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Public library services and the Polish community

The Polish Community in Great Britain

Currently, many libraries are dealing with increased demands from ethnic users from Eastern Europe including Poland. The first major wave of Polish immigrants arrived in Great Britain during World War 2 (WW2). Many of them stayed after the war and were joined by other Poles who had been scattered across Europe, escaping the Russian occupation (Clough and Quarmby, 1978).

The 1971 Census (in Clough and Quarmby, 1978) indicates nearly 111,000 Polish people settled in Great Britain. Almost 11,000 stayed in Yorkshire and Humberside.

The second wave of immigration commenced after Poland joined the European Union in May 2004, and the UK, along with Ireland and Sweden, opened its employment markets. Statistics show, that of the EU enlargement countries, Poland scored highest for National Insurance registrations at 223,000, or 69% of the total 321,000 registrations (DWP, 2007). This shows a significant increase from two years previous with 63,000 registrations. For Sheffield, the figures indicate that there were 600 Poles registered in 2005/2006.

Sheffield's Polish community has a long history, being established after WW2. At that time, the library authority adjusted their services to the Polish users' needs. However, there is a paucity of evidence of how the library services cater for the newly arrived communities. A local paper describes how libraries play a significant role for those Polish people who do not have a good command of English and therefore would like to read books in Polish, or for those who want to use the Internet to stay in touch with their relatives in Poland (Grimshaw, 2006). A recent article suggests that there is a big demand for the Polish books with one of the main bookshops stocking Polish materials (Martin, 2007).

Library service provision to Polish communities

Currently much of that need is met by the Polish Library in London that was established in 1942. It supports British public libraries by sending batches of Polish books as part of their circulating loans services (www.posk.org, 2007). This service has been operational since 1947 (Clough and Quarmby, 1978) and when first established, it was viewed as quite revolutionary (Nowacki, 1983).

In Sheffield in the early 1980s although the library service was aware of the Polish Community, they did not actively market services to them (Chang et al, 1983). In later years, Sheffield Libraries have shown increasing awareness of demographic changes, having produced a publication to promote understanding of the Polish Community (Ara, 2000). A recent local study (Mansoor, 2006) confirmed that libraries have experienced increasing numbers of newly arrived Polish people who are regular users, and recommends further investigation into the library needs of newly-migrating Eastern European workers. Issues of Polish books have almost doubled from 789 in 2005-2006 to 1470 in 2006-2007 (Sheffield City Libraries).

This study was conducted as part of a master's dissertation project at the University of Sheffield, where the researcher was a student. This Sheffield case study is timely, and contributes to the body of knowledge, allowing libraries to learn about the needs, expectations and opinion of the newly arrived Poles with regard to the library service. It also examines the librarians' opinion of their service. The results may be of interest to other libraries meeting the demands of Polish communities in this time of change.

Aim

This study investigated the public library service provision for the Polish communities living in Sheffield from two points of view: the Polish communities, (newly arrived Poles, and the established Polish community) and the library personnel.

Methodology

A case study method was applied of Sheffield Library Service. Sheffield Library Service forms part of Sheffield City Council's services, supporting a population of approximately 525,800. The central library and five branch libraries across different parts of Sheffield were identified as having high or increasing numbers of Polish users.

The newly arrived Poles.

Questionnaires were deemed the most effective way of reaching the newly arrived Poles who, unlike the elderly generation of Poles in Sheffield, do not hold formal meetings where in-depth interviews could be conducted. Fifty-two questionnaires were made available in both Polish and English, and distributed within libraries by the main researcher (of Polish nationality) having the linguistic skills to recognise Polish users among other Eastern European users. All questionnaires were returned, completed by 26 men and 26 women.

79% (41) of the respondents were aged between 17 and 26 years, 13% (7) were aged 27-36, and 8% (4) were in the 37- 46 age group. The cohort comprised mainly of young adults.

62% (33) used the Central Lending library, 38% (19) used a mix of Central Library and branch libraries.

The established Polish Community

The criteria for the Polish users were: that they were library users, and belonged to the generation of Poles who arrived in Sheffield after WW2. Contact was made with the local Polish ex-servicemen club where members of the established Polish community met on a regular basis. Five individual interviews were conducted with Poles who met the criteria and who showed willingness to participate. All interviewees were elderly retired people. The interviews were taped, transcribed and the content analysed to identify any emerging themes. The interview schedule followed closely the structure of the questionnaires distributed to the newly arrive Poles to allow for comparison.

Library staff

The main criteria for the library interviews were their knowledge of, and experience in, serving the Polish users: both newly arrived and the established elderly generation.

Nine interviews were conducted (face-to-face and telephone) and a librarian from the Polish library in London was contacted by telephone in order to obtain more information on aspects of the library service. Interviews were again taped, transcribed and content analysed to identify emerging themes. The interview schedule again followed the structure of the questionnaire.

Findings

The data presented below is a summary of a selection of key findings. A full data set is available from the author, together with the survey instrument and interview schedule.

The newly arrived Polish Community

90% (47) of the respondents are happy with the opening hours, whereas 10% (5) would like their library to be open either evenings (preferably till nine) or Sundays. Those dissatisfied were Central library users.

For the newly arrived Poles the most popular reasons for visiting the library was to use a PC, borrow books or borrow materials to learn English (Table.1).

Table.1 What do you use the library for?	
<i>Service</i>	<i>% of users</i>
PCs	90% (47)
Borrow books	67% (35)
Borrow materials to learn English	27% (14)
Browse	15% (8)
Borrow films	12% (6)
Borrow CDS	10% (5)
To read papers and magazines	6% (3)
Study	4% (2)
Meet friends	4% (2)
To use reference books	4% (2)
Borrow material for other languages	2% (1)
To attend meetings/evenings	0% (0)
Other	0% (0)

98% (51) read books in Polish, 50% (26) read books in English too. 48% (25) of respondents read books in Polish only.

90% (47) use a PC in the library, all using the Internet. 47% (22) also used a PC to word process, only one using a PC for other reasons.

96% (50) wanted access to materials in Polish. 48% (25) borrow them from a library (Figure 1). The most popular way of obtaining Polish materials was to bring them from home and borrow from friends (65%-34 and 56%-29 respectively). 4% (2)

obtained Polish materials in other ways; by buying them on the Internet or purchasing them from a Polish shop.

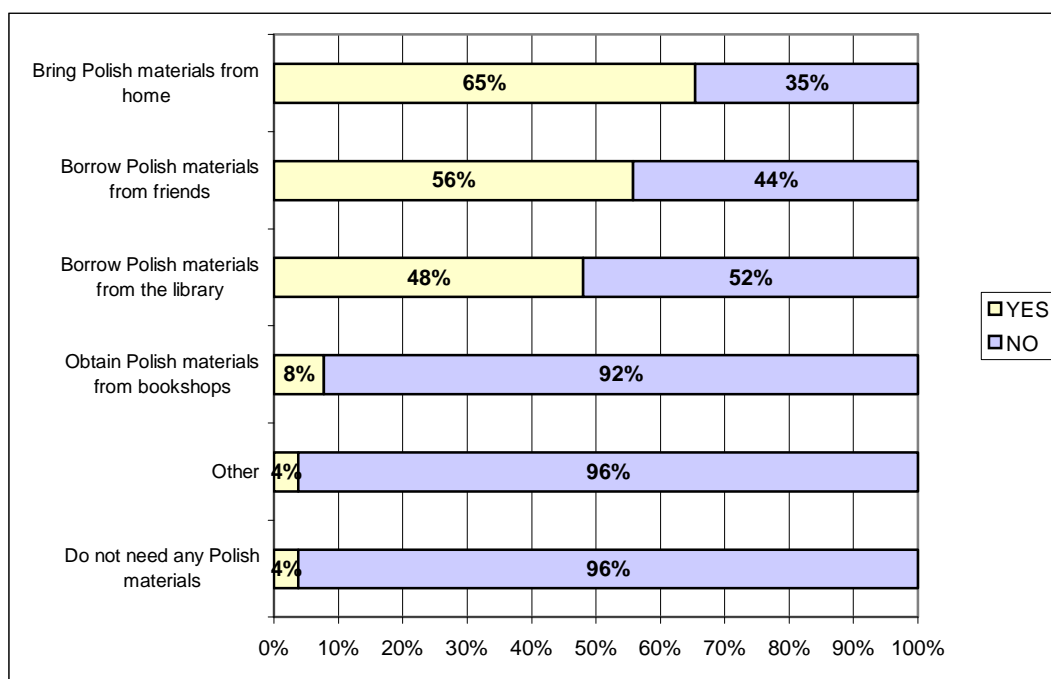


Figure 1. How do you obtain Polish materials?

Additional comments on the library service from the newly arrived Poles:

Respondents were very pleased with having the opportunity to read in Polish. *“Easy access to Polish books, which is very, very good as I miss reading in Polish”*. The libraries are also viewed as an excellent place to develop one’s interests and learn English, *“libraries help me to develop my interests and help me to stay in touch with my mother tongue”*; *“help me to learn English”*.

Availability of the Internet was appreciated. The most widespread comment was: *“free and easily available internet”*; *“it is an irreplaceable source of information, especially having just arrived here in England when you can’t afford to buy a PC or a laptop straight away”*. Free Internet has also turned their library into a place where they can keep up to date with the current news and events in Poland and stay in touch with their relatives and friends: *“free internet to send emails to friends and parents and keep up to date with the events in Poland”*.

A number of more general comments on how the libraries meet the Polish users’ needs also emerged. Many respondents felt that: *“the overall service really good, I can always find what I want”*; *“I am fully satisfied with my library services; they help me to relax”*.

There were fewer negative comments, mainly about books or the Polish collection: *“not enough Polish books that are particularly interesting”*; *“not enough non-fiction books”*.

Computer related issues generated slightly wider criticism. A few respondents were not satisfied with the allocated time to use the PCs: “*not enough time allocated for one user to use the internet-one hour is not long enough*”. Others suggested that the libraries should change their PCs, which are viewed as “*not the best quality*”.

When asked how they found out about the Central library Polish collection, 70% (39) said friends and colleagues had passed the information on. 23% (9) of those 39 people had found out from the library staff, and 25% (10) had found out themselves.

The next questions were based on a ten-point scale. A mean score was calculated to establish a scale of importance to the newly arrived Polish users.

Question: Importance of having access to Polish materials in the library.
The result suggests that newly arrived Poles appreciate having Polish materials in their libraries with an overall average score of 7.3.

Question: Importance for the newly arrived Polish users to have some influence on the selection of Polish materials.
The average score was 6.4 suggesting an interest in being involved in the selection of materials.

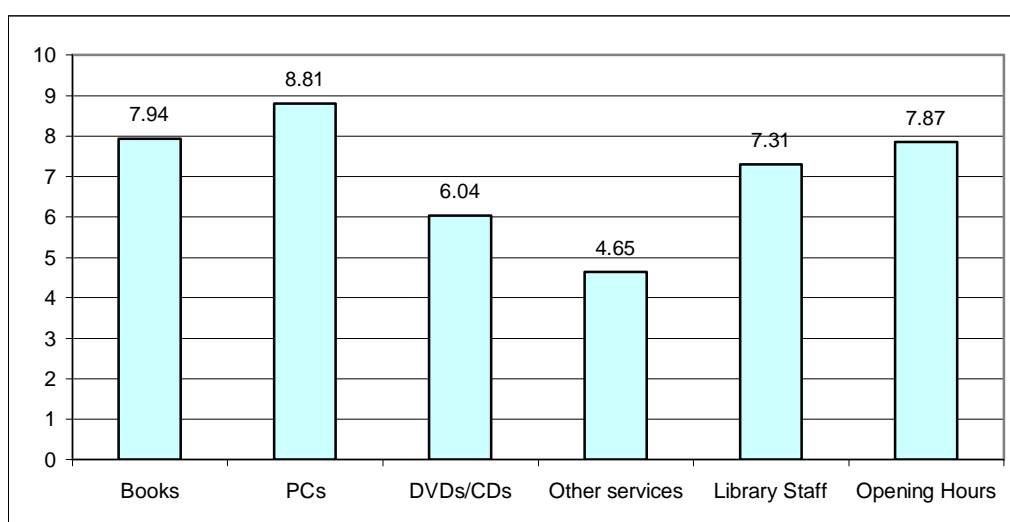


Figure 2. Question: What is the most important for you in using your library?

Computers play the most important role for the newly arrived Polish communities in their libraries. Opening hours are nearly as important for the Polish users as books. ‘Other services’ i.e. reference and information services scoring lowest.

The next question examined general satisfaction among the Polish users with the library services. (Figure 3).

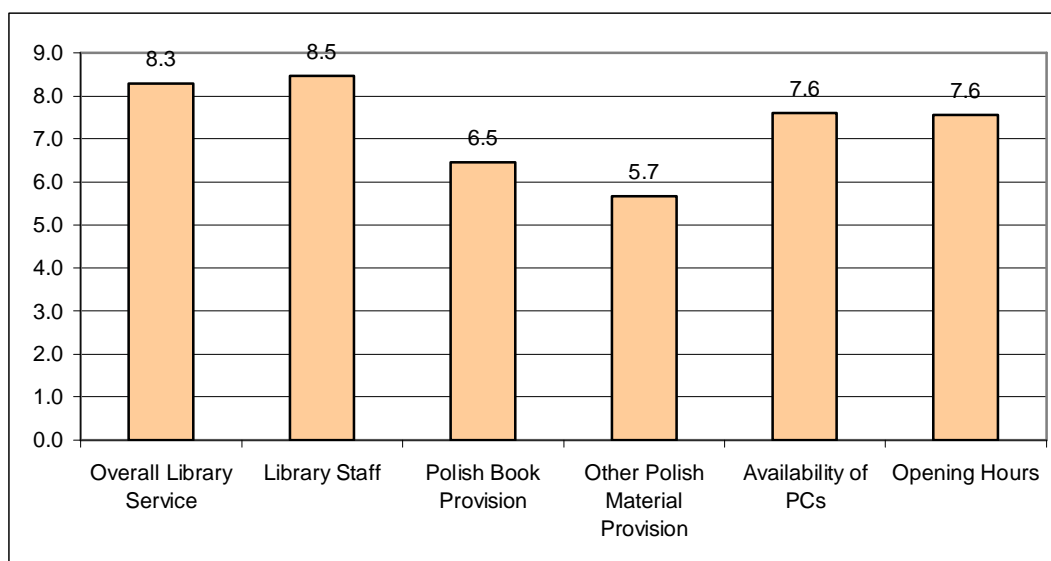


Figure 3. How satisfied are you with specific library services?

The findings show content (8.3) with the library services and with the library personnel (8.5). The majority of the newly arrived Polish users are satisfied with the opening hours (7.6) as well as the accessibility of computers (7.6). The slightly lower scores on opening hours, PCs and Polish material reflects the comments given earlier.

The most popular way of learning about the library services is by word of mouth (from friends) 82% (43). Others learned about the services from advertising.

Changes to services:

Suggested changes to the services, were mainly opening hours; *“I would like to change the opening hours for longer because many people are at work when the library is open”*.

Other comments related to use of books and computers; *“not enough Polish books”, “I would like to have more Polish non-fiction books”, “more Polish books and faster internet”, and “I would change the computers for new ones because the current ones are slow”*.

The established Polish Community

BOX 1. Results of the Interviews with the established Polish community

<i>Key findings</i>	<i>Examples of supporting evidence</i>
<p><i>Library needs:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Main use is for books. Some browsing, use of newspapers, magazines, computers and occasionally use a reference book. • Frequency of library use has reduced. 	<p><i>“Polish definitely. Its kind of handy to have Polish books, newspapers and magazines here in England.” Int.2</i></p> <p><i>“The frequency has changed and now I use the computers and I didn’t in the past.” Int.2</i></p> <p><i>“I read in both Polish and English” Int.3</i></p> <p><i>“I like to read in Polish...and it’s not because I don’t know English...I think it’s because you become sentimental about your own culture when you live abroad.” Int.5</i></p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to Polish materials is very important. • The library meets users needs • User needs have not always been met, initially the needs of the Polish Community where not understood. • Library did not play a role in helping them to settle in the country 	<p><i>“Usually in Polish...but...if I know that a good book has been published, then I’ll borrow it in English.” Int.4</i></p> <p><i>“..the services are really good” Int.1</i></p> <p><i>“yes it meets my needs...although when we arrived it took some serious badgering and pleading to start the Polish collection...Anyway, the service...its improves over time.”Int2</i></p> <p><i>“in the past we made a lot of noise about the library services...the paper published our case...we got what we wanted.”Int.1</i></p> <p><i>“..not really...the Polish books weren’t there...but how could they help? I’d expect the Polish community to help each other, not the library.”Int.2”</i></p> <p><i>“No, I don’t think they helped me but perhaps they can help now the younger Polish people who have come here recently. They’ve got the Polish books now, so it might be easier for them.”Int.5</i></p>
<p>Library Services:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Polish collection: good enough. Criticism of lack of Polish authors, too many translations. • Heard of library services mainly by word of mouth. • Information and advice on things such as health housing etc. not considered to be the role of the library. • No co-operation between library and Polish Community • Good services, helpful staff 	<p><i>“I think it’s good enough...because the Polish Library in London has a good selection...Most of the books have been published back in Poland...during the Communist era not many people wrote books, so you couldn’t get decent books...it’s changing...they have more good books.”Int.1</i></p> <p><i>“They’ve got plenty of romantic books...Cartland...there aren’t many Polish authors...all translations and there isn’t much Polish content in them.” Int.2</i></p> <p><i>“The majority of the books in Polish are translations...”Int.4</i></p> <p><i>“I don’t think it is the libraries function. I think Poles should and can do it within their communities.” There’s too much molly-coddling of people by the Government.” Int.2</i></p> <p><i>“..you learn about things like the library by going in or by word of mouth”Int.2</i></p> <p><i>“We’ve got the Polish Club here where we can hold meetings, ..I think we can do it ourselves.” Int.3</i></p> <p><i>“I think they should, but if they don’t.. then its probably our fault...not as far as I know, don’t have much contact with the necessary people, for examples [name of librarian]..now I can’t think of anyone.”Int.2</i></p> <p><i>“The services are really good...run really well”Int.1</i></p> <p><i>“I think the services are really good quality. Int.3</i> <i>It’s a good service, the staff are really helpful...I’d say they are good at what they do. Int.5</i></p>

The librarians

BOX 2. Results of the interviews with librarians

Selected illustrative evidence from the interviews with Sheffield librarians

Role of the library and librarians in a multicultural society:

The library is often seen as the “*hub of the community*” and “*a portal*” regardless of background, celebrating “*different culture*”. Giving “*an equal service to everyone.*” Part of that role: “*is to make sure that the stock on the shelves reflects what those customers want.*” It is also about “*us going out to the community*” “*We’re providing things which are helping communities.*” Librarians.1,3,5

The need for Polish materials:

Demand for Polish materials varied across the city: Some staff acknowledge a growing demand, and had been asked for dual language children’s books, Polish newspapers and magazines; other comments where, “*As far as I know there is no demand.*”; “*If there was a big enough community, I think there would be a collection for them.*” Staff identified that the problem was that “*New arrivals from Poland seem to be living across the city*” i.e. not confined to a definite area. “*Our outreach service is taking a mobile library to Fletchers Bakery to engage with the Polish community there and to find out what they want from the library.*” Librarians 2, 7

The Central Library co-operates with the Polish Library in London to supply materials. Every six months they receive new books to keep the collection fresh. The selection of stock is carried out by the Polish Library (who have the appropriate language skills) not Sheffield staff.

Promoting the service:

Currently, the catalogue supplied by the Polish Library is “*displayed with the Polish books.*” Some library staff take the initiative to display Polish materials themselves, others “*wouldn’t promote it off their own backs*” unless “*the manager would step in.*”

The collection at the Central Library is in a separate language collection, “*it’s nice to have an identifiable collection. They might feel frustrated having to look through all English books.*”

Librarian 9,1,4.

Partnership with Polish organisations:

None of the librarians were aware of any current co-operation between the library and Polish organisations (except with the Polish Library, London). “*We don’t work with any organisation at all.*” There had been more co-operation in the past; “*We lost a degree of our engagement when [name of a librarian] left and the old community got very old.*” Staff identified a need for change, “*We need to change the structure; .the ability and willingness is there, but at the moment they [front line staff] are tied to their counters.*” “*We don’t have time to go out and make links.*” And, “*It’s far harder if there’s a disparate group if people who do not use community organisations.*”

Librarian 2, 6, 1, 4,

The librarians thought there was a need for more consultation with the community: “*We haven’t consulted the community to find out if what we are providing is adequate.*” “*They may be open to a survey.*”

Librarian 3, 4

Other services;

Sheffield used to provide an information booklet on Polish culture. “*It was popular among the elderly Polish community, “It was a way of telling the children and grandchildren: this is our background, this is where we come from.”* None of the libraries had anything available now. The staff said “*I don’t know if it’s our role.*” “*You can go elsewhere to get information on that sort of thing.*” But also acknowledge, “*We’re not clear on what the needs of the newly arrived Polish people are.*”

However, all the librarians hope that they, and their services helped the newly arrive Poles settle in by: providing “*places for them..*” to “*feel welcome*”, “*computers to email people back home*”, by being “*approachable*”, “*helping them understand our society*” and “*find information.*”

Librarian 6, 3, 4

Discussion

User needs

The availability of Polish materials is important to both groups. The elderly generations appreciate having access to Polish books as much as the younger generations. For the newly arrived Poles, borrowing books, after using the Internet, was the second main reason for visiting a library. These findings are illustrative of the demand and link to the usage statistics Sheffield Libraries have collected showing a demand doubling between 2005-2007 (Sheffield City Libraries).

The quality of the Polish fiction raised a number of issues in both groups. Criticisms related to the number of translations into Polish and the lack of truly Polish literature, i.e. written by Polish authors. The high percentage of the younger Poles, bringing books from Poland (home), or borrowing materials from friends suggests that these channels provide something that the library does not. They would also like to see more choice of titles.

The younger Poles would be interested in getting involved in the selection process. This was not mentioned by the elderly generations, they admitted that they were not now frequent library users.

The younger Poles put great importance on access to the Internet. The librarians understood that much of this use was to keep in touch with family and friends they had left behind. This did not seem as important to the elderly Poles, possibly with more friends and family established in the UK and dwindling contacts in Poland.

Users' perspective on the library services

Both groups praised the library services. The elderly Poles had problems when they first arrived in the country, which had been resolved and they acknowledged the library service meets their needs now. The established generation thought highly of the library personnel. The younger Poles also showed a high score for the satisfaction with the library staff's attitude and service.

The major difference between those groups is their view on whether or not the library services have contributed towards the process of settling in a foreign country. The elderly Poles clearly stated that this was not the case whereas the newer arrivals indicated that they were pleased to have access to Polish books and free internet played an important role as a means of communicating with those back in Poland and also finding information. These proved to be important factors for the newly established communities, which could suggest that the libraries play a significant role in the process of settling in. The librarians certainly hoped that they had a positive role to play in helping people to settle.

Promotion of the services

Although 75% (39) of respondents knew of the collection, their main source of information was not the library but their friends. Word of mouth seems to be a very effective way of finding out about the collection (70%-27 respondents). This is useful

for libraries to know when promoting services. Contact therefore, with established Polish community groups, such as the Polish clubs could be a way to exploit this successful channel of communication for promotion.

Responding to Ethnic Diversity

Branch library staff particularly were uncertain of the demand for Polish materials, and felt it that they were not fully empowered to meet any demand. Some librarians admitted that the ability to introduce new services in their library would depend on the size of the local Polish community. Roach and Morrison (1999:116) reinforce this view claiming that the needs of smaller groups can be unnoticed because of the existence of more numeric groups or because other groups can be more vocal about their needs. The reason the Polish collection was established initially was because the then newly arrived Poles voiced their opinions in the local press. The difficulties are also compounded when the newly arrived Poles are dispersed across Sheffield, which, according to one librarian, makes it more difficult for the library services to reach out to them than to a group that resides in one part of the city. Many Sheffield librarians said that they would be willing to provide something extra for the new Polish users should they have the resources.

In the private service sector there are examples of banks responding with targeted services such as: Polish mortgage/loans advisors and Polish call centre staff. Some of the banks have also employed Polish-speaking staff and produced a number of information packs on their services in Polish (BBC, 2007), this may be a useful model for public sector services to follow where the larger communities do exist.

Organisational Culture

The librarians felt they could do more to engage with the Polish community if they had more resources and felt more confident that they had the skills, and the backing of the management. This confirms Roach and Morrison's (1998) study, which found a number of issues, such as: skills, training and the expertise of the staff that prevent them engaging more.

Conclusions

Generally, the Polish users were very satisfied with the library services and the way they are delivered. Improvements were suggested by the younger group, improved computer software and increasing opening hours. The younger Poles work during the day and need facilities in the evening and at weekends.

This study indicates the increasing scale of demand for Polish materials and the high importance users put on access to Polish materials. The fact that many users bring their Polish materials from home, or borrow them from friends could suggest that the Polish collection needs improving to some extent.

Finding ways to engage with the Polish community is recommended. Involving users in the selection of material might be helpful in this process in terms of collection management, promotion of the service, and service quality, as library staff lack the

language skills to make critical decisions with regard to Polish content, having to rely on The Polish Library entirely for selection.

Continued close co-operation and discussion with the Polish Library in London could also be beneficial for developing the service. As user needs are identified, this information can be shared with the Polish Library to enhance their collection.

As word-of-mouth is the most successful means of promotion to the Polish Community, further engagement can only serve to exploit this channel of communication. All staff should feel encouraged and empowered to promote the Polish collection throughout the community.

Library staff admitted not being fully aware of the needs of the new Polish Community and not necessarily having adequate staffing levels or appropriate organisational structure to be able to respond to any possible needs.

The librarians felt that although they are doing a good job, there could be room for improvement particularly in terms of outreach. The service therefore, needs to secure the necessary funding and support for any such development and structure the service for the flexibility to support outreach. Developments might also include employing Polish speaking staff or friends of the library with the appropriate language skills.

If history repeats itself, many of the newly arrived Poles will settle in Britain, just as the “first wave” of Poles did in the 1950’s. Many libraries have established collections as a result of the “first wave”, but need to be sensitive to the demands of the newer Polish communities in their transient stage. Closer links and strong community engagement strategies will help provide the information to support their needs.

Recommendations for practitioners

Increased opening hours: The younger Poles work during the day and need facilities in the evening and at weekends, therefore, if possible increased opening hours should be considered.

Improvements to the content of the Polish collection: Demand for Polish materials is high, particular quality material by Polish authors. Engaging with the Polish users can support collection development and so can working in co-operation with other organisations.

Co-operation and partnership: Continued close co-operation and discussion with the Polish Library in London can be beneficial for developing the service.

Marketing and outreach: Effective marketing strategies should be sought in order to target Polish users. Word-of-mouth was the most successful means in this study. Engagement with the Polish community can only serve to exploit this channel of communication. All staff should understand their role in the library marketing and be supported in that role by management.

Increased community engagement: Funding and the appropriate organisational structure is required for this to be successful. Developments might also include employing Polish speaking staff or friends of the library with the appropriate language skills.

If history repeats itself, many of the newly arrived Poles will settle in Britain, just as the “first wave” of Poles did in the 1950’s. Many libraries have established collections as a result of the “first wave”, but need to be sensitive to the needs and demands of the newer Polish communities in their transient stage. Closer links and strong community engagement strategies will help provide the information to support their needs.

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