

# Community Engagement in Public Libraries

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## ABSTRACT

An awareness of the importance of effective community engagement has been increasing over the past ten years. A number of public bodies in the U.K. and overseas have recognised the importance of engaging with local communities in their services and are tackling this issue. The purpose of this research is to investigate essential elements for effective community engagement in public libraries. This research takes a qualitative approach to capture both service providers' and service users' perspectives in the process of community engagement. This research will help to provide an overview of what is being done, leading to a detailed insight into what form community engagement can take and what makes it work, as well as the challenges. Hence, the research will inform future community engagement projects in library services and information services.

## Categories and Subject Descriptors

K.4.2 [Computers & society]: Social issues

## General Terms

Human Factors, Theory

## Keywords

Community engagement, Participation, Involvement, Public libraries

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Public libraries are often described in the literature as 'developers of social capital', 'civic agents' and 'community organizers' (Kranich, 2005; Budd, 2007; Willingham, 2008). Furthermore, it is widely acknowledged that community engagement can enhance public libraries' role in bridging together information and people.

However, limited research has investigated the role of community engagement for public libraries, in terms of social capital, human capital and cultural capital. Understanding the three capitals are crucial to the development of participation theories and practices

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in public libraries. This study explores the aims and objectives of community engagement in public libraries, drawing on theories of social capital, human capital and cultural capital. Its purpose is to identify the essential elements, as well as challenges, for effective community engagement in public libraries.

## 2. RESEARCH DEESIGN

This was an exploratory, qualitative study, involving three case studies in England. Three research methods: semi-structured interviews, direct observation and document analysis, were used to gather data. Both service providers' and service users' viewpoints were captured.

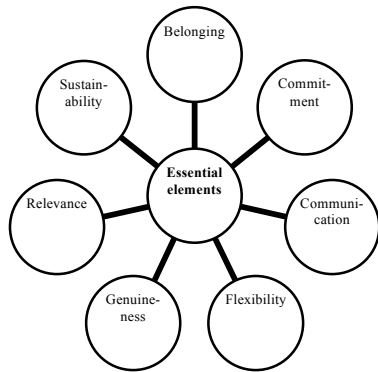
34 interviews, on a face-to-face basis, were conducted with library staff, local communities and partnership organization staff in the three selected case studies to obtain deep insights into the participants' perceptions of community engagement, elements that help make community engagement work, and challenges to stakeholders' engagement in the process of community engagement. In addition, nine relevant events and meetings were observed in order to capture key stakeholders' behaviors when they participated in community engagement events, and to understand the meanings of their behaviors in that setting. Finally, documents (e.g., government policies, meeting minutes and reports) were collected to help understand wider context as well as previous work on community engagement, and to help substantiate the findings.

Data was analyzed and coded, inductively, using the thematic analysis procedure described by Braun and Clarke (2006). Data was managed, using ATLAS.ti 6.1, qualitative data analysis software.

Using a range of data collection methods enabled triangulation of the data sources in order to enhance the validity of the research. Additionally, consistent and robust analysis and interpretation of the data helped ensure the validity of the research findings.

## 3. RESEARCH FINDINGS

Analysis of the data suggested seven essential elements for effective community engagement: belonging, commitment, communication, flexibility, genuineness, relevance and sustainability (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1. Essential elements for effective community engagement**

The findings of this research provided an insight into a range of elements for effective community engagement suggested by key stakeholders as well as their challenges to the engagement process, as seen in the three case studies. Seven elements put forward in this study should be viewed as equally important for effective community engagement. In addition, each element is interrelated and should not be viewed separately.

The research findings suggested that the involvement of local communities and partnership working were the two main strands in the community engagement process. However, these two strands did not stand alone as elements in this research model but were embedded within other essential elements. For instance, ‘flexibility’ underpinned the need for a flexible and adaptive approach in the methods of working with partnership organizations and engaging with local communities.

In addition, this model featured local communities at the centre of the community engagement process, reflecting the ethos of a genuine bottom-up approach in community engagement. It was suggested that a community project was community-initiated, community-led and self-sustained, and the library service acted as a facilitator.

Finally, this model highlighted the importance of the emotional support, i.e., belonging and commitment, from both service providers and service users in the process of community

engagement. This research found that the way in which the community engagement process was initiated, developed and sustained contributed to people feeling a sense of belonging, which would ultimately affect the outcome of community engagement.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

By addressing the purpose of this research, the findings provided essential elements for effective community engagement from the perspectives of both service providers and service users. Through the investigation, the research findings also identified the aims and objectives of community engagement for public library services, particularly in terms of social capital, human capital and cultural capital. The research findings enhanced the role of community engagement in improving public library services and the role of public libraries in promoting community engagement.

#### **5. FUTURE WORK**

Similarities and differences between the findings of this research and other community engagement models (e.g., Arnstein’s Ladder of Participation and Scottish Community Development Centre’s Key Purpose and Elements of Community Engagement Practice) will be identified. Based on the findings of this research, recommendations for effective community engagement will be presented.

#### **6. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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