

Aims

Primary Link provides a programme of activities using libraries and dedicated vans containing library stock and information and communication technology (ICT) equipment to enhance local access to services. These activities prioritise literacy, including ICT literacy and family learning.

A principal aim of Primary Link is to increase children's access to library services in targeted wards in Middlesbrough. This is achieved through the provision of laptops, which are loaned to households for family learning and giving access to library materials from mobile units.

Location

Middlesbrough is a large town situated south of the river Tees. Its population in the 2001 Census was recorded as 134,855. The town has experienced significant change over the last few decades as traditional industrial employers have declined leaving some neighbourhoods with high levels of worklessness. The town now relies more heavily on service sector employment, requiring a better educated workforce.

The Intervention Strategy

Staffing

Primary Link currently employs five library assistants and two van drivers to deliver 74 hours of work each week. The project is organised by a project leader, a project manager and an administrator.

Funding

Funding for the intervention amounted to £216,000 in 2002-2003. About a half of this funding was invested in library stock development. The remainder was employed to staffing costs and the purchase of a large delivery van with library stock trolleys. From 2004-2005 funding will be reduced to £96,000.

Operating method

The local strategic partnership 'Middlesbrough Partnership' has devised a renewal strategy which focuses on change over a period of 20 years or more. As the strategy states: 'Our long term vision will be realized by taking action to address the causes as well as the effects of disadvantage and exclusion, so we will focus particularly on young people and their families to develop citizens who care for their neighbours and look after their town'.

Middlesbrough Partnership has integrated the local Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy within the Community Strategy through the strategic theme 'Investing in our Neighbourhoods'. The Community Strategy has identified five strategic themes and a set of key priorities to help deliver the vision, namely:-

- ◆ Making Middlesbrough Safer
- ◆ Creating Jobs and Skilful People
- ◆ Investing in our Neighbourhoods
- ◆ Improving Urban Living
- ◆ Improving Health and Care

This case study addresses the third priority, investing in our neighbourhoods. Middlesbrough identified 15 wards with high levels of multiple deprivation, this intervention is focused on priority wards.

Primary Link targeted eight primary schools in deprived wards and worked closely with five branch libraries. The branch libraries were refurbished to make them more appealing to families and children in the area and were modeled on a bookshop style of layout which was less formal and allowed for social interaction by making coffee and seating available.

The mobile library can carry conventional library stock on trolleys and information and communication technology (ICT) equipment. Primary Link have ten lap-top computers which are loaned to families for around eight weeks. The laptops have family learning packages installed together with conventional office software. The laptops are internet enabled to offer access to the world wide web. The library assistants provide ICT training and support to families to develop their confidence and skill in the use of computers.



A key element of the intervention is to make learning fun for children. Outreach workers use story sacks which include books and props such as toys and furry animals to encourage involvement with the stories and to encourage parents to provide stimulating and fun environment when reading to children.

The intervention also arranges Easy PC evenings in branch libraries so that people can talk informally to library assistants, drink coffee and gain access to printers.

The intervention is designed to operate primarily during the school day during term time. However, the intervention teams also operate homework clubs and summer schools.

Achievements of the Intervention

Main achievements

Unlike conventional mobile libraries, where most usage is taken up by older residents who are either housebound or in sheltered accommodation, the Primary Link programme was targeted at families with young children. This benefited mothers especially, but fathers also got involved with family learning.

The biggest success of this intervention is that it has offered families their first opportunity to use ICT technology. At the time of the publication of the most recent Statement of Use by Middlesbrough Partnership in January 2004, 59 households had been given access to ICT equipment and 44 adults had taken up opportunities for training. While many families were nervous about using the computers at first, they soon grasped the basic principles and advanced their command of the technology from that point. The intervention also helped to develop literacy skills and creativity with evidence of poetry and story writing skills developing quickly.

In the wards where the intervention was delivered, there had been a low level of library usage amongst children and parents. It is not possible at this stage to measure impact on floor targets. In these areas, levels of achievement at GCSE level is relatively poor, and it is hoped that this intervention will, in the longer term, impact on levels of achievements. Evidence had already been collected to demonstrate that there had been improvements in SATS in two of the schools involved in the programme. A total of 2078 visits to classes in primary schools had been achieved by 2004, and there were 259 study support sessions in either schools or libraries. In total 1048 new library members were registered via the project.

Children were issued with dual library tickets that could be used in branch libraries and on the Primary Link vans. Junior library book issues had risen by 54 per cent in the targeted areas compared with 11 per cent over all for 2001-2.



Primary Link: Access to Citizen Services

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NRF Priority:

Education

NRF Authority:

Middlesbrough Local Strategic Partnership

NRF Funding Level:

Medium

PTO for additional information

Lead Agent:

Middlesbrough Libraries and Museums Service

Main Partners:

Local Primary Schools

Location:

Mobile units and Branch Libraries in
Middlesbrough

Main achievements:

53 households given access to ICT equipment.

44 adults had taken up
opportunities for training.

Evidence of improvements in SATS in two of
the schools involved in the programme.

2078 visits to classes in primary schools had
been achieved by 2004

259 study support sessions in
either schools or libraries.

In total 1048 new library members were
registered via the project

Junior library book issues had
risen by 54 per cent

80 per cent of targeted children
gained library membership

Mainstreaming Strategy

The project manager and project leader posts have now been mainstreamed. Due to the reduction of funding in the remaining years of the intervention, the amount of time devoted to work on the mobile units will reduce to 56 hours per week. Once the NRF funding ends, it is anticipated that the service will be reduced further but that the quality of the outputs will remain largely the same albeit in reduced intensity. The key point of the intervention has been to effect a culture change in library use in deprived wards and the statistical evidence on library usage seems to support the view that this has been achieved successfully.

As this intervention has only involved a selection of schools, it is hoped that its outreach work can be extended if other schools are willing to make a small investment in sustaining the service once neighbourhood renewal funds end in 2006. The intervention team therefore intend to focus upon this strategic objective over the remaining two years of the funding period.

Learning Curve

The success of the intervention is reflected by the strong interest in its achievements by other authorities. Interest has been expressed in the operating methods adopted by Belfast, Newcastle, Hampshire and County Durham. Additionally, Primary Link was represented at the Scottish Schools Library Conference. Belfast City Council intend to replicate the Primary Link model based on their experience.

The intervention is innovative in the sense that it employs library assistants on the Primary Link van whose jobs were advertised as 'outreach workers'. This led to the development of a different service culture among the outreach teams and the more conventional library assistant role in the branch libraries. In the conventional library role, assistants were required to deal with a whole range of customers compared with the outreach workers whose brief was more narrowly defined and explicitly focused upon raising literacy and numeracy in families with young children in deprived areas.

Even though working on the Primary Link project was known to provide less secure long-term employment, the outreach workers did not want to make the transition to the more permanent branch library jobs. This suggests that there is a culture gap between the two groups of employees. A staff conference is planned to bring all the library staff together so that they can learn about each others' roles in the service and gain greater insight into the contribution of all staff.

Key Lessons

The key lesson learned in this intervention is that when new projects are developed which involve staff from mainstream services and outreach workers, there can be different understandings about the purpose and direction of the service as a whole. This may prove more difficult in interventions where services are delivered by

- (a) a long-standing occupational group with a particular service culture and
- (b) a newly established group of employees who have to learn best practice as the intervention develops.

While it is difficult to anticipate how these different interpretations may impact on practice and processes, it may be a good idea to establish good lines of communication between both groups at the outset in order to avoid the development of conflicting priorities.

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