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Investigating Interlending:

a scoping study of resource discovery, sharing and cooperation

**Executive summary produced by the Centre for the Public Library and
Information in Society (CPLIS), Information School, University of
Sheffield, for TCR (The Combined Regions)**

September 2015

Dr. Briony Birdi

Dr. Stephen Pinfield

Sophie Rutter

Dr. Simon Wakeling

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents work commissioned by The Combined Regions (TCR) and undertaken by a team from CPLIS (the Centre for the Public Library and Information in Society) in the Information School at the University of Sheffield, to investigate the factors influencing interlending and resource sharing in public libraries, and identify potential future models of cooperation. The research was led by Dr. Briony Birdi as Principal Investigator, with Dr. Stephen Pinfield as Co-Investigator, and Sophie Rutter and Dr. Simon Wakeling as Research Associates.

The research consisted of three phases, conducted sequentially between January and June 2015:

Phase 1: A review of the relevant academic and professional (including policy-related) literature was conducted to identify and synthesise key research into interlending provision.

Phase 2: An online survey was distributed to members of SCL and the UnityUK mailing list, which resulted in a total of 65 responses. The primary objectives of the survey were to establish the current levels of provision of ILL services in public libraries, and to investigate library managers' views of the role of the digital environment in resource discovery and resource sharing.

Phase 3: Interviews were conducted with twenty individuals associated with interlending in public libraries. The interviews explored perspectives on current interlending services, the impact of the digital environment, and visions of the future for interlending.

Taken together, results from these three phases of research indicate several areas of consensus within the interlending community:

Declining rates

There seems little doubt that interlending rates are declining nationally, and that this decline is due to a combination of public library budget cuts, low public awareness, rising costs to library users, the increased availability of digital content, and the ever improving cost-effectiveness of e-commerce services.

E-content is a problem

Participants in phases two and three also agreed that the sharing of e-content was highly problematic. These problems are due to general issues with acquiring e-content, as well as licensing and technical issues making the sharing of e-resources extremely difficult.

HE involvement adds value

The results of this study also indicate that there is a clear perceived benefit to entering into consortia schemes that include one or more HE institutions, particularly as a means of leveraging HE

experience with and access to digital material, and allowing users access to specialist academic material.

Lack of awareness of services

Many participants in this research spoke of a lack of public awareness about interlending. Even if aware of the service in general, users were also perceived to be confused by the variety of ILL schemes being offered, and the associated costs and delivery arrangements. The variety of interlending schemes utilised by libraries, and the different rationales for its provision, have perhaps contributed to the lack of a coherent message to be communicated to users.

Potential for a national catalogue

Discussion of the future of interlending and potential developments in resource sharing frequently centred on the development of a national catalogue. Most participants saw some value in a system with national coverage, but only if that system has universal coverage, and incorporated unmediated user reservation functionality. While it is beyond the scope of this report to draw firm conclusions about the feasibility of such a system, we note several significant barriers to its development and implementation. Aside from the significant technical challenges associated with such a system, these barriers relate to the capital, both human and organisational, invested in the status quo, and the difficulties associated with obtaining buy-in from the whole public library community.

Perhaps the most striking feature of results from all three phases was the lack of consensus regarding many key aspects of interlending. These can be summarised as follows:

Use of Interlending Terminology

It was noticeable that the terminology relating to resource sharing was not used consistently by participants in the research. This was particularly evidenced in the different applications of the terms “interlending” and “interlibrary loan”. It seems likely that the established vocabulary of resource sharing has not been consistently adapted to the modern landscape of interlending.

How schemes operate

Descriptions of national, regional and sub-regional schemes revealed significant variation in all aspects of service delivery. These included the transfer of stock (post vs. van), library to library fees (free vs. nominal vs. cost price), mediation (self-service vs. librarian instigated), patron fee (free vs. subsidised vs. full recovery), and systems used (shared LMS vs. union catalogue vs. independent systems). This had a number of implications for our ability to construct a coherent picture of the state of interlending, and for future developments in the field. We also found the variety of schemes negatively impacted individual authorities’ ability to determine the cost-effectiveness of interlending, and made the sharing of best practice between consortia problematic. It was also suggested that the range of schemes operated by individual authorities is confusing for library users. Finally we note that

the diversity of existing interlending schemes makes the development of any future national scheme problematic.

The moral imperative

Opinion among our participants was divided over the extent to which public libraries operated under a moral imperative to offer interlending. We generally observed three broad perspectives on this issue. Some identified strongly with the moral argument, and viewed the provision of interlending as the realisation of a duty to meet any and all needs of library users. A larger group shared this perspective in principle, but were more pragmatic about the likelihood of interlending being sustained in a harsh economic environment. A final group might be characterised as rejecting entirely the notion of a moral imperative to offer interlending. A natural question of great significance to the future of interlending is the extent to which any one of these viewpoints represent a majority opinion at an appropriately senior level.

Impact of the digital environment

There are significant challenges relating to the provision of e-content, particularly the licensing of e-books, integration of open access content, and the access to and functionality of publisher e-content platforms. Some see such barriers as essentially insurmountable, and that the future rationale for interlending lies in its capacity to deliver print copies in an increasingly digital world, while others believe the widespread availability of digital content will terminally reduce demand for interlending. Developing a digital strategy for interlending would seem to require two complementary facets; a comprehensive analysis of the perspectives of library users towards digital content, and a thorough study of the technical challenges associated with the digital publishing and licensing landscape.

Interlending, collections and shrinking budgets

One of the starkest contradictions to emerge from this research was the difference between participants who see interlending as a means of coping with reduced budgets, and those for whom the reduced budgets themselves represent a threat to interlending services. In most cases schemes were found to cost net lenders money, and several consortia agreements include arrangements to compensate for this. In a few instances, however, it was seen as preferable to be a net borrower. In both cases there was clear evidence from this study of tensions between net lenders and net borrowers within schemes. Assuming that a perfect equilibrium is impossible, there will always be net lenders and net borrowers. The best that can be hoped for is that tensions are clearly and appropriately addressed at a consortia level, and compensation schemes for authorities disadvantaged financially by interlending clearly help in this regard.

Recommendations

We believe that this study has thrown light on some key issues at a local, regional and national level, and we present the following recommendations for consideration. The first of these relate specifically to further research or enquiry in order to inform future decision-making regarding interlending and resource-sharing, and the second are recommendations to those involved in planning and delivering such services.

Recommendations for Further Research

1. To conduct a user study to understand the needs and perspective of those utilising the service (and those not), to ensure that staff perceptions are accurate
2. To investigate and compare e-content licensing models (state of the art, future plans, publisher perspective etc.)
3. To identify synergies between HE and public library sectors and, specifically, the motivation of HE stakeholders to participate in regional and national consortia
4. To conduct cost-benefit analysis of local and regional schemes, and to develop benchmarking tools for wider dissemination and use.

Recommendations for Stakeholders

1. To establish a consistent terminology for interlending that is used in discussions in order to promote coherence in policy-making and service delivery
2. To develop unified marketing tools, material and strategies for libraries keen to promote interlending, emphasising the value of the service to library users
3. To develop further marketing tools for use by managers and senior stakeholders to lobby other organisations (e.g. other local authorities, HE providers) and national organisations (CILIP, SCL) to gain their support for developing a more unified approach
4. To identify action that needs to be taken regarding licensing e-content, possibly including an education program and liaison with publishers, followed by implementation of the identified actions
5. To establish an inter-consortia forum for sharing best practice – perhaps facilitated by the FiL or TCR, or alternatively discussed in a free-standing summit
6. To review the current relationship with other sectors, particularly the higher education sector, with a view to developing possible synergies
7. To coordinate discussion regarding the feasibility of a universal, national catalogue with reservation functionality (potentially by enhancing the FABLibraries system), and specifically, to determine whether further investment is justified.