

Engaging with 'hard-to-reach' groups through public libraries in Leicester, England



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Introduction:

In the midst of an economic recession, 'community engagement' is high on the new coalition government policies in the UK. How can the public library service, in conjunction with other local authority departments and outside agencies, help the new government achieve this goal? Leicester City Library works in partnership with Citizens' Eye community news agency to engage with so-called 'hard-to-reach' groups, including young people, older people, ex-offenders, homeless people, disabled people, refugees and asylum-seekers at a more personalised level.

Research question:

What are the key components for successful community engagement in public libraries?

Research methods:

This was an exploratory qualitative research study. A mix of research methods, including semi-structured interviews, direct observations and document analysis were adopted to identify key components for successful community engagement in Leicester Central Library, from the perspectives of key stakeholders – library staff, local communities and partners.

Research results:

Data analysis identified key components for success. The following table shows 7 components that help make community engagement work. The fundamental characteristics of each component are shown below.



Communi-cative	Belonging	Relevance	Flexibility	Sustain-ability	Genuine	Commit-ment
Identifying community needs	Communities feeling a sense of belonging to the library	Carrying out a service that was relevant to key stakeholders	Working with multi-partners	Beyond project work	Understanding what community engagement is	Commitment from key stakeholders
Fulfilling the statutory duty	Libraries being part of the community	Stakeholders sharing the same goal	Adopting various ways of working with partnership organisations	Being integrated into the library service	Not ticking boxes	People being emotionally engaged
Generating ideas and looking for solutions to problems	Library services being developed with the input from the community	Identifying mutual benefits to key stakeholders	Involving different communities	Increasing capacities through partnership	Breaking down misconceptions	Enthusiasm and passion
Listening, honesty and openness	Libraries acting as a facilitator	Stakeholders having things in common	Embracing different methods to engage with communities	Building a personal relationship with wider communities	Really involving communities in the library service	Trust and support
Two-way dialogues					Realistically working in partnership	