



**C.H. Booth Library – Strategic Planning  
Needs Assessment Report – Community and Library**

**Completed by:**

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**Introduction**

As part of the Strategic Planning process, community and library data were gathered in January and February 2016. Multiple methods were used to collect information including focus groups, key informant interviews, a community online survey, solicitation of feedback from library staff, and review of existing data sources. This information was compiled and presented to the Planning Committee, who then developed a community vision that will guide C.H. Booth Library's selection of service priorities.

**Methodology**

Focus Groups

A series of eight focus groups were held. Seven of these groups were open to any Newtown resident, regardless of demographics or target group. A separate group was held for teenagers. A total of 55 individuals participated, including seven teenagers.

Questions asked (general population):

- Why do you live in Newtown? What's important about it to you?
- Think five years out and mention one thing that you're pretty sure is going to change in your life? (Prompts: employment, retirement, moving, more leisure time, etc.)
- What's on your to-do list to learn that you just can't seem to get off the list?
- Where do you go to seek enrichment or learn new things? Why those places?
- Tell me about the first time you were in a public library
- When you think of Newtown's public library, what words come to mind? What words do you wish came to mind?
- What would be the most important achievement of Newtown's public library by the end of five years?

Questions asked (teenagers):

- Where do you go to have fun?
- Where do you go to get information/learn?
- Where do you go in the community for support?
- What keeps you from using the library (more)?
- Who don't you see at the library who you think should be here? Why do you think they don't come?
- Fill in the blank - If people only knew \_\_\_\_ about the library, they would use it more.
- What do you do elsewhere that could be happening here?
- What would make this the best possible library (if there weren't transportation of homework constraints...)?

### Key Informant Interviews

Eight individuals took part in key informant telephone interviews, 30-60 minutes in length. Interviewees were selected by the Library Director and President of the Board of Trustees and included the Chief of Police, a local pediatrician, the President of the Historical Society, and the President of the Friends of the Library.

Questions asked:

- Based on your experiences and observations, what do you think are the major issues facing Newtown now and into the next five years?
- How can community organizations and town collaborate to meet community needs better?
- How would you describe the library's relationship with the community?
- How would you describe your relationship to the library? Has your experience been different than you expected? If yes, how?
- What would be the most important achievement of Newtown's public library by the end of five years?

### Survey

An online survey was available from January 27 to February 16, 2016 using the Survey Monkey web portal. Printed copies were also made available at the library, Municipal Center, and the Senior Center. The survey was promoted through the local newspaper, library e-blasts, website, Facebook and Twitter posts, the Newtown school system's and town employee e-blasts, a street sign placed outside the library, and word of mouth. Survey-takers were asked about usage of the library and satisfaction with services, as well as incorporating the open-ended questions from "Libraries Transform Communities" to solicit input on developing a community vision (The full survey is included as appendix A). A total of 861 individuals took the survey. The following tables show the characteristics of the individuals who responded.

Table 1. Age distribution of survey respondents (n=629)

Under 18	18-24	25-49	50-64	65+
1%	1%	44.4%	39%	14.8%

This age distribution compares favorably with Newtown's overall age distribution. As expected, there were few respondents under the age of 25, but the response rate from individuals between 25 and 49 was encouraging and likely due to its promotion through the school system's e-blasts.

Table 2. Children as part of household of survey respondents (n=645)

Not raising any children	29.7%
Children under 6	17.2%
Children between 6-18	56.3%
Children over 18 at home	14%

Note: respondents were asked to check all that apply

While a large majority have children 18 and under living at home, it is interesting to note that 14% have children over 18 at home. This percentage is in line with national data from the Pew Research Center indicating that 12% of college-educated 24-35 year olds are now living at home.

Survey respondents were also asked about their employment status (n=650). Of the 650 who selected one or more options, 44% were employed full-time, 20% employed part-time, and 13% chose self-employed/entrepreneur. Almost one-fifth (18%) of respondents selected stay-at-home parent, 1.7% between jobs, and 3.5% are caring for aging parents. When asked about retirement, 14.2% said that they were already retired, and 5.4% are planning to retire in the next five to ten years. Finally, respondents were asked if they are planning to live in Newtown in five years (n=653). Almost three-quarters (73%) responded "yes," while 6% said "no." Over one-fifth (21%) selected "I don't know."

While the characteristics of survey respondents cannot be generalized to the population of Newtown, the data provide an insight into target groups that the library can consider serving, including people with children over 18 at home, entrepreneurs, and those planning to retire in the next five to ten years.

#### Survey and interviews with key library staff

Library staff received a brief survey that asked questions about their perceptions of community engagement, professional development goals, and the strengths and challenges of C.H. Booth library. Nine interviews were conducted with key staff who were asked the following questions:

- What are your hopes and dreams for your library to be able to do for your community?
- What do you find yourself saying "no" to?
- What do you think your library could be doing that it isn't right now?
- What should your role be in helping to reach that goal?
- What makes this library function best?
- What holds it back?

#### Other data sources

Other data sources that were consulted include the 2014 Connecticut Economic Resource Council's town profile of Newtown, the 2010-2014 American Community Survey (Census), the Town of Newtown website, and CT State Library statistics.

#### **About Newtown**

Newtown is a town of 27,543 residents in northern Fairfield County. Of note, Newtown has a higher median household income (\$116,024) than the county (\$82,614) and the state (\$69,519), as well as a higher percentage of persons age 25 or older with a Bachelors degree or higher (51%

of Newtown residents vs. 36% of state residents). The median age in Newtown is 43 years old. As presented in the table below, Newtown is a racially homogenous community.

Table 3. Race/ethnicity of Newtown residents

White	87.2%
Hispanic/Latino	8.1%
Asian	2.1%
Black/African American	1.1%
Two or more races	1%

Newtown is a primarily residential community, with 92% of housing units for single-families and 86% owner-occupied dwellings. It is located 61 miles from New York City. Between 2010 and 2014, 7.1% of children in Newtown lived in households that received Supplemental Security Income (SSI), cash assistance, and/or Food Stamp/SNAP benefits in the past twelve months. Major employers in Newtown include Masonicare at Newton, CT Department of Corrections, and Taunton Press.

The Newtown Public Schools district operates four elementary schools (Hawley Elementary School, Head O'Meadow Elementary School, Middle Gate Elementary School, and Sandy Hook Elementary School) that serve grades K-4, Reed Intermediate School serving grades 5-6, Newtown Middle School serving grades 7-8, and Newtown High School serving grades 9-12. Newtown also has several private and parochial schools, including St. Rose of Lima Roman Catholic School, the Fraser-Woods Montessori School, and the Housatonic Valley Waldorf School. Notably, the *Newtown Bee*, the local weekly newspaper, has been serving the area since 1877, and has been owned and operated by the Smith family since 1881.

Two significant and interrelated projects that have involved the community in recent years are the Fairfield Hills campus and the Newtown Community Center Commission. Fairfield Hills is a 186-acre site purchased by the town from the state through a bonding initiative approved in 2001 with a vision to create a vibrant, sustainable destination for recreational, social, and cultural use, municipal offices, and other town-wide uses. There has been extensive public participation in the development of its Master Plan, the most recent version of which was updated in 2013. The Newtown Community Center Commission (NCCC) was created after General Electric donated \$10 million to Newtown as a result of the tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary School. This gift is intended to create a facility that acts as an anchor of the community. The Commission began meeting in May 2015 and has also solicited extensive community input, including a survey, and community forums. At the end of February, the NCCC presented its final recommendations to the Board of Selectman, Board of Finance, and Legislative Council, all of which approved sending it to a referendum, now scheduled for April 5, 2016. The proposal is to create a multi-purpose community center between 13,000 and 18,000 square feet available to residents of all ages. Proposed features include aquatics and a study of a potential ice arena.

## Summary of Key Findings – Community

Through the focus groups, interviews, and survey, we sought to understand the aspirations of the Newtown community and the challenges it faces in reaching these aspirations. The following sections summarize what we discovered.

### Aspirations

The word cloud below shows the responses of people when asked “What are three words or phrases to describe the kind of community you’d like to live in?” on the community survey:

Figure 1. Aspirational Words



While compassionate, welcoming, child-friendly, and open were prompts provided to respondents, people’s answers indicate a desire for a community that is more diverse, supportive, collaborative, and inclusive. Below is a representative quote from responses to “Why is that [the words to describe the kind of community you’d like to live in] important to you?”

*“I have children and want them to be a part of a place with a strong sense of community where they feel comfortable to grow and learn and play. Thoughtful innovation will help our town meet our evolving and growing needs in new and exciting ways and encourage entrepreneurship.” (34 year old)*

### Challenges facing Newtown

In interviews, focus groups, and open-ended responses to the survey, Newtown residents identified the following as challenges that Newtown faces in the next five to ten years:

- Economic and demographic transitions
  - Declining school enrollment
  - Desire to maintain residential feel while remaining affordable

- Two-income families leading to lower volunteerism
- Continued recovery from 12/14
  - Need for healing is ongoing, but there is a fear that divides have emerged over issues such as the Community Center
  - Remaining stigma preventing people from moving to town
- Widening gaps in different groups
  - Anger in a segment of the senior population
  - Expectations of people who are newer to town
  - Increased political polarization
  - Recognition of a lack of diversity.

Based on these issues, there are several ideas that need to be better understood. While many residents expressed a deep affection for the status quo of Newtown – residential, friendly, rooted in family – keeping things “the same” in fact requires a concerted effort that impacts all sectors of the community who have differing views on the importance of service accessibility and affordability. In addition, in today’s diverse world, it is essential to consider how children in Newtown are being prepared to live and work with people who do not share their experiences and racial/ethnic background.

#### Achieving Newtown’s aspirations

When asked how Newtown can move past its challenges to achieve its aspirations, the following themes emerged:

- A need to work together, collaborate across town departments and organizations, and open lines of communication.
- An increased awareness of and support for the diversity that does exist in town (e.g. economic, racial/ethnic, ability)
- Support for entrepreneurship and business growth.

#### **Community Vision**

On March 1, 2016, the results of the community needs assessment were presented to the Planning Committee. They were tasked with answering the following questions, both individually and then in two groups:

- My aspirations for my community are...
- The challenges we face in reaching these aspirations are...
- The changes needed in my community to reach our aspirations are...

Based on this exercise, the following community visions were developed:

Group 1: “We want a community where people feel valued and engaged, but we face multiple barriers (social, age, economic) and a resistance to change. If we want to reach our aspirations we need to create more opportunities for respectful and constructive engagement.”

Group 2: “We want a community where we collaborate freely to enrich, attract, and grow human capital and business interests, but we face a growing socio-economic divide with

increasing needs, less engagement and growing separation from one another. If we want to reach our aspirations, we need to create a community hub with greater interaction.”

These community visions, which reflect similar thinking, will guide C.H. Booth Library as it moves forward through the strategic planning process, so that its mission and strategies are reflective of the needs and aspirations of the Newtown community.

### Summary of Key Findings – C.H. Booth Library

The information collected provided an important snapshot of the community’s perceptions of the library, current usage, and aspirations for the library. Staff feedback also provided key insights into day-to-day issues facing the library.

#### Library’s relationship to the community

As an institution that depends on community support, it is essential to understand the relationship of a library to its community. In the case of C.H. Booth and Newtown, there appears to be a strong foundation on which to build. Survey respondents were asked about the importance of the library to the community. Results are presented in the table below.

Table 4. Importance of C.H. Booth to... (n=698)

	Very Important	Somewhat Important
The Newtown community	92%	7.5%
You and your family	77%	22%

An overwhelming majority of respondents consider the library to be very important to the Newtown community; when combined with those who responded “somewhat important,” the total reaches 99.5%. Retirees are significantly more likely (89%) to rank the library as “very important” to them and their family as compared to those who work full-time, part-time, are self-employed, stay-at-home parents, or those who are planning to retire in the next five to ten years.

The affection of the community for its library is also evident in an open-ended question from the survey and focus groups where people listed words that described the library as they see it now.

Figure 2. Words to describe C.H. Booth Library



In their survey, library staff also reflected on their relationship to the community. This question was adapted from the Harwood Institute’s “Libraries Transform Communities” materials and staff were asked to rank themselves according to a five-part scale (We’ve Got It, Real Progress, Starting to Improve, Lip Service, and Business as Usual). The table below presents the results.

Table 5. Staff perception of connection to community (n=27)

	We’ve Got It	Real Progress	Starting to Improve
We exercise a sense of affection for the community in our daily operations and work	77.8%	22.2%	0%
People outside the organizations would describe us as operating as part of the community rather than apart from it	56%	41%	0%
We hold deep knowledge of the community; we understand people, their lives, where they live, and their aspirations and concerns	52%	44%	4%
We have a culture open to learning about the community and we account for what we learn in our daily work	41%	33%	26%
We have created ways to deeply listen to the community in an ongoing way	19%	33%	48%

These results reflect the take-away messages from interviews with key staff, which revealed that staff see themselves as a strong team devoted to their community, and have a deep desire to be “the best we can possibly be” while looking forward to aspirational change. The elements where staff have room for improvement are areas where the implementation of the strategic



plan can provide key support, including ongoing professional development and community assessment mechanisms. Through the staff survey and interviews, a desire for more effective marketing was expressed so that the community can be made more aware of library offerings. In addition, a majority of the staff named the building and its layout as the one thing they would change about C.H. Booth Library so that they can better serve the community.

Use of library services

Over 90% of all survey respondents (n=791) had used C.H. Booth Library in the past 12 months, either in person or through the website. Those that had not (8.13%, or n=70) “skipped” to questions that were not related to their current use of the library.

Of those who had used the library in the last 12 months, average usage is presented in the table below.

Table 6. Average monthly usage of C.H. Booth Library (n=698)

1-5 times per month	49%
Fewer than once per month	30%
More than 5 times per month	19.5%
I only use the website	1.3%
I only used other CT libraries	.6%

People without children at home are most likely to use the library more than five times per month (30%), followed by people with children under six years old (20%). Conversely, people with children over 18 living at home and those with children between 6-18 years old are significantly more likely to use the library fewer than one time per month than those without children (41% and 35% vs. 22%)

When asked about the importance of library services (collections, hours of operation, staff availability to assist patrons, programs, use of library computer, and trainings/classes), there were also distinctions between different groups of library users.

People who are employed part-time or retired are significantly more likely to say that *having staff available to assist patrons* is very important to them as compared to those who work full-time.

Stay-at-home parents are significantly more likely to say that *programs* are very important to them as compared to those who work full-time or those who are retired (60% v. 40%; 60% v. 46%). Parents with children under the age of 6 (76%) are most likely and significantly more likely than all other groups to say that programs are very important. These groups likely have significant overlap.

People not raising any children are significantly more likely than those raising children under 18 to say that *using library computers* is very important to them (22% vs. 8% and 13%). In addition, people who are self-employed and people who are employed part-time are significantly more

likely to say that *trainings and classes* are very important as compared to people who are employed full-time (25% v. 13%; 24% v 13%). All library services have high levels of satisfaction, with 90% or more of respondents saying that they are “very satisfied” or “somewhat satisfied.” When asked what changes would encourage them to visit C. H. Booth Library more often, almost 60% said providing more relevant programs. Focus group respondents told us that they primarily stay close to home for entertainment and enrichment, presenting the library with a prime opportunity to engage more people. Focus group respondents also spoke about mobility challenges that they are facing currently, or anticipate facing in the future, including being less willing to drive at night.

Comparing C.H. Booth

Seven libraries were selected by Library Director Brenda McKinley for comparison to C.H. Booth Library: Branford, Cheshire, Monroe, Ridgefield, Simsbury, Southbury, and Westport.

Table 8. Selected statistics of comparison libraries

	POPULATION OF SERVICE AREA 2014	AENGLC WEALTH RANK 2015	TOTAL LIBRARY VISITS	LIBRARY VISITS PER CAPITA SERVED	TOTAL PROGRAMS	TOTAL PROGRAM ATTENDANCE
<b>Branford</b>	28,225	47	213,766	7.6	865	17,537
<b>Cheshire</b>	29,250	72	170,062	5.8	517	14,311
<b>Monroe</b>	19,867	45	114,122	5.7	552	13,864
<b>Newtown</b>	28,152	42	140,303	5.0	909	11,438
<b>Ridgefield</b>	25,205	12	268,714	10.7	1161	28,829
<b>Simsbury</b>	23,975	38	361,357	15.1	1573	38,634
<b>Southbury</b>	19,881	51	187,143	9.4	570	15,251
<b>Westport</b>	27,561	4	393,050	14.3	1978	65,665

While statistics reported to the Connecticut State Library have drawbacks based on differing methods of counting and reporting information, they provide a general snapshot to compare Connecticut’s public libraries to one another. The table above shows that Newtown’s library visits per capita served (5.0) is below all comparison libraries, and while its total programs (909) fall in the middle of the pack, its total program attendance (11,438) is the lowest as well.

Table 9. Selected statistics of comparison libraries

	HOURS OPEN	LIBRARY APPROPRIATION AS % OF TOTAL MUNICIPAL REVENUES 2013	WAGES & SALARIES PER CAPITA	TOTAL LIBRARY COST PER CAPITA	TOTAL FTEs PER 1,000
<b>Branford</b>	63	1.41%	\$35.79	\$68.11	0.76
<b>Cheshire*</b>	61	1.59%	\$46.29*	\$59.61*	0.74
<b>Monroe*</b>	51	0.90%	\$25.21*	\$32.64*	0.59
<b>Newtown</b>	61	1.01%	\$27.53	\$52.75	0.6
<b>Ridgefield</b>	52	1.33%	\$54.76	\$101.21	1.08
<b>Simsbury*</b>	64	1.50%	\$43.29*	\$76.42*	0.75
<b>Southbury*</b>	59	1.04%	\$25.78*	\$55.39*	0.69
<b>Westport</b>	69	2.17%	\$120.55	\$196.74	1.65

\*municipal library

The table above shows that, with the exception of one other library, Newtown had the lowest library appropriations as a percentage of total municipal revenues in 2013. This is particularly important, as Newtown is an “association” library, as distinguished from a “municipal” library. A municipal library operates as a town department and therefore has access to payroll, purchasing, maintenance, and other service through the town’s budget.

#### Aspirations for the library

In focus groups and interviews, residents were asked to imagine the most important achievement of C.H. Booth Library at the end of five years. Based on their responses, five main themes emerged:

**Library as connector:** The library was envisioned as a place to connect groups and ideas that are currently seen as disconnected – young and old, past (genealogy and Newtown’s rich history) with future, people and resources, and as one focus group participant so eloquently put it, a place to connect “kindred spirits.”

**Library as a place to learn in community:** There was excitement about the idea of the library as a place for lifelong learning, not only as somewhere in the community, but as a place to learn *in* community with one another, bringing people together. Desires included more makerspace functions (audio, video, music, woodworking), training on new technology, and compelling programming.

**Library as convener:** Throughout the process, we heard about the growing influence of social media and the internet on “uncivil” discourse and the growing divides between groups in town. The groups recognized that the library has the ability to bring people together in a neutral setting and act as a convener of different groups and organizations for conversation and collaboration.

**Library as partner:** The library is seen as an ideal partner for the school system, the Senior Center, and Continuing Education.

**Library as community hub:** The lack of a natural center of Newtown gave participants an opportunity to imagine the library as a more central gathering place. One focus group participant said that she hoped the library would become the place where people say “I need something, let me try the library.” The library can serve as the go-to place, both physically and virtually, to connect the community to one another.

### Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats

A Work Group of staff and board members gathered on February 25, 2016 to hear the results of the needs assessment and conduct an exercise to understand the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) facing C.H. Booth Library. Their responses to the following questions are below:

What does C.H. Booth Library do well?

- Friendly staff
- Staff who are committed to the community
- A commitment to innovation
- Openness to change and a willingness to try and fail

What are our aspirations for C.H. Booth Library?

- To be a social and economic leveler for Newtown
- To be more accessible to all (physically and digitally)
- To take a proactive approach to community needs
- To be the “go-to” place in Newtown

The challenges we face in reaching these aspirations are...

- Getting the word out
- The building/space configuration
- Current staffing levels/configuration
- A fear of change (staff and community)

The changes needed at C.H. Booth Library to reach our aspirations are...

- A more effective use of space
- A willingness to move beyond the library walls
- Intentional looking outward into the community
- Commitment to improving marketing/communications

### **Next Steps**

Using the information gathered from the Newtown community, the Planning Committee, along with the library staff and board, will select service priorities that respond to community needs.

The priorities that are chosen will inform broader strategies, goals, objectives, and activities that will form the core of C.H. Booth's three-year strategic plan.

### **Initial conclusions**

The aspirations of the Newtown community and those of the library are in alignment, establishing a positive base from which to move forward. The community feels that the library is a very important part of its life and library staff feel connected to the community that they serve. Looking forward, we can identify two key issues that the library is well-positioned to address through its strategic plan.

First, the survey and focus group data tell us that many library users are facing transitions in their lives during the next three years. These transitions include uncertainty about moving out of Newtown, impending retirement, re-entering the workforce either full-time or as an entrepreneur or part of the "gig economy" (i.e. freelancers), and increasing mobility issues. Transition points are prime opportunities for libraries to engage individuals with programming and services that are relevant to their circumstances.

Second, we became aware of the community's need for feeling centered. As stated previously, there is no natural physical center in Newtown, and there are increasingly felt divides between different groups. As a neutral, welcoming space, the library offers both the physical and emotional space to bring people together.

A key challenge facing the library in reaching its aspirations is the library building and space configuration. While an important, historic structure, its layout creates a barrier to connecting with the community as emphasized by the staff. Its aging infrastructure and staffing needs make it a fiscal challenge as well. The ability to tackle this issue is paramount to C.H. Booth Library's future success in meeting community needs.