

# Still barriers to overcome

NICOLA HARRIS and ANOUSH SIMON discuss public library provision for homeless people in Wales.

**W**ith the recent announcement by the Society of Chief Librarians (SCL) that more than 4,000 public libraries across England, Wales and Northern Ireland would allow anyone with a library card or proof of address to borrow books from any participating library regardless of where they lived, this seems like an appropriate time to address the barriers faced by homeless people wishing to join public libraries.

SCL President, Fiona Williams, asserted that this new initiative was “an important step towards making libraries even more accessible to all”. (SCL) However, this article aims to highlight the fact that along with membership requirements, such as proof of address, there are still many barriers that prevent homeless members of society accessing some public libraries in Wales.

## Background

In 2007, the first author was looking for ideas for a postgraduate research project and read an article in the *Guardian* entitled ‘Hannibal Lecter saved my life’ (Oltermann, 2007). The subject of the article was a mobile library service that had been established in 1999 to provide for London’s homeless community by Quaker Homeless Action (QHA). It explained how the service filled the gap left by those public libraries that did not allow people without a permanent address to use them. From this newspaper article and an interest in social inclusion in public libraries, the research project evolved.

## Research parameters

As the first author was based in Wales and had experience of Welsh public libraries it made sense to limit the research sample to Welsh public libraries. Also, Welsh public libraries are all supported by CyMAL: Museums Archives and Libraries Wales, a division of the Welsh Assembly Government.

Although the research only involved public libraries in Wales, no organisations similar to the Park Bench and QHA’s Mobile Library could be identified in Wales. For this reason, these two organisations were used as case studies even though they were based in England.

## Research focus

In the context of existing research and literature, it was possible to develop the following research questions:

- Do homeless people face problems when trying to join public libraries in Wales because they do not have proof of a permanent or stable address?
- How can public libraries develop services that would be useful to homeless people?

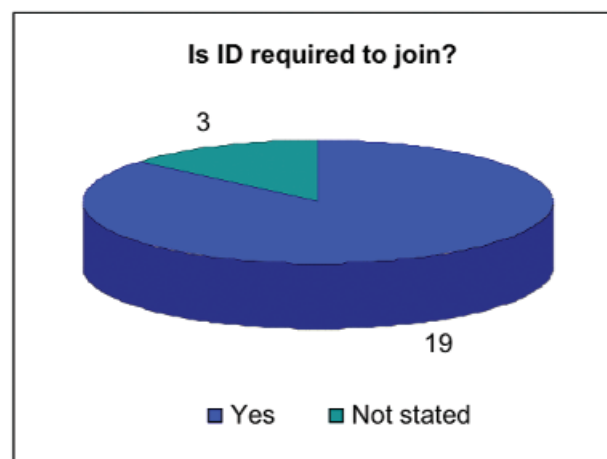
Essentially, the research considered how public libraries

could become more user-friendly to homeless people, by addressing these aims:

- To identify whether homeless people faced problems when trying to join public libraries in Wales because they lacked proof of a permanent or stable address.
- To examine the existing provision of alternative library and information services for homeless people.
- To gain insight into what public libraries could learn from these services.
- To provide suggestions for how libraries could adapt to meet the needs of homeless people.

## Methods

A mixed method approach was undertaken, combining website analysis, questionnaires and interviews. This combination of methods provided a good range of data.



**Chart 1: Number of library services that require identification to join**

## Findings

The findings have been categorised into three sections: Identification Requirements, Staff Attitudes, and Homeless Projects and Services.

## Identification requirements

The website analysis showed the identification required by Welsh public library services, as specified on their websites. As illustrated in **Chart 1**, out of 22 library services, 19 stated that they required identification. Identification requirements could not be found on three websites.

Of the 19 library services that stipulated their identification requirements, only three asked for two forms. At all other Welsh libraries one form was sufficient. As one of the aims of the research was to identify whether or not homeless people were prevented from joining Welsh public libraries because they lacked proof of a permanent or stable address, the website analysis also looked at what the identification should

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prove. As **Chart 2** shows, the websites of 14 of the library services stated that the identification should include proof of address.

The examples of identification provided by the library services indicate the very real difficulty facing homeless people wishing to join one of the public libraries included in the website analysis. Out of 13 different examples provided and 10 involved proof of identification or address and are subsequently unobtainable by homeless people. Examples of these were utility bills, driving licences, passports, credit or debit cards, rent books, and council tax bills. Only three websites provided exceptions: official correspondence, a current entry in the electoral register, and a medical card. It is possible for homeless people to register to vote by making a declaration of local connection to their electoral registration office (Electoral Commission). However, similarly to obtaining a medical card, effort is required to pursue this. This leaves only one option, official correspondence, which may be useful but still relies upon homeless people being able to obtain 'official' correspondence.

All of the library managers that responded to the questionnaires accepted proof of a temporary address, which for the most part included a letter from a hostel or shelter, or proof of a friend's address. In addition to this some front line staff also placed importance on a homeless member providing proof of a temporary address:

*"Once a homeless person has proof of address, even if that is temporary, they are welcome to issue items out."*

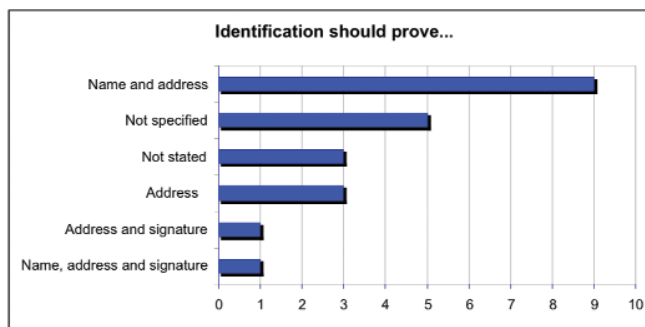
*"I believe that restrictions on how many books a homeless person can take out would be advisable with the provision that they are currently at a shelter."*

Many of the frontline staff who responded felt that homeless people should not be allowed to borrow books (71%) and audiovisual items (80%) without proof of an address. However, they felt happier about lending this material if a temporary address could be provided. Unfortunately, the need to provide proof of a temporary address still excludes many homeless people who are not based in hostel accommodation or staying with friends.

In support of the exclusionary nature of the identification requirements imposed by public libraries in general, the volunteers from the Park Bench and QHA's Mobile Library felt that the primary reason homeless people used their services instead of a public library was that no identification was required to join. In addition to this, 12 volunteers felt that some homeless people would use public libraries if no identification was required. The volunteers who were interviewed also felt that identification requirements, namely proof of address, were a problem for homeless people. Although these are opinions about the behaviour and attitudes of homeless people they are based on experience and the communication that these volunteers have had with homeless people.

### Staff attitudes

One of the main reasons given by the volunteers about the reasons why homeless people used their services was social interaction. Obviously, in a public library setting this social interaction would be predominantly with front line staff. Out of 31 respondents from the front line staff survey, 19 had never registered a homeless person. However, almost two thirds of them knew of homeless people who currently used their libraries, even if they were not official members. Frontline staff



**Chart 2: Chart showing identification required**

were asked how they would feel about more homeless people being encouraged to use their libraries and half were happy or very happy about this. However, almost 30% refused to give an opinion.

Despite the happiness of many of the frontline staff about the increased usage by homeless people of their libraries, none of the managers at these libraries provided any staff training about how to work with homeless people.

Although the prevailing feeling from frontline staff was that they were happy for homeless people to use public libraries (albeit with restrictions), the volunteers who were interviewed did not seem to think that homeless people felt welcome by public library staff, as the following quote illustrates:

*"Sometimes I get the sense in public libraries that librarians regard themselves as guardians of the books so it seems to be more about the books than about the people."*

### Homeless projects and services

One of the more concerning trends that emerged from this research was that none of the participating libraries provided projects for homeless people or, at that time, had future plans to do so. In addition, none of them kept records of how many homeless members they had so had no idea of what the demand for these services could be.

With regards to ways in which public libraries could provide a more effective service the suggestions from the volunteers, both in the questionnaires and the interviews, are potentially very useful to all public libraries, not just those based in Wales. These included the removal of identification requirements, better staff training and awareness, the provision of more useful information, the provision of outreach services, and raised awareness of public library service amongst the homeless community.

### Recommendations

The strongest element of this research came from the suggestions made by volunteers from the Park Bench and QHA's Mobile Library as to how public libraries could make their services more user-friendly to homeless people. These recommendations are summarised below.

**Remove identification requirements:** Neither the Park Bench nor QHA's Mobile Library asks their users for proof of identification. Two interviewees from these services supported the idea of removing identification requirements for homeless people in libraries.

However, the data from the front line library staff surveys does not support this idea, with only 13% agreeing that homeless people should be able to borrow books without proof of address. The reasons given by staff for this related predominantly to financial implications for libraries of losing items.

**Provide outreach services:** An increase in outreach services were suggested by a number of volunteers. Examples of these services are listed below:

“Invite us to take guests to the libraries, explaining different services available, different courses on offer etc. Inform us of those.”

“They could start an outreach programme taking underused books to local shelters.”

“If a mobile library came to where homeless people are it would undoubtedly be used.”

At the time of the research project, none of the library services surveyed provided any projects or initiatives for homeless people. This is an area of support that could be vastly improved.

**Improve staff training and awareness:** Half of the frontline library staff surveyed were happy for more homeless people to use their libraries. However, this research found that none of the library services involved provided staff training about working with homeless people. This is an area that could be developed by library managers, building on staff enthusiasm and providing training about the information needs of homeless people.

**Increase IT and internet access:** The provision of IT access was presented as a ‘useful’ service by the Park Bench and QHA’s Mobile Library volunteers. Research released by Off the Streets and into Work (OSW), in 2004, also suggested IT access would be useful to homeless people wanting to write job applications. (Kambo, 2004) Improving access to these types of services could well be of benefit to homeless people.

**Provide specific information:** In the survey of the Park Bench and QHA’s Mobile Library volunteers, a number suggested that a useful provision by libraries would be printed information specifically for homeless people. Examples were given as *In Reach*, *The Pavement* and *The Big Issue*. This type of information is both relevant and helpful to homeless people and is not dependent upon library membership for access.

**Develop non-borrowing services:** The volunteers also provided examples of services that did not involve borrowing material. These included writing workshops and peer one-to-one reading schemes. In a similar way to providing information for homeless people, these schemes do not rely upon library membership but instead the generosity of staff time and resources.

## Conclusion

This research project suggests that the libraries involved had not implemented valuable recommendations made in previous works about how to make their services accessible to homeless people. As illustrated, homeless people still faced barriers and their library and information needs were not being met.

This research project identified that homeless people do not face problems when trying to join public libraries in Wales because they lack proof of a permanent or stable address, as all the represented services allow homeless people to join with proof of a temporary address. However, homeless people who can provide neither, such as rough sleepers, are still excluded. In addition to this, other barriers for homeless people were also identified while researching the provision of alternative library and information services.

The overall aim of this research project was to suggest

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how public libraries could provide services to meet the needs of homeless people and one of the suggestions made was that library managers should look at existing services provided by public libraries to homeless people. One project that has been implemented in response to the needs of homeless people in London is Outside Story. Fiona Heffernan described this project, in the Autumn 2009 edition of *Public Library Journal*, as one that aimed to “reduce or eliminate the barriers to access for homeless people and to improve the satisfaction with library services for them,” (Heffernan, 2009). Along with the findings of this research project, Outside Story could inspire other public libraries to look at their existing service provision to homeless people.

Although this research found very little library provision for homeless people in Wales, the results need to be considered in the context of the demands that public libraries face. Budgetary demands are restrictive, along with staffing and time and this makes dedicating resources to new initiatives for homeless people difficult. This is especially true if it means removing them from established projects for larger, more obvious user groups. Despite this, as the research has shown there are small things that libraries could do that would not place high demands on their resources, but would still provide a more user-friendly library service to homeless people.

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If you would like to know more about this project please contact Nicola Harris at nicolah79@gmail.com. This piece is based on research in Harris, 2008 (reference below)

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