Working Paper 16

Public libraries, Older People and Social Exclusion

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Abstract

This paper considers ways in which older people can be excluded in UK society and then reviews public library provision. It begins by considering the position of older people in the light of current social and economic policy, and also individuals' experience, and others' perceptions, of ageing. It then briefly reviews studies of the information needs of older people. UK public library policy and provision are then considered. Drawing on research on the social impact of public libraries, it is argued that public libraries represent a broadly positive, and valued, resource for older people. At the same time, the diversity of individuals grouped together as 'older people' is emphasised and it is suggested that this needs to be reflected in the delivery of library services. Much existing good practice is identified as being based on local partnerships and consultation, and the paper argues for the increased usage of these (September 2000).

1.   Introduction

This paper provides a selective review of contemporary public library provision to older people, focussing on the potential of library services to address exclusion. It does this by first looking at the general position of older people in UK society. Here, it argues that although they should not be considered as a homogenous group, some older people are amongst the most vulnerable in society. It also argues that older people are comparatively neglected in the Government's social exclusion agenda, with its emphasis on paid work, and refers to the material poverty of many. It then briefly considers the information needs of older people, before turning to public library provision. Specifically, recent work on the social impact of the public libraries is discussed, before drawing general conclusions.

2.   Older people and social exclusion

If older people are defined as being of pensionable age (i.e. men of 65 and over and women of 60 and over), there are over 10.6 million older people in the UK or 18.1% of the UK population. This figure includes 4.3 million people over 75 and 1.1 million over 85, with the proportion of women increasing significantly for the older groups (e.g. almost three quarters of those over 85 were women). These numbers are based on 1997 statistics, and it has been projected that there will be 11.8 million older people by 2011, and, allowing for the increase in female pension age to 65, 12 million by 2021 (Age Concern, 2000). A truism, in relation to older people, is that an ageing population will bring increasing social costs in the areas of

pensions and personal care[1] (see Dalley, 1998). However, only about 360,000 older people live in residential or nursing homes – belying the images of "dependency" that can be associated with ageing. A high proportion of older people, especially women, live alone; for example, 58% of women aged over 75 live on their own (Age Concern, 2000).

In what ways are older people excluded in UK society? Another of the truisms about older people is their heterogeneity as a social group (although statements about heterogeneity still do not prevent widespread use of age-based classification (Blaikie, 1999)). This diversity is a particular factor when considering the degree to which they are affected by social exclusion. As Kendall (1996) points out, the "older adult" group, between 55 and 100, can easily cover two generations. For this reason, many commentators refer to the heterogeneity of this group, and employ terms such as "older elderly," for those over 75 and "active elderly" for the younger group (Kendall, 1996). Reflecting this, incidence of limiting long-term illness increases significantly with old age. For example, the likelihood of dementia increases with the advance of old age, seriously affecting 5-8% of people over 65, but no less than 20% of people over 80 (Riordan and Whitmore, 1990). Overall, 59% of people aged 65-74, and 66% of those over-75s, had a long-standing illness, compared to 35% of the population as a whole (Age Concern, 2000).

Increased life expectancy in the 20th century, combined with the emergence of retirement, has resulted in the idea of the rise of the Third Age. Summarising Laslett's work on the life course, Blaikie refers to:-

> "…a division between the Third and Fourth Ages [that] effectively bisects the conventional category 'old age'. Whereas decline as one aged may once have been gradual, the shape of the biological survival curve now reflects an abbreviation of the Fourth Age, so that following a long period of relatively good health, final illness is more and more likely to be steeply compressed into the very last years of life, beyond age eighty-five".
> (Blaikie, 1999, p.10)

Laslett, however, argues that although the UK is numerically a Third Age Society, it has not achieved his idea of the Third Age as "the 'era of personal fulfilment' at a personal level and, collectively, a stage of cultural development where older people act as 'trustees for society'" (Blaikie, 1999, p.11). This conception of the Third Age is returned to in the discussion of public libraries. As implied in Laslett's view that the Third Age has not yet been achieved, ageist stereotypes still abound:-

> "At one recent event held by Help the Aged, the unequivocal answer to a question about the biggest difficulty facing older people was 'other people's attitudes'".
> (Harding, 1997, p.30)

> "Why is it that in a society where nearly one person in five is over retirement age, older people are virtually absent from our television screens? Except in stereotype roles, older people are very rarely included in adverts, and when presented on the small screen, all too often they are misrepresented as poor, decrepit, sick, stupid and asexual.

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[1] The focus of this paper is on current provision; the implications of demographic change are discussed in general reports on public libraries, such as that by Aslib (1995).

Yet audience research shows that older people form the most loyal and attentive section of the viewing public".
(Johnson, in Blaikie, 1999, p. 96)

Such negative perceptions have, arguably, been exacerbated by Government policy. Its benefits policies have directed resources towards means-tested benefits for older people, (Department of Social Security, 2000) putting an emphasis on dependency, rather than rights. Moreover, as Martin Dutch (1999) comments in his paper on government policy and social exclusion, the Blair Government's emphasis on inclusion through paid work obscures the needs of those for whom work is not an option[2]:

"For pensioners an 'employment' based strategy for alleviating poverty is by definition irrelevant…"
(Robinson, in Dutch, 1999, p.8).

Moreover, it has been argued that Government employment policy, focussed on younger people, has reinforced existing age discrimination in the job market (Harding, 1997), which has been described as "[p]erhaps the most tangible result of ageism, and certainly the most widely focused on" (Titley, 1993, p.12). In fairness to the Blair Government, more recent policy statements have the stated aim of changing assumptions about ageing, so helping people in the 50-65 age group stay in, or re-enter, the job market (Cabinet Office, 2000a). The Government has also launched the Better Government for Older People programme, which aims to improve public services for older people (Cabinet Office, 2000b). Nonetheless, the emphasis in the *Winning the Generation Game* (Cabinet Office, 2000a) report is on inclusion those below pensionable age through work. The paper from Help the Aged, quoted above, points out that paid employment is not the only means of achieving inclusion or "social health":

"Involvement in our own families, in community activities and in pursuing our individual interests and areas of expertise are also ways of continuing to have a meaningful and valued life…"
(Harding, 1997, p. 28)

A final important point is that ageist stereotypes of "dependent" older people have been challenged in recent years. A work on ageing and popular culture states that:-

"In the popular media, a vision which pictures old people as a passive and pathological problem group characterised by dependency has been partially eclipsed by 'positive ageing' messages about the hedonistic joys of leisured retirement".
(Blaikie, p. 14, 1999)

In summary, the rise of the Third Age can be seen in a positive view of later life as an "era of personal fulfilment" (Laslett, in Blaikie, 1999). Against this, even the most basic statistics, not to mention the ongoing political furore over the level of state pensions (Help the Aged, 1999; White, 2000), show that many older people are often profoundly affected by social exclusion. In fact, the latest Government "poverty audit" has found that the gap between the richest and poorest pensioners has widened (Department of Social Security, 2000). Tony

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[2] This argument is also made in relation to disabled people in Working Paper 11 of this series (Linley, 2000)

Blair has described the effects of social exclusion as shaming us a nation (Social Exclusion Unit, 1998, foreword). One final figure may serve to illustrate just how the social and economic situation of some older people is definitely a cause of national shame: in 1997, in England and Wales alone, the deaths of 158 older people involved hypothermia as the underlying cause (Age Concern, 1999).

As Bowen and Dee say "the idea of post-industrial society and the positive value of leisure … validates a situation where people leave the workforce, perhaps permanently, at 50 or even earlier". However, this emphasis "may mask the very real disadvantage experienced by older people and the lack of attention to variety of need" (Bowen and Dee, 1986, p.101). Information needs are briefly discussed in the next section.

3.   Information needs and skills

Time and space do not allow for a detailed examination of the information needs of older people. Instead, the available literature is used very selectively to consider some of the factors affecting provision of library and information services to older people.

Information needs can be approached from the perspective of what reports[3] have described as "transition points, critical points or life events" which can trigger an information need (Tester, 1992). Examples might include, say, diagnosis of an illness or moving into residential care. At the same time there have been criticisms of librarians' use of "medical" models of ageing (see Dee and Bowen, 1986). Cullen (1997) agrees that the information needs of older people have traditionally been seen as relating information about social welfare, pensions or care. He goes on to say that:-

"The changing nature of retirement means that these needs are in fact more specialised and diverse … Older people are increasingly coming to terms with the concept of retirement as a time of opportunity…."
(Cullen, 1997, p.111)

He then refers to educational, cultural and sporting programmes for older people and asks whether "library and information services meet these needs and are they keeping up with the massive changes that have occurred in the area of retirement?" These comments are written in an Irish context, but these questions seem equally relevant for UK library services. Addressing information needs of the kind mentioned by Cullen is important in terms of libraries' role in promoting inclusion through participation and personal development (issues which are discussed further below). Cullen also mentions the related area of information skills, commenting that "older people are a surprisingly large segment of the population using computers" (Joyce, in Cullen, 1997, p.111). This conclusion is supported by a recent survey by Age Concern and Microsoft which found that:-

- a quarter of over-50s used a PC in their spare time;

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[3] Mullings, C. 1989. *Famine amongst plenty: the paradox of information use by the elderly.* Bath: University of Bath. Troup, G. 1985. *Information and older people in Scotland: needs and strategies, a research report.* Edinburgh: Scottish Community Education Council. Both quoted in Tester (1992).

- 81% found it easy to use a PC so "the stereotype of older people being intimidated by computer technology couldn't be further from the truth";
- users preferred sites that "expanded their horizons" with learning and education sites being the most popular
- 64% of users felt that using a computer had made a positive difference to their lives.

(Age Concern, 2000)

Older people's use of ICT, in a public library setting, is briefly discussed in the final part of this paper.

Harding, who argues that older people need quite specialist information services, provides another perspective on information needs:-

> "Information alone is often of limited use – advice is often required as well. The problem for which older people seek help may only be part of the picture; an experienced adviser may be able to suggest different ways of approaching the problem and better ways of solving it. Familiarity and expertise may be required to access a service – many older people who complete a claim for attendance allowance are unsuccessful unless they have the advice of someone who understands what the assessors are looking for and can help the claimant find the right way to describe their circumstances".
> (Harding, 1997, p.30)

Continuing with this theme, Harding goes on to describe the need for advocacy services. In my earlier working paper, on disability, I argued that disabled people's information needs were often best met by specialist information services. Similarly, I would argue for some particularistic services targeted towards older people, for precisely the kind of reasons, and covering the subject areas, cited by Harding. Such provision can of course involve public libraries. The LIFE (Library of Information for the Elderly) project in Renfrew clearly takes a proactive approach to meeting the information needs of older people in targeted neighbourhoods, which from this description appears to have crossed into the areas of advice and information mentioned by Harding:-

> "Although established as a generalist information service LIFE has tended to focus on housing, benefits, aids and adaptations and money issues, helping many people to secure benefits and rebates to which they were entitled".
> (Matarasso, 1998, p.10)

Although a positive example, LIFE is also atypical in that it "is a pro-active information project, and as such needed additional resources, shaped by a clear policy commitment, to make it happen" (Worpole, 1999). Further examples of good practice are described in the ensuing discussion of public libraries.

4.Older people and public libraries

4.1   Library use and impact

At a basic level, many surveys suggest that older people use libraries more than younger adults (although, as discussed below, there seems to be stronger evidence that those older people who use public libraries are frequent/heavy users, than that a higher *proportion* of older people use libraries, compared to other age groups). Comedia's *Borrowed Time?* (1993), drawing on research in Birmingham reported by Lucas (1993)[4], refers to high usage by older people as a strength of libraries. More recent research suggests that 54% of over-65s are public library borrowers, the highest proportion amongst adult age groups (Book Marketing Limited, 2000). Other figures indicate that older people tend to use libraries more frequently than other sections of the population. For example, according to survey information collected in 1998, over-55s comprise 26% of the population, and 25% of library visitors, but are responsible for 36% of all library visits (Bohme and Spiller, 1999, p.14). The Department of National Heritage's Review of Public Libraries found that "among older users there is a dichotomy: people in the 60 plus age group either use public libraries either frequently or not at all, depending on their interests, eyesight and mobility" (Aslib, 1995, p.119). This reported high frequency of use is perhaps an indicator that the library is particularly valued by older people, and that library visits have a social value beyond the borrowing of reading material. This inference is supported by, for example, Comedia's Cleveland case study, where frequency of visit was suggested as an indicator of social impact (Comedia, 1993).

At the same time, it is possible to interpret these figures more critically; it could be reasonably expected that younger age groups, where most people are in work, might use libraries less than a group of people who are mainly retired. Here, there is a need to investigate reasons for non-use. Barriers to use, other than those mentioned by Aslib above, are suggested in the DCMS consultation document *Libraries for all.* These include institutional barriers, caused by libraries and staff and environmental barriers, such as "problem estates" and rural isolation (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 1999). It is easy to envisage that issues such as fear of crime and poor public transport in rural areas may be particular factors for some older people. Equally, there is need to see how usage figures interact with questions of social class, for example the lower levels of library membership for social classes D and E, found by BML in 1998 (Bohme and Spiller, 1999, p.14)[5]. Similarly, there appears to be little reported work specifically looking at library services to people from ethnic minority communities[6].

The *potential* relevance of public libraries to many older people is clear. Information needs have already been briefly discussed. Looking at needs more broadly, it has been said that:-

> "Retaining one's interests, one's skill and areas of expertise are not seen as a 'need' of older people. Especially as they reach their late seventies or eighties, there is an implicit expectation that they will sit back and cease to participate, cease to pursue their occupations and interests…"
> (Harding, 1997, p. 31)

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[4] This survey found that 70% of over-55s used the library at least monthly. Perhaps its finding that "98% of elderly people benefit from the library service" (Lucas, 1993, p.63) is somewhat doubtful.
[5] As discussed in other working papers in this series (Pateman, 1999; Muddiman, 1999).
[6] See Morrison (1993) for a description of the development of improved services to Asian elders.

Libraries undeniably represent a means for older people to pursue their interests. Moreover, the provision of a basically free service, and of housebound and mobile services, helps overcome the problem that:-

"From a practical point of view, staying active and involved is not always easy to do. With money in short supply and transport problematic, it can become more difficult to get out and about, and to keep active and in touch".
(Harding, 1997, p.31)

At this practical level, library services and professional groups have made considerable efforts to address these access issues, as reflected, for example, in the Library Association guidelines on housebound services (Library Association, 1991). In this context, it is interesting that the main allusion to older people in *Libraries for all* primarily refers to older people in relation to access to services:-

"Public library and information services should be available and accessible to everyone. To help to realise this goal, libraries should provide services to specific groups of citizens, such as older people and people with disabilities, to help them overcome their exclusion and enable them to be more active and informed. We encourage public library authorities to use mobile library services, particularly drawing on volunteers, to deliver books to housebound people in the community".
(Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 1999, p.16).

This policy objective is supported by an example of good practice describing Shropshire County Council's "specially adapted mobile library" (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 1999).

Services to housebound people are discussed briefly later in the paper, but the main focus here is on the *impact* of public libraries. Here the Aslib team received "many submissions from senior citizens, which emphasised the importance of library services in their lives". A typical comment was that:-

"My husband and I are retired and appreciate enormously the services which our local library in Wroxham provides. My elderly parents live with us and very much enjoy choosing books from the mobile library van which visits regularly. They would not be able to afford to buy all the books they read".
(Aslib, 1995, p. 122)

These comments suggest the importance of reading as a "continuing pleasure", which was found in a study of housebound services:-

"During the course of this study, the opportunity was provided to meet elderly people who spoke of the pleasure which they derive from reading: their comments reinforced the statistical data in the DHSS survey [which found that reading was the only leisure activity which did not deteriorate with age]. Active elderly people spoke of their enjoyment of reading with a purpose, tracing their family tree or learning about local history".
(Edmonds, 1991, p.59)

The importance of maintaining interests is also found in more general, non-LIS local research projects with older people. Drawing on these, Harding comments that:-

"Greater social contact and involvement with others appears to be associated with greater satisfaction with [older people's] lives and, literally, with survival. Quite simply, keeping up your interests and involvement with others is good for you".
(Harding, 1997, p.30)

These kinds of themes are developed in Matarasso's (1998) study of projects nominated for the Holt Jackson Community Initiative Award, now the Libraries Change Lives Award. Amongst the themes, identified by Matarasso, are impacts in the areas of personal development, social cohesion and health and well-being. For example, reflecting Harding's points, Horley Local History Centre was found to help develop social cohesion. The centre has "become something of a magnet for some of the older members of the community, who are pleased to meet people and share their interests in the not-so-distant past"; these volunteers at the centre also "help other visitors in their research" (Matarasso, 1998, p.27), so they feel their knowledge and skills are valued. It was noted earlier that many older people, especially those aged over 75, live alone (Age Concern, 1999) and it could therefore be anticipated that the value of this kind of social interaction would be particularly felt by these individuals.

The LIFE project, discussed above, was found to contribute to personal development by promoting new social networks, through users' links with the project's work. Within the general theme of health and well-being, the impact of local history/ local studies provision emerges in Matarasso's review of the Links Memories local history project in Fife and Shropshire Reminiscence. Shropshire Reminiscence is described as follows:-

"Through reminiscence sessions, training for care workers and an extensive loan collection of books, picture, tapes and artefacts, the project seeks to improve the quality of life of elderly people. Activities include craft work, art, creative writing as well as simply talking and sharing memories, but the purpose is not directly therapeutic. The emphasis is on reminiscence as a leisure activity, as something which people enjoy, for its own sake".
(Matarasso, 1998, p.41)

Although not considered in detail here, research in the health sector has demonstrated the quality of life benefits of reminiscence work. One researcher on reminiscence comments that:-

"Exclusion from the paid labour market, ageist images and public discussions about the burdens of old age do little to preserve the self-esteem of the older person. Using reminiscence techniques … can help maintain self-esteem".
(Tilki, 2000, p. 120)

Shropshire Reminiscence is also an example of the use of arts activity with older people, but generally there appears to be little evidence of the impact of this kind of work with older people. A paper by Morris (1993) suggests the potential of work in this area, and, especially, its importance in promoting positive images of ageing.

A strength of many of the projects discussed by Matarasso is a degree of "ownership". This suggests the importance of participation and consultation in delivering successful services. This is perhaps particularly true in the Links Memories project's impact in combating the disempowerment felt by older people deindustrialised Linktown area of Kirkcaldy in Fife – that is, in an area that might be defined as "excluded".

However positive these examples, it should be noted that the impacts described by Matarasso, relate to specific projects and initiatives, not the generality of library services to older people. Certainly, there is evidence of the library's importance of a provider of free reading materials (Aslib, 1995; Edmonds; 1991), and of having a broad social or caring role, as found in the case studies carried out in two deprived areas of Cleveland (Comedia, 1993). However, library services have been criticised for not responding to diversity of need; Dee and Bowen's national survey of services found that:-

> "Elders are defined as frail and with poor sight and emphasis is either on providing housebound services to isolated individuals, deposit collections to homes and day centres or adequate large-print material for branches and outreach services. There is very little evidence that the presence has been acknowledged of a younger group of active elders, who have had to leave the workforce in their fifties. … Since they are unlikely to be as well off as those in work, the free public library service will be especially valuable to them".
> (Dee and Bowen, 1986, p.75)

Following from this, Dee and Bowen also suggest that there has been insufficient attention paid to cost (in fines and reservation charges) as a barrier to take-up by older people, and also raise the question of budgetary allocations.

Much has probably changed since Dee and Bowen's research, and there is a need to see if their conclusions, especially around responsiveness to different needs, still hold true today.

4.2   Access to services

Barriers to take-up of library services are often described in relation to physical access to services. For older people, two key barriers often coupled together (for example by Edmonds, 1991; Aslib, 1995) are those associated with mobility problems and visual impairment. Visual impairment has already been considered in some detail in my working paper on disability (Linley, 2000), so, here, I will mainly discuss mobility issues, and, specifically, housebound services. One issue discussed in the earlier paper in relation to visual impairment, and worth noting in passing, is the importance of not making ageist assumptions about the kind of large print material that older people might want (see Linley, 2000; Rawsthorne, 1990).

Particularly relevant to the social exclusion agenda, the available literature suggests that there are inequities which may prevent older people receiving the services they need. This emerges especially strongly in Edmonds' (1991) large-scale review of services to older people, which focussed on housebound services. Concerns included the following issues:-

- "The criteria used to assess the suitability of applicants appear in some cases to place obstacles in the way of older people obtaining the housebound services", for example around requirements to live alone, or official/medical conformation of a need for a service.
- "Services are often not widely marketed", so potential users may not know of the service's availability.
- Delays are created by using waiting lists.
- "Different types of service are often provided within the same local authority boundaries … An example of this was provided by one local authority where volunteers deliver donated books in one area, while the library service provides a housebound service using library materials in another. However caring the volunteers are, it seems unlikely that donated material will provide the range of material or the variety of formats which are appropriate to the needs of elderly people".

(Edmonds, 1991, p.63)

The Aslib Team's trade-off analysis also had important findings in relation to users of housebound services:-

"Housebound users are reluctant to make any comment on the service which is not favourable. It is perhaps understandable that housebound users fear a loss or withdrawal of services almost more than any other users. Nevertheless, there are unfilled needs. … Unlike other users the housebound give less emphasis to more money spent on books. Housebound users would like access to a much wider range of services. … We recommend that library authorities examine ways in which services to the housebound can be broadened in scope; perhaps in conjunction with other service providers".
(Aslib, 1995, p. 197).

Like housebound people living in their own homes, those living in residential care may be affected by variations in services, or indeed whether there is access to a service at all. For example around private care homes should be charged for services:-

"While some librarians were willing to consider the possibility of charging privately-operated residential home for library services … others were concerned that the introduction of charges … might place their continuing availability at risk. The decision to purchase library services would be made by the managers of residential homes, rather than by individual residents: one librarian commented that she did not think residential homes should be charged 'because one is then penalising people who cannot get to a library because they are housebound'".
(Edmonds, 1991, p.66)

To conclude this discussion of access of issues, it is important to note that there are a proliferation of guidelines and recommendations on good practice (e.g. Library Association, 1991; Edmonds, 1991; Kendall, 1996). At the same time, there is evidence of variations in provision that may particularly affect some of the most frail and vulnerable elderly people. Some of this evidence is dated (e.g. Edmonds, 1991, and also Dee and Bowen, 1986), but nonetheless suggests that this an area where work around national benchmarking and

standards (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2000), and Best Value reviews, could be important in "levelling up" services.

4.3 Partnerships

Many of the positive examples of service provision mentioned by Matarasso (1998) are based on local partnerships. Other successful developments, based around partnership, can be found in the literature. One example here is Stockport Libraries' work with Age Concern to develop collections in day centres (Collinson and Murray, 1997). Two major research projects looking at public library provision to older people are somewhat critical of the level of collaborative work, with both statutory and non-statutory organisations, including other parts of local government (Dee and Bowen, 1986; Edmonds, 1991). The funding situation has changed so much, since the time of these two reports, that it would be unfair to assume that this is still the case today, but the key conclusion is the need for partnerships, most specifically with organisations and groups for, and of, older people, like Age Concern and the University of the Third Age, as well as other "professionals" (Titley, 1993; Kendall, 1996).

4.4 ICT and older people

Following the above discussion of information skills (in section 3 above), public libraries would appear to be well-placed, given the extent to which they are used by older people, to respond to needs in their area. One recent research project, carried out in Monmouthshire, following a targeted mailing, assessed Webwise taster sessions with older users. The study found how inexperienced older customers were with all aspects of the web, but also revealed their desire to learn about and use computers. Users placed the greatest importance on staff support when using IT and tutorials(Flatten et al, 2000). This last finding suggests the importance of staff support and staff attitudes.

An earlier report on older people and the Internet found a mixed picture in terms of older people's usage of the Internet, with visual and motor difficulties being an issue for some. It also found that many older people did not want to be burdened with maintaining PCs at home, so access in public libraries was vital if older people were not to be excluded from this technology. Here, it was concluded that libraries should have a role in encouraging older people to take up new technologies. (Blake, 1998).

Both these reports, then, are perhaps less sanguine than the general Age Concern (2000) survey about older people's use of ICT, but do suggest a proactive support and training role for public libraries. This will, of course, be especially the case for those older people who might be excluded by low skills and confidence.

5. Conclusion

This paper began by emphasising the heterogeneity of older people. Although the intention was not to replicate stereotypes of older people, the concepts of the Third and Fourth Ages were seen as helpful in understanding ageing. Equally, it was argued that a view of leisured retirement, typically associated with the concept of the Third Age, should not obscure either the diversity of need, or the real disadvantage, felt by many older people (Bowen and Dee, 1986). The discussion of information needs built upon the idea of the Third Age as a time of

personal growth, for example in learning new skills and developing new interests. However, I have also argued that, consistent with a view of the diversity of older people, there is a need for specialist and proactive services, often providing advocacy and advice as well as information (Harding, 1997). Here, it was argued that libraries could provide information services of this kind. However, in reality, these positive or proactive services have tended to exist only exceptionally (see Matarasso, 1998). This then suggests one possible line of criticism of public library services to older people – that it is proactive services, often based on local partnerships, that have the most obvious impacts in terms of quality of life benefits, but these are unevenly spread and often organised on a short-term basis; here, Matarasso raises specific questions about the sustainability of library projects.

At the level of library usage, baseline statistics suggest that older people are amongst the most frequent users of public libraries. For those older people who do use public libraries, there is evidence of impacts that can be broadly seen as promoting their inclusion. The one-off projects, discussed by Matarasso (1998), in particular, suggest that public libraries *can* have significant "quality of life" benefits for older people. More generally, reading appears to have a continuing importance, well into the Fourth Age (Edmonds, 1991).

Beyond this basic level, however, the paper has referred to some criticisms of the narrow and uneven range of services directed towards older people (clearly the examples described by Matarasso, and also ICT projects of the kind described by Flatten et al (2000) are exceptions to this view). The findings of the in-depth research project conducted by Dee and Bowen (1986) were expressed in criticism of some librarians for having a stereotypical view of older people which resulted in provision of a limited range of services (Dee and Bowen, in Kendall, 1996). How much has changed since then? Here, it is possible to agree with Edmonds (1991) that:-

> "Much of the literature on library provision for elderly people appears to be concentrate on the library, rather than the people; few of the reports in this field contain market research data on the needs and requirements of older people…
> "It is not difficult to list initiatives mentioned in the professional literature, but it is rather more difficult to estimate how evenly provision for elderly people is spread…"
> (Edmonds, 1991, p.12-13).

There is, then, a need for further research on both library and information needs, and to identify the extent to which this unevenness of provision, mentioned by Edmonds, still exists today.

Finally, what emerges most strongly is the complexity of responses to older people's library and information needs. An understanding of the diversity of needs can be underpinned by consultation, developing local partnerships and not making ageist assumptions about what services older people want. There are many challenges here, but libraries undoubtedly support the inclusion of older people, and have the potential to do even more.

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