DISASTERS IN LIBRARIES: GUIDELINES FROM LOUGHBOROUGH

Graham Matthews

Paper presented at the UKSG 19th Annual Conference, April 1996, Keele

This paper outlines some of the findings of a research project, 'Disaster management in British libraries', undertaken at the Department of Information and Library Studies, Loughborough University, and funded by the British Library Research and Development Department. Important issues are examined under two of the key aspects of disaster management, prevention and preparedness. The paper does not cover the two areas of reaction and recovery which were included in a separate presentation, but these aspects are covered in the research and guidelines.

Introduction

The four widely recognised key stages of disaster management are:
- prevention
- preparedness
- reaction
- recovery

I will focus on two, prevention and preparedness, by addressing some of the key issues which have been highlighted in the course of a research project undertaken by myself and my colleague, Paul Eden, in the Department of Information and Library Studies, Loughborough University. The research, funded by the British Library Research and Development Department, began in March 1995 and was scheduled for completion in April 1996.

The main aims of the project were to achieve an overview of current disaster management practice in British libraries, and, based on this, to produce practical guidelines on disaster management for use by library and information service managers. We have achieved this through analysis of disaster control plans, a review of the literature, including existing advice and guidance, and, most importantly, interviews with librarians and others in different areas with experience of, or expertise in, disaster management or particular aspects of it. These include: archivists; museums officers; fire officers; an architect; representatives of heritage organisations; disaster salvage and recovery companies; commercial binders; an insurance company, and loss adjusters. In all, 53 people from 34 different organisations were interviewed. In addition, we were advised throughout by members of a project advisory group, each with different disaster management experience and representing different areas of professional interest.

Thus, we have attempted to base our guidelines not on theory, but on practical experience from a broad background. Our findings and the guidelines will be published in the summer of 1996, by the British Library Research and Development Department as: Disaster management in British libraries: project report with guidelines for library managers.1
Before I address 'prevention' and 'preparedness', I should make two general comments. Firstly, the individuals who participated in our research did not make many specific references to serials when we talked with them. However, many of the activities we recommend, or issues we suggest, need to be addressed, obviously do relate to serials as they do to other material held in libraries. I will try to illustrate this by using examples relating to serials where I feel this is appropriate. Secondly, not all disasters in libraries are on the scale of that which occurred at Norwich but even an apparently minor incident can have serious implications.

Prevention

Prevention is better than cure! Prevention focuses on the identification of risks to people, collections, buildings, contents and facilities, and the subsequent actions needed to reduce these risks, thereby lessening the likelihood of a disaster occurring.

Risk assessment

All the disaster recovery experts we talked to stressed that disasters, other than natural catastrophes, are seldom caused by a single incident. Rather, in the words of one such expert, "they tend to be the result of a number of relatively minor events or situations occurring either together or, more usually, over a period of time"; that is, there can be a cumulative effect. Assessment of risks is, therefore, a first and most important step in disaster prevention.

Fire, water ingress and security risks, for example, all need to be assessed. Reputable advice and professional expertise will need to be consulted and brought in. Make the most of in-house expertise, such as conservators or archivists, you may have; also use expertise within the library's parent organisation, such as health and safety officers, building and estates managers. Do not overlook the free advice available from the local emergency services. It is important to be specific when asking for risk assessments to be carried out - make sure your collection requirements are understood, for example, by building surveyors or fire officers.

Having identified risks, they need to be removed or reduced. In some cases this may be simple - think of the piles of newspapers, duplicates, discards, which can easily build up and lie around on the floor, or piles of cardboard boxes kept for sending consignments of binding - remove them and remove a fire hazard. Other cases may require costly building or repair work such as rerouting water pipes, introducing compartmentation to open areas, installing smoke detectors and sprinkler systems. Establish good working practice for outside contractors working in the library and monitor them to ensure these practices are followed.

Preventive action taken will depend on the circumstances of your library. You will need to assess your own priorities and balance these against issues such as cost and access. Where are your periodicals housed, down in the basement, susceptible to flooding, from outside the building, not just from water tanks or pipes within? How are they stored? Can you afford them extra protection in case of disaster? You may wish to add canopies to shelving, this may offer some protection from dust or dripping water. Consider boxing, again this can offer some protection for loose issues against dust or water from sprinklers or fire hoses. What about back issues on microfiche or microfilm stored in plastic binders or boxes on open shelves? Would these be better in metal cabinets? Or, will this impair user access and will they be easy to replace anyway? Think about the layout of storage areas. Does this take account of how the most important or valuable items and collections can be best protected environmentally and in terms of security and how these might effectively be removed if damaged or at risk? Consider redesigning the layout or moving high priority items or collections to 'safer' areas. Are storage areas also work areas? Consider using them as storage areas only - this will reduce risks. Designate all areas where stock is kept as non smoking areas and strictly enforce this. You should prioritise items and collections for salvage in the event of a disaster. Criteria you will need to consider include: how easily items or collections could be replaced and at what cost; the impact of loss of periodicals on the
library's core services; their monetary value, whether or not they are unique or replaceable, their vulnerability. In the words of one librarian interviewed, "Know your stock and prioritise items for salvage".

**Inspection and maintenance of buildings, contents and facilities - good housekeeping**

In addition to carrying out risk assessments, libraries should ensure that buildings, contents and facilities are regularly inspected and maintained. This should enable 'minor' problems to buildings or collections to be identified and rectified before they become more serious. There must be clear written procedures for reporting of faults and lines of responsibility for ensuring that repair work is carried out.

Staff awareness and vigilance is equally important as inspection and reporting procedures. As several interviewees pointed out, for example, the usefulness of a defect book depends not only on staff being aware of its existence, but also on them being 'risk and safety conscious' enough to notice problems and take the trouble to report them. Management must be responsive to this - if not, it should not be surprised if staff stop reporting!

Unfortunately, in spite of disasters like that at Norwich, there still appears to be an attitude among some librarians that 'it won't happen here', or maybe they just afford it low priority among all their other functions. Perhaps it is difficult to persuade senior managers or funders to take action and to spend time and money on something which may or may not happen. Again, this is where risk assessment is important - it should be easier to convince funders of the need to address and manage known, identified risks!

**Sprinkler systems**

It is worth noting another issue which came up frequently in our research - whether or not to install sprinklers. The consensus of opinion among the insurers, loss adjusters and salvage experts was that libraries should install smoke detectors rather than heat detectors, and that sprinklers afford the best protection against fire. The librarians interviewed seemed less certain about this. Pearson, in his report on the Norwich fire, seems much more certain:

There is a long time, almost traditional antipathy on the part of Librarians towards sprinkler systems. This is perfectly understandable because they fear the water damage to their stocks of books which could result from the sprinkler heads discharging accidentally or as a result of a false alarm, and a perception that in such an event the whole sprinkler system will begin a discharge giving rise to enormous damage. These fears are in my view wrong... In fully sprinklered premises automatic sprinklers can be expected to control fires in 95% of cases and, significantly, in over 90% of cases the fire will be controlled within the system's design area of operation. Modern systems have become extremely sophisticated and the risk of accidental discharge is now so low that it can be almost entirely discounted.³

I should add that installation of such systems is relatively expensive and libraries can only do what is reasonable given their resources and missions. It may make sense to install such systems along with others, such as security and environmental control in a specific area in the library where valuable and/or unique items are stored.

**Preparedness**

Being prepared should enable the library to respond more quickly and more effectively to disasters, thereby reducing their effects and facilitating recovery.

With regard to collections, some simple but effective measures which can be undertaken include: recording details of storage requirements for collections, in case they need to be moved into temporary storage following a disaster - record floor loadings, shelving strengths, shelving capacity and keep these records in a separate, secure place. Remember that stock, like back runs of journals, kept on mobile shelving will require a lot more space if temporarily housed on fixed shelving. Proper documentation of collections, including clear
permanent waterproof labelling of boxed collections, will assist in the control and identification of stock during reaction and recovery.

The written disaster control plan

The focal point of disaster management is the written disaster control plan which should be a clear, concise document outlining simple and flexible preventive and preparatory measures intended to reduce potential risks, and which also indicates reaction and recovery procedures to be undertaken in the event of a disaster, to minimise its effect.

Our guidelines include advice on what to include in the plan; we also discuss who should write it and how. Disaster control plans have been published and are widely available. It is helpful to consult these, but it is essential that libraries take a pro-active approach to disaster management, designing their own plan which meets their particular circumstances and requirements. It needs to be library and building specific and to take into account any broader organisational plan which may exist. If the library has shared occupancy of the building then this must also be taken into account. The plan must be regularly reviewed.

Training

A well-structured and targeted training programme is considered a vital prerequisite to a successful use of the written disaster control plan. In the words of one fire officer, for example, unless supported by training the plan will be "little more than words on paper". Training should be realistic. Organising simulation exercises is not easy but several organisations we visited had carried them out, successfully, in their opinion, as they had discovered quite serious problems or omissions relating to their disaster preparedness and ability to cope in a real situation. They were then able to amend their plans or adapt their preparations based on what they had found.

One practical training exercise which should be undertaken is the handling and sorting of damaged materials for salvage. Serials in all their formats should be included in training exercises. What can be air dried and how? What will need conservation treatment? What about protecting undamaged runs on the shelves - how easy is it to protect these with polythene sheets and fix them to the shelves? How easy is it to move items to safety? Wet volumes are heavy to carry, and not just large bound newspapers! And what about removing them from the building - at night and it's raining!

Emergency equipment and supplies

It is in such exercises that the usefulness of equipment and supplies can be tested too. Libraries should keep their own basic stocks of emergency supplies and equipment (for example, aprons, blotting paper, dehumidifiers, polythene bags, torches). What libraries will keep will be determined by their size, the nature and value of their collections and the availability of equipment and supplies elsewhere in the organisation. In any case, libraries will need to know where they can buy or hire items quickly should they need them in an emergency. Staff must be trained in the use of equipment and supplies, and equipment should be maintained in good working order and supplies not kept beyond any 'sell by date'. Libraries may wish to consider cooperative initiatives such as buying and storing equipment on a local or regional basis.

Insurance

It is important to find out what insurance cover you have for your library and collections. Interviewees with experience of insurance pointed out that many librarians do not know the value of their collections, or, as one put it, "even what is in them". At the very least, libraries should have particularly important items valued, or in the case of irreplaceable items, obtain estimates for any conservation work which may be necessary. With regard to serials, do you have up to date price lists for back issues? If not, check with your suppliers. This will also help you check on availability - you may find some titles difficult to obtain. One librarian, with experience of a major disaster, commented that you should not assume items would be readily available: "...some items such as government statistics are not as easily replaced as might be supposed. Similarly,
specialist journals ... very quickly go out of print. Salvage priorities would have been different had the ... librarian been aware of what was, and was not, available."

A basic tenet of insurance is that the insured must prove loss. Insurers strongly recommend that libraries keep up to date and comprehensive catalogues of their collections and inventories of office furniture and equipment - how many of you here could tell me now, accurately, how many chairs there are in your library? Or, how many pamphlet boxes?

**Service continuity and access**

It is important to consider what steps to take to ensure service continues as soon as possible, or without disruption, and that users continue to have access to services and collections. This may involve finding temporary accommodation or making reciprocal arrangements with other local libraries such as allowing your users temporary access to their journals and other collections.

Libraries should check that their insurance covers them for 'consequential losses' incurred as a result of a disaster and for how long this cover will last. This will cover the library for costs such as loss of revenue from any charged-for services, temporary storage and accommodation, salvage operations and overtime payments.

Up to this point, I have talked a lot about the library building and its collections. Librarians need to also ask themselves what the impact of disaster on management and administrative systems will be on the library's mission and services. Take the case of serials - if your serials records, receipt, claims, binding and so on, are maintained manually, what effect would their total destruction have on service provision? If these are handled by an automated system, what back up procedures do you have in place?

Are all staff aware of these and do they follow them? Have you made arrangements with system suppliers to provide emergency support? It is equally important to consider PCs. This is where often only one copy of some particular software is used, maybe specifically written, and yet do we all make the backups we should and store off site? What about passwords for online database searching? Are there records of these kept securely elsewhere so that searching can continue without the bother of acquiring new ones. Increasingly, libraries and their users have electronic access to journals - has thought and preparation been given to how management of access to these might be handled should disaster disrupt this access? And, back to basics, what about rerouting delivery of journal subscriptions, invoices, consignments of binding, the new shelving or storage cabinets you ordered recently?

**Responsibility for disaster management**

From the point of view of serials, it is important that the Serials or Periodicals Librarian, makes his or her requirements with regard to the serials in their charge well known. Any special risks or circumstances should be brought to the attention of the person(s) in charge and explained.

**Conclusion**

Our guidelines cover many more aspects than I have mentioned in this short session, and in more detail. (They cover, under the four headings Prevention, Preparedness, Reaction and Recovery, Advice, expertise and services, Buildings, contents and facilities, Collections, Computers, Emergency equipment and supplies, Finance, Handling and salvaging damaged materials, Health and safety, Human resources, Insurance, Public relations, Security, Service continuity and access, Training, Written disaster control plan.)

Whilst it is not possible to remove totally the incidence of disasters in libraries, good disaster management can reduce their occurrence and facilitate effective reaction and recovery. Our guidelines aim to help you do this - look out for them in the summer!

**References**

Disasters in libraries Graham Matthews

Department. x, 176 pp. ISBN 0 7123 3306 1. £15.00. Available from Customer Services, Turpin Distribution Services Ltd., Blackhorse Road, Letchworth, Herts., SG6 1HM.
