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Justify or Die? – Using Contingent Valuation of Service Provision in a UK Public Library.

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Abstract:

The public library service in the UK is currently under pressure to justify its existence. An Audit Commission report suggested that if current borrowing rates for libraries continue into the future, libraries would be effectively issuing no books by 2020. Recently the Coates Report asserted about book loans that, “in simple terms, if a service is without separate charge and the public decides not to use it, then the service is de facto without any value to these individuals”. Yet Coates’ simplistic notions of the services public libraries provide lies at the heart of the problem. Performance indicators based on book loans are unable to assess ‘the totality of library effectiveness’. Conversely, qualitative analysis, interviewing users about service impact, shows that libraries ‘promote social cohesion and community confidence’. However qualitative findings are by nature not quantitative and not comparable. To try to produce a measure for service quality, contingent valuation was chosen. It elicits economic value judgements from users on both services they use and services they do not use.

A major independent study using contingent valuation was conducted by the Department of Computer and Information Sciences at the University of Strathclyde on East Renfrewshire Library Services, near Glasgow, which is recognised as an exemplary public library service. The study revealed the inability of contingent valuation to adequately assess the complex mix of services provided. The study concludes that an urgent rethink is required regarding measures for public library service evaluation.

The Public Library Service in the UK

Public libraries have long served as a leading public service institution in UK. However, the public library service in the UK is now a domain that is under pressure to justify its existence. A 2002 Audit Commission report for England suggested that if current borrowing rates for libraries continue into the future, libraries would be effectively issuing no books by 2020. (Audit Commission, 2002) This issue was taken up in 2004 by the contentious Coates Report, which asserted that, "in simple terms, if a service is without separate charge and the public decides not to use it, then the service is de facto without any value to these individuals." (Coates, 2004, p.5)

The most recent estimates for the cost of a national public library service put the cost at £1 billion pounds a year. This is a major public commitment of resources, and although the expenditure fairly reflects the wide range of services that are operated by today's public library service the domain remains an easy target for criticism due to outdated modes of measurement which threaten the development of the service, and a focus in the measurement on only part of the service environment, namely the lending of book materials.

However, over the years the role of public libraries have changed from institutions merely providing circulation and reference services to institutions taking a major part in educating and reinforcing society (Aabo 2005a). This has led to an explosion in the range of services provided by typical public libraries, which can be categorized into six inter-related strands:

1. Leisure services: lending books and media for leisure activities, offering drop-in access to read newspapers and magazines, allowing the use the library as a venue for community group meetings, maintaining listings of local events.
2. Information services: lending books and media as sources of information, providing reference services – both in person as well as virtual (e.g. Ask a Librarian, <http://www.ask-a-librarian.org.uk/>), maintaining community information listings, conserving and digitising local heritage collections and setting up and running web sites and intranets supporting the local community and local government services respectively.
3. Advice services: offering personal advice in vital areas like health, careers, social security/pensions, major life events, etc.
4. Learning services: fostering reader development, offering homework clubs and family learning programmes, developing lifelong learning in the community by means of basic literacy and numeracy initiatives, ICT skills training, and the provision of a wide range of networked learning resources, some of which might be self-produced.
5. Equity services: ensuring opportunity of access for all by means of housebound services, pensioner/young people's services, ethnic minority services and disability services
6. Citizenship services: encouraging the local community to participate in its governance through building community portals containing information on local government, central government and pan-national governments and agencies and on e-government services and functions

These strands are all inter-related in that, for example, lifelong learning can be fostered by online resources, by print and media materials, by community groups running events in the library, by linking with schools and other appropriate agencies, both local and national etc.

It is quite clear that, given the wide variety and the complexity of the services provided by the public libraries in today's world, it may be useful to set measurement criteria for each strand of service provided by public libraries and appropriate methods for data collection, which may comprise both qualitative and quantitative methods. However, evaluating strands is not the same thing as evaluating the whole package. Moreover, since public libraries are dependant in terms of service delivery and impact on the socio-economic infrastructure of their locality, it is important to attach appropriate conditions or parameters to performance criteria for each strand.

Current evaluation methods for public libraries

Given the diversity, complexity and novelty of service strands provided by public libraries, it is extremely important that a set of measurement criteria be developed and followed for evaluating these services that leads to an accountable, but service-development focussed sector. This has not happened for two reasons. First, national performance indicators currently implemented merely cover quantitative features of traditional services like book loans (Audit Scotland 2004). New services, or those without quantifiable outputs, are not covered at all. For example, the Accounts Commission in Scotland (2004) publish an annual report on the performance of public libraries in Scotland based on three Statutory Performance Indicators (SPIs):

- (1) Indicator 1: Borrowers as percentage of the resident population and the average number of issues per borrower. The report points out that this performance indicator may be influenced by such factors as the marketing policy on libraries, the nature of the stock of the libraries, the loan period and the number of items issues to the customers at a time, the location of the libraries, the demand for the stock, and the levels of investment on the stock.
- (2) Indicator 2: Changes in library stock measured by the library stock turnover per 1,000 population. This relates specifically to the expenditure on the collection development and is influenced by such factors as the demands for the various categories of document in the collection, the level of wear and tear, the level of loss of items, patterns of past investment in collection development, and income generated from certain types of collection, such as video renting.
- (3) Indicator 3: Book requested measured by the average time taken to satisfy book requests. This indicator is influenced by such factors as the level of demand and the availability, the efficiency of the currently practised ordering system, the loan period, and the late returns of items by the customers.

Clearly these indicators focus only on the lending services of the libraries which form only one part of the library services.

Second, qualitative measures exist but are flawed. In Scotland the Best Value regime in the public sector has focussed on using more qualitative measures to justify public services, which is welcome. Guidelines for assessing some of the more traditional library services have been developed by the Local Government Act and the SLIC (Scottish Library and Information Council) Best Value in Public Libraries initiative as audited by Audit Scotland. However the ability of local authorities to develop their own evaluation

criteria has led to a lottery in terms of what services are covered, and the exact criteria used. In a climate of criticism what is needed is a set of evaluation guidelines that all stakeholders – government, funding bodies, librarians and the general public – can use to assess the quality and value of public library services.

The problem of evaluating public library services has a long pedigree. “Public libraries have a long held tradition of using quantitative measures to assess performance and monitor trends” (Favret, 2000, p. 341). To try and counter the charge of irrelevance a new SPI on learning centre access has been added to compensate for declining borrowers and issue statistics. However one new indicator still means coverage falls far short of the breadth of service strands covered earlier. Not all authorities use all SPIs. For example, Argyll and Bute Council gather information for two of them. Even if authorities use the same SPIs comparison between authorities is difficult to obtain as using the same indicators for each authority would suggest that each authority operated under precisely the same circumstances and like was being compared for like. However, factors such as length of loan period, location of the library, local authority funding and investment in stock all vary from authority to authority and will undoubtedly influence the outcomes of SPIs. Therefore, an understanding of context and circumstance must be in place to interpret and fully appreciate the relevance of public library statistics:

“The initial conception of performance indicators as hard-edged market surrogates was badly flawed – the challenge now is to rescue PIs from a mechanistic and impoverished model of management.” (Midwinter and McVicar, 1996, p.29)

Moreover even if public libraries meet all of the SPIs this is still no hard indicator that “the real needs of users and non-users are being met or whether society is benefiting from public library use and offsetting the costs of providing for the service”. (Brophy, 1986, p.32).

“It is easy to measure output in terms of, for instance, average time taken to satisfy book requests but more difficult to measure the ultimate value of reading, literacy, information, and knowledge” (Linley and Usherwood, 1998, p. 85). It is a case of attempting to ‘measure the unmeasurable’ and performance indicators are unable to assess ‘the totality of library effectiveness’ (Sumsion, 1999, p.179). Qualitative analysis can be carried out in an attempt to gain a better understanding of service performance and the actual impact which the service has on its users. This approach takes context into consideration and allows for a more narrative measurement of impact.

There are many studies which outline the positive social impacts of the public library, for example learning in low achievers (Proctor and Bartle, 2002), the public library’s effects on social inclusion (Train et al. 2000) and adult basic skills (Train, 2003), the impact and value of homework clubs (Bevin and Goulding, 1999) and the public library’s role in family learning (Kirk et al. 2004). Linley and Usherwood (1998) state that:

“These findings are largely derived from qualitative, often anecdotal, evidence. The key message of this study is that qualitative data, properly gathered, are valid evidence and it should be treated as such by both politicians and professionals.”

This study took the form of a social process audit, discarding traditional quantitative performance measurement methods and focussed on the outcomes, impact and value of the public library rather than its outputs. The research therefore sought to analyse the

goals (aims), inputs (resources), outputs (the programme or service) and outcomes (actual experience) of the public library and information service. As a public service, the public library would be expected to hold certain social objectives and it is these objectives which act as the starting point for the social audit process. These objectives were likely to revolve around issues of social inclusion, community participation, outreach and equity of access for all. Interviews with stakeholders from a variety of locations (e.g. staff, users, councillors) were carried out in a variety of ways, alongside focus groups and workshops. Linley and Usherwood concluded that, in the two locations in which the studies were carried out, it was felt by many that the public library had a unifying influence on the community which helped to 'promote social cohesion and community confidence' and sustain community identity (1998, p.84). It was also found to have a social impact on user skills and confidence and proved psychologically beneficial for the isolated and vulnerable. In addition, it had an economic impact in the provision of resources for start-ups and successful job-seeking.

'Soft' data is seen as inferior to 'hard' data as generalising from qualitative findings is impossible. However, extrapolation is possible: 'modest speculations on the likely applicability of findings to other situations under similar, but not identical, conditions.' (Patton, 1987 in Linley and Usherwood, 1998). This is undeniably useful when measuring the value and impact of a public service. However, it is difficult to apply qualitative methods of measurement in a standard manner across different libraries and different local authority areas.

Contingent Valuation

While quantitative measurement measures output and qualitative measurement attempts to measure impact, the main impetus the current climate of evaluation and measurement is economic. Therefore, it makes sense to assess library performance in terms of economic value:

'Contingent valuation draws upon economic theory and the methods of survey research to elicit directly from citizens the value they place upon goods not traded in private markets.' (Aabø and Audunsen, 2002).

CV utilises rational choice theory in which people are held to calculate the likely costs and benefits of any action before deciding what to do. In rational choice theory, individuals are seen as motivated by the wants or goals that express their 'preferences'. Rational choice theory holds that individuals must anticipate the outcomes of alternative courses of action and calculate that which will be best for them. Rational individuals choose the alternative that is likely to give them the greatest satisfaction. CV works through constructing a market by an interview survey of its potential players (Aabø and Audunsen, 2002) using:

- a scenario or description of the hypothetical or real policy or programme the respondent is being asked to value or vote upon
- a mechanism for eliciting value or a choice from the respondent
- information on the respondent's socioeconomic characteristics, attitude and behaviour towards the good to be valued, and whether the respondent understood and believed the scenario and took the hypothetical decision-making seriously

A final CV can be calculated by comparing the perceived return on the service to the actual costs of the service and the costs users incurred accessing the service.

CV is also potentially good in measuring non-use values, something which traditional quantitative and qualitative measures do not do – a person who does not go to the public library will have little opinion on, for example the quality of its reference services. However, they may still place value on the public library reference service in terms of its worth to society. CV generates quantitative results which can then be interpreted in a qualitative manner: i.e. understanding user attitudes towards the library (e.g. what services do they value?) rather than user behaviour and actions alone (e.g. how many books borrowed?).

CV has already been applied to public library services. There have been three major studies. St Louis Public Libraries (1999) surveyed branches separately and found returns on a USD varied from USD 1.30-2.70 in Birmingham Public Library to USD 10 or more in Phoenix Public Library. Differences in return were also found for the same service at different locations. Griffiths et.al. (2004) looked at investment in Florida State Libraries and found that USD 6.84 was returned for every USD spent. Barron et al (2005) looked at South Carolina State Libraries and found a direct return on investment of USD 4.48 for every USD spent on public libraries. Bolton Metropolitan Borough Council and MLA North West (2005) found a low return of GBP 1.60 for every GP spent. In comparison, a recent use of the methodology at the British Library suggested that for every GBP spent on the service, a return of GBP four is generated (Pung et al, 2004). Aabo (2005b) has attempted to apply CV to the Norwegian public library service as a whole.

As Missingham (2005) notes, there are issues in using numerical values as a measure of success – how comparable are they and is there a potential to find a benchmark, what causes variations in results and what contextual and external factors might affect a CV study? To a large extent these issues relate back to the core proposition of CV, that people can make rational economic judgements about hitherto ‘unvalued’ services.

This paper is about an experiment carried out which tries to elicit the motives for CV choices from respondents. It is hypothesised that the roots of instability in CV might stem, not from people’s irrationality, but from their inability to make a valuation because of lack of the knowledge and the experience required to do so. This study therefore does not force respondents to make valuations. When valuations are asked for, respondents can make a valuation or not, and, of they wish, make a comment or not. No pressure, in the shape of a person asking questions and expecting answers, was used. Rather a questionnaire survey was delivered and left to respondents to complete alone as and when they wished.

East Renfrewshire Library Service was chosen to host this study. It is an exemplar of a ‘modern’ public library service, in that it aspires to deliver the range of services listed in the strands model above, and performs well in traditional evaluation measures. This paper will elicit respondent viewpoints about East Renfrewshire Public Libraries to use as context for the CV questions.

Survey of East Renfrewshire Public Library Service

East Renfrewshire is located south of Glasgow and was created in a local government restructuring in 1996. It is bordered by East Ayrshire, Renfrewshire, South Lanarkshire, Glasgow and North Ayrshire. Approximately two thirds of East Renfrewshire is rural farmland containing the villages of Neilston, Uplawmoor, and Eaglesham, whilst the remaining area is made up of the mainly suburban residential areas of Thornliebank,

Giffnock, Clarkston, Busby, Netherlee, Newton Mearns and the town of Barrhead. East Renfrewshire Public Library Service has branches in all these areas.

A survey form consisting of four sides of A4 was constructed, in consultation with staff from East Renfrewshire Public Libraries. It was designed to be answered chiefly by option ticking and to be completed within 5 minutes. Questions were grouped into four sections:

- A: Awareness of public library services
- B: Usage of public library services
- C: Contingent valuation of public library services
- D: User Characteristics

A grid was used to present the range of services East Renfrewshire Public Libraries provided, using the service strands model developed earlier:

Borrowing books	<input type="checkbox"/>	Borrowing music CDs	<input type="checkbox"/>
Borrowing videos/DVDs	<input type="checkbox"/>	Reading newspapers etc in the library	<input type="checkbox"/>
Reading your email	<input type="checkbox"/>	Surfing the web	<input type="checkbox"/>
Looking up information yourself	<input type="checkbox"/>	Asking the staff for information	<input type="checkbox"/>
Finding out 'whats on' locally	<input type="checkbox"/>	Finding out about local history	<input type="checkbox"/>
Getting advice on health matters	<input type="checkbox"/>	Getting advice on careers	<input type="checkbox"/>
Getting advice on social security	<input type="checkbox"/>	Getting advice on pensions	<input type="checkbox"/>
Getting advice on courses	<input type="checkbox"/>	Learning how to use computers	<input type="checkbox"/>
Doing a course on a computer	<input type="checkbox"/>	Improving your reading/writing skills	<input type="checkbox"/>
Joining a family learning group	<input type="checkbox"/>	Joining a reading group	<input type="checkbox"/>
Special services for the housebound	<input type="checkbox"/>	Special services for the young	<input type="checkbox"/>
Special services for the retired	<input type="checkbox"/>	Special services for the disabled	<input type="checkbox"/>
Special services for ethnic groups	<input type="checkbox"/>	Booking a library room for an event	<input type="checkbox"/>
The Barrhead.com website	<input type="checkbox"/>	The Holocaust Survivors website	<input type="checkbox"/>

Most are self-explanatory. The last two services are unique to East Renfrewshire Public Libraries: Barrhead.com is a local community portal and the Holocaust Survivors website is a prize-winning initiative which records the memories of survivors of holocausts throughout the 20th century, who live in East Renfrewshire (McGettigan et al, 2004). This grid formed the first questionnaire section A, asking respondents to tick which services they were aware of.

The next section, B, on public library usage, asked the questions:

- B1: Which branch libraries were visited?**
- B2: How long the respondent had used East Renfrewshire Public Library services?**
- B3: How often they went to their most visited branch library?**
- B4: How long on average was their journey to their most visited branch library?**
- B5: How long on average these visits lasted?**

Respondents were presented with the service grid again and this time asked to tick which services they used (question B6). They were also asked for their opinions on three perceived core services: book loans, drop-in computer use and the Barrhead.com portal (B7, B8 and B9 respectively). Comments on these services were sought.

The third section asked four contingent valuation questions. Before these were asked a clear, explanatory note was given:

“Important note: The following questions will ask about paying for library services. They are **NOT** intended to prove that a paid-for library service is better than a free one, only that a free library service can have its value measured in terms of willingness to pay.”

and then respondents were asked:

C1: How would you be affected if you did not have access to any public library services at all?”

Possible answers were: unaffected, somewhat affected or severely affected. The four contingent valuation questions were:

C2: The public library service is funded by an amount taken from Council tax payments. The average monthly Council tax payment in East Renfrewshire is around £85. How much of this £85 should be spent on public libraries?

C3: Imagine a situation in which the public library service ceased to issue new library cards. The only way of getting a library card would be to buy one from an existing library user. In this imagined situation, if you had a library card how much per month would you be willing to accept for the use of your card?

C4: If the public library service had to be funded by voluntary donations, how much would you be willing to give?

C5: If the public library service did not exist, how much would you be willing to pay for an alternative equivalent service?

Each of the above contingent valuation questions was given a box for the respondent to comment on their answers.

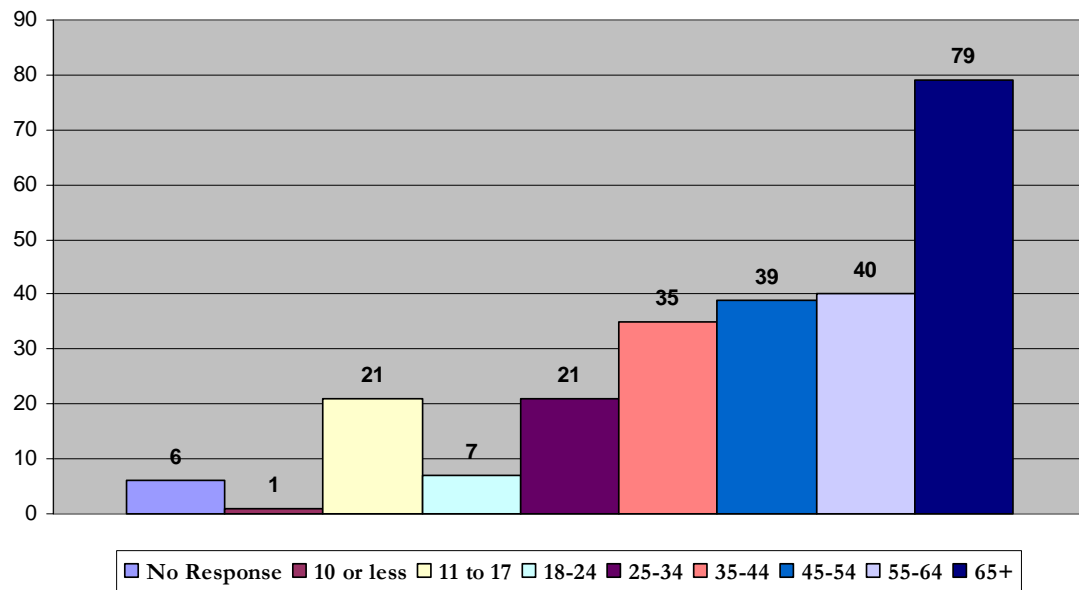
Finally the last section of questions asked about user age, gender, ethnic background, status, length of residency in East Renfrewshire and postcode.

Printed forms were distributed throughout the ten branch libraries in East Renfrewshire over the period of a week. 249 completed questionnaires were returned.

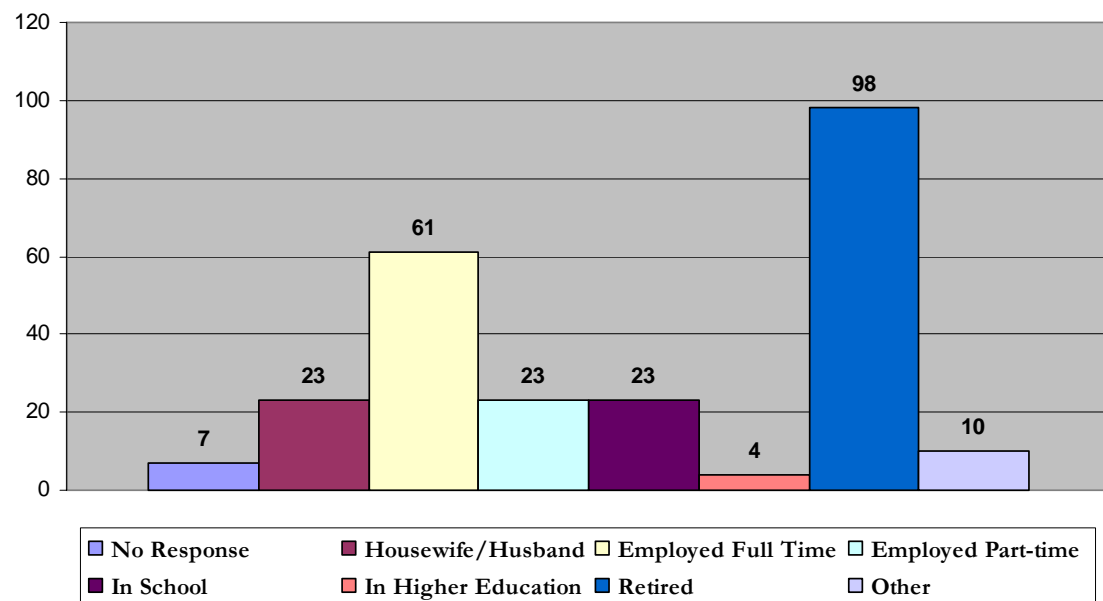
General Survey Results

To start with a breakdown of the 249 respondents, many are stereotypical public library patrons: mainly female, largest grouping by age is 65 or more, largest status is pensioner and most have lived in the locality for 10 years or more. But there are clear signs that East Renfrewshire is reaching outside this group as the detailed results for age (question D2) and status (question D3) show:

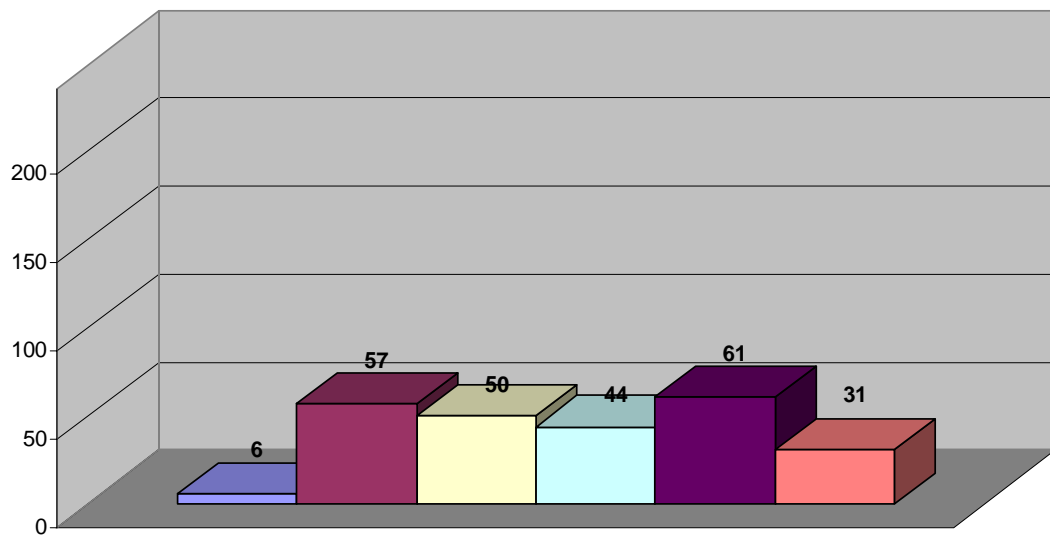
D2.Age --- (n=249)



D4.Employment Status (n=249)

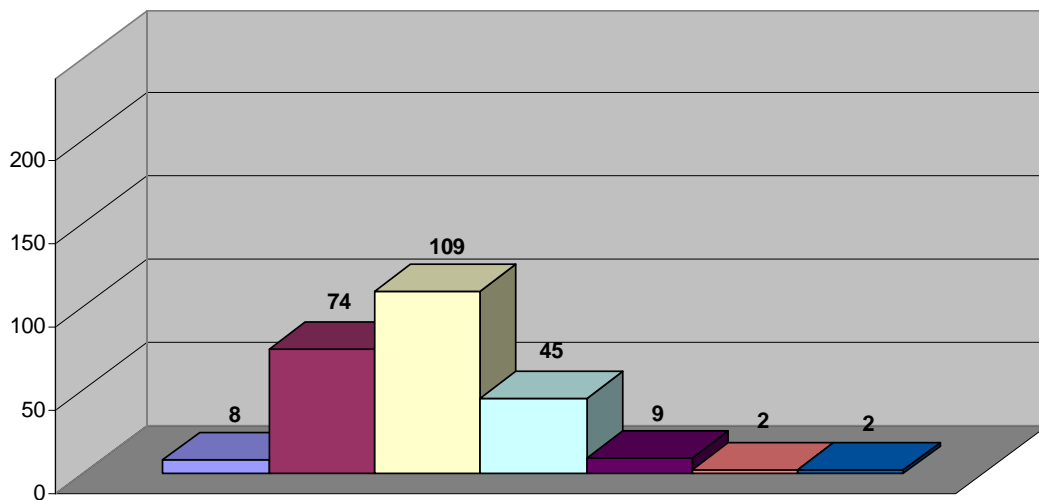


B3. Frequency of Use --- (n=249)



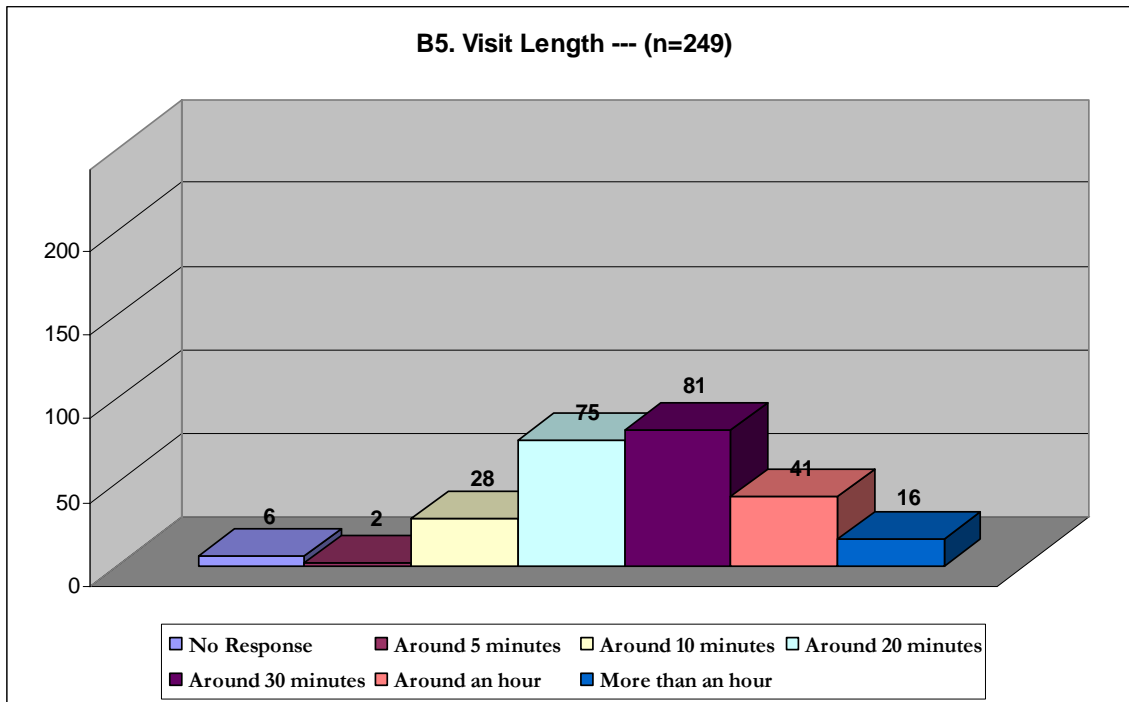
■ No Response ■ More than once a week ■ Once a week ■ Once a fortnight ■ Once a month ■ Less than once a month

B4. Journey Time to Library --- (n=249)

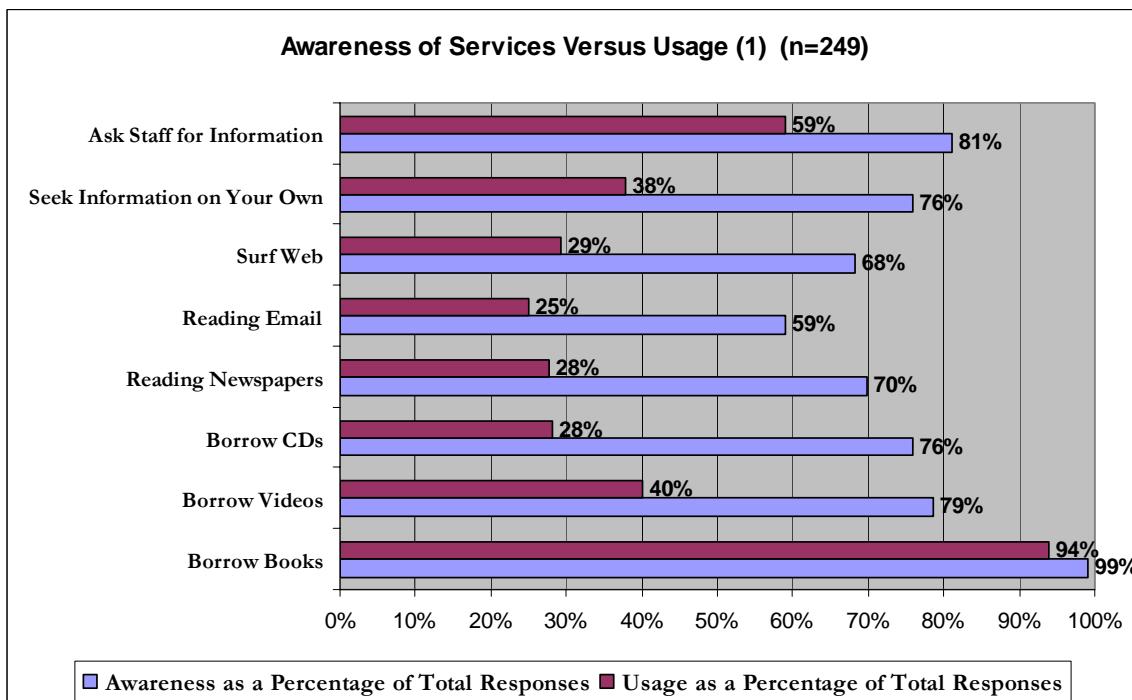


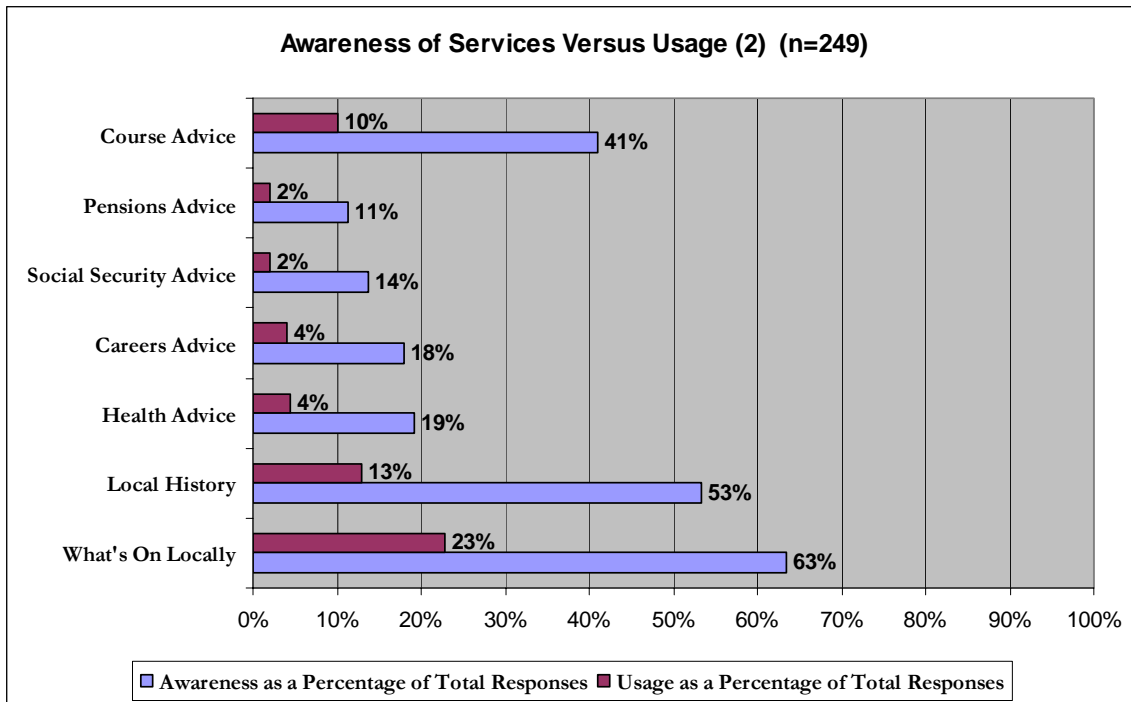
■ No Response ■ Around 5 minutes ■ Around 10 minutes ■ Around 20 minutes
■ Around 30 minutes ■ Around an hour ■ More than an hour

Journey time to the nearest library, frequency and length of visits all appear to be reasonably healthy:

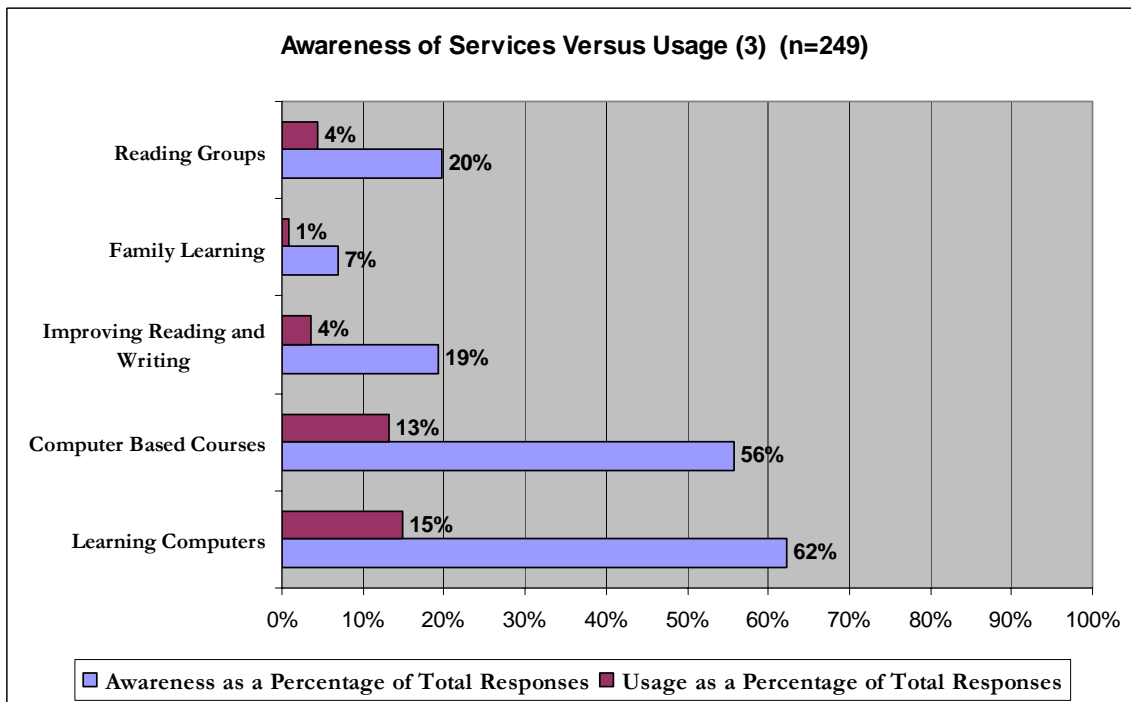


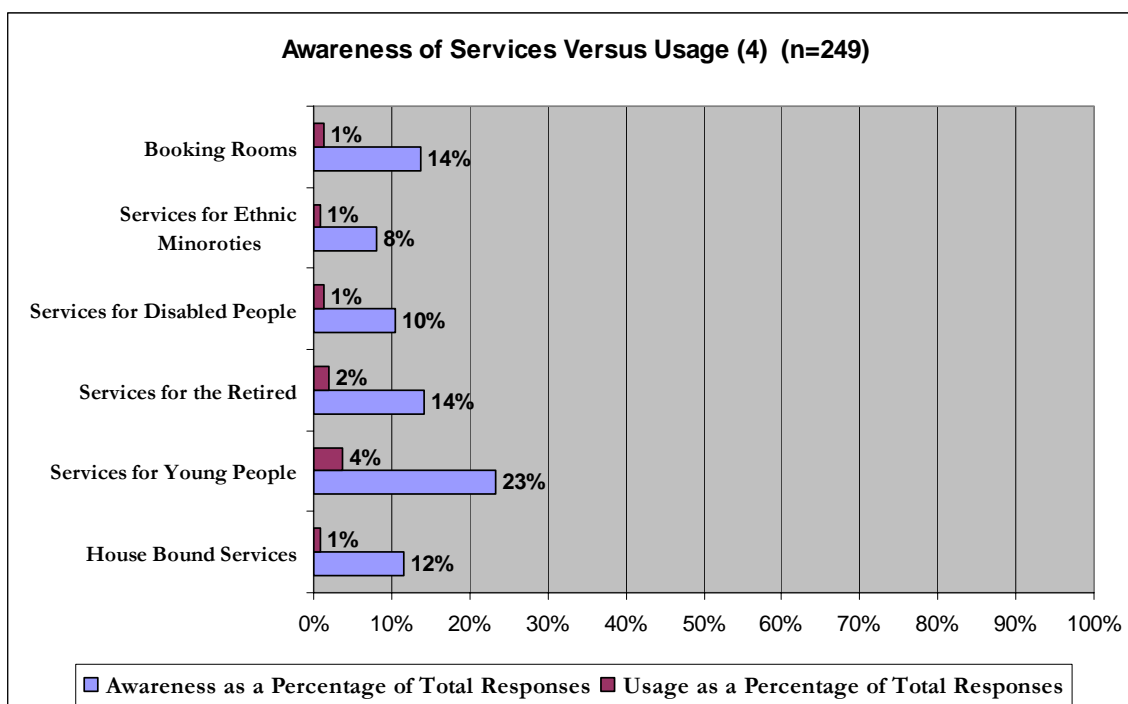
The responses regarding awareness and use of library services show that the full range of services available was definitely not known to respondents and that there was a corresponding bunching of usage around the more traditional services. However some new services, like public access computers, are becoming popular, as the detailed response breakdowns show:



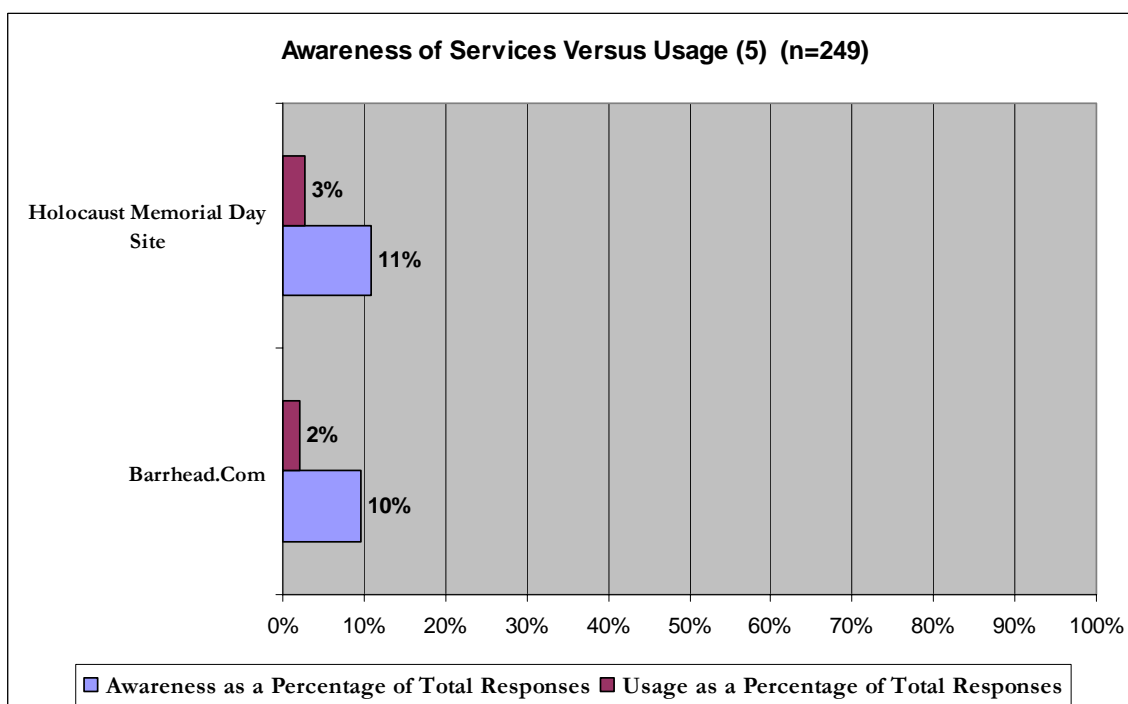


On the results above it can be seen that awareness and use of some services are at low levels and further results show even lower figures:

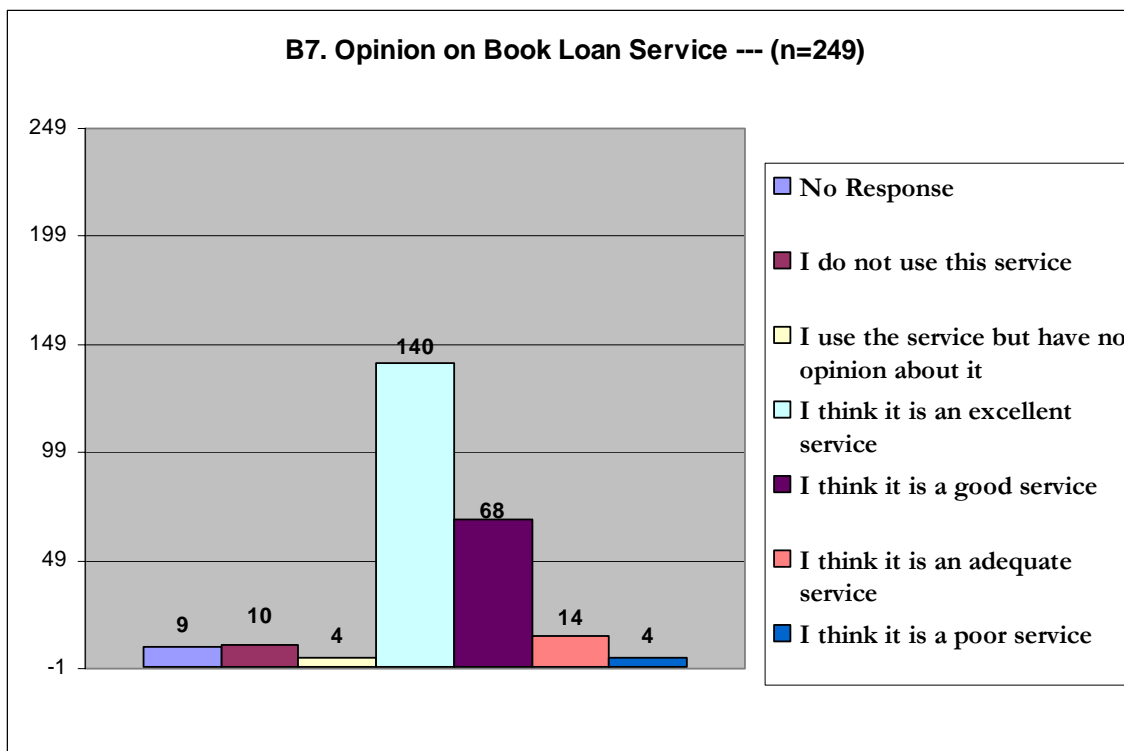




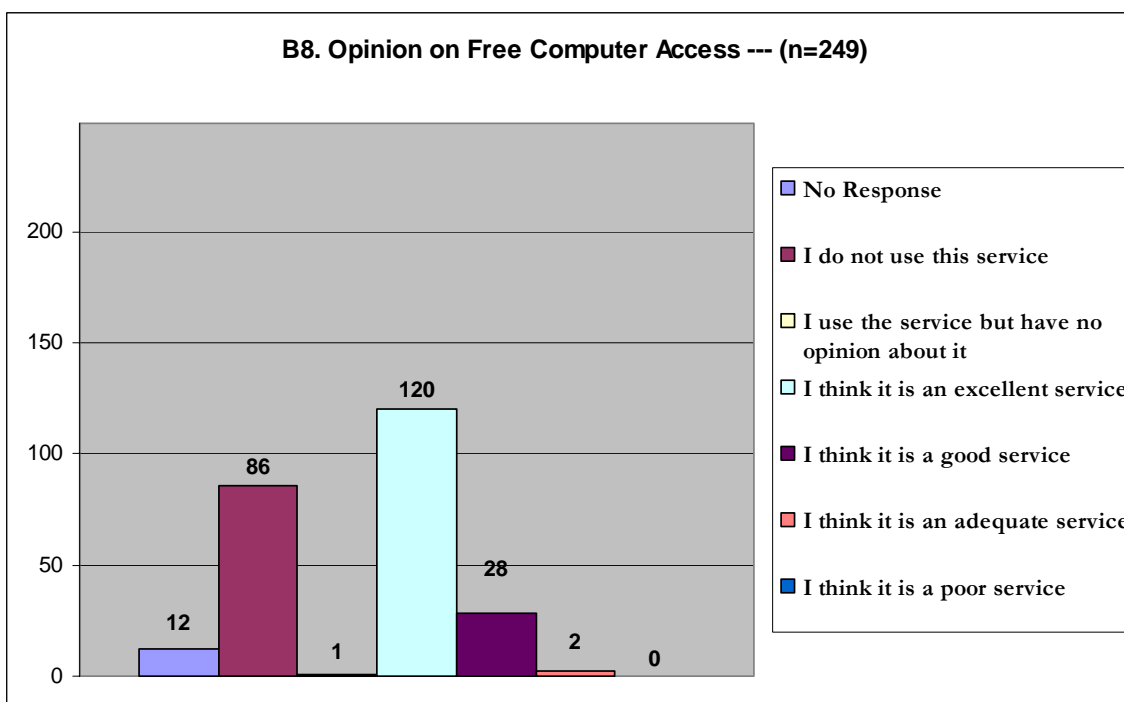
Perhaps the most disappointing results are for the flagship new services, the Barrhead portal and the Holocaust Survivors website:



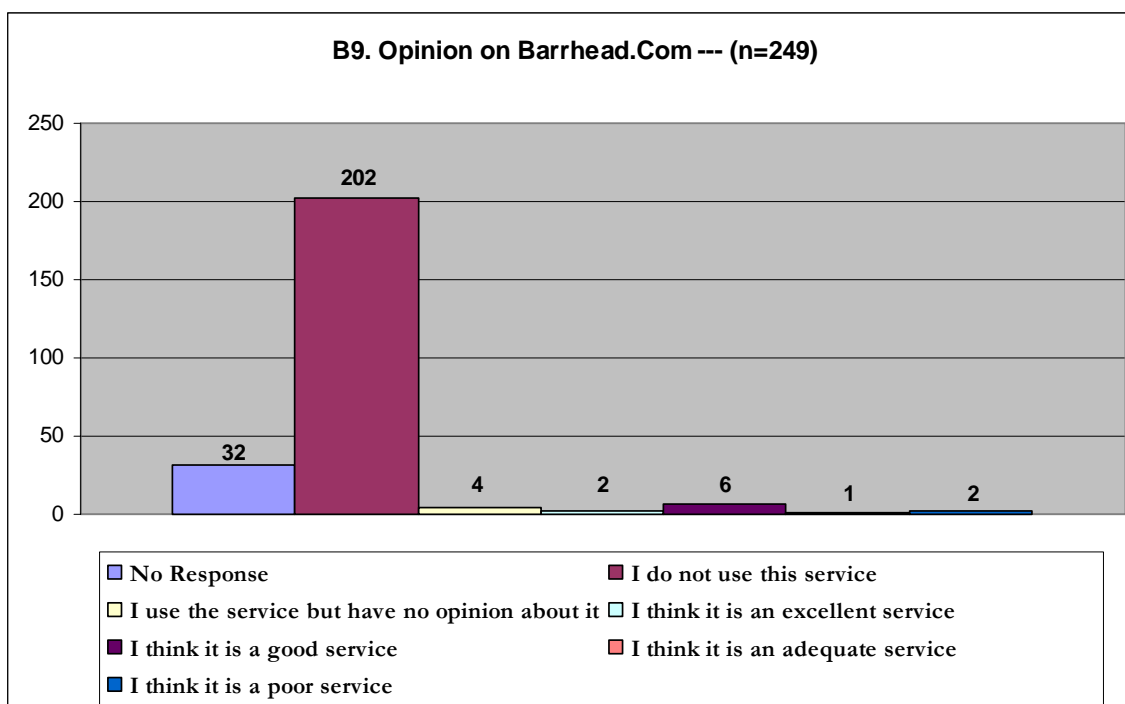
The questions on user ratings of core services: book loans, drop-in computer use and the Barrhead.com portal (B7, B8 and B9 respectively) received interesting responses. For book loans most respondents responded and most of those chose good or excellent. There were some useful suggestions for improvements (e.g. a Scottish fiction section, weeding out old computing books on Windows 95) plus some gripes (lack of new books, lack of certain types of book etc):



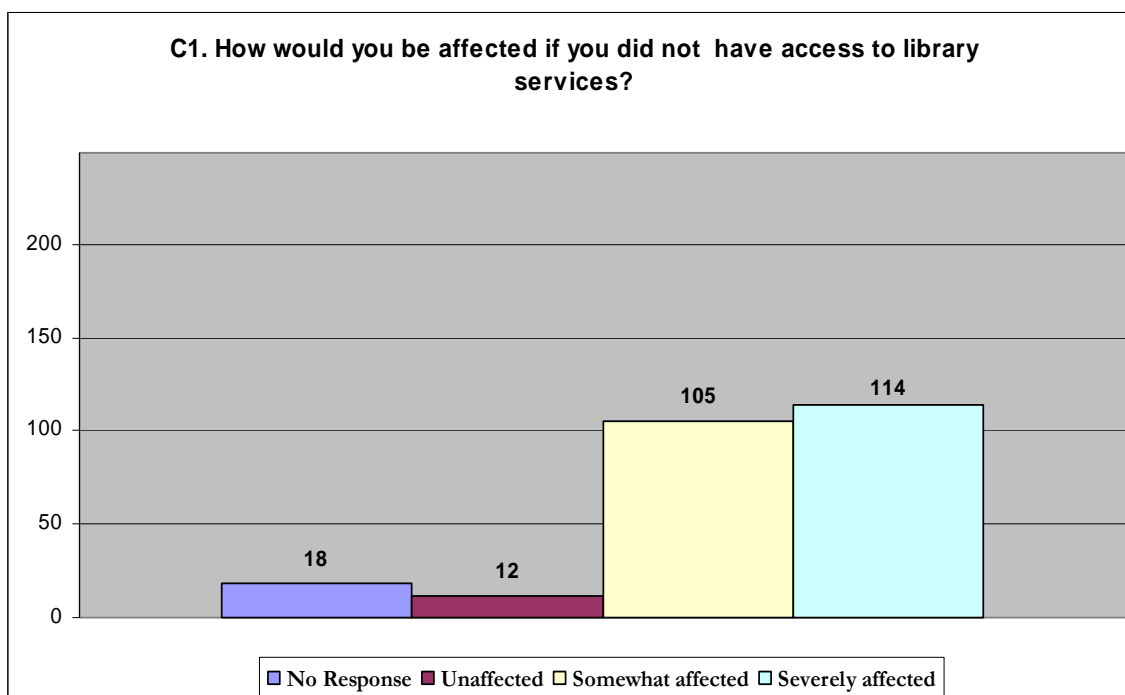
Responses on computer use were more mixed. While it got strong usage, there was also a significant segment that did not use it. Comments on it were mixed: along with the non-users there were those who disapproved of computer-based activities in the library (e.g. kids making noise playing games), and a few who did not want computers in the library all:



Most respondents gave a 'do not use' response to the question on the Barrhead.com portal. One comment said that current Council meeting minutes would make this site much more useful. Obviously something is needed to give this portal 'pulling power':



In answer to the lead in question for the contingent valuation section, only a few said they would be unaffected by the lack of a library service. The 'somewhat affected' and 'severely affected' choices split respondents into two roughly equal groups:



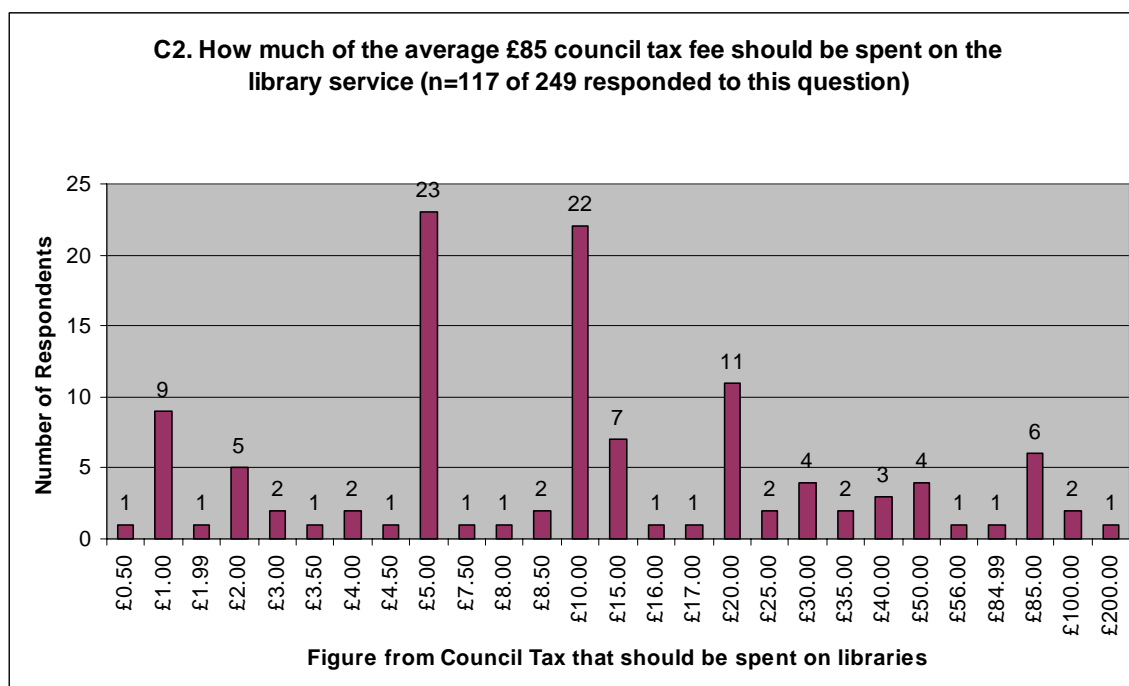
In summary then we see a public library service offering a wide range of services, of which only a portion are taken up. Most users are stereotypical (retired people) but all sections of the community do use public libraries. Public libraries are convenient to use and were used frequently by most respondents. Book lending is still the core service but other services, notably computer use, are being taken up. Most respondents valued, in the sense of being affected if they were lost, their public libraries.

Contingent Valuation Results

In response to the question:

C2: The public library service is funded by an amount taken from Council tax payments. The average monthly Council tax payment in East Renfrewshire is around £85. How much of this £85 should be spent on public libraries?

a wide range of responses were seen:



The clumping of responses around 'easy option' values (£1, £5, £10 and £20) should be noted. The intention of giving out the average Council tax payment was to give respondents a yardstick to use. A large number of comments for this question asked for more details about council expenditure on services so that respondents could use this data to make a realistic choice vis a vis public libraries:

"This question is unbounded that is to say you do not indicate whether if more were spent than is currently the case that a better service would be offered. My guess is that somewhere in the region of £1.50 out of the £85 is spent on Libraries. I would be happy to increase that to as high as £2 if it meant that a better range of bookstock were available and improvements to access all stock holds." (No value chosen)

"Unsure of funding. Taking more for libraries may affect other services or increase (overall) Council Tax." (No value chosen)

"I'm sorry, I really have no idea how much is spent at the moment so I don't want to put less than is currently spent. I would be prepared to pay, say, £2 per visit to use the computers" (No value chosen)

"As much as necessary to provide an excellent service." (No value chosen)

"Cannot be answered without knowledge of cost of running the service. Question should give indication of how much of the average Council Tax is spent at present. However as

you can see from my Council Tax payment which is £223 I am more than helping to pay for the service in ER" (No value chosen)

"This is a difficult question. Without knowing the other expenditure it is not an easy one to answer. At the end of the day it is not an initial service bit it certainly improves the standard of living." (No value chosen)

"Without knowing the costs associated with running the libraries, and the number of people paying council tax, and the current proportion of monies being allocated to it, it is hard to work out a realistic figure for this question." (Chosen value £1)

"You really need to know all other services that are provided to make a realistic assessment" (Chosen value £2)

"This is a difficult question to answer without thinking alot about other services competing for the pot of money." (Chosen value £5)

"For a single retired person like myself, the library service is one of the comparatively few "bonuses"!" (Chosen value £5)

"this is difficult to answer without having a list of all the other things it needs to be spent on, that would help me decide proportion better" (Chosen value £10)

"I don't really know how the Council tax is apportioned." (Chosen value £16)

Although some respondents did appear to have some knowledge of Council budget allocations:

"I think I am aware that ERC has a good record on cost of public libraries, 2nd best in Scotland? per capita cost per head" (Chosen value £5)

"I don't imagine the service gets this proportion of funds at present!" (Chosen value £7.50)

"If the Council stopped wasting money on cycle lanes and other PC matters, they could spend more on libraries." (Chosen value £17)

Many respondents who chose high values for library services from their comments appeared to be aware that they were making an irrational choice but were doing so because of the value they place on libraries or a service they provide:

"I would hate the service to be reduced. Reading is a great pleasure." (Chosen value £85)

"Libraries give good public service and should be maintained." (Chosen value £85)

"I get tremendous enjoyment from reading and computers, so would spend max." (Chosen value £85)

"Only the books though" (Chosen value £84.99)

"To fund books only - not computers." (Chosen value £100)

Conversely, many of the respondents who refused to give a value, or gave a very low value, in their comments stated that they valued their free public libraries highly but did not want to give a figure for that value. This may have been because they felt that valuing highly a hitherto 'free' public service might enable the Council to raise rates if people appeared willing to pay more for services:

"I find this difficult to answer as I do not want my Council Tax to go up (we certainly pay a lot more than £85) however I do believe that the library service is essential to all communities and should be valued." (No value chosen)

"I think the amount taken from an average Council Tax charge to fund public library services ought to be doubled! What amount? Impossible to answer when one doesn't know how much the amount is. Plus the Council Tax is much, much too high." (No value chosen)

"The service should be free to those that require it. However a free service for all is a good thing and if possible maintained." (No value chosen)

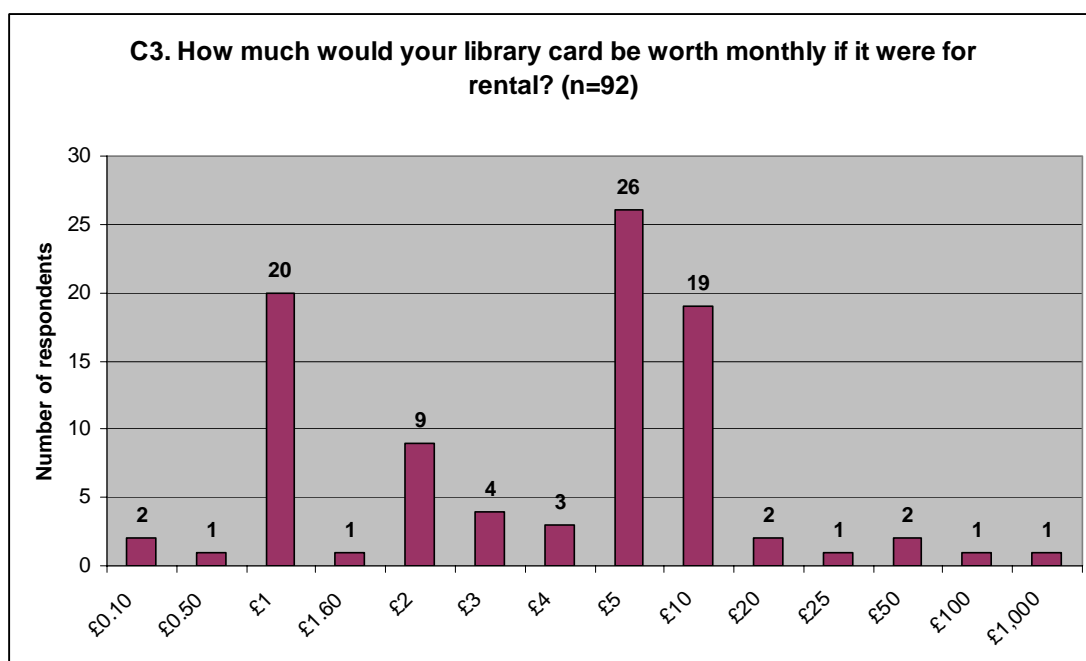
"Considering the first free public library was the Stirling in 1791 why fix it if it isn't broken." (No value chosen)

"Council Tax is a problem for elderly people as there is no lower rate unless you have very little savings. Therefore everything from this Tax should be run very economically to reduce the Tax as much as possible." (Chosen value £5)

In response to the question:

C3: Imagine a situation in which the public library service ceased to issue new library cards. The only way of getting a library card would be to buy one from an existing library user. In this imagined situation, if you had a library card how much per month would you be willing to accept for the use of your card?

a similar wide range of responses were seen:



Again there is clumping around £1, £5 and £10 values. However this question of the four contingent valuation questions got the lowest response rate. The reason for this seems to have been that this question was regarded by some as unanswerable, in that the scenario it envisaged was extremely unlikely and therefore not possible to judge:

"I don't approve of the question. Sounds complicated to operate." (No value chosen)

"This seems a peculiar idea." (No value chosen)

"This is beyond my imagination" (No value chosen)

"Don't know. You can't know until the situation arises." (No value chosen)

"Unfair question" (No value chosen)

"Not a relevant question!" (No value chosen)

"As this is an unlikely scenario - my answer would have to be that an alternative solution would have to be found - maybe use your C.tax number/Nat Ins number instead." (No value chosen)

"I cannot answer this question as this imagined situation is totally unrealistic." (No value chosen)

"A ludicrous scenario!" (No value chosen)

"C3 question is absolutely outrageous - what about very young children - how on earth would they be able to buy a ticket!!!!!!!!!!!!!" (Chosen value £1)

"Really no comment as I cannot envisage such a situation." (Chosen value £1)

"Not interested in this idea." (Chosen value £10)

A few were happy with the question however:

"This is a very inventive question - is it useful?" (Chosen value £5)

"I would not like to share my card. However, selflessly, I would hand it over for £5!"
(Chosen value £10)

Many respondents did value the library service highly in their comments but again many gave no value figure:

"I would willingly give the use of my card to someone who couldnot afford to pay if it meant they had access to books" (No value chosen)

"As an ex-librarian, I don't think I would sell my card, as I think the public library service is priceless." (No value chosen)

"I think in this case people would stop using libraries altogether so many people buy books now as they are a lot cheaper from supermarkets and charity shops although I myself enjoy going to the library and I think although I don't have children the childrens

section always looks good and imaginative for children starting at a young age.” (No value chosen)

“I would not part with my library card for any amount. It is too precious a possession.” (No value chosen)

“I would be willing to lend a card free of charge.” (No value chosen)

“As I am disabled and am limited by circumstances outwith my control it would be dreadful not to hav exclusive use of a card, or to have to pay beyond my means.” (No value chosen)

“Nothing if I also retained use of the card. If use was lost entirely to the new owner I would not offer card for sale.” (No value chosen)

“Somewhat defeats the purpose of a public library - I think people would stop library use.” (No value chosen)

“I didn't pay for my card therefore I would lend it for free.” (No value chosen)

“I receive too much pleasure to give my card away.” (No value chosen)

“The exact figure is difficult to judge, for my personal use I would say it is worth very little. I would simply reread more of my own books or borrow more from friends. The main value to me of the library is as a source of reading material for my children if someone were wanting to borrow one of their cards then the price would be much higher say £10.” (Chosen value £0.50)

“I believe libraries are wonderful places and would probably give my card for free.” (Chosen value £1)

“I would not mind paying a token amount for thr use of the library, 25 p fines probably cost more to administer overall than they raise, say £1 a month to use the library, no payment made when the service is not used” (Chosen value £1)

“This would be very detrimental. Reading needs to be encouraged - many would turn away in favour of TV etc.” (Chosen value £5)

“This does not relate to what i would be willing to pay for a card -but if i was still using a free one i wouldn't want to lose the use of it -so would price it accordingly.” (Chosen value £10)

“Academic answer as i would never sell/rent my card as fines alone could well exceed the rental income!!” (Chosen value £10)

“This service ought to continue to be free to all” (Chosen value £50)

Finally some saw this question as a stalking horse for privatisation:

“I work in a school library and have access to whatever books information I might need through my work and through the internet. I mistrust questions like this because the Thatcher years destroyed any faith I had that central government actually believed in providing high quality public services for all. I do not want to give East Renfrewshire

council any ammunition for any further charged-for services, particularly since the service in my local branch library (Mearns), is not as good as it was, and seems less good than in other areas of the authority" (No value chosen)

"Public libraries should be free! Think of the people who fought for this." (No value chosen)

"Are you thinking of charging for your service?" (No value chosen)

"As a matter of principle I would not pay for a service that should be free to all." (No value chosen)

"I would give free use to a closely associated person. Unethical to charge." (No value chosen)

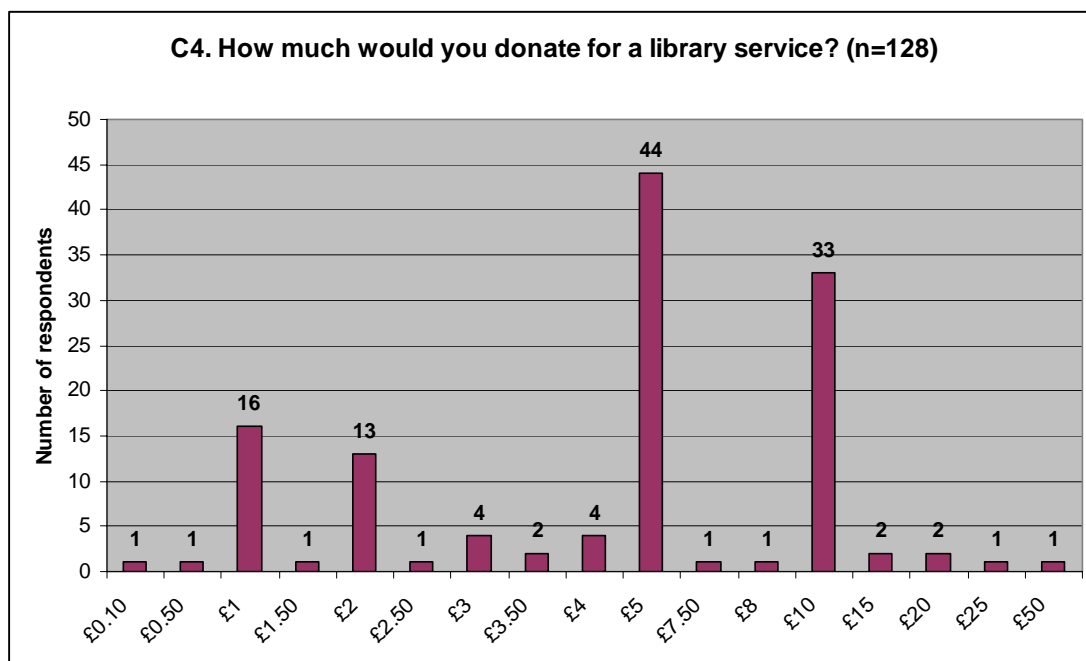
"Unfair to ask this as if we are going towards fees!" (No value chosen)

"I do think that users that can afford to pay toward service should. £10 is not excessive." (Chosen value £10)

In response to the question:

C4: If the public library service had to be funded by voluntary donations, how much would you be willing to give?

Again a clumping around £1, £5 and £10 was seen:



Most of those who offered comments were against the idea:

"I would put my money into a campaign to get this decision reversed and not buy into it." (No value chosen)

"I do not think that libraries should be voluntarily funded" (No value chosen)

"Councils should fund public services, councillors should fund trips abroad or fact finding missions, free drinks for council meetings should cease" (No value chosen)

"I think the library is a service which should not be funded by the public unfortunately I don't have spare money every month therefore I would be unable to commit to a monthly donation." (No value chosen)

"The idealistic part of me would like to say that I would be prepared to spend say £4 or £5 a month to support public libraries. The realistic part of me thinks that this is unlikely as I suspect that a library service run on donations would swiftly decline." (No value chosen)

"Is that Ewart spinning in his grave?" (No value chosen)

"Pay Council Tax, this should allow for this. Re-coup unpaid Council Tax from those owing!" (No value chosen)

"As a matter of principle I would not pay for a service that should be free to all." (No value chosen)

"Considering we get 'mugged' by the Council Tax - it is 'not on'." (No value chosen)

"Increase in illiteracy if this was ever introduced." (No value chosen)

"Library should always be free for benefit of people" (No value chosen)

"Not a reasonable question - would either be run via council or as a private concern - cannot see how it could be run by donations - would never get enough!" (No value chosen)

"Unfair to ask this as if we are going towards fees!" (No value chosen)

"If I was also paying the same £85 in Council Tax, I would grudge that more of that could not be given to a public library service. What about choosing how one's Council tax is distributed instead?" (No value chosen)

"I find it really difficult to put a price on this as I strongly feel there should be open and wider access to books" (Chosen value £1)

"Again a ridiculous question - it would lead to the demise of a certain group of people even thinking about reading and using the library, as a housewife I do not have extra funds to fund public libraries - I expect my council tax to pay for this!!!!!!!!!!!!!" (Chosen value £1)

"I think we all expect the library to be free to encourage people to read books. Also School children make excellent use of the library both as a meeting place and reference place." (Chosen value £5)

"It should NEVER happen." (Chosen value £10)

However some could envisage voluntary funding or using an alternative source:

"Any reasonable amount considering the cost of books." (No value chosen)

"Would prefer using charity shops." (No value chosen)

"I would not donate anything as you can buy from charity stalls." (No value chosen)

"I donate to a variety of charities and would donate to library services only if essential."
(No value chosen)

"10% of my Council Tax payment." (No value chosen)

"Willing to pay 'cost of running public library' divided by 'number of borrowers times number of books borrowed'." (No value chosen)

"For this money I would expect 7 day a week access." (Chosen value £4)

"It would be worth it. I love reading - if I had money it would be £20 per month." (Chosen value £5)

"Many would refuse - after life time of free provision it is seen by many as citizen's due."
(Chosen value £5)

"This is a 'top of my head' answer. I would probably pay more as I received a great deal of pleasure from the library services." (Chosen value £5)

"Funded totally. This is a very arbitrary figure but clearly would provide nothing like the service we have now! However, in the end libraries must have a lower priority than (e.g.) refuse collection!" (Chosen value £5)

"As an OAP this is all I can afford." (Chosen value £5)

"Buying spoken word books are very expensive so this would be worth it." (Chosen value £10)

"Response is based on guesstimated cost of buying second-hand books, or tapes or discs".
(Chosen value £10)

"plus use of Internet at say £2 per session." (Chosen value £10)

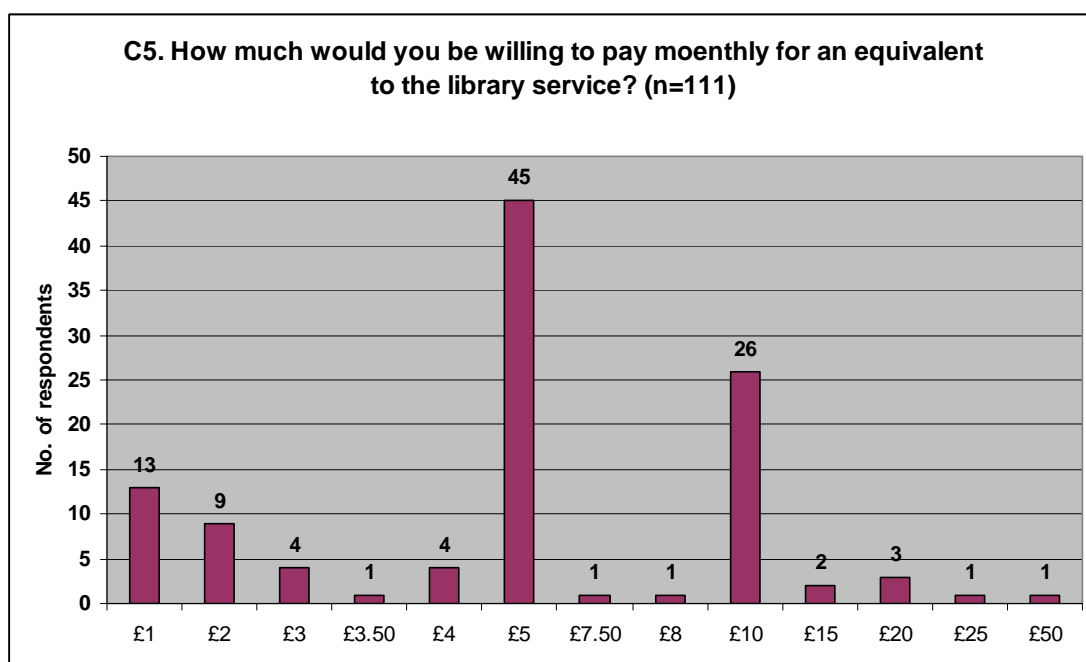
"Maybe less. I am benefits now but Internet is only way to stay in contact with some friends and family and can't do without." (Chosen value £10)

"Dependent upon income. Or charge by book." (Chosen value £20)

Finally, in response to the question:

C5: If the public library service did not exist, how much would you be willing to pay for an alternative equivalent service?

Again there was a clumping of responses around £1, £5 and £10:



This question again polarised respondents, over the implied issue of privatisation. Many were against it:

“Questions like this only give local authorities the idea that libraries are not essential services and therefore are up for budget cutting.” (No value chosen)

“I would go to charity shops for books and start book clubs with friends.” (No value chosen)

“If a public library service did not exist I would be bereft, and consider not paying my Council Tax in protest.” (No value chosen)

“Don't turn history back to subscription libraries. The poor would suffer.” (No value chosen)

“Again I feel as though you're indicating that you are going to charge for your service.” (No value chosen)

“We already pay quite heavily via the Council Tax.” (No value chosen)

“Library should always be free for benefit of people” (No value chosen)

“I would not pay for this 'public service' as the Council Tax should cover it.” (No value chosen)

“Too much handed over to private enterprise for profit.” (No value chosen)

“The service has existed free since Victorian times for good reason - education availability. I do not expect this to change. If it does - can I stop paying Council tax?” (No value chosen)

“Sounds like the end of the library service as we know it.” (No value chosen)

"Many poorer members of community would suffer. Better off could buy books and swap with friends." (Chosen value £5)

"This is a public service we cannot do without!" (Chosen value £5)

And some were for it:

"If I had to pay for a service directly I would want it to be something very different not an equivalent one, instead something that was very good at precisely what I wanted. The service I ideally want is something that offers me a ever changing range of fiction material of interest to me to read whilst on the bus. A wide range of introductory materials in non-fiction to interest me in new areas. More detailed books of areas of interest I would buy myself. A wide range of fiction and non-fiction for children." (No value chosen)

"Dependent upon income. Or charge by book." (No value chosen)

"If it was a good service - I would pay. I fear I would not be visiting the bookshop so often!" (No value chosen)

"Most likely prefer to pay on use rather than monthly" (Chosen value £5)

"I would open a broadband a/c with my ISP" (Chosen value £10)

"If all paid this would probably give fair service." (Chosen value £10)

"But only if Council Tax payments were reduced accordingly." (Chosen value £10)

"This is probably what I would spend on buying books." (Chosen value £50)

Conclusions

It is very clear from comparing comments to valuations that there is no clear link between a person's intrinsic sense of 'value' for the public library service and the contingent values they returned. Without any element of pressure, many people refused to give a contingent valuation. One reason for this was that the potential consequences of doing so (enabling local government to raise rates or central government to privatise the public library service) made any valuation dangerous. Another reason was the continual stress respondents reported in trying to make contingent value judgements without having the knowledge and experience of this method they felt they needed. The obvious artificiality of the questions made contingent valuation an alien activity to ordinary people. What people did seem to do was just guess: of those that did give a valuation many (over half of responses across all contingent valuation questions) plumped for round-number choices: £5 and £10. If the cost of delivering a library service comes in at under £5, then contingent valuation is going to produce a multiplier of that cost as the 'perceived value', if the majority of respondents choose £5 and £10. This effect would be worse, it is hypothesised, if respondents were put 'on the spot' by an interviewer: this could make them even more likely to respond with a round number.

Two further issues arise from this study. Firstly, it surveys users and not non-users. If users cannot supply cogent, rational contingent valuations of library services how can non-users? Secondly, there is a danger of evaluating the library service offering as users see it,

which appears to be a subset of the actual provision. If new services are not used (and thus cannot feature in any evaluation) is this an indictment of the mix of new services or of poor marketing of those services or both? The original problem, of justifying new library services to keep the public library service alive, appears not be addressable by contingent valuation methods.

One approach that might be promising is 'relative valuation' i.e. asking respondents to rank library services against other services competing for the same budget. Final rankings would determine flows of funding from relatively unwanted to wanted services. This people can do and are willing to do, as long as figures are available, as some responses already quoted above to C2 showed:

"This question is unbounded that is to say you do not indicate whether if more were spent than is currently the case that a better service would be offered. My guess is that somewhere in the region of £1.50 out of the £85 is spent on Libraries. I would be happy to increase that to as high as £2 if it meant that a better range of bookstock were available and improvements to access all stock holds." (No value chosen)

"Unsure of funding. Taking more for libraries may affect other services or increase (overall) Council Tax." (No value chosen)

"Without knowing the costs associated with running the libraries, and the number of people paying council tax, and the current proportion of monies being allocated to it, it is hard to work out a realistic figure for this question." (Chosen value £1)

"This is a difficult question to answer without thinking alot about other services competing for the pot of money." (Chosen value £5)

"I don't imagine the service gets this proportion of funds at present!" (Chosen value £7.50)

"If the Council stopped wasting money on cycle lanes and other PC matters, they could spend more on libraries." (Chosen value £17)

Advantages of 'relative valuation' would be that new services could be trialled for their acceptability for funding vis a vis existing services and that non-users would have a framework in which to situate their judgements of public library services.

One irony about contingent valuation is hinted at by one comment already quoted above for C4:

"Is that Ewart spinning in his grave?" (No value chosen)

William Ewart, MP for Dumfries, was a sponsor of the 1850 Public Libraries Act. When the Act was being debated, opposition to it focused on the concern that the wealthy would be funding a library service for the poor, which runs counter to a central tenet of contingent valuation, that people will value (and pay for) a service that gives value to others and not necessarily to themselves.

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