
Synergy, efficiency and vision – the Worcester Library and History Centre



Roger Fairman
*Library Systems Development,
University of Worcester*
Tel: 01905 855336
E-mail: r.fairman@worc.ac.uk



Anne Hannaford
*Director of Information &
Learning Services,
University of Worcester*
Tel: 01905 855378
E-mail: a.hannaford@worc.ac.uk

INTRODUCTION

The Worcester Library and History Centre (WLHC)¹ is a collaboration between the University of Worcester and Worcestershire county council that will offer the combined services of the university library, the public library, the county record office and history centre, the county archaeology service and the Worcestershire Hub (local government customer service centre).

The development has caught the imagination of public funding bodies, attracting £10 million from the HEFCE (Higher Education Funding Council for England) strategic development fund (£5m grant, £5m loan); £43 million in PFI (Private Finance Initiative) credits from DCMS (UK Department for Culture, Media and Sport); and £7 million from the regional development agency 'Advantage West Midlands'. Funders have not only caught on to the vision, but see an opportunity to share services across sectors with resulting efficiency gains.

It has been an exciting and challenging journey in the last five years, involving strong and enduring cross-sector partnerships, extensive consultation with a diverse range of stakeholders and a

detailed and complex PFI design and procurement process.

Now the pace has begun to pick up on the service-development work that will need to be complete before the building opens its doors in July 2012, in order to ensure that the users experience the seamless-service offer that is the vision of the project's partners.

VISION

Early in the design process, arising out of the first round of meetings between university and county council colleagues, a vision developed that was encapsulated in the phrase 'Shared vision – single community', supported by a set of ten key values:

- Inspiration
- Connection
- Aspiration
- Learning
- Integration
- Inclusivity
- Enduring Values
- Well-being
- Sustainability
- Visibility.

Each of these values was expanded in a detailed design statement, which was at the core of the documentation given to the competing consortia at the start of the procurement process.

The values have been a touchstone throughout the development and have provided a focus for continuity as staff have joined and left the project over its lifetime. Taken together, they represent a striking vision of educational transformation and social cohesion.

The architects have responded with a building that invites curiosity, uses transparency in the interior to tempt people to explore services and content that they may not have previously considered and offers the university and county council a setting designed to enhance innovation in service delivery.

THE BUILDING

The building is an exciting piece of architecture that will be highly visible from the Severn riverside and, together with the university's adjacent redevelopment of the Worcester Royal Infirmary site,² will completely regenerate this quarter of the city.



The Worcester Library and History Centre

The service floor area comprises around 10,500 sq. metres and provides a wide range of accommodation. In addition to a variety of study environments there is BS 5454 standard archive storage containing a superb primary resource collection of Worcestershire Archives, imaginative children's provision (including an outside "Island Room"), a cafe, and meeting rooms.

Another of the key values was sustainability, and the building has been designed with the aim of achieving CO₂-emission levels of a quarter of those for an average library and a BREEAM rating of at least 'excellent'.³ To achieve this, the architects have created a largely naturally ventilated building that uses its thermal mass to mediate temperature variation. Additional cooling is provided by drawing air, cooled by passing over the new landscaping, through the building by means of pressure differences created by the prevailing winds passing over the roofscape.⁴ Still further cooling is available at peak times from passing water from the nearby river Severn through a system of heat exchangers. Heating is provided by biomass boilers using locally sourced, sustainable woodchips for fuel.

SERVICES

A distinguishing feature of this project is the determination to achieve a high level of service integration while ensuring that the particular and

specialist needs of our students and staff continue to be met.

Both the university and the public library have a policy of getting staff out from behind desks and adopting 'roving models' to support users. Given the diverse service offer, delivery of a high-quality initial-contact experience will require a well-developed referrals procedure, backed up by effective staff training. The partners' goal is that users requiring assistance will receive an immediate resolution to their query or a timely referral to an appropriate specialist service or individual.

To facilitate the levels of communication required to achieve this, the project is investigating technologies such as the 'Vocera' system deployed at the recently opened Newcastle central library, and equipping front-line support staff with mobile devices, such as iphones or netbooks, to enable them to assist users anywhere in the building rather than having to take them to a fixed desk or support station.

Visibly this commitment to integration will be most evident in the proposed complete integration of the public and university library stocks. It is intended that all users will have access to all materials, albeit under different conditions as determined by the loan matrix. The arrangements have not yet been finalised but, for example, while members of the public will have access to

texts on the university's reading lists, that access is likely to be limited in relation to that available to students: maybe a loan allocation of one or two as opposed to the twelve to fifteen available to university members. High-demand short-loan material is likely to be restricted to reference use only for non-university users. This is an area that still requires very careful work if we are to ensure that students feel well served by university's resource provision.

Challenges also lie ahead in the area of e-resource provision, but these are being approached with three strategies:

- Firstly, by developing access-management arrangements that ensure that users only see those resources that they are authorised to use: this will ensure both compliance with existing licences and that users are not frustrated by being presented with lists of resources they cannot access.
- Secondly, by conducting an audit of all the partners' existing licences to determine how they might operate in the context of the WLHC: this will provide the default settings for the access-management arrangements.
- Thirdly, discussions are in progress with JISC (Joint Information Systems Committee) not only to ensure compliance but to keep it informed of this approach to sector service delivery, which may become more common as new partnerships are established.

One of the most exciting aspects of this project is the potential to provide value-added services through the harnessing of the complementary strengths of the partners. For example, in the children's zone – which is equivalent in size to a small primary school – there is the potential to develop a range of activities that build on the existing strengths of the public library in promoting reading and early years literacy and on the university's long-standing commitment to early years education. By combining the best of traditional 'story time' and 'bounce & rhyme' sessions with innovative use of new digital technologies the partners hope to inspire future generations of potential students with a love of literature and learning, together with an appreciation of libraries and what they can offer.

We are at the early stages of exploring where the potential might be for curriculum and research development across a range of subject disciplines.

STAFFING

Bringing together the staffs of the different partner organisations has been a challenging task and one which still has a long way to go, but there have already been a number of events and activities held to facilitate the development of integrated staffing arrangements.

One of the earliest was a series of visits during which staff had the opportunity to visit the other partners individually, for half a day, in order to gain a preliminary insight into how the other services worked. Not everyone went everywhere but, for example, nearly all of the staff of the public library have visited the university library and a significant number of university staff took advantage of the reciprocal arrangements. The results of even this simple exercise have helped to address misconceptions and help people to be at ease with each other. It also highlighted some areas where we needed to do further work.

One series of workshops brought over 70 staff together to develop a set of shared service values, led by a senior fellow in leadership development. The ideas arising from them were worked up into a 'values structure' (see Figure 2), which was sent to all the participants to check that they thought it fairly represented the outcomes of the sessions. The resulting values structure is being used as a basis for the next stage: to turn values into behaviours.

CONCLUSION

With two years to go there remains much to be done. Almost 100 colleagues from all the partners are now engaged in service-development work: ICT support and infrastructure, library-system integration, customer services, aligning of circulation policies, developing a shared virtual services environment, learning for life programmes, research, children and young people, staffing and volunteering and more...

We are all, inevitably, continuing to do 'the day job'. What drives us all is a belief that we are working on something that has tremendous potential to change lives for the better. Occasionally we come across the view that a serious academic library is incompatible with the different aspirations of a public library service: we disagree. A great university library should make its resources available to all who share a spirit of curiosity and enquiry.



The WLHC values structure

We believe that this development shows the wider community that a university education is accessible to all who have serious intent, purpose and ability. At their best, all libraries are places to encourage learning, promote cultural experiences and, in the words of Ted Hughes, 'turn the key to the whole world'.

And that is what we want the Worcester Library and History Centre to do.

REFERENCES

- 1 More information is available on the project website: <http://www.wlhc.org.uk>.
- 2 For further information see the university website: <http://www.worcester.ac.uk/about/8078.html>.
- 3 BREEAM – the Building Research Establishment Environmental Assessment Method
- 4 The innovative design of this roofscape won the 2009 'Be inspired' award for innovation in generative design.