

Living up to expectations – public library perspective

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Richmond upon Thames is an outer London borough providing library and information services to a population of 173,000 people. Since 1999 it has moved from a pre-ICT state to providing eight subscription services electronically, plus e-books and e-audio. This presentation looks at the provision of electronic resources through a public library service perspective (what we did and why, how we did it, what worked and what didn't), focusing on the importance of staff input and training, marketing and promotion, accessibility and increasing user take-up.

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Background

Richmond upon Thames is a small outer London borough with a population of approximately 173,000 (2001 census). It is small geographically, but contains a collection of diverse and separate communities, split by the River Thames, roads and railway lines. One third of the borough is open space and there are 13 libraries spread across the borough: 12 lending libraries and the main information services building. The library service has offered free public Internet access in all of its libraries since January 1999, and with the implementation of the People's Network (see <http://www.peoplesnetwork.gov.uk>) now has 162 PCs for public use across the service.

- restructuring had taken the professional staff out of the branches on a day-to-day basis
- the People's Network had improved access to the Internet and raised expectations among users and staff.

The challenge was how to:

- meet the information need within existing budgets and facilities
- provide quality resources across the borough regardless of the size and location of the library
- develop services for the future
- equip staff to deliver these services.

In January 1999 we installed the first public Internet PCs in the libraries offering free access. The previous year we had trialled KnowUK for public use, and in 1999 we signed up for KnowUK and the Guardian/Observer Archive (both ProQuest products). KnowUK provided a quick reference shelf of standard reference tools for staff and public use in all libraries and meant that for the first time we had a consistent collection of current, quality reference material in all branches. We added 30 newspaper titles from the Gale InfoTrac Custom Newspapers database in 2001; xreferplus, Oxford Reference Online (ORO) and World Book Online in 2002; and Britannica Online and the Times Digital Archive in 2003. ORO and xreferplus have been available for remote access since 2002 and KnowUK and Britannica since 2003. We will

What we did and why

In 1999 we made the first moves to providing information electronically. This process has intensified in recent years, driven by a number of factors. The main drivers for change were:

- almost half of all reference enquiries were taken in the branch libraries
- we had a stable book fund but were feeling the cumulative effects of inflation on reference and information titles
- there was an increasing need for quality reference material to answer enquiries in the branches

also be adding the new *Dictionary of National Biography* in September 2004. Users of Richmond's libraries now have electronic access to almost 400 books, two encyclopaedias, and over 30 newspapers, most of them being available at home, work or place of study as well.

How we did it

Staff

The success of any service initiative is dependent on having the staff on board. All electronic services were piloted with staff and members of the public before purchase and their comments and suggestions fed into the process. Staff were trained in the new services before we went live, and time was invested in maintaining staff training and awareness. Products are upgraded and content changes, so staff must be kept up to date if they are to make effective use of the services and promote them successfully to the public. There is also ongoing staff input – monitoring the usefulness and effectiveness of the services, noting problems, and feeding comments back to the publishers.

Content

We started with familiar content that would attract users and staff. In 1999 electronic resources were new in public libraries for everyday use. KnowUK, our first service, contained standard reference books, e.g. *Who's Who* and *Statesman's Yearbook*, which had previously been available to users in paper format. Services aimed at the general public need to be selected very carefully and key criteria were usability and accessibility. The ability range in users will be wide and services bought in as basic reference stock must be accessible to all.

Training

Training is vital to the success of electronic service provision. We provided training in-house and made use of the external training provided by publishers. The in-house training was focused to maximize effectiveness. Reference library staff were allocated specific resources and expected to maintain awareness in them and to train others. The training was regular, and an ongoing programme of sessions in the branches was organized. It was integrated into the service and built into the learning and development plans for

staff and the planning and review process for the branches. A modular Enquiry Handling Training Course was written and put on the intranet so that staff could follow it on site and train at their own speed.

Training is usually provided by publishers as part of the subscription and is used to support in-house training. Annual sessions by KnowUK and Oxford Reference are attended by representatives from each branch so that they can cascade it to other staff on their own site. Most publishers also provide online training resources and help. These are used by staff to deliver training to the public and to promote the resources. For instance, xreferplus provide curriculum support materials and KnowUK has produced a training guide for Adult Learners' Week.

Access

How users access the resources is a major factor in whether they will use them. In the libraries we have a People's Network log-on page to lead users into the services, and hotlinks to the services are on all staff desk-tops. We use IP recognition which means that access is seamless and there are no barriers to public use. Remote access works the same way. A virtual library has been created on the web catalogue. Remote access is via borrower barcode and PIN which gives access to the personal borrower area of the catalogue with hotlinks to all the subscription services, including e-books and e-audio. No further passwords or log-on procedures are required.

Marketing and promotion

Marketing and promoting the services to the public are vital to their take-up. We hold taster sessions for the public on a group or one-to-one, bookable basis. These give them an introduction to the service and help them to use it in the library and at home. We tie the sessions in with other promotions, such as Silver Surfers, Adult Learners' Week and Parents Online Week. We also hold sessions for staff explaining how to use the services in enquiry work and how to promote them. Handouts promoting the services are given out with book issues. We have handouts and publicity next to the PCs and displays promoting services in the libraries.

Publishers can provide high quality material, but this often needs tweaking for the local market.

They will often pay for local promotions, write press releases, give prizes and offer promotional items such as mousemats, pens, notepads, etc. When we launched KnowUK, Chadwyck-Healey (now ProQuest) bought advertising space at Richmond Railway Station and had a large display advert above the main stairway for three months. Publishers will hold promotional sessions for users in libraries and provide online presentations that you can use for training, and material is often available to download from the web. We make as much use as possible of our publishers – it is in their interests for a service to be a success, since otherwise we may not renew, and working together means that we get a product more in tune with our needs.

What worked

Introducing online services meant a major change from paper-based working to electronic with concomitant pressures on staff skills and service structure. Areas that worked well include:

- *Taster sessions for the public* One-to-one and group sessions have been very popular and proved an effective way to get the message across about using the Internet and online services to answer queries.
- *Ongoing staff training* This is vital to ensure that staff are engaged and using and promoting the services. If staff are not happy with them they will not push them to the public.
- *Integrating services* Online services must be an integral part of a focused service delivery. We moved to electronic provision because of various pressures, but the services we now offer are part of our overall service and are in place because they offer relevant content to deliver our information service.
- *Creating a virtual library for remote access* We have one access to all online services – borrower information, reservations, enquiries, subscription services, e-books and e-audio. Only one password access is required and there are no barriers to further use.

What didn't work

- *Not enough promotion* We need to push services to users continually and maintain a high profile

for them. To some extent, you can never do enough promotion.

- *Need easy access* Initially the service links were on the front page of our People's Network PCs, and users could just sit down and click on a link. A redesign pushed them several clicks down the hierarchy and usage fell.
- *Usage statistics* Subscription services count usage differently so it can be difficult to compare usage. You need accurate and relevant statistics to justify expenditure and to monitor take-up and usage. The COUNTER standard should help with this as more publishers sign up to it.
- *Suitability* Some online services are not designed for public use. Historically the major users have been academic or business organizations. Services often assume a higher level of ICT knowledge and searching skills than is often found among public library users. Increasingly though, public libraries are being seen as a viable market and new products are taking their needs into account.
- *Training* Initially we didn't do enough. Staff in our branches need ongoing support to take on new ways of working and also to support the public in the use of electronic services.

Where next?

No service is static. Information services in Richmond upon Thames are changing and evolving in response to user demand and technological development and as a result of things learned from past mistakes. There are several areas where we will be looking at improving our electronic service delivery over the next year:

- *MARC records* These are downloadable to the library catalogue and will open up another avenue of access to the services.
- *Rebranding e-services as a virtual library* We are looking at drawing together e-books, e-audio, online services and enquiry services as a single entity – a virtual library – and rebranding it as Richmond's fourteenth library.
- *Training* We are always keen to develop our training. The latest initiative is online quizzes for staff that they can answer at their desk, with all the answers coming from the various online services. Prizes will be offered to increase take-up.

Electronic services available in Richmond upon Thames libraries

KnowUK from ProQuest – contains about 100 general UK reference books from a variety of publishers.

<http://www.knowuk.co.uk>

Oxford Reference Online Premium Collection from Oxford University Press – contains OUP reference books and the Oxford Companion series.

<http://www.oxfordreference.com>

xreferplus – contains general reference books from a variety of publishers.

<http://www.xreferplus.com>

Gale InfoTrac Custom Newspapers – contains a range of UK national and local papers.

<http://www.galegroup.com/CustomNews>

Times Digital Archive from Gale – contains *The Times* from 1785 to 1985.

<http://www.galegroup.com/Times>

Guardian/Observer Archive from ProQuest – contains *The Guardian* and *The Observer* from the 1990s.

<http://guardian.chadwyck.co.uk>

Britannica Online – the electronic version of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

<http://www.britannica.co.uk>

World Book Online – the Heinemann UK version of the *World Book Encyclopaedia*.

<http://www.heinemannworldbook.co.uk>

Dictionary of National Biography from OUP – the electronic version of the new edition of DNB.

<http://www.oup.com/oxforddnb/info>

Further information about our electronic services is available on our web site:

<http://www.richmond.gov.uk/libraries>

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