The Public Library Service of Fingal County
A Study of the Response of a Public Library Service to the Recession 2009-2012

Karen Manning
1983050

MSc in Information & Library Management
Dublin Business School

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Declaration

I, Karen Manning, declare that I am the sole author of this dissertation, that during the period of registered study I have not been registered for any other academic award or qualification, nor has any of the material been submitted wholly or partly for any other award. I have personally carried out all the work of which this is a record. The Masters in Information and Library Management of which this is part is awarded by The School of Business, Dublin Business School.

Signed: ______________________________________________________________

Date: ________________________________________________________________
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Abstract
This dissertation examines the response of the Public Library Service of Fingal County to the onset of the recession since 2009. It is a qualitative study, undertaken in July and August 2012, interviewing the members of staff of a number of library branches across Fingal County. The research outlines the opinions and perspectives of the staff members to the changes in the patrons’ demands of the public library service with particular emphasis on the needs of the job-seekers in the Fingal County. The research finds a library service that was primed to react to the dramatic increase in patrons using the service in the years since 2009. The service has successfully responded to the needs of the patrons. The service has experienced cuts in funding, staff numbers and opening hours but has increased its partnership and collaboration with other local state agencies and organisations {for instance schools, FAS (Irish National Training and Employment Authority), Age Action and Europe Direct} to meet the growing needs of the community. The study also highlights the growing trend towards volunteerism among library patrons in times of economic uncertainty. The public library continues to be a place of social inclusion for all the community of Fingal County regardless of means. The Public Library Service of Fingal County has proven that it is, and will remain, a fundamental cornerstone in the local community.
1. Introduction

The purpose of this dissertation is to examine the impact of the economic recession on the branches of the Public Library Service of Fingal County Council, the changes in borrower behaviour and the response of the library service to those changes. It examines the impact of the economic recession on the services and initiatives run by the various branches since 2009. These services are viewed from two perspectives: the services being run to meet the social and cultural demands of the library users across the county; and the services run to meet the demands of the unemployed users across the county. The research was carried out by conducting a number of interviews with the library staff across a number of the branches in the county. The branches visited were Blanchardstown, Malahide, Howth, Rush and Baldoyle. There were a number of different staffing grades represented among the sample and this provided a number of different perspectives on the impact of the changing economic condition. These interviews were then analysed to give insights into the impact of the economic recession on the public library service. For the purposes of this study the recession is considered to have impacted on the Fingal County area from 2009 onwards.

1.1 The Research Questions

The research questions addressed in this paper are:

What specific measures are Fingal County public libraries undertaking in response to the recession?

Sub-questions:

1. Have there been any significant changes in patrons’ requests of the Public Library Service of Fingal County?
2. Has there been any change in the demand/uptake for the computer courses, book clubs and other events and activities that the library offers?
3. Specifically, have the demands from job-seeking patrons increased or changed since 2009?
4. How has the Public Library Service in Fingal County responded to the change in economic conditions in the county?
1.2 Rationale Underpinning the Research

The driving force behind this research was newspaper reports of the closure of high street book stores in Ireland including Waterstones on Dawson Street, Dublin. (Guardian Newspaper 2011) Another high street bookseller to close their doors since 2009 was Borders. The reasons for these closures have no doubt been manifold but it provoked the idea that if people were no longer purchasing their own books, how was that demand now being met? Would this mean that people were now borrowing books in increased numbers from their local libraries? The original research question asked this simple question. It became apparent from a summary glance at any appropriate literature that the answer to this question is a resounding ‘Yes’. Times of recession always result in an upsurge in library visits and library borrowings. This recession has been no different. The question therefore was already answered. However, there are further areas that need examination. What are the actual impacts of the current recession on libraries in Ireland? Are these impacts the same regardless of the type of library that is being examined? How have libraries changed or reacted to these new driving forces? Are the current recession and its associated impacts being viewed as a threat to the viability of the libraries or is it being interpreted as a force for positive change?

Most of the existing literature on the impact of recessions on a public library service and the changing expectations of library users is from the United States of America. This may be due to a number of factors, namely the recession is generally understood to have hit the United States in 2008 and libraries reported an impact almost immediately. (ALA Report 2010) The second factor is that librarians in the United States may be more used to publishing articles on their profession and the factors influencing it. However, there a number of articles from Irish librarians that shine a spotlight into a service that is straining to meet the changing demands of its users and the community that it services.

This literature, unsurprisingly, focuses on the operation of a library service with reduced budgets for resources and staff. This is particularly true of the Irish context due to the recruitment embargo on the recruitment of staff to the public service. This has meant that in each branch I visited, the staff numbers had fallen in the last three years and the remaining library staff was attempting to deliver a quality service with less staff and straitened resources. This study is however, an attempt to describe this service and how it is being delivered and modified to change the demands of its users and its local community.
The interviews were conducted over July and August 2012 and describe the individuals’ perspective on the public library service of the Fingal County. They outline how they feel the library service has changed in response to the changing economic conditions; how the expectations of the library users has changed in the same period and they also describe the particular effect of unemployment and the search for jobs has impacted on the library service.

1.3 The Objectives of the Research

The objective of the study is to provide an understanding of how a public library service brings a benefit to the community it serves during times of economic downturn and to track the changing demands of the library users when their own economic circumstances have altered. It outlines the role that the public library fulfils in meeting the social and cultural demands of the local community; the partnerships it forms with other local groups and in particular its response to the issue of job-seeking among users of the service. The four themes of the study are as follows:

1. Identifying the various activities, courses, book-clubs and events that the libraries across Fingal County run for their local communities and library users;
2. Identifying those programmes of activities that have changed or have been added since the onset of the recession;
3. Has there been any change in particular library user profile since 2009;
4. Specifically, has there been any change in the service offered to ‘job-seekers’ or the unemployed within the local community that the branch serves.

The dissertation aims to provide an outline of the role that the public library plays in the local community particularly in times of economic recession. The study aims to highlight the responsiveness of the public library service in Fingal County to the needs of the community that it serves. Furthermore, it is the aim of the dissertation to provide examples of what else can be done to make the service more responsive to the needs of the library users and the wider local community.

The study is carried out from the perspective of the staff in the service, taken from all grades across 5 of the 9 branches. It does not however, attempt to survey the library users. The timescale of the project meant that a survey of this nature would be too time-consuming to administer and the amount of data collected may be too voluminous to analyse properly.
Although I acknowledge research from this perspective would complement and add to the findings laid out in this paper.

A further restriction of this study was the availability of the library staff to be interviewed. The responses to requests for interviews were generally well-received but some branches were unable to provide a staff member due to the staff shortages at the branch. This is indicative of another impact of the recession on the public library – the reduction in opening hours and staff numbers across the branches. In the course of the interviews, these effects were mentioned regularly and often cited as one of the reasons for changes in the services and activities run by the branch. These effects are expected to be exacerbated by the reduction in funding to local governments and the slow uptake in payment of the household charge across the country.

The report does not explore in depth how the librarians are coping with reduced opening hours and reduced staff numbers. The report does not delve into the attitudes of the staff at the coalface of a service that has been put under pressure due the changes brought on by the recession. Questions still remain as to how the libraries are being managed often with human resources gaps in the management structure. Budgets have been put under pressure as can be seen from the fall in stock from 2008 to 2009. The report does not examine the decision-making processes that the librarians are using to arrive at how to manage their collections and subscriptions to journal/periodicals and e-journals.

1.4 Irish Public Library Statistics 2009

In early 2011, a report on Local Government and associated local services was published by the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government. The report made some interesting points regarding the usage of Irish public libraries in 2009. All public libraries have seen some level of staffing cuts due to the moratorium on staff recruitment. Vacancies that have arisen due to retirement, maternity leave or staff leaving the service remain unfilled.

This decrease in staffing levels has been accompanied by a rise in patron visits to the libraries across the country. In 2008, there were 2,885 visits to full time libraries per 1,000 head of population. This increased in 2009 to 2,897 visits per 1,000 head of population. The number of internet sessions has increased year on year since 2007. The number of books issued has remained steady at approximately 3.40 items per head of population. However, “other items issued” has increased from 0.26 in 2007 to 0.39 in 2009. Expenditure on stock also fell from 2008 to 2009. (Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government Management
Services Board 2011) These other items include DVDs and VHS – this increase re-enforces
the view that the library “...is no longer simply a place where you read or take out books; it is
an information and entertainment centre ...” (Kanfer 2009, pg 12)

1.5 The Library Patron in a recession

The other focus is the impact that the recession may have had on the library patrons. Firstly,
what is the time frame under discussion when considering libraries, their patrons and the
recession? The recession is generally understood to have become universally apparent in
2008. (ALA Report 2010 2010) Therefore, 2009 could be considered as the first full calendar
year where the general population were actively engaging in behaviour that could be said to
have been driven by the recession. It is widely accepted by the leading media outlets that
disposable income has fallen in the majority of households. Unemployment is in the region of
14% nationally. (CSO 2011) The National Consumer agency reported the following key
findings in its Coping with the Recession report (National Consumer Agency 2011, pg 21):

- 61% of consumers reported that their household income had decreased since the same
  period last year.

- 33% of consumers stated that their number one money resolution for 2011 was to
  “budget better” with 22% resolving to “save more”.

- The biggest financial worries for 2011 are “not having enough money to meet day to
day expenses (mentioned by 32%) and “not being able to meet unexpected expenses”
(23%).

This suggests that the average consumer is no longer able to devote much of his/her
disposable income to purchasing such luxuries as books, DVD, VHS cassettes and other
media items. It can also be extrapolated that the same consumers have little disposable
income to devote to leisure time activities and are now seeking activities that will cost little in
monetary terms.
1.6 The Contribution of the Research

I will present a number of recommendations to which I believe the outcome of the research points. These recommendations will ensure that the public library remains a valued institution in our community and that any decisions to reduce the funding to the public libraries in Fingal County will not be undertaken lightly and if taken will be done in full knowledge of the consequences of those decisions. This research provides data that will enable us to make better practice decisions. The recommendations include the development of a programme of activities and events for patrons who are job-seeking and the cultivation of strategic partnerships between the Public Library Service of Fingal County and other agencies of the state (including schools, FAS, Age Action and Europe Direct) with the purpose of identifying and meeting the needs of the patrons.

1.7 Organisation of the Dissertation

The dissertation is organised into a number of chapters including this introduction. Chapter 2 presents a literature review. Chapter 3 discusses the methodology used to complete the research with an explanation of the choices that I made as the Researcher. Chapter 4 will present and analyse my findings. Chapter 5 will outline the conclusions and recommendations from the findings. Chapter 6 is an examination of the learning and skills that I, as a Researcher, developed during the dissertation process and by undertaking the Masters programme.
2. Literature Review

There are a number of different themes that have emerged from reading the associated literature. These themes are:

- United States Public Library Experience
- The “More for Less” Effect – providing additional services with less resources
- The Irish Experience
- The Recession as an Opportunity

I will discuss each of these themes in turn to contextualise the research.

2.1 United States Public Library Experience of Recession

2.1.1 Patron Behaviour

Much of the available literature acknowledges the negative effect that the recession has had on the public library service in the United States. This negative effect is mostly viewed as a decrease in salaries and a decrease in budget for services and collections. A 2002 ALA (American Library Association) study “explored the proposition of whether or not library use increases during an economic downturn … although [the study] suggests a relationship between public library use and the economic cycle, they do not themselves specify the immediate causes …” (Davis 2009, p. 12). The same article does outline that more recent studies have shown that there has been steady library usage among households but that the frequency of usage among those households has increased. Davis outlines his belief that it is a “…reasonable conclusion that libraries are used more when the economy is in decline may be directly linked to household disposable income …” (Davis 2009, p. 14). He also acknowledges that the reason for visiting the library has changed in the latter half of this decade from education to entertainment. Essentially this means that Americans are visiting their public library as part of their leisure time activities and to borrow movies, music, use the computers for leisure purposes and to borrow materials for leisure time reading. The question remains is the same pattern repeated among the patrons of Irish public libraries?
2.1.2 The US Public Library – An Access Route to Social Services

Many of the articles discuss the role of the public library in getting unemployed Americans back to work. The public library is often the refuge of the unemployed person in order to begin their job search. “As one South Florida man discovered, canceling his home Internet access and taking advantage of the free Internet service offered at his local public library could save his family over $700 a year, according to an article in the Huffington Post.” (ALA Report 2010, p. 6) These services are invaluable to a community with limited disposable income. Furthermore, staff report helping patrons to put together curricula vitae and complete online job applications. (Hill 2009) They report helping people in difficulty, for instance homeless families, to access the various state services that they require. (London 2010) The local public library has been an integral part of the social network for struggling communities. Various initiatives include teaming up with local employment agencies with a view to providing a holistic approach to job searching. As London states this work has often been carried out in the face of declining budgets and staff hours. “Major media outlets from the New York Times to the Today Show have trumpeted the spike in library use, especially as job services have become a priority, but they miss the story of how public libraries deliver services in spite of budget cuts and the impact on those who deliver them. Nevertheless, for some library systems, for some librarians, this crisis has been an opportunity. On a personal level, many library employees have been reminded of how essential their work is, and, on the systemic level, some institutions are finding ways to rise to the current crisis, through collaboration, outreach, and innovation.” (London 2010, p. 41)

2.1.3 Saving the Public Library

There are reports within a number of the articles that a number of public libraries were able to garner sufficient support from the local population to stave off further budgetary cuts or indeed, closure of the library itself. (London 2010) The library has become a focal part of the communities that they serve since the beginning of the downturn in 2008. The initiatives as outlined above have built on pre-existing positive impressions that most Americans have towards their public library. It also helps that the public library budget is determined at a local level and by local elected officials. The library and its staff have been able to convince these elected officials of the importance of the public library to its local community.
2.2 The “More for Less” Effect – providing additional services with less resources

This effect has been felt across the public library sector in Ireland and also within the United States. The percentage cuts that have been reported range from 8% to 20%. Venkatraman discusses the effect on libraries of the downturn in detail. (Venkatraman 2009) Further cuts over 2010 and 2011 were predicted at the time of publication. The Association of Research Libraries (ARL) confirmed “...Large libraries are far from exempt from the consequences of the current global economic crisis.” (Venkatraman 2009, p. 3). As has been discussed above, Irish public libraries have also been affected by cuts in funding. The Service Indicators Report identifies “the current economic challenges, the sharp reduction in staff and other resources” as driving the provision of service within the public library sector. (Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government Management Services Board 2011, p. 9) Any staff member that leaves the service is not being replaced despite the increased demand. The impact of this squeeze on the staff of public libraries in Ireland needs further examination.

2.2.1 Collection and Subscription Management

The other impact of cuts in funding is across the collection management, periodical subscriptions and other professional tasks such as cataloguing. Librarians have to make decisions regarding what monographic materials to purchase and still keep their collections up to date. The subscriptions to periodicals are also under review in most libraries. Much of the literature offers advice to the librarian to ensure that collections are not too badly affected by the current climate. For instance, Taylor offers the following advice: “It will always help to know exactly what you are not buying. If your book budget has been cut, keep [sic] a detailed list including costs of what you would have purchased had money been available. Rank each request based on your collection development policy and current need.... allot a percentage of the budget to catch up, but concentrate on keeping current with necessary items as much as possible.” (Taylor 2009, p. 31).

Van Orsdel et al discuss how to handle keeping subscriptions to periodicals relevant to the library. The conclusion is that a move towards electronic journals means that subscriptions can be cancelled until such time as funding increases. When the subscription is renewed, the back issues will come with the new licence. (Van Orsdel 2009) ARL recommends that publishers work with public libraries to develop new purchase models be derived to “reduce
the cost and vulnerability of established publications of high value.” (Venkatraman 2009, p. 3)

2.2.2 Professional Tasks
Professional tasks such as cataloguing are time consuming and labour intensive. The main recommendation coming from the literature is that these tasks should be done using online catalogues such as OCLC (Online Catalogue of the Library of Congress). This particular issue is to the forefront of research libraries. Taylor also recommends that shared cataloguing and metadata projects are pursued. He has reservations though about the movement away from cataloguing towards a dependency on keywords and tagging stating “... [a]s a former cataloguer, I am not yet convinced of the efficacy of this move, but as an administrator, I do believe that we spend proportionally too much of our budget on this category [cataloguing].” (Taylor 2009, p. 30)

2.3 The Irish Experience
2.3.1 Impact on Academic Libraries
The concentration of the literature on the recession and libraries from an Irish point of view is mostly on academic libraries. John Cox, University Librarian, National University of Ireland, Galway has written two articles outlined the impact of the cuts in funding that have been experienced by academic libraries. In some aspects the effects on academic libraries are the same as those facing the public library sector. Staff hours have been cut and as Cox states “the entire focus is on headcount reduction and the Library at NUI, Galway has endured a reduction of almost ten per cent in its FTE complement in 2009.” (Cox 2010, p. 12). This reduction has meant that staff re-organisation has had to take place at the Library and new Heads of Department structure has been implemented. This has had the effect of re-energising the library and its staff and service provision. “A strong thrust of the new structure is to maximise teamwork and collaboration ... with increased flexibility of deployment.” (Cox 2010, p. 13).

A second informative writer on the effect of the recession on the Irish public library is Liam Ronayne, Cork County Librarian. (Ronayne 2010) He has acknowledged the increase in library usage and notes that this has been as much as 20% in some areas. His contribution to the literature on the effects of the recession on the public library is to outline the important role that public libraries play in anchoring people to their community “to gain a foothold through a shared love of books, through learning, simply as a place to come to and be
accepted, no questions asked”. (Ronayne 2010, p. 15) He acknowledges the importance of libraries as places where social inclusion underpins the existence of the library. He maintains that Irish public libraries “are responding energetically and imaginatively to the recession … and they have the potential to do much more in meeting the needs of people directly affected by the recession”. (Ronayne 2010, p. 19)

2.3.2 Collection Management

As outlined in the previous sections, academic libraries are facing similar quandaries with regard to keeping their collections up to date and relevant for their students. Cox admires the initiative that has been undertaken with the establishment of the IRel (Irish Research eLibrary) consortium in 2004. (Cox 2010, p. 13) This initiative will help to maximise scarce resources in a time of economic downturn. The initiative involves access to over 25,000 e-journals along with a range of databases, e-books and reference materials. It contributes to the move towards a knowledge economy. (Forfas 2004) The doubt over future funding of this initiative puts the involvement of various subscribers to the project and Cox laments this. Overall Cox states that “there is more pain than gain in the area of collections. Valuable information resources are under threat locally and nationally, long-term gaps may afflict collections and funding for strategically important rare or archival material is limited.” (Cox 2010, p. 14) Ronayne also touches on this in his discussion of the fall in expenditure on public library stock, pointing to the An Chomhairle Leabharlann’s statistic that expenditure fell from €13.5 million in 2009 to €10 million in 2011. This fall comes after an 11% reduction between 2008 and 2009.

Staff members have had to be imaginative in their use of the falling stock levels. Ronayne attributes “imaginative freshening up of displays and moving stock between service points” in an effort to ensure that the public library does not return to the “less inviting and shabby place that they were perceived to be in past years”. (Ronayne 2010, p. 17)

2.4 The Recession as an Opportunity

2.4.1 The Positive Message

Throughout the literature, regardless of the location of the library or the type of library, the core message is one of positivity. All the authors, while acknowledging the negative impacts the recession is having on the library sector, urges all librarians to view these changes in a positive light – a chance to do things better. Even the titles of the various articles re-enforce this, for example Beck’s article This is our Chance to Shine (Beck 2009). The various authors
see that the recession gives the public library a chance to re-connect with their patrons and to put the public library to the core of the communities that they serve. Farrelly states that due to the fall in disposable incomes, the public library has become something like a “third space for teens, neither home or school ... a community institution, a positive arm of local government” (Farrelly 2010, p. 28). This is alongside the emerging view of public libraries as a place of entertainment referred to earlier in this discussion. (Kanfer 2009) Farrelly backs this point up by explaining that people are visiting their libraries with a view to borrowing more than books. Patrons are visiting to access the latest technology, use computers with high speed internet access and to avail of the access to the other services on offer. Farrelly says that libraries “... can be even more useful, more a source of inspiration and ... hope. Services offered and information garners a huge return of money investments.” (Farrelly 2010, p. 29) This is backed up by the evidence offered in the Services Indicator Report 2009 outlined earlier in the discussion. (Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government Management Services Board 2011).

The position of the public library as a place of social inclusion is emphasised by Ronayne and this is a particularly important opportunity for the public library at a time of recession. He acknowledges that at a time of high unemployment and with less disposable income can alienate people from their own communities. Libraries have the opportunity to devise programmes and services that directly address these problems. (Ronayne 2010, p. 18)

2.4.2 Different Libraries – Different Approaches
John Cox, the University Librarian, Galway discusses the same issue from the perspective of the academic library and he sees the opportunities in three categories:

- Resourcing
- Technological Change
- Proof of Relevance

Essentially Cox’s point is that libraries have to streamline how they operate to ensure that they keep within the new budgetary constraints. New roles and responsibilities need to be defined in order to ensure that the library maintains its high service levels. This has been the case in his library and has wiped away a feeling of stagnation that had come about over the previous ten years. (Cox 2010) Cox advocates that librarians be very clear about their purpose and value and align this with the overall strategic plan of the university as a whole. (Cox 2010, p. 8) This will enable the library to maintain a sense of purpose. Technology can
be used to leverage this sense of purpose. Positioning libraries as central to the development of a knowledge economy can be achieved through the use of new technologies. The most prolific example of this is the IReL project outlined above. (Cox 2010)

Other librarians have offered their views as to how the recession can be leveraged to improve libraries and their operations. Hill offers a sample of responses from various librarians working in the United States. All three interviewees report a large increase in patrons visiting their libraries. Job hunting is often the driver for these visits and the staff members have had to become very proficient in dealing with the queries that this brings about and also explaining what the library is about and the services that it offers. (Hill 2009) The librarians interviewed have talked about how valuable their library’s website has become as a tool for communicating with their public. They report an upsurge in visitors to their sites and OPACs.

The recession is viewed as an opportunity to review the user statistics that are available and to fine tune what is on offer to the patrons. (King 2009) Tighter budget controls mean that collection management has to be more efficient. In essence, as Taylor states “... it helps to view budget control as a positive opportunity – a chance to re-evaluate library functions, to re-conceive what is essential, to re-conceptualise what the library is doing ... there can be something creative and energising in employing this line of thinking. It is more than a challenge to do more with what you have; it should also be a challenge to do something entirely different.” (Taylor 2009, p. 29)

2.5 Conclusion

The discussion outlined in this chapter endeavours to contextualise the need for further research into the response of the public library sector in Ireland to economic recession. It points to the United States as the source of much of the debate around this particular topic. Cox’s articles discuss the issues from an Irish academic library point of view whilst Ronayne begins a very valuable discussion on the role of the Irish public library service in meeting the needs of the community it serves in times of recession.

There are four main themes emerging from the existing literature. These are:

- United States Public Library Experience of Recession
- The “More for Less” Effect – providing additional services with less resources
- The Irish Experience
- The Recession as an Opportunity
Overall, there is a determination that the recession will be viewed as a positive catalyst for change. Librarians are urged to take the opportunity of better budget control to streamline their business processes and to tighten up their collection and subscription management. The restriction on staff numbers has had knock-on effects on the service that is on offer both in Ireland and in the United States. This has pushed some library patrons online to use the OPAC or the library websites. Libraries have become a core part of the community that they serve. They have become a “third space” (Farrelly 2010) and a place of entertainment for the whole family. (Kanfer 2009) Libraries are providing a route to social services and as a result various alliances have been forged with other social service providers (for example, employment agencies).

To re-iterate, the research questions addressed in this paper are:

What specific measures are Fingal County public libraries undertaking in response to the recession?

Sub-questions:

1. Have there been any significant changes in patrons’ requests of the Public Library Service of Fingal County?
2. Has there been any change in the demand/uptake for the computer courses, book clubs and other events and activities that the library offers?
3. Specifically, have the demands from job-seeking patrons increased or changed since 2009?
4. How has the Public Library Service in Fingal County responded to the change in economic conditions in the county?
3. **Methodology**

3.1 **Introduction**

The purpose of the study is to identify any changing expectations among library patrons in the Fingal County area as a result of the recession and to outline the responses of the various branches to these changes. As outlined in the introduction, there is an increase in library usage since 2009 as evidenced in the findings of the report on Local Government and associated local services published in early 2011. (Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government Management Services Board 2011) These increases in numbers do not capture the full extent of the changes in library usage however. They also do not explain the response of the library service in the area to these changes. In order to get an understanding of this complexity of this impact of the recession, I have undertaken a small scale qualitative study of the changes in the patrons’ expectations of the library service and to examine what the branches have done to meet these changing expectations. The study will also identify the use of the library as a social space for its patrons and how this has changed since the onset of the recession. The focus of my study has driven my choice of philosophy, strategy and approach.

The structure of this chapter is to take each area of the research process and to apply it to my research project. The chapter will discuss the decisions taken by me in undertaking this study and will outline the reasons for these decisions. It will also outline how the study was conducted to facilitate future research projects in this area of study.

3.2 **Research Philosophy**

The research philosophy chosen to underpin this study is **Interpretivism**. This choice reflects my understanding and view of the world and how people operate within it. This philosophy is one of a number of different philosophies that drive research. These philosophies range from considering the bare facts without any reference to the environment that gives rise to these facts (**Positivism**) to understanding that facts are dependent the subject’s understanding of the world around them (**Realism**). (Saunders & Lewis 2009) Interpretivism is the philosophy furthest along the spectrum where the facts can only be gathered and studied in the context or environment in which they occur and gaining an understanding of how the research subjects interpret their own environment. I believe that this philosophy is particularly suited to the research questions under investigation. It is an effective approach when attempting to
understand organisational behaviour which is an aspect of this research project. It is also a philosophy that takes account of the impact one’s environment has on one’s behaviour.

This approach has been chosen as it is important that the researcher needs to understand the difference between people as ‘social actors’ and also needs to have strong empathetic skills to enter the participants’ world and to understand it. (Saunders & Lewis 2009) This is an important methodological choice as it allows the study to expand/retract to take into account what the participants reveal during the interviews. This approach, I believe, suits the library environment and the research questions that I am examining. Essentially this research project is about the changes in environment, the impact of the recession, causing a change in library patrons’ behaviour and the subsequent change in the library service. Furthermore, this change is being tracked from the perspective of individual library staff members.

The other philosophies of Positivism and Realism were rejected when I was considering which philosophy to use to drive this study as they were not sufficiently concerned with the impact of the person’s environment on their behaviour.

3.3 Research Approach

The research approach is an Inductive approach. This essentially means that through observation and recording of evidence, a theory will be derived. The findings of the research project will be based on the interview output and the analysis of this output and any findings will help develop a thesis. As a researcher, I am particularly interested in the context of events and the interview strategy will help to more clearly track the context and get answers to my research questions. An inductive approach compliments the research philosophy chosen and the qualitative nature of the study.

However, through the literature review and an understanding of what has happened in times of recession in other countries (particularly the public libraries in the United States of America), I had a theory formed that I wished to explore. This theory helped drive the development of my research questions and the questionnaire that was used during the face to face interviews. The research approach therefore is not a straightforward choice between an Inductive and Deductive approach. It takes account of the fact that I as the researcher was aware that my research questions were framed by my understanding of the literature in advance of beginning my study.
3.4 Research Strategy and Choice

The research strategy I chose to use to undertake this project was a suite of semi-structured interviews across a number of library branches in the Fingal County area. I chose to use this method alone as the interviews were going to be in-depth in nature and would provide a wealth of qualitative data. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were chosen over structured interviews because “it allows a certain degree of flexibility and allows for the pursuit of unexpected line of enquiry during the interview”. (Grix 2001, p. 127) This method was chosen to support the detailed exploration of the behaviour of the library patrons since the onset of the recession from the perspective of the library staff.

These changes are more interesting than the bare user statistics available in the reports of the local government. User statistics tell us how many library visits are occurring and how often library items are borrowed. Budgets can tell us what is happening with library stock and subscriptions and what is occurring with staffing levels at the branches. This data does not explore why patrons are coming to their public library and what they want from their library since the onset of the recession. Nor does this user data show what the branches and the library staff have done to meet these changing expectations.

Another reason for choosing the semi-structured interview method is to allow the conversation between me as the researcher and the interviewee to be wide ranging and to allow the interviewee to explore the research questions from their own perspective. In the space of one hour (the average length of the each interview), is a relatively quick way to get a better understanding of the impacts of the recession on patrons’ expectations and the response of the library service to these expectations. The semi-structured interview gave me the chance to explore themes in subsequent interviews as they became apparent in earlier interviews. It also allowed the interviewee to discuss matters and issues that they saw as important from their own perspective of the research questions.

This research strategy also assists in overcoming the time constraints of this research project. The interviews will be the only data collection method employed and thus, it is a mono-method research project.

3.5 Time Horizon

The time horizon of this research project is cross-sectional. It is a snapshot in time of the staff at a number of the branches of the Fingal County public library service. This was chosen in
order to meet the time constraints inherent within this project. The timeline of the study was July and August 2012.

3.6 Techniques and Procedures

The focus of the interview was driven by the research questions. I was exploring why library patrons were visiting their library since the onset of the recession in greater numbers. I was also concerned with what the patrons were going to expect from their library when they arrived to the branch. The second focus of the research project is what the branches have done to meet these changing expectations. From the literature, the behaviour of job seeking patrons was of particular interest to me as a researcher. These were the themes I was attempting to explore:

- Identification of the services, courses, book clubs that the branch runs;
- Changes in services, courses, book clubs since 2009, if any;
- Changes in these services according to patron groups – student/teens; job-seekers; older age groups;
- Examples of initiatives (new courses, book clubs, etc) introduced since 2009;
- Specific questions around ‘job-seeking’ patrons – do patrons identify themselves as job-seekers and request specific services;
- Examples of initiatives to assist job-seekers, if any.

3.6.1 How the research was carried out

I undertook a round of interviews with members of staff across the library branches. These members of staff were from a number of different grades within the service and also across the various branches. The interviewees were nominated within each branch by the senior librarian. In two cases, I met directly with the senior librarian. Otherwise, it was a mixture of full and part time library assistants of various grades. Fingal County houses the largest public library in the Republic of Ireland - the Blanchardstown branch; serving a large urban community. The other branches range from medium to small branches from urban to more rural areas across the northern side of the Dublin County. I contacted the branches using the branch email address on the Fingal County Council website. Each branch was sent the same email (Appendix 1) introducing myself, what I was doing and requesting access to staff members across the organisation. There are 9 branches and a head-quarters in the county. Of these, 5 branches agreed to participate in the study and made a number of staff members available to meet with me. These staff members ranged from Grade 1 library assistant to
senior librarians. There were a total of 9 interviews executed. I was in a position to digitally record 8 of these interviews.

The interview was piloted with a telephone interview with a librarian from the Dun Laoghaire Rathdown library service and following that telephone interview, I amended my questionnaire to focus on the research questions at hand. The questions were refined and developed as appropriate. The interviews were guided by a list of approximately 18 questions. The participants were provided with an interview guide (Appendix 2) outlining the various themes that I hoped to address during our discussion. It was expected that each interview would take approximately one hour and in most cases, this was true. Some interviews were shorter, mostly as the participant had little to add to the discussion other than highlighting the impact of staff reductions on the service and what the library could offer its patrons. These findings will be discussed in detail in the subsequent sections of this report.

The interview was recorded by a digital voice recorder and I took notes of the pertinent points in order to facilitate later analysis. Some notes regarding the body language of the participant was noted where it added to the point under discussion. The recordings were then fully transcribed and analysed using Categorisation. Categorisation and unitisation of the transcripts was used to consolidate the emerging themes. This approach meant that there “well-structured, analytical framework” (Saunders & Lewis 2009, p. 480) in which I was able to develop my theory. This analysis was carried out manually. As I had set the interview questions and had carried out all the interviews personally, I was familiar with the emerging themes.

3.6.2 The Value and Importance of the Study

The study is of value as it assists in understanding the important role that the public library plays in a community. This role is a significant one at a time when the community is experiencing changes in their economic circumstances. It is recognised that since the onset of the recession, a large section of the population have experienced a decrease in their living standards and their disposable income. My aim is to demonstrate the role that the public library plays in providing support to the community in times of economic difficulty. The study will help inform the debate on the value of the public library at a time when public funds are under increasing pressure. The study aims to assist in proving the value of maintaining the funding of public libraries both in the staff budgets and the budgets for collection maintenance.
3.6.3 The Validity of the Study

The validity of the study is proven by the fact that the research questions have relevance to the understanding of the role of the public library in Fingal County area and they have been sufficiently answered. As the Researcher, I believe that the study has revealed the changing expectations of the library patron since the onset of the recession and what the branches have done to meet these expectations. The study has made clear how the library patrons use their public library and what the branches have done to meet their needs. The research strategy and approach has been successful in revealing this situation.

3.6.4 The Restrictions of the Method

The method chosen means that there was a small number of participants unlike in a questionnaire-driven study. This means that it may be difficult to apply the findings to any other public libraries and their service either in the Republic of Ireland or abroad. I attempted to offset that limitation by contacting all the branches in the Fingal County area and requesting that the branch make as many of their staff available to be interviewed. By the nature of the study, it was always going to be a small scale research project. However, the branches I visited were of different sizes and served different local populations from the more rural branches (Rush, Howth and Malahide) to the urban branches (Blanchardstown and Baldoyle). This selection and the fact that the staff members interviewed had moved regularly throughout the county gives the findings a level consistency and applicability for other public library services in the Republic of Ireland. This applicability may be less successful for public library services in other overseas but may provide a counterpoint to similar analysis carried out abroad.

A second limitation is that the questions themselves do not manage to reveal the full situation of the response of the public libraries in Fingal County to the recession. I attempted to offset that limitation by carrying out a pilot interview as outlined above. I carried out the interview as I did with the actual participants and then asked the interviewee to comment on the questions or to point me in the direction of other salient points that may help to get to the heart of the matter.

The sample of staff may also be a limitation in that most participants in the interviews were from the more junior staffing levels (although some were long serving members of staff). Again, the limitation may affect the applicability of the findings of the study. This limitation was unavoidable as the participant was making themselves available for an hour. However,
as the study was attempting to understand what the patrons were requesting of their public library service, it was important to talk to those who were on the front line of the delivery of that service.

The study could have been undertaken by providing a questionnaire to all staff and this would have then be analysed in detail. This approach did not lend itself to the subjective nature of what I was attempting to understand. It would also have been time consuming to get all staff of the Fingal County library service to respond to the questionnaire and focused interviews presented a quicker method to get that information. The questionnaire format would not have allowed the participants expand on the changing expectations of their patrons and how they have attempted to respond.

However, I believe that the study has findings that may help inform the debate on the value of the public libraries in the Republic of Ireland and may go some way to protecting the funding of the public libraries.

3.7 Ethical issues

It was important to consider any ethical issues that may have arisen in the course of this research project. One of these issues was the potential that the responses of the interviewees may have been skewed by the fact that the interviews were being recorded and as such could be reviewed by a manager in the Fingal County library service or any other interested party. It was made very clear in advance of the interview (on the interview guide) and also at the beginning of the recorded interview that the content of the interview was confidential. Although direct quotations may have been used when writing up the final report, it would not be attributed to a particular interviewee. The interview questions were also piloted in advance with a librarian outside the area of research to offset any bias that may have been in the phrasing of the question.

Another ethical issue was that the bias of the interviewer would influence the responses of the interviewees. This issue was monitored through the use of the recordings of the interviews and the subsequent contact with the participants via email. The purpose of this contact was to provide the participants with a synopsis of the interview (although not a full transcription) so that they were satisfied that they had not been misrepresented when the interview had been transcribed. This also allowed the participant to review what had been said (at a high level) and to comment, clarify or correct where they deemed appropriate. It was also an opportunity
for the participant to add anything extra that may have occurred to them on mature recollection of the interview and its topics. This approach was welcomed by all participants.
4. Findings and Qualitative Analysis

4.1 Introduction

This chapter describes the analysis from the findings of the semi-structured interviews carried out over July and August 2012 with the library staff of the Fingal County Public Library service. There were ten interviews in total carried out. The staff members represented a number of different grades and this assisted in gathering a number of different perspectives on the library service since 2009. The findings are organised according to themes that emerged following a detailed analysis of the interviews. This analysis was carried out by developing a set of codes and sub-codes and applying them to the transcribed interviews. In the case of those interviews that could not be recorded, the coding was applied to the handwritten notes. The interviews were semi-structured interviews and were organised around a set of 18 questions. However, the interviewees were encouraged to speak about their own experiences and perspectives on the research topic. They had been given an opportunity to dwell on the themes having received an interview guide in advance of the interview. The themes that the 18 questions addressed were:

- Identification of the services, courses, book clubs that the branch runs;
- Changes in services, courses, book clubs since 2009, if any;
- Changes in these services according to patron groups – student/teens; job-seekers; older age groups);
- Examples of initiatives (new courses, book clubs, etc) introduced since 2009;
- Specific questions around ‘job-seeking’ patrons – do patrons identify themselves as job seekers and request specific services;
- Examples of initiatives to assist job-seekers, if any.

As the interviews were positioned as a discussion group, the concentration on the various themes varied throughout the different interviews. The experience of the staff member as well as their grade, whether they were working on the front-line of service delivery or were more involved in the management of the library service impacted on their perspective and experience of the themes. All 18 questions were rarely directly asked as the discussion often dealt with the issues in a natural fashion. Where this was the case, I acknowledged this with the participant and did a quick synopsis during the course of interview to ensure that all major areas of concern were touched upon.
Over the course of a number of interviews including the pilot interview carried out over the telephone, additional questions or points of interest arose and the questionnaire developed from there. These additional points of interest were addressed in all the subsequent interviews.

### 4.2 Emerging Themes

Overall the findings from the interview show the Public Library Service of Fingal County to be a very integrated service across all the branches. The various staff members moved regularly from branch to branch and also from the relief team to cover positions in other branches that I did not get the opportunity to visit. Given this fact, I am confident that the findings outlined in this chapter will apply equally to the other branches within Fingal County despite the fact that I was unable to interview staff members there.

The other strong theme to emerge was the similarity in the programme of events run across all the branches. There were book clubs, events for children, art class and computer classes run in nearly all the branches that I visited. In all branches there was exhibition space that was very much in demand. All branches had divided their borrowers into 3 major groupings: Children, Young Adults and Adults. The activities that the branches run are then focused on those groups. The events and activities are tailored to meet the group’s needs and interests.

However, that is not to say that all the branches were exactly the same as each other. The local community gave each branch a distinctive character and coloured the activities programme accordingly. The branches of Howth, Rush and Malahide had a greater emphasis on maritime activities than Blanchardstown. Rush also had a horticultural focus that was absent from the other branches. Blanchardstown and Ballybofey branches are more urban branches and this is reflected in their activities and events. These differences between the branches are outlined in greater detail in this chapter. All branches are dealing with a more multi-cultural population than in the past. This diversity was been reflected in the activities and events that are being run.

**Unemployment** is a phenomenon that all branches are dealing with although the effects are different from branch to branch. Blanchardstown and Ballybofey are experiencing higher levels of unemployment than the Howth and Malahide branches. This is another indication of the differences between the branches visited and the applicability of the findings to other public library services. This diversity has also given a wide breadth of data to analyse. The other
factor putting demands on the public library service is the increase in recently retired people who have availed of the various early retirement packages from the civil and public service. These people are in the 55+ age group but remain active participants in community life and this is apparent through their use of the public library service.

**Ongoing adult and further education** and **supporting the more traditional student groups** is putting considerable pressure on the library service across the Fingal County. Students accessing the library for resources and a place to study have risen steadily since 2009. The pressure on some branches was particularly acute in the past six months.

Another factor to consider when examining the individual branches in the Fingal County area is the effect that the **self-service initiatives** have had on the service and the service delivery. All the participants discussed the self-service terminals in terms of the improvements to customer service that have been seen. The provision also of an **online catalogue and reservations and renewal service** over the past three to four years is also seen as a benefit to the delivery of the service. Those branches (particularly Howth) that are still waiting to come online and to get self-service machines are looking forward to these developments and view them as an opportunity to reach out to the community and to deliver a more meaningful service. The self-service machines have been a two-edged sword for others and have raised significant issues in terms of the patrons’ view of the library and its staff. I intend to discuss this in greater detail later in the chapter.
4.3 Performance Indicators

The following performance indicators supplied by an interviewee from internal reports that are used to analyse the public library service within the county show particularly clearly the challenges that the service has faced since 2009:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Performance Indicators</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2008</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Registered Members</td>
<td>129,020</td>
<td>88,616</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Registered members as a % of the local population (2006 census)</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visits by the public to Fingal libraries</td>
<td>1,043,983</td>
<td>1,003,683</td>
<td>986,988</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Website Visits</td>
<td>63,126</td>
<td>3,571</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Items Issued Per head of the population (Books &amp; Other)</td>
<td>5.13</td>
<td>5.01</td>
<td>4.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book expenditure per capita</td>
<td>4.15</td>
<td>5.83</td>
<td>7.18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Performance Indicators 2008 - 2010

The other interesting statistic supplied by one interviewee was the visits across all branches in the Fingal public library service for this year alone is 111,279. All interviewees reported that the branches are distinctly busier in the past 3 years. The performance indicators above show that this is clearly the case.

The research questions being addressed are concerned with this increase and/or change in the demands of the library patrons, how it has displayed itself and if there is a specific change in expectations by the job seeking patrons of the public library service. Overall, how has the public library service of Fingal County responded to the changes that the recession has brought?

4.4 Thematic Analysis

This part of the chapter is broken down into the following themes - each will have its own section:

- The activities and events run by the branch;
- The changes in the patrons’ expectations of the service since 2009;
The changes in the job-seeking patrons’ expectations of the service since 2009;
The developing partnerships between the public library and other agencies;
The use of the library as a social space.

4.4.1 Activities and Events being run by the branches

The public library in the Fingal County has an important role to play in providing patrons with access to many educational and cultural activities. This role is where the value added nature of the public library service is most apparent. One of the interviewees provided me with a number of different statistics that the Fingal County use to report on the public library service. An important statistic is the number of events and exhibitions that were run over the course of a year across all the branches. 2010 is the year that statistics were provided for and below is a table outlining the events in total over the year with the corresponding attendances across the branches that I visited:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Branch Code</th>
<th>Branch Name</th>
<th>Events 2012</th>
<th>Exhibitions 2012</th>
<th>Events 2010</th>
<th>Exhibitions 2010</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>VV</td>
<td>Baldoyle</td>
<td>264</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>320</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BA</td>
<td>Blanchardstown</td>
<td>No figs returned</td>
<td>No figs returned</td>
<td>1861</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SS</td>
<td>Howth</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MA</td>
<td>Malahide</td>
<td>323</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>521</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RS</td>
<td>Rush</td>
<td>224</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Events per branch 2012 v 2010

The events are aimed at specific patrons and span a range of cultural, educational and information services. The events are mostly facilitated by the library and the library staff and run by volunteers. Before 2009, these events did have more staff involvement but the cuts in budget and staff numbers has impacted on the involvement that the staff can have in these events. Nonetheless, the events hosted by the public libraries across Fingal County perform a vital public service in meeting the needs that the library patrons have.

4.4.1.1 Book clubs

Book clubs are an important service that every branch I visited provided to its patrons. The library staff facilitated the meeting of book clubs either within the library building or in recommending reading lists for the members of the club. In all but Howth, the book clubs
met on site and in most cases, there was more than one adult book club. There were a number of branches that supported a Young Adult book club also. In Blanchardstown, there are three adult book clubs meeting once a month. This number is an increase of one club since 2009. In 2009, the library staff were involved in the administration of the club and attended the meetings also. However, the staff has had to reduce their involvement considerably since 2009. Rush, Baldoyle and Malahide branches report a similar pattern with the administration of book clubs. Howth branch has never hosted the local book clubs as the branch has quite limited space. All branches organise access to the chosen reading material for the members and this often means having books delivered to the branch from across the other county branches.

When asked whether there had been an increase in demand for membership to the book clubs, there was a mixed response. In Blanchardstown the number of clubs had increased from 2 to 3 during the period and Malahide branch reported an increase to 5 branches since 2009. The other branches had not seen an increase in the number of clubs being established but reported a small increased demand to join. No interviewees felt that the membership profile of the book clubs had changed greatly since 2009.

4.4.1.2 Mother & Toddler Groups

These groups are again facilitated in every branch visited and remain an important service the library provides to the local community. A similar pattern of decreasing staff involvement with the groups is reported as with the book clubs. The demand for the clubs has risen in some branches (particularly Blanchardstown) and the availability of staff to run and administer the group has fallen since 2009. The staff members in the period up to 2009 were actively involved in the running of the Mother and Toddler group and attended the meetings. They often held activities such as arts and crafts and storytelling for the children. This service is no longer possible in any of the branches due to the reduction in staff numbers in the same period.

In Blanchardstown the number of mornings when meetings were held has been reduced from 2 to 1 as the staff availability to organise the meetings is reduced. However, an interesting development is the organisation of Mother and Toddler groups for specific ethnic groups, for example the local Nigerian community in Blanchardstown. This group meets every Saturday morning in one of the library’s meeting rooms. The interviewees from Blanchardstown
commented also on the increased number of fathers who were attending the group with their children and the junior library in general.

4.4.1.3 Junior Library Activities

The junior libraries in all the branches I visited are very active. The numbers of children being brought to the library since 2009 has increased. As noted above, the prevalence of fathers bringing their children to the library has increased in the same period. This pattern is recorded by all the branches. In the period prior to 2009, the library staff themselves hosted arts and crafts and storytelling activities. This has decreased in most branches mainly due to the shortage of staff numbers in the intervening period. Instead, children’s entertainers and children’s authors are invited to attend the library for specific sessions with the children. These events are always heavily subscribed. This is a normal pattern however, and no branch reported a particularly marked increase in the numbers attending the children’s events.

4.4.1.4 Young Adult Activities

The events for Young Adults were probably the least developed of all the services run within the branches. The popularity of fiction such as the ‘Twilight’ series has increased the numbers of that age group attending the library. Some branches have made particular efforts to attract the Young Adult age group with author visits proving to be particularly popular. Other branches, most notably Baldoyle, has provided dance classes for this age group using hip-hop and rap music as a way to attract the teen audience. The difficulty that most staff identified in reaching out to this age group is finding a way to communicate with them. The use of the social media sites, Facebook and Twitter, is actively encouraged and promoted across the Fingal County library service. Despite these media being particularly popular with the teenage group, very few of them will ‘follow’ or ‘like’ a library site. They are also no longer brought to the library by their parents. The most likely interaction they have is through their school. The partnership between the library and the schools is particularly strong and will be discussed in further detail below.

4.4.1.5 Adult Activities

The activities for adults are wide ranging from art class, exhibitions, computer classes, language learning classes, meditation and relaxation classes, social media and networking talks to the various activities supported by the Bealtaine Festival, Age Action, Europe Direct and other state agencies including FAS and Co. Dublin VEC and CDVEC.
The adult activities are very popular and all branches are oversubscribed with waiting lists for most adult events. Branch staff report a huge demand in the computer classes and most branches publish their timetable for events and enrolment at a set time each month or quarter to ensure fairness in who can access the various courses. In Blanchardstown, enrolment for new courses happens on the 1st of each month or the nearest working day.

Age Action is an active organisation within most of the local communities of the branches that I visited. They were responsible for recognising a need among their members and bringing that need to the local library to see if it could be met. This has resulted in a wide range of computer and IT courses offered across all the branches of the Fingal library service. The Bealtaine Festival is also run for the over 55s age group. This festival brings to the libraries across Fingal activities and events aimed particularly at this age group. Activities such as will-making and retirement preparation courses have been very popular over the last few years.

Language courses are also proving to be extremely popular across all adult age groups. In the period before 2009, there was a growth in the number of non-nationals taking English as a Foreign Language classes in the library and although the numbers here remain high, a number of the staff interviewed across the branches, pointed out that there has been an increase in Irish people taking language classes to improve their marketable skills. Europe Direct is another source of funding for language courses. These courses are only one of many initiatives supported by Europe Direct in the library branches.

Events such as those run around times of European referenda are one of the only times that the local library becomes politicised. It is an important tenet of the ethos of the public library service in Fingal County that the public library remains an apolitical and non religious environment. This ethos is important to ensure that the library remains a space in which all members of the community feel welcome and that there is no social exclusion experienced by any patrons of the service. This point was emphasised by a number of staff across the branches during their interviews.

4.4.2 Changing Expectations of the library patrons since 2009

The next theme to be examined as part of the interview was to establish if there had been any change in expectations of the library patron since 2009. This was recognised by most interviewees as hard to track. Most interviewees felt that the patrons had not come to the library with a particular set of demands or expectations. In fact, most of the interviewees
expressed the opinion that most people who came to the library for the first time or became more regular users of the service since 2009 were surprised at the range of services, activities and events that were on offer in the branch. One of the most commented upon change was the fact that patrons did not seem to be aware of the breadth of material and resources that could be borrowed from the library. Items such as DVD box sets, art prints, and computer games are proving to be a particular draw and the interviewees told of many patrons who were surprised on coming to the library for the first time that items like this were available to borrow.

The schedule of events and activities for children and young adults did not change substantially over the period under examination. The change that was most discernible was the usage of the service by children who before may have had their books, dvds and computer games bought for them. Two of the interviewees made reference to parents bringing their children to the library now as there was no disposable income to buy these items any longer.

The events and activities for adults, whilst there have been some changes in the patrons now attending the computer and language courses, the patrons have not expressed any substantial change in their expectations of the library service. The library would appear to be providing the activities and events for which the adult patrons are looking. The branches have offered courses on social media and how to use them in the past two to three years and these have proven to very popular. In the case of Blanchardstown, the library assistant ran the course himself and it was fully booked. Other libraries have volunteers who come to the library to offer courses on LinkedIn and other professional online networking programmes. This will be discussed further under the initiatives for job-seekers below.

Where there has been substantial change in the expectations of the patrons is in the materials that is requested either at the dedicated Reference Desk in Blanchardstown and Malahide or at the general desk in the smaller branches. The library staff all commented on the change in requests for material and books in the education sphere. In the mid-2000s childcare material was in very high demand. This demand was particularly prevalent in the Blanchardstown branch and two of the interviewees expressed the opinion that childcare material could not be kept on the shelves. This demand has fallen away since 2009. The resources that are now in demand have moved towards accountancy, business and management material. The public library is now being used to help people improve their skills in their careers.
4.4.3 The changing expectations of the job-seeking patrons

The interview had a number of questions around the expectations of the job seeking patrons who used the public library service. All interviewees agreed that patrons do not identify themselves as job seeking. The reason for this was generally agreed to be because of pride. Most people do not want others to know that they are unemployed or looking for work. Two of the interviewees from two different branches suspected that there were a few patrons who used the library as a place to come each day to try to maintain the routine of a person in employment.

Where the numbers of patrons using the library to fulfil their job seeking requirements are becoming apparent is when they use the computers. All the staff across all the branches are regularly asked to assist with laying out or correcting curriculum vitae documents. This and the printing jobs that the patrons pay for are good indicators of why the computers are being used in the public library. The other change is in the resources being requested at the desk. There has been a large growth in demand for books on how to compile a curriculum vitae and improving interview skills. The other growth area is for books and material on starting up a business. All staff interviewed across all the branches commented on how much of their time is spent on requests of this nature.

A number of branches, most particularly Blanchardstown and Baldoyle, did comment on a number of new activities and events since 2009 that may be seen as a response to the increase in unemployment and the effects of the changes in the economic circumstances of the patrons. The first of these activities was a series of talks held in Blanchardstown library called ‘Surviving the Recession’ in 2009. These talks were very popular and were fully booked. The second activity in Baldoyle library is a new group that meets on a monthly basis called Network.ie. The group is for professionals who are looking for employment or want to restart their career. The members of the group join online and their meetings are facilitated in Baldoyle and Malahide branches.

In the month of June 2012 there was a series of workshops aimed at helping patrons look for employment. These workshops were held in the Swords and Skerries branches. Although I did not interview any staff from those branches, the librarians at the other branches reported that the talks were well attended and were considered a success and offered good advice to patrons in their search for work.
4.4.4 Partnerships with other Organisations

One of most obvious developments since 2009 is the partnerships with other organisations that have developed in the branches across Fingal County. These partnerships are driving the response of the public library service to the changing economic circumstances that the recession has brought both to library patrons in a personal capacity and also the other organisations. These organisations include the Citizen Advice Centres, FAS, Adult Education Centres (for example KLEAR and AKSES), Enterprise Ireland, Age Action and the local schools both primary and secondary.

The partnership with schools is particularly well developed in all the branches that I visited. Class visits are a regular occurrence and were seen as a positive development among the library staff as it encouraged use of the library facility by the children and young adults outside of school hours. In one case of a school in Baldoyle, the school principal organised all the pupils from second class became members of Baldoyle library. The pupils are brought on a visit to the library on a monthly basis to borrow two items. This leaves space on their library card for a further four items if they wish to come to the library on another occasion. This initiative was considered a great success both from the school’s perspective as it meant that the children were introduced to the library and its resources and they became familiar with how to use the library. This meant that they may be more comfortable to visit in their leisure time. The other factor is that the funding for library stock from the Department of Education and Fingal County has fallen dramatically away since 2009 and this allows the school to provide a library facility to the children at a minimum cost.

Class visits such as those described and the assistance that library staff members are providing schools to set up their own library facilities is one method by which the library is helping schools and pupils to overcome the effects of the recession. This is a positive outcome of a partnership between two state agencies.

All branches, with the exception of Howth, also have programmes of activities for Transition Year students. In the case of Malahide this programme involves Age Action too. The Transition Year students teach the over 55s computer skills. This is a positive development for the schools in that the Transition Year programme is provided with the opportunity to add to its project portfolio and the library is offering further courses to its patrons. Both age groups report very positively on the experience. Howth do not currently liaise with the local schools. This is mainly due to the recent refurbishment work and staff shortages have limited
the number of activities that the branch could offer. This work is now finished and an additional member of staff had just started in the branch over the summer months and the staff indicated that initiatives similar to these were planned over the coming months.

Class visits at post-primary level were a regular occurrence in all branches. These visits were usually organised by a particular teacher in order to introduce the pupils to the resources available in the library for that subject. The positive effect of visits of this nature is that the Young Adult age group are brought to the library, introduced to the resources on offer and the facilities that the library have and they are encouraged to use these resources to complement their textbooks and study notes. Most of the branches I visited also reported that they hold copies of past papers for all Leaving and Junior Certificate papers and that these are a resource in constant demand. Without these class visits, students would remain unaware of the resources that their local library had to support their school work.

The adult education sector is another important user group of the public library sector. This is obvious from the changes in demand for resources since 2009. All the library staff report a heavy demand for resources in business, accountancy and management. This demand has shifted from other areas of education. Overall, there is a constant demand from adults who are undertaking additional study. The staff in Baldoyle and Howth mentioned one group in particular that used the local library to a great extent. The group is KLEAR Adult Education Centre. The centre offers a range of educational and hobby courses to the adults in the Kilbarrack/Baldoyle area including literacy, childcare and FETAC courses. The library staff come in regular contact with participants of these courses as they use the library resources to complete the assignments and homework. As many of the participants were early school leavers the KLEAR centre gives them an opportunity to educate and improve their skills and a reason to visit their local library that they may otherwise not have.

4.4.5 The Library as a Social Space

One interesting development over the last three years has been the demand for study space in the local library. This was clearly displayed in the run up to this year’s state examinations when a queue formed outside the Blanchardstown library regularly on Saturday mornings and additional security personnel had to be drafted in to ensure the health and safety of all library patrons. The students ranged from adults in third level to the teenagers studying for the Junior Certificates. Although the numbers arriving at the branches throughout the county were high and put a high demand on the library resources (desks, chairs and materials), the
staff members were mostly positive that it also showed to the Young Adult patron group exactly what the library could offer them. The study space in the library has become an important feature in attracting young adults to the library and making them aware of all that the library has to offer.

Another development in the use of the library is some patrons using the library resources – study areas, computers, internet access, printing and faxing – to run their own business. Although this development was more commented on in the larger two of the five branches that I visited, the question raised little surprise among any of the staff interviewed. Many thought it was quite possible that patrons were using the library to provide them with a work space and unless this was causing distress or inconvenience to other users, and as long as there was no actual money changing hands within the branch, most of those interviewed were happy enough to allow this use of the library to continue.

Another important use of the local library across the Fingal County is the exhibition space that most of the branches have to offer. In all the branches that I visited where this space was available, the bookings were in great demand. Both Baldoyle and Rush reported that their exhibition space was completely booked out until early 2013. Blanchardstown and Howth have a greater amount of space and lecture rooms but again, they are all in constant demand and bookings were at a premium. A number of the library staff commented that they felt this demand was one of the most obvious changes since 2009. This was due they felt to the extra time that people had on their hands to devote to their hobbies (photography, art, traditional crafts, jewellery/beading, yoga, etc) and exhibits gave these people a focus and a goal to aim for. Many of those who exhibited in the library branches were selling their work but again these sales were organised and completed outside of the library branch.

Another feature of the public library as a social space was the fact that in a library all comers are welcome. The only rule to coming and staying in the local library is that you are not a danger or nuisance to yourself or other library patrons. As one librarian put it “The library is the last truly public space left in Ireland.” This is perhaps the quote that sums up the importance and value that a public library offers to its local community.
4.5 Summary

This chapter discusses in detail the findings of the suite of interviews carried out across five branches of the Fingal County public library service. These interviews, when analysed, revealed 5 over-arching themes:

- The activities and events run by the branch;
- The changes in the patrons’ expectations of the service since 2009;
- The changes in the job-seeking patrons’ expectations of the service since 2009;
- The developing partnerships between the public library and other agencies;
- The use of the library as a social space.

These themes reveal the library to be at the heart of the community it serves. The services, activities and events that the library runs and hosts are meeting the demands of the library patrons. The staff are coping with this increased demand in a time of falling staff numbers and reducing library opening hours. The public library is a place where all members of the community can come either to use the resources for educational or recreational purposes. The unemployed in the community are using the library to attempt to build up their skills and network of contacts to help in their search for work. The public libraries are also attempting to build partnerships with other local and state agencies to ensure that they remain relevant to the demands of their patrons. The service is free, non-religious and a-political. The library is a social space for all members of the community.
5. **Conclusions**

5.1 **Introduction**

This chapter will summarise the findings of the research undertaken, it will tie these findings to the literature examined in Chapter 2. This will demonstrate how my research is building on the existing literature and adding depth to the situation in the Republic of Ireland, particularly in the public library service. The first section will present answers to the research questions posed at the outset of the dissertation. The second section will outline a number of recommendations for the Public Library Service in Ireland. The purpose of these recommendations is to help the service respond appropriately to the recession and the changes in the economic circumstances of the community that it serves.

The literature examining public library services in times of recession mostly originate from the United States of America. This literature discusses the increased use of the library as a social space for the local community. The library is also a place where people come to direct their job-seeking activities. The other focus of the American literature is the on providing a library service with less resources to more patrons. This ‘More for Less’ effect is felt across a range of factors: staff numbers, branch opening hours, collection and subscription management and the provision of activities and services on offer within the library. The literature from an Irish perspective emanates mostly from the academic sector. Similar themes have emerged with regard to increasing student numbers at a time when budgets for staff and collections has declined substantially. (Cox 2010) The literature from the public library sector urges the library staff to keep focused on delivering an inclusive service and places the public library at the heart of a population attempting to re-orientate its earning potential through the acquisition of new skills. (Ronayne 2010) The range of activities and events happening within the Public Library Service of Fingal County also shows that the recession is an opportunity to cement its position within the local community that it serves.

The research project undertaken in this dissertation was to attempt to understand the response of the Fingal County Public Library Service to the recession in Ireland since 2009. As the researcher, the approach that I felt would answer these questions was to undertake a suite of semi-structured interviews with the various staff members of the Fingal County Library Service. To this end, I visited 5 of the branches across the county and interviewed 9 staff members. These staff members were working at every level of the service with varying lengths of service. The movement of the staff from branch to branch across the county
became very apparent early on in the interviewing process. This gives me a level of confidence that the findings can be extended to include the other branches that I did not visit.

The patrons of the Fingal Public Library Service were not questioned as part of this particular dissertation and I believe that a research project of this nature would complement my topic very well. It would add greatly to the insights found within this topic and might reveal other areas that are worthy of additional study.

5.2 Answering the research questions

The research questions addressed in this paper are:

What specific measures are Fingal County public libraries undertaking in response to the recession?

Sub-questions:

1. Have there been any significant changes in patrons’ requests of the Public Library Service of Fingal County?
2. Has there been any change in the demand/uptake for the computer courses, book clubs and other events and activities that the library offers?
3. Specifically, have the demands from job-seeking patrons increased or changed since 2009?
4. How has the Public Library Service in Fingal County responded to the change in economic conditions in the county?

5.2.1 Changes in the patrons’ request of the public library service

The interviews with the staff members revealed there have been changes in what the patrons are looking for from their public library. This change has been evident from the resources requested at the Reference desk and the changes in the groups and organisations looking to access the library space. There has been a significant change also in the different ethnic groups using the library service. Overall, demand has grown across the service to access the resources and to get membership. The growth in membership as a percentage of the local population is a stark indicator of the increased demands put on the service overall. There has been a marked decline in the use of the public library service among some ethnic groups such as Polish and other Eastern European populations. This is attributed to the fact that these groups are usually economic migrants and have moved either back home or to other countries
where the unemployment rate is not as high. There has been a steady increase in the numbers of African people using the public library service. This was particularly noted in Blanchardstown. They are using the library service both as an educational and re-training facility and also from a social perspective to meet others in the local community.

The growth in groups and people requesting to use the exhibition and other library space to offer services to library patrons is another change since 2009. Library staff report great diversity in the reasons for these requests. The traditional demand for exhibition space for artists and photography groups remains strong. However the requests are now coming from people with other skills that they wish to either pass on or to teach. There are groups offering instruction in jewellery-making and traditional crafts. Social media and professional networking groups are appearing more often in the bookings for lectures and for meeting rooms and exhibition space.

5.2.2 Changes in demand for courses, book clubs and other activities since 2009

As discussed in detail in Chapter 4, Section 4.4, there are a large number of activities and courses on offer across the Fingal County Public Libraries. These activities were always very busy and remain so. There has been an increase in the numbers of book clubs in most of the libraries since 2009 although the availability of staff to provide support for these clubs has reduced and the library has become the location where the groups meet. The library staff members help to organise access to the chosen books by reserving the copies or organising copies from other branches in the County.

Computer courses and ECDL courses remain heavily subscribed as they did before 2009. The change there seems to be mostly in the patron accessing the courses. There is now a younger age profile signing up for the courses. Age Action remains heavily involved in the organisation of these courses and the early retirement programme in the public sector has had an impact on people accessing courses of this nature. Courses on social media are also a relatively new development and are always popular. The change in language learning courses is a small decline in the numbers enrolling in English language courses and an increase in numbers enrolling in courses teaching European languages. The impression among staff members is that this change is due to Irish people improving their skills to increase their employment prospects.

Another area of growth in demand is the numbers using the library as a study space or to access resources for their education. This includes the Young Adult age group that are
traditionally difficult to reach. The growth in a return to education among adults to up-skill or improve qualifications is also a very apparent trend in the public library. This is an extremely positive finding for the Public Library Service of Fingal County. It means that the library service was not under pressure to radically alter its service portfolio at a time when resources (staff numbers, collection and subscriptions) were under increasing pressure.

One of the changes in the public library service since 2009 has been the extent of partnership with other groups and organisations. This change is very clear from the data gathered. These partnerships range from working with local schools and Co Dublin VEC and CDVEC to provide a library service to schools when funding from the Department of Education and Skills for library resources to schools has fallen. A number of library branches in the Fingal County area have been instrumental in setting up library facilities within schools at a primary level. The involvement of libraries in providing assistance to the Transition Year programme is an example of how State bodies can work together to provide opportunities to a number of age groups in the one activity. Initiatives such as these with schools are an example of successful collaboration between two state agencies to offset the effects of the recession. This work helps shield the schools and the pupils from the lack of funding that the recession has brought about.

The public library service remains central to the adult education sector in the space that it provides for adult learners to pursue their studies and also to access resources that may otherwise prove difficult to buy or find. This pattern is a marked difference to the literature on the public library service of the United States of America. Whereas, the preponderance of the literature from the United States examines the role that the public library has in assisting people in their job-seeking endeavours, this study of the public library service in Fingal County has shown that the Irish experience is one of assisting people in furthering their education and up-skilling themselves to enhance their employment prospects.

5.2.3 The demands of the service from Job-Seekers

Job-seekers are using the Public Library Service of Fingal County. These patrons are however, using the library and its resources in an independent fashion. They do not generally request the assistance of the library staff with their efforts. Their use of the resources is obvious from the printing and faxing requested at the library information/reference desk. The other way library staff report the activities of the job-seekers is the requests that they get for resources on preparing curriculum vitae documents and interview techniques. Library staff
members also report that events scheduled for helping people to move into employment are extremely popular. The attendance at the workshops in Swords in June 2012 on job-seeking was very high.

Staff members also are often asked by patrons using the computers to help them with laying out curriculum vitae documents and to get them ready for submission to a job advertisement. However, unlike in the United States, patrons do not present at the public library looking for assistance with putting a job search strategy in place. The library staff members who were interviewed commented on how independent the job-seekers were in their search. The reason for this was often attributed to the pride of those who are job-seeking. Another reason for the difference was connected to the fact that there are other state agencies that assist people in looking for work, namely FAS. There is very little assistance requested to fill out electronic job applications. This is again a variation on the experience in the United States. This difference may be accounted for by the fact that people in general are more comfortable using online application forms and emails in other areas of their lives (for example, online shopping) at present than they were in the early years of the last decade, the time period when most from when most of the literature from the United States was published.

5.2.4 Changes in the Public Library Service of Fingal County since 2009

From the interviews with the various staff members it is apparent that the service of the public libraries has not radically changed since 2009. The situation as reported in this study is a case of more patrons accessing a service that was already offering a wide range of activities and events for the local community. The same range of courses in IT and language learning were available prior to the recession in 2009. However, more people are now using their public library both for social, entertainment and educational purposes since 2009. Any new members to the service are, according to the staff interviewed, regularly amazed at the extent of resources and materials available in the library and also the activities on offer.

5.2.5 Specific Measures undertaken by the Public Library Service of Fingal County since 2009

There have been a number of workshops and talks held in the years since 2009 addressing the changes that the recession has brought to the local communities of Fingal County. In particular the series of talks in 2009 called “Surviving the Recession” held in the Blanchardstown branch and the job-seeking workshops in Swords in June 2012 are particular examples of these specific measures to assist the patrons in dealing with the recession. There has not been, however, any central control from the service as a whole in addressing the
difficulties that the population of Fingal County face. There has been a growth in partnerships with other state agencies and individual branches but more could be done in presenting the library as a service that could assist people in up-skilling and returning to work and also to assist the community in coping with the changes that the recession has brought on living standards.

### 5.3 Recommendations

The Public Library Service of Fingal County has admirably risen to the challenges that the recession has brought. These challenges include coping with increased numbers with fewer staff and shorter opening hours. The response was facilitated by the fact that public libraries benefitted from funding and investment over the course of the boom years. This funding improved the infrastructure and library buildings with Howth’s refurbishment project just completed over the summer of 2012.

A first recommendation is that a more detailed study of the patrons of the Public Library Service of Fingal County should be undertaken. This study could be of a quantitative nature with a specific questionnaire compiled to ask patrons their opinions of the service. An additional suite of interviews or focus groups of the patrons similar to those undertaken in this study would assist in gaining a greater understanding of the opinions expressed in the survey. This study would assist in the designing of a programme of activities and events to support the community’s efforts to educate themselves and get back into the workforce. The Facebook page of Fingal Library could be used to host the questionnaire and to ask people to participate. Also the patrons using the emailing service to keep up to date with the events calendar for each branch could also be emailed to request that they participate.

The second recommendation arising from this study is a programme of workshops or classes to assist patrons with putting together a job-search strategy and preparing both curriculum vitae documents and interview skills. A programme of this nature should include the use of social media tools from online recruitment websites to LinkedIn and other more local networking organisations or sites to help people identify the job opportunities that are available in their local communities. The programme could be co-ordinated by the library service but the delivery of the programme could be provided by the experts in the particular area of the course (as identified by agencies such as FAS). Many of these experts have already requested access to their library to deliver classes or hold talks in their area of expertise or interest with a view to publicising their work. The programme could also be
designed by drawing on the expertise of the staff in FAS and other job agencies. There is a monthly meeting of the executive librarians across the Fingal County. This meeting provides the librarians managing the service to meet and discuss issues that the service faces. This is a forum whereby new activities and initiatives are discussed including a programme as described in this study.

Both of these recommendations would benefit from understanding the funding model of the Public Library Service in Fingal County. Most of the funding is received from the Fingal County Council and the Department of Environment, Community and Local Government. However, there is funding for events from Europe Direct and Age Action. An understanding of what other agencies could offer funding support would help in the running of the programme of activities outlined in the second recommendation.

5.4 Summary

In conclusion, the dissertation has examined the response of the Public Library Service of the Fingal County to the recession. The timeline of this study is 2009 to 2012. The research has found that the library service was well prepared for upsurge in demand that the recession brought about. The additional funding of the public libraries during the early years of the last decade was crucial to this readiness to respond. This increase in membership would have been expected as people joined the library as their disposable income fell. Job-seekers do use their library to help them in their job search, in accessing material to prepare their curriculum vitae documents and preparing for interviews. However, this use of the library is done independently of the library staff members with mostly ad hoc requests for assistance. The public library is not viewed in Fingal County as the location of support for unemployment. This is provided by other State agencies such as FAS and the Local Employment Service (LES).

The value of this study is in its examination of the responsive nature of the Public Library Service in Fingal County. This responsiveness is particularly evident in the work that the library staff do with other groups and agencies for example schools, post primary education facilities, Age Action and Europe Direct. It proves that the public library retains its place at the heart of a community providing access to resources for up-skilling and education. It also performs an important social function in that it provides a place that all members of the local community can gather to meet or use the facilities and resources.
This study would benefit from a similar research to be carried out directed at the library patrons themselves. A quantitative study to examine what the library patrons expect from their library service and what further activities or events would be valuable. Another area of interest would be to extend this study to other areas of the Republic of Ireland particularly examining the response of a more rural library service.

The literature on this topic reveals a number of different themes including the experience of the public library service of the United States of America to recessions. There are some similarities between the developments in both countries from the perspective of the increased usage of the library service as a social space and also in using the resources to help patrons their job-seeking efforts. However, the findings of this study indicate that the resources of the Public Library Service of Fingal County is being used more for the further education of its patrons so that they are able to take up any employment opportunities that arise. However, other State agencies are more important in helping people to access employment opportunities than the public library service whereas in the United States the public library appears to be the institution that people turn to for assistance of this nature.

The other theme of “More for Less” is very apparent in the Public Library Service of Fingal County. The membership has grown since 2009 across all branches and the numbers attempting to avail of courses and activities within the library have also grown. This is at the time when there is less staff available to meet the increased demand of the membership, the budgets for collections have fallen and the availability of staff to run the courses and activities is more constrained. However, the Public Library Service has responded by using the patrons to run the activities and employing volunteers to run courses. This approach has worked as there are many volunteers available.

The final theme from the literature is the recession as an opportunity for the public library service. This theme is very evident in the research carried out. The particular strength of the public library is in its ability to build partnerships with other organisations and State agencies. This is the way that the public library service will maintain its relevance to the local community that it serves. The recession has also given the Public Library Service of Fingal County the opportunity to showcase the breadth of activities and events that it provides the local community and to demonstrate the active part it can play in the social and cultural lives of the community that it serves.
Overall, the research has revealed a vibrant community across the Fingal County that is using the public library service to survive a drastic change in economic conditions and living standards. The library service has responded admirably at a time of cuts in staff numbers and budgets. This response bodes well for the future of the County as a whole as well as for the library service.
6. **Personal Reflection**

6.1 **Introduction**

The decision to undertake a Masters programme of study was a decision I considered for a number of months before taking action. In advance of making my decision I had a number of factors to consider: the time commitment that the programme would require; my ability to complete the programme to the best of my ability alongside my other responsibilities; the scheduling of classes and finally, the monetary cost. When taking all these factors into consideration, the MSc in Information & Library Management offered by Dublin Business School was the most appropriate programme for me to undertake. The taught nature of the programme suited my learning style as I remembered it from my undergraduate days. The structured modules ensured that I would find it easier to monitor my progress through the programme. In this chapter, I discuss the impact of this undertaking on my learning style; the issues and difficulties that I faced during the course and the effect of undertaking this programme will have on my future career.

6.2 **Time Management Skills**

Having previously worked in a project management role I believed that my time management skills would be sufficiently well developed when undertaking this programme. I was used to working in an environment where deadlines were priority and it was important that any risks to meeting this deadline were identified and properly managed. Although I believe they were quite good at the outset, there were times when it proved extremely difficult to balance all my commitments and keep my focus on the various assignments that were due. This programme has further enhanced my skills in organising my time in an efficient manner. It re-enforced the requirement that I begin tasks in a timely manner and allow sufficient time to identify what exactly the task in hand entails.

With particular reference to the dissertation process, I was managing not only my own availability but trying to ensure that I could match the availability of my interviewees. As the timescale of the dissertation was across the height of the summer, at times this proved difficult. I had identified this risk in my preparation phase and it had been raised by the lecturers and supervisors. I did not realise the extent of the impact that this risk would have on the dissertation process. As a result I did not have an opportunity to hold interviews across all the branches in the Fingal area. This was due to the branches not being a position to make
a member of staff available to me due to their own resourcing issues. It was also impacted by constrictions on my own time as the time period for the dissertation moved along.

With regard to my future career, I have learned that my time management skills in general are good. I produce better work when I have done my preparation early in the project lifecycle. The deadline does provide me with an impetus to complete the work, but this is a less stressful experience if I manage my time efficiently at the outset of the project.

6.3 Working with Colleagues

I had always enjoyed working as part of a team both as leader and team member. My career had given me plenty of opportunity for team work. The programme enhanced these opportunities. As I was often the team leader in a work environment, I had to be conscious that I was not my classmates’ line manager and I had no authority to direct them during the task. I found that during the group work, I often initially took charge of the project. However, it quickly became apparent that my classmates had their own ideas as to how to approach the project and these contributions were in many cases, more valuable than my own. The group projects were some of the more enjoyable assignments on the course. It gave me an insight into the differences of approaches that people have when considering a project. This insight is not always apparent in a work environment as a manager often imposes their own approach on the project team.

With particular reference to the dissertation process, I was essentially working independently. This was difficult for me given my preference for team work. I looked forward to meeting with my interviewees, to discussing my questionnaire with them and seeing did they experience any changes in the public library since the onset of the recession. The interviews were mostly a positive experience with most of the interviewees displaying a positive attitude to their chosen career. It was an interesting insight into the work and daily routine of the staff of the public library service. This was a learning opportunity for me as I do not currently work in a library. I believe these insights will benefit me as I attempt to move into the library sector as a career.

6.4 Communication and Listening Skills

In advance of beginning this programme of study, I had to use my communication skills, both written and oral, regularly as part of my career. However, the course gave me a number of opportunities to develop these skills even further.
My listening skills have been honed over the course of the programme. The process of interviewing the library staff improved my active listening skills. The interviewing process involves setting meaningful questions that are delivered in an understandable format to the interviewee. It also meant that I had to listen carefully to the information being delivered and pick up on salient points and also to clarify any points with the interviewee. This is a skill that will be very valuable in a career as a librarian where listening to your service user, identifying the important aspects of their request and delivering a quality service in your library.

The number of written assignments and the variety of projects undertaken as part of the course has also improved my written communication skills. I was used to preparing business reports and organising my written work in a coherent fashion. It had been a long time since I had had to prepare an academic piece of work. Initially I was nervous in my ability to complete the required reading, comprehending and organising what I had learned and putting these together in a document that reflected the standard required of a Masters programme. I believe that I improved this skill over the course of the programme. I found, as the course continued, my ability to identify the textbooks and articles that would be of maximum benefit to my assignment and learning improved and I spent less time reading additional information of minimum benefit. This improved my time management skills also. The final test was the preparation and collation of my research data into the dissertation. This was a piece of work that I would not have been able to prepare without the experience of the earlier assignments.

My presentation skills were used many times over as part of the programme. The presentations to the class were either individual efforts or as part of a team. Again, this was initially nerve wracking as, although I had often to give presentations to senior management in my previous career, it had been a number of years since I had done that. I found the key to presentations was in the practice of the material to be delivered.

When approaching the research and interviewing required for my dissertation, the initial contact with the library staff was similar to a presentation in that I had to explain what my project was about and what I was trying to achieve and my plan to achieve that in a meaningful fashion to the uninformed. I was mostly successful in this. I had few queries following my first email explaining who I was and what I was doing, in fact one branch librarian kindly pointed me in the direction of the American literature on the subject and
another gave me a copy of an article written by the Cork County Librarian (Ronayne 2010) that I had not had access to previously.

The start of each interview with the library staff appointed by the librarian to be interviewed was also a mini presentation when I had to explain my research topic clearly and explain the purpose of the interview. In most cases this was successful as the content of the interview provided valuable insights.

6.5 Completing Original Research

When first contemplating the Masters programme the prospect of completing a project that involved defining an original topic, honing research questions and collating the data and writing up the final report in the form of a dissertation was my biggest concern. I had completed one original piece of research as part of my undergraduate programme. I studied History in UCD and it was a topic that was suggested by my supervisor and although I had an interest in the subject, I struggled with the independent nature of the research. This led to the final version of the project not being the standard of work that I usually prepared. I was disappointed in myself and this was one reason I decided not to pursue a Masters directly after completing my primary degree. This decision was one I always regretted. I was delighted to have the opportunity to now pursue a Masters and did not want to let that fear prevent me from completing the programme.

The process of defining a research topic was one of the more difficult steps in the dissertation process. As I had little practical knowledge of the world of information and library management, I did not know what a reasonable subject for research was. Thus, I found myself guided by what the media outlets were saying about books and people’s changing book purchasing behaviour. I was particularly attracted to the idea that bookstores were closing and then thinking where were people going to fulfil their reading requirements. It quickly became apparent that it is a well-known fact that usage of public libraries increases during times of recession. That was my inexperience showing through! From the literature, I was able to identify the topics of the changing expectations of library patrons during times of recession that library staff in the United States were reporting. I have always had a great interest in why people behave as they do and I felt that a topic examining these changes in behaviour would be of sufficient interest to carry me through the dissertation period.
The second aspect of the research was the planning of the project. This was not as great a challenge having completed all my other assignments successfully; I had a good understanding of what was involved in getting organised. I had also worked as a project manager and had experience in defining and sizing tasks and understanding how dependencies need to be managed in order to get the project completed. This planning exercise was completed relatively quickly and I built contingency into the plan to account for delays.

I was in a position to begin interviewing early in July 2012 and this was of benefit as the final two interviews proved more difficult to organise due to the leave commitments in the various branches and also the fact that I started a new job at the start of August. However, the tasks of transcribing of interviews and the drafting of the additional chapters were running concurrently with the schedule of interviews.

The qualitative analysis of the interviews exposed my shortcomings and inexperience as a researcher. Although I had thought each interview had gone well (some more than others), it was more difficult to gather themes from the data than I had predicted it would be. An alternative method of data collection in conjunction with the interviews may have assisted in identifying themes in a more structured fashion. A survey of library users may have been of benefit in relation to this research topic.

6.6 Benefits Gained from the Project

Undertaking a project of this size and scope has proven to have a number of distinct benefits. These benefits include having developed the skills to define a topic worthy of research independently of a lecturer or manager. This project has proven to me that I have the skills to identify a topic that demands further attention and to put together a strategy to investigate the topic further. I have also learned to apply new competencies and skills to understanding and analysing the existing literature or knowledge on a given subject. I am able to size the workload accurately and plan the project and manage it to completion according to the timelines that have been set. I have developed a new skill set in that I am now able to gather, analyse and present a new set of data and findings and to consolidate those new findings into new knowledge in a particular area. The project also meant that I had to understand and explain why I chose the topic that I did and why I chose the research strategy and approach that was pursued. I have, I believe, also contributed to the existing knowledge in the area that
I have chosen to pursue. All these skills and learning opportunities will give me the confidence in my future career.
**Bibliography**


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Appendix 1: Introductory Email
Subject: Research Request: Karen Manning

Dear Sir/Madam

First let me introduce myself. My name is Karen Manning and I am currently completing a 2 year Masters programme in Information & Library Management from Dublin Business School. I have completed all the taught modules and am now in a position to begin my dissertation. My dissertation topic is focusing on the response of the public libraries to the economic recession.

In order to complete my research, I would like to be able to visit your library over the coming weeks (June/July 2012) and spend time interviewing some of your staff members. The interviews would be of a confidential nature and the actual library will not be named specifically in the final paper. I would also require that the interviews are recorded for analysis purposes and that the recording would be retained so that my findings could be confirmed.

As yet, I do not have certainty of the length of time that the interview will take or a draft of the questions but I don't envisage that each interview will take any more than one hour. I would also appreciate if I could speak with a number of staff during my visit with varying levels of experience and responsibility.

I would appreciate if you could consider my request and please let me know if it will be possible to meet my request.

I look forward to hearing from you. My mobile number should you wish to discuss this in more detail is xxx xxxxxxx.

Yours faithfully

Karen Manning
Appendix 2: Interview Guide

Introduction

This document is an interview guide for the participants of a small scale qualitative study of the response of the public libraries (primarily in the Fingal County Council area) to the recession. The study will attempt to identify changes in the demands of the library patrons since 2009 on their public library. 2009 is the chosen start point for examination of the study as the report on the Local Government identifies the increased usage and borrowings from the public libraries in that year and indicates that the changes in economic conditions may explain this. (Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government Management Services Board 2011) These changes grouped into the increased demand for the library as a social space: demand for internet access; IT courses; book clubs, etc. The second focus of the study is the particular focus on the impact of unemployment on the demands of the patrons on their public library.

It is expected that each interview will be face to face; it will take one hour and will be audio recorded, with the participant’s permission. The interviewer (Karen Manning) will take notes for the duration of the interview also. Each interview will then be transcribed and analysed to identify any patterns with a view to answering the research questions.

The interviewee’s details (including their name, job title and their branch details) will be kept confidential and this confidentiality will be maintained within the final written report.

Themes of the questions

The questions will be grouped into the following themes:

- Identification of the services, courses, book clubs that the branch runs;
- Changes in services, courses, book clubs since 2009, if any;
- Changes in these services according to patron groups – student/teens; job-seekers; older age groups);
- Examples of initiatives (new courses, book clubs, etc) introduced since 2009;
- Specific questions around ‘job seeking’ patrons – do patrons identify themselves as job-seekers and request specific services due to this;
- Examples of initiatives to assist job seekers, if any.
The interview will end with a brief review of what has been discussed with particular points of interest re-confirmed and allowing the interviewee to add anything. The interviewer will request permission to contact the interviewee afterwards if there are any issues that require clarification.
Appendix 3: Interview Questions

Interview Questions for Research project

1. What services and/or activities does the branch run for its patrons?
2. Are any of these services of activities new (since 2009)?
3. Does the branch run different programmes for different user groups?
4. If so, what are these? [Thinking particularly of student/teens; job seekers; older age groups]
5. Has there been any change in the demand for these services since 2009?
6. If there has, can you outline where changes have occurred and what these changes are?
7. Has there been any changes to the patrons’ expectations of the service offering from the branch since 2009? Other than borrowings.
8. What sorts of services/activities/programmes are the patrons now requesting?
9. Is there a particular group where demand has changed?
10. Could you give me an example of this change?
11. Do patrons identify themselves to staff as ‘job-seekers’ is they are looking for work?
12. If they do, how are they making this distinction?
13. If they aren’t (ie don’t announce themselves) as ‘job-seekers’, are the library staff able to make that distinction through their interactions with patrons?
14. Has the branch done anything in particular to meet those ‘job-seeker’ demands?
15. If so, what are those initiatives? Can you describe them for me and give me an indication of how long they have been running for?
16. Are they proving popular?
17. How has the branch been raising awareness of these initiatives?
18. Is there any other issues that you have noticed since 2009 that you think are relevant to our discussion?

   a. Use of library to run a business?
   b. Use of library by people who would be moved on in another (more commercial space)
   c. Changes in requests at reference desk