



# Getting engaged

How effectively does your library service engage with its users? Not just the easily reached and often heard but the marginalised groups who don't have the clearest voices or the greatest influence? ERIC ORME from the Suffolk-based social research agency Cultural Intelligence shares the groundbreaking creative consultation work his organisation has undertaken for Suffolk County Council to research the experience, needs and views of its priority adult customer groups.



**Participants play the Information Game**  
picture: Cultural Intelligence

### Creative approach

We chose a creative approach because we needed a way of quickly engaging participants in abstract concepts such as access to information, the role that libraries play in their lives and how it feels to use them. We needed an approach which would work for a considerable range of abilities, from people with no reading and writing ability to people who have limited vision or don't talk or are reluctant to join in.

We decided to work with Caroline Wright, a successful Suffolk-based contemporary artist who has strong experience in leading arts activity with marginalised groups and has a particular interest in alternative means of communication. Together we developed a 90-minute consultation workshop with creative activity at its core. In order to explore people's experience of libraries, participants were invited to work in small groups to create a two-

dimensional model of a 'Dream Library' using coloured shapes in textiles, plastic and card, photographs, stickers and post-its.

The point was never that their creations would tell us everything they need to know about their experience of libraries and the needs they have. It was, rather, that it would help to engage participants in the subject and provide a context for working with them to expose the important issues.

### Evidence

Evidence was collected using video interviews and audio recording, flip-charts, the models they produced and through the games we played. For the analysis all evidence was bought together and coded against the research framework and a report written in the usual way.

We have found the method to be very successful and this is why:

- Groups found the idea of a creative workshop more attractive than a discussion group or similar traditional approach and were more willing to participate.
- The use of a creative approach signalled to partner agencies that we understood the constraints of working with their client groups and this engendered confidence in the process.
- The creative approach allowed us to establish non-verbal

When Suffolk County Council (SCC) invited us to put forward a proposal for research with people with learning disabilities, people with physical disabilities, people with mental health issues, family carers and older people, I think they knew that the task would require an approach that was a little different to the usual public meetings and focus groups. I am not sure they necessarily had in mind an approach that would involve tropical fish, a contemporary artist, fluffy amoeba shapes and photographs of ice cream.

### Challenges

The difficulty of successful public consultation is well known. It sounds so simple but is deceptively hard to get right. The first challenge is to be sure to reach people beyond the usual suspects. It is right to consult, service users want us to consult, but it can be mighty hard to engage with them in a meaningful way. It was the process of thinking carefully about the groups we needed to reach, that led us towards creative consultation workshops of around 90 minutes delivered where our target populations meet anyway, at clubs, drop-ins, classes and their workplace. This would help overcome a number of the challenges we had identified such as recruitment and transport and the need to quickly gain the trust of participants.

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means of consultation which allowed participants who are not adept at verbal or literal communication to contribute to the consultation.

- Working in small groups allowed us to ensure that each group included an appropriate mix of complimentary abilities.
- The creative approach helped to engage participants in a number of topics which they are unaccustomed to considering.
- It is believed that the exercises helped to tap into more creative levels of thought than a traditional approach would have produced.
- The creative design of the workshop allowed it to be easily adapted for different abilities and contexts and to evolve as the fieldwork period progressed.
- The creative approach helped to establish a level playing field for all participants. The target groups and their care workers underwent a shared experience encouraging those with less confidence to respond.
- The most important aspect of the approach was that it was fun. This kept the participants engaged and focused in a way that more traditional methods sometimes struggle to do.

It was successful enough that we repeated the methodology with the same groups for a project about how adults access the kind of information we all need to lead a full life, such as information about transport, education and

## Insight gained

"Cultural Intelligence gave us insights into citizens' experiences which we had never had before. We learned from users and non-users what it felt like, what was good and what was bad, and what they wanted to be different. Marginalised people are often those people who need our library services more than most. Unlike those of us who lead competent, and functioning lives, they may not have confidence, mobility, opportunities or income to enjoy what we take for granted.

With these insights we were able to fix some simple problems, reflect on bigger tensions or issues, and factor in their preferences into new design or refurbishments. It also gave us powerful evidence on planning for some of the services which public libraries can do for other agendas." Alison Wheeler, Head of Service Development for Suffolk County Council.

employment, housing, money, etc.

Reports on both projects are available to download from [www.researchingpeople.org.uk/resources](http://www.researchingpeople.org.uk/resources)

Eric Orme is Director, Cultural Intelligence Limited. You can find out more about Cultural Intelligence or CI's work at [www.researchingpeople.org.uk](http://www.researchingpeople.org.uk). We are considering developing a training package based on this approach. If you are interested please call us on 01394 388029.