

# **Barking & Dagenham Family Reading Evaluation report**

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# **1. Introduction**

## **1.1 Project background**

The DCMS/Wolfson Public Libraries Challenge Fund is a partnership between DCMS and the Wolfson Foundation to enhance the facilities and services provided by public libraries in England. The 2000-01 Reader Development programme sought to fund initiatives which:

- encourage reading among particular age groups;
- combat social exclusion;
- attract new users and help existing users make more of library services;
- establish or develop specialist collections and services;
- exploit ICT in reader development.

A range of initiatives were supported by the programme, from a scheme to provide books for homeless people in Shropshire, to an initiative to develop services for the Bangladeshi community of Milton Keynes.

The London Borough of Barking and Dagenham's initial bid proposed to build on work that has developed as a result of a partnership between the Library Service, the Adult College and the Community Inspection and Advisory Service. Studies have found that parents often did not know how best to help their children learn to read at home (eg. *Improving Literacy in the Primary School*, Wragg et al). The 'Partnership with Parents' courses, which consist of five two-hour sessions, aim to help parents support their children's literacy by teaching them how their children learn to read, spell and write.

Under the council's proposal, the Family Reading Librarian would take library materials for the whole family into the schools, lead a session demonstrating the range of library services and encourage families to join and use the library. A taster collection of children and adults' reading material would be left in each school for the course participants to borrow and follow up sessions were planned to take place in local libraries. Provision was made for all library staff to be trained in family reading. Following on from some of the Partnership courses, family reading groups would be set up.

## **1.2 Barking and Dagenham**

Traditionally, Barking and Dagenham has been an area of low attainment; it is the fifteenth most deprived borough in England and has the highest proportion of adults without higher education qualifications; only 3.7% of children are in a household where the head has a higher education qualification (Barking & Dagenham Library Service, 2000). Supporting adult literacy is a priority because the borough was fourth from bottom in the Basic Skill Agency's 1998 index of adult literacy (Barking & Dagenham Library Service, 2000) and there are currently over 30,000 adults with very low levels of literacy.

The standard of children's literacy in the borough is rising rapidly; it is one of the fastest improving boroughs in the country for the performance of eleven year olds in their end of key stage 2 tests, having moved from near the bottom of the performance tables since the early 1990s. However, the gap between children and adults' literacy levels is widening. Literacy and Cultural Services has identified the improvement and support of literacy as a priority, which is to be implemented through a range of services, including libraries. Being community-based, libraries are "the key places for learning for most adults" (project partner interviews), who do not have the opportunity to attend colleges or universities. In a disadvantaged area, many people are not able to afford books and other items, so the library service can be a huge support, especially to people who lacked opportunities to learn and have access to information as children.

Many adults are understandably apprehensive or uncomfortable using libraries, especially when their experience of education has been negative. The Partnership with Parents course encourages them to become involved in libraries through supporting their children and seeks to widen family reading choices. By taking the Library Service to schools and adopting an informal approach, it was hoped to encourage more adults to use libraries. Almost 80% of eleven year olds in the borough have library membership, but, by the time they reach 25, this has fallen to just under one-quarter (Barking & Dagenham Library Service, 2000). However, the project aimed to encourage adults to read and use libraries for their own benefit and enjoyment, as well as to support their children. The project partners recognised that supporting their children's learning is a great motivator for parents who might not, initially, be interested in reading for their own development.

### **1.3 Family Reading**

According to the National Literacy Trust, "family literacy" is working "through parents to improve the reading and writing of their children, as well as the parents' literacy" (Bird, 2001). In the 1980s, there was a broad acceptance that parents had an important role to play in helping their children learn to read. However, it was not until the 1990s, that initiatives to support parents in relation to their own literacy development began to be introduced.

Recent initiatives that have an impact on family literacy include: Action Zones (education, employment and health), the Adult and Community Learning Fund, Sure Start and the New Deal for Communities. Schemes have varied considerably in terms of location, content and length. A wide range of agencies have been involved, including local education authorities, public libraries, private sector firms and adult education centres and schemes have taken place in baby clinics, family centres, day nurseries, libraries, after-school study, playgroups, churches and housing associations.

The National Year of Reading funded a variety of initiatives, including the Early Bird Project<sup>1</sup> and Growing Readers Book-Groups<sup>2</sup> ([www.yearofreading.co.uk](http://www.yearofreading.co.uk)).

One of the closest, geographically, to Barking and Dagenham was the South East London Performance Improvement Group's "Read around the Family". This enabled six library authorities to run seven-week programmes of family reading events, backed up by printed support material and leading to the development of two family reading groups in each borough.

There are many other family reading group activities, some dating back to the mid 1990s. For example, Norfolk Libraries run Family Reading Groups for children aged between seven and twelve, and their parents, grandparents or guardians. At each session, a librarian talks about books on a different topic and children and adults join in the discussion. Members have a special card allowing them to borrow more than the usual number of library books.

There have also been various projects aimed at improving parents and children's literacy by providing parents with information about the curriculum and education system and supporting them in developing their own strategies to help their children learn to read and write. For example, The Liverpool Parent School Partnership has been running since 1995 and now operates in more than forty schools from nursery to Year 7. Parents completing the course are offered accreditation by Merseyside Open College Network. The 'Parents as Educators' course gives parents information about the Literacy Hour and presents ways in which parents can support children in their learning. Parents' own learning has been encouraged to such an extent that, a degree course will soon be available in Family Studies. The Government's 'Standards Fund Family Literacy Programme', developed by the Basic Skills Agency, is a twelve-week course that targets parents with poor literacy skills and their children. It is a mixture of separate and joint activities for parents and children.

Many family literacy programmes have been criticised because they are restrictive in terms of who can participate and how the programme is structured. 'Keeping up with the Children' is a taster course designed to provide flexibility and engage a wider parental audience. The six-week course, which began in Leicester, aims to keep parents informed about how the Literacy Hour works and improve skills in areas where adult literacy is poor, giving parents the confidence to support their child's literacy development. The structure and content of the course mirrors that of the Literacy Hour. By the end, parents commented that they felt more confident in being able to help and support their child's learning and were better able to talk to their children's teachers about schoolwork. This is a similar structure and approach to that of the 'Partnership with Parents' course.

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<sup>1</sup> Working through mobile and branch libraries to support and encourage family reading and literacy activities in rural Lincolnshire

<sup>2</sup> Run by Dorset Professional Education Centre, to establish a minimum of four book groups in rural areas in Dorset. Parents, grandparents and children will meet and discuss books for young readers that will initially be provided by the County Library. Once the groups are established, books for adults will be introduced and other members of the community involved. Aims to involve adults in their children's reading and to enthuse adults themselves

## 1.4 Aims of the project

It was hoped that the Family Reading project would lead to a stronger role for library services; they will be “at the centre of vitally necessary and urgent programmes on adult literacy” (Barking & Dagenham Library Service, 2000), promoting new ways of learning and working with schools, the Community Inspection and Advisory Service and the Adult College. Hopefully, the promotion of family reading and adult literacy would provide further status and recognition for the library. The project was seen as an opportunity to recognise the importance of the library’s role, emphasising its strengths and raising its profile. By working as a partner with the Adult College and others, the Library Service would become more central; there will be less danger of staff feeling marginalized and as though they were working alone. As the Annual Library Plan states:

*By working in partnership, not only will the library service support the learning agenda, but colleagues in education are well placed to encourage membership and use of libraries.*

The project partners anticipated that everyone would be able to achieve more by recognising areas of professional expertise. Through giving library staff a central role in the council’s key campaign, their status would be enhanced. Training would provide staff with an opportunity to improve their customer care skills and gain a greater understanding of families. It was thought that the project might result in changes in the attitude and image of library staff; they would have the opportunity to reconsider how they and the library are perceived. Through the project, the library service would also gain an opportunity to try out new ideas and a new style of service to see how these innovations can be used to increase use of the library and encourage more members.

The project linked with the Library Service’s strategy, set out in the Annual Library Plan. This emphasises the Service’s key role within community, its ability to provide opportunities for all and to help to raise pride in the borough. The project relates to many of the Library Service’s aims and objectives, particularly:

- to maximise membership of the service and increase take-up; this is the central priority of the action plan;
- to provide a service that is accessible, inclusive and welcoming to all, identifying and removing barriers to library use;
- to be the main provider of information to the community;
- to provide a comprehensive range of literature;
- to support families in their use of libraries, in particular, providing support for parents to encourage their children’s reading;
- to respond to changing educational needs;
- to provide high quality advice and guidance to all;
- to promote and support arts, heritage and leisure;
- to work with local community, other council departments, voluntary groups and other agencies;
- to respond to the needs of existing and potential customers.

The work of the Family Reading Librarian was a key part of the borough's strategy to remove barriers to library use. In addition, the project evaluation provided an ideal opportunity for consultation with users and non-users.

In more prosaic terms, it was hoped that the project would encourage more families to gain benefit and pleasure from libraries and understand what their local library had to offer. In addition to greater membership, it was anticipated that there would be increased use of the whole range of services on offer and greater use of books by the community as they gained more understanding of the library service and felt more confident using libraries. The Library Service hoped to gain a better understanding of the barriers to library use, analysing feedback from local families involved in the project to enable it to improve its service. Family Reading Groups were seen as a way to encourage more in depth use of libraries and reader development at all ages.

It was anticipated that the taster collections and Partnership with Parents courses would allow those who were not already library users to see the range of resources and services on offer, while current users would be encouraged to try things they had not considered before, like non-book materials. In addition, being presented with a more manageable taster collection to choose from would stimulate parents and children to try different kinds of books.

The project would also help the Education Service to work towards several of its priorities, including:

- improving parents' and carers' understanding of how to help their children through their school career;
- improving standards and skills for early years;
- raising standards in literacy at all levels of attainment. (Barking & Dagenham Education Service, 1999)

One of the potential benefits for schools was the prospect of more input by families as parents involved would, perhaps, be more likely to contribute to the school and encourage their children. As parents found out more about what goes on in schools and how their children learn, this would, hopefully, impact on literacy and numeracy standards. It might also have knock-on effects on a wide range of issues, for example, improving reading ages and developing more positive attitudes to books, especially amongst boys.

The Library Service recently merged with the Education Department and this project was a practical way to help to strengthen connections and links and improve communication by working together. The anticipated benefits for the Adult College included the possibility of more families attending this and other courses.

## **1.5 Report structure**

After an outline of the methodology employed and a brief summary of the responses obtained, the main body of the report outlining the findings has been divided into five major themes, related to important issues addressed by the project and concerns raised by the Steering Group. These five sections are:

1. Views of the library service
2. Developing library services
3. The impact of the project on parents
4. The impact of the project on library staff
5. Partnership approaches

After outlining current views of the library service, the report considers what impact the project has had on these opinions. Following on from this, the role of family reading in encouraging new library users and developing new methods of service delivery is considered. The evaluation attempts to provide an indication of the overall impact of the project on parents, particularly in terms of developing adult learning and literacy. The project's current and future impact on library staff in the borough is a further area that is considered. As partnership working is key to the success of this project, a section of this report is devoted to this aspect. Finally, examples of good practice emerging from the project are highlighted and the report makes recommendations for its long-term sustainability.

## **2. Methodology**

The evaluation activities undertaken by the Centre for Information Research (CIRT) at the University of Central England have focused on the impact of the Family Reading Project on:

- parents in Barking & Dagenham;
- the staff of the library service;
- partnerships between organisations involved in the initiative.

CIRT designed instruments to collect both qualitative and quantitative data using a variety of methods. These instruments consisted of:

- questionnaires;
- telephone interviews;
- observation.

Some additional data, such as membership figures and taster collection issues, was collected by Barking and Dagenham staff and fed back to the CIRT for analysis to supplement other data collected by CIRT.

CIRT regularly updated the Steering Group throughout the project, including an Interim Report produced in January, which was intended to inform the future development of the project and the evaluation. The initial evaluation plan, like the project itself, was revised as a result of issues arising during the course of the project.

### **2.1 Areas of investigation**

The following sections provide further detail about each of the areas investigated by CIRT.

#### **2.1.1 Partnership with parents courses**

CIRT initially devised a short, user-friendly questionnaire for distribution after each library session (the first session in each Partnership with Parents course). The questionnaire in this format was used for sessions between October and February. The questionnaire sought to discover such things as the usefulness of the library session, parents' attitudes towards attending a follow-up session, initial views of the taster collection and library membership and use.

The format of the questionnaire was changed in March to include more questions about library use following discussions at the Steering Group concerning parents' reluctance to use the library, despite showing interest in the Partnership sessions. Like the other evaluation instruments used, the Family Reading Librarian (FRL) and Community & Education Services Manager advised the evaluation team on the suitability of the format and structure of these questionnaires.

The FRL was responsible for distributing questionnaires, supervising their completion at sessions and regularly forwarding responses to CIRT for analysis.

Observation of one Partnership with Parents session in June and one FLARE group in March was undertaken by CIRT. It was initially intended that two Partnership sessions would be observed, but low turnout at some schools and cancelled courses meant that this was not possible. This provided an opportunity to observe the interaction amongst parents, the FRL and the course tutor.

### **2.1.2 Taster collections**

CIRT devised another questionnaire for distribution at the fourth session of the partnership with parents course. This was the session attended by the Family Reading Librarian in order to gain feedback on parents' progress. This survey focused on parents' attitudes towards and use of the taster collection. Again, the FRL distributed questionnaires to parents and forwarded completed forms to CIRT.

### **2.1.3 Library session**

As part of the project, it was originally planned to hold a follow-up session in the library for parents who had attended the Partnership courses. CIRT designed a questionnaire for parents to fill in after the session. However, as parents were reluctant to attend this session, a decision was made to omit this aspect of the project and refocus on other areas.

### **2.1.4 Reading groups**

CIRT devised one questionnaire to be distributed to all parents and another to be completed by children attending reading groups. The aim of this survey was to ascertain individuals' motivation to join the group and the perceived benefits of reading groups. As this aspect of the project had not been fully developed by the end of the evaluation period, the limited responses gathered have not been included in the analysis.

A member of the CIRT team attended one of the reading group sessions to observe. Although this session was not well attended, it helped to provide CIRT with an impression of the general format of these sessions.

### **2.1.5 Training**

As staff training had only been introduced two months before the end of the funding period of the project, the amount of data relating to training collected for inclusion in this report is limited. CIRT devised a questionnaire for all staff to fill out at the end of each training session giving their impressions of the delivery and applicability of the training. A member of the CIRT team observed one staff training session (Family Reading Groups).

It was initially intended that staff training would take place earlier in the project and that, towards the end of the project, a further survey would be conducted to discover

how the training had been put to use in the workplace. However, due to training taking place later this was not possible.

### **2.1.6 Partnerships / Project Management**

To provide information about the success of partnerships and assess the strategic aspects of the project, CIRT conducted telephone interviews with a sample of project partners in November, towards the beginning of the project and again in June, towards the end. In the first round of interviews, members of the steering group were asked about:

- their expectations of project;
- the perceived benefits of involvement in the project;
- and any potential issues they thought needed to be addressed throughout the project.

The second round covered reflections on:

- the success of the project;
- problems encountered during the project;
- and issues surrounding sustainability and future development.

In addition, a sample of head teachers from schools involved in the project also took part in telephone interviews towards the end of the project to give their impressions of its impact and success as well as details of any difficulties encountered. This provides an alternative perspective on the project and highlights the importance of partnership working.

### 3. Number of responses

The following section details the number of respondents to the project activities and the evaluation instruments.

The FRL has taken part in FLARE or Partnership with Parents sessions at nineteen schools as well as one community group. However, some venues have hosted more than one course; the FRL has actually attended 25 Partnership and 10 Family Literacy and Reading Enhancement (FLARE) courses. In total, she has reached 280 families, 198 of these through Partnership with Parents courses and the remainder through FLARE sessions.

#### 3.1 Library sessions

Table 1 shows the number of parents completing evaluation questionnaires at the library session Partnership with Parents courses throughout the year and the number actually attending the courses.

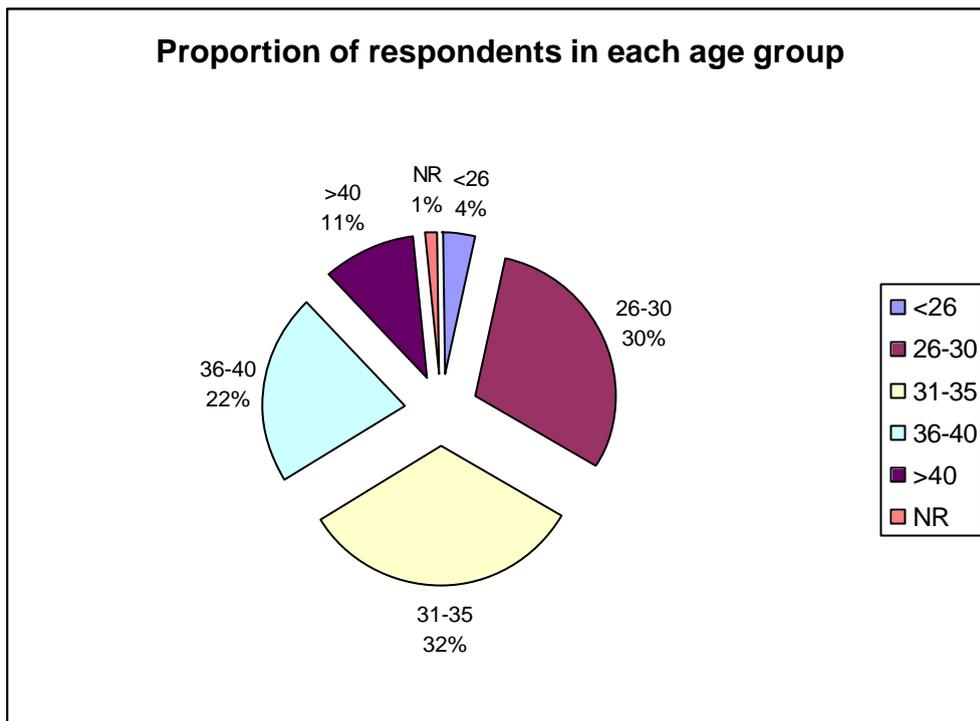
Number of library session questionnaires completed – October/November	25
Number of library session questionnaires completed – January/February	64
Number of library session questionnaires completed – March	24
Number of library session questionnaires completed – April/May	24
Number of library session questionnaires completed – June	15
Number of Partnership with Parents library session questionnaires completed	152
Number of parents attending Partnership with Parents courses	198
% course attendees completing library session questionnaires	76.7%

*Table 1:*

Tables 2 and 3 show the breakdown of library session questionnaire respondents by age and gender.

Number of female respondents to library session questionnaires	147 (96.7%)
Number of male respondents to library session questionnaires	5 (3.3%)
Number of respondents to library session questionnaires aged between 20 and 40 (project target group)	136 (89.5%)

*Table 2*



*Table 3*

### 3.2 Taster collections

Table 4 shows the number of parents completing taster collection evaluation questionnaires, in the fourth week of the course, throughout the year.

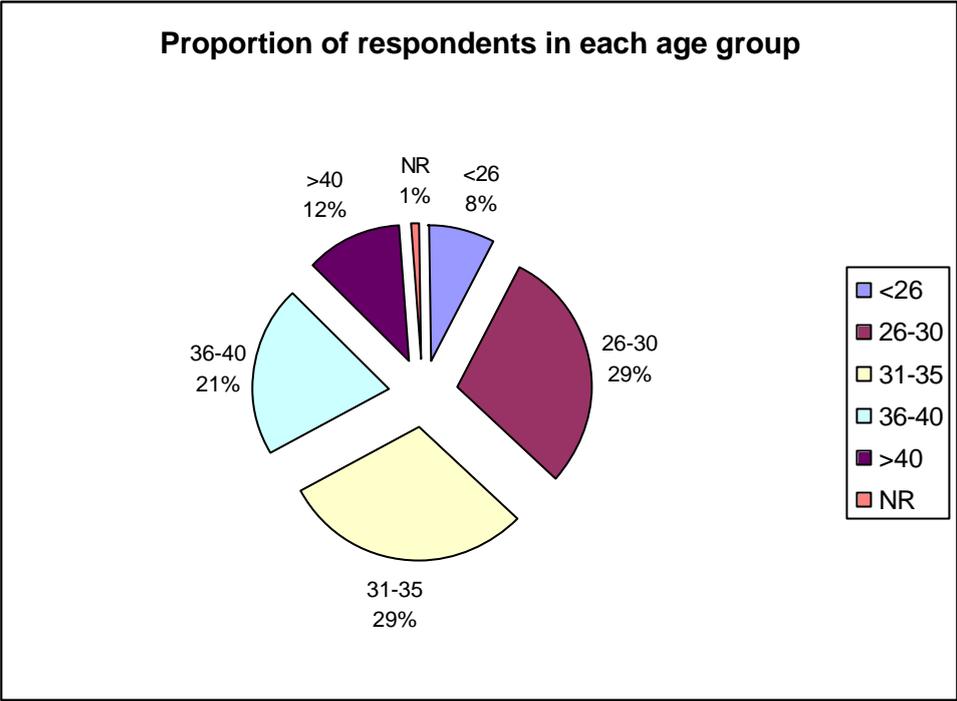
Number of taster collection questionnaires completed – October/November	29
Number of taster collection questionnaires completed – January/February	41
Number of taster collection questionnaires completed – March	23
Number of taster collection questionnaires completed – April/May	10
Number of taster collection questionnaires completed – June	8
<b>Total number of Partnership with Parents taster collection questionnaires completed</b>	<b>111</b>
% course attendees completing taster collection questionnaires	56.1%

*Table 4*

Tables 5 and 6 show the breakdown of taster collection questionnaire respondents by age and gender.

Number of female respondents to taster collection questionnaires	108 (97.3%)
Number of male respondents to taster collection questionnaires	3 (2.7%)
Number of respondents to taster collection questionnaires aged between 20 and 40 (project target group)	98 (88.3%)

*Table 5*



*Table 6*

The number of library session and taster collection questionnaires completed each half term do not tally for a variety of reasons including: parents being absent on particular weeks, parents dropping out of courses and courses being cancelled because of low turnout.

## **4. Views of the library service**

In a disadvantaged area such as Barking & Dagenham, many people are not able to afford books and other resources, so the library service can be a huge support, especially to individuals who lacked opportunities to learn and to access information as children. However, many local people are reluctant to make use of the library service; they feel apprehensive or uncomfortable using libraries. The Partnership with Parents courses aim to encourage 20 to 40 year olds to become involved in libraries through supporting their children.

Adult College tutors have noticed this aversion to libraries among some parents; it appears that a minority have previously made up their minds that libraries are not for them. Tutors have even been slightly worried about losing students from the course as a result of the library involvement; a few parents simply did not turn up to a session if they realised that someone from the library would be speaking. They now feel that, given the attitude of some parents, it may have been wise not to mention the FRL visits, but simply to treat that week as a normal session about books and reading.

### **4.1 Partnership with Parents sessions**

This project was unique for Barking & Dagenham library service because it has provided staff with an opportunity to give a clear explanation of what is on offer for families in local libraries and parents have had the chance to ask questions in a way that is not normally possible in a busy library. The FRL has attended twenty-five Partnership courses, reaching 198 families, since the start of the project.

In the Partnership sessions, the FRL provided parents with more information about the facilities available in local libraries and guided them through the selection of books she had brought to the session. These started with books for babies, before moving on to Key Stage 1 and 2 books; she also briefly talked about novels for older children. At the session observed by CIRT, parents joined in at various points commenting on their likes and dislikes. When addressing this fairly large group, although books were not passed round, several were held up for parents to see their covers and one or two were held open. At the smaller FLARE group that was also observed, some of the books for babies were handed round to parents. With both groups, the FRL was able draw on subjects the parents had talked about earlier, for example, having realised that one parent was religious, she mentioned Bible stories and, as one parent's first language was Albanian, she highlighted the books in different languages available.

Before moving on to books for adults, the FRL asked whether parents had time to read themselves. At the Partnership session observed, one participant was particularly responsive, saying she read Danielle Steele, adventure books, wildlife books and Stephen King. This led other members of the group to add their comments, saying what type of books they enjoyed and what they were currently reading. They agreed that it was difficult to find the time to read if they had young children. The FRL then showed examples of adult books available in different fiction genres and non-fiction categories.

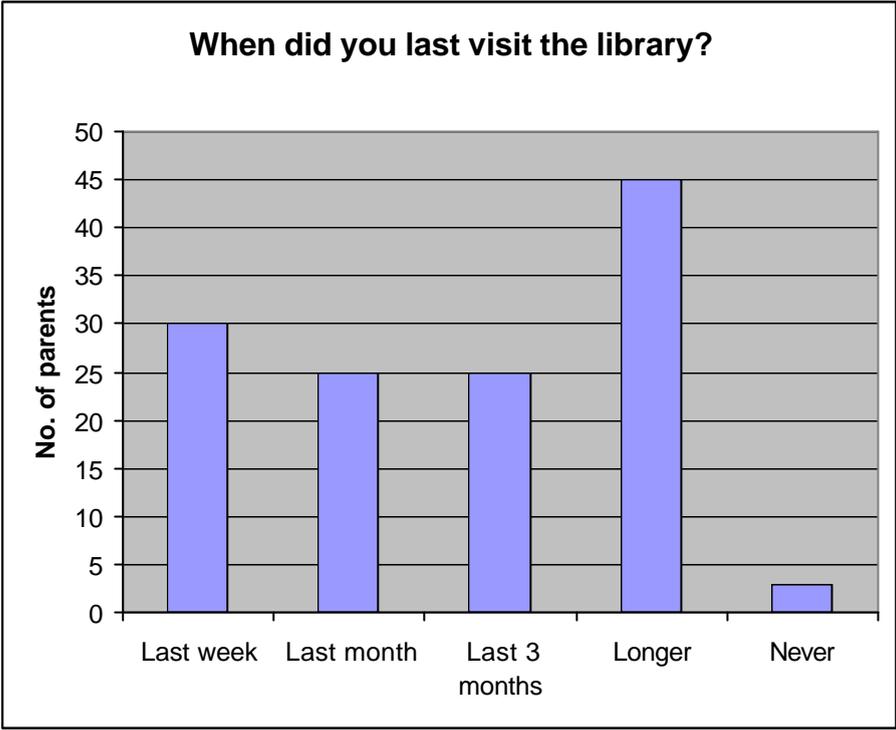
Parents responded enthusiastically to much of the material, for example, one parent commented that she had not thought about audio tapes for adults, although she borrowed them for her children.

The FRL suggested methods of choosing books for parents and children and encouraging wider reading, in particular the “Who Next?” and “Who Writes Like?” guides and highlighted particular sections of the library the parents might find useful, such as the Parents’ Shelf and services they might not be aware of like the Reading Zone and Reading Challenge, books on tape, videos, local history and reference facilities. The FRL asked the parents about their use of the public library, prompting them to talk about whether they used a library, which branch they used and so forth. She told parents about the facilities available at the local library and parents had the opportunity to add their own thoughts and asked questions. It was clear that most parents attending the observed session were unaware of some facilities, for example, the arrangements for returning books to any branch in the borough. Parents were keen to discuss general issues relating to library use, such as the number of books they could borrow, the problem of returning all books on time.

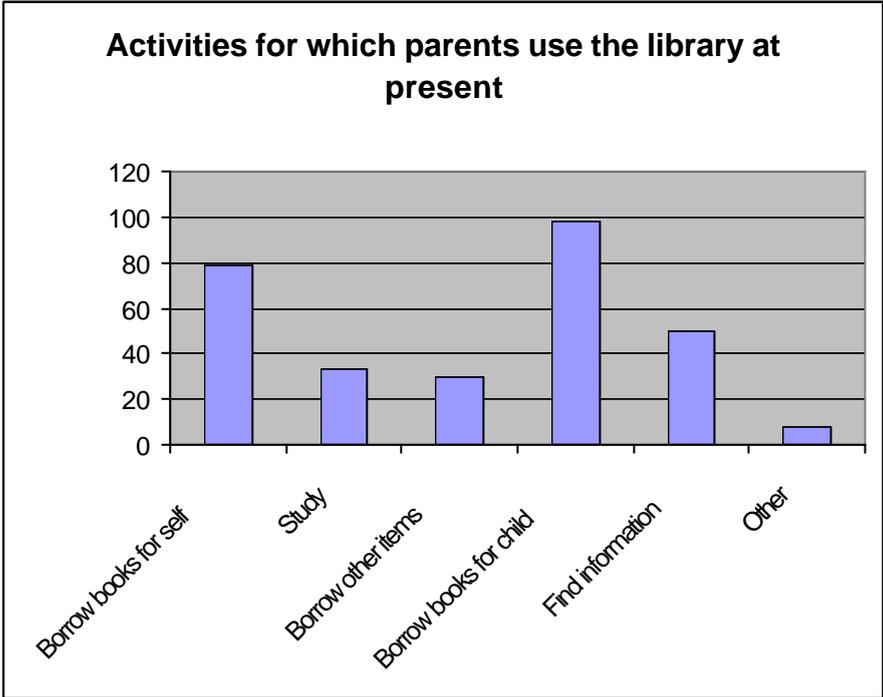
The FRL regularly paused to ask parents if they had any questions. The parents themselves volunteered information about local facilities, demonstrating practical knowledge on the few occasions when the FRL was unsure of the details. However, the parents in the FLARE group were much more reluctant to respond to the FRL’s questions and had to be encouraged by the tutor.

## **4.2 Current library use**

Even if they were library members, more than one-third of respondents to the library session questionnaire had not used a public library for longer than three months. However, approximately the same proportion of parents, 36% of those completing questionnaires, had used the library within the last month.



*Table 7*



*Table 8*

Borrowing books for their child was the most common reason parents gave for visiting a public library, followed by borrowing books for themselves. In fact, 72 parents borrowed books for both themselves and their child from the library; this represents 64% of library members on the Partnership courses. Finding information, studying and borrowing other items such as CDs and videos were the next most frequently mentioned activities. To some extent, borrowing appeared to depend on frequency of library visits. 80% of those parents who had used the library within the last week borrowed books for themselves, compared with just half of those who had not been to a library for more than a month. Over 90% of the most frequent library users borrowed books for their children, but this fell to 60% for those who had not used a library for more than three months.

### 4.3 Factors that discourage library use

The library service was keen to use this project as an opportunity to find out what prevents local people using its services so that it can improve accordingly. Consequently, from March, the Partnership with Parents library session questionnaire asked parents what might encourage them to make greater use of library facilities.

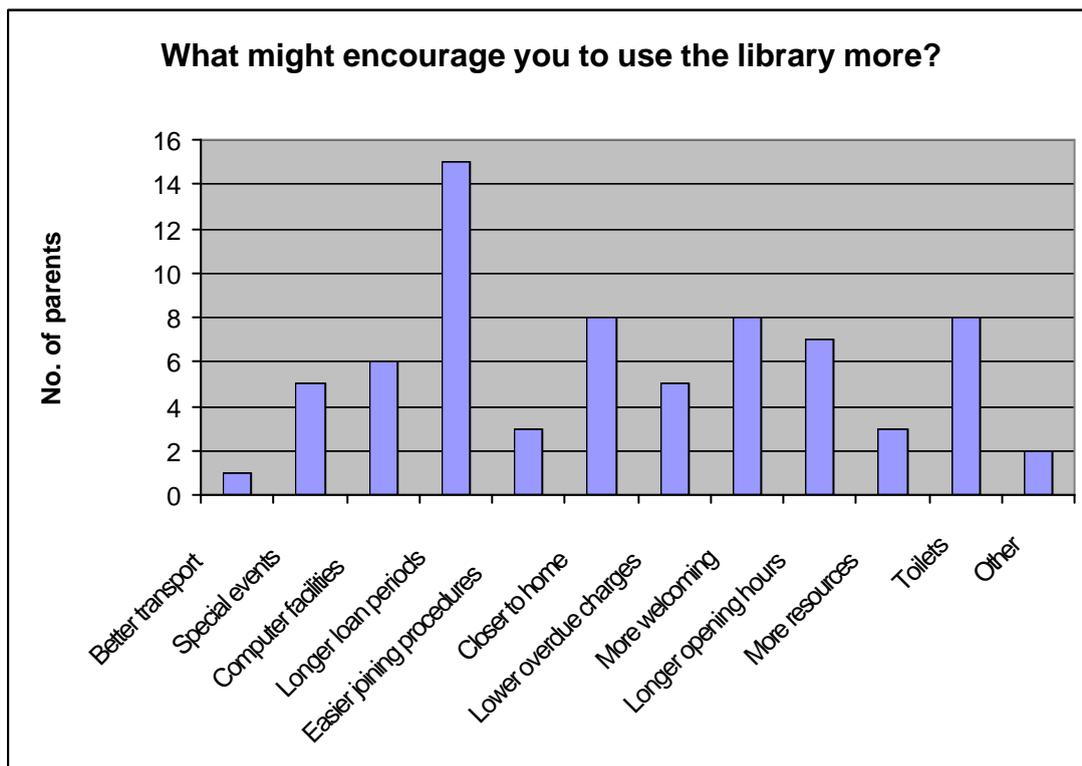


Table 9

From Table 9, it can be seen that loan periods that are too short emerge as the main factor discouraging greater library use among parents on the Partnership courses. The distance of the public library from their home, the general atmosphere in the library and the provision of toilet facilities are also clearly important to parents.

Others also mentioned inconvenient opening hours, suggesting additional opening times at weekends, in the evening and on more days, especially during the school holidays.

These factors may go some way to explaining the success of the taster collections. These were located in schools, presumably fairly close to parents' homes and in a setting that was familiar to them. Parents simply signed the register to take out taster collection books and they were able to borrow them for as many weeks as they needed to during the course. As they already have regular contact with the school, it may have been easier to remember or to find an opportunity to return the books.

Another attraction of the taster collection is that the books were new. At the Partnership session observed, the FRL asked parents if there were any particular reasons why they did not use the library. One parent responded, saying she belonged to a book club and did not like the fact that the books in the library were often dirty.

#### **4.4 Have Partnership with Parents sessions changed views of the library?**

In total, 82% of respondents to the library session questionnaire commented on some aspect of the session they had found useful. Some found it worthwhile to find out more about the work of libraries and librarians, in particular, learning about new facilities such as videos and computing facilities. Only 41% commented on any aspects of the session they had not found useful.

The most common response when parents were asked about the usefulness of the session was surprise at the range of books and library services available. Typical comments were:

*I found the information about the range of books you can borrow from the library very useful.*

*There is such a wide range of books on every topic.*

*Although I already belong to the local library, this session made me realise just exactly how wide the library's range covers.*

*It's useful to know the different services the library offers.*

*Good to know about different types of books there are.*

*They catered for different ages, but I had no knowledge of this.*

Both frequent library users and non-members said they had learned something new at the session. A non-user commented,

*I did not realise there was so much to offer*

while a parent who had used the library in the previous week admitted they:

*Didn't realise Internet was free at the library.*

Parents also appreciated having the opportunity to meet each other and exchange views. A few parents did not find the session helpful, in both cases, this was because they were already aware of the services offered by the local library:

*We already use the library regularly and know what the facilities are.*

Another parent felt the session would have been more useful if it had provided information about “moving on very competent readers”, while others thought that the section on adult reading was irrelevant.

From January, there was evidence that parents responded to certain changes made to the FRL’s talk. Following feedback from parents during the autumn term, the talk was developed to include information about services such as computer facilities in the library, the local history collection, library activities and new ideas for new ways of choosing books. In the first half of the spring term, more than one in ten parents mentioned that they found the information about Internet access in the library useful; others expressed an interest in the library’s family history section or mentioned talking books. Another library activity that seemed to appeal to several parents was the Reading Zone activity. The information about reference guides to choosing books, such as “Who’s Next?” provided a number of parents with new sources of ideas on what to read:

*I didn’t realise there were books to help you find authors who write in the same style.*

The session was constantly developed in this way, by the FRL responding to parents’ comments. In the second half of the spring term, parents began to mention an additional component of the session: clarification about their entitlement to use any library in the borough.

Due to the large number of sessions attended by the FRL, by the summer term, a small number of parents were commenting that they had heard the same talk before on another course, so did not feel they had learned anything new.

Through the family reading project, the library service has gained a higher profile, for example, through publicity in the local newspaper. The project has been a good opportunity to “promote the library in a more focussed and specific way”. Many parents now have more understanding of the facilities offered by the library service for both parents and children.

The library service has needed to be flexible and adapt the original proposal to make the project successful in practice. Using feedback from parents throughout the project, the library service has adapted and tried meet parents’ needs, for example, the use of community venues to give the project “an extra dimension”.

## **5. Developing library services**

Widening usage of the library, getting people to join on the spot and giving them the opportunity to find out more about libraries has been one of the most successful aspects of the project. This section examines the way in which this has taken place.

### **5.1 Library membership**

The easier procedure for parents wishing to join the library is an important feature of the project. At the FLARE group observed by CIRT, the two parents who were not already library members completed application forms and were given cards that would be valid from the following day. Although 178 individuals, 65 adults and 113 children, have joined the library in a similar way as a direct result of attending a Partnership with Parents course, just 17 adults and 24 children have actually made use of their library tickets so far. However, it is an unquestionable achievement that, as a result of the project, some parents have gained the confidence to use the library for the first time.

It was hoped that, the family reading project would encourage some members of the community to make more use of libraries because they will be more aware of what is available. In the long term, the Borough Council aims to encourage the community to make greater use of libraries as local people become more aware of the range of services on offer and feel more confident in using libraries. In this way, libraries have the ability to change the quality of life for their users.

In total, just over one-quarter of parents (40) attending the Partnership courses were not current library members. Of those parents asked (in the revised library session questionnaire), 72% said they planned to join the library as a result of attending the session. In fact, the library service figures show that 83% of Partnership with Parents course attendees joined the library. This is just below the project's target of 90% and compares favourably with the FLARE courses, where the figure was just 15%. The FLARE courses had the same talk from the FRL, but did not have the benefit of access to a taster collection.

### **5.2 Future library use**

Another question added to the revised library session questionnaire, was whether parents intended to use the public library for any new purposes following their experience on the Partnership course. Overall, just under one in four parents said they did intend to use the library for a new activity. The most frequently mentioned were: borrowing CDs or videos, borrowing books for their child or finding information. Around two-thirds of these were infrequent users who had not used a library for at least three months.

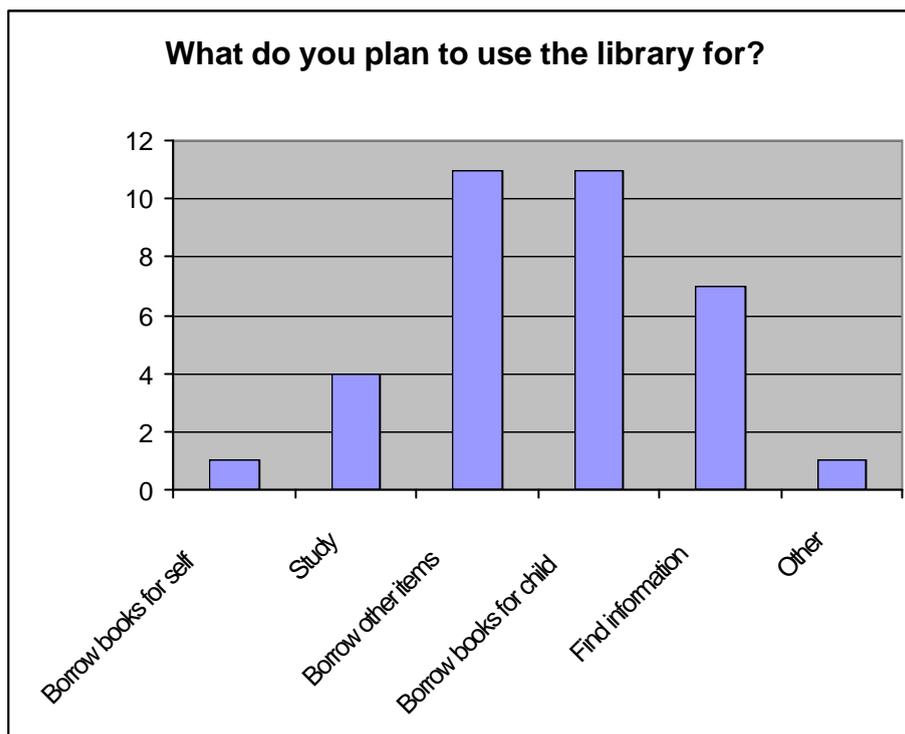


Table 10

### 5.3 Taster collection use

In total, 1140 items were loaned from taster collections during the course of the project. 87.6% of these were children's titles. The highest proportion of adult titles was borrowed during the spring term, when one adult book was borrowed for every 5.4 children's titles. Although there was still a wide gap, this was a vast improvement from the autumn term, when just one adult book was borrowed for every 15.8 children's titles. There was a marked difference in levels of borrowing between schools. For example, during the spring term, the number of books borrowed ranged between 12 and 89 at different schools. There was also considerable variation between the number of resources borrowed from the same school at different times of the year. For example, in the autumn term, a remarkable 120 books were borrowed from the collection at Ripple Infants, but this fell to just 12 items in the following term.

#### 5.3.1 Initial views of the taster collection

Views of the taster collection at the first session in the Partnership courses were only collected during the first two half terms. (A full explanation is given in the methodology section.)

Overall, 65.2% of these parents borrowed material from the taster collection. Just under one-quarter of those who did so were not library users. In fact, more than half of those parents who did not currently use a public library did borrow books from the taster collection at the library session and more said they intended to borrow material from the collection at a future session.

In fact, the percentage of library users who did not intend to use the taster collection at any point in the course was higher than the percentage of non-users who said the same.

The presence of the taster collection appeared to have an even greater effect on lapsed library users; 63.6% of those who had not used a public library for a least three months borrowed books from the taster collection at the first Partnership session. However, the biggest users of the taster collection were those parents who already used a public library regularly; 68.4% of those who had used a library within the last week borrowed additional material from the taster collection at this first session.

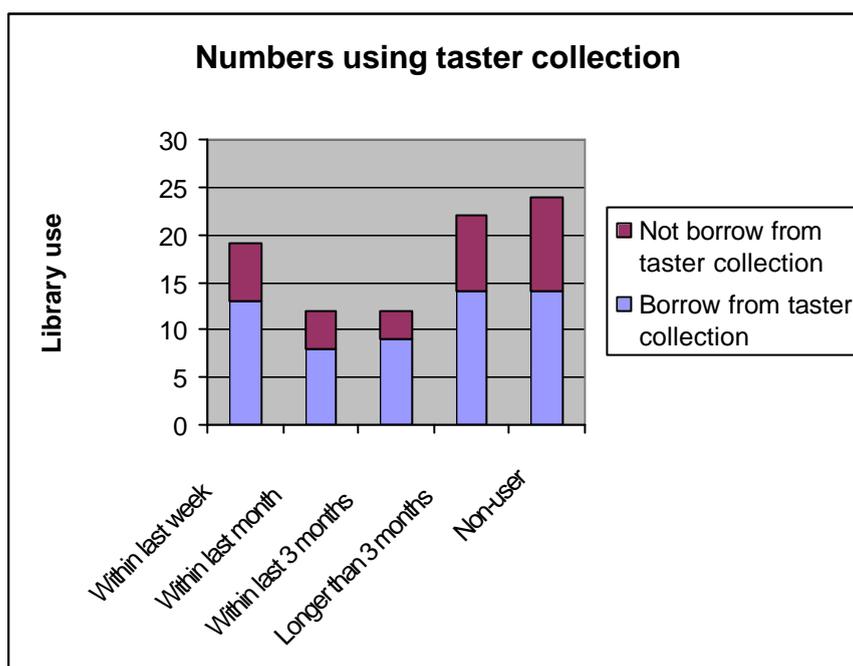


Table 11

However, at some points during the year, this pattern varied slightly. The highest proportion of parents, 80%, borrowed material from the taster collection at the first Partnership session during the autumn term. In this term, only six parents were not already library members. Of these, four borrowed books in the first session and another planned to do so in the future.

In the first half of the spring term (January), it was noticeable that fewer non-members, 44%, borrowed books from the taster collection. However, the taster collection did appear to have a greater impact on infrequent library users in this half-term; 73% of members who had not been to a library for more than three months borrowed material from the taster collection. Another noticeable trend during this half-term was that the percentage borrowing books gradually decreased as the frequency of library use rose; only half the members who had used the library within the last week borrowed books from the taster collection.

Frequency of library use also appeared to influence the type of material borrowed. Frequent and lapsed users were particularly likely to borrow books for themselves as well as for their children. 42.1% of those who had visited the library within the last week and 31.8% of those who had not visited a public library for at least three months did so. In comparison, only 25% of non-users borrowed material from both themselves and their children.

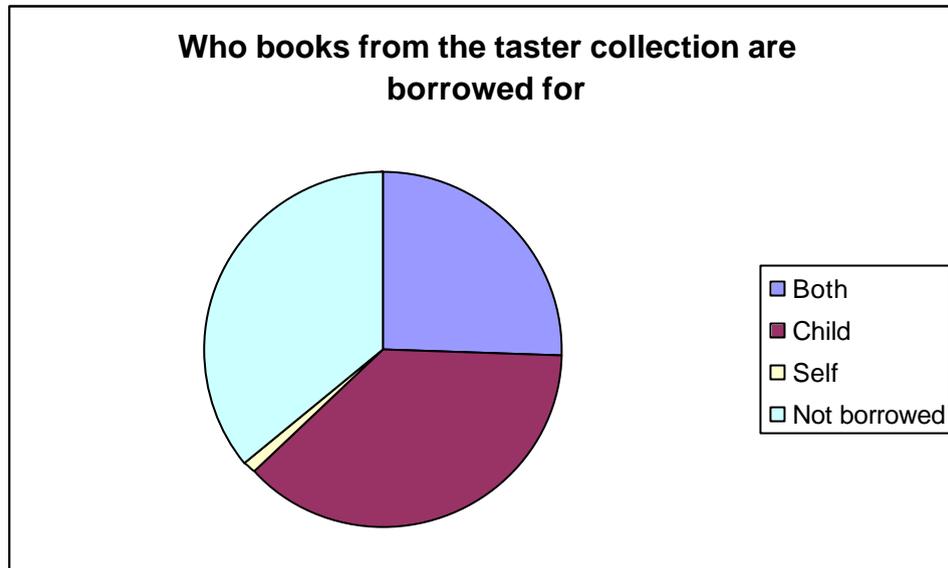


Table 12

Many praised the variety of material in the taster collection; one mother was pleased because,

*it gave me some ideas on different books for my daughter*

and another pointed out that there were,

*books that suit all family members-not just one age group.*

From their comments, it appears that some parents borrowed books for younger and older children and other adults in their household. Several particularly commented on the inclusion of books for babies and pre-school children. One mother said the thing she liked most about the taster collection was,

*Having books to take home for pre-school children.*

The most common observation was surprise at the variety of material on offer. Almost half the parents remarked on the range or variety of books in the collection. Comments included:

*Very varied collection of books from babies to adults.*

*A wide variety of novels, thrillers, biographies, romance.*

*Lots of different books for all ages and different tastes*

The wide range of material led to some problems however; one parent found the selection a little confusing and would have liked more guidance on the type of books to choose for children of different ages. There is evidence that this problem was quickly addressed as, in later sessions, a number of parents said they appreciated the advice about which books were suitable for each age group. Very few parents found anything to dislike about the collection; although one mother would have liked to see more early reading books. Another parent said they could:

*See lots of good books, but I don't have time to read now.*

However, even this mother borrowed books for herself as well as her children.

At the Partnership session observed by CIRT, the FRL ended her talk by explaining how parents should go about borrowing material from the taster collection. During the coffee break, about half the parents went to look at the taster collection and a few borrowed books.

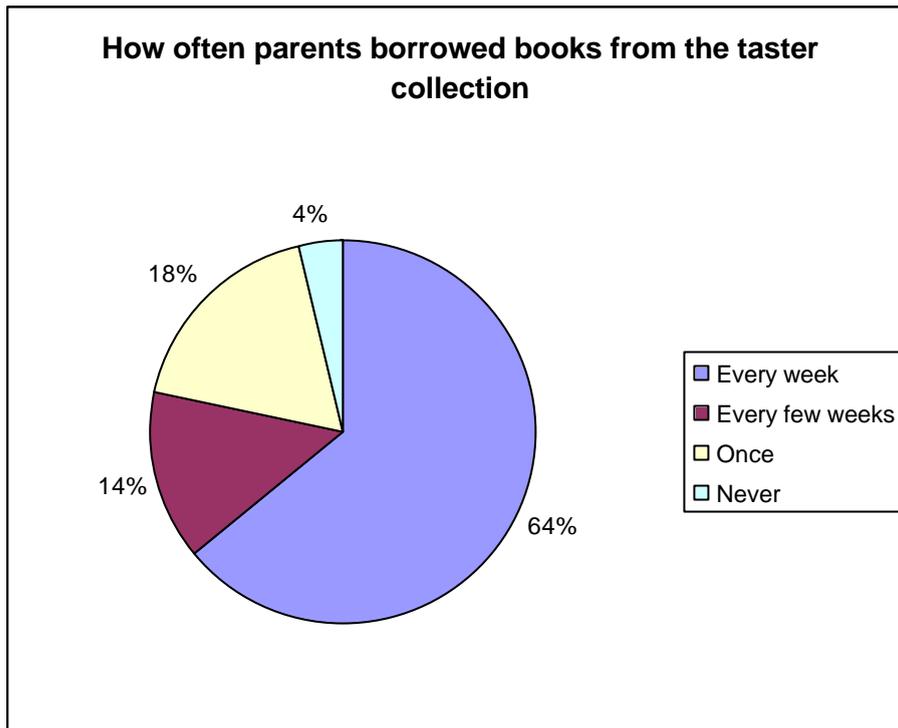
### **5.3.2 Other views of the taster collections**

Despite reservations about lack of space in some schools, several headteachers thought that the most successful aspect of the library service input was the taster collection; they reported this was well used by both parents and children. It gave parents an opportunity to access good quality children's literature and also to become more familiar with the library service. The school involved in the family reading group pilot project felt that the course had improved with the FRL's input and by providing a "book element", which gave parents the opportunity to look at adult books as well as children's titles.

However, one headteacher did not believe that the take-up of parents joining the library service had improved significantly, although she acknowledged that it was difficult to draw any definite conclusions. She further argued that the taster collection had not helped to overcome the problem of some parents' reluctance to use the library; although it was useful to have the books in school, the parents who borrow from the taster collection are the same group that take their children to the library anyway. Other teachers feel that parents have gained a lot from the taster collection, "being able to borrow so conveniently" means parents are able to experience books without the trouble of going to a library. It may help parents to "get back on track" with their reading.

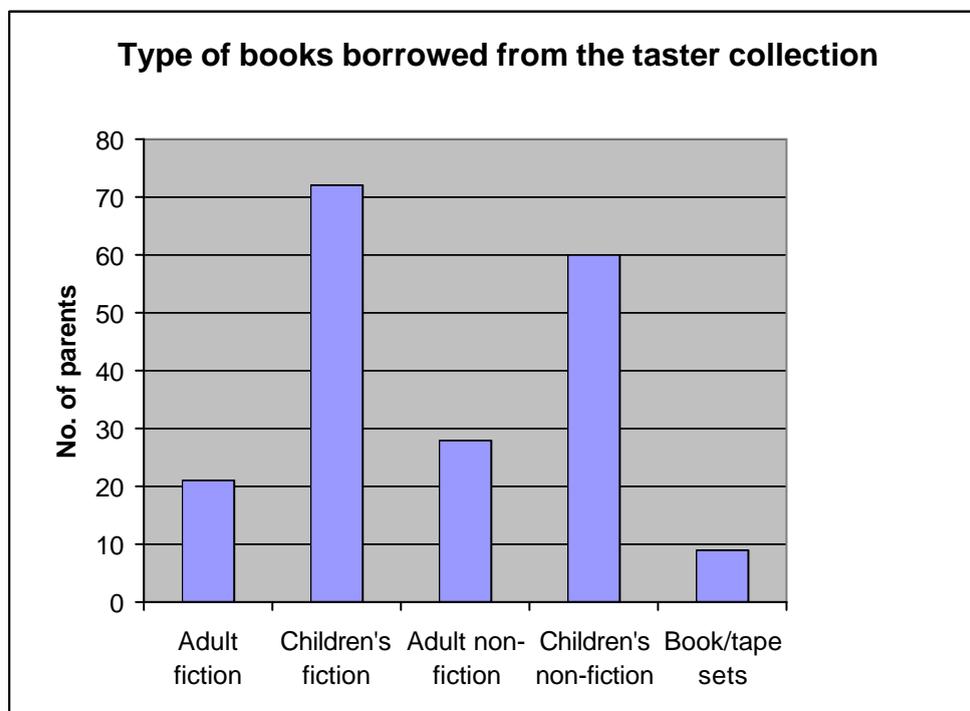
### **5.3.3 Reflections on the taster collection**

The taster collection questionnaires were usually completed in the fourth week of the course, when parents had had an opportunity to explore the collection and to borrow items over several weeks.



*Table 13*

64% of parents had borrowed books from the taster collection each week and a further 14% had done so every few weeks. Only one parent said they had no intention of borrowing any books saying they had books of their own at home.



*Table 14*

Table 14 shows that 41% (46) of parents borrowed some adult material from the taster collection, with non-fiction material being more popular than fiction among adults. 73% (81) borrowed either non-fiction or fiction materials for children. For children, fictional material was more popular than non-fiction titles. In fact, 46% (51) borrowed examples of both.

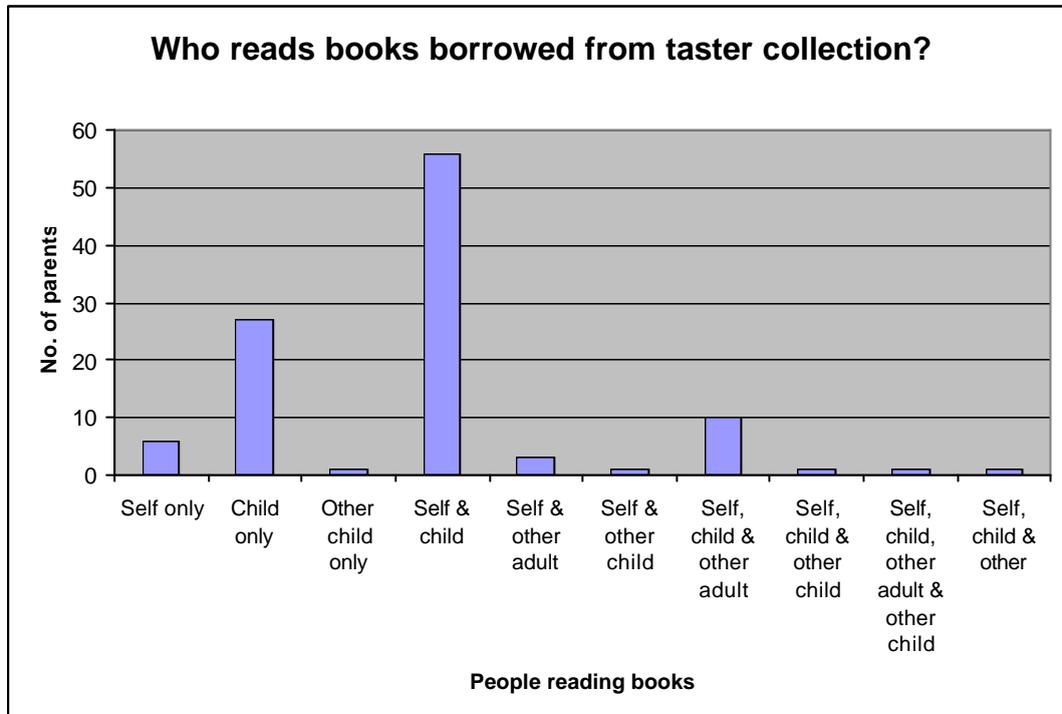
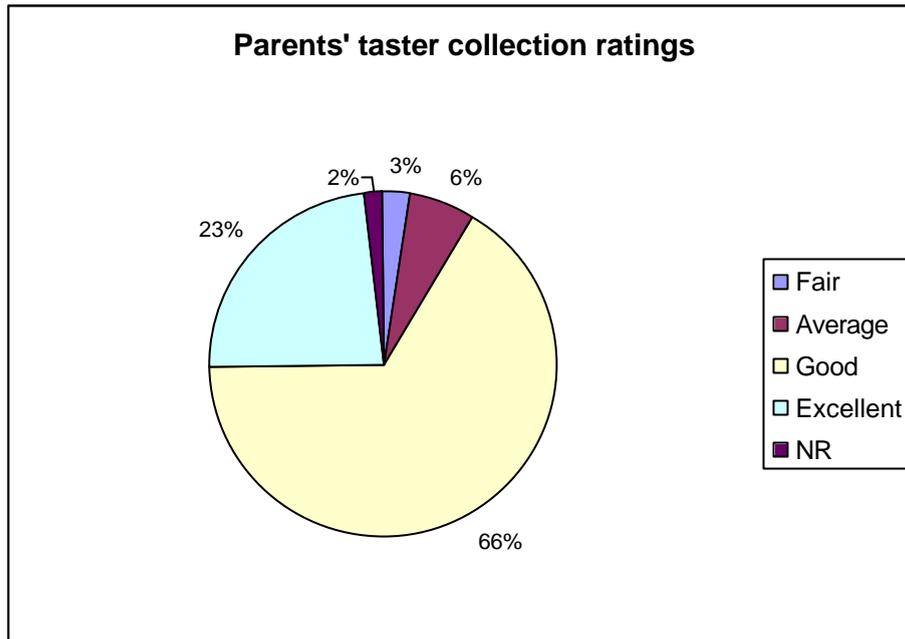


Table 15

From Table 15, it can be seen that, although 71% of parents read books borrowed from the taster collection, it is not always clear whether they borrow books to enjoy themselves or titles to read with their children. In fact just over half those parents who said they read books themselves did not borrow any adult titles from the taster collection. 86% said they borrowed books for their child and 62% said both themselves and their child read books from the taster collection. In a number of families, another adult also read books borrowed from the taster collection.

*We enjoyed all the books together as a family. We enjoyed reading them together and doing activities.*



*Table 16*

Table 16 illustrates parents' "ratings" of the taster collection. 88% of parents rated the collections good or excellent. No one rated the selection poor and just three parents thought it was less than average. However, two of these had still borrowed from the collection every week.

*there was an excellent range and I really enjoyed being able to choose from such a good selection*

*there has been an excellent variety of books to choose from and I have thoroughly enjoyed the case.*

*There was a lovely selection of books to choose from, something to please everyone!*

These were comments typical of many. The fact that books catered for a wide age range was noted; one mother thought,

*there was something of interest for all my family.*

*I have enjoyed reading all the books that I take from the taster collection and so have my children.*

Another parent found something for all her children, who ranged in age from 11 months to five and a half years, while yet another borrowed books for eight to twelve year olds.

An additional favourable feature of the taster collection was the newness of the books; parents and children appreciated having access to titles that were not yet available in the library:

*I liked the fact that the books were brand new and had not yet been in the library, as my children have borrowed most of the fiction [books]... from the library and so it was refreshing to find some that we had not seen before.*

A few parents remarked that using the collection had encouraged them to visit their local library.

*It has actually given me a boost into taking my children into the local library and sitting and reading books...on a regular basis.*

*I thought it is a lovely idea having the book collection because it has got me interested. I will be going to the library.*

In the early stages of the project, before the taster collections had been fully developed, some parents complained about insufficient books for very young children; they found there was a shortage of picture books with no or very few words.

Others requested more book/tape sets. At later sessions, parents seemed to agree that the choice of books for younger children and adults was good. However, several parents commented that they would have liked to see more books for older children. One mother wrote:

*Good range of books for adults and children ages 3 to 7; not many books for children older.*

Several parents thought there should be fewer adult titles and others said that they were not interested in the adult collection because they did not read a great deal themselves.

*I haven't a lot of time at home for reading myself, so I cannot comment on the adult selection*

was a view echoed by several parents. Among the types of books mentioned by parents as being enjoyable were works on interior design and local history.

## **5.4 Follow-up sessions**

While the sessions in schools and taster collections have been very successful, getting parents into libraries has proved to be a trickier, more complicated issue that requires further work. The planned follow-up sessions are generally acknowledged as one of the least successful aspects of the project. The library service recognises that the number of parents who attended follow-up sessions was very modest. This reflects the fact that one of the most difficult aspect of the project has been to encourage parents to move from the school sessions into libraries; it has proved very hard to persuade parents who claim they are "too busy" to use libraries. The project partners are acutely aware that, in the future, the move needs to be made from librarians visiting schools to parents and schools coming to libraries.

The information about follow-up session was really only valid for the autumn term respondents. Of the 7 library members who had not visited within the last three months, 6 said they would attend the follow-up session. Three of those who were not currently members also said they planned to attend the follow-up session. In total, 12 parents said they would definitely attend a follow-up session in the library, and a further 7 were undecided. All those who did not plan to attend already used the library regularly.

## 5.5 Family reading groups

The family reading group initiative has, so far, been one of the less successful aspects of the project; turnout has not been as high as was hoped. Parents who had recently completed the Partnership with Parents course at a local school were invited to join the first family reading group, which held its first meeting in February. At the parents' suggestion, the sessions are held monthly on Saturday mornings at the local library. Two parents attended the first session, each bringing two children. In an attempt to boost numbers, the FRL had sent out reminders to the other members of the group and invitations to parents who had attended a course at another nearby school. However, there was only one parent and one ten-year-old child at the second meeting.

This family reading group was held in a corner of the children's section of this relatively small branch library. Even though the library was quite busy, there was little disruption to the session or other library users. After introductions, there was an icebreaker game. Following this, each member of the group was encouraged to talk about what they had read recently, outlining the story and explaining what they had liked or disliked about the book. The FRL encouraged discussion, for example about other books by the same author. The main difficulty with this activity was the lack of common ground between children and adults' reading; this was, perhaps, exacerbated by the small size of the group. Time was allocated for refreshments, during and immediately after which, there was a more general discussion, unrelated to books or reading. Although the session was led by the FRL, the pace was largely decided by the participants; the session was very relaxed and the FRL ensured participants were not placed under any pressure.

Two of the five parents who completed family reading group questionnaires said they had joined the group as a direct result of attending the Partnership with Parents course. Two others felt it was a chance to meet new people and gain:

*More information about others' experiences around books.*

Another parent thought it was:

*Easier than going to the library.*

The opportunity to discuss books and reading habits was clearly the most enjoyable aspect of the session. Comments included:

*Talking about books with other people who enjoy reading.*

*Feedback about the different kinds of books other members of the group have read.*

One parent said they would have preferred a more structured format and another said she had not expected children to be involved in the reading group to the extent they were. Although the reading groups are only in their infancy, one parent said they had begun to use the library more regularly as a result of attending and two had already started to read new types of books: classics and biographies.

## 6. Impact on parents

The project aimed to impact significantly on parents by:

- assisting parents who wish to become more actively involved in their child's education;
- breaking down barriers to library use;
- improving standards of adult literacy;
- encouraging parents to participate in adult learning;
- widening reading choices.

As has already been expounded in chapters 4 and 5, the library service hoped that parents who were not already library members would become aware of the range of services on offer and those who already used the library might see resources they had not previously considered. At all the schools interviewed, there are currently two strands of complementary initiatives linked to their involvement in the Partnership with Parents courses; these focus on raising standards and involving parents. These are fundamental concerns for most local schools.

However, the Partnership courses were not a suitable approach for all parents. A problem faced by the Adult College tutors was ensuring the right people are enrolled on the course. Participants need to be in a position to develop their existing skills in English. To ensure that people were “not set up to fail”, tutors had to ask a few parents to transfer to an alternative course.

### 6.1 Involving parents in children's education

The project partners hoped that, by gaining an understanding of how their children develop as readers, parents would be better placed to support them in choosing and enjoying books. It was also thought likely that families who attend the Partnership with Parents sessions would be more likely to contribute to the school and encourage their children. The headteachers, interviewed towards the end of the project, believed that parents had benefited from taking part in the courses by becoming more involved with the school and better able to support their children. They claimed that the courses had raised parents' expectations and allowed them to gain an insight into what the schools are doing and what teachers are trying to achieve; many expressed surprise at the work their children do at school. When asked about the library session, several parents said that it had helped them to develop a greater understanding of their children's education.

*Extra help with children's education is very useful.*

*I find some parts of the session like how I can find some books to help my children's reading [useful].*

Others applauded the advice given in the sessions on choosing books for children of different ages.

*I find some parts of the session [useful] like how I can find some books to help my children's reading.*

Literacy had been identified as an area in need of improvement in the development plans of several schools involved in the project; in some cases, involvement in the initiative was related to the recommendations of recent OFSTED inspections. Involving parents in their children's reading and encouraging children to visit the library are seen as very important parts of any strategy to improve standards in most schools. In addition to running courses such as Partnership with Parents, FLARE and numeracy groups, most schools also operate less formal schemes to promote parental involvement, such as requesting parents read with their children and inviting parents into school to work with support staff to help with reading and writing.

One headteacher felt that, after attending the course, parents had more positive attitudes towards school; it had helped to develop more of a partnership. As parents are made more aware of what is being taught in schools, they began to feel more included and informed. However, the parents the schools most want to target tend to be the group who are still not responding or participating. They include the parents of children with special needs and infrequent attenders. These parents are reluctant to commit themselves to a course lasting half a term or longer.

## **6.2 Promoting adult literacy and adult learning**

The important role the library service plays in family learning and adult literacy has been officially recognised through the project; the FRL and Community & Education Services Manager are both members of the borough-wide Family Learning Steering Group and are currently studying for the Certificate in Adult Literacy.

One of the aims of the project, from the Adult College's point of view has been to encourage more parents to attend its courses. Schools and the library service also acknowledge they have a role to play in improving adult literacy levels in the borough. One teacher identified two of those who had significantly benefited as a young mother who has gained insights into how to help her child and a mother who has literacy problems of her own.

The attitude of the adult tutors is seen as key to the success of the courses. Headteachers felt that, even when parents have described the course as "difficult" or "challenging", the tutors were very supportive and responded to parents "at their level". The tutors were felt to be "key players" in making parents feel at ease.

As a college tutor commented, it has been "amazing" how much parents taking part in the sessions have gained in terms of confidence, skills and ways of approaching things. One Headteacher reported that attending the short Partnerships course had encouraged some parents to go on to take other courses. However, measurable gains for parents in terms of their own learning are difficult to evaluate because this is a more long-term issue that cannot be adequately addressed through a single nine-month project.

### **6.3 Widening reading choices**

The Partnership course and in particular the library session, can be seen as a useful way of alerting parents to the importance of books and reading. One headteacher expressed the hope that, through the project, homes, as well as schools, would become “book environments”, as family reading becomes established. Many parents have enjoyed the taster collections and have used them to get back into the habit of reading. Being able to choose from a more manageable taster collection may stimulate both parents and children to try different kinds of books.

*There was an excellent range and I really enjoyed being able to choose from such a good selection.*

was a comment typical of those made by numerous parents.

### **6.4 Enjoyment**

Perhaps one of the most important benefits of the Partnership courses has been the sense of enjoyment parents have gained from attending. All the schools reported that parents seemed to enjoy the course and were enthusiastic about it. The word clearly spread amongst parents in some schools; this encouraged several to join the course midway through. One headteacher described how, after they had got over their initial apprehension, many parents treated the classes “as a social event”.

### **6.5 Problems encountered**

The numbers attending the Partnership courses and making increased use of the library has not been as great as was hoped. The numbers enrolling on courses varied considerably at different times of the year at most schools. For example, at one, although the first course was very successful, there were problems during the second term because the course relied on supply tutors, so it was difficult to sustain parents’ interest. By the third course of the year, parents seem to have less incentive to come. Lack of advance information about the numbers attending can make organisation difficult for schools. Even at the largest infants’ school, it was difficult to recruit parents, despite holding coffee mornings, putting posters on noticeboards and sending information home. By sharing information about successful approaches, it will, hopefully be possible to increase the number of parent participating in courses at all schools.

One difficulty is that, although there is a core group of committed parents in most schools, the course was not suitable for all; some dropped out and more still were not regular attendees. Some parents have an aversion to libraries and have simply not turned up when they know that someone from the library will be speaking. This obviously limited the session’s impact on parents. In addition, several parents were dealing with quite serious problems in other areas of their lives and may have been unable to devote their full energies to the course. However, in many schools, the course members formed their own support groups. One parent commented it was useful to hear:

*Other parents' views and opinions; many were similar to my own.*

Several headteachers had noted this and commented that the opportunity to meet other parents and share problems was one of the main benefits of the course for some parents.

In some schools, it has been difficult to attract those parents who stand to benefit most from the courses. Many of the parents who have attended do not really need such a course because they already read and do activities with their children. Staff involved in delivering the sessions have also noted that few fathers have taken part in this project. They suggest that this may be due to work commitments, the number of single parent families in the borough or the style and “hands-on” approach, which appeals more to mothers. One school ran the courses after school, hoping to attract a slightly different group of parents, and reported that this had worked well. However, although the free crèche has made the after school course very popular, some parents were still unable to attend because of work commitments.

Some headteachers felt that, at the moment, courses can be quite insular; parents who attend enjoy it, but few others know about it. Schools suggested a number of methods to attract more parents including: a leaflet for parents or a flyer describing what had taken place in that week’s session to keep their interest up and inform other parents and free gifts, such as books, to reward parents for attending the course.

## **7. Impact on library staff**

At the beginning of the family reading project, it was hoped that, “the status of library staff will be improved, through giving them a central role in the council’s key campaign”, that staff would cease to feel as though they are working alone and by recognising areas of professional expertise, “everyone will achieve more”. In addition to the opportunity to develop new skills, it was suggested that involvement in this project might bring staff greater job satisfaction.

An initial concern for the project partners was that some staff might be nervous or apprehensive about change, while others may not have given much thought to the subject before. However, it was hoped that training would enable all staff to improve their customer care skills and gain a greater understanding of the needs of families as well as having an opportunity to reflect on how they and the library are perceived. In addition to transforming parents’ views of the library facilities, it was thought that this project might generate a lasting change in the attitude and image of library staff.

### **7.1 The Family Reading Librarian**

The FRL has been at the centre of the project and the post has now been made permanent, a move that would not have been possible without the progress made over the last year. It is generally agreed that this is one of the most successful outcomes of the project and it is an action that recognises the importance of this type of outreach activity to the library service. Given the current concern about literacy levels in the borough, the FRL is “a key post in library services”.

The need to address a more specialised audience and to take on “a semi-teaching role” means that this position has required very specific skills. Although most of the training undertaken by the FRL has proved useful, some of the earlier courses attended were less appropriate because they did not focus on the special role that librarians have in enriching children’s experience and emphasising the idea of books as a source of pleasure. The most useful courses were those aimed at parents; they were considered more relevant because they were aimed at a non-teaching audience. The FRL, along with other library staff, is currently studying for qualifications in adult literacy to make her better informed and able to guide and support users and recognise difficulties.

The FRL has gained new skills, confidence and experience through the project. This has been a good experience for her personally and for the service; the borough now has a permanent member of staff with expertise in family reading. In addition, the development of this post has acted as an example for other staff. The professional gains for the FRL include:

- experience of working on a specific project with its own aims and objectives, for example, buying special stock and organise presentations;
- gaining an insight into literacy education and the organisation of schools;
- building up detailed areas of knowledge on subjects such as literacy teaching and reading groups;
- working with parents;
- trying out new ideas such as reading groups;
- developing the skills and confidence necessary for public speaking.

## **7.2 Staff training**

In the long term, it is hoped that family reading will become a mainstream service, rather than a “bolt-on”. For this to happen, the skills and knowledge gained by the FRL need to be cascaded to other staff in the borough. The project partners believe it is important to include all staff in the family reading training, recognising that those staff who have regular contact with the public, but are not professionally qualified would gain by having more knowledge of issues such as social exclusion and how children learn to read. The staff training will help to develop skills and will, hopefully, contribute to a better service for the community.

Originally, staff training was planned to take place from the start, but the project partners now recognise that this was unrealistic as the FRL needed to be trained herself before she was able to deliver training to other staff. Ideally, the FRL would have been in post before October; the slightly delayed start meant that the project only ran fully for nine months, so time has been tight, in particular for training. Outside influences, particularly the restructuring of the library service, have also had an impact on the amount of time other staff have been able to devote to the project. However, now the training programme has started, it will continue beyond the project’s finish date.

Eventually, all library staff will have attended a series of three courses: Family Reading Groups, Social Exclusion and Back to Basics: How Children are Taught to Read. These are being delivered at the Central Library in the first instance and will then be extended to staff at branch libraries. A range of training materials has been built up and all staff who attend are given a set of handouts, providing them with material to refer to at a later date.

## 7.3 Format of the training sessions

At the Family Reading Groups session observed, there were six participants, two male and four female, who hold a variety of positions in the library service, from assistants to management. It is difficult for the library to release more staff than this at any one time and still maintain an adequate level of service; this will be a particular problem when delivering training in branch libraries.

To introduce the session, the FRL outlined the basic format it would take and explained the purpose of a reading group. To give the group a flavour of what reading groups are about, she then played a section from the Waterstones compact disc. This was followed by an update on the latest reading group developments in Barking and Dagenham and an outline of future plans. The FRL related what had happened at the sessions that have taken place so far, including the types of activities and exercises parents and children had been engaged in. This twenty-minute introduction ended by the FRL asking whether participants had any questions.

The trainees were then divided into two groups for a short activity. One group was asked to think about strategic and policy implications of reading groups, while the other had to consider the practical measures needed to ensure a successful reading group. The participants appeared enthusiastic and generated an assortment of ideas during this exercise, with everyone contributing. They then fed back the information and there was a limited discussion of the ideas generated.

The final fifteen minutes was spent playing an icebreaker game for reading groups to demonstrate how the activity could successfully stimulate conversation. Overall, the staff demonstrated a positive attitude towards the idea of reading groups and the general atmosphere of the course was relaxed and friendly.

## 7.4 Feedback on training sessions

Eight members of staff: library assistants, senior library assistants, senior librarians and a principal librarian, have taken part in the two “Combating Social Inclusion” training sessions run so far and a similar mix has participated in the Family Reading Groups sessions.

### 7.4.1 Social Inclusion

All but one of the participants in the Social Inclusion Course rated the content good and five out of eight rated its delivery as good; the remainder rated the content and delivery average. Only two participants did not learn any new skills on this course; in one case this was because they had already attended a number of courses on the subject. All except one found some aspect of the training useful.

*Useful insight into what other staff think and feel.*

Comments about the most useful aspects of the training included:

*Discussing problems concerning disabled people and social exclusion barriers*

*To highlight “barriers” in the library and to try to overcome them.*

A number commented on the opportunity to discuss social inclusion issues with other members of staff. One participant found the information about appropriate terminology helpful. However, this was a contentious issue for another respondent, who felt “exasperated” by this aspect of the course. This member of staff was clearly concerned about practical issues such as staffing and resources and felt “it’s deeds, not words that matter”. However, for most, the training was deemed to have practical value. Three members of staff intended to put the skills and knowledge they gained into practice immediately and a further four said they would do so in the future.

The main complaint was that the time allowed was not long enough to cover the topic fully. Three members of staff felt that the course should have been longer to allow a full discussion of the issues and some would have liked the opportunity to examine some aspects of social exclusion in more detail, for example, ways of overcoming barriers or how the issues applied to children.

#### **7.4.2 Family Reading Groups**

All the staff who have taken the Family Reading Groups course rated the content as good and all but one gave the same rating for delivery. No one thought the timing of this course was inappropriate and while they may not have the opportunity to put the skills and knowledge acquired into practice immediately, 85% said they intended to do so in the future.

Some trainees found it useful simply to gain a general understanding of the philosophy and *raison d’être* of reading groups.

*Thinking about why groups could benefit from discussion of what they are reading.*

*Having an understanding of what they are and why they are being run.*

Again, the opportunity to discuss reading groups and share thoughts and ideas with other staff was seen as one of the most useful elements of the training,

*Sharing ideas and expanding on the theme to achieve a bigger picture on group reading.*

*Actually discussing all the aims and objectives of family reading in general.*

*Discussing the benefits reading groups can bring to people and the library service.*

Much of this discussion was facilitated by the group activity; this was clearly seen as useful exercise. Very few members of staff could think of any aspects of the course they had not found useful. Some did mention the icebreaker game, acknowledging that, while it was fun, they had not learnt anything from it.

Several of the respondents said the course have given them a better overall understanding of both the aims of reading groups and the practical considerations involved in their creation.

*A greater awareness of the issues involved with family reading groups.*

*To show what is needed to put into running a reading group.*

Even when they had not actually learn anything new from this particular course, members of staff acknowledged that the session had:

*Put into perspective things I have learnt previously*

There were two common suggestions for additional subjects that might have been included in the training. Four members of staff, including two children's librarians, would have liked to have seen more consideration of the role of children and teenagers in reading groups. A further two wanted more ideas on ways to promote reading groups to their users. Perhaps with the content of the previous week's session in mind, one respondent thought it was important to think about ways in which reading groups could be made accessible to all, including ethnic minorities and the physically handicapped.

### **7.4.3 Back to Basics**

So far, only four members of staff have taken part in the Back to Basics course. Their ratings for course delivery and content range between average and excellent. Trainees thought the course was useful because it gave them an insight into how children are taught to read. Several staff mentioned the differences between literacy teaching today and the way in which they had been taught to read. The course had given them a:

*better understanding of reading development and the support available.*

This course was obviously of more immediate relevance to some staff than others; while some felt they could put their new knowledge into use immediately, others did not see how it would help them in their work at the present time.

## 8. Partnership Approach

Through the family reading project, Barking & Dagenham Library Service has gained more opportunities for joint working with schools, the Adult College, the Community Inspection and Advisory Service and community groups. This partnership approach has enabled the library service to assume a more pivotal position in the borough, but it has also benefited the other agencies involved. The project partners consider successful partnership working to have been one of the most valuable aspects of the project; the experience of working together more closely and in a more focussed way has led to a “real rapport” between individuals involved, such as the FRL and tutors and headteachers. One headteacher described the Adult College and library service staff as, “wonderful to work with”. Staff have gained from the sharing of experience as each sector has its own specific area of expertise. They have also become increasing aware of the opportunities to make “intelligent connections” between services to enable them to “marshal resources and expertise in pursuit of a common aim”.

### 8.1 Schools

Through working more closely with schools, the library service has gained an insight into literacy education and information about how schools function and likewise, schools have learnt more about the library service. Typical comments from headteachers about the family reading initiative included:

*There have been benefits all round.*

*There are lots of pluses.*

*Everyone working together makes it a real success.*

In the long term, both the library service and schools themselves hope the project will impact on a wide range of literacy issues, for example, by improving reading age scores and creating a more positive attitude to books, especially amongst boys. More immediately, the schools also benefit from extra resources in the form of the taster collection and from more input by families.

Partnership working was clearly important to many schools; working with others was part of their ethos and the library partnership was seen as yet another facet of that. Teachers felt that involving the library service in the school would be beneficial to both because it gives the message that the library is important in education.

Headteachers pointed out that there are currently few opportunities for teachers and librarians to meet and many would welcome an INSET session at the library headquarters. The Department of Education, Health and Libraries is working to improve contacts between public and school libraries and one of its long-term aims is to get every school child to join the public library. The school libraries are less than adequate at several schools. One headteacher reported difficulties arranging staffing, which prevents parents visiting after school to borrow books to take home to read with their children. In another school, there is the possibility that part of the library may be converted to an ICT suite.

In some schools, the headteacher was actively involved in the Partnership courses. At the beginning of the session observed by CIRT, the headteacher spoke briefly to welcome parents and in another school, the headteacher personally targeted those parents she thought would benefit from attending the course, emphasising how they would be helping their child.

Although the involvement of the library service did not figure in the decision to become involved in the initiative at any of the schools interviewed, teachers did identify many benefits likely to result from the collaboration. These included:

- more children taking books home from the school library;
- increased interest in books and improved literacy levels among pupils;
- better liaison and “more of an open relationship” with parents;
- fewer queries from parents as they gain a better understanding of the education system.

Although the impact on children may only become evident over a longer period, several headteachers did feel there had been an effect on the literacy skills of those children whose parents have been involved. Although this only accounted for a limited number of pupils, “anything we can do to improve literacy is a help”.

Lack of space has prevented some smaller schools running courses in the past because of difficulties finding a venue. This year, one was forced to hold courses in the library and staffroom, with a crèche in the nursery. Although this arrangement worked well during the summer term, it would not be appropriate at the beginning of the school year when the nursery children are settling in. In another school, the hall and dining room had to be used to hold the courses. The library was a popular location, but this obviously meant it was not available for the children to use at certain times. At schools where the Partnership with Parents sessions are just one in the “cycle of events”, these logistic issues have already been addressed and fewer problems were reported.

Some schools would have liked more consultation between the project partners to decide the timing of courses. To attract more parents, one headteacher recommended timetabling the courses at a time of year when there were not too many other activities going on in the school or local community parents may wish to become involved with.

It is clear that schools are keen to work in partnership with the library service and the Adult College in the future. One teacher emphasised that her school has “thoroughly welcomed” the courses and the involvement with the library service. Although she acknowledged that it does take some organisation, this is manageable and she was keen to stress that her school would continue to encourage these partnerships and involvement with the library service. The Parents’ Forum at another school has suggested that one-off workshops might work better in extending the school’s role in providing advice and promoting greater partnership with parents. Another teacher advocated a very similar idea: a reading workshop for parents, with library involvement, which might encourage parents to join the library with their children.

Headteachers suggested many new ways in which relations between the two services might be improved. Several related to parental involvement.

- A library welcome pack could be provided for the parents of nursery children, with a list of library events and opening times, a map, an application form, a bookmark or badge.
- The school could send forms home to parents encouraging them to join the library service.
- The library service could attend meetings held in schools for parents and staff would be able to talk to parents, display books, hand out application forms and leaflets. Alternatively, the library service could simply supply a pack of posters, books and applications forms for the school to display.
- Travelling exhibitions could be held in schools.

## **8.2 Adult College**

It was important to the library service to set this experimental form of service delivery within the proven structure of the Partnership courses that were already in place. At the start of the project, it was anticipated that the Adult College would benefit from the project by more families attending its courses as those who have taken part in the Partnership with Parents sessions may go on to enrol other courses. Headteachers and tutors have reported instances of this taking place.

College tutors have gained an opportunity to find out more about the community and discover different ways of working with adults and children together. They have also benefited from being able to use the taster collection as a resource in their teaching if they wish, for example, to illustrate different types of text. Tutors have also gained a greater knowledge of library facilities, which they will be able to pass on to future students.

## **8.3 Community Inspection & Advisory Service**

The Community Inspection & Advisory Service hoped to benefit from more support as parents find out more about what goes on in schools and how their children learn. In the long term, this will, hopefully, impact on literacy and numeracy standards in schools.

## **8.4 Community Groups**

The links developed between the library service and community groups has been one of the more unexpected outcomes of the project. The family reading initiative was originally focused on the schools, but some of the most successful sessions have taken place at different types of venues, such as the Vineries Young Women's Project. This group has asked to be allowed to keep a permanent taster collection and has established one of the project's first reading groups. The library service has also started to work with the Gascoigne Community Association. These developments further the library service's ambition of placing itself in the heart of the local community.

## 9. Conclusions

The project partners acknowledge that the original targets for the project were ambitious. Although courses have been arranged successfully in schools, the numbers enrolled have not been as great as was hoped. Around half of the six hundred families it originally hoped to reach have actually taken part in the Partnership with Parents or FLARE courses.

The library service now realises that it is a much longer process than it had at first realised to engage large numbers of families. However, through the family reading project, the borough now has staff with more experience in this area and further staff training will continue. Some parents have gained the confidence to use the library for the first time; others have a better understanding of their child's reading development while others have simply enjoyed having the opportunity to meet other parents and discuss issues and problems they all face.

The library service has gained valuable information about how it is viewed by the local community and has suggested ways in which not only the family reading project, but the service as a whole, can adapt to better meet the needs of local people.

The taster collections have been a particularly successful aspect of the project, and one that is likely to continue beyond its end date, regardless of future funding. The library staff themselves were surprised by parents' responses to the taster collections; they "hadn't realised how special that would be". Much of this success is attributed to the fact that it has been developed from comments made by parents and been tailored to their needs. The only drawback has been the difficulty of moving the collections between schools; arranging delivery of the trolleys to schools and their removal at the end of the course was the main problem for the FRL as it has to tie in with the delivery of project loans to schools and other items. However, the effect of having a borrowing facility that is "on the spot" more than compensates for this inconvenience.

Recognising the reluctance of some parents to visit a public library, the library service hopes to find ways to continue the taster collections in community locations such as Gascoigne Community Association and the Vineries Young Women's Project. The Vineries group had one of the highest borrowing levels. Although the centre is not far from a public library, the closest branch only opens on two days a week. Taster collections may also be left permanently at more distant schools. These would contain more adult material rather than duplicate what is provided by the school library or schools library service. Links have also been developed with the Gascoigne Community Association, where a reading group that is being set up. The library service also intends to try to work in partnership with the Women's Refuge and the Ford plant.

The service hopes to build on the success achieved and consolidate progress made in successful schools. Hopefully, by examining the factors that determine success in schools, in particular, successful recruitment and links with libraries, family reading can be extended successfully throughout the borough. Ways to encourage other family members to become involved in Family Reading have been investigated by the project partners and incorporated into future planning.

The library session has now been embedded in the Partnership with Parents and Keeping up with the Children courses. These will continue, and “libraries will continue to play an important role”. However, to try to overcome the problems of getting parents into libraries, the family learning team at the Adult College plans to build a library visit into their course structure. The taster collection could then be introduced by the course tutor, who would explain the borrowing arrangements. The library visits would involve parents in an active learning experience, completing specific tasks, picking up books and investigating. Parents might be more open to this hands-on approach, which it would get them physically into the library environment.

The project partners agree that the crucial issue facing any project addressing the problems of adult literacy, family learning and library use is to actually get parents involved, but to do so requires a shift in culture. The long-term nature of any such change means that many of the effects will not be evident within the time span of the project. When it comes to overcoming deep-seated attitudes, one headteacher acknowledged, children “have a lot more clout than me”. This confirms that the family reading project is taking the correct approach in trying to get more adults involved is through their children:

*The best way is always through the children.*

## **10. Recommendations**

Many of the recommendations below refer to initiatives that are already planned or are under consideration as a result of project partners' responses to the development of the family reading project during its first nine months.

### **Partnership with Parents/Keeping up with the Children courses**

- Work with schools to encourage more parents to attend the courses and promote library use more generally.
- Appoint "leader" schools to promote the benefits of the courses and help other schools in their area.
- Introduce a session in the library as part of the course to introduce parents to the library environment.

### **Taster collections**

- Maintain taster collections as an integral part of the Partnership courses, making sure the stock is kept up-to-date and in good condition.
- Introduce permanent taster collections, focusing on community locations and areas remote from existing service points.
- Ensure Adult College tutors have the opportunity to plan their teaching around the material in the taster collection if they wish.

### **Library use**

- Consider reviewing length of loan periods, especially for books borrowed from branches with restricted opening hours.

### **Training**

- Continue to cascade family reading training to all staff in the borough.
- Consider allowing more time for discussion among staff within training sessions.

### **Reading groups**

- Open up membership of family reading groups to the wider network of library users.
- Investigate the possibility of more reading groups in community venues.

### **Partnerships**

- Continue to build up partnerships with schools eg. INSET, more class visits, attending parents' evenings, parents' workshops, and permanent taster collections.
- Continue to foster links with community groups to offer joint services such as taster collections and reading groups.

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