

Improving access to information for everyone at all times: the case of Inspire in the UK

What is Inspire?

Inspire provides a service for learners and researchers at all stages of their lives and careers to improve access to information and library collections across all types of library by means of proactive co-operation and joint working.

This service is delivered through Public Libraries and libraries in Higher and Further Education, Government, health, cultural and research organisations.

Inspire is underpinned by the support of The British Library, the National Library of Wales, the National Library of Scotland and the Library and Information Services Council, Northern Ireland, the Society of College, National and University Libraries [SCONUL] and the Society of Chief Librarians [SCL] it is managed by a steering group representing these interests, the Inspire Management Board [IMB].

Background

Inspire was created in 2003 to support the political imperatives of the time: the need to create a 'knowledge society' and the desire to develop a culture of lifelong learning and of widening participation in tertiary education.

Learning was, and is, seen as necessarily an ongoing process and, whilst libraries offer natural gateways to learning (whether formal or informal), no single library can fulfil the needs of all learners and researchers. Inspire was created to bring libraries from different sectors together so that information could be accessed where ever it was to be found.

Because of its funding programme, Inspire focussed on libraries and learning organisations in England, but it also has links with parallel developments in Scotland, Wales, the Republic of Ireland and especially with Northern Ireland.

Objectives

Inspire's objective is to ensure that all learners can have access to the most appropriate learning materials for their needs – irrespective of the status of the learner or the location of the materials.

To achieve this Inspire set out to sign up all publicly funded libraries plus any others that were willing to take part In addition Inspire aims to provide a guide for both librarians and for learners to map libraries with collections and materials relevant to their needs.

How does Inspire work?

Management of Inspire:

- The Inspire Steering Group, which became the Inspire Management Board when the funded period ended, provides overall direction for Inspire. It consists of members representing the key supporting bodies SCONUL, SCL, and

The Combined Regions and the British Library and also includes members from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

- Inspire is managed on a regional or sub regional basis. Large and small groups sprang up to support Inspire across the nine English regions. In some instances collaborative access groups already existed and these were built on and extended. In others Inspire was a new concept. In the East Midlands, for example, the pre-existing Libraries and Information East Midlands (LIEM), [1] took on the running of Inspire for the whole region. In the North East a new group, 'Inspire in the North East' [2], co-ordinates activities for this region. In the North West there are smaller groups such as 'Addlib' in Cumbria, [3] and the 'LEARN Partnership' in Cheshire, [4] and there is a small but very active group Inspire group in Herefordshire and Worcestershire.

Making it easy for Libraries to join Inspire

The key to achieving Inspire's objectives and encouraging take up amongst libraries was the creation of a system of reciprocal and managed access between the Inspire library members.

- Reciprocal Access: all libraries can refer their members to any other library registered with Inspire that can provide the information needed.
- Managed Access: Although all participating libraries are expected to allow access for Inspire users, they are also free to place their own conditions on this access. Such conditions could include a request for the provision on arrival of some form of ID, the request for a phone call in advance or limiting visits to specific times of the day or year. Participating libraries are not expected to offer borrowing rights to Inspire visitors but access should be available to their collections on site.
- The Inspire website holds the details of each member library and any access conditions are added to the record. Although initially intended for librarians, the Inspire website is available to all. [5].
- Reciprocal and managed access therefore gives participating libraries control over the visiting arrangements to their library and, equally importantly, it ensures that library visitors know in advance the terms of access to each library so that they are prepared for their visit and can be confident that they will be admitted to the library of their choice.
- During Inspire's two year funded period, an extensive programme of communications, visits and presentations was undertaken to spread the word of the work of Inspire and to encourage libraries to join.

Membership of Inspire currently stands at 549 library organisations equating to an estimated 3,950 individual libraries, branches and community libraries. Membership includes over 90% of University libraries, over 95% of Public Libraries, over 80 health related libraries and over 100 specialist libraries including five cathedral libraries, the library of the Islamic Foundation Trust, an anarchist library in Bradford and Kew Library and Archives.

Making it easy for learners and researchers to visit Inspire libraries

- Inspire produced posters, leaflets, bookmarks and door and window stickers to help member libraries to advertise their participation and encourage library users to make use of the service. These materials are free to all participating libraries.
- The application of the Inspire Kitemark Criteria which all joining libraries agree to follow. This requires all front line library staff to be informed about Inspire and about how to support Inspire visitors to their library.
- If the home library cannot supply the information a reader needs, anyone who is a (reputable) member of an Inspire library can ask for an Inspire passport, [see below] or local equivalent, which will give them access to one or more alternative libraries.
- The Inspire website provides basic contact and access information on all libraries registered with Inspire.
- The Findit! website which is being developed to provide more extensive information on libraries and their collections.
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More on Findit! Although librarians in any town or region are likely to know something of other libraries in their neighbourhood, they cannot all know everything and may not always be able to advise information seekers about the best libraries to visit.

How many people, for example, are aware that Chesterfield Public Library holds a collection on dog breeding, focusing on smooth haired Fox Terriers in particular; that Newcastle University Library has an extensive collection of Catherine Cookson novels in languages other than English; that Leeds City Library holds the Saxton Atlas, the first national atlas of any country commissioned by Elizabeth I and surveyed by Yorkshireman Christopher Saxton or that a lock of pixie's hair can be found in a letter written in the 1850s in Hull local studies library?

To ensure that such information is available and in order to allow learners and researchers to discover this information for themselves, Inspire established the Findit! website which aims to describe the collections held in all its member libraries. The website is not for 'special collections' only. Contributing libraries are asked to indicate the essential components of the library coverage as a whole as well as indicating content deemed to be of particular interest.

The development of this website is still a work in progress. Despite its several thousand entries, it is far from comprehensive but it is already a useful tool and can be used for both simple searches such as for 'music' or, for more specific subjects. For example a search for, 'Lawrence' provides information on five collections on D.H. Lawrence and one on T.E. Lawrence. Search results can be sorted by post code or region to identify which may be closest to the home area of the searcher.

The essential information that is also included in Findit! and that is missing from other discovery services is information on how the resources described can be

accessed. For example, the T.E. Lawrence collection mentioned above is held in the Library and Archive collection at Royal Air Force College, Cranwell. The information on Findit! not only gives the postal address but also the contact phone number and email address and the following Access information: 'Access by prior appointment only. Researchers welcome but need to establish necessity for access.' It also notes that 'Access is difficult as the collection is on the first floor with no lift.'

Measuring success

Because the objectives of Inspire are to make it easier for both learners and libraries, member libraries are not required to keep a record of every Inspire visitor. This obviously inhibits the compilation of statistics so it is difficult to define the extent of usage. However, two regions, the North East and the East Midlands, have adopted an 'Inspire passport' system. Here, those who wish to use libraries other than their own are registered and issued with an Inspire Passport which guarantees the visited library that their visitor is a registered member of another Inspire library. The fact that both these regions have recently had to re-order passports for their libraries implies a significant take up.

One small survey of users carried out in the North East produced some written responses including the following:

"This is a wonderful service to provide for the general public. Please don't stop it."

"The card is an excellent idea. Would be a help if it was nationwide."

Inspire support for staff development

Although Inspire's principle objective is to support library users, the regional and sub regional Inspire groups also perform a valuable function in the area of staff development. At the most basic level, local and regional meetings both formal and informal help staff to develop a knowledge of other libraries and to get to know other library staff in their area. This knowledge is valuable in assisting librarians to advise users about visits to other libraries. In many cases the Inspire groups set up regular meetings to support staff development. For example, as reported in the March 2010 Inspire e-newsletter, a recent meeting in the West Midlands focused on specialist collections through the ages and "local speakers from the health, public and cathedral sectors shared information on their collections. This was followed by a session on how the group could share their expertise and resources through locally held workshops".

Inspire today

In 2011, the principal objectives of Inspire remain the same as they were in 2003, but operational priorities have been reworked and extended. The focus is now on:

- wider support for collaborative programmes and projects with similar aims, whether they are led by Inspire or others
- direct links with the home nations including representation in the Inspire Management Board
- support for networking and dialogue across library sectors that leads to collaborative activities and shared services.

The Inspire Directors and other members of the Inspire Management Board give their time freely to continue to support a service which has as much relevance now as it did in 2003.

Supporting learning and research

The need for access to learning and research resources for all is as great today as it was when Inspire was initiated.

Government focus may have moved away from the agendas for Lifelong Learning and the Knowledge Economy, but the cuts in funding and the current job losses make the need for lifelong learning and the opportunity to study, learn new skills and retrain as important as ever – if not more so. Public libraries may have many of the materials needed to support learners but they cannot hold everything. The ability to direct learners to the nearest appropriate Further Education or Higher Education library and provide these learners with the assurance that they will be able to enter, is a huge bonus for public libraries and learners alike.

Unfortunately for such visitors there are increasing limitations on what is available on academic library shelves. For those who are members of such libraries, especially in the sciences, engineering and medicine, most of the information resources they need are now available online. Print copies have therefore, in most cases, long since disappeared from the library. Restrictions on the licensing of online resources prevents visitors to the institution from accessing most of these online resources so, until the time when scientific papers are available to all through Open Access, finding and accessing a library that still has print journals on their shelves is an issue for unaffiliated learners and researchers.

For learners and scholars of the Humanities, a significantly smaller subset of the papers and other materials they need have moved to digital form only. However, this does not mean that the print versions are all readily available. As libraries, especially academic libraries, turn an increasing proportion of their floor space over to student group-study areas, monographs are being checked for recent usage and many have been retired to remote stores or more permanently disposed of.

These developments mean that less and less material is available on the shelves in academic libraries. Local catalogues and Copac, [6] which now holds the catalogue records of many specialist and learned society libraries as well as those of the Russell group, are good sources of information about where collections or specific items are located.

There is also the issue of 'hidden' collections which are either uncatalogued or only catalogued in hard copy format so that their records are not available online. In 2007 a RIN report *Uncovering Hidden Resources, extending the coverage of online catalogues*, surveyed major Higher Education, public and specialist libraries and found that records for 50% of material was not visible online, (RIN, 2007).

And a survey undertaken in summer 2010 by Research Libraries UK (RLUK) and The London Library showed that, of the 75 libraries that responded, (39% from HE) 15%

had no records visible online at all, there were an estimated 10.6 million items waiting to be catalogued and 1.2 million that needed their records to be improved. A full report on this survey is planned but is not available at the time of writing.

The Findit! Website is one of the few places where collections such as these can be found and of course, individual items can be borrowed via interlibrary loan but this a) costs money, b) takes time, c) provides no opportunity for browsing before selecting for ILL and therefore holds no guarantee that the item concerned contains the information needed.

An Inspire passport however, allows individuals direct access to the items they wish to use.

Inspire's value within this widening access agenda has been acknowledged and reinforced within the Higher Education sector this autumn with the establishment by SCONUL's Executive Board of a Task and Finish group to look at Access issues, covering reciprocity, walk in access to electronic resources and Inspire.

Shared services

There has rarely been a time when libraries in the UK have faced greater financial challenges and there is an increasing consensus that sharing is the only way forward to achieve the proverbial 'more with less'.

The problems now facing libraries follow a period of significant expansion of services and accompanying raised user expectations.

For Public Libraries, the period from 1997 onwards has seen developments unparalleled since the building programme of the 1960s. Public Libraries changed for ever following the arrival of the People's Network which aimed to start to bridge the 'digital divide' through the provision of PCs in public libraries enabling public access to Internet and email services. It attracted new users and, although it alienated others, it made library staff and managers and politicians rethink the business they were in and it arrested the decline in public library usage across the UK.

Further improvements were made following the introduction of the first Public Library Standards which provided performance indicators which could be benchmarked against a standard and which consumers and stakeholders alike could use to compare their service with those of neighbouring or comparable Public Library Authorities.

There was also additional funding for refurbishment/renewal of buildings, for increases in opening hours, and for the purchase of more books, DVDs, CDs and online databases, all of which modernised the service and improved performance significantly.

Academic libraries too, have expanded the range and extent of their services over the last ten years, providing hugely increased volume of digital content, for example through 'big deals' with publishers which almost tripled the number of journal titles

subscribed to across the sector; by extended opening hours often, to 24 hours a day, by extending and enhancing facilities for students both for individual and group study, and through the provision of specially designated areas for research.

Services in Health Libraries were also extended. In 2004, the Government White Paper, 'Choosing Health – making healthy choices easier', required health services to provide better health information for patients and the public. This put information at the centre of the health agenda. As a result of this and of other initiatives, health libraries have opened up access to non-medical staff and the public; provided outreach services to general practices and provided outreach services via clinical librarians to clinical areas.

IT networks have also improved, enabling the offer of training to remote staff and for many, the introduction of Library Management Systems (locally and regionally) has provided the means of sharing stock and rationalising purchasing.

Although across the sectors, extra funding was almost always provided to support these developments, in order to provide these additional services, significant efficiency savings were also made. Opportunities now for further in-house efficiency gains are often therefore negligible. As a result, when such large financial cuts are to be made, one of the only positive options that library services, and others have identified as a way forward, is that of pursuing shared services.

The Research Information Network provided an early indicator of the future need to rely on shared services in *Challenges for academic libraries in difficult economic times*, (RIN, 2010).

This guide identified that, in order to support their institutional mission and to sustain the services they offer to support teaching, learning and research, libraries are going to have to rethink the kinds and levels of service they can provide. In conclusion this guide states: '... it is crucial for libraries to exploit the potential for co-operation in developing a range of shared services in order to enhance efficiency, as well as the scope and quality of what they provide to both academic staff and students.'

Public libraries are already addressing these issues. The current focus is on identifying possibilities for shared back office, shared front office or even sharing services with other providers outside their own local authority (for example developments in Hammersmith and Fulham, Kensington and Chelsea and Westminster – [8]).

They are even considering working with the private sector, or with a Trust or a third sector body to operate their services. The Department of Culture Media and Sport, (DCMS) through its Library Support Programme has already funded 10 services or consortia to explore new ways of delivering services, [9].

Health libraries too are concerned about how financial constraint in the health service will affect their work and are anticipating yet further changes in

organisational structure, increases in user demands and increased pressure to income generate, focus on impact, as well as lower motivation and morale.

So what can Inspire offer in these difficult times?

Inspire's unique network of links across sectors provides ideal scope for sharing staff, resources, support services, premises, training and even the possibility of joint customer membership. These are all opportunities which Inspire with its the pre-existing groups can sustain, support and facilitate.

The value of sharing services has been widely recognised and whilst each sector will start within their own grouping, there is no reason why similar services in different sectors cannot cooperate, whether for sharing remote book storage and associated transport services, joint procurement of stock, cataloguing or even the joint provision of a frontline service. The new Worcester Library and History Centre currently being developed by Worcester County Council and Worcester University provides a timely example of how far sharing can go [10].

The way forward

In this period of financial stringency, the benefits of working collaboratively, of sharing – access, back office functions such as cataloguing, staff training etc are all clearly apparent and Inspire is well placed to support these developments.

There are however contra-indications which augur against the apparently healthy outlook for increased collaboration. As funding constraints tighten, in the academic sector at least, the need to compete may overcome the desire to collaborate; the concern that staff should be focussed on the needs of institutional members to the exclusion of others, apart from those able to pay for the privilege, may close once open doors.

It is to be hoped that the value of collaboration to individual organisations will be greater than that of competition and that sharing services, resources, even staff perhaps, will be the way forward for all to assist in riding out the storm of coming financial cutbacks.

For more information about Inspire, or to subscribe to the monthly Inspire e-newsletter, please contact Sally Curry sally.curry@newcastle.ac.uk

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