

LIBRARY & INFORMATION SERVICE DELIVERY TO REMOTE RURAL COMMUNITIES: A REVIEW

Having access to information is one of the undisputed rights of every citizen

Libraries as a community resource. David Hayes Associates [1]

One person's margin may be another's heartland

François Matarasso. [1.1]

Introduction

A study of the literature surrounding the provision of library and information services to remote communities suggests a dynamic in which rural populations are drawn to urban areas (for primarily economic reasons) and city dwellers are drawn to rural areas to escape the pressures of city life. The former probably have a low expectation of the range of public services available to them locally and an acceptance of the need to travel to obtain wider access. Travel, however, may not be an easy option, due to low income, poor infrastructure, etc.

The latter group are likely to be more able to invest their time and money in commuting from home to work in centres where a range of better resourced services are relatively easily available to them.

although there is little direct evidence or available research results, it seems likely that mobility and income levels determine the extent to which the rural population are able to access library and information services in market towns and major urban centres... There will be an increased demand [for library services] in the future from the elderly and housebound reader... Many of the elderly make significant demands on services and as the range of materials is extended to include talking books, large print materials, and other non-standard items, these demands are likely to increase significantly. [2]

These trends

- depopulation of traditional centres of rural communities and
- the increased occurrence of low-density single family units

can be seen in the USA as well as Europe. The provision of once-off housing in the Irish countryside is, at present, a particularly contentious issue. The recent Draft Development Plan for County Louth contains proposals aimed at counterbalancing this trend through the provision of development centres which will cater for people wanting to locate in rural areas. The centres will typically include 'a school, community centre, church, shop etc. in order to achieve a more sustainable approach to development'. [3]

Wider dispersal of people decreases the profitability of service providers and increases the necessity to travel for access to services.

Rural areas with small, widely-dispersed populations are constantly having to face deteriorating services...Over the last few decades a "strategic withdrawal" of services, both private and public, has been taking place in Europe... The provision of services has been dispersed and access to various services has become more difficult; the principal victims of these developments have been people without any individual means of transport, due to their being too young, too old, too poor, or too ill [4]

At the launch of the Clár programme for re-vitalising rural areas, the Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development, Éamon Ó Cuív commented:

The biggest problem and the biggest excuse offered for not providing services in rural areas has been lack of population This has become a vicious circle; a declining population leads to the withdrawal of services, lack of services means that more people migrate to our cities, which in turn means that even more services are lost in rural areas [5]

Matarrasso suggests that:

... the steady rise of the town means that urban experience, values and culture will come to dominate our sense of what it is to be human one crucial role for rural cultures in the new century must be to question increasingly dominant urban cultural norms [6]

Public libraries pride themselves on their tradition of inclusivity but have themselves suffered from the rationalization that has seen the disappearance of many other local services, both public and private, further contributing to the marginalisation of remote communities. As we will see from examples in the section dealing with 'mini-mobiles' some Scandinavian library authorities have managed to improve services to the community by closing small branches and replacing them with targeted mobile services.

The Danish National Association of Local Authorities published a paper which stated:

“proximity’ is not unambiguous It is important to determine which kinds of proximity are most essential for solving tasks in the best possible way in the future and which are important for the citizens’ feeling of proximity / affinity with their local authority:

- geographical proximity (physical distance)
- technological proximity (IT society)
- cultural proximity (local / regional community spirit) [8]

Libraries are in close technological and cultural proximity to their communities and this technological proximity helps compensate for the problems caused by a lack of geographical proximity. ICT has a role to play in re-defining the concept of proximity in relation to local communities and services they require but it is not just a question of libraries providing access to networked terminals,:

However libraries should not only be concentrating on networking and access issues, but should also be at the centre of efforts to develop content and new information tools and databases.

Libraries as a community resource. David Hayes Associates [7]

A survey of Scottish households in 1999 [9] revealed a slightly higher percentage of household in rural areas had Internet access than in urban areas. What survey like this cannot show is the pattern and efficiency of use within the home.

[There are no equivalent figures for Ireland]

Wider ICT applications may bring a partial solution in terms of service delivery but raise their own problems of access and familiarity and the need for training of end users. Libraries can, and do, provide training and support for ICT users. A number of Irish library authorities provide training sessions for Internet users, some are targeted at specific groups such as retired people.

A public opinion survey carried out in 1996 [10] asked people:

If you wanted to learn more about using computers to find information [on the Internet] where would you go? Libraries came a creditable second in people’s replies.

- *ask somebody you know* 23
- **go to a library** 20
- *take a class* 17

One UK authority has established a training programme using volunteers or “buddies”. These volunteers receive training to an agreed level and are then used to assist members of the public using the library Internet facilities. These, and other solutions, are addressed in the section **ICT outreach**.

Libraries are often seen by other service providers as being one of the more successful community services. However, most library provision is still based on the static service point to which people are expected to travel. Those who are disadvantaged by this approach are often the more vulnerable, the very old and the very young. In targeting the library and information needs of remote communities these

demographics need to be considered and services to the community prioritised. Mobile library services encompass services to the housebound and schools, as well as the 'traditional' mobile library. These services are considered in detail later in the report.

The dichotomy is that libraries exist for all but do not reach everybody, for a variety of reasons. This project seeks to remove geographic isolation as one of those reasons and to promote equality of access to library and information services to members of remote communities.

Libraries are a much valued public institution built around a shared ideal: to make available resources that can be used by all members of the community to stimulate imagination and inquiry, through literature and reference, for culture and commerce. They are open to all and should benefit those least able to afford private provision. [11]

There is ample evidence that access to library and information services contributes to the sustainability of communities and to their empowerment:

The California State Libraries *Info People Project* has

...had a tremendous success in linking communities around the library. Rural communities geographically isolated from the rest of the State have taken advantage of this library-based resource to obtain state and government information [12]

Such communities do not remain sustainable solely through the provisions of the library, however. :

It is important that the library planning process should be linked to community planning so that the contribution of libraries to the broader priorities of local communities is identified and integrated with other service provision. [13]

Beacon Council research has identified essentials of best practice. Libraries should, it recommends:

- *be able to demonstrate their awareness of the wider authority strategies*
- *demonstrate how they support the wider strategy*
- *be able to put their proposed actions into wider authority, regional and national contexts*
- *contribute to the community development strategy*
- *be able to demonstrate how they contribute to the social and economic well being of the community*

Communities do not remain static, either demographically nor in their general level of development. Community development programmes need to be flexible enough to incorporate change

Rural needs and circumstances need to be included in any planning process... greater attention needs to be given to how mainstream services are targeted to overcome rural exclusion

It is in the area of partnership provision that much of the innovative approach to library and information provision to rural communities has taken place. Library authorities have forged partnerships with other public service providers and with the private sector. Some of these strategic alliances are facilitated by differing governmental and funding structures than exist here in Ireland, many are still in the experimental stage.

Different approaches to the provision of library and information services to remote communities are illustrated in the following section

Examples of innovative library and information services to remote communities

Static services

Suffolk Libraries & Heritage Service is piloting a scheme called *Library Links*. These eight *Links*, or mini-libraries, are located mainly in village shops and post-offices and consist of a collection of frequently exchanged books and a networked PC which gives access to the library service's catalogue. Users can reserve books which are delivered to the Link for collection. Books can be returned via the Link or to any branch library in the county. There are also self-issue and renewal facilities, although trained staff in the Links can also provide this service. The *InfoLink* computer also provides access to a variety of local information. Although 'business' is not huge, the Links provide a permanent presence in the community for the library service, as well as providing a means of safeguarding the future of village stores. The project is currently under review and the authority is considering ways of using the Links, the mobile and the static branches more innovatively in rural areas. One of the advantages of the Links was that they are open when other library services are not but now there are proposals to open all 43 branch libraries on Sundays.

Public library authorities are well placed to act as providers as well as mentors for community information services. Beacon Council research identified a number of other initiatives:

- A youth centre with a library and information centre, ICT suite, music and art studios, fitness centre, crèche, café, performance area
- A partnership between the a medical centre, local authority and the library service has been set up to pilot, access to authoritative health information for non-professionals. It contains a range of information on medical conditions, support groups, and treatments.
- Integrated health and social care – Strathcarron (Scotland) pioneered an integrated health and social care service which provides nursing, residential and day care, GP services, sheltered housing and a community library - allowing older people to continue living in their community.
- Barking and Dagenham Public Libraries (UK) have established libraries in a number of 'learning villages' where the joint use buildings are shared by other community and 'second chance, education centres. One branch library has been extended and refurbished to provide a library, health centre and community hall.

There are examples in Ireland and the U.K. where branch libraries share facilities with:

- village halls
- council service points
- cultural centres
- care centres
- colleges
- art galleries
- archive & art gallery

The State Library of New South Wales has published *Guidelines for Joint-use Libraries* [www.sl.nsw.gov.au/plb/policies/jointuse.cfm]

In communities where there is limited access to library services, perhaps due to restricted opening hours, consideration could be given to 'seeding' the community with books. Books for and about children could be left with pre-school playgroups. Similarly with other groups such as the elderly, etc. These taster collections act as an advertisement for the library service, giving details of opening hours, information on how to join, library-based activities, etc.

ICT outreach

There are a number of library based initiatives using ICT which I have named *ICT Outreach* – their common theme being that they can be accessed by remote library users, in their own homes or other community access points. Most of the following are taken from the Beacon Council research paper:

- *Linnnet Local* terminals can be found in village shops and halls, church hall, doctor's surgeries, and public houses throughout Lincolnshire. The terminals provide access to training, community and other information services.

- The Liberator Project aimed to establish and develop regional information services in three European regions. The project established a subject gateway for and about the North East Region of England.
- A library authority undertook a project called the Electronic Community Magazine which included individuals within local geographic areas trained to become editors of online magazines reflecting the interests and character of the community.
- Some library authorities have made their community information accessible outside libraries across wide rural areas.
- An authority has made their community information available over the Internet and given leisure organisations web design training so they can design their own pages hosted by the city, including an events diary and bulletin board, and also offer community organisations a chance to enter their own information.
- Some library authorities are taking part in the Community Legal Service (CLS) initiative which is being taken forward by the Lord Chancellor's Department. One authority has become one of the CLS information providers by piloting a new touch-screen kiosk linked to the local courts. Content includes information on court procedures, a video on jury service and a dial-up videolink to the Citizen's Advice Bureau for one-to-one help.
- One authority has developed a network of "electronic village halls" based in community buildings (such as library buildings, further education college, community business centre and a community and voluntary group network). Offering free access to PCs, the Internet and a wide range of software programmes supported by trained staff to offer assistance as required, who also offer a range of free training sessions.
- A library authority has set up a programme of using "buddies" or volunteers to offer training and support to the public using the PCs. The buddies received training to an agreed level of proficiency. The buddies gained new skills and qualifications to add to their CVs, and the public were offered support in addition to the services the library could provide.
- A metropolitan borough council has implemented a Community Information Programme (CIP), in order to support their strategy of social inclusion and economic regeneration, provided citizens with 1,000 public access PCs over 160 locations with access to the internet, and a huge range of community information in schools, colleges, libraries, one stop shops etc.
- In one area a library service, in partnership with the local police force and health authority, has developed a website to provide the public with information about services such as health and community safety, and are working with voluntary agencies to help them develop their information resources.
- A library authority together with district authorities in their area, have an electronic gateway acting as a one-stop shop to local e-government information.
- [Scottish initiative] public access internet point with 5 miles of all rural households supported by a 24 hour training support line
- Rural Community Gateway website - internet points in hairdressers, village halls, etc
- [Canada] library staff offer web development skills to local businesses and other agencies to help create their own web presence – may be possible to attract funding from other areas to support local enterprise.
- Library staff can share knowledge of digitisation to encourage local communities to document their own area and culture

- Library staff can compile targeted Internet directories, e.g. Seniors pages with access to information for older members of the community (e.g. health, security, concessions, activities)

There are also examples of online reading groups or e-mail book promotion schemes:

- In the USA, the Chapter-A-Day organisation supports many local library-based online reading clubs. Short, consecutive excerpts of books are emailed to book club members each day. Members can then decide to borrow or purchase the book. The books covered include a range of topics. Over 2,000 US and Canadian libraries use the service with some 40,000 users
- Kenton County Public Library offers users access to 8 online clubs (Original [mixture of genres]] Teen; Business; Good News; Fiction; Romance; Audio; Q&A)
- Baltimore County Public Library provides an e-list for patrons wishing to discuss books with others.

The first issue is access, access, access...

These services pre-suppose ease of access to the Internet. Some authorities provide Internet access in a range of locations, as we have seen. Others loan out portable PCs to members. Derbyshire County (UK) provides laptops to housebound users. Newham Public Libraries (UK) hire out laptops. Other libraries utilise less HiTech systems: Seguin-Guadalupe County Public Library in Texas, provides a computer and the library catalogue on CD-Rom in community centres. Users can search for an item and free-call the library. The book is then posted out to the borrower. Items may be returned using the same mailer, or in person to any branch library.

... and then the second is training, training, training [Albert Joy: Vermont State Library]

Users have to know how to access and navigate the Internet. Training courses for the public are commonplace in many library authorities. There are examples where children take part in Family Computing Programmes to tutor their parents on the use of PCs. Others employ the 'buddy' system whereby a trained person passes their skills on to another member of the community, and so on. South Lanarkshire Council's Rural Citizens Network utilises the development of the Post Office network's Internet learning access point. Sub-postmasters act as trained 'moderators' to assist members of the public in accessing public services on the Internet

These mentoring initiatives may be particularly well suited to rural communities which have a tradition of self-help.

One draw back to over emphasis on ICT outreach is that, unless procedures are put in place, they can increase physical isolation. One participant in the California State Library's *InfoPeople Project* commented:

...a good tool to get in touch with people, not just computer hardware talking to computer hardware, but real people-to-people contact

and this approach will suit some people, but not all. ICT outreach projects could include details of library-based activities (author visits, other cultural events, etc.) People taking part in e-book groups may like to meet every for face to face discussion. The library could initiate such activities, perhaps bringing people into the library using a hired mini-bus to bring people in to main library centres from outlying areas.

e-Books

The advantages of e-Books are:

- they can be accessed anywhere / anytime providing there is Internet access
- they incorporate search facilities
- users can change text size to suit their own personal requirements
- hyper links are provided

- content can be updated online

Disadvantages are:

- expensive
- eBooks (readers and texts) still in a development stage
- content geared towards the American market
- lack of standardisation

There are two approaches:

1. Download free reader software (and some titles) for use on PCs
2. Purchase dedicated readers for loan to users

The most common provider of e-books to libraries is NetLibrary. A trial in Australia (Yarra Plenty Regional Library in Victoria) started building their collection of e-books around the research needs of young adults. This approach was based on the premise that the e-book format was best suited to reference materials and study guides where 'searchability, linking and currency is needed. Another pilot in Queensland [www.quloc.org.au and www.toowoomba.qld.gov.au/Visitors/Ebookproject/index.html] concluded that the service was staff intensive, especially in the controlling of eBook readers, and available titles were not that attractive to readers outside of America.

Blackburn (UK) libraries ran a small scale project using one Rocket e-Book which proved popular with the small group involved in the project but difficulties were experienced in downloading new titles. [www.sbu.ac.uk/litc/2000/news1919.html]

There may be some advantage in developing a project in conjunction with educational institutions.

Mobile services

Mobile libraries are a highly valued community service but one which has great scope for development. There have been a number of projects aimed at re-inventing the mobile library service to make it more relevant to the communities served and especially to those groups within the community that do not make much use of the service

D Bertram Bruce (Professor of Library & Information Science, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign) noted that:

the word literacy never seems to stand still... in the workplace, literacy is assuming an ever more central role This is a new kind of literacy, which entails not only basic reading and writing, but the ability to use reading and writing to solve problems and to communicate complex information

The State of Vermont Department of Libraries conducted a two-year project to discover if mobile library services were a viable means for serving rural populations in the 21st century. and, if so, does the mobile library service

entice citizens to use the library and is it an effective marketing tool for attracting attention to all the services Vermont's small libraries offer?

[Mobile library literacy: solutions for a rural environment / Sybil Brigham McShane First Monday 6(4)]

A concept which is also endorsed by Maria-Antonia Carrato in Spain:

While it is true that mobile libraries are the last link in a chain, as they take public reading services to the most remote areas having no stable library services, if we want not to cause any discrimination in access to culture, they must be considered as significant as conventional libraries. Mobile libraries, apart from being a library extension service, are in themselves a permanent advertising of stable libraries. Therefore, if their activity is adequately orientated they can become an enticement that enhances the use of all the points of the library system to which they belong

Maria Antonia Carrato - Mobile libraries and social change: a view from Southern Europe IN Information on the move.

The Vermont State Library was involved with two pilot projects. In the first, staff from the State Library and local library staff and / or volunteers from a local literacy group provided a service which included family story time sessions, advice on choosing reading materials, a limited inter-library loan service and information on events and services based in the branch libraries in the area. The project was successful in attracting users who were not registered users of other library services in the area and achieved its qualitative goals of promoting books and reading to a wider user-base.

The second pilot was a targeted service to children which stopped at locations where summer classes were held, day care centres and parks.

This concept of mobiles serving specific groups was also tried in Denmark. The *Mobille* service is aimed at 0-16 year olds. Partly driven by research in the mid 1990' which indicated that Danish children were not as proficient in reading as their contemporaries in other countries. The *Mobille* carries a stock of about 1,500 items (picture books, books for reading aloud, books for adults about children; music and material aimed at stimulating language development). The *Mobille* aims to stop within 500 metres of the user (s), which in practical terms in the more remote areas, means driving right up to the users' front door.

The Mobille helps to strengthen cultural identity, awareness and debate and it also greatly helps to improve the quality and diversity of library services in the region

[Oh, to be a child once more / Esben Møller Christensen, Lisbeth Bach Sørensen.
Scandinavian Public Library Quarterly 3 /01]

The Ringsted Municipalities 'mini bookmobile' takes this concept further by adapting the contents of the mobile to meet the requirements of different target groups served at different times. Depending on its route for the day the mobile varies stock emphasis. On its regular route it carries a wide variety of materials to suit people of all ages, at different educational levels and with varying interests. On the mornings it visits kindergartens and day-carers the stock is changed to include material specially suited for the very young. For scheduled visits to the elderly the bus carries an extra number of large print and talking books. The bus is also used to visit individual housebound members of the community. People with Internet access at home or at work can order books via the library's own webcat or via the national bibliotek.dk service, to be collected from the library van. It is also used to advertise the wider library service at fairs and festivals and assist other local services when needed (the closure of a school library during rebuilding was mitigated by regular visits from the book bus).

The EU funded MOBILE Project was established with the following agreed set of objectives:

- To assess the information needs of rural and other communities... where the public library services are currently unable to meet demand
- to identify ways in which the specific information needs of target user groups within these communities may be met by provision of experimental mobile library services using, where appropriate, IT applications
- to investigate the technical feasibility of introducing a range of information services using telematics in mobile libraries to meet the identified user needs
- to provide a mix of innovative services in each of the three areas to meet identified demands

MOBILE proved beyond dispute the popularity of CD-ROM format information, education and entertainment materials in mobile library environments although results from the Scottish Borders revealed a more traditional response [MOBILE in the Scottish Borders / Brian Croft] - One large mobile visits villages - smaller vehicles operating in remoter areas [including individual farms and houses]. User profile: 60+ female. Users happy with traditional services - more books, less computers. No non-user surveys carried out.

Netherlands: User profiles: children, housewives, unemployed and the elderly
Lincolnshire's combined mobile trailer unit delivers

- library service
- fully equipped, self powered IT trailer

via a trailer which provide access to the County Council community information service and the Internet. It is also used to deliver community based learning or as a small meeting space for community groups. The unit was obtained on a contract hire basis over 10 year period

The CoEast consortium of libraries (UK) plans to provide telephone, fax and postal services on their mobiles.

Mobiles need to become more flexible in the services they provide. There is no reason why they cannot include technology based services but in order to provide a real service, periods of stops must be increased. The Lincolnshire project delivers a 'traditional' book-orientated mobile service plus ICT facilities via the trailer unit which is left for longer periods of time in one location. It may be possible to develop such a service in conjunction with other educational institutions. In the case of existing mobile IT facilities being supplied by these institutions, the public library service could seek a presence via taster collections, information on other library services, introduction to use of e-Books, sharing library staff experience with IT applications, web navigation, digitisation, etc.

Stops should be chosen to coincide with other community events – end of school, community meetings, meetings of clubs, etc.

"The recommended standard to reach a sustainable population, according to Ohio bookmobile consultant John L. Philip, is 100 people within walking distance of the stop; 8 people who board the mobile at the stop; 50 circulations per hour

Are these standards relevant?

An analysis of the questionnaires returned by users of mobile libraries during the National Public Library user Survey (PLUS) in 2002 revealed that almost three quarters of users were women (compared to 66% of national library users)

The results of the PLUS survey concur with other evidence which suggests that mobile library services attract specific groups of users Usage is obviously affected by timing and duration of stops and stock. There is some evidence that mobile library users also tend to borrow on behalf of other members of the family / community.

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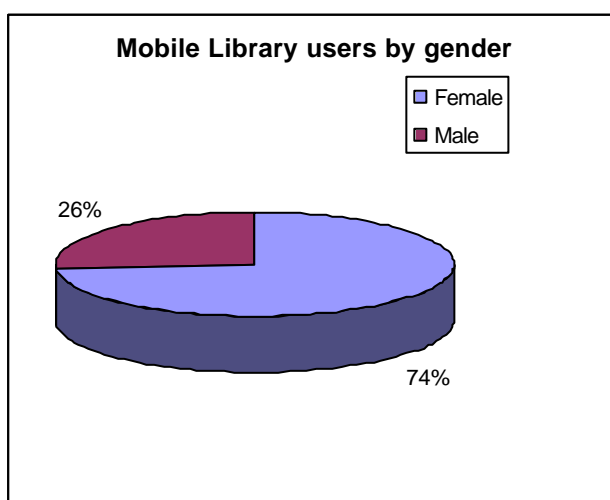


Chart 1: Gender breakdown of mobile library users (PLUS 2002)

67% of users lived within 1 mile of the mobile library stop 96% lived within 5 miles

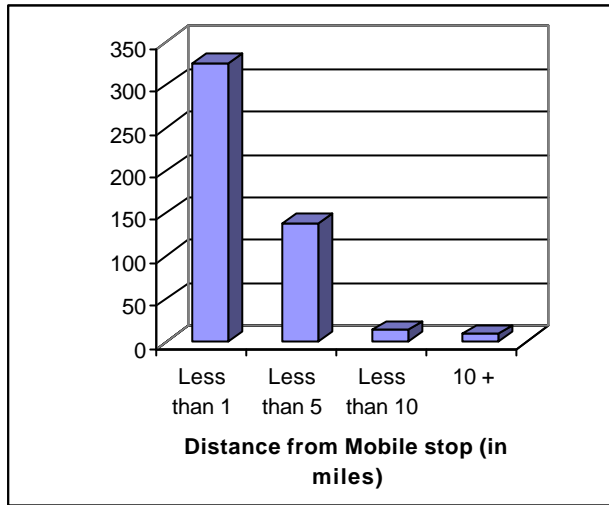


Chart 2: Distance users lived from mobile stop

The user profile shows a lower percentage of users under 35 than the main survey and a proportionately higher percentage of users in the middle and upper ranges

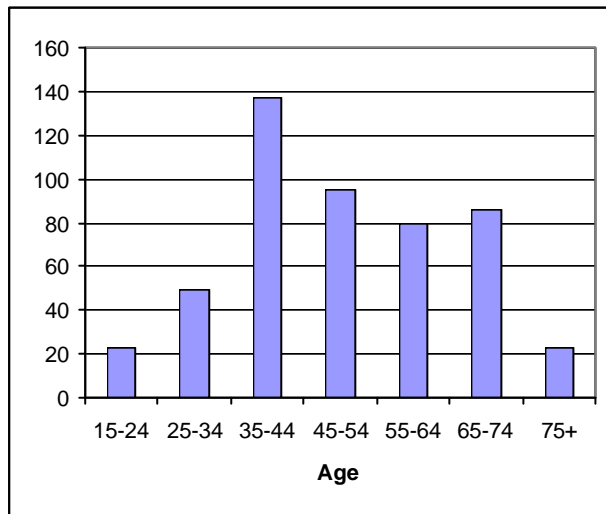


Chart 3: Age profile of mobile library users (PLUS 2002)

Age range	Mobile PLUS	National PLUS	2002 Census
15-24	5	16	21
25-34	10	16	20
35-44	28	23	17
45-54	19	18	15
55-64	16	13	11
65-74	17	10	8
75+	5	3	6

Table 1: Comparison of age profiles

The breakdown by occupation was as follows:

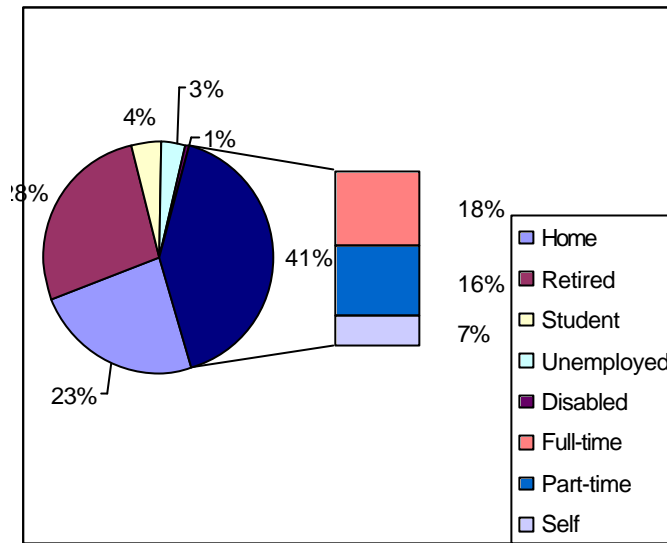


Chart 4: Mobile library users by occupation (PLUS 2002)

Occupation	Mobile	Total
Employed	41	51
• Full-time	• 18	• 28
• Part-time	• 16	• 16
• Self employed	• 7	• 7
Unemployed	3	6
Retired	28	18
Student	4	17
Home	23	17
Disabled	1	1
Other	0	3

Table 2: Comparison of occupation of mobile library users against national survey (PLUS 2002)

The results of the PLUS survey concur with other evidence which suggests that mobile library services attract specific groups of users Usage is obviously affected by timing and duration of stops and stock There is some evidence that mobile library users also tend to borrow on behalf of other members of the family / community.

[This section will be expanded on following the survey of mobile library services]

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