

**EVALUATION REPORT**

**SURE START TAUNTON**

**BARRIERS TO LIBRARY USE 2003**

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

## AUTHORS

**Lynnette Chapman** Evaluation Officer  
**Katherine Williams** Evaluation and Data Collection Assistant

**The authors would like to thank the following people who contributed to this work:**

- All mystery shoppers who took the time to contribute their experiences
- Staff from Sure Start Taunton
- Library service staff
- Staff within the Evaluation Unit who input the data

## **CONTENTS**

Executive Summary	5
Background	8
Methods	11
Results	14
Conclusion and Recommendations	21
References	23
Appendices	25



## **1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

### **Background**

- 1.1. People may become excluded from communities for a combination of reasons, one of which can be limited basic skills and low literacy levels. It is necessary to improve levels of basic skills in order to successfully combat social exclusion.
- 1.2. Research highlights the importance of public libraries within the community yet it is evident that some members of the community are unable to access the services due to a range of barriers they face.
- 1.3. This piece of evaluation attempts to identify the barriers that Sure Start families may face when using library services.

### **Methods**

- 1.4. A mixture of methods were used to investigate possible barriers to library use for Sure Start families which included consultation at a fun day event and recruiting local parents as 'mystery shoppers'. Mystery shopping took place at a range of library venues in the local area.

### **Results**

- 1.5. We spoke to approximately 20 people (parents and children) through the consultation at the fun day. The consultation found that in the 'world's best library' people would expect to see books, computers, videos and toys. In contrast, in the 'world's worst library', people would expect there to be no books and that they would have to be very quiet. Informal conversations with parents suggested that they may avoid taking their children with them to the library in case they are disruptive.

### Staff Friendliness

- 1.6. There was a range of different experiences from the mystery shoppers regarding staff friendliness. Staff friendliness varied between settings and further details are provided in the main report.

### Story Sessions

- 1.7. Two of the mystery shoppers visited a story session at different venues and reported very different experiences. In one setting, the mystery shopper was very happy with the experience, whilst the second shopper felt that the experience (where her child was disruptive) and the response of the library staff made her look like a "bad mum" and was "embarrassed" in front of the rest of the group. As the result of this experience the mystery shopper concerned would now not attend any future story sessions held at the library.

### Taking Children in to the Library

- 1.8. Many parents reported positively on their experiences relating to taking children into the library. However, several of the mystery shoppers felt that their experiences of the library would have been totally different if their child had been disruptive.

### Facilities for Children

- 1.9. Whilst there are no toilets in either of the libraries, mystery shoppers were told by the staff that they could use the staff toilets in emergencies.
- 1.10. Some of the mystery shoppers felt that adult seating in the children's areas would make them more accessible to the whole family and that interactive activities, such as story tapes, would encourage families to spend more time in the library.

### Awareness of Services

- 1.11. Advertising relating to the story sessions was felt to be very clear at the mobile library but less clear within the other libraries.
- 1.12. All library venues visited explained to the mystery shoppers that children can become members and can borrow videos, book & CDs yet not everyone was told that they could renew items by phone or on the internet. No parents noticed any advertising regarding the fact that children can become independent library members.
- 1.13. Staff awareness of the mobile library appears to vary as some mystery shoppers were given thorough details whilst others were not aware of the details of the service.

### Computer Facilities

- 1.14. A variety of experiences were reported by parents who tried to use word processing facilities at each of the libraries. One mystery shopper was pleased with all aspects of the service and the help received by members of staff. In contrast, a mystery shopper at a different venue reported that they were not allowed to print as they had outstanding fines. The mystery shopper found this experience very embarrassing and as a result would now not use the computer facilities in the library again.
- 1.15. Those mystery shoppers using the computerised library catalogue found it easy to use.

### Practicalities

- 1.16. All of the libraries were open when the mystery shoppers visited and telephone enquiries were dealt with quickly by the library staff. Problems were reported with the telephone service at Sure Start Taunton as calls were regularly diverted to the answer machine.

- 1.17. Two of the shoppers attempting to borrow specific books were not able to do so yet were told they could order it in. One shopper mentioned that as ordering items incurs a charge they would not do so.
- 1.18. Joining the library did not cause any of the mystery shoppers any problems, there was someone ready to help and staff gave them a thorough explanation of loans.

## **Conclusions**

- 1.19. A full set of recommendations are provided in the full report. However, the findings suggest that some of the changes noted below may help to reduce potential barriers and increase library use by Sure Start families.
  - Ensuring all staff are given appropriate training in customer care as several of the mystery shopper experiences have indicated how easily a negative experience can put people off from returning.
  - Ensuring frontline staff are kept up to date about the available services, follow the same procedures and realise the importance of telling people that they can renew items by telephone.
  - Sure Start Taunton need to review their telephone system as it is important for families to get a good first impression of the programme when requesting information.
  - Providing a weekend story session may help to include working families in library services.
  - Consideration should be given to whether particular families can be accompanied to groups if they do not wish to attend on their own. It may also be beneficial to research the need for a series of taster sessions to welcome parents who have not used library services before and help to break down misconceptions that can act as barriers.
  - Interactive activities and comfortable adult seating may encourage families to stay at the library longer and play and learn together.
  - Steps could be taken to raise the level of awareness that children can become their own members.

## 2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1. The term social exclusion refers to where individuals or groups of individuals face barriers to accessing or taking part in activities or opportunities. People or communities can find themselves socially excluded for a variety of reasons and typically a combination of problems are at the root of social exclusion.
- 2.2. Many factors are involved in social exclusion, such as family conflict, high crime levels, literacy problems, bad health and poor access to local services. It is important to realise that these problems do not work in isolation to one another and they often combine to add to the cycle of deprivation and poverty.
- 2.3. People with limited basic skills and low literacy levels often find themselves facing the issues that surround social exclusion. According to the Moser Report (1999)<sup>i</sup> one in five adults in England has a lower level of literacy than would be expected of an 11 year old. Improving levels of basic skills needs to be addressed if social exclusion is to be successfully combated.
- 2.4. Abolishing social exclusion and the cycle of deprivation is one of the Government's highest priorities. Many area based initiatives have been funded to tackle the causes of social exclusion and to help ensure that everybody has the opportunity to achieve their potential.

### **Social Exclusion and Library Use**

- 2.5. This report focuses on social exclusion and the use of public libraries. As part of the drive towards tackling social exclusion, the Government wishes for everyone in the community to be able to access public library services.
- 2.6. As part of the Public Service Agreement, Sure Start programmes are required to work towards meeting national objectives and targets. One of these objective focuses on 'Improving Learning' and includes the following target:  
  
*Increase use of libraries by families with young children.*
- 2.7. As highlighted by The Guardian<sup>ii</sup> the number of people visiting a library has decreased by 17% since 1992/3. In comparison to 3 years ago, there has been a reduction of 23% of people who borrow items from the library.
- 2.8. Research<sup>iii</sup> indicates the importance of public libraries within the community. Libraries can help individuals gain new skills, improve confidence levels and act as a venue for social networking and integration into communities.
- 2.9. A recent report<sup>iv</sup> by the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE 2003:6) emphasises the need for children's services to be incorporated within the library, therefore introducing them to literacy at a young age. They describe the public library as 'one of the few spaces in the town or city where children are not only welcomed, but are treated as people and citizens in their own right'.

- 2.10. Of particular relevance to initiatives tackling social exclusion from an early age, research has shown that introducing young children to books can improve numeracy and literacy levels at school. Observational research<sup>v</sup> has found that children involved in the Book Start scheme, which provides families with free books and parental advice, were more actively involved and interested in story sessions with their parents than those who were not. Developing a relationship with books at an early age is clearly important and is thought to promote life long learning.
- 2.11. There has been a clear shift away from the traditional role of libraries, not only do they lend books but also contain information about local services and events. They offer internet access and photocopying, support students with appropriate resources and loan CDs, videos and spoken books. To ensure that everybody within the community can access the valuable services that libraries have to offer, it is important to identify whether there are any barriers to library use.

### **Barriers to Library Use**

- 2.12. From interviews with non-library users, research conducted by Barbara Hull (1999)<sup>vi</sup> has highlighted a range of reasons for not using the library. Practical limitations, such as low basic skills, and psychological barriers, including feelings of inadequacy and previous negative library experiences, emerged as issues for some people. Although this research took place in a college library some trends may be useful when attempting to understand public library use.
- 2.13. During the same study “computer phobia” was also described as a barrier to library use and experiences with library staff were commented on. People found it important for the staff to have enough time to help them if they required it.
- 2.14. New Deal students involved in the study reported accessing the library significantly less than the other students did. The possibility of incurring fines acted as a greater barrier to borrowing books amongst the New Deal students. Students who had been unemployed before starting their course were significantly more likely to feel concern about their ability to use the library and its facilities.
- 2.15. The Community Services Group has conducted further work on the issue of social exclusion and the use of public libraries. ‘Open to all?’ (2000:6)<sup>vii</sup> discusses barriers that prevent people from accessing public library services. These barriers include institutional barriers (for example, rules, policies, opening times, fines), personal and social barriers (levels of self esteem, low numeracy and literacy skills) and perceptions and awareness barriers (for example, people may feel the skills that can be developed at libraries are not relevant to their lives). Lastly, environmental barriers may prevent library use, and these include factors such as poor transport links, isolation problems and difficult physical access into the public library.
- 2.16. Having examined current policies and procedures the research concluded that social exclusion has not been adequately addressed and has therefore not been resolved. The Community Services Group report argues that the needs and opinions of non-library users have not been explored before designing initiatives that aim to include these groups in library use.

- 2.17. In an attempt to work towards social inclusion, Cumbria County Council consulted with the public on what they thought about current library facilities<sup>viii</sup>. The results demonstrated a huge variation in the awareness of non-book borrowing facilities and that an increased variety of books and longer opening times would encourage more people to access the services available through the public library.
- 2.18. At a local level, Taunton library carried out a consultation with a group of 11 to 13 year olds to gain an understanding of their views on library use<sup>ix</sup>. Having visited the library, 14 users and non-users gave their opinions of the library service. The following table demonstrates some of the opinions given:

**TABLE 1 – Opinions of the Library Service**

Statements	Number Agreeing
When I come into the library I feel like staff are watching me	14
There are always adults on the computers	14
I mainly find out what to read next from books on displays	14
I mainly find out about what might be good to read next by browsing	13
I would like more computers and informal seating	13
I get embarrassed if I am unsure how to explain my request	11
If I wanted a book on X I would ask the librarian	11
I know how to use the catalogue to look up a book	1
I understand how the library sorts its books on shelves	1
I mainly find out about what might be good to read next by talking to the librarian	0
I mainly find out about what might be good to read next from teachers and other adults	0

- 2.19. In order to directly understand the barriers faced by Sure Start families when accessing public libraries, the current project aims to further the work that has already taken place by identifying local barriers.

### 3. METHODS

- 3.1. In August 2003 we attended a Sure Start Taunton fun day to ask people what they thought would help to make the 'world's best library' and the 'world's worst library'. We hoped to collect a range of views and opinions in a fun and non stigmatising way.
- 3.2. Children and their parents attending the fun day were invited to play our game which involved throwing bean bags onto targets in a pretend pond as shown below.



- 3.3. We asked everyone taking part to give one suggestion as to what would make the 'world's best library' and one suggestion for the 'world's worst library'. These suggestions were written onto stickers and stuck onto the bean bags to be thrown at the targets as part of the game. Everyone landing their beanbag on a target successfully was given a small prize and anyone wishing to play again was welcomed as long as they provided new ideas for good and bad libraries.
- 3.4. After each turn the labels were removed from the bean bags and kept to one side as we didn't want the people playing to feel they had to compare their answer to other peoples and come up with unique ideas. The suggestions given allowed us to identify what people associate with libraries and factors that are of importance to them.
- 3.5. The suggestions from the fun day were used to design the next stage of the study in order to explore potential barriers to library use further. In an attempt to involve parents and identify specific barriers that Sure Start families themselves may face we decided to run a mystery shopping exercise.
- 3.6. In conjunction with the Sure Start Library Worker a series of scenarios were designed for mystery shoppers to carry out in each of the libraries serving Sure Start families. The scenarios are listed below, along with the key points each shopper was asked to consider. Appendix 1 contains details of the full briefing given to each mystery shopper.

### **Scenarios Considered**

- Book Borrowing
- Using the Computer
- Visiting a Story Session
- Joining the Library
- Telephone Enquiry to Join
- Telephone Enquiry Regarding Local Services for Young Children

### **Areas Mystery Shoppers were asked to Consider**

- Whether they were able to do what they set out to do
- What library services are there for under 4's?
- How helpful/friendly were the staff?
- Was it welcoming ?
- Did they know what you were asking about? Did they have the knowledge?
- What was it like taking children in to the library?
- Was there any advertising for story sessions?
- What could have made the experience better?
- Would you use the library again?

- 3.7. In order to recruit the team of mystery shoppers G.P records were used to identify households eligible for Sure Start services. A postcard advert was then sent to half of the households in the Sure Start Taunton area with a child aged under 4 years. Initially only half of the households in the area were sent the adverts (437/873 a one in two sample) in case we were inundated with interest.
- 3.8. The postcards explained that we needed to recruit a team of voluntary mystery shoppers to gain some insight into the library service and whilst expenses would be paid no other incentive to take part was offered. People were asked to telephone the Community Evaluation Team to express an interest in taking part. From this initial mail out we did not receive any phone calls. Full details of the postcards sent are available in Appendix 2.
- 3.9. Having waited a week it was clear that no volunteers were going to come forward. It was decided to send postcard adverts to the other half of the Sure Start families (436) offering a reward of Argos vouchers for taking part. Adverts were also displayed on the notice board in the local Post Office and at local community centres. These adverts did not specify the amount of Argos vouchers that would be given and full detail is given in Appendix 3.
- 3.10. The second phase of advertising resulted in 19 people telephoning to take part in the mystery shopping although we only required 12 mystery shoppers to cover all of the necessary scenarios. Working on a 'first come first served basis', the first 12 people to call were included in the team and the other interested people have been kept on our records for future exercises.
- 3.11. All 12 mystery shoppers were visited in their homes to decide which scenario would be the most relevant for their family to carry out (for example, whether they would feel comfortable using the computers). Having selected one of the scenarios a briefing was run through with each of the shoppers covering all of the topics they

needed to be aware of while mystery shopping. Having made sure that they felt comfortable with the scenarios a time was arranged to come back once they had completed the exercise to talk through their experiences, record the information they had collected and give them their voucher.

- 3.12. All three of the library venues to be included in the mystery shopping exercise were notified that this exercise would take place between October and December 2003. It was felt that by specifying a long period for the mystery shopping to take place staff would not be as aware of the shopping taking place as they may have been if it was carried out in a shorter time span.
- 3.13. In order to maintain the anonymity of the libraries involved in this project their names have been changed throughout the report.
- 3.14. A £10 Argos voucher was offered to those shoppers who actually needed to visit a library setting and £5 was given for any telephone enquires that took place.
- 3.15. Many of the shoppers said that they enjoyed the experience and were keen for us to keep their details if we need them again.
- 3.16. The mystery shoppers ranged from approximately 18 to 35 years and they all took their children with them when carrying out the scenarios in order to gain an accurate picture of what the library services are like for families with young children.

#### 4. RESULTS

##### Fun Day Consultation

- 4.1. We spoke to approximately 20 people, both parents and children, and the following table shows their answers to what would make the world worst and worlds best library.

##### The World's Best Library

Books	Computers
Books	Toys and videos
Books	Videos
Every book in the world	Drinks
Lots of good books	To be able to sit and relax
More Books	Fun Park
Stories – piggies books	Tropical fish
Story Books	Longer Hours
Good Selection of books	Lights
All interesting books	Candles
No books	Ducks

##### Worlds Worst Library

No Books	Noisy Toys
No Books	Having to be quiet
No Books	Dull Walls
No Books	Frogs
No Books	Frogs
No Books	Frogs
No Books	Make Noise
No Books	Inaccessible
No Books	Fish Tanks
Poor Books	Too Many Books
Boring Books	Library Flooded
Ripped Books	Drugs in the toilets
No bookshelves to put books on	Alcohol
No Computers	Grubby Old Floor
	Ghosts

- 4.2. It is interesting that a lot of the responses given focus on books, either a wide range in the world's best library or no books in the world's worst library. These suggestions imply that the library is still typically associated with book borrowing although they offer a wealth of other services. Several comments were also given to do with the game itself, such as "Frogs" and "Ducks", which demonstrates the difficulties of consulting with young children.
- 4.3. During informal conversations with parents at the fun day several families suggested that they may avoid taking their children with them to the library as they worry that they are going to be disruptive and they will be asked by library staff to be quiet.

### **Mystery Shopper Results**

- 4.4. In total 12 mystery shoppers took part, two of which made telephone enquiries. The findings have been grouped around central themes. In some cases they are talked about in terms of libraries where it makes it easier to understand.

#### Friendliness

- 4.5. All comments received regarding the friendliness of the staff at the mobile library were positive. It was felt that they had enough time to help and were very friendly and welcoming.
- 4.6. The vast majority of comments received regarding the staff at Haven Library described them as being friendly and approachable.

*"They were really friendly they even took me over to the children's corner"*

*"They couldn't have been more helpful if they had known (that they were a mystery shopper)"*

- 4.7. The only negative comment given relating to the staff at Haven Library was about a mystery shoppers experience of joining the library:

*"She just wanted to get it over and done with"*

- 4.8. Mixed comments were received regarding the friendliness of the staff at Sylvan Library. Some of the mystery shoppers were very positive and said that the staff could not have done enough to help, yet two of them described what they considered to be bad experiences.
- 4.9. In both of the negative experiences the staff were said to be very friendly initially yet when problems were presented it was felt that their attitudes changed. These experiences shall be discussed at a later point in the report.
- 4.10. Negative comments were also given relating to the weekend staff at Sylvan Library. It was suggested that they were busy, under stress and didn't appear to have enough time to help. One shopper gave the following comment:

*"I felt the Saturday staff were watching the clock"*

- 4.11. Those enquiring on the telephone about joining the library felt that if they had reading or writing difficulties they would be helped to become a member when it came to joining.

#### The Story Sessions

- 4.12. Two of the mystery shoppers visited a story session with their child, one at Haven Library and one at Sylvan Library. Very different experiences were reported, to the extent that one family would attend the story sessions again and one would not.
- 4.13. The family attending the story session held at Haven Library were very happy with the experience and said that it met their expectations. The feedback they gave mentioned that they felt the session was relaxed and comfortable (parents and children were given seats) and their child enjoyed the story “very much”. The only difficulty that they encountered was the timing of the session as it meant they had to rush home in time to collect their eldest child from school. However, despite the rush they said they would be keen to attend again.
- 4.14. The family attending the story session at Sylvan Library reported having a negative experience which they felt was partly due to their child’s behaviour and partly due to the attitude of the library staff.
- 4.15. Whilst the family who had a negative experience commented that they felt welcomed on arrival at the library, they felt that the fact that the story session was 15 minutes late to start caused them difficulties. Their child had been happily playing in the children’s area while they were waiting for the story to begin and threw a tantrum when they were expected to leave their play there as the story was ready to start. Obviously the tantrum was disruptive to the other people attending so the lady running the story session asked the mystery shopper to take their child outside until they had calmed down. Once they came back in it was clear that the child was not going to calm down and it was suggested to the family in front of the rest of the group attending that they try again another week.
- 4.16. When giving feedback on this experience the mystery shopper commented that they did not feel it was an unreasonable request for them to take their child outside to calm down or to try again another week but they were upset about the manner in which it was done. It was felt that the staff involved dealt with the situation very abruptly and was made to feel like “a bad mum” and “embarrassed” in front of the rest of the group who appeared to attend the story sessions regularly.
- 4.17. Other feedback given from both of the mystery shoppers regarding the story sessions was that they were pleased that their children were encouraged to be involved in reading the story by talking through the pictures.

#### Taking Children into the Library

- 4.18. Across all of the scenarios and the library settings there were several positive feedback comments about taking their child in to the library, such as:

*“The library is very good and the staff were fine with children”*

- 4.19. Several comments were made which demonstrate that the shoppers felt they would have had totally different experiences if their children not been behaving and did disturb others:

*“I was glad (my son) was asleep and would have felt on edge that he would make a noise if he was awake”*

- 4.20. In many cases their children did not cause a noticeable reaction in members of staff or other library users as they were quiet. However, one mother was very embarrassed by the fact her daughter had a tantrum during the story session and she was asked by a member of staff to take her outside until she calmed down.

- 4.21. Throughout all the enquiries made by mystery shoppers staff were keen to reassure parents that the library is not as strict as it used to be and to not be put off bringing their children in with them.

*“(I was told that) the children’s area is nice and bright and friendly and there is not such a silence rule as before”*

*“They are very tolerant of children and do not do any shushing”*

- 4.22. It was felt that the mobile library was very welcoming to children

*“She (the library worker) will get down on the floor and play”.*

#### Facilities for Children

- 4.23. The mystery shoppers found that there are no toilet facilities in any of the libraries although Haven Library does have public toilets directly outside. Telephone enquirers were told that in emergencies they could use the staff toilets if they needed to. A comment received from one of the mystery shoppers highlighted that although there is no toilet on the mobile library, given the fact that it travels around the local area those accessing it would not expect to be too far from home and their own toilet facilities.

- 4.24. Several parents commented that they would not leave their children unattended in the children’s area and that some adult seating would make it more accessible to them and their child. It was also suggested that the children’s area could have some more interactive activities for parents to stay and do with their children, such as story tapes.

- 4.25. One recommendation was given for children’s books to be sorted by either author or title as although the current set up is good for browsing it is difficult to find any specific books.

- 4.26. Several of the mystery shoppers commented that children are actively encouraged to become library members yet there was no mention of specific advertising to make parents think about their children becoming independent members.

- 4.27. All of the comments given about the mobile library were positive and those visiting it felt that it works well due to the fact that it has been specifically designed to meet the needs of children.

Awareness of Services for the under 4's.

- 4.28. From the feedback received it is clear that visual advertising for the story sessions was very obvious at the mobile library. However, at both Haven and Sylvan Libraries only a few of the shoppers specifically commented that they had noticed advertising for the story sessions. When specifically asking staff about what services are offered for under 4 year olds several of the mystery shoppers have been told about the story sessions yet it seems to be the case that the story sessions are not necessarily being actively promoted.

*“Yes it’s plastered all over the mobile library”*

*“I had to ask if there was anything for children”*

- 4.29. With regard to the library services offered to under 4 year olds, comments from the mystery shoppers revealed that all of the venues explained that children can become members and that CDs, videos and books are available for hire. It does however seem that the mystery shoppers were not regularly being told that they could renew items by phone or on the internet which several of them commented would be a useful service for them to know about.

- 4.30. From the mystery shoppers experiences it appears that there is limited staff awareness of the mobile library. Looking at each of the venues separately, the mobile library was only mentioned when one of the mystery shoppers asked about it specifically at Haven Library and the staff there had a very limited knowledge of its services and suggested they contacted Sylvan Library. More positively when asking about the mobile library at Sylvan Library one of the mystery shoppers was given very thorough information yet on another occasion one member of staff did not know about the service and was only able to mention a rural service to the enquiring mystery shopper.

*“The lady (at Haven Library) was not too sure of all the details and where it stops etc. but she said that the lady who runs it works at Sylvan and would be able to help me”*

- 4.31. On the whole there was mixed feedback on whether mystery shoppers were told they could order items in from other libraries as some people were told and some were not. One shopper who did order them in said that they were was not informed how they would know it would be available.
- 4.32. All mystery shoppers visiting one of the libraries were asked to look out for advertising regarding computer training which is run through the library service. Although none of the mystery shoppers mentioned that they noticed adverts at either venue, the training was mentioned directly to several of the mystery shoppers at Sylvan Library but only one parent at Haven Library received a leaflet.

## Practicalities

- 4.33. All of the libraries were open when the mystery shoppers visited and the two people who went to use the computers were able to do so immediately.
- 4.34. Mixed feedback was received regarding the mystery shoppers experience of word processing within both Haven and Sylvan libraries. The mystery shopper accessing the computer facilities at Haven Library reported no difficulties and was pleased with all aspects of the service and the help received by members of staff:

*“The prices seemed reasonable and she did it for me! (the printing.)”*

- 4.35. When asked what could have made the experience better the only comment she was able to give was *“a cup of tea”*.
- 4.36. The mystery shopper who accessed the computer facilities at Sylvan Library reported a negative experience. Although they were able to access the facilities and carry out word processing they experienced difficulties when it came to printing off the work they had completed. When asking for help to print a member of staff commented on the fact that she had not paid her library fines and would not be allowed to print until she had done so:

*“The lady said, ‘If you can afford to print you can afford to pay your fines’”*.

- 4.37. The mystery shopper concerned commented that this experience caused embarrassment as it was said in front of other people in the library and also very abruptly. The mystery shopper would now not use the computer facilities in the library again after this experience. It was suggested that the library staff should make this clear before allowing people with fines to go on the computer.
- 4.38. Two of the mystery shoppers needed to use the computerised library catalogue to locate specific items they required and they both commented that they found the system easy to use.
- 4.39. When attempting to borrow a specific children’s book, two of the shoppers were not able to get hold of the specific books they wanted and the family visiting the mobile library were able to. The shoppers who were not able to borrow the specific book immediately were told by staff that they could order it in yet the one who chose to do so was not told how they would be notified when it was available. One shopper mentioned that the fact that ordering items incurs a charge (unless it was a children’s book) would prevent them from doing so.
- 4.40. With regard to joining the library, the feedback given indicates that there was someone ready to help immediately at all of the venues and the new members received a thorough explanation of book, CD and video loans. Being able to provide the necessary identification to join did not cause any problems as although one of the shoppers did not have the required identification with them but were still able to join as both their children are members.
- 4.41. The mystery shoppers who phoned either Sylvan or Haven libraries commented that the telephone was answered quickly and that they had no problems getting through.

Several of the shoppers chose to telephone the Sure Start Taunton office and remarked upon the difficulty in getting through to speak to anyone as the answer machine is often switched on. One of the mystery shoppers phoned Sure Start Taunton to ask about the times of the story sessions and commented that they were only able to get through on their third attempt (they did not like leaving answer machine messages) and when they were able to talk to somebody they were not able to give them the information they required, so they had to phone the library.

- 4.42. One of the mystery shoppers felt that it would be useful to produce a library information pack to be sent to all new Sure Start families moving in to the area. They suggested that a pack could include details about all of the library services including the library bus, story sessions and registration details.

## **5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 5.1. The results of the mystery shopping exercise may need to be treated cautiously due to the small scale of the study and factors outside of the studies control. They do however, provide an indication of Sure Start families experiences of library use and some of the barriers they may face. By recruiting local families as mystery shoppers we have followed the recommendations of previous research which urges for the opinions of the communities involved to be sought when designing initiatives to tackle social exclusion in library use.

### **Staff Friendliness & Awareness**

- 5.2. In the majority of cases library staff are said to have been very friendly and it has been commented on by several of the mystery shoppers that this is important to them. From both previous research<sup>x</sup> and these mystery shopper experiences it is evident that it is vital for the staff to be aware of how easily people can be put off from returning to the library if they have a negative experience. Staff training could be arranged to raise the awareness of sensitive customer treatment.
- 5.3. Frontline staff within the library service and the Sure Start Taunton's office need to be provided with thorough and up to date information on what the library service can offer to under 4's, including details of the Sure Start library van. There also seems to be a need to inform staff how useful it is for them to mention that items can be renewed by telephone as families may appreciate this flexibility.
- 5.4. It is necessary to ensure that all library staff are aware of and follow the same procedures and policies.
- 5.5. Whilst the telephone service at the libraries was reported to be quick and good, several of the mystery shoppers have commented that they find it difficult to get through to someone at the Sure Start Taunton office. It is vital that Sure Start are efficient in answering the telephone and able to respond to queries as for some families this is their first impression and contact with the programme.

### **Story Session Feedback**

- 5.6. Positive comments were received on the fact that children are involved in the story sessions.
- 5.7. Attending pre-established groups can be intimidating and the fact that previous research has identified that some members of the community feel that libraries are not for them may contribute to such feelings of insecurity<sup>x1</sup>. Sure Start may wish to offer people support and accompany them to groups, especially if they have more than one child to take. It may also be beneficial to run a series of 'taster sessions' to welcome parents who have not used library services before and help to break down misconceptions that can act as barriers.
- 5.8. It may be an advantage to limit the story sessions to children of a certain age as very young children find it difficult to settle for a story.

- 5.9. It would be difficult for the timing of the story sessions to suit all families, but running weekend sessions would help to include working families in these activities.

### **Children Misbehaving**

- 5.10. Several comments have suggested that parents worry about their children misbehaving in the library. Staff need to be aware that parents feel on edge and can be sensitive to their comments, it may be beneficial to consult with parents themselves about what they feel should happen if their children are disturbing other library users. Advertisements could help to convey the message that the library is not as strict as it used to be.

### **Encouraging People to Stay**

- 5.11. Toilet and baby changing facilities may be needed if the library service is going to encourage people to visit and spend time there. Offering some sort of interactive activities, such as story books, may encourage families to stay and play/learn together.

### **Other**

- 5.12. Unless they are specifically told families may not be aware that their children can become independent members of the library. This level of awareness could be raised as it can be an attractive option to families who have fines or do not feel like becoming members themselves.
- 5.13. Computer facilities in the library were generally thought to be good. Further advertising would be helpful to raise the awareness of the computer training offered by the library yet they need to be able to meet the demand for places.
- 5.14. There was the suggestion of sending out a library information pack to new families within the Sure Start area. Whilst this may be difficult to administer it would help to raise the awareness of library services available.
- 5.15. The library service needs to be aware of possible barriers that they themselves may impose (institutional barriers). Careful consideration needs to be given to how potential library service users are affected by decisions made regarding the services offered.
- 5.16. This piece of work has begun to explore the needs and requirements of Sure Start families in terms of library use. Having identified some of the barriers to library use the Sure Start Taunton programme now need to tackle these issues in order to meet their target of increased library use by families with young children in the Sure Start area.

## REFERENCES

---

- <sup>i</sup> Department for Education and Employment (1999)  
A Fresh Start: Improving Literacy and Numeracy  
London: DfEE.  
[www.lifelonglearning.co.uk/mosergroup/freshsum.pdf](http://www.lifelonglearning.co.uk/mosergroup/freshsum.pdf)
- <sup>ii</sup> Wainwright M. (2003) “Libraries blamed for their own decline” in  
The Guardian, 18<sup>th</sup> August 2003.  
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/story/0,3604,1020923,00.html>
- <sup>iii</sup> Department of Culture, Media and Sport (1999)  
Libraries for All: Social Inclusion in Public Libraries.  
London: The Stationary Office.
- <sup>iv</sup> Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (2003)  
Better Public Libraries  
London: Resource.
- <sup>v</sup> More M. and Wade B. (1998)  
A Gift for Life, Book Start: The First Five Years.  
<http://www.bookstart.co.uk/professionals/docs/giftforlife.doc>
- <sup>vi</sup> Hull B. (1999)  
Barriers to Libraries as Agents of Lifelong Learning: Research Report 31  
Library and Information Commission  
[www.lic.gov.uk/publications/executivesummaries/rr031.html](http://www.lic.gov.uk/publications/executivesummaries/rr031.html).
- <sup>vii</sup> Resource (2000)  
Open to all? The Public Library and Social Exclusion  
London: Re:source  
<http://www.la-hq.org.uk/groups/csg/lfa3.html>
- <sup>viii</sup> Cumbria County Council (1998)  
Not just turning over a new leaf: what the public think about libraries  
<http://www.cumbria.gov.uk/briefings/1998/brf9812.htm>
- <sup>ix</sup> Boyd R (2003)  
Taunton Library Consultation Winter/Spring 2002/2003

---

<sup>x</sup> Hull B. (1999)

Barriers to Libraries as Agents of Lifelong Learning: Research Report 31

Library and Information Commission

*[www.lic.gov.uk/publications/executivesummaries/rr031.html](http://www.lic.gov.uk/publications/executivesummaries/rr031.html)*.

<sup>xi</sup> Department for Culture, Media and Sport (2000)

Social inclusion and Libraries: A Resource Guide

<http://www.la-hq.org.uk/groups/csg/lfa3.html>

---

## **APPENDICES**

**Try and borrow the given top 10 titles for the appropriate age group**

Was the library open when you first went?

Did you feel welcomed?

Was the book available?

Did you need help looking for it or were you able to find it easily?

Did you use the computer system to look up the books? How was it?

If you asked for help how approachable were the staff? Did they have enough time to help you?

Were they friendly?

If it was available how long can you borrow it for?

Did they tell you that you can renew it by telephone or on the internet?

If it wasn't available – did anyone tell you that you can order it in from another library?

Were they encouraging or did it sound like a real effort?

Did you have to pay to order it in from another library? (Not for children's books)

How do you know when its available? Does that suit you or make things difficult?

Was there any advertising about the story sessions run? Did that encourage you to go back?

Would you use the library again after this experience?

What was it like taking children with you into the library?

How did the staff react? Other library users?

Are there facilities for children at the library? Are there toilets/nearby?

What could have made the experience better?

Do you have any further comments on the experience?

**Visit to join the library (either a child or non member)**

Was the library open when you first went?

Did you feel welcomed?

Was there someone immediately available for you to talk to or did you have to wait?

Did you have with you any identification needed to join?

How approachable were the staff?

Did they have enough time to help you?

Were they friendly?

Did they explain all of the services available through the library and how long and how many books you can borrow?

Did they tell you that you can renew items by telephone or on the internet?

Did they tell you that you can use the internet and that there is help available if you need it?

Did anyone tell you that you can order items from another library?

Do you have to pay to order it in from another library?

Did anybody or any advertising tell you about the story sessions run at the library?

Would you consider attending them?

Would you use the library again after this experience?

What could have made the experience better?

What was it like taking children into the library? How did the staff react? Other library users?

Are there facilities for children at the library?

Do you have any further comments on the experience?

**Visit to use the computer (members only) do some photocopying and printing**

Was there a computer available?

Did you ask for help?

How approachable were the staff? Did they have enough time to help you?

Were they friendly?

Could you write a quick letter using word?

Were you able to print your work off? How much did you have to pay?

**Visit a story session**

How did you find out about when the story sessions were on?

Was it well advertised or did you have to seek the information out?

How did the timing of these sessions fit into your day/routines?

Did you feel welcomed at the session?

Was it at all intimidating if you went alone? What could have been done to make it easier?

Was it comfortable?

Did your children enjoy it?

Was it pitched at the right age group?

Was it too slow, too fast or anything?

Did the children have any say in the story read?

Were the children involved/encouraged to be involved in the story telling?

How were the staff? Did they make you feel welcome? Were they friendly?

Would you consider going again?

What could have made the experience better?

What was it like taking children into the library? How did the staff react? Other library users?

Are there facilities for children at the library?

Do you have any further comments on the experience?

**Telephone enquiry about what services the library offers for under 4's**

Who did you call? i.e. Sure Start, Haven or Sylvan Library

Where did you call from?

How many times did the phone ring before it was answered?

Did you get through on your first attempt?

Did someone have to call you back? If so how quickly did they get back to you?

How friendly was the person on the other end?

Were they able to help you or was the call passed to someone else?

What did they tell you was available for the under 4's?

Did they mention the mobile library – if not ask about whether there is one

Did they mention the story sessions - if not ask whether they do story sessions

Did you feel welcomed to come and use the services?

Are there baby changing facilities at the library?

Tell them you always worry about talking children into the library in case they are going to be noisy – did they say its not a problem and encourage you or were they off putting?

Would this experience encourage you or put you off taking it any further?

What could have made the experience better?

Do you have any further comments on the experience?

---

---

**Visit The Mobile Library**

How did you find out when it was in your area?

If you phoned Sure Start how helpful were they?

Was it there on time?

What were the facilities like?

Did you feel welcomed?

Could you find what you were looking for?

How helpful or approachable were the staff? Did they have enough time to help you?

Were they friendly?

Did they tell you how to renew your books or how to return them?

Was there any advertising about other Sure Start activities?

Would you go back?

What was it like taking children with you?

What could have made the experience better? Do you have any further comments?

**Telephone to enquire what you need to join**

Where did you call from? Is there any hassle getting to use a phone?

How many times did the phone ring before it was answered?

Did you get through on your first attempt?

Did someone have to call you back? If so how quickly did they get back to you?

How friendly was the person on the other end?

Were they able to help you or was the call passed to someone else?

What did they tell to bring in to join the library?

Did it sound an easy process or was it made out to be quite difficult?

Did you feel welcomed to come and use the services?

Do you have all the necessary paperwork?

Think about how you would find this process if you struggled reading and writing but want to get something for the children

Can your children be members? Do they encourage you or your child to take out the membership?

What does a child need to join the library? When is the best time to come in and join?

Tell them you always worry about talking children into the library in case they are going to be noisy – did they say its not a problem and encourage you or were they off putting?

Would this experience encourage you or put you off taking it any further?

What could have made the experience better? Do you have any further comments?

**Visit to use the computer (members only) do some photocopying and printing**

Was there a computer available?

Did you ask for help?

How approachable were the staff? Did they have enough time to help you?

Were they friendly?

Could you write a quick letter using word?

Were you able to print your work off? How much did you have to pay?

Try and photocopy it – did you have the right money, did you need any help, was the machine working etc.

Did you notice any advertising for computer training?

Would you use the computers again in the library after this experience?

Did you take your children with you? Were they able to entertain themselves while you worked?

How could the experience have been better? Do you have any further comments?



---

# DO YOU HAVE A YOUNG CHILD? IF SO WE NEED YOUR HELP

We need a team of mystery shoppers to try out the local library services

This could be your chance to try something different and help your community

We are looking for volunteers to do any of the following and tell us how it went

- Phone in with an enquiry
- Try and borrow specific books
- Visit a story session with your children
- Find out about the Sure Start library van
- Log onto the internet

If you would like to get involved or ask any questions please call Kath from the Community Evaluation Team on  
01823 344418

Your help is valuable & expenses will be paid



---

# **DO YOU HAVE A YOUNG CHILD?**

## **WOULD YOU LIKE TO EARN AN ARGOS VOUCHER?**

**We need a team of mystery shoppers to try out local library services**

**This could be your chance to try something different, help your community and earn a voucher for Christmas**

**We are looking for volunteers to do one of the following and tell us how it went**

- **Phone in with an enquiry**
- **Try and borrow certain books**
- **Visit a story session with your children**
- **Find out about the Sure Start library van**
- **Log on to the internet**

**If you would like to get involved or ask any questions please call Kath from the Community Evaluation Team on 01823 344418**

