The public library service in a divided community, Portadown, Northern Ireland: a case study


Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between the library service and the local community in Northern Ireland, using Portadown as a case study. Librarians and local groups from both communities were interviewed individually, and in focus groups, to explore their perceptions of the current role and function of the library service in such a deeply divided town. Among the findings was the perception by local people that social and political barriers existed, preventing optimum use of the public library service by all sectors of the community. Furthermore, the emphasis on traditional aspects of library service meant that local groups were circumventing the library service and setting up their own community information provision.

Full Text

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Introduction

On Good Friday 1998, politicians in Northern Ireland agreed to put 30 years of violence behind them and build a new future for the province. The Belfast Agreement is a complicated document which aims to address a wide range of contentious issues including national allegiances, government structures, policing, and paramilitary decommissioning (The Belfast Agreement, 1998). Shortly after it was signed, referenda in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland returned overwhelming support from the people of both parts of Ireland. However, within a year the agreement began to unravel as...
the Official Unionists and Sinn Fein, through mutual distrust, were unable to agree terms for setting up the new Executive. As a result of the Mitchell Review, an Assembly was formed and met briefly. However, direct rule by Westminster was re-established this year, as a result of difficulties with regard to the process of weapons decommissioning.

Regardless of whether the current impasse is resolved, few in Northern Ireland believe that the path to peace and reconciliation will be straightforward. The distrust existing between the political parties reflects that between communities and individuals, and is deeply imbedded in political and religious division. It is in the ghettoised housing estates where the scars are most apparent. Almost invariably, these areas belong to the working and lower class, suggesting links between political violence, religious bigotry and social disadvantage (Springfield Inter-Community Development Project, 1993).

Few libraries are situated in lower class areas. Instead, they are located in town centres and have on occasion experienced collateral damage because of terrorist attacks. Nevertheless, libraries have escaped the worst of the violence and it is the perception within the profession that this is because of their neutral stance. However, it could also be argued that libraries have avoided confronting divisions in society by ignoring the disadvantaged, a group that traditionally, has had little contact with libraries. Furthermore, libraries have seemingly preferred to serve those from the middle classes (Vincent, 1986).

While the impact of the "troubles" on libraries receives scant reference in the professional literature, community librarianship is better documented. Here, there is similarity between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK where the relationship between the library and the community is well-researched (Black and Muddiman, 1997, p. 1). This paper is concerned with the effects of political and social division on public libraries in Northern Ireland. It was prompted by the lack of reference to the Northern Ireland situation in the professional literature, and to the traditional unease displayed by librarians when confronted by political and religious issues. The general aim of this research was to examine how political and social division interacts within the context of public library provision in Northern Ireland. Thus, a clearer understanding of the interactive process was the main research goal, rather than the provision of answers to specific questions. In addition, the stance of "neutrality" adopted by professional library staff was felt to be a relevant and interesting political phenomenon, and as such, was also addressed within this study. The term "neutrality" has social as well as political connotations, and thus, a further research objective was to investigate the degree to which the library wished to provide a service to disadvantaged groups. If the need in the community is for information, our aim was to delineate the extent of library participation in the overall community effort.

Case study

A case study approach was selected because of the degree of complexity within the topic (Powell, 1991, p. 41). Public library provision in Portadown was examined, using in-depth interviews which explored the needs of the community and the level of library service provided, from the perspective of both members of community groups, and library staff. These interviews supplied the range of opinions necessary to judge whether library service matches the expectations of the community. Such multiple perspectives also served to triangulate the findings.

Portadown was selected as it is part of the Southern Education and Library Board (SELB) Library Service, with one of the authors being a senior librarian in its employ. The SELB is one of the five boards in Northern Ireland, which are responsible for the administration of education and libraries, and thus illustrates many of the difficulties faced by libraries in Northern Ireland. However, it is not meant to represent typical public library provision, but is rather a critical case, chosen purposefully to illustrate problems associated with library provision in an environment of extraordinary social and political division (Patton, 1990, p. 174).

One-hour interview sessions were held at four community group premises, a local high school and at various library locations. Interviews were exploratory, with the aim of increasing our understanding of pertinent issues, rather than a comparison of the views of individual subjects (Stone, 1984, p. 15). It was obvious from the outset that matters for discussion would be contentious and might have the potential to damage working relationships. Therefore, a carefully structured interview guide was used, which enabled the interviewer to follow up on new, unexpected perspectives, whilst nonetheless retaining control of the situation (Oppenheim, 1992, p. 67).

Within the community, groups drawn from both traditions were interviewed, as it was essential that our approach was balanced explicitly. The use of such groups also ensured that the views of library users and non-users were represented in the study, it being important to convince subjects that there was no hidden agenda. The purpose of the research was fully outlined, with assurances provided concerning confidentiality and, where possible, anonymity.
The literature which describes the experience of libraries operating on the "frontier" between the two communities in Northern Ireland is both limited and dated, but Sawey (1988) described the situation in Ardoyne. Hence there is a scarcity of literature concerned with the relationship between libraries and the Northern Ireland situation. However, social and political aspects of library provision cannot be entirely divorced in Northern Ireland, because political violence and social disadvantage often go hand in hand. In this respect, the general literature of community librarianship raises serious questions about the nature of the library service and the provision of such services to socially disadvantaged groups.

The concept of the library as an institution displaying bureaucratic attributes occurs regularly throughout the literature. There is evidence to suggest that bureaucracy is the antithesis of responsiveness, the result being that "services to the disadvantaged" are compartmentalised, as if they were quite separate from services to the community (Zachert and Williams, 1986). Astbury (1989, p. 44) wryly proposes that community services are not services to the minority, but are for a wide range of groups representing society as a whole.

Martin (1989, p. 92) cites the 1980 Library Association definition of community information as: "... services which assist individuals and groups with daily problem solving and with participation in the democratic process."

This is a useful definition as it addresses both the social and political aspects of library provision. However, librarians may become uneasy when the library is politicised; Martin (1989, p. 24) cites Foskett’s doctrine of neutrality as an enduring principle among the profession.

The concept of neutrality is a prominent theme addressed in this paper. Neutrality in Northern Ireland is normally taken to mean either a bipartisan approach, or a non-biased environment where people from both communities are equally at ease. In its wider meaning outside Northern Ireland, Barugh (1989, p. 37) suggests that the neutral library is a bogus concept: "Because the status quo can masquerade as neutrality, proponents of change can too easily be characterised as partisan in a negative sense, political as if this were something new, and in general a danger to public library professionalism, tradition and philosophy."

Ultimately, the quality of services to the community is contingent upon assumptions with regard to values, with such values being expressed explicitly or held implicitly. The dichotomy of explicit and implicit values has implications in any discussion about Northern Ireland and is a central theme addressed in this paper. Explicit views require an unequivocal statement of political beliefs and are rare and unwelcome in the library profession.

In the rest of the UK, the notion of neutrality is less concerned with political violence than with class. Black and Muddiman (1997, p. 32) suggest that the "universality" of libraries was hijacked in the 1950s by a "critical and vocal" elite from the middle classes. It was not until the 1970s that a movement began, which attempted to redress the balance back towards serving the community in its entirety, particularly the disadvantaged.

The emphasis on individualism associated with the Thatcher and Major governments muddled the notion of services to the community. Black and Muddiman (1997, p. 96) argue that individualism was preceded and accompanied by managerialism, which in many circumstances was at odds with professionalism. However, there are now indications that the profession is concerned to evaluate the social impact of libraries upon the community, using techniques such as the social audit, outlined in Linley and Usherwood's (1998) New Measures for the New Library.

Knowing one's community is recognised in the literature as an important prerequisite for delivering community services. Thus, there is a need for a systematic approach to community profiling. As Stone (1985, p. 6) observes: "Although subjective notions of community are important, they are hard to study and may therefore be inadequate as the basis for planning services."

Community is a difficult concept to define and many may view it quite narrowly. Difficulties in defining community pose particular problems in Northern Ireland where there are two distinct traditions, often diametrically opposed, yet demonstrating similar social problems. Portadown library, in common with other library service points caters for a geographical population. However, despite common social problems, the demography of the area dictates the extent to which sections of the community are able to avail themselves of its services. The existing building is in a Protestant area and next door to a heavily fortified RUC police barracks. Martin (1974) suggests that this is a disadvantage, Northern Ireland style. Sawey (1988), in one of the few contributions to the local library literature which addresses directly the issue of the "troubles", describes the setting up of a new library in Ardoyne, a small Catholic enclave surrounded by large Protestant housing estates. This project was a joint venture between local community groups and Belfast Public Libraries in the late 1970s and early 1980s, which attempted to serve the needs of local residents who.
feared travelling outside their area. The situation that applies in Portadown today, where community tension affects the daily life of the community on an on-going basis, is comparable.

The Northern Ireland community perspective

It is often difficult for people outside Northern Ireland to appreciate the scale of division that exists in a region of the UK. The literature of the local community identifies two areas of potential conflict, both of which are relevant. First, and most apparent, is that Catholics and Protestants live apart, with each of the two traditions having their own separate community organisations. These cater for exactly the same areas of social concern including housing, employment, health, welfare, the elderly, children, and disability. Only rarely do groups from each side come together under the umbrella of a cross-community project. Even then, as Rolston (1981, p. 41) suggests: "If ... improved relations exist, it is often only between these community workers and leaders, and not necessarily between the communities in which the workers work and the leaders lead."

The second area of conflict lies within the voluntary sector itself. Here, there is conflict between local volunteers and professional community workers.

Both these areas of conflict are of relevance to libraries. The sectarian nature of groups and the siting of libraries may determine the extent of library access. Less obviously, tensions within the voluntary sector may give rise to concerns concerning the nature of the library service and the extent of institutionalisation. The key question being whether the library is viewed as a community resource, or is seen as an arm of the State. Martin (1989, p. 3) suggests that institutionalisation may be a benign addition to society if defined in terms of process rather than bureaucracy. However, in Portadown where services are delivered via an old, centrally located building, the library is more probably viewed in terms of bricks and mortar, rather than as a system capable of development and change. Martin (1989, p. 8) observes that, ultimately: "... institutionalisation, while providing a comfortable niche within the social and institutional hierarchy, has relegated the public library service to an undemanding and essentially supportive role."

In attempting to define the nature of political division in Northern Ireland, Morrow (1990, p. 2) suggests that: "... two groups whose identities are shaped largely through their relationship to one another and their relationship to two different states still dispute the ownership of a shared territory."

Hence, a situation exists which is virtually impossible to explain adequately to an outsider. When local politicians appear on national television, the UK audience may be unaware of the nuances that are deliberately intended to give offence to the opposing point of view. As Morrow (1990, p. 4) observes, these consist of: "... subtle gestures and rituals that only those au fait with their meaning would recognise."

Other than in the most exceptional circumstances, the two communities, in the main, live apart and further perpetuate division by enrolling their children in differing schools; Catholic children attend Catholic schools, with Protestant children attending State schools. To the outsider, the extent of segregation in Northern Ireland may appear astonishing. To the residents, the norm is that, as Cavanagh (1981, p. 34) observes: "... newspapers, trade unions, sports, political parties, charities, voluntary organisations, pressure groups, community associations, tenants associations, etc., find it quite normal to cater primarily for Protestants or for Catholics."

Only when their education is completed, do residents from these differing communities encounter their counterparts. Such a situation has obvious implications for the library service, where staff of differing religions and political persuasions have to work together, being aware of each other's traditions, and therefore remaining reticent on many matters which may be of major concern. The degree to which this may impinge on the effective provision of library services is unclear.

Whilst the extent of the impact of sectarianism on the library is unknown, there is evidence to suggest that it is institutionalised. Whereas the assumption that intolerant individuals cause problems in Northern Ireland may be valid, it may be of equal validity to suggest that political and economic structures also create problems, with systematic injustice leading to: "... a culture of dominant and subordinate groups (Wright, 1990, p. 26)."

Evidence suggests that there may be a bias towards the provision of services to the middle class, rather than to the disadvantaged. This is of importance in the Northern Ireland context as: "... only occasionally, and usually at middle-class level, do structures exist which facilitate contact, if not discussion between communities e.g. arts societies, golf clubs, Rotary and Lion clubs (Fitzduff, 1989)."
However, simplistic assumptions regarding the deep-seated problems of Northern Ireland are dangerous. Even where middle class "cross-community" groups exist, members observe a strict code dictating that discussion on religious and political subjects is taboo. Whereas an air of pleasantness is maintained, so too, are barriers. Wright (1990, p. 29) suggests that: "... politeness is ... an extremely effective way of ensuring our differences remain intact without us having to be engaged in overt hostilities."

This is not to underplay the more obvious dangers of explicit manifestations of religious and political divisions. There exists an embittered view of official institutions, and a perception of the State as endeavouring to manipulate the people. Community leaders display resentment at government exhortations to indulge in cross-community activities. The view from the community is that many more pressing social problems desperately need attention (Springfield Inter-Community Development Project, 1993, p.28). Frazier (1981, p. 25) describes the: "... community mafia that has hijacked real community work and which, through "helpfulness" to government agencies, gets to allocate the money."

Hall (1997, p. 2), in proposing that the peace process is itself a government distraction, cites, as evidence for this suggestion, the views of a local community activist describing: "... stacks of people running around with high salaries yet doing fuck all at the end of the day. We're as marginalised as ever, unless we're prepared to act in a way that makes us acceptable to the establishment."

The real question for librarians is whether the local community views the library as being part of the Establishment, or whether there is an alternative perception of the role and function of the library service.

All of the above, suggests that the library service in Northern Ireland may encounter great difficulties in both providing, and being perceived as providing, services for the community as a whole. By providing a highly institutionalised service based almost entirely on book-lending, the library may be sending out all the wrong signals to the less fortunate in society, and clearly not satisfying their needs. It may even be discriminating against this group. St Lifer and Nelson (1997, p. 43) suggest that librarians: "... have to be as concerned about human rights as we are about intellectual freedom."

A tacit understanding that all is not well is not good enough. More specifically in Portadown, the institutional nature of service delivery and the dubious siting of the building in a town divided by explicit sectarian hatred may be perceived as the act of an establishment unsympathetic to the needs of all the community. As Rolston (1981, p. 41) observes: "The mistake of equating the absence of sectarian intentions with the absence of sectarianism is a common one."

In Northern Ireland, sectarianism is a matter of perception.

A divided town "And then two years ago I was called out in the middle of the night to go to the library because it was on fire. And you drive up. It's pitch black. There's nobody there and suddenly these figures loom out of the darkness - police and firemen and smoke everywhere. They stand back and you have to open up and go in because they won't go in before you and it's like going into Dante's Inferno. It's horrendous going into a building that's on fire. And then the firemen and police come in after you (SELB Librarian describing the destruction of Brownlow Library, Portadown library's nearest neighbour during the 1997 Drumcree dispute)."

Portadown is a market town standing on the river Bann and situated about 25 miles south west of Belfast. Historically, the prominent and relatively wealthy status it enjoys is due to a strategic position on the main Belfast to Dublin railway line, and within a short distance from the M1 motorway, which connects Belfast and the middle and west of Northern Ireland. This has attracted manufacturing, food processing and other economic activity. Outside Belfast, Portadown is perceived as a major provincial shopping town and in the past ten years there have been two major shopping developments in the town centre area.

The population of Portadown was given as 21,017 at the last census in 1991 (Northern Ireland Department of Health and Social Services, 1992). The unemployment rate was 14.5 percent, which was below average for Northern Ireland (16 percent), and well below the high rates of unemployment prevalent in other similarly sized locations. The census also shows that 73 percent of the workforce belong to social classes I, II or III (professional, managerial or skilled). Despite these indications of relative wealth, 11,107 people (53 percent) possessed no formal qualifications.

In common with most towns in Northern Ireland, Portadown is demographically and geographically divided by
religious and political affiliation. According to the 1991 census, 66 percent of the population are Protestant, whilst 25 percent are Catholic[1]. Most working class Catholics live in a clearly defined area, known locally as Drumcree.

Recently, political violence in Portadown has centred on what is termed the Drumcree dispute. This dispute began in 1995, as the route chosen by the local Orange lodge for its march from the annual 4 July service at Drumcree Church, passed along the mainly Catholic Garvaghy Road. For a number of years the Orange march was either forced through, or prevented from proceeding by security forces. The Drumcree standoff now occurs on an annual basis, causing a bitter political split in the town between supporters of the Orange Order and supporters of the residents of the Garvaghy Road. The two conflicting sides line up according to exactly the same criteria which divides Northern Ireland in general: Protestant against Catholic; Unionist against Nationalist; Loyalist against Republican. However, whilst there appears to have been political progress in the Province culminating in the Good Friday Agreement, the atmosphere in Portadown remains bitter.

Apart from the annual standoff at Drumcree, two recent atrocities illustrate life in Portadown in the late 1990s. The first was a massive bomb attack on the town centre carried out in February 1997 by dissident republicans. Many in Northern Ireland believed the explosion to be an attack aimed specifically at the Protestant people of Portadown, with the Reverend Ian Paisley stating: “It's a citadel of Protestantism and that's why it was chosen (Portadown Times, 1998).”

The second atrocity was the murder in April of the same year of a Catholic youth, Robert Hamill by a loyalist gang. It is claimed that police looked on from their Land Rover parked 20 yards away as Hamill was beaten to death (Hardy and O’Docherty, 1999). Many in the Catholic community saw this as evidence of police collusion with Loyalism, further confirming the Catholic perception that Portadown was an unsafe place for them.

Almost in the middle of this bitterly divided town is Portadown library. By common consent, the library is situated in a Protestant area. The library escaped the worst of the 1997 bomb, but sustained damage in a more powerful attack in 1993. The Drumcree dispute was also responsible for the burning of Portadown’s nearest neighbouring library at Brownlow in 1997.

Portadown library is housed in an old Carnegie building dating from 1902. It is dilapidated and too small to provide a range of modern library services, and for more than 20 years was high on the list for replacement. In 1998, the Department of Education Northern Ireland allocated Pounds 1 million towards a new library for the town to be completed in autumn 2000. Many librarians, whilst welcoming the announcement, nonetheless took the view that this allocation owed more to political expediency, rather than to library needs. As one senior librarian remarked: “Personal opinion, purely personal, certainly the situation in Portadown, trying to give the new assembly, the ministers, a kick-start was one of the reasons behind the announcement. I think good news coming to Portadown at this particular time was what the government really wanted. I'm quite convinced in that.”

The effects of division

One objective of this study was to examine library provision to those at the lower end of the socio-economic scale, with particular attention to the political environment. In terms of social deprivation, Portadown resembles many towns in Britain. The leader of Community Network Portadown, a local community umbrella organisation, summarised its problems as: “lack of employment, low incomes, division, poor health, poor diet in areas, feelings of isolation, of not being able to control the direction of their own lives, of not being able to access services and facilities, of not knowing why those facilities are there, or what they can offer - like the library.”

Other interviewees highlighted caring for the elderly, lack of education, single parent families and alcohol abuse as major social problems in the town. Extreme social deprivation in Portadown occurs in the districts of Corcrain and Drumcree where there are large housing estates. As one member of the Drumcree Community Co-operative group observed: “Portadown is one of the wealthiest and most industrialised towns in Northern Ireland and it prides itself in that - having a high economic output. But still here in this corner of the town there’s still 65 percent unemployment - that’s long-term unemployment.”

A related problem was identified by the leader of the Killicomaine Caring and Housing Committee, which caters for an extensive area on the outskirts of the town: “One of our difficulties is that we’re not seen as a deprived area - say, like Drumcree. We don’t have high unemployment, but it is not recognised that people are in very
low-paid jobs."

All these areas, Corcrain, Drumcree, and Killicomaine, have social deprivation in common. However, in Portadown, social problems take second place to religious and political division. Division impinges on the day to day life of citizens. No one is unaffected and even community leaders involved in cross-community work suffer. The council controlled Corcrain Association, which represents a staunch Protestant community, has great difficulty communicating with its Catholic counterpart, the Ashgrove centre, situated less than 200 yards away. The leader explained: "I would have gone down there for coffee, and she would have come up here. That has stopped because we're afraid of being seen doing that. Everybody up here knows my car and everyone down there knows her car. If someone passes on a bus and sees her car sitting here, or my car sitting there - we don't know what's going to happen to ourselves."

Despite these sectarian difficulties, community leaders work quietly against the odds, often in dangerous circumstances.

In addition to the perception of a divided community, is the belief held amongst the minority Catholic community, that Catholics are constrained by the surrounding Protestant districts, being unable to move freely in a Protestant controlled town centre. A member of the Drumcree group commented: "There are two towns here: a big Unionist town and this Nationalist village attached onto it. We all recognise in this community that it's no good."

This claim is disputed by Protestants, many of whom suggest that the Catholic perception is either "in their heads", or a device to manipulate or attract sympathy from the media. As the Killicomaine leader commented: "But you will get that in Catholic areas where they feel that the town is not their own. That comes across very strongly from them. We take it as par for the course."

However, as the Drumcree leader remarked: "Let's go with the scenario that it's in our heads. The fact that it's in our heads is real to us. It makes no difference whether it's true or not."

The validity or otherwise of the claim that Catholics are excluded is, to a large extent, irrelevant. The belief that such exclusion exists, constitutes the reality for that grouping in the community, and thus in practice, they are excluded. Nonetheless, one librarian in Portadown is hopeful: "There is a big middle ground, but as with all situations, I think it's a truism that moderates don't get heard."

Since the Drumcree dispute arose, residents of the town from both communities are aware of restrictions on their lives. There are certain days, and certain times of day, when everyone curtails their movements; few are prepared to venture out of their own area at night. As one member of the Killicomaine group observed: "When something does happen in the town both Catholics and Protestants don't go into it - you know after a bomb, or if there's a bit of a riot or something, and it's not because it would be a fear of something happening to them. They just don't want to be caught up if something does happen."

One member of the Drumcree group was more specific, viz: "I wouldn't go during school holidays, if I was a kid. You wouldn't go on Saturday afternoons, and certainly not after 6 pm. Now, Saturday should be a prime time for libraries, but it's not safe to go into town."

Community information

As a direct result of the embittered atmosphere pervading Portadown, community groups have virtually suspended cross-community work. However, such groups are still active within their own working class areas, dealing with the everyday problems of their constituents. The leader of the Drumcree group defined the role of such co-operatives: "They handle everything from cradle to grave. Mothers and toddlers, over 50s, drop-in, cabin club, education, computer classes, and raising funds to keep the organisation going, from statutory bodies, charities and the money we raise ourselves. The main thing is to empower people."

A member of the Killicomaine group described typical activities of such groups: "We try everything from personal development through to arts and crafts. We've just finished a computer course - Brownlow open learning centre were able to send a mobile unit out. They don't want anything too structured here at the minute - it's a confidence-building exercise really - a lot of them are single parents and they do need a lot of confidence - they leave us to go on and do things they've never done in their lives before."
Groups may be voluntary, or organised by the local Craigavon Borough Council, or part-funded by a number of authorities, including the DHSS. Whilst funding tends to be issue-based, community groups are aware that funding can determine policy and are careful not to lose their autonomy. Obviously, the voluntary groups are more successful in this respect. The Drumcree leader explained: "We hit as many funders as possible but most of the money is raised within the community. The community owns the centre. We built this ourselves."

A managerial approach, however, appeared to be the key determinant in the ability of community groups to attract funds successfully. All the groups consulted in the research were involved in a planning process, and the extent to which planning centred on customer needs was notable. The leader of Community Network Portadown commented: "We are in the process at the moment of doing a five-year plan. Its very specific to local needs and the way things are at the present, so in that sense it's a working document. It will shape exactly how we work."

Even the voluntary groups displayed a keen awareness of management issues, as one member of the Killicomaine group remarked: "It's very hard for voluntary groups like ourselves to get a foot on the ladder. Literally, you need to have many things going at one time to be eligible, and fit the criteria."

Groups perceived the provision of information to be a high priority, maintaining a clear distinction between information and advice, avoiding the latter altogether. The leader of Community Network Portadown was very forthright in this regard: "We are not an advice centre. You need to be very careful because you can run into a lot of problems if you're giving advice. But we offer support."

A member of the Killicomaine group described typical community information work: "If there are a number of people looking for information, we can invite people to come and talk to us, which we do on a regular basis. The likes of BT, the Fire Service, Housing Executive, Health and Social Services. If they want anything, we know the people to get in touch with."

Common to all the groups, and within the library service itself, is a recognition of the importance of education. Education is seen as a means of escaping the entrapment of social disadvantage. A member of the Drumcree group suggested that harnessing the interest in politics which pervades the community, may be one way of improving reading skills. His views are accompanied by a seeming criticism of the library: "Politics would be a way of getting people to read more here, because if people are reading about something that's vital to them, you know, it's reading that stretches them. Instead of the little one shelf for Irish interest - that could be expanded - there's probably more in Eason's [the local bookstore] on Irish issues than there is in the library up there."

Apart from the major question of access to Portadown library by the Catholic community, there is the more general problem with regard to library purpose. From the views expressed above, it is apparent that there is little involvement in community activities by the library service. Thus, a new group has arisen, to address the information needs of the community, with community groups using Community Network Portadown, rather than the library, as a resource centre. As the Killicomaine group leader explained: "They run a service where you can go and get photocopying and typing done - a resource centre for community groups. They put on training days, produce a newsletter."

The leader of Community Network Portadown nevertheless conceded that she used the library as one model when designing her community organisation: "In a way we did look at what the library offers when we were looking at what we could be."

Ironically, at least from the perspective of Portadown Library, her account of the purpose of Community Network Portadown is a near perfect description of the ideal community library: "In a way its a one-stop-shop for information, and things that affect people's lives. Any documents or books we see that we think would be useful we would buy or get in some way."

The library makes little concession to the needs of community groups. Whilst there is a general recognition amongst professionals that more could be done, the reality is that it is not. There is a perception that "social" librarianship is not encouraged, and certainly not enshrined in library policy. It is a paradox that whilst library professionals criticise the service for inadequate provision to the community, they also appear reluctant to undertake such work, as one remarked: "If you put yourself in the position of
a branch librarian in a town - why should you get involved with the local community? Why should you get involved with community groups? Ultimately they're going to give you hassle. They'll want things from you. At the very least they might want you to come and talk to them - on a wet winter night at eight o'clock. Why should you do that?"

Furthermore, when questioned as to the services the library could provide to the disadvantaged, the same librarian replied: "The library service is a book providing service and I wouldn't want it to change being that. The argument is that you bring people up to the level of the library service - you don't bring the service down - lower your standards in other words."

Library access

Given the views expressed above by library staff, community groups are concerned with access to the library. It is apparent that there are other barriers to library usage, apart from problems associated with usage by the Catholic residents of Drumcree. One such problem is the location of the building near the town centre. The Community Network Portadown leader was adamant that "outreach" provided the key to successful community services: "While we have a resource centre, and it is used extensively, our strength is in having workers to go out to where the groups are, because you won't get them to come to a central [facility]."

Ordinary members of groups, particularly those in Killicomaine situated two miles away on the outskirts of town, expressed concern about the lack of parking facilities at the library: "You have to go down the town and you have to pay for parking. All right, it's only 30 pence but that annoys me, and even at the back of Wellworths [the nearest carpark] I have still a fair distance to walk."

More contentious than the issue of physical access, was the barrier caused by the levying of fines. Within the library service, opinion was equally divided on this issue, with strong views being expressed. A senior manager stated: "In actual fact someone who doesn't bring our stock back is to some extent a thief. No commercial undertaking would let them off without a major penalty."

In contrast, one librarian declared: "I despise and detest fines. I hate them with a vengeance."

Charges for library services, as distinct from fines, are equally contentious. Constraints on spending make charges a common feature of both existing, and proposed, services in the SELB Library Service. A member of Community Network Portadown commented: "It's hitting the lower income people who can't afford it. If you have a job application and need to photocopy it. There's no way."

One librarian summarised the argument against charging disadvantaged members of the community for new services, viz: "I'm not interested in arguments that say we're still value for money. If you're on a pension or are a low earner with four kids, value for money, while important to an extent, but the money in your pocket and how far it will go [is more important]."

Clearly there is widespread concern, both within the community and amongst professionals in the library service with regard to access. Problems caused by lack of physical access to the library building are exacerbated by charges that exclude groups of potential library users on economic grounds.

The library and services to the community

However, regardless of the existence of the barriers to library usage discussed above, there is much goodwill in the community towards the library. Nonetheless, the library is still perceived as being an official institution, rather than a community resource. The leader of Community Network Portadown expressed the view that, in order to become part of the community, the library was required to participate more actively within the community itself: "They could become so important if they became part of the community, as part of everything else, and looked at the wider picture."

However, the widespread perception of the service reflects a very traditional view of the library's role and purpose within the community. As one member of the Killicomaine group observed: "Personally, I would only see it as a place to go to borrow books, because we have all the other things. We have the places to meet."
The same respondent elaborated further: "I was very wary when my kids borrowed books from the library. That's a library book - you have to keep it good. You read it and put it down. Don't play with it. That book had to be treated with reverence because it was a library book."

As regards community expectations of library service provision, there was some degree of uncertainty and confusion, viz: "What would a tenants' group go to a library for?"

The leader in Corcrain observed: "If I do think about it, it's just a place to borrow books. I would never think of going to it for anything else other than borrowing. I wouldn't say I'll meet you in the library to anyone. To me it would be a personal thing."

The Drumcree leader commented: "If Maxine needed information on women's issues, she should be able to go up there, sit down and access that information, get what she wants, pay for the photocopying and come out. It should be more than this place where you leave a book in and take a book out."

Librarians expressed the view that the raison d'être of a library service is the provision of books, with other activities being peripheral. As one librarian explained: "Book lending is unique, a core service that's unique to us. There isn't anyone else doing it, whereas other organisations supply community information, provide access to the Internet. You can rent videos from Xtravision. Not that I'm saying we shouldn't do those, I think we should recognise they are a fringe operation."

The library and social class

The debate on charging outlined earlier is a small component of a much wider debate with regard to social class and library usage. One member of Community Network Portadown remarked: "I think it is being used, generally, by people who can afford to pay for the service. It is funded by taxpayers, and I think it should be reaching those who cannot afford to access it - lower income groups, unemployed families. I don't think it is hitting that group."

Whilst not explicitly denying this, the librarians offered the following perspectives on the situation: "There is a big divide in Portadown between the disadvantaged and the better off - but it isn't so much that we're only used by the middle class - they are the most vocal and up-front."

and: "The Arts Committee doesn't have to be middle class anymore than the library has to be. It's just that it's been claimed and taken - and fair play to them - that's what the middle class tends to do. They get in there and they claim things."

One senior manager conceded: "Personal opinion, I think that by accident or design, its the middle class type people that tend to use libraries more. We probably have less people, per head of population in the socially disadvantaged group than we should have."

Nevertheless, despite such explanations, the views expressed within the community groups were that the library service was biased towards the middle classes, at the expense of the more disadvantaged in society. The Corcrain leader, representing an area of particular deprivation commented: "I would say more upper class people use the library - the very well off. I would see these people who live in these big posh places using the library."

Neutrality

Regardless of the extent of deprivation within Portadown, nonetheless, religious and political divisions remain uppermost. The existing situation may be viewed as tragic; nevertheless, it presents an opportunity to examine the library within such an environment. In particular, the circumstances in Portadown provide a yardstick by which the traditional view of libraries as neutral may be judged, with the term "neutrality" being defined as unaligned, and thus available to all.

The major difficulty, with regard to Portadown library, is its relationship with the Drumcree community. As described earlier, many people in this area feel isolated and unable to go into the town in safety. The Drumcree co-operative leader explained: "One of the main problems is that there
are facilities very close-by but they might as well be ten miles away - that includes recreation centres and the library and such."

However, a clear contrast is delineated between the difficulties of accessing the library physically, and the reception which awaits those who overcome such difficulties, viz: "I've always felt comfortable in it to be honest with you - in the library itself. I've never felt threatened or marginalised. The staff have been brilliant and helpful."

With another Drumcree resident observing: "If you do get into it it's unlikely you'll be attacked. But getting to the library can be another thing altogether - and leaving it as well."

One librarian, whilst aware there is a view that Catholics do not use the library, is sceptical of the validity of such a view. In her analysis, people are prevented from using the town centre from a fear of encountering violence, rather than prevented from doing so on grounds of religion. This view is shared by some of the Protestant community groups, who perceive the Drumcree co-operative as politically motivated. The librarian is convinced that many library users are Drumcree residents:"We have a lot of readers from that end of the town and the ones who come in here - it's interesting - the first year nobody said anything; the second year nobody said anything; last year people were coming in and saying "I'm fed up with this I can't get down the town, I can't get home"."

When such views were relayed to the Drumcree group, they elicited the following response: "She's living in cloud-cuckoo-land. She has no appreciation of what's going on. If I had to go to the library I would go via back streets so as not to have to pass the police station. There was once I came out of the library and when I came out I was arrested and taken in for questioning and I was held for three hours in the police station. If I come down and tell people that I was arrested coming out of the library, what are they going to think?"

The oldest member of the group, and the only regular library user lent weight to this view:"I would say, from what I see in the lending library, the vast majority of people in the book lending part of it would be people I don't know. I assume they're people from other parts of the town. I don't often meet people from this end of the town. But it's not those people that matter - the people who use it. It's the people who feel alienated from it, and even though you get a small minority of older people who use that newspaper facility, I would say the vast majority of people would feel alienated."

Outside the environs of Portadown, senior library managers sense that all is not well. The siting in Edward Street and the location next door to the police station are acknowledged as problematical: "In Portadown, the site we're in, the old Carnegie building, as far as I'm concerned it's totally unacceptable to the Nationalist side of the community. It's in a very strongly Protestant area, it's beside the police station, which is unacceptable to some sections of the community, and I've a feeling that the Nationalist community, more than a feeling, are not using it to its best advantage, because of the siting."

In Northern Ireland, education and library services are delivered via Boards which have only 40 percent of their membership elected. However, political factions from both sides, are seemingly prepared to use institutions, including the library service, for their own ends. For their part, libraries have become extremely wary in dealing with matters that may be viewed as contentious. One senior librarian described the difficulties: "We get complaints all the time that we're giving more emphasis to the Nationalist viewpoint, or in years gone-by various ministers were involved. We've had MP's involvement about why we were not flying the flag on certain buildings."

One of the objectives of the research was to establish whether library policy existed, with regard to the use of library premises by groups which may be politically motivated. There is no doubt that such groups exist, including some tenants' associations, which many would claim, are controlled by the paramilitaries or their political wings. Whilst it became apparent that there was no written policy, probing on this topic resulted in mixed responses from the library staff on the issue of whether or not to bar certain groups from the library. A senior librarian commented: "We usually would try and keep anything that has extreme views out of the building."
However, the practical difficulties of implementing such a policy are outlined by one librarian as follows: "I just feel if I checked it out I would be told no. My gut reaction is to say fine, you're a community group, go ahead, we're a community resource. But I do recognise it would have its dangers."

Neutrality, in Northern Ireland terms, is based on the understanding that both communities are able to use library facilities with equal facility. Such a view implies the need for balance, and suggests that bias towards one or other point of view is dangerous. In such circumstances, principles must normally give way to pragmatism, as one librarian explained: "Rational thought doesn't play a huge part in this sort of thing. If I thought that ultimately it would damage the library service in terms of usage by either side of the community, I would come down against usage of the library for things like that."

Library location

The pragmatism shown in dealing with library usage by quasi-political groups is absent in relation to the siting of the library buildings. Whilst the benefits and drawbacks of siting a library in the Drumcree area had never been seriously discussed before, caution or disapproval was universally expressed. Even the community groups were unimpressed. The leader of the Killicomaine group commented: "It would be ideal if we had a library in Killicomaine, but that's not good for community relations, where you have one big building where everyone can meet."

The Drumcree group leader was also aware that a fixed library in Drumcree may result in social division becoming institutionalised: "The last thing we want to is to develop the Nationalist village here, because it's a sort of apartheid."

A librarian echoed this view: "I don't think we should ever get into this situation where we have Catholic libraries and Protestant libraries - libraries built specifically in clearly designated communities of one religious persuasion or the other. I think that would be the road to nowhere."

One solution which may alleviate the concerns of the Catholic community, would be to site the library in the middle of town. When questioned as to the positioning of the new library, which is not central, the Drumcree leader was realistic: "It's hard to get a so-called shared venue in the town. It should have been in High Street or Market Street - right in the middle of the town and that puts in straight in people's faces."

The siting of the new library, whilst less contentious than the current position in Edward Street, is still not satisfactory to the Catholic community in Drumcree, as it is less than 100 yards from Portadown Orange Hall. This was not the first choice of location on the part of the library service, but plans for development on at least two more central sites, have had to be abandoned over the years. Exorbitant costs and a reluctance on the part of the business community to welcome the library in its midst, were cited as reasons.

Obviously, in a deeply divided community such as that of Portadown, location is of crucial importance. However, no site will ever be acceptable to all groups. Ultimately, the answer may lie more in the relationship between the library and the community, rather than in the buildings. One librarian proposed a way forward: "Chris Smith, the Minister for Culture in England, is on record as saying that the library should be the hub of the community - its prime existence should be to give a voice to the community. In a situation like Portadown we have two communities - and two very divided communities - I think you have a very great difficulty, because if you give voice to one, you're liable to give offence to the other. The obvious answer to that is for the library to be deeply integrated into both communities."

Conclusions

In conclusion, there are first, two important caveats to be made, the first of which concerns the selection of Portadown as a case study. The methodological justification is that Portadown is a critical case, and as such is not intended to represent the situation either in the SELB area, or in
Northern Ireland as a whole. Thus, it would not be valid to extrapolate findings more widely, nor to make any general assumptions. The study took place in a unique time and space, namely Portadown in 1999. However, the underlying social divisions and the extraordinary distrust and political violence evident in Portadown are deeply rooted throughout Northern Ireland, although not always on the surface. If there is a lesson, it is that the situation in Portadown could happen anywhere.

Second, community groups, by their nature, are close to those communities which suffer most from social division and political violence. They are often associated with local politics, are aware of paramilitary activity, and may be subject to manipulation. More plainly, the claim by the Drumcree Community Co-operative that Catholics are prevented from using Portadown town centre and the library may or may not be politically motivated. Either way, it is important to bear in mind that the roles played out in Portadown 1999 could be quite easily reversed. In differing circumstances, the Protestant community may equally perceive themselves as the victims.

The results suggest that the library is not providing adequately for the needs of all sections of the community, and in particular, the disadvantaged. Furthermore, lines of communication are poor or non-existent, with librarians seemingly unwilling, or incapable, of addressing the needs of the entire community, viewing the concept of community in purely geographic terms. There is an in-built bias towards the literate, affluent and articulate classes, and consequently, sections of the community and whole communities remain unserved.

In addition, the library is perceived as an institution, and not as a living part of the community. This is partly due to the history of libraries, and partly as a result of the bureaucratic nature of the Northern Ireland State. More specifically, there has been little encouragement from library managers to engage in outreach activities.

Within the community, people are specific about their library expectations. Most view the library service in traditional terms, as a book loan service. However, there is an explicit expression of dissatisfaction amongst the disadvantaged, and a desire for a service more relevant to their needs. Whilst there is a genuine desire within communities in Portadown to establish links with the library, there are also specific demands for an educational, rather than purely recreational approach.

There are pressing social problems in Portadown including unemployment and low pay, health problems, lack of opportunities and poor standards of education, as outlined earlier. Those affected are often unable to deal with the complexities which arise, and need help. Information is, therefore, high on the agenda. The survey showed that small community organisations, often run on a voluntary basis, have developed to satisfy the information needs of the Portadown community. Small groups are now well organised and have their own network, one which excludes Portadown Library. Eighty groups comprise Community Network Portadown (CNP), which co-ordinates activities, and provides support for informational needs. The mutual lack of knowledge of each other’s activities, displayed by the library and CNP is disturbing. Even more disturbing, from the library point of view, is the fact that CNP has virtually usurped the role of a well-organised community library.

Librarians appear nonplussed by charges of neglect in the social area. To many, it seems natural to counter by insisting that libraries are there to promote reading. The library view that the world is divided into readers and non-readers is entirely plausible. Even within the community, library users display astonishment at the idea of the library providing services other than books. However, it is unclear from the survey whether the range and types of books provided match the educational needs of users and non-users. Nonetheless, reliance on book lending does not address the information aspects of library provision, nor justify alone, the cost of a professional library system.

One related issue of concern in the community was that of charging for services and the levying of fines. Our results demonstrated that librarians on the ground are strongly opposed
to such developments, and view charges and fines as barriers to library usage. This view is shared in the community where unemployment and low pay are major social issues, which may affect adversely ability to pay for library services. Plans to charge for ICT services in SELB libraries do not sit well with hopes for equality in the information age. More specifically, it may appear untenable for a public library service to provide free book lending services, regarded as irrelevant, whilst charging fees for much needed information.

The major issue with regard to the issue of political division concerned library access in Portadown. Although it was disputed, the evidence suggested that residents from the Drumcree area are either unable, or unwilling, to use Portadown Library. The problem lies in the location of the library in close proximity to the heavily fortified RUC police barracks in a Protestant part of town. The reasons for the siting are historical, and the survey shows that final decisions on location may not always be decided by the library service. However, librarians need to consider issues such as the siting of libraries as important elements of service provision. Failure to do so, may reinforce the view held by some community groups, that the library service is an arm of the State, rather than a community resource. By immersing itself in the community, the SELB Library Service may gain the confidence to engage in the type of cross community work which may make a real difference to the community. The Portadown case study demonstrates goodwill does exist between a tragically divided community and the library service; it would be a pity to waste it.

Note

1 The term "Protestant" is not used in the Census. The figure given to this group is the sum of all those who declared themselves members of the reformed churches. The percentages do not add up to 100 because the question on the census forms was not compulsory, and there was an option for no religious affiliation.

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