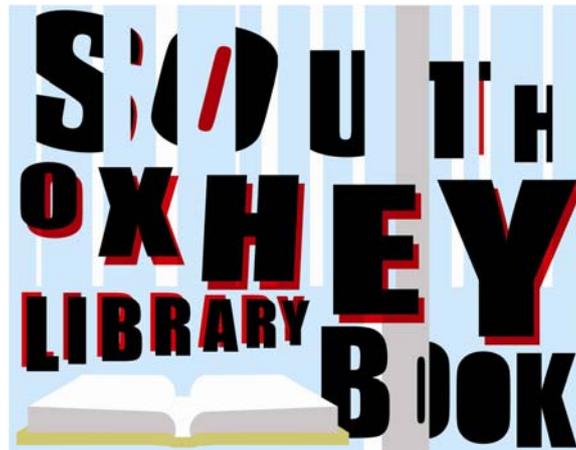


‘South Oxhey Library Book’
South Oxhey Library Creative
Engagement Commission

Interim Report

Grennan & Sperandio
28 March 2008



Above: Proposed cover for the South Oxhey Library Book



Introduction

In 2007, Hertfordshire County Council was awarded £1.4 million from the Big Lottery Fund for Community Libraries to remodel and expand Oxhey Library. The library is situated on the South Oxhey Estate, a post-WWII London overspill estate, which in relation to surrounding areas suffers from some deprivation. A number of original residents have remained on the estate since it was built, fostering a strong sense of community and pride in the estate which is not commonly communicated outside of the estate.

The South Oxhey Community Libraries Project, running over three years, will extend the public area of the existing building to include a flexible community space, a modernised layout and facilities to improve access, a cleaner, greener building and an architectural focal point in the community.

The new library will provide an upgraded venue for:

- a range of community activities, including an extended homework club
- family learning opportunities
- computer classes
- the development of a community archive
- reading and writing groups
- an access point for agencies such as Connexions and the Centre for Voluntary Service
- a display space for local artists and organisations
- a meeting venue for clubs and societies.

This is an interim report for a creative consultation project facilitated by Green Heart Partnership in collaboration with Hertfordshire County Council to engage the residents of the South Oxhey Estate in the redevelopment of their library. During Spring 2008, international artist team Simon Grennan and Chris Sperandio, known as the Kartoon Kings, worked with local residents in South Oxhey to discover what their ideal library service would be like. This work built upon previous consultation carried out by Hertfordshire County Council with the community about the future of the library and the future services it will provide.

Simon Grennan met with local residents over a period of ten weeks, to discuss memories, personal experiences and anecdotes about libraries in general and discover how best the redevelopment of their local library could provide the activities and services they need. Simon conducted interviews in a wide range of settings with 69 people between the ages of 5 and 97, including library users, neighbourhood residents, business people and community groups. Simon captured their thoughts through one-to-one and group interviews centred on the questions: 'What is a library to you?' and "What could a library be to you?"

Grennan and Sperandio's work in South Oxhey will culminate in a book presenting the ideas, visions and suggestions of local people for their valued library. The artists' work will help Hertfordshire County Council to develop a Community Engagement Plan and plan future activities and services to run from the library.



Green Heart Partnership (GHP) is one of Arts Council England, East's Arts Generate Programmes, project managed by Landscape + Arts Network Services. GHP works with local authorities to address government priorities creatively. It began as a strategic collaboration between Arts Council England, East and the eleven local authorities in Hertfordshire, focused on achieving growth and capacity across the arts and environment sectors. GHP aims to raise the profile and value of the arts in Hertfordshire by adding creativity to processes or through an end product.

Central to GHP's approach is supporting cross-departmental teams to provide creative and practical solutions to existing needs within local authorities. GHP facilitates the relationship between local government and creative practitioners to bring about effective art-led regeneration. GHP considers 'art' to be an integral part of how we address our public realm, and not solely an isolated portion of the physical environment. By working to develop new models of creative cross-departmental working practice this initiative is pairing the arts with the environment and capital development departments to explore how creative-led collaborations can assist in creating more engaging, appealing and environmentally sustainable communities.

The team that developed the Oxhey Library project included officers from Hertfordshire County Council's Library Services and Arts Departments; Three Rivers District Council's Leisure Department; and GHP project managers and artists. This cross-departmental team worked together, drawing on the expertise of individuals in different departments implement to the project.

Interim Report

Aim

1. To reveal, focus and describe the functions of an ideal Oxhey Library, as imagined by people who live and work in South Oxhey, centered on the questions: 'What is a library to you?' and "What could a library be to you?'

Methodology

1. For the purpose of this research, South Oxhey was taken to comprise the area circumscribed by Prestwick Road in the east and south, Sandy Lane in the west, Hampermill Lane becoming Eastbury Road in the north and all abutting areas with social connections to this area.

2. For the months of February and March 2008, Simon Grennan of artists team Grennan & Sperandio undertook desk research aimed at compiling a long-list of services, businesses, community associations, clubs, learning and leisure facilities and social networks operating in South Oxhey.

3. Simon arranged meetings with groups and individuals on this list in South Oxhey in order to conduct a series of one-to-one and group interviews in the field. He met with people wherever and whenever they felt most comfortable. As a result, Simon had conversations with people and conducted interviews and workshops in their homes, at work, at school, in the street, at the local launderette and hairdressers, in the local convenience stores, restaurants, cafes and bars, in a number of the area's community halls and community centers and on public transport. A number of places emerged as hotspots of social activity: the Sunshine Café in particular is a recognisable, regular meeting place for a wide variety of people during the day, especially on market days, as are the fast-food outlets on The Parade at night. Simon sometimes traveled a little out of the area in pursuit of a particular group or person – for example, a number of members of the Viola Lesbian Support Group live in South Oxhey but convene in the Load of Hay, over the boundary, which is the only established gay pub in the whole of greater Watford, where interviews took place.

4. Similarly, Simon undertook interviews throughout the day and into the late evening, depending on the life of a particular location and habits of a particular group or groups. In the earlier part of the day on weekdays, for example, the wall in front of the Library is a regular meeting spot for young men, who seem not to appear at any other time of day. The launderette has a brisk early morning trade, which gradually diminishes during the day. Locations like the Swallow Garden Restaurant only open in the evening.

5. Simon initially approached representatives of groups or network leaders by phone, and made arrangements to meet personally with members of these groups and networks during the usual course of their activities. With unaligned interviews, he approached people in public or commercial spaces as a fellow member of the public. In the majority of cases, interviews followed a brief description of what he was doing (that is: asking the two questions detailed above). Conversations developed organically, with Simon asking further questions for clarification. In the case of group interviews (as with members of the Air Cadet Force, the DOSTI lunch club or Year 6 school children), he followed a similar methodology illustrated with verbal or visual examples – with the Year 6 children, for example, he engaged their visual imaginations by asking them to imagine a fantasy library like an iceberg, with only 5% above ground

and the body of the library below ground, the stacks only available by miles of conveyor bringing books to the surface – only at the end of the workshop did he reveal that he was describing an actual library (the new British Library), to much amazement and excitement.

Please see Appendix 1 for examples of children’s drawings from Oxhey Wood Primary School.

6. Between 18 – 29 March, Simon conducted interviews with 69 people between the ages of 97 and 5. These interviews were annotated with text and image.

Community Engagement Plan Specific Groups

The numbers of people falling into specific Community Engagement Plan groups are as follows:

Adult learners	09
People with disabilities	04
Older people (estimated ages 60-97)	19
Children and parents	13
Young people (estimated ages 12-18)	24

Total¹	69

Simon Grennan Personal Commentary

“I found the people of South Oxhey welcoming, open and friendly without exception, and the environment domestic, pleasant and calm. Although I had been appraised of the social classification of South Oxhey as an ‘area of deprivation’ by colleagues, commissioners and my own desk research, I found that the people I met belied this categorisation. Although I have no authority to contradict any of the indices of social deprivation (health, education, employment, literacy etc), South Oxhey appears to be socially cohesive, active, intelligent and happy. I feel it is important to present this impression as part of this Report, because the categorisation ‘deprived’ carries with it an almost inevitable series of images of damage and desperation, none of which describe South Oxhey accurately, in my experience. The Library, along with a number of other formal and informal social centers within a half a mile of each other, seems to form part of a coherent fabric of local life across times of day, age and social background.”

Emerging Themes and Suggestions

The strongest theme to emerge across all of the consultation focuses on learning. Although expressed in a number of different ways by people across a range of ages and life experiences, the idea that libraries are for collecting information, gaining knowledge and supporting learning activities was dominant.

This idea was often expressed in opposition to ideas that focused on library provision as entertainment. Many people expressed in some way the idea that there is a dominant culture of entertainment to which libraries do not belong. Far from being a negative, people value this difference, sometimes viewing library sites as oases of calm on an otherwise raucous and commercially demanding high street. For some, an important aspect of this is underwritten by the provision of services for free. For others, libraries offer a valued type of

¹ Based on Simon’s conversations it was clear that all of the participants had used a library at some point, and approximately two thirds of them were current users of Oxhey Library

democratic experience of being with a range of other people that is rare in leisure and entertainments provisions.

As a result of this view of libraries as valued environments for learning rather than gateways to entertainment, many people thought that current library provision was entirely satisfactory. There is a sense that even if people might only make use of library provisions for specific, limited things, or at certain times of their lives, that these provisions and the contemporary library environment fulfilled their needs, and that libraries didn't need to change.

Activities

A few people imagined specific changes to meet needs generated by changes in lifestyle, particularly in relation to the possibility of provisions beyond the library walls. One participant imagined a loyalty card-style development of the traditional membership card, where a member's profile of interests could be logged, for example, and relevant events and provisions in the local library could be digitally flagged by phone or email as they appeared.

Others imagined more mobile services, an increase in structured social activities around learning and even functions expressed in the architecture of the building, including absolutely quiet areas alongside areas for conversation.

Without exception, people expressed the idea that libraries should retain their identity as places for open-access learning rather than adopting aspects of commercial entertainment or leisure available to buy elsewhere, even if this meant that their provision were not necessarily 'fun' and that they might spend years of their lives where they felt that they didn't need library provisions at all.

List of Participants

Swallow Garden Chinese Restaurant , Mr and Mrs. Wong	020 8428 5596
Fairways Residential Care Home , c/o Wilma Gauthier, Manager Primrose, Audrey, Gladys, Lillian, Leonard and Irene	01923 221 345
Saveron Insurance , Joan King and Denise McLernon	01923 225 201
Rainbow Kids Toddlers Club , c/o Mrs. MacDonald Kelly, Nicola, Nicky, Lucy and Victoria	020 8386 8553
Brookfields Launderette Ameena, Joan, Mick and Derek	No number
Relate Charity Shop Lynne	01923 241803
Girlzone , c/o Pauline Butcher Gemma, Rosie and Cat	0776 9648524

Dosti Lunch Club, c/o Hansa Patel 01923 229 903
Kamla Gathani, Pushpa Patel, Suda Sachdev, Tara Sejpar,
Induben Nathwani, Mridula Bhatt, Kanchan Nathwani,
Kokila Patel, Jotsna Dattani, Shanta Kerai, Savita ben Chonan,
Hemlata ben Ranchhod, Jaya ben Khagram, Kamla Puri and
Pravina Nanclna

Mini Movers at The Centre, c/o Lynsey 0208 428 4954
Kelly, Tina, Jay, Jane, Hayley, Lisa, Tom and David

OC Air Cadets c/o Andy Falkner, 07968 159 844
Fatema Janjur, Katie Rolls, Liam Nunn, Laureen Meredith,
James Mason, Max Flowers, Nick Sims, Chris Rush,
Jordan Meale, Tommy Odusanya, Robert Smith

Oxhey Wood Primary School, c/o Rita Jackson 0208 428 4828
Jordan, Nathan, Jack, Laine, Danielle, Connor,
Nathan Creswell, Cortney, Shannon

Voila Lesbian Support Group, c/o Christine 07845 6087 545
Lynne

Text Records

1. "I have fond memories of libraries as a kid. It was the atmosphere. I can't have been 9 or 10 and the library seemed to be a kindly sort of place. I used to think that the librarians were related to us in some way. Every time you went, you came away with a book or books. I knew they had to go back, but they always seemed like a present." – Joan
2. "You can run a whole business from a library if you get organised. It's the internet for free." – Mick
3. "It's a place for finding out information and a place to relax. It's good they have Chinese newspapers in the library." – Mr and Mrs. Wong
4. "It's good for people who can't see very well. Speaking books are a great idea." – Anita
5. "Libraries are good for socialising quietly." – Anita
6. "Libraries are for everybody, they're for sharing." – Anita
7. "You shouldn't be able to get food in the library. Maybe a coffee." – Anita
8. "You go to read and if you read a lot, borrowing's good. When I was at school, reading was part of the lessons, but I enjoyed it, learning to read." – Primrose
9. "Reading gives you language and that helps you with everything." – Primrose
10. "I like reading – it takes you somewhere else. It's an escape from the everyday." – Audrey
11. "Large print is good – everything should be large print. It's easier to understand than the telly." – Audrey
12. "I don't read in the library, I read at home. Catherine Cookson is my favourite. I've read over forty of them." – Audrey
13. "I like romance. Some are very good and some aren't as good as others. – Gladys
14. "I haven't thought about what makes a good book. I just read them, take them back and get another. – Gladys
15. "Of course, romances are what I like. I don't read any others." – Gladys

16. "I wouldn't go for anything apart from romances, in and out." – Gladys
17. "Libraries are for people to get different types of books to get an education." – Lillian
18. "You learn a lot reading – you learn history and about royalty." – Lillian
19. "I read a lot of romances to see if I've missed out anywhere. I find that I haven't. I'm near the top of the class when it comes to romance." – Lillian
20. "My daughter takes her daughter to the Library club to learn things and have fun." – Lillian
21. "The library seemed much more important when I was in school, about the age of ten or eleven. That was eighty-seven years ago, in 1920." – Lillian
22. "Reading is lovely AND it's good for you." – Lillian
23. "We'd all sit and have a chat in the library. It was a bit of a social club. We'd talk about everything, but a lot about books." – Lillian
24. "Now I dance in this chair. You couldn't do that at the library, but then, I didn't need to because I went to Hammersmith Palais to dance." – Lillian
25. "Libraries are for people to expand their minds. You learn by reading." – Leonard
26. "It's important to learn outside books though, particularly by meeting people." – Leonard
27. "I only read when I wanted to pass the time. They weren't fiction. Facts only. Fiction is boring – it isn't true." – Leonard
28. "Reading was very good to pass the time. I had a lot of time to get rid of – reading was an escape from imprisonment" – Leonard
29. "I didn't want to talk about books. It was a way of passing time." – Leonard
30. "My mind went somewhere else through reading." – Leonard
31. "I have never been to a proper library. I wouldn't have gone, except for the circumstances." – Leonard
32. "My favourite book was about Nelson – the drama and excitement, and all of it true. It was wonderful." – Leonard
33. "When I came out of prison, I stopped reading." – Leonard
34. "Libraries are interesting because words are interesting. But reading's never really appealed much to me." – Irene
35. Conversation between Joan King and Denise McLernon
- D "They're for the community."
- J "What?" Oh, they're for education, information and relaxation and getting warm if you're old – it's cheaper."
- D "...learning, information and fun."
- J "Free at the point of service. Our taxes paid for it already."
- D "It's good it's free for people who can't afford hardback s and DVDs – for people who don't have the means, but everyone should encouraged to go."
- J "And the internet is used by youngsters."
- D "Libraries are safer than a lot of places."
- J "They're for meeting, socializing and connecting to other people. It's a quiet time and you have to respect other people around you."
- D "I don't think they should have computer games – they'd alienate broader sections of users. You'd get hoodies and jobs."
- J "Not all young people are hoodies and jobs, but you could scare off older people."
36. Conversation between Joan King and Denise McLernon
- J "I wouldn't put anything else in there."
- D "Exhibitions."

- J "Maybe linked to education. Not just entertainment. If you've got a nice big library, a local archive would be good..."
- D "Real local archives and archive shows. You could bring stuff together from different places – parish records, newspaper offices, town archives."
- D "And every library should have dishy staff."

37. Conversation between Joan King and Denise McLernon

- D "Libraries should open later in the evening."
- J "I have to go to my local library to collect my recycling bags."
- J "More story times for toddlers would be good."
- D "More things in school holidays – learning as fun. A noisy room."
- J "Mobile libraries should go to housing estates and to old people's homes as a service to people who can't get out. 'Books on Wheels' you could call it."

38. "Libraries do loads of things: books DVDs, CDs, reading groups, reference, newspapers, electoral role information, photocopying, the internet." – Kelly

39. "Lots of books for free is great." – Kelly

40. "I went to study because it was much quieter than home." – Nicola

41. "It's good for photocopying, if you just need to nip somewhere." – Nicola

42. "Libraries to me are more learning than fun." – Nicky

43. "The story time sessions they have are difficult because of the range of ages. They need to cater for very different ages differently." – Nicky

44. "Libraries are more social. It's not like PlayStation which is isolating." – Nicola

45. "They're good really, all the resources are right there." – Nicola

46. "I have five kids and we read a different book each night, so I can get through twenty-four books or whatever in no time if we're reading a new story each night." – Nicky

47. "There's never a crèche, so you do spend a lot of time going 'Shh,.. Shh'." – Nicky

48. "Actually, Libraries are great from getting away from the kids." – Lucy

49. "If you read a lot, then it's cheaper to go the library, and you don't need to store your books either" – Victoria

50. "Libraries aren't a laugh though, are they? It's learning. The pub's a laugh – a chat, a drink and a bit of food." – Victoria

51. "I wouldn't change them – they're libraries." – Lucy

52. "It might be good if you get a cup of coffee." – Victoria

53. "You can feel really self-conscious reading to your kids on your own. Sometimes it's easier to read all together at the Library." – Victoria

54. "It's too controlled, too quiet." – Josh

55. "They should have more up-to-date stuff: magazines." – Josh

56. "It's not a shop. You don't have to buy anything. You have to wait and you have to think about what you want. It slows you down. But it's free." – Nasim

57. "It's OK if you want to learn stuff, but I've learned enough already." – Anon

58. "People say open your mind, but I don't know what they mean." – Nasim

59. "You can get a lot of help in libraries – like finding out if they're going to build a motorway through your house." – Derek

60. "I've got five books on the go at once. I'm a quick reader. I couldn't read so much without a library." – Lynn

61. "I stopped going when I was fourteen. There was no more homework. I used to go to look up recipes and different questions about cooking. I used to bake a great cheesecake with Maltesers." – Gemma

62. "When I was in Year Six, I read a lot. I loved the size of the books when I was little, like 'Going on a Bear Hunt'." – Rosie
63. "We used to sit outside the library and drink, but that's more to do with the bench and the bus shelter." – Gemma
64. "Libraries are like a church, really." – Gemma
65. "They should be more for socialising, but you can't talk. They should have a special room for socializing." – Gemma

66. "I'd like to take my iPod or phone into the library and have them download audio stories onto it for me. The last audio story I had was by Ian Rankin. If you're going on a car journey, you can't beat it. You're there before you know it.." – Pauline
67. "They could combine books and films with services where you have to wait around a lot – like having a library at the hairdresser or the launderette or the nail bar." – Pauline
68. "Library cards could be information-specific, so that whenever something turned up that you were interested in the card would let you know." – Pauline
69. "Mobile libraries should be on trains. The length of the book could match the length of the journey." – Pauline
70. "If there was a mobile library at the end of my street, I'd use it." – Pauline

71. "You meet all kinds of people at the library, but it's always when you want to have a bit of time on your own." – Dosti Lunch Club
72. "Books are your friends and you need to visit them often." – Dosti Lunch Club
73. "Mobile libraries aren't so good. It's better to get out of the house." – Dosti Lunch Club
74. "Libraries are libraries. They could be more fun." – Dosti Lunch Club

75. "They're for education, but they can be fun if you make them fun. It's all in your head." – Kelly
76. "It's important that children can go in by themselves. They're safe and free." – Jay
77. "It's a better place to look for jobs and check out college courses. Otherwise you have to go to two different places." – Kelly
78. "They're more for much younger people." – Tina
79. "They're something I'd class as a last resort when there's nowhere else to go." – Tina
80. "They were a great place to skive off school. I couldn't go home because my dad would find out and that you have been disrespectful." – Kelly
81. "They shouldn't be just quiet places." – Tina
82. "Coffee and tea would be good." – Jay
83. "They should have much cuter staff." – Tina
84. "Libraries and librarians are stereotypes, really. They could be friendlier." – Tina

85. "Libraries are to make people smarter." – Air Cadets
86. "You only really go to a library if you need to. They're a resource, not for leisure." – Air Cadets
87. "There are loads of places where you can get entertainment. We need libraries because they are unique and they shouldn't change." – Air Cadets
88. "They should offer more help for people my age (fifteen) to make use of them. There's lots in there that we don't know about." – Air Cadets
89. "They help to bring people together." – Air Cadets
90. "They should have a separate silent area and speaking area." – Air Cadets
91. "Libraries are special. If they changed, with games and stuff or started charging, they'd just be like everything else." – Air Cadets

92. "You lose you library card to easily. They should be on a chain, like a store card and you could have a pin, credits and information on there." – Air Cadets
93. "They should have a fast service – two items or less like the basket aisle in Tesco." – Air Cadets
94. "They're a bit old-fashioned. But at my age, old fashioned is a good thing." – Christine
95. "You don't have to buy stuff. In fact, they help people earn money by getting jobs and getting more knowledge." – Oxhey Primary
96. "Authors get ideas from libraries for their new books." – people earn money by getting jobs and getting more knowledge." – Oxhey Primary
97. "In the library, you can make your own world." – Oxhey Primary
98. "I like it when they read stories to us." – Jane
99. "When I grow up I want to have my own books that people want to read." – Jane
100. "We made some animals and a story about a bear with Mummy." – Tom
101. "I do 'Five Fat Peas' when they go 'Pop!' – Lisa

Future Involvement

From the conversations held, Simon has identified the two following participants as individuals who are willing to be involved in future activities relating to the South Oxhey Library development and can be contacted on the following numbers:

Joan King, Saveron Insurance: 01923 225 201
 Pauline Butcher, Girlzone: 0776 9648524

ends



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Appendix 1

Drawings made by children in Year 6, Oxhey Wood Primary School, March 2008.



