The role of Irish Public Libraries in Assisting Users with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Benefits, Challenges and other Considerations

Dissertation submitted in part fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of MSc Information and Library Management

Dublin Business School

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I, Lou-Ellen Kiely, declare that this research is my original work and that it has never been presented to any institution or university for the award of Degree or Diploma.

In addition, I have referenced correctly all literature and sources used in this work and this work is fully compliant with the Dublin Business School’s academic honesty policy.

Signed: Lou-Ellen Kiely

Date: 20.08.2018
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Cork County Libraries
Cork City Libraries
Monaghan County Libraries

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Abstract

According to figures around 1% of the Irish population is now on the autism spectrum. As autism is considered to be an invisible disability it is not always obvious when a child or adult has the condition. Libraries are seen as a safe space and their aim is to be socially and culturally inclusive and to minimise barriers to use. They are leaders in delivering an innovative service which engages, informs and provides greater access for individuals and communities to reading and literacy, learning and information, and community and culture.

A busy library however, can be a very challenging place for a person with autism for several reasons including bright lights, unfamiliar layout, too noisy, to name but a few. To effectively meet the needs of people with autism it is necessary for librarians to understand autism and what extra supports are required.

There have been several studies undertaken on autism services in academic libraries in Ireland. Research of services in public libraries however has remained largely untouched.

This research attempts to investigate the role of public libraries in assisting library users with autism. This exploratory study collected data from individuals with experience of autism and from librarians working in libraries that offer autism friendly services. By doing this we were able to examine people’s awareness of autism friendly services and how they perceive library environments in general. It also examined what potential improvements could be made to ensure the library experience is as enjoyable as possible. Various librarians gave their insight into how their libraries assist people with autism.

Results of the study show that there is a lack of awareness of the services on offer in the library amongst library users. It also highlighted several factors which could be a barrier to accessing the library, along with changes that could be made to make the library more autism friendly. Consequently, these findings enable recommendations to be made that can be applied across all public libraries in order to develop programmes or strategies to assist users with autism.
Foreword

Person-first terminology (i.e., “a person with such-and-such-disability”) is the language that is most often used in North America to discuss disability; it “literally means that the person receives greater emphasis than the impairment” (Jaeger, 2012). As a result, in most cases LIS scholars make use of person first terminology in scholarly articles that focus on autism. However, many members of the Autistic community have a strong, considered preference for identity-first language (i.e., “Autistic,” “Autist,” or “Autistic person” rather than “person with autism”) because we “understand autism as an inherent part of an individual’s identity – the same way one refers to ‘Muslims,’ ‘African Americans,’ ‘Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgender/Queer,’ ‘Chinese,’ ‘gifted,’ ‘athletic,’ or ‘Jewish’” (Brown, 2011). Taken directly from (Lawrence, 2013, p. 102)

In this thesis the words “person with autism”, “library users with autism”, “someone on the autism spectrum” etc appear many times. In my opinion a handicap should never be mistaken for a person’s identity. However, I am aware that others may not feel the same way. It is not my intention to cause offence with any wording and I sincerely apologise if any offence is taken.

Please note that the words “Autism” and “Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)” are interchangeable and for the purposes of this thesis can be used to mean the same thing.
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Chapter 1 Introduction & Background

1.1 Background to the topic

“Accessibility for everyone is fundamental to the concept of the public library” (Kaeding, Velasquez and Price, 2017).

Accessibility inclusion and minimising barriers to use, form the framework for this research project. As outlined in the new Libraries Ireland Strategy Plan for 2018-2022 Ireland’s public libraries are “increasingly progressive, innovative and responsive” (Department of Rural and Community Development, et al, 2018, p. 3). They are leaders in delivering an innovative service which engages, informs and provides greater access for individuals and communities to reading and literacy, learning and information, and community and culture. Libraries are seen as a safe space and their aim is to be socially and culturally inclusive and to minimise barriers to use. As a society, we have made huge strides forward to be inclusive of people with physical disabilities. However, for those with hidden impairments like autism there hasn’t been the same level of progress. The purpose of this thesis is to examine the role that public libraries have in providing facilities for people with autism.

There are two legal Acts that are of relevance to this research. Firstly, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2006. The CRPD is an International Agreement which is directed at changing attitudes and approaches to people with disabilities. The purpose of the Convention is to promote, protect and to ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and freedoms by all persons with disabilities and to promote respect for their inherent dignity. It states that persons with disabilities are entitled to the full spectrum of human rights and fundamental freedoms without discrimination. (United Nations., 2018). Ireland ratified the convention on March 7th, 2018.

The current Minister of State for Disability Issues, Finian McGrath was quoted as saying by ratifying the convention that it “fundamentally requires the government to end structural bias around accessing services from the state” (Oireachtas, 2018).

The second legal act of relevance is the Disability Act 2005. This act places a statutory obligation on public service providers to support access to services and facilities for people with disabilities. There is an obligation on all public bodies to make their buildings and services accessible to people with disabilities (AHEAD, 2005).
Libraries therefore have a responsibility to be inclusive of their whole community. While there is no question that people with autism have the same access to libraries as everyone else, quite often due to the many challenges that will be reviewed later, a person with autism may find it harder and more challenging to go to their local library.

One groups that need extra support in many local communities are children and adults with special needs, including autism, and their families. Libraries have a responsibility to welcome people with autism and their families, and to provide them with the same exemplary service as other patrons. In order to do this, we need to know more about what library programmes are on offer, what would truly benefit these patrons and what they want out of their experience at the library.

1.2 What is Autism?

Autism is lifelong neuro-developmental disability that affects the development of the brain in areas of social interaction and communication and sensory processing. Autism spectrum disorders (ASD) comprise a group of developmental disorders which cause difficulties in communicating and forming relationships with other people, and in developing language skills. When we refer to the autism spectrum it means that no two people are affected in the same way as they are affected in varying degrees (AsIAm, 2015, p. 1). People who have autism can find that it can impact on their ability to make sense of the world around them. Autism can be described as a hidden disability, as people who are on the autism spectrum show no significant physical difference to their peers (Autism Ireland, 2018). Autism and Autism Spectrum Disorder will be discussed in more detail in the literature review.

1.3 Rationale for the topic

A study undertaken in Dublin City University and funded by Irish Autism Action in 2016 shows that currently 1 in 100 people in Ireland have autism today. This is a similar statistic to studies around the same time in the United Kingdom and the United States (Dublin City University, 2016). A library should be seen as a safe space for all and they are by their very nature naturally inclusive. A busy library can be a challenging place for someone with autism. Some of the challenges facing a person with autism in a library are bright lights, a confusing layout, unfamiliar people and different noises.

The new Libraries Ireland Strategy Plan for 2018-2022 “Our Public Libraries” (Department of Rural and Community Development et al, 2018) states the following
“The public library service must meet the needs of a diverse range of individuals and communities, facilitating inclusion and participation by all” (p. 33)

“ensuring existing and new services take account of the full range of user needs” (p. 33)

“The library is a free lifelong resource that should be available to all without barriers” (p. 36).

The library “facilitates personal development for all people, providing a range of supports which reduce marginalisation of all types” (p. 29)

However, despite all the above sentiments there is no mention of disability in this strategic plan. There is however one quote that says, “There is significant potential to develop targeted outreach initiatives for hard to reach individuals and groups” (p. 30). This is the potential that this research project aims to look at. How can libraries reach that potential when serving their patrons with autism?

1.4 Research Aims

The purpose of this exploratory study is to examine how people use specific autism friendly public library programmes and how they perceive library environments and services on offer. It will also examine what potential improvements can be made from the perspective of people with ASD and their families. It will also examine the role that public libraries have in providing facilities for people with autism. Librarians from various libraries will also be interviewed for their perspective on how autism friendly programmes are working and what are the benefits and challenges to same.

1.5 Research Questions

The main focus of the thesis is

“The role of Irish Public Libraries in Assisting Users with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Benefits, Challenges and other Considerations”.

The following research questions will guide this study.

1. What specialised services are currently in place for people with autism in public libraries?
2. How are these programmes working and are they of benefit?
3. What services and programmes do people with autism want to receive from the public library?
4. What are the main barriers to using the library and how can these be overcome? This will be examined from both the perspective of individuals and/or families and the library staff.

The following areas will also be explored in an effort to gain an understanding of the role of the library in this area.

1. Awareness of services. This will be looked at both from the viewpoint of people using the library and the librarians themselves.
2. Training and awareness of staff.
3. Best Practices. A review of some of the services that are already in place.

1.6 Importance of the topic

In her article written for the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) “It takes a community to raise a reader” Sarah Mears talks about how a library should be a welcoming and inspiring place for children. Sarah highlights that for children with autism that books can open doors to a wider world and also act as a navigational guide to complex and confusing social experiences (Mears, 2017). The Strategic Development Plan for Cork City Libraries outlines that “public libraries are open to all (Cork City Council, 2015, p. 29). By minimising barriers to use, every person will be given the opportunity to access the library and the services it offers.

The analysis of this topic will hopefully show that by making libraries more accessible to people with autism we can help break down barriers and encourage a community based reading and learning environment among a group of vulnerable people.

1.7 Structure of thesis

This thesis will be organised as follows:

Chapter 1

Introduction. This chapter will give a background to the topic and will also discuss the research aims and the importance of the research and the topic.
Chapter 2

*Literature Review.* This chapter will review existing literature of the various elements around library usage amongst people with autism.

Chapter 3

*Methodology.* The methodology details various stages and design of the research method and approach.

Chapter 4

*Findings.* The findings of both the survey and the interviews will be outlined in this chapter. These will be presented separately.

Chapter 5

*Discussion.* In this chapter the findings of both research methods will be analysed and discussed in context to the literature review.

Chapter 6

*Conclusion.* This chapter will provide concluding remarks to the findings and discussion and will also provide recommendations for future study and initiatives.

Chapter 7

*Reflective Learner Account.* This chapter will outline a Personal Reflection on the overall learning experience

A full bibliography and appendix will be included.
Chapter 2 Literature review

“A review of prior, relevant literature is an essential feature of any academic project. It can create a firm foundation for advancing knowledge, facilitates theory development, closes areas where research exists and opens areas where research is needed” (Webster and Watson, 2002).

2.1 Literature Introduction

This literature review will explore the functions of public libraries to society, the background to autism and how the environment around us can affect people with autism. In order to understand an individual with ASD we must understand that each individual is different. “If you’ve met one person with autism then you’ve met one person with autism” (‘100 Favorite Quotes About Autism and Aspergers’, no date). It will examine the benefits to people with autism of using the library as well as the challenges that can be faced. In the course of this literature review it became apparent that there is very little research done in this area in Ireland. For this reason, literature from other countries will also be reviewed in order to provide context to the research questions.

2.2 Defining Autism

According to Frith (2003, p.1) autism should not be seen as a snapshot. Autism is not a physical or intellectual disability. It is a disorder that can affect mental development, affecting 1 in 100 Irish people (Dublin City University, 2016). However, this figure could be higher as studies in America have shown that 1 in 68 school age children are on the Autism Spectrum (Barna, 2017, p. 62). Autism Ireland describes autism as a lifelong neuro-developmental disability that affects the development of the brain in areas of social interaction and communication and sensory processing (Autism Ireland, 2018). It is known as a spectrum because it can impact people in different ways, in different degrees, in different situations and at different times. A person may not be affected by the same situation twice. (About Autism, 2018). Until 2014, Asperger’s syndrome (AS) or Asperger disorder was used to describe individuals who are on the upper end of the autism spectrum. People with AS would have no significant verbal delays and less severe characteristics (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Gobbo, 2014). However, in the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V), a
change was made to incorporate AS into the autism spectrum as a whole (Anderson, 2016, p. 10)

The Irish Taskforce for Autism found that people on the spectrum are characterised by a triad of impairments in, social relationships, communication, social imagination and thought, including restricted, repetitive and stereotyped patterns of behaviour and interests (Dept for Education and Science, 2001). Although it is not included in the above triad there is also another area that can present difficulties, that of sensory processing. This will be discussed separately in the next section.

As stated by Frasier-Robinson (2015, p. 113) there is no known cause for autism despite decades of research. Genetics can play a part as studies on twins have found that “ASDs are highly heritable (Hoekstra RA et al., 2007). There is also no cure although interventions and support are available. Interestingly there seems to be a gender imbalance with more boys than girls being affected. Some figures state that the ratio is 4:1 (John, 2017), however other studies have shown it to be closer to 3:1 (Loomes, Hull and Mandy, 2017). So far there has been no definitive reason found for this imbalance (National Autistic Society, 2018).

2.3 Sensory and communication issues affecting people with autism

The American Psychiatric Association publishes the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) which is recognised worldwide. Section B4 of the guidelines (Carpenter, 2013) state that people with autism can display hyper or hypo-reactivity to sensory aspects of the environment. It also notes that odd responses to sensory input can be experienced in all the senses, sound, smell, taste, touch and sight. People may become extremely distressed by certain smells or sounds. Polacek, Remy and Seaman (2014) state that “Sensory overload can occur quite frequently for people with ASD. Most people have filtering capabilities and may not be as sensitive to external stimuli, however, many with ASD cannot “turn these off” preventing them from concentrating on tasks and resulting in anxiety and exhaustion”. As outlined in Marsh Read (2014, p. 13) most individuals are able to take in sensory information and produce an adaptive response, an ability called sensory integration. “As I Am” is a charity that offers autism spectrum information has outlined that if someone with autism is exposed to a sensation which is particularly painful or upsetting for them the physical effect can be so strong that it can inhibit their ability to communicate the cause of their distress (AsIAm, 2015). This can be upsetting and frustrating for both the person suffering and anyone with them at the
time. As outlined by Marsh Read (2014, p. 13) “With sensory processing dysfunction, an overload of sensations can produce “a traffic jam in the brain.” Instead of an adaptive response, a person with autism may display emotional outbursts, distractibility, or other responses. As stated by Donnelly (cited in Marsh Read, 2014, p. 14) “All behaviour has meaning,” which is a way of stating that behaviour that may seem out of place is often a way for an individual with ASD to meet his or her sensory needs.

Communication skills are also an issue for people with ASD. Some of these issues may include echolalia which is repeating what has been heard, very literal understandings of words and phrases, using vocalizations rather than words to communicate, difficulty generalizing, or a difficulty being spontaneous in responses to questions for example. There can also be a delayed development of speech (Farmer, 2013). The National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders in the US (NIDCD) has noted that while some children with ASD are unable to communicate using speech or language, others may have rich vocabularies and be able to talk about specific subjects in great detail (NIDCD, 2015).

2.4 Functions and value of a public library to society

As outlined by Goodrich (2014, p. 6) libraries are agents of change and innovation but first and foremost they serve as support for their communities. To serve the community the library needs to make its values, realities and operations accessible to all. Moran and Morner (2018, p.7) have noted that libraries today are very customer oriented and responsive to patron’s needs. Campbell-Hicks (2016, p. 1) states that public libraries can also play a role in the community by reaching out and providing a variety of programmes to develop a national culture of reading. Indeed one library council advises that books and reading are at the heart of the library service (Cork City Council, 2015). The new national library strategy plan 2018-2022 which was launched on June 14th 2018 states that he library is a trusted space which should integrated into local community and open and accessible to all (Department of Rural and Community Development, no date, p. 7). According to the strategy plan, reading and literacy programmes will be put in place, libraries will become information and service hubs and the plan also hopes to ensure that libraries are positioned as a central community, civic and cultural amenity within their localities.
Public libraries have long made it their mission to serve their communities by providing services and resources to satisfy information needs (Farmer, 2013, p. 212). As outlined by Herring-Harrington et al (2015, p. 74) accessibility and inclusion are at the very core of what libraries are all about. IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions) publishes guidelines to improve public library services. These guidelines outline that public libraries aim to serve all citizens and groups (Koontz and Gubbin, 2010, cited in Ghuloum & Alyacoub, 2016, p. 407). The various groups are outlined below in figure two.
2.5 Benefits of libraries to people with autism

As outlined by Stern (2014) libraries are naturally inclusive places so for this reason they are ideally situated to step up as safe, accommodating places for both children and teenagers with autism to learn, both academically and socially. Wang (2014) states that the public library can be an ideal place to start learning about public behaviour, because the environment is generally quiet but designed for exploration.

Nobody can argue against the idea that books are vital to all children. This is also true for children or adults with autism. Mears (2017, p. 2) outlines that books can open doors to the wider world and can act as a navigational guide to complex and confusing social situations. It can used to gain a better understanding of other people. One quote from the above journal article, from Gwen Greenwood, a young person with ASD, states “my understanding of empathy has greatly improved through immersing myself in literature” (Mears, 2017, p. 2). A library can offer a huge range of choice of books, much more so than any parent or school. Research shows that young people with autism can benefit greatly from reading, story times, and literacy efforts (Akin and Mackinney, 2004). Librarians have an opportunity to make a real contribution to the lives of children who face many challenges.
From a medical point of view a reading program that uses the strengths of people with autism can both improve their comprehension, and establishes new connections between areas of the brain involved in understanding language (Murdaugh, Deshpande and Kana, 2016). As outlined by an organisation called Autism Speaks (Reading program improves brain connectivity in students with autism, 2012) the investigators of the above study reported seeing significantly increased brain activation and connectivity between two of the brain’s core language areas upon completion of the specific reading program. While this specific programme is most likely too “high tech” for a public library to engage in, libraries can certainly play their part in opening up the world of books to people with autism. A study of a story time session for children with special needs which was run in Adelaide in Australia in 2011 (Kaeding, 2014, p. 323) found that there are other benefits such as those to the families of children with autism. There was an increased confidence in using the library, local support was increased by meeting and interacting with other families and also other library patrons benefitted from the programme by being given the opportunity to interact with the families.

### 2.6 Challenges faced by people with autism in libraries

As outlined previously, people with autism can be hyper-sensitive to various sensory stimuli. Polacek et al (2014, p. 25) states that contemporary library environments can bombard us with constant stimuli, such as flickering lights, background noise, and countless other sensory distractions. One study on academic libraries outlines that students with autism use the library as an auditory escape, yet they can still find the library to be too loud or chaotic (Anderson, 2016, p. ix). Other challenges as outlined by Dieffenbach (No date, p. 15-21) can be open spaces, difficulty interacting with other children, perceptions of staff and other library patrons, amongst others.

Another challenge is that “people with autism are often loud. They may feel the need to touch, pull out or even mouth books. They may have a hard time if a book or video they want to borrow is out on loan” (Rudy, 2011, cited in Kaeding, 2014, p. 320). A study by a group in the UK, Dimensions, found that people with autism are much more likely to visit the library, and twice as often as other people. However, 40% of respondents still never visit. 90% of the respondents said they would be more likely to visit their local library if some changes were made (Autism friendly libraries, no date).
One of the changes that could be made is by addressing the need for education and awareness training throughout the library profession (Bonanno and Schriar, 2015, p. 15). A study amongst librarians in the United States found that 55% of the librarians questioned thought that library staff attitudes and sensitivities was one of the greatest barriers to access and inclusion for children with disabilities and their families (Kaeding, 2016). This was also highlighted in by a study on Activating the Role of the Public Library towards Autism Spectrum Disorder in Kuwait by Ghuloum and Alyacoub (2016, p. 412). This study found that over half the respondents who did use the library faced difficulties when doing so. One reason given for this was they faced difficulties with some librarians who did not know the meaning of autism.

Librarians and library assistants are not special needs teachers, however basic training could be given to ensure that they are aware of the specific needs of their patrons with autism. Dimensions the group mentioned above have developed a short training programme which could be useful in this regard (Dimensions, 2018). Kaeding (2014, p. 320) also notes that families of children with special needs can feel quite often feel self-conscious and concerned that they are being judged by other library users and staff.

There is very limited research into the types of programmes on offer in libraries for people with autism. One study done in the US by Adkins and Bushman (2015, p. 30) surveyed 39 librarians and found that only 15 of them had separate programmes for children with disabilities. Some of these programmes had been done upon request from parents and carers. While this survey relates to disabilities in general it is interesting to note that only 38.46% of the libraries surveyed provided separate programmes.

A survey which was conducted by the National Autistic Society in the UK found that 28% of people with autism were asked to leave a public space due to behaviour associated with their autism (National Autistic Society, 2015) They also found that 79% of people with autism and 70% of families feel socially isolated. Another significant finding was that 50% of people and families don’t go out as they are worried how people may react to them. While the report does not relate to libraries it does relate to autism and how people perceive autism in general so can be seen as a good indicator of some of the challenges faced by people with autism when going to public places such as the library.
2.7 Autism and Academic Libraries

2.7.1 Challenges

A large exploratory study done by Guckin et al (2013) for the National Council for Special Education, studied the experiences of students with special education needs as they progressed from secondary school to higher education. As stated in the report (2013, p. 10) participation rates for students with disabilities, including those with autism, in higher education in Ireland have remained persistently low. The same report shows that for students with disabilities, the experience of moving from secondary education to third level is fraught with additional challenges which includes a change in the organisation of special education resources and supports that the student may have had in secondary education. Thus there is a “need for collaboration and coordination between schools and further and higher education institutions to ensure effective and appropriate information sharing and a continuum of support to address their needs” (Guckin et al., 2013, p. 11). While the report does not focus on libraries, it does highlight the importance of ensuring that the necessary support is available to students as they move to third level or higher education.

A study done in University College Cork looked at the supports required for students with Asperger’s syndrome to successfully transition to third level education. Eight students were interviewed and of these students six had problems using the library. (Slattery, 2012, p. 51). The students that took part in the study have identified specific ways in which an orientation programme could assist in ensuring successful use of the library. Two interviewees both commented that a step by step guide to using the library would be beneficial.

A separate study done in Old Dominion University in Virginia USA has found that an academic library can be of benefit to people with autism. Libraries are often an ideal environment for people with autism, as they typically have clear layouts, straightforward signage, organized collections, and some may have access to quiet spaces (Anderson, 2018, p. 647). However, the same study also found that others can find it exceptionally loud and chaotic (p. 654). This brings us back to the quote in our introduction where “If you’ve met one person with autism then you’ve met one person with autism”. As no one person is the same there is not going to be a one size fits all solution to the issue of ensuring access and inclusion for all.

Under the Disability Act 2005, colleges have a legal responsibility to support students with disabilities by ensuring that all aspects of the campus and curriculum are accessible
(Association for Higher Education Access and Disability, no date). This ensures that academic libraries uphold their duty of care for all students.

2.7.2 Best Practice Interventions

Various Colleges and Universities in Ireland have different strategies in place to ensure they are more autism friendly. This section is not meant to be fully inclusive of all third level institutions in Ireland, it is merely a snapshot of various supports on offer.

Dublin City University has recently been recognised as the world’s first Autism Friendly University (DCU, 2018). To achieve this DCU had to address eight generic principles as outlined by AsIAm, which is a charity working in the area of autism advocacy. One of the changes that will be made is the Library Service will add an autism-specific element to their orientation programme to support autistic students with different sensory processing needs (AsIAm, 2018).

University College Cork have also recently launched a campaign to become an Autism Friendly campus working towards the same principles as DCU (UCC Express, 2018). While there is no specific mention of the library, UCC has pledged to introduce an array of supports which includes with autism-specific training and awareness for academic and support staff across the university (UCC, 2018).

Trinity College in Dublin has various supports for people with ASD and information is available on their website. While the information is not specifically about the library it is quite comprehensive. The information also includes several video’s made by people with ASD (in these cases it was Asperger’s) giving a walk through of the campus and giving general advice about coping with life in college (Trinity College, 2018). Trinity College also offers a service called Unilink. This is a service run through a collaboration between the Department of Occupational Therapy and the Disability Service and it is a practical way of supporting students with ASD. A designated occupational therapist works specifically with students with ASD in order to support their unique needs (Gleeson, Quinn and Nolan, 2010, p. 8). When the service was first introduced it dealt mainly with Asperger’s, however, this is now under the whole ASD umbrella.

Queens University in Belfast has a comprehensive plan in place for students with hidden disabilities such as Autism. There are regular training sessions which focus on particular conditions, for example Asperger’s Syndrome. The University now coordinates library services
for students with disabilities and works with the disability officers to develop services. Students can avail of one to one sessions on using the library catalogue and databases. The university has made assistive technology available on all their computers as a way around the issue of forcing students to use a designated area (Mooney, 2016, pp. 31, 36, 37).

2.8 Autism and Libraries around the world

There is a distinct lack of literature surrounding autism friendly programmes and their benefits in Ireland. Much of the literature discussed in this chapter was taken from studies done around the world. The below is a snapshot of initiatives, programmes and other studies being made available in other countries.

2.8.1 United Kingdom

After conducting a survey on library usage amongst people with autism, Dimensions, a charity in the UK, has developed autism friendly libraries training that is free to download (Dimensions, 2018). As outlined in Mears (2017, pp. 3–4) libraries in Yorkshire in the UK have already built a partnership with the local autism and learning disability partnership. Libraries in Newcastle have all declared themselves Autism Friendly by displaying posters, providing staff training, creating guides and social stories on their websites, and by creating calm zone areas in all libraries. Gateshead have a range of books on autism and related topics, library staff are trained in autism awareness, a quiet space is available and there is a drop in session once a month with a special education improvement team. Library tours can be arranged and an online guide is also available (Bell, 2017)

2.8.2 United States and Canada

As previously mentioned in the introduction, an in-depth study titled “Public Libraries and Access for Children with Disabilities and their Families” highlights “accessibility for everyone is fundamental to the concept of the public library” (Kaeding, Velasquez and Price, 2017). After interviewing eighteen librarians across twenty two libraries in the United States and Canada the study found that 94% of these libraries had implemented programmes for children with special needs. 94% had also developed partnerships with external organisations and 88% had conducted staff training. While the research does not focus on autism specifically it does give a good indication of the awareness of children with special needs in libraries in these areas.

Grants and training are available in different forms from various charities. One example can be seen from an organisation called Targeting Autism for Libraries which provides a grant for the
The Association for Library Services to Children which is a division of the American Library Association offers a free webinar training session to members titled “What's After Storytime: Programming for Children and Tweens with Autism”. This training programme offers advice on autism and techniques that can be used when working with school age children with autism (DRUDE, 2013).

In 2008 two libraries in New Jersey in the United states started a project called “Libraries and Autism: We’re Connected”. This project produced a customer training video, and website which was primarily aimed at library personnel. The training and resources available were presented to hundreds of librarians around the country to address the implementation of various programmes to benefit people with ASD and their families (Libraries and Autism: We’re Connected, 2018). This project continues to work in the area of autism awareness in libraries in the United States.

2.8.3 Kuwait

One study in Kuwait found that public libraries in Kuwait do not pay sufficient attention to the needs of individuals with ASD and their families (Ghuloum and Alyacoub, 2016, p. 406). According to the study there are 27 public libraries in Kuwait and librarians from all libraries were interviewed. 370 members of the public with ASD and/or their families also took part in a survey. The main findings were due to a lack of staff, insufficient budget, and lack of awareness and clarity that libraries in Kuwait do not meet the needs of users with ASD (p. 416). Upon analysing the findings in detail, a framework was provided to outline how libraries in Kuwait can provide the appropriate level of service to ensure that library users with ASD are catered for. This framework could be applied to any library worldwide.
2.9 Autism friendly programmes in the community

“Greater understanding about what can be done to make activities and venues more autism friendly is slowly seeping into mainstream events and businesses” (Wayman, 2017). Lidl, Supervalu and various cinemas for example around the country are implementing autism friendly hours to ensure the comfort and safety of their customers. Noise is reduced, lighting is dimmed, staff are made aware and where necessary sensory maps are provided outlining where there might be strong smells or different temperatures etc. In the UK, Supermarket chain Morrisons was the first supermarket to introduce a nationwide Autism Hour on July 19th 2018 (BBC News, 2018).

As of July 2018, a new collaboration between AsIAm, the autism advocacy charity, and the town of Clonakilty in Cork aims to become Ireland’s first autism friendly town. As part of a
f


tive representatives from businesses, organisations and community
groups will undergo specialist training and organisational changes in order to receive autism-friendly accreditation (Ryan, 2018).

As outlined by the Autism Ireland organisation (‘Autism Friendly – Autism Ireland’, no date) autism impacts the family and not just one individual. By creating a more inclusive setting and environment, families affected by ASD can be made to feel more comfortable in society.

2.10 Reading Dogs in Public Libraries

While reading literature for the various benefits of libraries to people with autism the idea of “reading dogs” for people with autism was happened upon. It was also discussed in one of the interviews conducted as part of the research for this thesis. It is a very different approach to teaching a child with autism to read and use the library, so it was felt that it would be beneficial to include it in the literature review.

Various studies have highlighted the benefits of assistance dogs for children and adults with autism (Burrows, Adams and Spiers, 2008; Carlisle, 2014, 2015). One observational study (Redefer and Goodman, 1989, cited in Stevenson et al., 2015, p. 344) indicated that introducing a dog into therapy sessions for children with autism caused a sharp increase in frequency of verbal and nonverbal social behaviour for highly withdrawn children with autism. Canine-assisted reading is a form of therapy in which children can read aloud to a specially trained dog (Lane and Zavada, 2013, p. 87). Students read aloud to dogs and the fear of making a mistake will subside, allowing them to achieve their reading potential. Another research paper by Hall et al (2016), whilst it does not specifically relate to autism, highlights that improvements to children’s reading abilities, and their behavioural and emotional processes can be seen after partaking in this form of therapy. This can be highly beneficial in creating a learning environment to best cultivate reading skills. Story Pals is an initiative in the United States where therapy dogs are brought into selected libraries and children can spend one to one time with the dogs and can practice their reading on them. This has proven to strengthen their reading ability, increase their confidence and also to increase their communication skills (PALS Programs & Facilities | PALS, no date). One mother of a child with autism was quoted to say “Story PALS has had the greatest impact on Julia’s development of any program or therapy we have tried” (Story PALS: How Reading to a Dog Gave My Daughter a Voice, 2017).
2.11 Literature Conclusion

Based on the literature review, it is clear that there is a need for libraries to become more autism friendly. The benefits of being able to use a library and all the services it has to offer while on the autism spectrum are immeasurable. Libraries are seen to be community hubs and their main purpose is to serve their community. With 1% of the population now being classed as being on the autism spectrum there has never been a greater need for our libraries to implement autism friendly programmes. If supermarkets, cinemas, and indeed whole towns can do this, then there should be no reason why we cannot implement the same type of service in our public libraries. Academic libraries have a duty of care to their students and are taking huge strides to ensure they are inclusive to all students. The 2005 Disability Act ensures that all citizens should have equal access to the same buildings and services as other citizens. This also applies to public libraries.

There is a distinct lack of literature available on what public libraries in Ireland are doing to implement autism services or indeed to complement other services. It is hoped that this research project will highlight at least some of the gaps in this area.
Chapter 3 Methodology

Every research project needs to follow a methodology or process. “The term methodology refers to the theory of how research should be undertaken” (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012, p. 4). Saunders et al (2015, p. 165) state the development of a research methodology ensures a reasonable level of coherence exists throughout the research design This ensures effective answering of the research questions and also ensures that there is a focus on achieving the research goals. In essence a methodology could be described as a recipe for the design of the research being undertaken.

3.1 Methodology Introduction

The intention of this research is to gain some insight into how public library autism programmes and services are currently being used, how library environments are perceived for people with autism, the barriers to using the library and the potential improvements that could be made for children and adults with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and their families.

The methodology section of this proposal will cover the research philosophies, the research approach, and strategy that is to be used. It will examine the data collection and analysis techniques and will also look at the sampling procedure and how participants were selected. Lastly, this section will detail any ethical considerations and what limitations were encountered.

A research design framework was suggested in Crotty's, (1998, cited in Creswell, 2003, p. 4-5) which established the groundwork for this framework.

It was suggested that in designing a research proposal we must consider 4 questions.

1. What epistemology-theory of knowledge in the theoretical perspective--informs the research (e.g., objectivism, subjectivism, etc.)?
2. What theoretical perspective-philosophical stance-is behind the methodology in question (e.g., positivism, interpretivism, critical theory, etc.)?
3. What methodology-strategy or plan of action that links methods to outcomes-governs the choice and use of methods (e.g., experimental research, survey research, ethnography, etc.)?
4. What methods-techniques and procedures are we proposing to use (e.g., questionnaire, interview, focus group, etc.)?
3.2 Research Design

Labaree (2018) outlines that a research design refers to the strategy that is chosen to integrate the various elements of a study both coherently and logically. A good research design ensures that the research problem is addressed effectively.

For this thesis both a qualitative and quantitative research approach was taken. As both approaches were taken the nature of the research will be both exploratory and conclusive. The exploratory qualitative approach aims to explore specific aspects of the research however it does not aim to provide final and conclusive answers to the research. The quantitative approach however will seek to provide more conclusive data.

3.3 Research Philosophy

There are many definitions and representations of what a research philosophy should be. One definition is “a research philosophy is a belief about the ways in which data about a phenomenon should be collected, analysed and used” (‘Research Philosophy - Research Methodology’, no date)

Saunders (2013) states that the way in which a researcher views the world and their assumptions about human knowledge and the nature of the realities encountered can shape how a research question is understood and the research design accompanying it. This can be of particular importance when choosing which philosophy to use. Pragmatism research philosophy accepts concepts to be relevant only if they support action. Pragmatics “recognise that there are many different ways of interpreting the world and undertaking research, that no single point of view can ever give the entire picture” (Dudovskiy, 2018b) This paper will adopt
a pragmatic and interpretivist approach to the research. Every research method has limitations and by conducting several different types of methods each one can complement the other. As outlined by Saunders et al (2012, p. 137) interpretivism advocates that it is necessary to understand differences between humans in our role as social actors. Interpretivism also highlights the difference between conducting research among people rather than objects (Saunders, 2012, p. 8) and given that the nature of this research involves people the fact that their perspective can be influenced by the environment around them will need to be considered when interpreting the data collected.

3.4 Research Approach

For this thesis there were two different types of research approach taken, deductive and inductive. As stated by Amy Blackstone (2012, p. 42-43) deductive and inductive approaches can be defined as follows.

**Deductive.** In the deductive approach the researcher studies what others have done, reads existing theories of the research they are undertaking, and then tests the hypotheses that have emerged from those theories. Deductive reasoning moves from a generalised theory and generates a more a conclusive result. This approach can be used when undertaking quantitative research.

**Inductive.** In an inductive approach to research, a researcher begins by collecting data that is relevant to his or her topic of interest. The researcher looks for patterns in the data, working to develop a theory that could explain those patterns. This is mostly used in qualitative research.

While this research used both qualitative and quantitative methods of research the approach has been mostly inductive with a smaller amount of deductive. There are no hypotheses formed from this research as it is trying to gauge people’s general perceptions about public libraries and the services provided to people with autism. The study also explored what programmes are available, are they being used and are there any patterns in their usage. The inductive approach allows us to be more flexible with the questions asked in the interviews in the hope that various themes will begin to emerge.

3.5 Research Strategy

According to Saunders et al, (2012, p. 173) a research strategy can be defined as a plan of how a researcher will go about answering the research question. The research strategy will describe
the rationale behind the research and how it will accomplish the required goals, i.e. answering the research question.

This thesis took a mixed methods approach to the strategy. This approach was chosen to ensure a well-rounded study and multiple perspectives into the research area.

**Qualitative-Interviews**

As described by Gorman et al (2004, p. 3) qualitative research is a process of enquiry that draws data from the context in which events occur. The ultimate goal of qualitative research is to understand those being studied from their perspective, from their point of view. As part of the research several librarians, or other library personnel, were interviewed on a one to one basis. These interviewees were all working in a library that already have an autism friendly programme in place. It is hoped that we can gain some knowledge about how the programmes are working day to day and are there any plans to extend the services.

A librarian working in the area of access and inclusion was also interviewed to try to gain some insight into what initiatives are being implemented at a county level.

These interviews took place using a semi structured approach. A questionnaire was developed to guide the interviewee, but it was completely open as to what is discussed. Most of the questions were open ended to allow the interviewee to expand on their own experiences and knowledge.

**Quantitative-Online Survey**

Quantitative research was conducted in the hope that we will be able to gauge people’s current perceptions to library usage among people with autism. According to Saunders et al (2012, p. 171), a “descriptive approach to research is an appropriate way of gaining an “accurate profile” of a situation”. This was done via an online survey. Several questions were asked in order to collect data on the usage of autism friendly programmes, the awareness of these programmes along with barriers to usage of public libraries for people with autism. An online survey was considered most suitable as it gives access to a wide range of interviewees such as people with autism, parents of children with autism and also people working in the area of autism. The survey also included an open-ended question to ensure that participants were given the opportunity to make any further comments that may not have been included in the survey questions.
3.6 Time Horizon

Given the time constraints of this project it was not feasible to interview librarians from every library that offers specific autism friendly programmes. After researching the libraries that offered services, interviews were restricted to libraries in Cork and Monaghan. This was mostly due to the location of the libraries and the interviewer, and also the number of libraries in each area that offered services.

The online survey was also run in conjunction with the interviews. The survey was open for one week to ensure participants have enough time to respond.

3.7 Data Collection

As previously discussed there was several different types of research.

The quantitative data was collected via an online survey. This was structured in such a way as to ensure that the participants have some knowledge of autism such as they work in the area or they are a parent or guardian of a child with autism. It can then be reasonably assumed that they have an opinion of library facilities for people with autism. The survey was posted on different social media accounts of organisations working in various aspects of autism. Members of the organisations or groups were then able to respond to the survey. Several participants who work in the area of autism who are known to the interviewer were also contacted and invited to participate.

For the qualitative research most of the interviews took place face to face using a semi-structured type format. This allowed for some flexibility in the interview while still following the same general themes. As discussed previously interview questions were developed but will acted as a guide only. This was important to ensure that all areas are covered, and that the interviewee had the opportunity and freedom to express their own opinion and knowledge outside the constraints of a rigid questionnaire. Two libraries returned the questionnaires by email as due to time constraints and distance it was not possible to meet.

3.8 Sampling-Selecting Respondents

Sampling is the principle used to select members of population to be included in a study. As this thesis used a mixed research method approach it was necessary to have different sampling frames.
Survey

The chosen technique for the quantitative research is self-selected or volunteer sampling. Volunteer sampling can be described as “a form of case selection which is purposive rather than based on the principles of random or probability sampling. It usually involves individuals who agree to participate in research” (Jupp, 2006). Participants were targeted via the Facebook (or other social media) pages of different organisations working in the area of Autism. The survey was created on an online survey provider, Survey Monkey, and each organisation posted a link to the survey so that participants could complete it. Contact was made with approximately twenty organisations via email. The response rate however was disappointing. Only three organisations responded to say they would post the survey. One other organisation responded to say that unfortunately they could not facilitate the request as they had other projects ongoing at the time and did not want to overwhelm their members. There was no response received from all others. Ultimately the survey was only posted on the Facebook pages for two organisations and on the webpage of a third organisation. It is not possible to quantify the sampling frame as there is no way of knowing how many people have access to the social media account for the first two organisations or how many people accessed the web page of the third.

Bias can be an issue in self-selection or volunteer sampling, however, as we are only targeting organisations dealing with autism it can be reasonably assumed that the people responding will have an interest in autism for a variety of reasons. Several participants who work in the area of autism who are known to the interviewer were also contacted and invited to participate.

Interviews

As discussed previously interviews were restricted to libraries in Cork and Monaghan. This was mostly due to the location of the libraries and the interviewer, and also the number of libraries in each area that offered services. Face-to-face interviews took place with four librarians or other library staff and two were conducted over email. This was due to difficulties in arranging a meeting due to holidays and other cover within the library. Only one of the interviews was recorded as all others took place in a public place.

One other interview/meeting was conducted with a person who contacted the researcher by using the email address given on the online survey. This person advised that they were working in a library in an academic setting and also had autism themselves. They were very interested in this area of study and a meeting was arranged. The viewpoint of this person was highly
beneficial as not only were they familiar with working in a library but also of the challenges that a person with autism may face in the library. This interview was not recorded.

3.9 Data Analysis Procedures

Survey

The quantitative data analysis involves turning raw data or numbers into meaningful information. Data was collected from online service provider Survey Monkey and exported to excel and other software for analysis. This involved different methods of examining the data and cross tabulating answers to different sections of the questionnaire. An analysis of the responses given by different respondents was also conducted to see if there are any significant differences in opinions and experiences between people with autism and parents or guardians for example.

Interviews

Content analysis was used to analyse the data which was gathered from the interviews. Content analysis “refers to the process of categorizing verbal or behavioural data to classify, summarize and tabulate the data” (Dudovskiy, 2018). Codes were developed and applied across all interviews. Once the codes were finalised themes and patterns were identified. The final part included summarising the data and then linking it back to the research question and sub questions. An unbiased researcher was imperative to ensure a full picture emerges from the interviews.

3.10 Research Ethics

According to Farrimond (2012, p. 4) one of the basic concepts to good research and design practice is ethical behaviour. Due to the sensitive nature of this paper all research will need to be carried out in a responsible manner. As Saunders et al state, most ethical issues can be foreseen and handled during the design phase of a research project (2015, p. 249). Taking this into consideration the following points were adhered to:

• All participants voluntarily took part in the survey and all confirmed they are over 18. No incentives were offered to encourage participation.
• No identifying details was taken from participants.
• The survey questions were reviewed by the various organisations before being posted. The organisations were free to make any suggestions or to ask that any question be
removed if they believe it may be inappropriate for their members. Neither organisation asked for any changes to be made.

- People with autism were free to participate in the survey. As all participation was voluntary and respondents had to be over 18 there was no ethical issue to consider.
- Interviews were recorded where possible and permission was sought before the interview took place. If consent was not received, notes were taken and transcribed.
- All interviewees were given an information sheet before being interviewed and confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed in writing. An informed consent form was sent to the participants ahead of any interview, so they had time to read it and raise any concerns they might have had.

3.11 Limitations of research

The most obvious limitation was the lack of response to the survey as only thirty four people responded. As previously discussed approximately twenty organisations or charities working in the area of autism were contacted. Ultimately only three organisations posted the survey on their social media pages or webpages. Several people did advise that they shared the survey link amongst other people such as friends with children with autism for example. This may or may not have increased the respondent rate of the study.

It would have been highly beneficial to interview individuals who use specific autism friendly library programmes. However, with data protection and the implementation of GDPR, libraries are unable to divulge any contact details. It was hoped that the survey might counteract this problem, but this was not a guarantee as there is no control over who responds to the survey.

One of the main themes emerging from the interviews is the participation of ASD units from various schools in the different programmes being offered. Feedback from some of these schools would have been of huge benefit to the research but unfortunately, as the interviews were completed in July, all the schools had closed for the summer.

There was no problem in obtaining interviewees for the qualitative section of the research. All participants were delighted to partake, and all said it was great that there was research being done in this area.
Chapter 4 Survey and Interview Findings

4.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to outline the findings from both the online survey and the various interviews that were conducted amongst several librarians. The findings from both the online survey and the interviews will be listed separately for clarity. Due to the sample size for both the survey and the interviews these findings cannot be seen to be representative for all librarians or library users. They are merely a snapshot of how some libraries are becoming more autism aware, what programmes are in place, and how libraries and autism friendly programmes are being used and perceived by people.

The survey was purposefully kept short to try to encourage participation, while at the same time to elicit as much information as possible. The survey consisted of 12 questions including several open ended questions to ensure participants had the opportunity to share their full opinions and experiences. 34 people responded to the survey. Where it was deemed necessary a table showing a breakdown of answers by respondent group will be shown. This will show comparisons between answers from someone with autism and a parent or guardian for example.

The interviews amongst the librarians consisted of 22 questions. Three librarians working in branch libraries were interviewed face to face and a further two librarians gave their responses over email. The interviews were conducted in a semi structured manner and questions were quite open and flexible.

Two further people were interviewed. One person who works as a library assistant in an academic library and has autism, and one access and inclusion librarian working on a new initiative in Cork that will be of benefit to people with autism. These interviews were not recorded and were quite informal conversations.
4.2 Survey Findings

4.2.1 Demographics

Question 1

Can you confirm you are over 18?

![Figure 5 Confirmation of age](image)

All participants confirmed that they are over 18.
Question 2

Can you confirm your interest in autism?

Twenty four (70.59%) people confirmed that they are a parent or guardian making this by far the biggest group of participants.

Seven people answered that they have autism themselves. One person clicked “other” but in the comments advised that they have autism. Their responses will be included with the other responses from people with autism, so a total of eight people (23.5%) responded to say that they have autism. Of these eight people, two are also a parent or guardian.

Four people (11.76%) work in the educational sector.

Three people (8.82%) work as a care assistant or key worker 2 or these people are also a parent or guardian.

There were no participants in the working in the medical profession dealing with autism category therefore this group will not be included in any comparisons in further questions.
4.2.2 Library Usage

Question 3.

As someone on the autism spectrum or in a care giving or professional role for someone with autism do you use your local library?

Nineteen people (55.8%) advised they do use the library. Fifteen people (44.12%) people do not use the library. This was broken down as follows:
Three (37.5%) people with autism use the library. Fifteen (62.5%) parents or guardians use the library. Two (50%) people working in education use the library and two (66.66%) care workers use the library.

An opened ended question was included asking the people who did use the library what services they used.
The most popular reasons for using the library were as follows.

1. Book lending (11 people)
2. Borrowing DVD’s (6 people)
3. Quiet area (4 people)
4. Playing with toys (3 people)
Question 4

*If you answered no to question 3 (Do you use the library?) can you, please advise why? You can tick more than one box.*

![Figure 8 Reasons why people don’t use the library](image)

Respondents who replied in a previous question that they do use the library were asked to tick not applicable. Percentages may not add to 100% as people were able to choose more than one option. As five people skipped this question percentages below are assuming that they do use the library.

Of the people who did not use the library the reasons were as follows;

- 33.33% of people gave the reason (a) It’s too noisy, or (b) the lights are too bright or (c) the layout is unfamiliar.
- 26.66% responded that a lack of awareness from library staff was a reason.
20% responded that (a) People don’t understand me or the people I am with, or (b) it’s too quiet, or (c) a reason unrelated to autism.

6.66% responded that certain smells would stop them going to the library.

33.33% of people said a different reason to those listed stops them going to the library. Some of these reasons include, no library near them, hates the lights, the library is too small, and one person advised they felt like their son was interrupting a story time session.

Respondent Breakdown

![Diagram showing reasons for not using the library](image-url)
4.2.3 Awareness

Question 5.

Some libraries will open early by appointment to facilitate autism friendly hours that are specifically designed to meet the needs of someone with autism. Others have a specific sensory hour available where they turn off lights and background noise etc. Are you aware if your local library offers these services?

![Chart showing the awareness of library services among surveyed people.

Figure 10 Awareness of Services]

The majority of people surveyed were unaware if their library offers specific autism friendly services. Twenty three people (63.65%) said they were not aware if their library offered services. One person (2.94%) responded to say they open early by appointment. Ten people (29.41%) responded stating their library did not offer any service.
Question 6.

*If your library offers autism friendly or sensory hours can you advise them if you use them or not and why. If they do not provide these hours, please tick the option for not applicable.*

One person responded to say they use the autism friendly hours that open early or late. However, the same person responded in question 5 to say that they were not aware if the library offered such a service.

Nine people responded to say they do not use the service. However only one person had answered in the previous question that their library offered the service.

There may have been some misunderstanding about the question due to the anomalies listed above. Some of the comments were as follows and it is quite possible that people were answering no they wouldn’t use the service if it was on offer as opposed to them knowing it is on offer.
1. Three people were unaware of such a service
2. Two people advised that the hours don’t suit
3. One person advised that they have no interest in library
4. Two people do not need sensory help

**Question 7**

*Are there any other autism friendly initiatives or services such as sensory story time or online maps of the library available in your local library?*

![Figure 12: Awareness of extra services](image)

One person (2.94%) advised that other services were on offer. This service was displaying books that a local autism group fundraised for.

Six people (7.65%) advised that there are no other services on offer.

The overwhelming majority of twenty seven people (79.41%) advised they were unaware if there were any other services.
4.2.4 Changes that could be implemented

Question 8

What changes do you think a library could make to ensure the library is more autism friendly?

![Figure 13 Changes that could be implemented](image)

People were asked to pick their top three changes that they would like to see, however, some people ticked more than three changes and some people ticked less than three.

The top change that people wanted to see was more awareness from library staff. Twenty one people (61.76%) ticked this as one of their changes. Signs advising that is it an autism friendly library was the next most popular choice with eighteen people (52.94%) advising this is a change they would like to see. Seventeen people (50%) advised they would like to see quiet room being made available if needed.
Fifteen people or 44.12% of respondents want technology such as noise cancelling headphones and customised tablets. The same number also want fidget toys to be provided as a distraction for children. Fourteen people (41.18%) want more tolerance of certain noise levels. Thirteen people (38.24%) want autism friendly signage showing where the toilets are, where water is etc. Twelve people (35.29%) want sensory changes such as lower lights, calm music etc. Ten people (29.41%) would like a map of the library available online. Six people (17.65%) would like a video showing a walkthrough of the library. Seven People (20.59%) advised they would like to see other changes. These included, more consistent opening hours, a friendly tour of the library, no automatic doors as children can bolt through them. One interesting finding is that that 71.43% of people with autism advised that they would like to see sensory changes in the library. This compares with only 16.67% of parents and guardians. This difference is highlighted graphically in Figure 14.

![Respondents looking for sensory changes](image)

*Figure 14 Sensory Changes by group*
Question 9.

If some or all of the above autism friendly changes from Question 8 were implemented would you use your library more often?
Twenty four people (70.59%) said yes, they would use their library more often if some or all the changes were implemented. Ten people (29.41%) said they might use the library if the changes were implemented. Nobody said that would not use their library more.

4.2.5 Barriers to access

Question 10

What do you think are the greatest barriers to access to libraries for children and adults on the autism spectrum and their families?

Figure 17 Barriers to access

By far the biggest barrier is the attitudes, sensitivities and awareness seen by other library visitors. Twenty two people (64.71%) responded saying that other library visitors were the biggest barrier. The next biggest barrier was the physical environment of the library such as lighting, noise etc as thirteen people (38.24%) advised this was a barrier. Twelve people (35.29%) said the attitudes and awareness of library staff were an issue. Ten people (29.41%) said
programmes do not cater for people with autism and this can be a barrier. Nine people (26.47%) said communication difficulties were a barrier. Five people (14.71%) said the collections and resources were not suitable. IT services are also a barrier for three people (8.82%). Four people (11.76%) said they did not think there were any barriers.

Three people (8.82%) specified other barriers mentioned below:

1. Finding it hard to renew membership card due to communication difficulties. Should be available online.
2. Fear of parent bringing the child to the library which can be the stress that comes with bringing a person with autism into this type of environment.
3. Not sure.

Figure 18 Question 10 Respondent Breakdown
4.2.6 Improved Access

Question 11

If access to public libraries is improved, what benefits do you think this will bring children/adults and their families or support networks?

![Figure 19 Benefits after access is improved](image)

If access was improved the most popular benefit would be a greater interest in reading. Twenty three people (67.65%) of people advised that this is one of the benefits they could see arising from increased access.

Twenty two people (64.71%) of people said that increased social interaction for the whole family, development of support networks within the community and a feeling of being connected with the community would be a benefit of increased access.

Twenty one people (61.76%) of people advised that opportunities for lifelong learning would be a benefit.
Nineteen people (55.88%) of people said that increased access could lead to a greater motivation for people to learn or develop a new skill. While eighteen people (52.94%) said it could lead to increased awareness of and referral to other support groups within the community.

One person said that none of the listed changes would apply.

Three people said other benefits may be seen. These benefits include

1. For children who hate noise it is a great place to be around people as there are lots of people there, but everyone is quiet.
2. We are going to the library since my children were quite young, and during that time my kids have improved social skills, learned interaction, how to ask, work on their manners, etc.
3. It's a simple case of equality of access. The same benefits of libraries that apply to any human would apply.

Figure 20 Question 11 Respondent Breakdown
Question 12.

Do you have any other comments to make in relation to libraries and autism? This can be anything from you are happy with the services, the services are not good enough, your local library does not provide enough services etc.

This question was left open to allow people express any opinion or share any experiences of libraries that they may have that was not included in the survey. Twenty one people chose to leave a comment and thirteen people skipped this question. All open comments can be seen in Appendix 3.

The comments varied from comments on what people think the library’s need to change to become more autism friendly to what the respondents’ own library does quite well. Two people mentioned that the library’s physical design is or can be an issue. Two people also mentioned a lack of books for autism and a lack of books in general. Another two people mentioned that staff in their local libraries were extremely accommodating and understanding and patient. One person mentioned that there should be some minimum standards in place. That librarians can vary from incredibly good to downright impossible. Services can also vary enormously.

As part response to the survey a very detailed email was received from one respondent highlighting her experience and that of her son’s in their local library. Permission was received to use some of this response as it is a great example of how using the library can benefit someone with autism. This can be seen in the Appendix 7.
4.3 Interview Findings

As previously discussed various librarians were interviewed as part of this research. For clarity in the findings the interviewees will be coded, and the libraries and the services offered are outlined in the chart below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Service Offered</th>
<th>Note</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interviewee A (IA)</td>
<td>Librarian</td>
<td>Library A</td>
<td>Private visit by appointment before normal opening hours.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewee B (IB)</td>
<td>Librarian</td>
<td>Library B</td>
<td>Private visit by appointment before normal opening hours.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewee C (IC)</td>
<td>Librarian</td>
<td>Library C</td>
<td>Private visit by appointment before normal opening hours.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewee D (ID)</td>
<td>Librarian</td>
<td>Library C</td>
<td>Private visit by appointment before normal opening hours.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewee E (IE)</td>
<td>Librarian</td>
<td>Library D</td>
<td>Sensory hour during opening hours during school holidays.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewee F (IF)</td>
<td>Library Assistant</td>
<td>Academic Library</td>
<td>Also, on the Autism Spectrum.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewee G (IG)</td>
<td>Librarian</td>
<td>Headquarters</td>
<td>Access &amp; Inclusion Librarian.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 21 Interviewee Chart

4.3.1 Motivation for the implementation of autism friendly programmes

When asked why the autism friendly programmes were implemented each of the librarians interviewed advised that it was not a decision made at council level but a decision by an individual librarian. IE advised that they had been involved in a project with a family resource centre when they were asked to host an event in the library. This event was falling on a Sunday, so the library opened as a once off autism friendly day. This event was a huge success and IE advised that they hadn’t realised the scale of the service need at that point. It was after this that they implemented an autism friendly hour during school holidays. IA and IB both advised that they launched their initiative after seeing it in another county and thought it was a service worth offering. Library C launched their programme as they had an awareness of the needs of people with autism through friends and various conferences that they attended. The general consensus from all librarians was that it is a very staff led initiative. One librarian outlined that
“executive decisions always need extra work, they need extra preparation, which needs to be done on a volunteer basis as there is no extra money for extra staffing, so it has to be somebody on the ground who wants to do it really”

It was also highlighted by one library that management is really supportive with any kind of innovation

“Anything at all that we do, they will give us a chance to try anything and everything and there is no issue”

Speaking with IF who also has autism it was noted that there is no national or county plan in place to make libraries more autism friendly. It is very much down to individual librarians taking the initiative to start a service. Neither is there any minimum standard across libraries.

4.3.2 Funding

One of the questions asked was how the autism friendly hours and sensory hours are funded. The general consensus is that funding isn’t a huge issue for this particular service. All libraries stated that staff start work before opening hours, so no extra staff levels are required if a private visit is required. Sensory books and materials come under normal book funding. Some comments included

“There’s not a lot of extra funding involved”

“the children’s librarian has no problem spending money on sensory books and materials”

“I have never been limited in what I can ask for the sensory box”

“we have a very good book stock around the topic”

Funding for the pop up sensory space which will be discussed later came from two different sources. The funding for the initial pilot scheme was from sponsorship from a local company. This was a chance for the library to showcase the programme to secure further funding. Funding for subsequent programmes came from the City Council.

4.3.3 Marketing

One of the questions asked in the interview was how is the service marketed. All libraries stated that it was marketed through local resources.

“So, marketing we use all the local resources, the local newspaper is really good to us. Telling everyone what’s going on week after week, local Facebook pages”
“The service has been promoted on Facebook, the libraries website, flyers, posters through the local schools and ASD units, through the parents of children in the ASD unit”

“We did push it a lot at the time through local media, social media etc and we have posters on display in the library branches”

Two libraries advised that it is promoted more during the school holidays. Again, this is due to the lack of uptake during school term due to timing issues and other commitments. One library did mention that more marketing was required with another saying that the interview was a good reminder that they should continue to promote it.

4.3.4 Day to Day Workings

All the libraries that were contacted had different opening hours. However, all library staff start work at approximately 9am so staffing for the early private visits is not an issue as staff are already in the office. All libraries offering private visits however emphasised that there is either very little or no uptake for the private visits from individuals and families. One potential reason given was other commitments with families etc such as trying to get other children to school, work etc”. Another library also indicated “it just didn’t materialise into the service we thought it might”.

Library D which offers a sensory hour during normal opening hours cannot quantify how many individuals and families are using the service as it is open to the general public anyway. Unless someone specifically asks for the sensory materials or they know someone personally it would be impossible to know if someone has autism or not. This library offers the sensory hour service during school holidays as there would be very little uptake of it during term time due to children being in school. IA also mentioned that “We also facilitate school visits and computer classes prior to opening to the public so as to minimise noise etc once the library is open”.

4.3.5 School Usage

All four libraries stated that ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder) units in local mainstream schools get the most use out of the service or the library. Three out of the four libraries advised that the schools use the service during normal opening hours at the request of the schools and teachers. Library C opens early for their local unit as the school is located very close to library C, so it is convenient for them to use the private visit service. Library A also advised that an Autism Friendly Summer Camp has availed of the private sessions on occasion.
Library D which offers the sensory hour also advised that the ASD units in two local schools use the service during normal opening hours as the sensory hour is only offered during school holidays. Anywhere between 12-20 children can be brought to visit the library at one time.

4.3.6 Interaction with staff

One library stated that it is a completely un-intrusive service. Staff are there if needed. Another library stated that the teachers are very hands on with the children so there isn’t much interaction needed from the staff unless requested. One request that was made in Library C was that the children using the private visit service are encouraged to use the main desk to take out books rather than the self-service kiosks. This is to help with communication and social skills. The children know what will be asked of them at the desk so there are no surprises. Staff are on hand to help with the self-service kiosks if needed.

4.3.7 Staff Awareness and Training

It became very clear having spoken with the various librarians that all librarians were very enthusiastic and passionate about the programmes in their libraries. Libraries A & B did not specify if they received training or not. Library A however did mention

“We would have lots of families availing of the library service who have children with Autism, but they tend to come in as family units during opening hours so perhaps it’s just that they feel comfortable bringing their children into the library during regular hours as we are a very child friendly library “

“In general, our staff would be well aware of the needs of the parents and children.”

Library D did not receive any training but said “extra training would be nice”. IE also commented that “services could be directed a lot better, purchasing could be directed a lot better, if there was a bit more knowledge and knowledge can only come with training really”.

Library C specified that they received general disability awareness training for disabilities in general which included a section on autism. However, this was after the initiative was introduced.

This training was discussed in detail with IG. Library staff from several libraries attended a training day on disability awareness and inclusive libraries. The theme of the training was Get Real (Responsive-Engaged-Aware-Libraries). During the training a parent of a child with autism explained the background as to why a child might have a meltdown and advised why a
parent may not bring their child to the library. There may be a fear of a child “kicking off” in the library and to bring their child to the library they need to feel supported and comfortable. This training was seen to be of huge benefit to library staff as it gave some insight into the day to day life of having a child with autism, and also made them aware of the various reasons that a child might be having a meltdown.

4.3.8 Benefits and positive feedback to the service

It was apparent from all librarians that the feedback received from these programmes has been very positive. One comment stated that

“We would have lots of families availing of the library service who have children with Autism”

Library D advised that people approached them after the initial autism friendly day and said that it hadn’t dawned on them before that that the children would be ok if they were disruptive in the library. Parents had previously been inclined to avoid using the library for this reason.

Library C suggested that the local schools have seen a huge benefit for both schools and staff advising that

“There is more inclusion for the students now as all other classes used to use the library while the ASD unit did not.”

“There is also a big increase in the awareness of staff towards the challenges of autism.”

Library C also noted that children using the service took part in a summer reading challenge which may not have been possible before. The teachers behind the unit are hugely committed and encouraging to the children which helps them in using the service.

4.3.9 Challenges to the programme

Negative feedback of the programmes on offer has been minimal across all libraries. The only negative point that has been highlighted is the timing of private visits. One librarian stated that

“It isn’t always practical to bring someone to the library at 9.15 with school, work and other commitments.”

The opening hours may not suit offering a private visit as libraries in different areas open at different times. The local school using service in library C is within walking distance of the library, so convenience is a factor here. Smaller libraries with staffing issues might also not be able to facilitate the service again due to timings.
Library C highlighted a new pilot scheme that is now being offered called “Pop Up Sensory Space” which may alleviate some of the timing issue. This will be discussed under “Services and Facilities”.

4.3.10 Services and Facilities offered

In extension to the autism friendly visits or sensory hour all of the libraries offer extra services or facilities. The range of services in each library is very different and can relate back to the conversation with IF that there are no set standards and it is very much down to each librarian to decide what facilities to provide. The below list is only what was mentioned in the interviews and may not cover all services and facilities.

Library C also offers is a sensory story time service. This sensory story time was also discussed with IG and is on offer in several libraries. Books are read and are brought to life in an interactive event using story boards, velcro boards, puppets and interactive storytelling. Library C also advised that they will be starting a support group in Autumn for parents. It will be very much a community driven support group and will be sensory friendly. An online Social Story is also available which can help a child or class prepare for their library visit, what to expect, and how things work.

Library A arranged a talk titled ‘Autism – The Science and the Practicalities’ as part of a Science Festival last year. They also advised that many parents have come in seeking information after a child has been diagnosed and that they would always take the time to specifically show them exactly where they books are located so as they aren’t searching in vain through the whole library.

Library B has a collection of assistive toys and books for people with special needs (not specifically Autism). This service offers the loans of specific toys and books such as balance boards, sensory motor kits and latch puzzles etc and can be borrowed for three weeks at a time. This initiative has been funded by the National Disability Funding initiative in consultation with a special needs active parents group. They also provide access to the TTRS, (Touch, Type, Read and Spell) programme which is a programme for assisting with literacy difficulties. This is particularly useful for people with Autism as the programme is customisable allowing the appearance and colours on the screen to be adapted to the person’s needs.
Library D also has an online map of the library on their web page and a large range of sensory material geared towards smaller children.

4.3.11 New Initiatives

Two libraries mentioned new initiatives or services that are currently implementing or taking part in.

Library B are currently working on developing a short movie titled ‘A Trip to the Library’. This will outline what will happen on a visit to this particular library from the time you arrive in the car park to the time you check out a book. A book of photos of the library has also been developed which can be borrowed in advance of a visit. Both initiatives will provide a Social Story which can be used at home in advance of a visit to the Library.

Library C also mentioned two initiatives that are in progress. The first is the support group that should be in place by Autumn. The second is an initiative called Pop Up Sensory Space. This initiative was discussed at length with IG and is outlined below.

4.3.11.1 Pop Up Sensory Space

Growing Imaginations Sensory Books Service is currently being offered by Cork City Libraries. This project involves the provision of a new service to people with intellectual disability of moderate, severe and profound levels. It involves the creation of sensory tactile books that can be used by people with intellectual disabilities. The sensory components of the book are all stored in specifically designed bag. This initiative was in response to a shortage of appropriate sensory reading material for adults in the library.
The pop up sensory space/room is being introduced as part of the growing imaginations project. Not all libraries can offer specific autism friendly hours, so this initiative aims to help resolve this issue. It was initially set up last year and the idea revolves around a bespoke treasure chest and its’ contents. The treasure chest was designed in collaboration with a local school for children with Autism and other needs. This treasure chest will be kept in a quiet room in the library assuming there is a room available. If not, a space will be created on the library floor where possible. Once the room is free and there are no other events going on in the room anyone wishing to use the service will be free to use the room.

The significance of the treasure chest is that it’s mysterious and the children do not know what is kept inside in it until they open it. The chest itself is not the main focus but what is inside is what matters. Inside the chest will be a variety of toys, books and other materials. These toys have all been selected from suppliers that provide products that add value to the user by using play to create stimulation in specific areas of need. A tent will also be included which will give a child extra quiet space if needed.

The initiative aims to provide a quiet sensory friendly space for anyone with sensory issues, not just autism.
4.3.12 Open Libraries Initiative and Autism

One issue that arose during the interviews was that of the new Open Libraries Initiative when libraries will be open from 8am to 10pm. As the initiative is still in its infancy it is not clear how this will affect private early morning visits. As noted by IF “It could go either way”. At one end of the scale libraries that offer private autism friendly hours will no longer be able to offer these as the library will be open to the public. On the other hand, the libraries may be much quieter at 8am or closer to closing time so someone with sensory issues may feel more comfortable going into the library at this time.

Library C highlighted that along with issues surrounding the private visits there are computers at the front desk which will contain information about the library patrons. It may be necessary to install partitions to ensure that the public cannot access the computers while staff are not in the office. This could lead to a loss of the community feel about a library.

Library D thinks that libraries are “pretty open as it is” as you can now renew books online, read eBooks, emagazines etc.
4.3.13 Universal Design

The idea of universal design was touched on briefly in the interview with IF. The intention of Universal Design is to create products and environments that when designed initially that they can accommodate individuals with a wider range of abilities and disabilities as well as people who may not need extra supports. It was noted during the interview that when libraries are being built and designed that they should be designed to accommodate all disabilities, not just autism, rather than trying to adapt later. It involves finding that one solution to improve usability for all. IF emphasised that while new glass buildings can be aesthetically pleasing, they are not always good for people with sensory issues. Heat, glare and bright sunlight coming in can cause issues for people with sensory issues. On the other hand, IE in library D stated that that were lucky as they have a lot of natural light so turning off the lights isn’t an issue.
Chapter 5 Discussion

The previous chapter outlined the findings from both the survey of library users and the interviews conducted with several librarians. This chapter however sets out to interpret these findings in relation to the literature review. From the analysis of the interviews and the survey, several themes emerged. This will all be discussed thematically while simultaneously addressing the original research aims.

5.1 Limitations of findings

The main limitation of this study is that the libraries selected are not representative of all libraries. They were selected so as to gain an insight into the workings of autism friendly programmes and sensory hours. All staff were very aware of the needs of people with autism.

Another limitation of the study is the small number of respondents to the survey. The findings cannot be found to be conclusive or representative of every person with autism or the parents for example. The findings do however highlight some of the issues facing people with autism and enables discussion around these issues.

5.2 Addressing the Research Aims

The research title for this thesis is;

“The role of Irish Public Libraries in Assisting Users with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Benefits, Challenges and other Considerations”.

In summary the research questions that guided this study are:

What specialised services are currently in place and are they of benefit?

What services and programmes do people with autism want to receive from the public library?

What are the main barriers to using the library and how can these be overcome?

Awareness of services from both library staff and library patrons.

Training and awareness of staff of the needs and challenges faced by people with autism

Best Practices. A review of some of the services that are already in place.
5.3 Usage of the library and of the various programmes on offer

As highlighted by a study of 460 people with autism in the UK, 40% of people with autism don’t visit their library (Autism friendly libraries, no date). A similar trend can be seen in this survey with 44.12% of respondents saying they don’t use the library. 33.33% of people who don’t use the library say it’s too noisy, the lights are too bright, and the layout is unfamiliar.

As outlined in the survey findings, different libraries offer different types of autism friendly hours, from an early morning private visit to a sensory friendly visit during normal opening hours. When asked about services other than autism friendly hours only one person (2.94%) in the survey was able to say what service was on offer, 17.65% of respondents said there were no other services which left almost 80% of respondents unaware if services are offered or not. All of the librarians questioned were able to advise on various services they offered such as sensory story time, sensory friendly books, toys and other materials, online maps, and software packages such as TTRS. As the libraries that were surveyed were selected due to the Autism Friendly initiatives already being in place this cannot be seen to be representative of all public libraries. However, with 80% of respondents being completely unaware this suggests that there is a lack of marketing from libraries that do provide services or that that the services are not being offered in the first place.

It is evident from the interviews that that there was a distinct lack of uptake on the private visit service from individuals and families. Each librarian from the three libraries offering the service confirmed this. One was quoted as saying “it didn’t materialise into the service we thought it would”. The general consensus is that this is most likely due to the timing of the visits in the morning and having other commitments such as bringing children to school, or work etc. This theory was corroborated by two comments from parents on the survey;

“I find specific autism service hours unhelpful as they are out of hours, too early in the morning”

“Not suiting work hours as early in the morning”

“Tend to be designed around the service rather than the needs of the service user”
5.4 Benefits to using the library

5.4.1 Reading

Conjuring up an image of a typical public library generally involves shelves of books. Book lending remains one of the most popular reasons for using the library. Nineteen people (55.88%) surveyed advised that they use the library. 73.68% of people using the library use it for book lending. In an age of video games and smart phones it was interesting to see that the 67.65% of all respondents chose a greater interest in reading as a benefit that increased access to public libraries could bring.

The benefits of reading for a person with autism are well documented in the literature review. Murdaugh, Deshpande and Kana, (2016) studied the effects of a specific reading programme which uses the strengths of people with autism. They found that there was significantly increased brain activation and connectivity between two of the brain’s core language areas upon completion of the reading program. As highlighted by one librarian, children from an ASD unit using the private visit service completed a summer reading challenge which may not have been possible before visiting the library. This was also corroborated by one of the parents responding to the survey when they confirmed that their library hosted a Reading Bee. Their son took part in this scheme for a couple of years when he started reading and it was found to have a hugely beneficial effect on his reading skills.

5.4.2 Communication and social skills

The National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders in the US (NIDCD) states that “some children with ASD may not be able to communicate using speech or language, and some may have very limited speaking skills” (NIDCD, 2015). One of the librarians involved in this research advised that children from the ASD unit in the local school are encouraged to use the main desk rather than the self-service kiosks to check out books. This is to help with communication and social skills. The conversation is predictable and there are no surprises, so children will feel more at ease than in other social situations. A similar comment was made by one of the survey respondents when they stated, “there is very little verbal requirement required to check out books”.

One parent commented that the library is a “huge social currency for kids with autism”, starting off with baby steps and knowing when to go when it’s quiet, and gradually building up to when it’s busy and noisy is a great development for the kids.
5.4.3 Other benefits

Kaeding’s study (2014) on “Increasing access to public libraries for children with special needs and their families” found that introducing a separate story time for children with special needs (not specifically autism) in libraries has huge benefits. It found that there was an increased confidence in the library and its environment, families increased their social network, and there was an increased confidence for library staff with their interactions with the children. This can be correlated to the survey results with 64.71% of respondents stating that the benefits they could envisage from increased access could be, increased social interaction for the whole family, development of support networks within their own community, and a feeling of being connected with the community. Another benefit from Kaeding’s study was that other library patrons also benefitted from the programme as they had an opportunity to interact with the families of children with special needs. Considering that 64.71% of respondents for this research advised that other library visitors and their attitudes and sensitivities were one of the greatest barriers to access, it’s possible that a programme such as this may be of benefit in Irish libraries.

5.5 Barriers

5.5.1 Sensory Issues

When questioned for this research, 44.12% of people advised that they did not visit the library. Polacek et al (2014, p. 25) states that contemporary library environments can bombard us with constant stimuli, such as flickering lights, background noise, and countless other sensory distractions. This observation is also proven in this survey as, of the fifteen people who don’t use the library 33.3% said it’s too noisy and/or the lights are too bright, and 20% said it’s too quiet. Certain smells were also given as a reason by one person as to why they don’t go to the library. When asked about barriers to access five people (62.5%) with autism said that the libraries physical environment was a barrier. Four of the same people said they would like to see sensory changes introduced to make the library more accessible. However, when parents and guardians were asked the same questions six said the libraries physical environment was a barrier but only one of these people said that one of the changes they would like is sensory changes.

One interesting point was that only 10.53% of people who used the library would like to see sensory changes. However, 66.67% of people who do not use the library would like to see sensory changes. While this is a significant difference, sensory issues do not affect every person
with autism, and when they do they can affect them in different ways. Every person with autism is different so while the difference is significant it is impossible to draw any conclusions from it.

5.5.2 Library Staff

A study by Jo Kaeding (2017) on a proposed inclusive library model found that 55% of librarians interviewed thought that library staff attitudes and sensitivities was one of the greatest barriers to access and inclusion for children with disabilities.

This can be compared to 21 out of 34 people (61.76%) from this survey stating that they would like to see more awareness from library staff when they were asked what changes could be made to make the library more autism friendly. Only four people (26.66% of people who do not use the library) responded that a lack of awareness from library staff was a reason they didn’t use the library and another three people (20%) responded stating that people don’t understand me or the people they are with. When questioned about what the greatest barriers to accessing the library were, 12 people (35.29%) said library staff and their attitudes and sensitives were an issue. These figures show that while library staff awareness is an issue, it also suggests that it doesn’t seem to be stopping people from using the library.

5.5.3 Other library patrons

When asked what the greatest barrier to access for people with autism was, twenty two people (64.71%) advised that other library visitors and their attitudes and awareness was the greatest barrier. One parent even went on to say that other library users complained to the library staff that their son’s stimming was distracting and called him a “public health hazard”. One of the librarians that was interviewed stated that, “there may always be anxiety from parents or guardians etc when bringing children with autism into the library”. It’s understandable, from this type of “public health hazard” comment why there could be anxiety.

One of the questions in the survey asked participants to advise what changes they think could be made to make a library more accessible. Eighteen people (52.94%) advised that they would like to see signs stating that it is an autism friendly library. Signs like this will at the very least advise other patrons that a certain noise level will be tolerated. One example of such a sign is shown in appendix 8.
5.5.4 Programmes

One of the barriers highlighted in the survey was the programmes on offer in the library. Ten people (29.41%) said the programmes on offer were not suitable for children or adults with autism. As outlined in the study by Adkins and Bushman (2015) 38.46% of libraries surveyed in the US offered programmes specially designed for children with disabilities. Due to a lack of research in Ireland there is no way of knowing if this is comparable with Irish libraries. While all the librarians interviewed for this survey offered programmes, this is not representative of all libraries as these libraries were selected for sampling due to the fact they offer autism friendly programmes.

5.6 How to overcome the barriers

5.6.1 Sensory Changes and Universal Design

An interesting point that arose from the survey was that 71.43% of people with autism advised that they would like to see sensory changes in the library. This compares with only 16.67% of parents and guardians. Even considering the small sample size the difference is significant. Similarly, when asked about what the greatest barriers to access were 71.43% of people with autism said the libraries physical environment was a barrier compared to only 25% of parents and guardians. This may indicate that people with autism are more aware of the sensory environment around them than their parents or guardians are aware of.

The concept of universal design was brought up by IF during the interview process. While changing the sensory environment is part of changing the physical design of a building, universal design goes beyond this. The Center for Universal Design outlines seven principles to ensure that a building is accessible to as many people as possible. 1. Equitable Use 2. Flexibility in Use 3. Simple and Intuitive Use 4. Perceptible Information 5. Tolerance for Error 6. Low Physical Effort 7. Size and Space for Approach and Use. (Center for Universal Design, 1997). This concept was also addressed by one of the survey respondents, although not using the term Universal Design, the respondent was quoted as saying “My main issue is the physical environment of many libraries is not suitable - Even if autism sessions are available. a purpose build library is without doubt my go to, rather than the adapted ones”. As outlined in the Cork City Libraries Strategic Plan previously mentioned in the introduction, and discussed with IG, all new buildings completed or designed during the period 2015-2019 will be fully accessible for people with physical, sensory, mental health or intellectual impairment.
5.6.2 Other Changes

There are also not insignificant differences between the amount of people with autism looking for changes such as autism friendly signage advising where the toilets etc are and a map of the library available online versus the number of parents looking for the same changes.

17.65% of respondents said they would like to see the implementation of an online video map of the library. As outlined in the interview findings, one library is currently working on this for their own branch. It would be interesting to see the feedback on this initiative once it is implemented.

50% of respondents advised that a quiet room being made available would make the library more autism friendly. Of course, this is dependent on space as not all libraries have an extra room. One initiative that might be a solution for this issue, at least for children, is the pop up sensory space initiative as discussed with the access and inclusion librarian. This initiative includes the use of a tent which gives a child their own space if necessary.

Fidget toys and adaptive technology were also mentioned by 44.12% of respondents. Fidget toys would be a very simple change that any library could make. Adaptive technology of course would depend on funding. As one librarian interviewed said “it would be amazing to have some ICT”.

Awareness of library staff as a barrier to be overcome will be discussed in the next section.

5.7 Awareness

Awareness was a huge element of both the survey and the interviews. Both awareness of the services on offer and awareness of library staff to the needs of people with autism will be discussed in the following sections.

5.7.1 Awareness of Services

67.65% of respondents (23 people) stated that they were not aware if their local library offered specific autism friendly or sensory hours. 79.41% of respondents stated that they did not know if their library offered other autism friendly initiatives such as sensory story time or online maps for example. These figures show a very significant lack of awareness of the services on offer. One possible reason for this is a lack of marketing. As Jo Kaeding (2016, p. 25) stated “Marketing is how public libraries put out the ‘welcome mat’ for children with special needs and their families”. All of the libraries interviewed for this research said they used local
resources to market their service. Others stated that they marketed the services through the local schools. One library did state that more marketing is needed, while another library said this research is a good reminder that they should continue to promote the service. It’s also possible that in other library branches that the services are not offered, hence there is nothing to market.

5.7.2. Awareness of other library users

It was also noted by one librarian that families may always feel anxious about bringing their child to the library. Integration and education however is key as confirmed by Kaeding’s (2014) study on increasing access to public libraries for children with special needs. By offering a separate programme for children with special needs it offered parents a chance to become more acquainted with the library thus making it easier to build up to visiting the library when it was busier. The benefit to this was that other library patrons have also benefitted from the program by interacting with families with children with special needs. Lawrence's paper (2013, p. 105) on neo diversity in LIS Theory and Practice also states that “educating neurotypical individuals about Autistic people is an effective means to improving well-being for Autistics”.

5.7.3 Staff Awareness and Training

Kaeding’s study in the US and Canada (2017, p. 110) found that out of eighteen libraries only seven had a disability access and inclusion plan. It had originally been assumed that as all libraries in Monaghan County Council offered autism friendly hours, that the initiative had been written into policy. However, it was found that was not the case and it was an initiative put in place by librarians working in the branches. Similarly, the topic of a branch level access and inclusion plan was not mentioned by Library C or D and again it was librarians on the ground putting the initiatives in place. All interviewees mentioned that they had very supportive management.

The issue of a lack of awareness from library staff about the needs of people with autism was raised several times in the survey results. These results can be compared to the study “Activating the Role of the Public Library towards Autism Spectrum Disorder” in Kuwait by Ghuloum and Alyacoub (2016, p. 412). This study found that over half the respondents who did use the library faced difficulties when doing so. One reason given for this was they faced difficulties with some librarians who did not know the meaning of autism. This compares to 21 out of 34 people (61.76%) stating that they would like to see more awareness from library staff with one person saying that “some of the staff in the adult section can be quite rude and
“gruff” and another saying, “Better education around autism and stimming for the staff would make parents feel more accepted”. However, for balance this was countered with “I have found the staff extremely accommodating”, “Staff are so understanding and patient”. “most libraries are very good with autism kids and adults, sometimes it can be the fear for the parent stopping them from going which can be the stress that comes with bringing an autism person into this environment”

One possibility is that there is a perceived lack of awareness but once the fear of going to the library is overcome that it’s possible that staff can be very accommodating. Of the people who use the library 31.5% of people said one of the barriers was library staff compared to 40% of people who do not use the library.

When questioned about training two libraries did not specify if they received training or not. One library advised that their staff did receive general disability awareness training after implementing the programme. This training was completely independent of the autism friendly programme as all libraries in this particular local council received it. While the training was not specific to autism it did include a section on autism. After speaking with the access and inclusion librarian this training was seen to be of huge benefit to library staff as it gave some insight into the day to day life of having a child with autism, and also highlighted awareness around the various reasons that a child might be having a meltdown. The training was given over half a day and there should be no reason why it could not be rolled out across all local councils. One librarian who confirmed that they did not receive training was quoted as saying “extra training would be nice and it’s something that we will hopefully get eventually”

5.8 Best Practices

There have been many autism friendly initiatives discussed over the survey findings and discussion chapters. Ideally autism friendly or sensory hours would exist in all libraries, but this is not the case at present. Only one person who responded to the survey was able to confirm that their local library had autism friendly hours. From researching autism friendly libraries in Ireland, the only county to offer autism friendly hours in all their libraries is Monaghan County Council. Of course, this is open to correction as within the scope of this research it was not possible to individually contact all county and city librarians in the country. As the research has found, the usage of these hours has been mostly from ASD units in schools. The benefits
to these schools have been huge, with benefits to communication, inclusion, social skills and reading ability.

Sensory story times are offered in some libraries. Books are read and are brought to life in an interactive event. Some of the methods used are story boards, velcro boards, puppets and interactive storytelling. A study in Adelaide in 2011 (Kaeding, 2014) found that “regular early childhood group sessions were too large and too loud for their children. Children with autism and hearing difficulties were overwhelmed by these sessions”. One important feature of sensory storytime is that families can feel relaxed in an environment where they are in the company of their peers. Some of the open comments on the survey mentioned that parents felt that they could not bring their child to a regular storytime session as they felt their child would be too distracting. Specific autism friendly storytime sessions could help alleviate this fear.

Other initiatives include the Pop Up Sensory Room that is currently being offered in four libraries in Cork. This is a new initiative that will eventually be rolled out across all libraries. Children will have access to a treasure chest filled with sensory books and toys in a quiet room or quiet space. As this is a very new initiative there is no research or feedback available yet, however initial response has been very good. It also offers a solution to the issue with the timings of the early morning private visits. It’s a simple concept with huge potential.

In this chapter, the findings from the primary research were discussed in relation to the literature review. Findings from the survey were compared with findings from the interviews to see if any common themes emerged. Following this several conclusions can be drawn, and recommendations can be made. These conclusions and recommendations will be presented in the next chapter.
Chapter 6 Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1 Introduction

The main focus of this thesis was an exploratory study on how public libraries in Ireland can assist users with autism. A survey was designed and distributed to members of the public with experience of autism. The survey was designed to gauge library user’s perceptions of the library and awareness of services with autism in mind. It was also hoped that it would provide helpful and practical information that libraries could use to implement changes to make their library more autism friendly. Several librarians were also interviewed in order to gain an understanding of the various autism friendly programmes on offer and also to identify the motivation in setting up the programmes.

6.2 Concluding Remarks

As outlined in the introduction libraries are seen as a safe space and their aim is to be socially and culturally inclusive and to minimise barriers to use. This study addressed many issues faced by people with autism when accessing library services. Physical barriers and other barriers were discussed and changes that could be made to made to make the library more accessible were also highlighted.
One of the main findings of this research was the awareness or lack thereof of autism friendly services in libraries amongst library users. This could be due to several reasons, marketing, services not being offered or the fact that people just are not interested in the library services. Using the library has very real and tangible benefits for people with autism. If people are unaware of these benefits they may never visit their library regardless of the services on offer. The usage of the autism friendly hours or sensory hours has been largely used by ASD units in schools. It’s disappointing that families and individuals are not using the service but as highlighted several times this is most likely down to the timings of the service. The new open library initiative may alleviate this issue as libraries will be open later but on the other hand it may exacerbate the issue as there will no longer be the option of providing the private visit. With no feedback to date it will be interesting to see how this initiative works when it comes to facilitating people with autism.

The research also confirmed findings by Kaeding’s study in the US (2017) and Dimensions study in the UK (Autism friendly libraries, no date) that lack of awareness from library staff can be seen as one of the biggest barriers to library usage amongst people with autism. This issue was certainly not evident in the librarians interviewed for this research, in fact the opposite is true. All librarians showed great enthusiasm, were innovative and were thoroughly engaged in the services they offered. However as previously discussed these libraries are not representative of all public libraries.

This study though limited in its scope gives valuable insights into how users perceive the library and its environment. There have been several studies on autism and academic libraries but the study of role of public libraries and how they can assist users with autism has remained largely untouched. This study has touched on the various topics that can be addressed but there is certainly scope to undertake a similar study on a much larger scale. The recommendations in the next section will outline several changes and areas of study that may be undertaken

6.3 Recommendations

6.3.1 Further Research

All the librarians involved in this research made the comment that it was great that research was being done in this area. Within the time frame it was not possible to conduct a nationwide study of either librarians or library users. Further analysis could be conducted amongst a much greater sample population of library users. The response rate to the survey was disappointing,
if a larger organisation was involved in conducting the research it might be possible to ensure that a wider audience is reached. The result of this being more conclusive findings. Feedback from the schools using the various autism friendly hours would also be highly beneficial.

A study done in Kuwait was mentioned several times in this paper. Kuwait has a population of approximately 4.2 million but only 27 public libraries covering that population. For this reason, it was possible for this study to interview librarians from every library.

According to the latest public strategy plan Ireland currently has 330 libraries and 31 mobile libraries across 31 local authorities (Department of Rural and Community Development et al, 2018, p. 10). It would not be possible to interview librarians from every library separately. However, this type of research could be coordinated through the county librarians of the 31 local authorities and would become much more manageable.

6.3.2 Training and awareness of library staff and management

Lack of training amongst library staff has been highlighted in many studies and also within this thesis. One library did partake in a half day of training in general disabilities which was found to be hugely beneficial. Libraries could engage with external organisations or family support groups to develop partnerships which could assist in the development of any programmes. The experts on autism are people with autism themselves therefore it would be highly beneficial to include their opinions in the development of new programmes.

The framework developed by the study in Kuwait can be adapted to any other country and could provide the basis for management to develop new strategies.
6.3.3 Physical Changes

There are many small, inexpensive physical changes that every library could make to ensure their library is more autism friendly.

- Autism friendly signage such as visual aids showing where the water or toilets are.
- A map of the library online or a social story advising how to use the library and its facilities.
- Sensory changes. Dimming of the lights or using new sensory lighting. Calm music if music is played. Strong smells kept to a minimum.
- A quiet room or space should be provided also where possible. If no room is available a tent could possibly provide the quiet space needed. The pop up sensory initiative outlined in this paper provides a relatively inexpensive option for libraries.
• Fidget toys. Toys such as fidget spinners could provide a welcome distraction for children.

• Once training of staff has been undertaken a sign stating that this an autism friendly library. This will have the dual effect of firstly, advising people with autism that noise will be tolerated, and staff are aware of their needs and secondly, it will advise other patrons that noise will be tolerated.

• Reading Dogs. This initiative was addressed in the literature review and was seen to be a great success in the libraries offering the service in the US. It is unknown how practical this initiative would be in Ireland and one organisation providing autism assistance dogs were unable to provide any insight. However, given the success in the US it is felt that it is an area certainly worth looking into.

All these small changes will go a long way in ensuring someone with autism enjoys the same benefits of using the library as everyone else. However, it’s not enough to just change the physical surroundings, we need to also change the mindset so that every user who walks through the door is able to enjoy the same library experience.
Chapter 7 Reflective Learner Account

7.1 Introduction and Background

"Success is peace of mind, which is a direct result of self-satisfaction in knowing you did your best to become the best you are capable of becoming," (philosiblog, 2011)

The above quote is a quote that I read many years ago that always stuck with me. While in school, I probably never achieved the grades that I could have or should have. I was quite happy to “plod along” and in my mind, I didn’t reach my true potential. While I worked enough to obtain enough points to go to college I know I could have done more. This realisation is what I think motivates me today. I want to reach that potential.

My undergraduate degree was a BA in Economics and Sociology. After this I completed a postgraduate Higher Diploma in Business Economics. I worked in several financial roles for the past 17 years including the Central Bank and a Hedge Fund company for the past 12 years. The work was busy and stressful, but I was good at it and was able to manage the stress. Promotional opportunities however were limited so I began to think what else is out there. All my qualifications are business related and while the skills I have obtained over the years are transferable to almost every job, I felt that unless I re-trained I was going to be limited to business and finance roles. Books and the library have always been one of my first loves so after much research and deliberation I handed in my notice and applied for the Masters in Information and Library Management.

7.2 Learning Experience from the course

Kolb Learning Style theory identifies four learning types according to how learners perceive and process information (Sharp, 1997, p. 130). The diverger looks at situations in different perspectives, is sensitive and is interested in people. They learn by concrete information given them by their senses (feeling) and by watching. The assimilator prefers a concise logical learning approach, ideas are more important than people. They learn by watching and thinking. The converger prefers technical tasks and uses their skills to problem solve. They learn by doing and thinking. The accommodator is a hands on learner. They learn by concrete information from their senses (feeling) and doing.
Gibbs’ Reflective Cycle model was developed from Kolb’s theoretical model. Whereas Kolb’s model is sometimes referred to as an experiential learning model (which simply means learning through experience), Gibbs’ model is sometimes referred to as an iterative model (which simply means learning through repetition) (Lia, 2016).
Gibbs’ reflective cycle has 6 stages.

1. Description
2. Feelings
3. Evaluation
4. Analysis
5. Conclusion
6. Action Plan

Using Gibbs, we can challenge our assumptions, it can be used to explore new ideas and approaches to how we do or think about things, and it can be used to promote self-improvement (by identifying our strengths and weaknesses). This course certainly challenged my assumptions and made sure I explored new ideas and approaches.

My college experience previously was all business related with a minor element of sociology. Assignments were mostly if not all business report style. There was no thinking outside the box.
as Economics was facts and figures and graphs and percentages and growth or decline. My first assignment in the Masters was an essay on Ethics. It was probably the first essay I wrote in 20 years and to say I struggled was an understatement. The internet and google was very much in its’ infancy when I was in college previously so electronic journals were a whole new world for me. I had to question and change everything I had ever learned before about doing assignments. While I didn’t break any records for the highest result in that essay, I did well enough to give me the confidence to think “You got this”. I learned a lot from this essay in the way I structure my points, referencing, and of course time management. I spent about three weeks on and off doing this assignment which was fine as it was our first one, but I knew that wasn’t going to work going forward. I had to learn how to search more efficiently and how to better make use of the library, so I could face the rest of the assignments in a timelier manner.

7.3 Modules

Following on from learning how to search more efficiently the teaching librarian module was invaluable for this element of learning. I’m ashamed to say that I would have gone straight to google for an assignment before. However, this module taught me about information literature which I had never heard of before. I understood the concept but never knew that it had a name.

For me the IT modules were probably the most challenging. In my previous job I worked on a live trading system, moving between 15 different systems and had two screens in front of me. Despite this I have an immense fear of computers and “IT”. I slowly but surely worked my way through these with a lot of help from wonderful classmates, now good friends, and an understanding lecturer who very patiently answered my many many questions. I don’t think I will ever be 100% comfortable with IT and I can’t imagine that I will ever be a systems librarian. There is always going to be the fear that I might break the internet. I do however know that by breaking things down and trying to think about them logically it does make more sense. I also know that if you stick at something that isn’t working, even when you think you can’t do anymore, it will eventually come together.

The research methods module was a great learning experience that helped build the foundations for my thesis. The excel training was invaluable even though I ended up using the analysis function of Survey Monkey for the most part for my thesis. Knowing my way around excel however will stand to me in any job I work in.
Other modules which I thoroughly enjoyed included management for library professionals and records management. Strategy and demonstrating value to an organisation, records management and GDPR are areas I am very interested in. Maybe this is my finance background coming through, but I do like the business side of the library as well as the traditional books side.

7.4 Group Work

Group work will always be challenging. Initially I was horrified at the thought of group work purely for practical reasons. I have worked on many teams and have led teams and projects in my old work life, but this is completely different to group work outside of a professional setting. It can be very difficult to organise meetings with other commitments such as family, work and commuting. However, despite my initial trepidation, it worked really well. It was a great opportunity to get to know class mates and to discover the various learning styles that other people have.

7.5 Presentations

Presentations in college are very different to presentations given in work for two reasons. Firstly, you’re being graded on them, and secondly, they are in an area that you are only just learning about. There were group or individual presentations in every module and at the time it felt like we were doing presentations for the sake of presentations. I now understand why it is such a huge element of the course. You can only excel at something if you practice it enough, so it becomes second nature. The process of doing the presentations in this manner will be of huge benefit to me in any job I have after this course.

7.6 Thesis

The biggest challenge so far from this course has been the thesis. When we were asked to start thinking about our topic way back in October or November it felt like the thesis was so far away and we would never actually have to do it. However before we knew it we had to start submitting our proposals. I picked my topic of Libraries & Autism as I have personal experience of a close family member with profound special needs, so I am interested in the whole area of special needs and services available. I picked autism to narrow down the research as looking at disabilities in general would have been too broad.
One of the most difficult parts of the research process was the lack of research available in Ireland on anything to do with libraries and autism. Every librarian I interviewed said how great it was that someone was doing research into the area and all of them asked for a copy of the thesis afterwards. To complete the literature review I had to look at other countries and even that was very limited. Some of the research available looked at libraries and disabilities in general so this was quite helpful. At times it felt like the literature review was getting out of control as even though research was limited, there were so many elements to look at, autism, function of a library, benefits, challenges, community schemes, academic libraries amongst others. Trying to tie all the elements together was a challenge.

For similar reasons the data analysis was very challenging. I decided early on that to ensure the thesis was well balanced that I was going to have to complete research from both sides of the service provider and the service user. I decided on the mixed methods approach of a survey and interviews. I felt that an online survey for library users would allow me to reach more people and by keeping it completely anonymous would ensure that responses were as honest as could be. Interviewing the librarians ensured that all areas were covered and gave me an in-depth insight into how the various autism friendly programmes worked.

The survey which library users completed was not overly long but there was a lot of information in it. There were several open ended questions which ensured a variety of answers. This section of the analysis was so important as it’s the feedback from the people using the service that should drive how the service is provided.

The interviews with the various librarians were also quite open which ensured a wealth of information was received but this also meant a wealth of information to be analysed. At the start of the thesis 20,000 words seemed like a mountain to climb in my barefeet. However, I ended up having to leave out information so as to keep within the word count. This was both challenging as I had to keep the information as concise and relevant as possible, and frustrating as all the information received was important.

While at times the thesis process was limiting and frustrating, I found that I really enjoyed the research. I was interested in my topic at a personal level which absolutely helped. Interviewing the librarians was a completely new process to me and I found that the more interviews I completed that the more comfortable I became doing them. All the librarians I met and spoke with were so enthusiastic about the work they do, and I hope I gave the topic the justice it deserves.
According to Kolb I am both an accommodator and a converger. I like practical solutions, new challenges, planning and doing. I am very much “a hands on person” and I am sometimes guilty of thinking “if you want something done right do it yourself”.

Having worked for so long I feel like I have taken a huge personal and financial risk in giving up my job and going back to college. Having completed the course, I know I made the right decision. I feel much more confident giving presentations, completing assignments and interviewing people. Working in a library will be a new challenge for me and I firmly believe that the skills that I gained completing this course will benefit me greatly in whatever direction life takes me.
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Appendix

Appendix 1. Interview Questions

**Motivation behind Autism Friendly hours.**

1. Can you tell me why the autism friendly hours were introduced? Was it a decision from one librarian or was it a decision made at council level?
2. How does it work on a day to day basis? (Extra questions will be asked depending on the answer such as how many people are left in, how many staff have to be in the building, at what age can patrons come in on their own (children without guardians for example).
3. As the library opens early to facilitate the hours how do you manage this? Do you need extra staff or do ye take it in turns to come in early?
4. Do you think this service could be rolled out across all public libraries?
5. Did you or any of your staff receive extra training before implementing the service?

**Benefits and Usage.**

6. Are the hours being used? If not, why not (in your opinion)?
7. Do people turn up without an appointment? How do you manage this?
8. Have you seen any benefit to the service?
9. Have any participants mentioned any benefits that they have seen?
10. Have you received any other feedback from people who have used the service?
11. Has there been any negative feedback or responses in relation to the service? If so can you advise what this was (assuming no confidentiality is broken)?
12. Are there any schools in the area that use the service? If not, could you facilitate a group of school children with their teacher? I ask this as a friend of mine is a resource teacher in a different area and has said she would use such a service if her local library offered it.

**Funding & Resources.**

13. How is the service funded?
14. Are the staff expected to come in early or is it on a voluntary basis?
15. Some libraries have an online map of their library on their web page. Do you think it would be possible to add a video segment to this showing a walk through of the library and how to use certain facilities such as the online catalogue etc.

16. How do you market the service to users, management etc.

**General Questions.**

17. Other than the specific autism friendly hours are there any other services, facilities and equipment provided to people with special needs, especially for autism, in your library?

18. If yes, what services, facilities and equipment do you provide for them?

19. Overall, what do you think toward the level of services, facilities and equipment that offered for ASD in libraries in general?

20. Do you have any further plans to develop more services, facilities and equipment for people with ASD?

21. In your point of view, what are the main barriers facing your library currently regarding ASD services, equipment and facilities?

22. How do you think the new open libraries initiative will affect patrons with autism?
Appendix 2. Survey Questions

*1. Can you confirm that you are over 18?*

☐ Yes

☐ No

*2. Can you confirm your interest in autism? You can tick more than one box.*

☐ I am a person with autism

☐ I am a parent or guardian of a child or adult with autism

☐ I work in the educational sector dealing with autism e.g. teacher, SNA, etc

☐ I work in the medical profession dealing with autism

☐ I work as a care assistant or key worker with children or adults with autism

☐ Other (please specify)

☐

3. As someone on the autism spectrum or in a care giving or professional role for someone with autism, do you use your local library? For example, a parent bringing their child or an SNA/teacher bringing students.

☐ Yes

☐ No

If you answered yes can you advise what you like about your library and what services you use? Such as book lending, public computers, specific services such as story time etc.

☐

4. If you answered no to question 3 can you please advise why? You can tick more than one box. If you answered yes to question 3 please tick the option for not applicable.

☐ It’s too noisy

☐ It’s too quiet
The lights are too bright
People don’t understand me or the person I am with
Lack of awareness from library staff
The layout is unfamiliar
Certain smells such as the photocopier, glues from art and craft sessions, etc.
A reason unrelated to autism
Not Applicable
Other, for example texture of the furniture, ceiling fans, wall colours or other patterns. Can you specify?

5. Some libraries will open early by appointment to facilitate autism friendly hours that are specifically designed to meet the needs of someone with autism. Others have a specific sensory hour available where they turn off lights and background noise etc. Are you aware if your local library offers these services? You can tick more than one box if needed if your library offers both services.
Yes. They open early or late by appointment to facilitate autism friendly hours
Yes. They have a specific sensory hour/time slot within normal opening hours
No. They do not offer this service
I am not aware if they offer this service or not

6. If your library offers autism friendly or sensory hours can you advise if you use them or not and why. If they don’t provide these hours please tick the option for Not Applicable.
Yes I use autism friendly/sensory hours that are open within the normal opening hours of the library
Yes I use the autism friendly hours where my library will open early or late by appointment

☐ No I don't use this service

☐ Not applicable

Can you specify why you do use the autism friendly hours and what you like about them? If you do not use the autism friendly hours can you advise why not?

7. Are there any other autism friendly initiatives or services such as sensory story time or online maps of the library available in your local library.

☐ Yes other services are offered. Can you please specify below?

☐ No there are no other services offered

☐ I am not aware if other services are offered

Can you advise what other services are offered?

8. What changes do you think a library could make to make the library more autism friendly? Can you please select your top three changes that you think would make the biggest impact?

☐ More awareness from library staff

☐ A quiet room is available if needed

☐ Sensory changes such as lower lighting and calm music (or no music)

☐ Tolerance of certain noise levels

☐ Autism Friendly signage such as signs in the library showing where the toilets, water etc are located

☐ Signs advising that it is an autism friendly library

☐ A video online showing a walk-through of the library

☐ Map of library available online
Technology such as customised tablets with specialised apps, noise cancelling headphones etc
Provision of fidget toys for example as a distraction for children
Other (please specify)

9. If some or all of the above autism friendly changes from question 8 were implemented would you use your library more often?
☐ Yes
☐ No
☐ Maybe

10. What do you think are the greatest barriers to access to libraries for children and adults on the autism spectrum and their families? You can tick more than one box.
☐ Library staff (attitudes, sensitivities, awareness)
☐ Other library visitors (attitudes, sensitivities, awareness)
☐ Library’s physical environment (lighting, noise, universal design)
☐ Information technology (hardware, software and website design)
☐ Programmes on offer do not cater for children/adults with autism
☐ Collection resources not appropriate or suitable
☐ Communication difficulties
☐ I do not think there are any barriers
☐ Other (please specify)
11. If access to public libraries is improved, what benefits do you think this will bring children/adults with autism and their families support networks? You can tick more than one box.

☐ Motivation for the person to develop or practice a skill

☐ Increased social interaction for the whole family

☐ Development of support networks within their own community

☐ Feeling of being connected with the community

☐ A greater interest in reading

☐ Opportunities for lifelong learning

☐ Increased awareness of and referral to other support organisations within the community

☐ None of the above

☐ Other (please specify)

12. Do you have any other comments to make in relation to libraries and autism? This can be anything from you are happy with the services, the services are not good enough, your local library does not provide enough services etc.
Appendix 3. Open Ended Comments from Survey

Question 3. What people like about and use the library for.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Book lending, playing with toys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Book lending and playing with the toys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Very little verbal requirements for checking in and out books, quiet area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>I personally use my small local library regularly for book lending services. Staff are lovely and they do hold some events. I have never attended a story reading session...clashed with other activities and my child would have found it difficult to stay still. Couldn’t bring him to look at books too often either for the same reason.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Books &amp; Sensory toys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Book lending</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Book and DVD lending. Peaceful space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Books, games and videos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Books, social integration, new environment, research for their special interest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Book lending and interesting seating arrangements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>We go to the library at least once if not twice a week. My kids love how they can be in different areas, and be in control of what they want to do. They are well known by the staff in the library who actively chat to my kids. We take out books, comics, dvds, and audio cdxs from the library and attend relevant work shops</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>I bring my daughter to the children’s section</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Question 4. Reasons for not using the library.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>I love libraries, but there isn’t one near me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>It’s too small. There’s nowhere to sit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Even though I clicked yes in the previous question, I hate the lights in my library</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>I brought my son for a reading group and left we were interrupting as he couldn’t stay still</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>The doors are automatic and my son wil bolt straight out. We use a small library that is further away but safer for my son</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Question 8. Changes that could be made to make the library more autism friendly.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>OTHER (PLEASE SPECIFY)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>More consistent opening hours!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>friendly tour of library when registering at all aspects of the library</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Better library's in general - my local library - lucar unsuitable in ever area cramped noises small-ballyfermot - should be given creditation for design for autism friendly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Dewey decimal filing system, indexes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>I would tick all the above as they are fantastic ideas for all libraries to take part to make it more friendly for our Autism kids</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Some of the staff in the adult section can be quite rude and gruff, which is not nice for anyone but, as an autistic person, it causes me considerable upset.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Safety. It shouldn’t be so easy for any child to run straight out onto the street. No automatic doors</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Question 10. Barriers to access.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>OTHER (PLEASE SPECIFY)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>13 / 18</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Irish Libraries and Autism Services

1. I am finding it hard to understand how to renew my library card as I find it hard to communicate with staff. Would like to do this online instead.

2. Not sure - my teen only uses the library occasionally

3. Most libraries are very good with autism kids and adults, sometimes it can be the fear for the parent stopping them from going which can be the stress that comes with bringing an autism person into this environment

Question 11. Benefits if access is improved.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>OTHER (PLEASE SPECIFY)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15 / 18</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Irish Libraries and Autism Services

1. We are going to the library since my children where quite young, and during that time my kids have improved social skills, learned interaction, how to ask, work on their manners, etc to the extent that my son who is now 16 was able to contact them to see could he do his transition year work placement with them. They agreed and found it good for the staff and my son that they want him to come back in Sept to volunteer helping like he did during his work placement.

2. The above list of benefits is very patronising. It’s a simple case of equality of access. The same benefits of libraries that apply to any human would apply.

3. For children who hate noise it is a great place to be around people as there are lots of people there but everyone is quiet
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>RESPONSES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>I'm not acutely aware of the services, but will pay more attention to them on my next visit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Our library has no books regarding autism for adults or children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Social story boards of communication, visuals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Need more chairs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>My experience has always been positive in one library in particular as the children's section is large with plenty of space and none of the older Silence rules. Staff are so understanding and patient allowing my son to learn how to check out and return. Also great leeway with extending borrowing time when something becomes a favourite! My son is now 16 and I hope that he will be able to continue to access books for younger children without being judged by other customers or staff. Great survey and very best of luck with your work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>I have found the staff extremely accomodating I am key worker as well as a parent. My main issue is the physical environment of many libraries is not suitable - Even if autism sessions are available, a purpose build library is without doubt my go to, rather an the adapted ones.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>I am autistic and also a library assistant, but currently in an academic library. I can see the benefits that improving libraries (especially the physical buildings with the idea of universal design) could have for anyone with disabilities, including autistic people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Development of links with Autism groups to develop groups to meet together at a specific time at the library so it will encourage shared learning and develop networks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Local has very many fewer books than a few decades ago, and are now in bookshop sales categories, making it more like a small bookshop. This makes it very hard to browse by category, or even find detailed information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>I would love to see advertisement of autism friendly times in library. I also feel having an autism friendly story time for toddlers young children would be very helpful for both children and parents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Better education around autism and stimulating for the staff would make parents feel more accepted.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>I cant recommend the library enough as its a huge social currency for our kids with autism, even starting off with baby steps and knowing when to go when its quiet and gradually build up until there when its busy and noisy is a great development for the kids.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>There is a greater need for autism awareness in general and all public facilities should be friendly and accessible to all people, including autistic people. If I was going to prioritise a public service in need of drastic change, libraries would be low on the list.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>I have had other library users complain to the library staff that my son’s stimming is distracting and calling him a “public health hazard”. Also getting books out is an issue as currently he was the same ones all the time yet that is not possible. I am a big reader myself and I love that my son likes to look at books so the library the only option we really have as books are expensive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>We would use it more if it was more autism friendly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 4. Email to Libraries

From: Lou Ellen Kiely  
Sent: Thursday, June 21, 2018 12:14 PM  
To:  

Hi,

My name is Lou-Ellen Kiely and I am a mature student from Cork studying for a Masters in Information and Library Management in Dublin Business School. As part of the Masters we must complete a thesis over the summer and I am planning on doing my thesis on Libraries and Autism.

My thesis topic is "The role of Irish Public Libraries in Assisting Users with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Benefits, Challenges and other Considerations. I want to look at the benefits to such a service, how it is funded, what are the challenges, is the service being used and what else can be done. I also want to look at why the service is not being rolled out in all libraries.

I am aware that you offer specific autism friendly hours and I would like to ask if you would be willing to take part in a one to one interview with me, at a time and place convenient to you as part of my research? The interview will take less than one hour, and your time and input would be greatly appreciated. I fully understand that you may not have time to participate in my research but if you know of a colleague who would like to do so perhaps you could refer me to them.

Any data that is collected will be completely anonymous and will not contain any personal or identifying information about you. However, the name of the participating library will be included in the thesis.

If you have any queries, please do not hesitate to contact me at this email address or on 0876972858. I am also happy to forward a copy of the interview questions before meeting. I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for taking the time to consider my request and I look forward to hearing from you

Kindest Regards,
Lou-Ellen
Appendix 5. Information Sheet for Participants

INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARTICIPANTS

PROJECT TITLE

“The role of Irish Public Libraries in Assisting Users with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Benefits, Challenges and other Considerations”.

You are being asked to take part in a research study on various aspects of autism friendly programmes in public libraries.

The study is being conducted by Lou-Ellen Kiely – a student on the MSc in Information and Library Management Programme in Dublin Business School.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN

In this study, you will be asked to take part in a face to face interview with the researcher which will be recorded (assuming consent is given). The purpose of this interview is to gain as much insight as possible into the day to day workings of, the motivations for setting up, and the challenges of autism friendly programmes/hours in public libraries.

TIME COMMITMENT

The interview will take approximately 30 minutes.

PARTICIPANTS’ RIGHTS

- You may decide to stop being a part of the research study at any time without explanation required from you.
• You have the right to ask that any data you have supplied to that point be withdrawn / destroyed.
• You have the right to omit or refuse to answer or respond to any question that is asked of you.
• You have the right to have your questions about the procedures answered (unless answering these questions would interfere with the study’s outcome. A full de-briefing will be given after the study).
• If you have any questions as a result of reading this information sheet, you should ask the researcher before the study begins.

CONFIDENTIALITY/ANONYMITY

The data I collect does not contain any personal information about you. Your anonymity will be maintained at all times and no comments will be ascribed to you by name in any written document or verbal presentation. Nor will any data be used from the interview that might identify you to a third party, however the names of all participating libraries will be included in the thesis.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

I or / and my supervisor, Colin O’Keeffe, will be glad to answer your questions about this study at any time. You may contact my supervisor at Tel: 01 417 7594 or at colin.okeeffe@dbs.ie. Alternatively, I can be contacted on louellenh@yahoo.com.
INFORMED CONSENT FORM

PROJECT TITLE:
“The role of Irish Public Libraries in Assisting Users with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Benefits, Challenges and other Considerations”.

PROJECT SUMMARY:
My thesis topic is “The role of Irish Public Libraries in Assisting Users with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Benefits, Challenges and other Considerations”.

As part of my research I want to look at the various programmes being offered in public libraries in Ireland such as autism friendly hours. I want to see how these are funded, what are the challenges, is the service being used and what else can be done. I will also try to establish if it would be beneficial or even possible to offer these facilities in all public libraries. An analysis will also be done as to what services are offered in academic libraries and if these could be of benefit in a public library.

By signing below, you are agreeing that:

(1) you have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet,
(2) questions about your participation in this study have been answered satisfactorily,
(3) you are aware of the potential risks (if any), and
(4) you are taking part in this research study voluntarily (without coercion).

Participant’s (Printed) ____________________________  Participant’s Name signature ____________________________

Student Name (Printed) ____________________________  Student Name signature ____________________________

Date: ____________________________
Appendix 6. Example of a sign for an Autism Friendly Library

Figure 28 Autism Friendly Library signage

Taken from (Dimensions, 2018)
Appendix 7. Detailed Response from one parent regarding the benefits of using the library

“My son was diagnosed aged 6 with classic autism non-verbal with co morbid ADHD SPD. He was non-verbal until the age of 8. When my son was about 10 he was diagnosed as having dyslexia too. He only started reading at the age of 13. My son's love of the library developed from a young age. We went as a family to the library as a social outing. Getting him use to the different sounds, the journey up to it be it walking along the canal taking in nature, or driving up through the town to get him use to the directions. This became a regular thing for us, going once or twice during the week or on a Saturday, as we wanted him to learn to read, and by going to the library we felt that this process of making decisions would help and encourage him. Over the years we learned that his brain just wasn't ready or able to understand the process of reading, but we kept at it finding and trying out different methods.

Our library was one of the first to run the trial of the TTT programme, Toys, technology and training. This provided to be a huge success and we availed of many items under this scheme. Also, the library has hosted lots of the parent work shop talks.

My son took part in a reading scheme for a couple of years as it launched around the time his reading came in and they had the kids complete book reports on the chosen books they read over the summer holidays and they had tokens placed on their name cards in the library and in September there was a guest invited in to put on a show or a display for the kids, after they were given certificates of rewards, medals and goodie bags.

My son completed transition year back in May this year, and part of the TY as you know is to have work experience done.

I had sent an email to the HR dept of our local County Council and from there they sent it to the manager of our local branch and she then got in touch with me. We arranged suitable time and dates for my son to attend the library for completing the work experience and how it didn't impact on his school hours.
This proved to be a huge success and the manager was very proud of how my son completed the work experience that he was doing it for over 8wks. She actually wanted him to come in over the summer to volunteer but we had to decline as he needed the break to unwind, but he still goes on Tuesday as his time in the library. The jobs that he was looking after was as such as shelving, stacking, helping sort out rooms for talks, and removing the used date stamp white sheet and replace it with a new one. He did numerous little jobs, but he did so with great enthusiasm that she loved. She asked that he come back in September to do more and he has accepted this.

There is no specific programme in place in our library regarding autism, I think it was just by chance we had taken a chance sending off an email and taking it from there regarding TY work experience. They do take in a certain number of teens to cover their experience.