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Citizen services  
and public  
libraries

# Citizen services and public libraries: an analysis of a new service in Danish public libraries

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to analyse the introduction of citizen services in the public libraries in Denmark. The paper focuses on how library staff has perceived the introduction and how the library visitors look at it. The paper further elicits information about differences between library visitors using this service and visitors not using it.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The paper examines the introduction of citizen services in two local libraries. It focuses on staff reactions and perceptions and it also analyses the use and perception of the service in relation to the traditional services. The paper is based on interviews with the involved library staff, citizen service users and administrative staff. The paper is also founded on a survey among library visitors in the two libraries. The survey was conducted as an on-line and a paper-based survey.

**Findings** – The major findings of the paper are that the library staff as a whole welcome the new work tasks because they feel that it is of value for the local community. The findings also indicate that a feared conflict between service tasks and authority tasks did not pose a problem in reality. The library visitors as a whole also welcomed the citizen service in the local libraries and perceived it as a kind of service improvement. Nearly, 25 per cent of the users have used this service in the library and they appreciated it very much. However, the service does not rank high in the visitors' perception of significance of library services. It indicates that the library visitors appreciate new services that are convenient but also that it does not matter that much. The paper also indicates that it is frequent library visitors who use citizen services in library most. There is no indication of the new library users as an effect of the introduction of citizen services in the library.

**Research limitations/implications** – The limitation is, of course, that the paper is based on a study of only two local branches and it would be scientifically problematic to generalise the results – at least in a statistical sense.

**Originality/value** – The paper is based on a traditional evaluation study. It is one of the comprehensive assessments of introduction of citizen services in Denmark and some of the findings will be of wider interest for other libraries that intend to take up the cooperative service.

**Keywords** Public libraries, Library users, Public administration, Denmark

**Paper type** Research paper

### Introduction

Public libraries take up many new tasks and services. One of the newest trends appears to be implementation of services that integrate the public library into the municipal administration and public service. This is obviously not the only example of a close cooperation between public libraries and the administration of the municipality. Other examples include integration of projects directed towards children and adults with an ethnic origin other than Danish and delivery of services such as managing a local newsletter in digital form for the benefit of especially the blinds and other



people with disabilities. Public libraries have always been a gateway to public and community information and have played a very active role in this respect (Block, 2007).

This paper reports the results of an investigation into two public libraries which have implemented citizen services in their portfolio of services (Pors, 2009). The two libraries are rather large branches in the library system of the second largest city in Denmark. The two branch libraries, Lystrup and Tilst, both have a population close to 15,000 to serve.

In 2007, a reform concerning the municipality structure was implemented in Denmark reducing the number of municipalities from over 270 to just below 100. The reform was followed by a massive closing of small library branches and by a restructuring of quite a lot of the public services.

Citizen services are those services where citizen and authorities interact on issues such as social security, tax, social benefits, passports, change of residential address, driving licenses, change of medical doctor and similar issues.

As part of the process of restructuring the services, about 25 per cent of the municipalities started to cooperate with libraries about delivering citizen services in library buildings. This was part of a policy to take the services out to the proximity of the households. It is a process of decentralisation of services going hand in hand with the centralisation of the administration. In most cases, the citizen services taking place in the library buildings were delivered by staff from the administration employed in citizen service units in the municipal administration. This organisation of the citizen service does not require much cooperation but different reported experiences indicate that a certain cooperation and crossover of activities emerge during the process (Bibliotek og Medier, 2009; Danmarks Biblioteksforening, 2009).

As part of the national strategy for digitalisation of public services and self-service, the idea of closer cooperation emerged as the public authorities acknowledged the competences which library staff possess in relation to helping and educating the public in using the internet to cope with public services. This raised the question about the possibility of involving library staff more directly into the delivery of citizen services. Of course, some of the work tasks, such as decisions about complicated cases – for example child support, are not delegated. It is only the more simple tasks without possible judicial consequences that can be handled by library staff.

The portfolio of citizen service tasks that can be carried out by library staff includes (among many others) the following:

- overall, helping citizens with digital services as part of the policy for a digital nation;
- passports;
- social security issues such as social security cards;
- change of medical doctor;
- change of residential address;
- applications for simpler forms of social benefits;
- help with digital tax services;
- applications for support for housing and rent; and
- medical bills.

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There had also been a discussion about driving licenses but this task is postponed at present.

Different models can be seen in the municipalities, and an analysis of the documents (Bibliotek og Medier, 2009; Danmarks Biblioteksforening, 2009) indicates several factors at play in relation to the single model. It has to do with the geography of the municipality, the tradition for cooperation between the service units and simple factors such as the physical placement of the libraries in relation to habitation areas.

This paper is the result of the first comprehensive evaluation of citizen services in Danish public libraries. It means that there is lack of evidence-based literature on the topic. In this way, the paper fills a gap in the knowledge area. Further, the paper is exploratory and it is not at the moment written into a proper theoretical framework. A relevant theoretical framework would probably be to interpret citizen services in libraries as a kind of organisational recipe intended to increase the legitimacy and attraction of the public libraries (Røvik, 2007; Pors, 2008c; Evjen and Audunson, 2009). However, the possible theoretical perspectives will not be elaborated in this context.

### Research questions

It is impossible to present all the details of the rather exhaustive study. However, it is possible to answer some of the more pertinent questions that arise from the introduction of a new service into the portfolio of the traditional services. The analysis focuses on the following themes:

- How do the library staff perceive the challenges and opportunities of introducing a new service?
- How well do the staff feel they are equipped with the necessary competences?
- How do the library staff perceive the cooperation with the authorities responsible for citizen services?
- How do users perceive citizen services in the public library setting?
- How do users perceive the importance of the new service?
- Are there indications that these new service will attract previously non-library users to employ the service of the library?

These broad questions are analysed in relation to a number of the traditional demographic factors.

### Methodology

The study originated as an evaluation study and it began in the spring of 2008 and ended in August 2009. It consisted of several evaluation steps outlined below including a mid-term evaluation report (Pors, 2008a).

The study has employed different data collection methods. It consisted of a series of interviews with staff members of the involved libraries. The first interview round was conducted just after the start of the new service in May 2008 and the second interview round was conducted a year later to elicit information about experiences, failures, recommendations for improvements and the general feelings in relation to the new service and the effects. This took place in August 2009. The interviews took the form of group interviews. In total, five group interviews with a total of nine staff members were conducted. Two of these interviews took place at the beginning of the process

and three took place a year later at the end of the evaluation period. Each of the interviews lasted 1-1.5 hours.

Interviews with staff members from the local authorities responsible for the service were also conducted. These were open and semi-structured interviews taking place as personal interaction between staff members and the authors, like the interviews with the staff from the libraries.

A third kind of interview was conducted with users of the service. These interviews were telephone interviews and they were conducted parallel to the interviews with staff members. Telephone interviews were conducted at the beginning of the project and followed up a year later. In total, seven telephone interviews were conducted with citizens. A common factor was that the citizens had all used the service in one of the two libraries. The telephone interviews lasted around 15 minutes each.

The data collection also included a traditional survey of library visitors conducted by the means of a questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of the traditional demographic factors and included sections on information behaviour, purpose of the visit, activities during the visit, and preferences in relation to different services. It also included sections on the use of citizen services and attitudes towards it. The users had the choice to complete the questionnaire in paper form or to receive a sheet of paper with a link to the online form of the questionnaire. The result was 243 valid responses.

Further data were collected from the database providing information about the number of transactions and the distribution of transaction on different services delivered by the libraries in the portfolio of citizen services.

Finally, a literature study based primarily on the very few reports and library web pages was conducted to form an overview of existing policies and models for integration of citizen services in the public library system. A list of the most important web pages is provided in the list of references. The web pages are in Danish and they do not have the form of papers but are more like press releases, announcements and information to users.

### **Analysis**

The analyses of the data highlights some of the more pertinent tendencies elicited from the interviews with the stakeholders and it analyses the data from the survey in relation to the research questions.

#### *The interviews*

The analysis of the interviews is conducted as a presentation of the overall broad tendencies and does not extract citations and more detailed statements from the respondents.

The interviews with the staff at the two libraries indicated that staff as a whole welcomed the new services in the library setting and they felt they had been part of the decision process. Before and just after the start, the staff participated in courses and workshops together with the staff from the citizen service administration. The development of new competencies mainly took form as learning-based practical hands-on sessions. The library staff as a whole judged the professional development as sufficient to take up the new work tasks.

Just before the project started, the staff had two main concerns or worries. First, they did not know how much time the new tasks would take and of course, they worried

to some extent about possible damage to the traditional library services. Second, they were concerned about taking up tasks that could be considered authoritative which they contrasted to the traditional service activities. Authoritative tasks involve payments and decision making that could interfere in citizens' private lives.

The staff also expressed the hope that the implementation of the service would benefit the local community and that it would be helpful attracting new users creating a synergic effect.

It is also important to note that all library staff, both library assistants and librarians worked on equal terms in the project and performed exactly the same types of tasks.

During the first round of interviews, an overriding concern was the introduction of making and delivering of passports. The concern was directed towards the possibility of failures and the time the staff believed the new task would take. However, after a short period of time the new task became just a normal part of the daily routine and it really did not pose serious problems. Another important matter during the interviews concerned the interaction with the staff from the citizen service administration. On the personal level, cooperation was smooth, helpful and friendly but the library staff also indicated two very different organisational cultures. The staff especially emphasised differences in the communication structure and the adoption of social technologies as means of communication about operational questions. There is no doubt that staff in libraries have a much more intensive and knowledge sharing culture than their colleagues in the administration, and this is probably due to the fact that they are professionals.

After just a few months, the library staff felt quite comfortable with the new services with the exception of a few. The exception was a combination of services that could have economic implications for the users and were very seldom requested. An example is helping citizens with applications for a reduction in rent for housing, and similar types of applications.

During the interviews, the staff commented that the new service did not attract new library users. It was one of the points of which they were aware and it was the point they were concerned about. Of course, the library staffs were in contact with people they had not seen before, but it is difficult during a service session to start to market the library. It feels like an intrusion into peoples' lives and awkward in relation to the current service provision.

#### *The library visitors and citizen service: survey data*

Regarding the survey, the sample consisted of 243 valid responses collected in either paper form or an online survey form.

Respondents (63 out of 243) have used citizen services during the present visit or in an earlier visit in one of the two libraries. In total, 57 visitors have used this service indicating that a few of the present visitors used the service earlier in one of the libraries. It is approximately 20-25 per cent of the respondents. It is a rather high figure taking into account that the majority of citizens do not need to be in contact with citizen service very often.

It must be noted that numbers cannot be a criteria for success. The overall objective is to foster competencies among the citizens to be digitally competent to interact with the citizen services on their own. The more they are able to do that the less contact

the library will have with these group of citizen. Of course, there are some services such as passports that are different because people need to come and present photos and other documentation personally.

Table I shows the overall figures for the respondents' answers to seven statements concerning the introduction of citizen services in the two local libraries (Table I).

Most of the users find that the introduction of citizen services in the library is beneficial for the local community and consider it as a clear service improvement with very few demerits in relation to the traditional services. Nearly, half of the users state that they would appreciate a more comprehensive service, implying that they would like the whole range of citizen services to be located in the local library. It is also obvious that a majority of library visitors state that they would use the service if they need to.

It is evident from the paragraphs above that users appreciated citizen services in the library. However, this appreciation of the introduction of new services that increase general convenience is not reflected in the perceived importance of the service. The importance of the service is just ranked as number 12 with a score of 42. It is not surprising because citizen services can be considered marginal in relation to traditional services in the libraries.

Table II shows the users' perception of the significance of different library services including citizen services. Table is organised by the ranking and gender as one demographic factor is not included in the table because the difference in perceptions related to genders are very small and insignificant. However, the paragraph following Table II discusses the small differences in perception related to gender.

There is only a marginal difference related to gender. Non-fiction is rated slightly higher by female users – 82 versus 69 for male users. Women tend to consider distance to the library slightly more than male users – 92 versus 69. The homepage means more to female users than male users – 66 versus 55. The importance of wireless network in the library receives a score at 29 for male users but 18 for female users. It is also interesting that users in different age groups overall have the same ranking of the importance of services. There are significant differences in relation to some of the services but in the overall pattern they are small.

This ranking of the importance or significance of services for the single user is interesting because it appears to be a general pattern. A study of high schools students from 2007 (Pors, 2008c) found nearly the same ranking. However, there was one difference, which is that the homepage of the library means more to users in 2009 than it did in 2007. It is an indication of the increased use of computers among citizens.

Statement	Disagree	Neither nor	Agree	<i>n</i>
It is clear service improvement	4	9	87	188
The consequence is the traditional services have suffered	89	5	6	179
It is an advantage for the local community	4	5	90	194
The service ought to be more comprehensive	12	44	45	185
I will not use citizen services at the library	77	12	10	189
It does not matter for me	61	19	19	156
I have benefitted from the service	35	30	35	185
A library should not take up tasks like these	82	12	6	193

**Table I.**  
Attitudes towards citizen services in the library, row %

	Age group			Use or non-use of citizen service		Total score	Total rank
	Young	Middle	Older	Users	Non-users		
Distance to the library	87	92	94			91	1
A kind and polite service						90	2
Ambience	79	83	90			84	3
Collection of fiction						78	4
Collection of non-fiction	66	79	60			66	5
Quite and peaceful place in the library						65	6
The Library's homepage	61	72	55			63	7
Places for relaxation				61	48	51	8
Collection of film	54	51	35			47	9
Collection of music	48	50	38			46	10
Exhibitions, lessons				53	43	45	11
Citizen services				57	37	42	12
Computers				37	26	28	13
Wireless network						21	14.5
Study places						21	14.5
Group work facilities						15	16
<i>n</i>						243	

**Table II.**  
The perceived  
significance of services in  
relation to age and use or  
non-use of the citizen  
service

**Note:** Scores on a scale from one to 100 (empty cells signify no difference in relation the demographic variables)

### *Users and non-users of citizen services*

Another analysis conducted concerns possible differences between users of the citizen services in the two libraries and the users who have not employed these services. Table II shows that the differences between these groups were minimal in relation to perceptions and perceived importance of different library services. The two groups are explored in relation to demographics, activities and other forms of library use as follows.

There is no difference between the visitors who have used citizen services at the library and the visitors who indicate that they have not used it in relation to educational level, gender and age. Furthermore, the data does not indicate that the preference for online survey or paper-based survey correlates with the use of citizen service in the libraries.

It is interesting to note that the positive attitude towards citizen services in the library overall is independent in relation to use of the service. However, some small differences can be highlighted. The citizen service non-users state more than the users of the service that the service is an advantage for the local community – 89 per cent versus 85 per cent agree with this statement (Table III).

In relation to the pattern of activities during the visit, some small differences can be seen. The differences relates to the fact that users of citizen services state that they have used the library's computers during the visit more than non-users. This could be an affect of the principle of digital self-help. Most of the services are digital and education takes place in front of a computer.

If looking at the time the visitors spend in the libraries, a tendency can be seen that visitors employing citizen services stay longer than other library visitors. It is just

a tendency because one has to remember that most of the 57 visitors who have used citizen services did not do so during the present visit but during previous visits. However, the figures indicate a slight tendency that visitors using such services stay longer – 23 per cent versus 10 per cent stay for more than 30 minutes. The difference is not statistically significant. However, it is safe to conclude that the new service tends to keep people longer in the service area.

One section of the questionnaire was concerned with what type of material the visitors wanted. It could be specific documents, types of non-fiction, genre of music, genre of films and so on. The data did not reveal any differences between the two groups in relation to the stated purposes of the visit.

Table IV indicates a correlation between library visit frequency and the use of citizen services in the libraries. It is not conclusive proof that the introduction of the service does not attract new library users. A more secure confirmation of that thesis would require a different research design. However, it is an indication of the fact that this analysis raises the hypothesis that frequent library users are more attracted by new services than others. This thesis is supported by the fact that 54 per cent of the citizen service users do use other public libraries on a regular basis versus 30 per cent of the other group.

Over 80 per cent of the visitors use their internet connection to contact the library or browse its home pages. There is no difference between the two groups in question. In the survey, visitors were asked about the frequency of use of a selected number of library web pages. Out of nine portals and web services, differences in relation to three could be elicited. The users of citizen services visit [www.litteratursiden.dk](http://www.litteratursiden.dk), [www.forfatterweb.dk](http://www.forfatterweb.dk) and [www.borger.dk](http://www.borger.dk) slightly more than the other group. The first two of these pages are directed towards people with interest in literature and authors. The third is a portal for citizens to contact the public services and obtain information about public services.

Overall, the differences between the two groups are rather small in relation to nearly all the dimensions of services and activities.

**Table III.**  
Attitudes towards citizen services among users and non-users of the service

Statement	Citizen service users (%)	Citizen service non-users (%)
	Agree	Agree
It is clear service improvement	85	89
The consequence is that traditional services have suffered	2	7
It is an advantage for the local community	89	92
The service ought to be more comprehensive	6	13
I will not use citizen services at the library	50	43
It does not matter for me	8	24
A library should not take up tasks like these	4	7

**Table IV.**  
Library visit frequency among users and non-users of citizen service, row %

	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Quarterly	Less than quarterly	<i>n</i>
Citizen service users	9	55	32	0	4	56
Citizen service non-users	1	52	45	1	1	179
Total	3	53	42	1	2	235

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## Conclusion and perspectives

One of the interesting phenomena regarding citizen services in the library is that the criteria for success appears to be different from criteria used to measure other library activities and services.

As the service is introduced as part of a national strategy and by means of upgrading citizens' IT competencies to empower them to interact on their own and independently with the public authorities, the criteria for success cannot be an increase in the amount of visitors using the service. The criterion for success is probably a complex phenomenon, but it is important to stress that decrease in the amount of visitors using the service is in accordance with the strategy. However, this development will, of course, take some time and other measures to evaluate the effects must be employed.

Regarding the research questions, the findings can be summarized as follows. The interviews with staff showed that they were very positive in relation to the introduction of citizen services. The main reason for the positive attitude depended upon their perception of the service as an improvement for the local community and also the hope that it would attract more visitors to the library. Overall, the positive attitude reflects the service orientation of the library staff and it is strengthened by the experience that the tasks involved turned out to be less time-consuming than feared and that the staff did not experience any kind of conflict between the roles of service and authority.

Most of the professional development and education took place as hands-on teaching pairing people from the central citizen service department with library staff and, overall, the evaluation of the teaching was judged favourably. However, there were some complaints. The complaints often referred to the fact that the educational sessions often came a bit late making it difficult to obtain the necessary competencies before the introduction of the single service. Some staff members would have preferred a more mixed method of learning. The establishment of a help desk or hot line to which library staff could get help was evaluated as a very positive experience. The libraries tried to set up a combination of a wiki and a blog on the intranet to share knowledge, information, solutions and other kind of information related to citizen services, but it has not been very successful partly because the staff from citizen services participated at a very low level in this knowledge sharing activities. The library staff perceived it as a consequence of two very different communication cultures.

The library visitors are very positive in relation to the new service and it is evident from the data that only a few have concerns about its effect on the traditional library services. However, even if the library visitors welcome the new service it is also evident that it does not rank highly in the structure of preferences among the library visitors. It is as a whole, considered convenient, but may be not extremely important. It is not surprising that the service is ranked rather low in importance. Most of the citizens will only have an occasional need to be in contact with these types of services.

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