



## Suffolk Libraries Consultation

**Older people**  
**People with learning disabilities**  
**People with mental health issues**  
**People with physical disabilities**  
**Family Carers**

Summary  
Report

Commissioned by Suffolk County Council  
from Cultural Intelligence Ltd

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## Introduction

In 2009, Suffolk County Council commissioned Cultural Intelligence Ltd to develop a programme of consultation with five of its key customer groups.

The groups were:

- People with a physical disability
- People with a learning disability
- Family carers
- Older people
- People with mental health issues

The consultation sought to improve understanding of the target groups, their experience of using libraries and their library and information needs and to explore opportunities for future development of the service. The exercise was to be wholly qualitative in nature.

In view of the diverse range of abilities of the consultees and the topics to be explored, Cultural Intelligence recommended a creative approach and appointed an experienced Suffolk based Artist, Caroline Wright, to help develop and deliver a programme of creative consultation workshops.



Figure 1 Illustrating Dream Library model

As trust is of key importance to successful consultation with vulnerable groups, workshops were hosted by trusted agencies who work regularly with members of the target groups. We are grateful to the partner organisations who collaborated on this project (see page 12). We are also grateful to the 177 people who participated in the workshops which were held in rural and urban settings across Suffolk.

## Findings

The full report includes over sixty pages of findings, quotes and pictures. A summary can necessarily only cover the main findings. There was considerable overlap between the groups particularly **Older people** and **Family carers** and **Older people** and **People with physical disabilities**. Several participants could have been included in three or possibly more of the target groups.

In general, the consultation found that, for each of the five target groups, the libraries service is contributing to the Suffolk County Council's community strategy as follows:

<p><b>The development of skills, ambitions and potential</b></p>	<p>The libraries were actively used by all five target groups for training or study. This was perhaps most applicable to Older people, a significant number of whom had participated in courses introducing them to computers and the internet or who had used the library as an environment in which to introduce themselves to the internet.</p>
<p><b>Enjoyment of the County, its natural resources and its heritage</b></p>	<p>Local history was frequently mentioned as a topic that participants in the study used the library for but most significant to this priority was the widespread use of the library as a source of what's on, community and travel information.</p>
<p><b>Well being, involvement in the community, social confidence and a sense of belonging</b></p>	<p>It was to this priority which the study found that libraries make the greatest contribution. Whilst access to information, reading and other media is the library's primary instrumental focus, their value to people as a safe, calm and inspirational public environment came across most strongly in this study.</p> <p>Benefits expressed under this priority extended from just spending time in the company of other people to active volunteering in the libraries.</p>
<p><b>Prosperity and lifestyle</b></p>	<p>Participants in this study had used the libraries for exploring training and employment opportunities as well as studying for vocational courses. Many used the library to enrich their lives through participation in hobbies and other interests.</p>

## Family carers

*“You do get stressed [as a carer]. I think to go into a library, you relax more. You can lift yourself up by whatever book you read. For a short time you forget everything that is going on”.*

Use of the libraries is as mixed for **Family carers** as it is for any of the other customer groups with some carers making weekly or monthly use of the libraries whilst others visit only occasionally or not at all.

A relaxing and tranquil environment in libraries was of particular importance to **Family carers** who often lead very stressful lives and find a therapeutic value in the library experience. Libraries are also seen as a relatively secure environment for many of the people they care for.

With very few exceptions participants were happy with the service they receive in libraries. For many, caring can be an isolating experience and **Family carers** valued libraries as an environment in which they can be in the company of others without necessarily knowing them.

Some critical comments were made about the limited range of specialist media (large print, audio books, etc) on the shelves in some libraries.

*“My cared for has a physical impairment, not mental, so it is difficult to keep him stimulated.”*

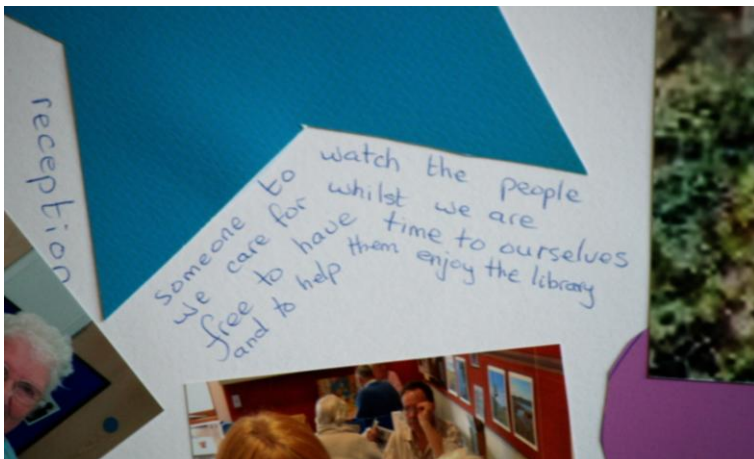


Figure 2 What a lot of carers would really like

Levels of knowledge about the library service in Suffolk were patchy with some carers not knowing about the availability of large print books or audio books which could be of value to the people they care for.

The main barrier to making fuller use of the libraries service was the severe time poverty experienced by most **Family carers**. Getting to the library is another barrier for many

carers with many needing to park close to the library as they care for a disabled person whilst others are dependent upon public transport.

For many carers, the distraction of having someone who permanently occupies part of their attention significantly inhibits their library experience. Carers with little time need to be able to find what they are looking for in a library without difficulty but many complained that this was not always possible. The difficulties extend from basic orientation in the library to understanding of the Dewey-decimal system and use of the library catalogue which is available only on computer.

*“The split attention is the main thing. When you are caring for someone, half your mind is always on them. You feel like you are on a long piece of elastic sometimes”*

Some **Family carers** explained that they would be wary of visiting a library in the company of the person they care for because that person could not always comply with the conventions of behaviour in a library which tend towards quiet and order.

**Family carers** seek tranquillity and relaxation from a library. Some carers recognise in libraries an environment in which they can spend time with the people they care for. Key factors for them are a very low cost and a relatively secure and tolerant environment.

They also require ease of use which includes ease of navigation, easily accessible toilets, wide automatic doors and wide aisles for those pushing wheelchairs. **Family carers** also prioritised plenty of bright natural light and an understanding attitude from staff.

**Family carers** also need a good information service. With so much information available primarily through the world wide web this also means continuing to offer easy access to the internet with support for beginners as many carers are not internet users at home. Access to books and other media are also important to carers and the people they care for, specialist media such as large print books are especially important as they are not readily available in charity shops.

## **People with a physical disability**

*“Years ago, people with a disability didn’t go out did they? Now, people want to go out and about and do the same as everybody else.”*

Almost all **people with a physical disability** had made use of a library at some time or another and some are still very regular users. However, quite a few had reduced their library use because of difficulties getting to the library. One or two were users of the ‘Libraries at home service’ and a few make regular use of a mobile library.

Those who do use libraries spoke highly of library staff. Though a good number used the library for borrowing books or conducting research, few had used it to access information about choices relating to their health.

The greatest barrier to **people with physical disabilities** making greater use of the libraries is that of physical accessibility. Many of the respondents were dependent upon others or on public transport to get around and their realm was much reduced as a consequence. Some people identified a lack of disabled parking whilst some said they were often too unwell to go out. Others complained of difficulty reaching books if they are not on middle level shelves whilst others noted difficulty negotiating steps up to mobile libraries.

**People with physical disabilities** were perhaps the least well informed group about the services available through libraries. This may in part be due to the reduced realm of engagement that many seemed to experience.

*“It’s not knowing where things are that stops me from going in”*

Easily accessible toilets, generously wide aisles, wide automatic doors and no steps were the most frequent requests from **people with physical disabilities**. As with other groups, they also asked for bright light.

In order to provide equal access to the catalogue and internet facilities the computers in libraries should include appropriate adaptive technologies.

*“We need computers with disabled access including a special large mouse, large screen, talking software with read-back, etc”*



Figure 3 Model produced by people with physical disabilities. This group took an approach dominated by written labels but this serves to communicate many of the points they wanted to make

The **participants with physical disabilities** included many users of large print and audio books. They commonly complained of a limited choice in these formats.

Although **people with physical disabilities** spoke well of staff, they noted that disability awareness training needs to be kept up to date.

## People with a learning disability

*“Libraries are good for going to take your mind off your worries”*

Although few **participants with learning disabilities** were able to read and write, there were quite a few who make regular use of a library however, many were only occasional or rare library users.

Their use tended to focus on information books rather than story based books with the graphical elements interesting them most. Several borrowed DVD's. Participants in this group were very unlikely to use the library to research information about health and welfare as they prefer to ask for advice from trusted associates.

For several of the **participants with learning difficulties** who are sufficiently independent to use buses on their own, libraries offer an informal, safe and familiar environment for them to visit independently. They were proud of this independence and said that a bus stop near to the library is a priority for them.

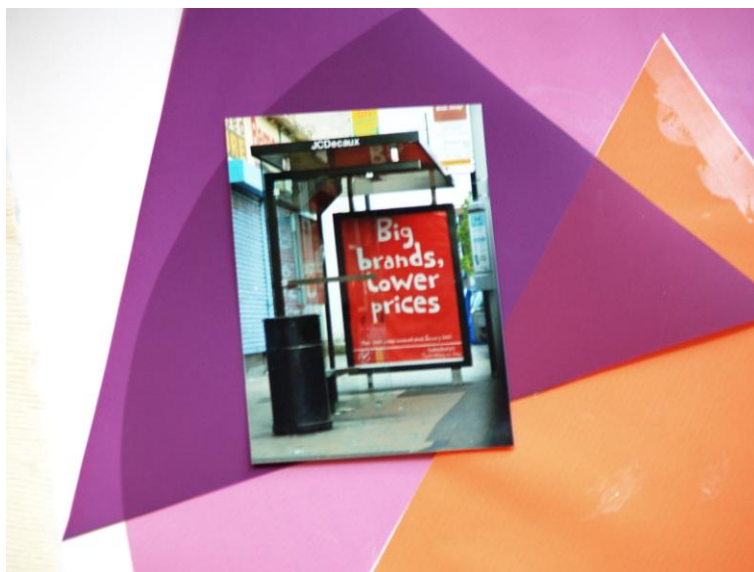


Figure 4 Good public transport links were of high importance to those people with a learning disability who were able to make independent use of public transport

The main barrier for many to making greater use of libraries was that the options they are offered are determined by parents and carers. If the parent or carer is a library user they were more likely to be given the opportunity to visit a library themselves.

*“From what I have seen today, [in Felixstowe library], my Sister would love this. She would love the social. I am glad it is not hush, hush because she is a chatterbox. I feel she would love this. She would enjoy supping coffee, having a biscuit and she has repetitive few lines and once she goes through that she just starts again.”*

Lack of familiarity with libraries is a significant barrier for some. Many associated libraries with enforced silence whilst quite a few regular users of computer games were unaware that libraries offer computer games for loan.

The convention of quiet in a library can be a barrier for some people with learning difficulties whose voices can tend to be louder than the norm or who have difficulty making themselves understood.

In order to access libraries more easily, **people with learning disabilities** need more signposting, orientation and resources. A friendly and approachable enquiry desk is a priority for this group.

Like all other groups in this study, **people with learning difficulties** prioritised cafés with good healthy food. The library for them was as much a place to spend time as to borrow books or DVDs.

Several **family carers of people with a learning disability** noted the shortage of books for adults who do not read well. They often end up looking for books in the children’s section which is not appropriate for older non-readers.

## **People with mental health issues**

*“I haven’t got special needs or anything but if I’ve got a problem they explain it straight away. I’ve never had a problem in the library. Even my friend Chxxy has never had a problem and he normally has problems wherever he goes.”*

It was notable that many younger urban dwelling **participants with mental health issues** make regular use of a library as a relatively safe and peaceful environment with plenty of interesting ways to spend time. The library did not fulfil the same role for the more rural dwelling participants.

The majority of these participants spoke positively about their experiences of libraries with several mentioning the feeling of cultural and intellectual enrichment they felt from just being surrounded by books.

*“ . . they need to be beautiful, you can’t escape to somewhere that isn’t beautiful. Why shouldn’t public places be beautiful?”*



Figure 5 All groups saw libraries as a place where they could spend time with other people and possibly meet new people

The barriers, for **people with mental health issues**, to greater participation in library services were broadly similar to those of the wider population such as lack of time and lack of familiarity. For several, their mental health condition inhibited their participation however, one person who is fearful of going to places on her own did say that a library might be the kind of place she would consider visiting alone.

It is the human face and a positive, uplifting atmosphere that was of greatest importance to **people with mental health issues**. Users value the relatively ordered, calm and safe environment where rules are well understood and generally observed. One or two noted that libraries are a good place to spend time alone without feeling self-conscious or insecure.

As with other groups, they value the provision of comfortable chairs which signal that people are welcome to stay a while and prioritised the provision of cafés in libraries.

*“You need to feel that you are worth having nice things”*

Many **people with mental health issues** are unable to work or have changeable residential arrangements. This can exclude them from access to the internet. Free access to the internet in libraries is of particular importance to younger members of this group for whom the internet has practical and social importance.

## Older people

*“They helped me to use the internet and I was able to find out about the arrangements for my granddaughter’s wedding. I did not know anything about it before, the wedding list, directions, reception hotel, times were all on the internet”*

Participants in the workshops for **Older people** tended to be relatively fit and independent. It should be noted however that many of the issues relating to **People with physical disabilities** also relate to **Older people** and that **Older people** were

commonly represented in workshops for **Family carers** and **People with mental health issues**.

Among all of the groups, **Older people** were the ones more likely to regularly use the library as a place to read newspapers and magazines. Few of the participants in this group were computer users and many of these had little interest in becoming so. This was despite the fact that they had noted a progressive level of exclusion as the internet gains dominance in the provision of public information.

**Older participants**, particularly those now living alone, value the human interaction of visiting the library and would rather visit in person than conduct the transaction by phone or using the internet.

*“I like to order my books in person, it means I get out and meet people”*

**Older people** made regular use of the library to access information about what’s on locally and about public transport but were often unaware of the availability of information on health and welfare issues.



Figure 6 *“If I could only read large print, I would want the same choice of books to read as other library users”*

Barriers for **Older people** included difficulty finding what they need in the library. As with other groups, **Older people** were very unlikely to be hands-on users of the library catalogue which is available only on computer.

**Older people** want their libraries to be bright, light and welcoming. Bright light is important not only to contribute to ambience but of practical value for people whose sight is not what it was. They need clear and consistent signposting within the library and all wanted cafe’s in libraries.

*“Keep up the good work. Thank you for the politeness and helpfulness of staff”*

Easy access to toilets are a major priority for **Older people**. Though many libraries have toilets for public use, it was commonly suggested that access to toilets in Suffolk libraries is sometimes somewhat protected.

## **Possible solutions and opportunities**

Most of the suggestions and solutions given in the report would be of benefit to all of the groups. The main ideas included:

- Offer easily accessible toilets
- Develop an easy to use touch-screen catalogue. Ideally one that doesn't look like a desktop computer.
- Conduct a lighting audit. To ensure that libraries have maximum levels of natural light.
- Develop a system of clear signage with non-literal symbols for those who do not read English well.
- Develop a basic guide on how to use a library.
- Review library layout at a local level taking note of the comments in the full report, in particular room for wheelchair users, accessible toilets, location of enquiry desks and availability and location of comfy chairs.
- Develop a guide to using the library computers to access the catalogue and internet. This should be designed to answer basic frequently asked questions so that people don't feel they have to bother library staff.
- Develop a programme of better communication, library familiarisation and outreach to the key target groups. This not only helps develop customer familiarisation with libraries but if conducted by library staff, will help the staff gain a better understanding of the needs of the target customer groups.
- Include cafés in libraries where viable.
- Try promoting a particular day or morning of the week where **Family carers** and the people they care for are especially welcome. Appropriate information and education programmes could provide a focus for these.
- Explore how libraries can extend their information services to these groups through hubs such as day centres and specialist agencies.
- Promote the availability of large print, audio books and other media. Awareness of these resources which can be of particular value to these groups was often low.

## Conclusion

The methodology was successful in engaging people within the target groups in effective consultation about libraries. The full findings of the study were often subtle and richly layered. The attention of the reader is therefore drawn to the full report.

It was noted that many participants in this study value the library service for reasons which extend well beyond the instrumental value of information, education and access to books. It may therefore be important to consider the extent to which the performance of libraries is evaluated against indicators which reflect these qualities.

## Acknowledgements

Whilst all consultation was conducted directly with members of the target groups we are grateful to the following agencies who supported us in accessing the participants by hosting or convening groups.

- Top Time, Felixstowe
- Suffolk Family Carers
- Out and About
- Optua Leisure
- Suffolk Befriending
- Mencap
- Mid-Suffolk Axis
- May Centre for Disabled People, Beccles
- East & West Suffolk MIND
- Crossroad – Caring for Carers, Lowestoft
- Felixstowe Resource Centre
- InsideOut Community
- Royal British Legion
- Bury Info Bar

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Photo credits: Eric Orme & Caroline Wright