff member’s ability to do ‘additional’ work in the community when not responsible for manning service points etc:

“...we have to keep professional standards... I disagree with the move towards retail standards and the negative assumption that library work is easy... librarians are as qualified as doctors and should be recognised as such... as the remit of public libraries gets more and more challenging we need professional skills to deliver the best service” (South East FG)

“...internally promoted experienced non-professionals can get caught up in restructurings and end up struggling and out of their depth... How much better to have professionally designated roles for librarians, finance, marketing, training, senior managers and leaders so people have some professional training for what they are doing? Now that professional librarians rarely work on the front counters, the standard of service to the public has dropped hugely as the non professional staff struggle to answer detailed enquiries, and keep having to seek a professional librarian to help them. Specialist librarians have an essential body of knowledge, whether cataloguing, local history resources, children’s literature, stock, indexing etc. It gives a far better service to the public for a qualified librarian to establish and run a service than for someone who has to make it up as they go along.” (South West FG)

“I think to answer the question, there is still a place for professional staff. Also I mean speaking from my own point of view, the library assistants are tied to the branch, they don’t go out in the community, because they’re only employed for the time that they need to be in the branch, so any promotional work or outreach would be down to senior staff” (North East FG)

“I find the lack of appreciation that is becoming apparent in some authorities lately for the fact that professionals have committed themselves to the profession by qualifying very depressing.”
(South West FG)

How do the ‘for’ arguments relate to comments already made concerning the (arguably generic and interpersonal) skills and attributes needed to engage with communities, target the socially excluded and provide relevant services? Those in the ‘against’ camp argue that experience of working with communities is more relevant than professional training and qualifications:

“...in the old days we used to only have chartered librarians but now in the city they’ve taken off that as an essential, you can actually be a senior community librarian if you have experience of working with the communities and not necessarily a degree, so that barrier has gone and its opened it up to what experience people actually have when looking at is as a career... maybe they started off as library assistants and move on to become SLAs [Senior Library Assistants] and community librarians, and then senior community librarians” (East Midlands FG)

“There was a restructuring about 3 years ago and a ring-fenced librarian was given the new post of Social Inclusion Officer. Should that librarian leave, then a non librarian would probably be appointed, and at that time the job description & person specs would probably be amended to encourage a wider range of applicants.” (South West FG)

“We have what we call as I say a library outreach worker... so her job now is very specific to undertake outreach all the time and it’s not a requirement that she is a qualified librarian, so what we’ve said is that outreach and communication in the community [associated skills and experience] is a vital thing” (London FG)

Experience of working in other sectors was also considered to be more appropriate than a library qualification, particularly in sectors where identifying and responding to the needs of the customer are essential:

“I’m a senior librarian with no library background... I’ve only worked in the library service for two and a half years and I was managing bars and things like that before this... they wanted a degree in something and a certain amount of experience... from their position they had started to see that you can bring in skills from other areas and maybe even bring a whole new aspect to working in libraries” (London FG)

“...there are all sorts of skills that you get from other professions where there is a more direct or stronger link with customers, which isn’t necessarily something that you can get from a management course either. To take on staff from the private sector who have had to make their business make money, they’ve had to listen to the customers that they’re dealing with otherwise they go under, it’s a different way of thinking” (London FG)

The flattening of traditional hierarchies and work assimilation is also causing tension within services concerning pay and status, questioning the organisational relevance of the professional bar. It is accepted that public library staff need a certain level of educational attainment, but given the continuously changing demands and expectations of the sector as a whole, the given role conflicts and increased benefits of partnership working, the usefulness of a prescribed course of study or training programme has been questioned:

“I think you have to respect the skills and experience of qualified librarians, but then again, I know that people are basically doing the same job for a lot less status or recognition and money. We’re lucky in that we’re a relatively small, mostly community based service and are never made to feel conscious of hierarchy and status, but it is a growing problem for some I know working in other services. It generates a lot of demotivation and low staff morale” (North West FG)

“When you say non-professional staff, with the experience they’ve got they know so much more and out-professionalize those higher up the food chain every time” (East of England FG)

“I think it’s important to have literate, articulate, learned people who can appreciate the quality of the information they’re providing on behalf of their customer... if someone is educated to degree level they should certainly be able to do that, irrespective of what the degree is in” (West Midlands FG)

“...who knows what a twenty-first century public library is really going to develop in to? Its really mutable at the moment and if they try to prescribe it with regards to training, some of it will be relevant but some won’t... by the time I’d done my chartership training at [university], by the time I actually worked in a library, it didn’t seem relevant to the job I got, so it makes you wonder... they should be looking at trends ahead rather than what used to be... you can do individual core modules on human resources and so on, but if you don’t work in human resources they’re not much use” (East Midlands FG)