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Resource sharing in the UK public library system: an update

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to review the position of UnityUK and FABLibraries (Find a Book in Libraries) some five years after a review by the same author (with Elisabeth Robinson) was published in 2011.

Design/methodology/approach – The UnityUK service and its co-service FABLibraries is placed in the current service and political context: changing politics and reductions in public service. The conclusions of a survey conducted by the University of Sheffield are noted as current technical developments.

Findings – Subscriptions to UnityUK remain stable despite an overall decline in interlending. The FABLibraries service is well positioned to play a key role in the creation of a single digital presence for public libraries in England and in the UK.

Practical implications – The outcome of major recent political change in respect of public service is not yet known, but there is reason to be confident about the role of the two services in supporting resource discovery and supply.

Social implications – The FABLibraries service is well positioned to be the major building block in a national e-public library platform. This would provide a cost-effective means of making national resources accessible to everyone who can get online.

Originality/value – The author provides an up-to-date perspective of the impact of change, recent government reports and public sector austerity on interlending and the position of key resource discovery tools in that environment.

Keywords Public libraries, Interlending, Resource management, Ambition, FABLibraries, UnityUK

Paper type General review

Introduction

An article in this journal (Froud and Robinson, 2011) described the state of resource sharing and interlending in the UK with reference to public libraries in the main and new initiatives which would enhance resources discovery in particular. The key points described in 2011 were:

- the decline in regional arrangements;
- growth of consortia;
- the fragmented nature of national leadership;
- the impact of budgetary pressures on services; and
- the introduction of FABLibraries (Find a Book in Libraries) and the need for a holistic approach through a “single digital presence”.

All these considerations are very much “live” at present and provide the context for this update.

Contextual developments since 2011

In five years, a great deal has happened to change the number of publicly funded libraries and the governance of those that remain. Technological change has led to a new vision at a national level for public libraries. The provision of the

UnityUK service has remained stable and strong, but hopes for the national profile of FABLibraries have not yet been realised for reasons touched on below.

UnityUK

OCLC continues to develop UnityUK and does so in response to subscriber/user feedback and being proactive on their own part.

Two upgrades have been implemented since 2011 – the first in December 2012 and the most recent in December 2014, with another likely for the end of 2016. The main features are:

- ability for the staff user to configure which page is displayed after login;
- a new British Library “BL For Review” queue that was introduced to replace the existing “BL Pending Reapp” queue (BL Reapp action was removed);
- a new variant of the “Cancel” action for use with e-mail and integrated transactions called “Cancel Now”;
- introduction of the ability to sort saved Advanced Request searches by last transaction date/time (“Status Change Date” appears as a request sort option on the advanced request search criteria); and
- rota building that has been made easier by adding “Move to Top” and “Move to Bottom” of list buttons.

Regions and consortia

Looking back 10 years or more, one could point to a plethora of regional bodies across a whole range of public services and national organisations. Since then, a move towards the

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development of shared services, and the associated growth of sub-regional partnership arrangements, has meant that the rationale for separate regional bodies is less clear. Other types of organisations have been placed to take on a further strategic or even operational role. Such has been the case with the Library Regions in the East Midlands, for example, where the role of LIEM has been subsumed within the East Midlands Society of Chief Librarians. The South West Regional Library Service is the sole surviving co-operative regional library body, following the decision to wind up the North West Regional Library Service in 2016.

Consortia have grown in number and in size over the past five years. Libraries West was probably the first of its kind in its scope in its first form as Foursite (Froud, 1999) with a shared library management System, centralised acquisitions, free interlending, shared transport and more. This has now grown from five authorities to eight, creating a huge sub regional system in its own right. Other consortia across the country have expanded also, and in Wales, there are plans to redraw local authority boundaries once again to resemble something like the eight pre-1996 authorities.

Public spending

This is not the place to describe the impact of the reductions in public spending on public libraries. Although one might have expected interlending to increase at a time when there is pressure on local resources, this has not happened, and, indeed, the reverse is the case.

The reasons for this have been identified to some extent in study carried out by the University of Sheffield for the combined regions.

Key amongst these has been the increase in charges for interlibrary loans, with some authorities requiring payment of the full economic cost of a loan. Other considerations recognised by *investigating interlending* are:

- declining public library service budgets;
- increased availability of digital content; and
- cost-effective e-commerce services.

Technical solutions

Despite the reduced volume of interlending activity nationally[1], inter-library loan still remains a vital tool for users who need to access specialist or elusive material. UnityUK has continued to evolve technically to improve accessibility and reduce the administrative and cost pressures on participating library services. So, for example, Lancashire County Libraries rolled out branch requesting in 2014 to over 70 branches. Following that, they introduced an online request form to allow borrowers to submit ILL requests from their library web pages. The local system sends a formatted e-mail message to UnityUK, which then sits in the UnityUK Idle work queue. Monograph requests then follow the auto-mediated rota building workflow, whereas other formats are manually processed.

OCLC upgraded the UnityUK service to VDX v. 5.4 in December 2011, as planned. The upgrade delivered much improved brokering functionality, integration with a reduced set of British Library messages, interface improvements and streamlined workflows.

The UnityUK system was further upgraded to VDX version 8.2 on Wednesday, 10 December 2014. The upgrade delivered interface improvements and the ability for staff users to locally configure specific areas of the interface and set preferred default settings.

This focus on developing the service to help address the challenges facing library services has enabled subscriptions to maintain a high level, with barely a 5 per cent reduction in the number of subscriptions, despite all the considerations detailed above.

FABLibraries (www.bookmarkyourlibrary.org.uk/find-a-book)

The public facing view of UnityUK is FABLibraries. More than *books* are available through the database but books are the primary offer and come in many formats.

At the time of the soft launch, it was considered important to make this service to the public part of a wider public library digital offer. Plans for a unified digital platform were to some extent scuppered by a change of government and a consequential review by partners of their ambitions.

Since then, The Society of Chief Librarians (SCL) has aligned its priorities around four universal offers: reading, information, health and digital. In 2015, SCL commissioned Biblio Commons to review the digital infrastructure of public libraries in England. In November 2015, its report was published: *Essential Digital Infrastructure for Public Libraries in England—a plan for moving forward* (<http://goscl.com/wp-content/uploads/151130-DigitalPlatformFinalReport.pdf>). The report presents a transformational plan or blueprint for a combined digital presence for public library digital services, which is predicated on an investment of £20m over three years. If realised, library management systems would be transformed, and, interlending, as we know, now would be radically different. At the time of writing, the Chancellor's budget has incurred the wrath of backbenchers and is about to be rewritten, but there is no indication of an allocation to achieve this vision. On the contrary, local authorities are facing further austerity. Notwithstanding that, however, yet another consultative document was published by DCMS in March 2016: *Libraries Deliver: Ambition for Public Libraries 2016–2021* (www.gov.uk/government/consultations/libraries-deliver-ambition-for-public-libraries-in-england-2016-2021/libraries-deliver-ambition-for-public-libraries-in-england-2016-2021).

The one section which would impact upon ILL is 15.6:

Public libraries in England use technology in a variety of ways to promote access to information, services and the library building. We believe a joined-up approach to the use of digital tools and innovative technologies is an essential part of realising our vision.

We see four main areas for future development as part of this ambition:

- 1 *delivering 24/7 online access to public library services through a single library digital presence (SLDP);*
- 2 *improving access to library buildings and services;*
- 3 *improving access to information and resources within library buildings by getting the most from universally available WiFi; and*
- 4 *Encouraging users to become more involved in providing feedback and contributing to the development of services.*

Taskforce members will review proposals for the Single Library Digital Presence and develop an implementation plan, including working with partners to establish a sustainable governance and funding model.

We will also identify and promote examples of good practice using technology to facilitate access to library buildings and services.

The vision may stand the test of time and be realised in due course, and, OCLC, as the technical provider of the UnityUK service, is actively involved in the Taskforce's Single Digital Library Presence working group. In the meantime, FABLibraries is a huge step forward for the library community and remains a priority for OCLC and TCR as the *de facto* public-facing UK national union catalogue. This is a USP of the "national service", the existence of which is predicated on shared values and a willingness to collaborate on a quid pro quo basis for the benefit of the end-user. This principle is becoming fragmented through the growth of localism, shared services and sub-regionalism, yet national solutions remain both relevant and cost-effective, and that is where UnityUK and FABLibraries sit, quite comfortably. Both offer a quick win, a key building block for a national digital platform for public libraries.

For the future, then, UnityUK and FABLibraries will continue to play an important part in resource discovery, but will sit within a different strategic framework, if the last government's *Ambition* programme is realised. In Wales, however, steps are already underway to create a single national library management system, with six authorities in North Wales set to merge their bibliographical services. In England, terms of reference have been drawn up for the Leadership Task Force (www.gov.uk/government/publications/leadership-for-libraries-taskforce-terms-of-reference/leadership-for-libraries-taskforce-terms-of-reference-january-2016). The Independent Library Report drawn up by the coalition government (www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-library-report-for-england) made a number of recommendations, which are now for the Task Force to take forward. The key challenge in this context is the recommendation to "support the creation of a national digital framework". The recommendation by the coalition was still on the table for the last government, but post-Brexit, and yet another government, we shall have to wait to see what impact both will have on the *Ambition* and on public services in general. The minutiae of service delivery are now dependent more than ever on political whim, so one can conclude that in these turbulent times, the UnityUK service remains a reliable tool underpinning resource discovery and supply.

Note

- 1 Between 2012 and 2015, the number of requests placed via UnityUK fell by 44 per cent, but in recent years, the rate of decline has diminished.

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