



Your ideas



Community engagement workshops: what you told us

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Introduction

This booklet aims to pull together much of the learning shared through the Big Lottery Fund's Community Engagement workshops held during November 2009. These workshops brought together those at the front-line of Community Libraries projects to share current and potentially new ways of working, and in particular to talk through common challenges faced when engaging with communities. What we share with you here is a record of some of the suggestions and ideas you exchanged for overcoming these challenges, helping you to learn from others' experiences and successes and come up with new ideas of your own.

Some of you will relate to just a few of the challenges captured in this document; others to many. It's impossible to fully reflect all the great work and current practice discussed at our workshops in just a few pages, but we hope to provide you with a good flavour of the ideas generated, to help you on the path to success. It is important to remember that this resource should be viewed as a guide only. Whether anything here is useful to you, and whether you choose to use it, will depend entirely on the needs of your library and local community. However, we strongly encourage you to keep talking and sharing your successes (and occasional failures) with each other through the life of your project (see Who can help? section) and to consider looking outside the Library service for other ideas and tried-and-tested alternatives.

We would like to thank all those who attended and contributed to the workshops, and wish you every success.

Below are ten 'top tips' extracted from what you told us. They cut across many of the challenges we explored.

1. Communicate

It may be clichéd, but regular two-way, clear communication with staff, managers, volunteers, sponsors and the public at large is crucial to your success. Consider promoting the project, selling the benefits it can bring to various audiences, and be clear in your roles, responsibilities and decision making. Don't shy away from social media such as Facebook; it's the future!

2. Don't reinvent the wheel

Seek out existing organisations, partners, networks and experts in your area and council. Work with schools, voluntary groups, other services and practitioners and save time, money and stress.

3. Get staff on board

Involving staff at the earliest opportunity and empowering them to contribute ideas, take on roles or solve their own problems can help contribute to a shared vision and a stronger chance of success.

4. Get out there

Don't wait for people to come to you – go find them! Talk to people outside the library, in shopping centres, pubs, schools and sports facilities. Go to existing meetings and promote the project in your library and out in the community. Some projects have used posters, 'consultation caravans' and local media to raise awareness.

5. Use project champions

Spread the word through people who already support you, whether its library users, councillors, volunteers, or schools and other services. Getting young people on board can snowball support across siblings, parents, schools and other groups.

6. Sell the benefits

Make sure all of the people involved in your project, from volunteers, staff and council management to the community, know what's in it for them. Recognise and celebrate the value people bring to your project. How else might you reward it? Consider accreditations, references, vouchers or free use of services 'in-kind'.

7. Trust

Relationships are extremely important in any project. Train your staff and build up their confidence and skills, and make time to listen and act on their feedback. You can't please everyone but tell them why something might not be possible – and show them when it is.

8. Publicise

One of the biggest problems faced is people's perception of libraries. Help change it by celebrating your successes in the media, in your council and with your community. Tell people's stories and sell them the difference your project is making.

9. Be flexible

Roll with change – rise to challenges faced and treat them as opportunities to try something else. Keep 'rules' to a minimum and encourage a sense of fun, give staff and volunteers 'permission to fail' and try new things. Be aware of, and responsive to changing community needs.

10. Variety

Try to provide a range of stock, facilities and activities that meet a wide range of needs (influenced by your local residents), in the most versatile space you can offer. Consider more flexible opening hours to best meet the needs of your local community.

Reaching others outside of the 'usual suspects'

Reaching others outside of the 'usual suspects' can be really challenging. Libraries can be perceived as 'boring' and a place to 'be quiet' which act as barriers to engagement. People may also find the library difficult to access, have language barriers or respond to different methods of communication than those traditionally used.

Workshop attendees identified the following groups as harder to reach: current non-users, black and minority ethnic (BME) communities, older people, young people, the unemployed, homeless, migrant workers, travelers and people with disabilities.

Your ideas:

- ▶ Promote and publicise your transformed library and the new services it offers as widely as possible. Hold imaginative events outside of the library space, considering what might be of interest to 'hard to reach' groups. Promote the library as a neutral place where other agencies, groups and organisations can provide services.
 - ▶ Use social media as a tool to communicate with library users and others – you could create a Facebook group to allow you to post updates and new information instantly, letting people sign up to become 'fans'.
 - ▶ Explore options of self-service and more flexible opening hours if appropriate.
 - ▶ Where possible, recruit a diverse workforce and volunteers representative of the local community. It may also help to have community language speakers on hand for translation purposes.
 - ▶ Access Local Authority translation services to ensure the stock meets the needs of all community members and offer specific services that respond to particular needs. For example, some libraries offer storytelling in different languages.
 - ▶ Offer tailored facilities and services for people with disabilities, such as assisted technology and reading groups for the hearing or visually impaired.
- ▶ Make contact with existing community groups and community champions, using their local knowledge and connections to encourage participation from those currently not engaged.
 - ▶ Consider taking the library out to 'hard to reach' non-users such as the homeless, unemployed and migrant workers. You could try door-knocking to get people involved in projects or stock selection, translating informative posters into relevant languages, or removing the need for ID when signing up to the library. Providing incentives for engagement or working with the Local Authority to engage refugees and asylum seekers through the 'Welcome to your Library' initiative, are other options you could try.

For further ideas around engaging Young People, please see page 13.

Ensuring representation from BME communities

Being inclusive of all your local black, minority ethnic (BME) communities can be a challenge due to the variety of languages spoken and different cultures. It can be difficult to maintain stock that is reflective of diverse needs and to make sure people feel comfortable using the library service. It can also be difficult just knowing who's out there; local populations can often change fast, with statistics quickly becoming out of date.

Your ideas:

- ▶ Employ a community engagement officer. It can take a long time to build up contacts and someone dedicated to this task will make far better progress. They can link with key workers in the council who may already have made in-roads to different sectors of the community, and utilise schools and interpreting services. They might also be able to use social networking sites to find out about local community groups and make contact with places of worship, CVS/voluntary action groups, day centres etc.
- ▶ Brief community leaders about library services so they can spread the word – and perhaps even act as translators at events. Find out where ESOL classes are being held, then visit and invite students to a library tour. Seek out community workers, existing networks and community groups and use these to access residents. Use local media, specific community newspapers, or talk to people in shopping centres, etc.
- ▶ Find out which shops, health centres, dentists etc are regularly used and circulate leaflets or posters (in community languages where possible), telling people about the services and activities you provide. Emphasise how accessing these services can be of benefit – perhaps meeting new people, offering a safe place for women and children to go, providing IT support and books in community languages.
- ▶ Develop specific programmes for a community group you wish to reach – once you involve people in one activity they're more likely to return and encourage others. For example, consider a homework club in partnership with a local school. Children can get used to using the library and may encourage their siblings and parents to come in too. Intergenerational projects, such as cultural history, might also work.
- ▶ Where possible, try to ensure staff members are culturally diverse and can speak some of the local community's languages. Provide training to help staff recognise and offer help when someone might be struggling with written/spoken English, for example, in completing registration forms. Being polite and respectful is essential; knowing what's appropriate for a particular community can help you build relationships and trust. Have a set of customer care standards. Deliver on your promises, admit it if mistakes are made and try again!
- ▶ Remember, one size does not fit all; consider different strategies for each community you wish to target. One library discovered that their local community wanted a cinema project. The library responded, and through this, that community became more involved with the library. Where possible, consider the day and time you run activities, as some might not be appropriate on religious grounds.
- ▶ Indirect strategies can sometimes work better, for example, asking a community leader to consult with their community on your behalf and feed back to you afterwards. Find out what people want and then respond. Start off with small, practical services that can be delivered quickly.

Taking current library users with you through change

Many of your staff and existing customers might be fearful of the changes you're planning to make, and may have very fixed views of what a library ought to be. They may fear new services, new users from different sectors of the community or the prospect of more noise. They might not understand why you're doing it and how they might actually benefit. On the other hand, many might be very excited about the prospect of change and be potential champions/volunteers throughout the project, so you'll want to capitalise on this and keep them on board.

Your ideas:

- ▶ Involve people from the start and invite them to contribute ideas or talk about their anxieties. Understand their needs and agendas and seek to make provision for that – or explain why you can't. Sell the benefits of the new library space/services and communicate with them frequently, in a way that's comfortable for them.
 - ▶ Where people have expressed anxieties around different groups using the library more, think of ways to dispel myths and build relationships. Intergenerational work, such as young people interviewing older people about their lives/memories, can work very well. Consider working with other organisations and networks to build relationships and bring people together.
 - ▶ Try to think about how you communicate. Make sure it is appropriate to the audience, vary your methods and see if you can get volunteers or the community themselves to take on writing a newsletter, for example. This can not only generate greater ownership, but is also more sustainable. Social networking websites can reach audiences very quickly and are a great way of engaging with young people. Use the local press and other community newsletters to reach residents. If possible, go to your audience; visit shopping centres, pubs, community centres, children's play centres and schools to 'sell' your project and raise awareness.
- ▶ Get existing users on board to act as champions or advocates for the project. If you can get some of these people involved in or running events for you, they will spread the word among their friends, families and communities.
 - ▶ Use existing organisations or teams within the council to help promote the project and for sourcing volunteers. Work with partners such as neighbourhood management teams, residents associations, schools and so on. Try to attend relevant meetings and network to get invitations to others.
 - ▶ Be mindful of the timing of events/activities so they're suitable for your target audience or wider community. It's important to be considerate of particular needs in order to be inclusive and engage with BME, deprived, transient and other communities. Clarify common expectations and establish acceptable behaviours.

Getting 'buy-in' to community engagement at senior levels of the council

An understanding of community engagement at senior levels can have a real impact on a project's chances of success. Senior council managers who embrace attempts to move away from traditional ways of doing things, by giving decision-making 'power' to local residents, foster empowered communities that feel listened to. Getting this level of buy-in however, can be difficult to achieve.

Your ideas:

- ▶ Remind senior managers of the agreed outcomes of the project and what the council has signed up to if possible. Focus on the 'bigger picture' benefits of community engagement beyond just the library service; be clear where your outcomes or achievements will fit in with and reinforce other council strategies.
- ▶ Make sure you have good measuring systems in place so you can gather and share evidence on the benefits community engagement is delivering through your project. You will need to make sure the right information gets in front of the right people in order to achieve the greatest impact.
- ▶ Use your people! Your 'champions' can be immensely influential, for example, generating local press coverage to celebrate the achievements and contributions made by the community. Volunteers can make a real difference by influencing their own councillors directly by singing the praises of the project. Equally, getting a few councillors on board from the start and keeping them regularly informed or involved can pay dividends when they champion the project for you among their colleagues.
- ▶ Time is often a challenge when talking about influencing and getting buy-in/support for your work. However, working smartly with volunteers or partners can help overcome this.

- ▶ Look for good practice and guidance from outside the sector too; community engagement is happening all around us and probably in many other projects the council is supporting. Pull the collective benefits of this together for a more powerful message.
- ▶ Have clear roles and responsibilities as well as defined decision-making channels from the start, and manage expectations accordingly. Volunteers and staff may need to know exactly where the limits of their influence might be.

Volunteers – how to recruit and retain them

Many libraries have raised the issue of recruiting volunteers, particularly those outside of the ‘usual suspects’, and keeping them interested and involved in the project. Co-ordinating and managing volunteers can be complex and time-consuming, and keeping them involved long-term is difficult. They may have a lack of confidence or skills, complicated lives with little spare time or they could be unsure about the formalities of working with statutory agencies.

Your ideas:

- ▶ Raise the profile of the library by taking it out into the community, perhaps using a mobile library van or having a presence at community events. Seek out press opportunities and host events and non-traditional activities (such as five-a-side football, table football, salsa nights etc) at the library.
- ▶ Ensure that consultation with the community is undertaken and that suggestions are considered and implemented where appropriate. You should also be willing to give up some control to volunteers, be it a formal management board/advisory group or less formal group of individuals. Seek to empower individuals, supporting them to make decisions and take ownership of the project. Give people different ways to contribute their opinions too – one library set up a Big Brother-style diary room.
- ▶ Give local staff the chance to be part of the recruitment process for volunteers, highlighting the benefits that freeing up their time can bring. Be clear from the beginning about the roles of volunteers and staff using role profiles, policies and clear lines for reporting. Try to match skills to roles and manage expectations about the volunteer positions.
- ▶ Create opportunities to bring staff and volunteers together, offering them joint training, team building days and chances to help develop relationships and learn from each other. Consider a training programme that builds up people’s skills and confidence to contribute more fully.
- ▶ Try to give volunteers tangible benefits depending on what motivates them – consider vouchers, expenses, training opportunities, work experience, qualifications, development paths to become volunteer mentors,

crèche facilities or opportunities to use the facilities for free. This allows the volunteers to feel valued and rewarded for their input.

- ▶ Have some fun! Find ways to increase the social benefits of volunteering or fun ways to engage and consult with the public. One library did a ‘Strictly Come Reading’ evening with Salsa classes, where staff dressed up!
- ▶ Seek out potential partners to save time, money and resources in recruiting, training and managing volunteers. Examples of potential partnerships could be volunteer co-ordinators within Local Authorities, local volunteer bureau, local universities, Duke of Edinburgh schemes, etc.
- ▶ Use a range of communication methods to suit different volunteers’ needs, such as email, social networking sites, and text messages, allowing you to communicate with your volunteers instantly. Avoid jargon.
- ▶ Offer a variety of opportunities for volunteering – both short and long-term, catering for a variety of people with different time commitments. Consider offering the opportunity to contribute to a certain number of meetings/events within a fixed time period, allowing more flexibility than a ‘once weekly’ format. Accept that some people won’t be in it for the long haul, but recognise that as an opportunity to recruit new people and gain different ideas or perspectives. Don’t be afraid to target ‘known’ people too or seek volunteers who are representative of a number of sectors, for example, a young carer within a BME group.
- ▶ Organise meetings with lots of notice and be clear about timings and purpose. Some people can feel intimidated by strong personalities, but it’s the library’s role to facilitate and ensure everyone has a voice. Over time, the chairing can be rotated as confidence and skills grow.
- ▶ Find ways for young people to contribute; they will often want to help, feel appreciated and involved. Perhaps they can be ‘roving reporters’, help with setting up rooms for meetings, or participate in a working/steering group that feeds into the management board.

Funding – getting more!

An issue facing all libraries is how to get more funding and maintain services and staffing in times of change. Despite financial uncertainty, the needs of your community still exist and will continue to develop over time. Your community may also have raised expectations of what you can do for them following the initial work you have done. The way your library is perceived by others – both within the local authority and externally – may also affect how easy it is to obtain future funding.

Your ideas:

- ▶ Publicise the library within the local authority, demonstrating community links and highlighting successes. This can help improve perceptions about the place of the library within the Local Authority, and help libraries to get more involved with developing local agenda such as participatory budgeting.
- ▶ Try to make sure the library is on an equal footing with other council departments. For example, you can develop a clear strategy and vision which will help to deliver more joined-up services across a local authority. This makes the library a key part of both the local and national outcomes that the authority is working towards.
- ▶ Consider plans for income generation and diversification, such as renting out rooms for commercial and community use if this is appropriate for your building and community.
- ▶ Work with councillors, local MPs and other cabinet members to demonstrate the importance and value of library services for the community, and help change the way the library is perceived. Try to offer examples of how the library's position in heart of the community can help achieve wider social objectives.
- ▶ Develop strong links with other community partners, such as Connexions, housing associations, the Citizens' Advice Bureau and local colleges, to help with long-term sustainability. Consider whether you can offer joined-up services or input to each other's work – it will raise the profile and credibility of both organisations and add value to both your customers.
- ▶ Maintain outreach work to help you respond to any changes in need and keep your finger on the community pulse. Keeping in touch with local residents will build trust and provide you with opportunities to demonstrate and promote your worth.
- ▶ Keep the community informed and involved in what is going on at all times. An engaged community carries greater weight in local authority discussions.

Engaging front-line staff

Front-line staff may feel that change is something being done to them, rather than something they are part of. As a result of this, they may be resistant. Staff may be very busy, and not have time to engage with information or training, especially if they are part-time or shift workers. They may also be fearful about threats to jobs (which can lead to a lack of incentive to change), changes to working patterns or conditions, or increasing numbers of volunteers and new users. In many cases, a lack of understanding can contribute to these fears.

Your ideas:

- ▶ Look for ways to keep everyone in the loop and minimise the rumour-mill – for example, use relief cover so that all-team meetings can be held in normal work time, close the library or do it out of hours if appropriate, and send regular email bulletins to all staff. Communication should be timely and transparent.
- ▶ Make communication two-way – listen to your staff's concerns and check their understanding of the changes taking place and the reasons behind them. Regular one-to-one meetings, an anonymous 'worry wall' or a suggestions box might help. Communicate with staff individually and let them know how they're valued and what you perceive their strengths to be. Be clear about the benefits change can bring to them as individuals.
- ▶ Spend time explaining project aims and objectives to staff. Give them the opportunity to ask questions and, most importantly, contribute their own ideas. Empower and involve them in the process of change and get them involved in the project at the earliest opportunity. It's particularly important to involve them in the building/design process so they have ownership of the new space.
- ▶ Deliver a tailored training session that responds to staff worries, aided by a neutral facilitator to map fears and empower staff to come up with their own solutions.
- ▶ Demonstrate your commitment to staff development by agreeing personal development plans that reflect the opportunities presented to the individual through the changes, building on existing skills and creating more variety or responsibility. Consider working towards an 'Investors in People' accreditation, and providing structured, relevant and timely training.
- ▶ Hold team-building exercises to help staff learn how to overcome challenges together. Arrange job shadowing or visits to other libraries to experience different environments, challenges and mind-sets.
- ▶ Arrange for local partners to hold awareness sessions on particular groups, such as people with mental health problems, to help staff better understand their needs. 'Targeted reading groups' can help to dispel myths.
- ▶ Recruit volunteers to add value to the project, rather than to fulfill a requirement to have volunteers – or to fill gaps left as a result of recruitment issues! Explore options with staff for making the best use of additional resource/time.
- ▶ Involve staff in external consultation/promotion so they get a feel for what the community needs and wants at an early stage and help staff recognise the community engagement they already do.
- ▶ Make sure members of staff know that as long as they try, they have permission to fail – and empower them to analyse what to do differently next time!

Getting young people through the door

Getting young people to appreciate what the library has to offer, and to contribute towards what it delivers, is a challenge for many libraries. Perceptions and stereotypes from young people, library staff and the general public litter this issue – for example, libraries may be regarded as ‘uncool’ or to have too many rules, young people may be seen as noisy or disruptive, and library staff may be viewed as inflexible. Staff may have limited experience of engaging with young people and the library as a whole may have struggled to actively find young people to engage with them. Also, young people often have limited spare time. Other issues could include safety and trust issues, for example, parental consent, CRB checks, or the lack of a specific space for young people within the library.

Your ideas:

- ▶ Go to them! Find out where young people are already going and ask them what would make them more likely to use a library. Consult through existing youth organisations/forums to find out what is ‘cool’ and needed in the area, but beware of ‘consultation fatigue’. Could you use results from existing research? If you’re asking them what they want, make sure you deliver on it or explain why something might not be possible. Show them you’ve listened and encourage them to be involved in promoting your project.
- ▶ Set up a young person’s library forum, across multiple library sites where it makes sense. Offer fun start-up events/projects such as pizza nights, games evenings or a time capsule project. Give them incentives to come and recognise the contribution they are making, for example, experience that can support their UCAS application, CV or lead to an accreditation. Help them develop new skills and give them an opportunity to contribute in a way that’s comfortable for them. Avoid jargon!
- ▶ Make use of modern technology for a young people’s section on the library website. Look into implementing social media such as Facebook and Twitter, or text messaging. Work in partnership with companies and places young people use to promote awareness of the library and what it offers.
- ▶ Passionate and enthusiastic staff can be invaluable library champions. Having a dedicated ‘youth librarian’, who is nearer in age to the young people, and up-to-date with current youth culture trends could be beneficial (but keep in mind your equal opportunities/recruitment policy!). If you’re incorporating a dedicated youth area in your library, consider the visibility of the space for health and safety reasons, as well as how it might impact on other users. Think about where it’s placed and potential noise.
- ▶ Look at ways of developing relationships with younger children and families and work with them to improve their transition into youth services. Team up with schools and other existing youth groups.
- ▶ Ask users to sign up to a behavioural contract, already common in schools and colleges, rather than displaying off-putting lists of rules. Where rules must be displayed, convert them into visual cartoons that encourage or discourage certain behaviours. Train staff in how to deal with young people and challenging behaviour, encouraging a culture of mutual respect between young people and staff.
- ▶ Co-ordinate with schools to make the library more relevant – for example, students studying the war poets may find an event featuring older people’s war memories very interesting and this could help bridge generational gaps and break down stereotypes. Link with curriculum requirements and involve the young people in selecting stock; help them decide how their budget is spent.
- ▶ Offer free use of library space for young people’s events (such as band nights or games tournaments) and consider providing them with technology such as music/recording equipment and game consoles, which will attract them into the library space and keep their interest.

For more helpful tips, see the section on recruiting and retaining volunteers on page 10.

Who can help?

Recruiting volunteers/volunteer policy:

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Listserv

For quick and easy access to support and ideas from fellow library practitioners involved in BIG-funded projects, or to share your successes and/or lessons learned, post your questions and experiences on:

www.mailtalk.ac.uk/cgi-bin/webadmin?SUBED1=communitylibraries&A=1

Further sources of information and support**Big Lottery Fund:**

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Useful supporting documents and links to other sources of information can be found at:
www2.biglotteryfund.org.uk/prog_community_libraries

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Regional Field Team:

see www.mla.gov.uk/about/region

Information, research and publications can be found at www.mla.gov.uk. You can access 'Community engagement in public libraries – a toolkit for public library staff – MLA & CSV consulting' at www.mla.gov.uk/what/publications/2006

Chartered Institute of Librarians and Information Professionals:

www.cilip.org.uk