



# Use it or lose it! The importance of measuring the impact of Irish public libraries

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## Abstract

This article considers the importance of measuring impact in public libraries. Example of various metrics are described.

**Keywords:** *Metrics, Public Libraries, Ireland*

## Introduction

My interest in this topic was piqued by my research<sup>1</sup> on the role played by outreach activities in Irish Public Libraries (Nolan, 2011). For the purposes of this study outreach is defined as – ‘the active involvement of libraries in community activities, forming partnerships and seeking ways to encourage library use’. The study findings confirmed that such activities are now regarded as an integral part of today’s Irish public library service but that there is no consistent measurement of these programmes. So why is it so important to be able to measure and prove the value and impact of public library programming, and how can this be achieved?

<sup>1</sup> Nolan, P. (2011). An exploration of the role played by outreach activities in Irish public libraries today. Dissertation. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.askaboutireland.ie/search.xml?query=outreach&query.x=15&query.y=14>

## Previous research

The original study examined this topic from a public library perspective using a mixed method approach incorporating desk research, a descriptive questionnaire, Delphi study and semi-structured interview. The questionnaire survey was distributed to all Irish public library services with an overall response rate of 91%. A request for volunteers to participate in the Delphi study was incorporated into this survey questionnaire and the nine participants were all members of different library services. Following completion of the survey questionnaire and Delphi study, a semi-structured interview was held with Alun Bevan (An Chomhairle Leabharlanna) to further validate findings. The overall picture that emerged was of a library service in which outreach activities play a major role in serving the local community, raising the profile of the library and promoting the service to both users and non-users. It was also found, however, that a large percentage of public libraries did not evaluate these services (45%) and where measurements were in place many were undertaken on an ad hoc basis. Participants felt that a system of relevant qualitative and quantitative indicators would be very beneficial in both raising the public library profile and as a support to service planning and development, in the words of one respondent - *measuring the success of these activities is crucial as often they go unnoticed and their value diminishes because of this.*

## Raising the Public Library Profile

### Funding:

- Irish Public Libraries are very much dependent on priorities and resources at national level and original research findings highlighted the challenge in raising awareness, particularly at government level, of the degree of programming taking place each year across the public library network. Funding for public libraries has been threatened, and, although part of today's modern digital world, there is difficulty in articulating the value of the public library effectively. The positive impact that libraries have in the fields of employment, education, health and community engagement can

be overlooked, and having verifiable data readily available to support this is very beneficial. Such data confirms the value for money provided by the service and demonstrates how it supports and feeds into government policy and priority areas. The ability to produce 'evidence of the positive impact public libraries have on the lives of people in their community' (Jacobs, 2015) is one of the most important and effective ways of securing government support and funding in an environment of cutbacks and budgetary constraints.

At local level, study participants agreed that library programmes are popular with the elected members and that the service is generally regarded as a 'good news story'. In order to benefit from this goodwill at budget time, it is important that 'libraries are recognised and funded as core community assets and partners' (Jacobs). By linking performance indicators to local policies and development plans such structured measurement tools can be used to illustrate the significant contribution being made at local level and the value of the library service within the wider public service.

A good example of how this can be achieved was presented by Richard Bealing, (Director of Wigan Libraries, Museums and Archives) at the recent LAI Public Libraries conference (2015). With his view that 'politicians love numbers' he demonstrated how Wigan LMA collected data relevant to their council's priorities and presented this information to senior management in a succinct manner via digital media. This approach was received favourably and the service has managed to survive restructuring and budget cuts without library closures.<sup>2</sup> This is no mean feat as according to CILIP, almost 450 library branches have closed since 2010, with more than 100 libraries closed in England, Wales and Scotland in 2015 (Flood, 2016).

In addition to government funding, the development of working partnerships and externally funded projects can only be enhanced by the

<sup>2</sup> Presentation entitled *This is what you think we do* can be accessed [here](#)

ability to demonstrate evidence of need, originality and value for money (Poll & te Boekhorst, 2008). Verifiable proof of a potential audience with a specific interest or need, for example, can help both potential funders when making investment decisions, and library professionals as a means of demonstrating the impact and value of public libraries when seeking such support.

### Promotion:

- The use of measurement data can be very effective in general library service promotion. In spite of acknowledged improvements and progress in how libraries self-promote, my original study (2011) indicated a general lack of awareness of the public library service, what it has to offer, and particularly so among non-users, other agencies and organisations. Proactive use of measurements in local and social media improves the visibility of the service and demonstrates the impact that library programmes can have on those who participate. The profile of the public library can be further raised by using verifiable quantitative and qualitative data to demonstrate both its economic and social value and statistics can be supplemented by the creation of digital records collecting visual and multimedia evidence (Cole, 2014). As trusted information providers, targeted information campaigns can enhance our attractiveness and increase demand for our services.

### Programme Planning and Development

Data collected can also be used to inform the organisation and procedures of the library and as a guide in the library programme planning process (Poll & te Boekhorst, 2008). A preference for structured programming of activities emerged from the study and this was re-enforced by the concern that event and activity programming on an ad-hoc basis may lead to a lack of recognition of the importance of these services and impact negatively on the availability of resources. The use of relevant measures encourages a more structured approach, improving recognition of the value of these services and enabling better service planning.

Performance measurement should not be seen as an end in itself but rather a proactive way of informing and improving practice in the following ways:

- Offering the ability to assess the changing needs of communities and service users
- Measuring how the public library rises to meet these needs
- Identifying gaps and less successfully targeted areas
- Evaluating the underlying reasons for gaps in provision and addressing these where possible
- Relaying information and results back to all staff members
- Using results in a practical manner by feeding them into library procedures
- Comparing results with former ones collected or similar indicators in other libraries

### How to measure?

Measuring the impact of public libraries is a difficult task, as what we are basically trying to measure is 'whether our services make a difference' (Brettell, 2014) This is complex due to the multidimensional nature of public library service provision.

Internationally, a number of research projects have been undertaken recently in an effort to identify the most appropriate methods - most notably:

**ISO 16439:** The International Standards Office commenced this project in December 2010 involving 17 experts from 13 different countries (Poll, 2012). This culminated in the publication of **ISO 16439: Methods and procedures for assessing the impact of libraries in 2014**. Building on existing projects and literature, the aim was to standardise the terminology for impact assessment and to describe and select the methods most used and most effective in delivering meaningful results. The methods prescribed are not exhaustive but rather a guide from which to choose suitable methods for assessing the individual, social, educational and economic impact of public libraries.

**Common Impact Measurement System (CIMS):** This measurement system was co-designed by Global Libraries staff along with Country Grantees and has been in use since its introduction in 2013 (Streatfield, Markless and Cottrill, 2015) The aim is to quantify the impact participating libraries have on their users and, by all participants using the same measures, data can be aggregated, monitored and compared across countries. There are both required and optional indicators across seven categories: digital inclusion, health, education, economic development, communication, culture & leisure and government & governance. In addition, participants are encouraged to collect other data which they perceive to be relevant to their local priorities and needs.

**National Impact of Library Public Programming Assessment (NILPPA):** This initiative is a response by the American Library Association to the demand by librarians in the USA for a means by which they can demonstrate the impact of library programming. Following publication of a White Paper (2014) a research framework has been developed which will be implemented over a five year period. This three phase research plan will culminate in usable data, data collecting tools and an ongoing reporting mechanism for assessing the impact of American library public programs in public, school, academic and special libraries.

**LibQual+:** Developed by the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) and members of Texas A&M University this is essentially a survey instrument used to assess service quality in academic libraries. Although principally academic it has also been used by some public libraries (Saunders, 2007) and is a good example of a standardised method which can be used both to compare services with peers and to seek help and advice from higher performing services in implementing best practice. As a reliable, valid and robust method the data collected can also be used as an aid in strategic planning, seeking funding and support and implementing improvements and changes in service delivery. LibQual+ recommends using the survey as a first step in highlighting specific issues, regarding it as ‘one tool in a kit of tools for performance measure’ (Saunders).

This level of commitment on an international scale demonstrates the need for realistic measurements to be introduced. The general consensus is that a mixed method approach, using both quantitative and qualitative data, is the most appropriate with methodologies then adapted to suit national and local needs.

### Measurement in Irish Public Libraries

At national level the public library service indicators collected annually are (1) Number of library visits and (2) Operating costs per thousand population. In addition, detailed statistical information is collected in the Public Library Service annual statistical returns to the Libraries Development Unit.

Neither method, however, adequately captures information on the real nature of activities and programming in public libraries. Those participating in the outreach survey had developed quantitative and/or qualitative indicators as methods of capturing this information. Quantitative indicators included attendance, loans, number of events and number of visits. Participant feedback was the most commonly used qualitative measurement, some services indicating regular reviews and evaluations, others seeking feedback but not on all events.

The need for a uniform system of data collection is recognised at national level and included in *Opportunities for all*, the current Strategy for Public Libraries (2013). Programme seven of the strategy highlights the need for immediate performance measurement with the associated aim of generating measurable data on the provision and impact of library services.

In the interim, current performance data collected by Irish Public Libraries can be supplemented by other statistics such as the number of events, event attendance, requests for assistance with online searches etc. but the gathering of qualitative material, although rich in information, is much more problematic.

## Survey follow-up 2015

In preparation for this article the original study participants were contacted as part of an informal follow-up and were asked the following questions:

1. Does your library service actively engage in outreach activities (e.g. community projects, targeted reading initiatives etc.)?
2. Has your service developed any indicators to measure the success, or otherwise, of outreach activities?
3. If yes, are these quantitative and/or qualitative in nature?
4. If no, do you feel such indicators would be worthwhile?

The responses (40% response rate) indicate no significant change from the initial results five years ago, which is understandable given the pressures of maintaining service levels over the intervening period. All participating services indicate regular engagement in activities and outreach, dependent on staff resources. Most have measurement mechanisms in place and the methods used are mainly quantitative in nature e.g. attendance figures, memberships, issues, number/type of event. Feedback forms are still the preferred method of collecting qualitative data but there is a concern that these may be off-putting for participants. What has emerged from the responses is a real appetite for some well-structured and robust qualitative indicators to show the real impact of library activities. It is also suggested that these be suited to uniform application across the library network, be user friendly and place minimum demand on staff resources. In her literature review of methods for demonstrating the value of public libraries (2011), Rooney Browne concludes that there is no perfect method for measuring the value of public libraries – but there are many possibilities. Initiatives such as Speaking Volumes<sup>3</sup> (Carnegie Trust, 2015) demonstrate, through the use of

databases and accompanying material, one method by which the impact of libraries can be effectively communicated to stakeholders. While, ideally, a nationally co-ordinated standard methodology will be established, in the interim public libraries can select methods best suited to their programmes and objectives to ensure that valuable data is collected. These methods can then be used, in addition to national indicators and PLS returns, to inform, enrich and provide service specific information. Public libraries are changing and being challenged to re-invent themselves (Brophy, 2008). The ability to assess performance is necessary to raise the library profile, secure funding, assist efficient planning and maintain and enhance their contribution to society.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Speaking Volumes can be accessed [here](#)

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