INPSPIRE in the West Midlands – tarmac or tracks?

Caroline Rock,
Deputy Librarian
Coventry University Library
Tel: 024 7688 7516
Email: c.rock@coventry.ac.uk

The following article is based on a presentation given at the West Midlands strategic briefing day, 15 July, 2004, at which heads of library services from the public and academic sectors were being invited to join the INSPIRE scheme. The intention of the presentation was to share the experience of a group of 'demonstrator' projects and to highlight issues which would have implications for the further rollout of the INSPIRE initiative.

Earlier this year, as part of the INSPIRE England initiative, the INSPIRE West Midlands Steering Group established three 'demonstrator projects' which ran from January to April 2004. The aim of INSPIRE England is to 'facilitate access between libraries in the public and higher education, meeting key strategic drivers such as widening participation, social inclusion, and resource sharing'[1], building on the work already undertaken in the London, with the Libraries and Learners in London Scheme (LLIL)[2]. The purpose of the demonstrator projects was to explore the development and implementation of schemes for 'managed access and referral' between member libraries, with differing user constituencies in the region.

The three 'demonstrator' projects were centred in different areas of the region; Coventry, Staffordshire and Wolverhampton. Each project drew together partners from at least two different library and information sectors, (education, health, public, community information) and each differed in emphasis in terms of the focus of the project and the learners / library users which they were hoping to reach.

The Coventry project comprised Coventry University (Lanchester Library and Centre for Lifelong Learning), Coventry City Council Libraries and Information Services, and the Coventry Health Promotions Unit, with a focus on improving access to information for members of the public with information needs in three sample areas of Health, Art and design, and Returning to work.

The partners in the Staffordshire project were Staffordshire University Library, Stoke-on-Trent City Council Libraries and Stoke-on-Trent Further Education College Library. Drawing on well established access schemes offering public access to the university library, the focus of this project was to reach the further education community in particular.

Thirdly, the Wolverhampton project comprised the University of Wolverhampton, the City of Wolverhampton College, Wolverhampton Adult Education Service and Wolverhampton Library and Information Services. Once again based on a commitment to enhancing access for members of the public, this demonstrator project drew on the tools being established through the *Ticket to Find* initiative and had a particular focus on supporting the development of information literacy of library users.

All three projects however shared the INSPIRE vision of seeking to foster and improve co-operation between library sectors to support lifelong learning. More specifically, working with their particular user communities, the projects also shared common objectives concerning:

- the identification and removal of barriers to access (whether physical, procedural or cultural) for referred learners
- the testing of 'access' and 'referral' procedures, to establish their efficiency and effectiveness
- the development of appropriate mechanisms through which to locate, market and promote collections in partner libraries.

Against this backgrounds I should now explain my chosen subtitle: 'Tarmac or tracks?'

I had been asked to give the presentation shortly before leaving for a cycling holiday in Central Europe. Consequently, one afternoon, as I cycled along a straight section of comfortable tarmac road, I found myself contemplating the topic. All too quickly, with a change of direction, and finding myself on a gravel track with a much bumpier ride, it struck me that there were some useful parallels between my current situation and the recent experience of approaching and testing out INSPIRE.

I thought about expectations (the tour brochure had suggested 80% tarmac and 20% tracks for the terrain to be covered – how accurate was this?) and perspectives (the prospect of the 170m climb over a distance of 2km, scheduled for day 2, would constitute a warm-up exercise for some, a daunting challenge for others). Perspectives and expectations of the key groups involved in the projects seemed to me an appropriate framework in which to summarise the experiences and lessons of the demonstrator projects. Whether stated explicitly, or through inference, each of the following groups had questions, concerns and expectations:

- senior managers within the institutions and/or the library and information services
- front line library and information staff
- core customers (i.e. the individuals for whom the services are primarily intended, and whose resources were being shared)
- referred learners (i.e. those individuals hoping to benefit from the scheme).

From the perspective of the senior managers, INSPIRE had to be viewed in terms of congruence with institutional culture and direction. Was it an appropriate initiative with which to be involved? Managers also anticipated resource issues since, in addition to the potential demands on collections and materials, staff time would be required to manage and monitor the scheme, to brief and train colleagues and to deliver front line services.

In reality, the projects demonstrated that the INSPIRE vision fitted well with institutional agendas for 'widening participation' and 'lifelong learning' with senior managers willing to commit to them. The opportunities either to establish or to further develop partnerships both within and beyond the academic sector were also recognised. As regards the demands on materials, there was no evidence of unsustainable demand for reference access to materials. However the need for sensitive management of the expectations of the INSPIRE participants regarding the absence of borrowing rights and the restriction of access to e-resources was clearly important. As for the demands on staff time, whilst commitment to any access and referral scheme such as INSPIRE will inevitably bring overheads, a distinction should be made between the staffing implications for initial implementation and those for on-going delivery and support. Although undoubtedly staff intensive at the outset, once established, it was envisaged that the scheme could be managed

alongside, or even assimilate, other access and referral schemes.

Moving to the perspective of those front-line (reception desk and enquiry desk) staff responsible for the delivery of the INSPIRE scheme on a day-to-day basis, the following issues emerged in the initial 'briefing' stages of the projects. Based on former experience of less secure physical environments, concerns were expressed at the possibility of inappropriate and / or demanding visitors. Similarly, front-line staff feared the administrative / procedural / information 'burden' of operating the scheme and of having 'yet more to learn!'

Inevitably the need both to pilot procedures and to gather information with which to evaluate the projects did increase the administrative workloads of some staff. Ultimately though this has resulted in more efficient and integrated procedures and manuals[3]. The experience of dealing with what turned out to be relatively small numbers of INSPIRE visitors[4], but who had been appropriately directed to a partner library, was however entirely positive. Visitors were enthusiastic and appreciative of the services being offered and all came with genuine information needs. The importance of 'managed access and referral' schemes and of the need for thorough training of all staff cannot be understated. As for having too much to learn, with hindsight colleagues actively involved in the scheme have pointed to the incidental yet valuable staff development opportunities which working with new customers and new partners had provided.

But what of the core customer? This too was a perspective which has to be considered. Might our core customers (university students and staff) be disadvantaged by the potential demand on collections and facilities or by a reduction in the quality of service offered at over-stretched enquiry points?

In reality these did not become problems. As indicated above, INSPIRE visitors were few in number and principally only required access to reference sources unavailable elsewhere. Service at enquiry desks was arguably enhanced for all customers as, in the light of training, staff gained confidence in dealing with the needs of a more diverse customer base. In addition, access to resources for our core customers was enhanced indirectly through increased awareness of the collections in partner libraries and the virtual enrichment of local collections.

Finally, were the expectations of 'referred learners' at the heart of the INSPIRE initiative met? Returning to the key objectives for the demonstrator projects, we need to ask if the perceived barriers to access, whether physical, procedural, cultural or attitudinal had been removed. Similarly were expectations of access arrangements, usage entitlements and levels of support at least clearly presented even if not always as generous as hoped for? Ultimately did the INSPIRE visitors have a positive experience of engaging with formal education?

Answers to these questions were given in the 'exit surveys' completed by referred learners who participated in the demonstrator projects. In addition, the effectiveness and value of the referral mechanisms can be seen in the uptake of the opportunities by participants and in anecdotal observations such as 'more libraries equals more information'. Awareness of the opportunities provided by schemes for 'managed and referred access' was raised through the preparation of appropriate publicity materials, open days, and staff briefings. Finally, evidence that the INSPIRE initiative had created opportunities for participants to develop skills, knowledge, understanding within a semi-formal learning environment could be seen by the achievement of the 'generic learning outcomes' against which the projects were evaluated[5].

In conclusion then I return to the cycling analogy (which, from my perspective, was a positive experience) to summarise the key lessons learned through the demonstrator projects:

- Gain senior management commitment from all partner institutions: and follow the direction given by the tour leader

- Invest in the briefing and training of *all* staff: without which you won't be able to make the most effective use of your bike, or deal with a puncture!

- Maximise existing cross-sector relationships: and use the momentum gained from the down-hills to fuel the up-hills

- Minimise or at least balance the need for administrative and procedural activity with the collection of useful management information: travel light!

- Publicise and promote both the collections and relevant access information: when lost, look at the map!

Reference

1   Hamlin, Y. , *INSPIRE England: Project report*. LISU: Loughborough University, 2004 available at http://www.inspire.gov.uk

2   http://www.londonlibraries.org.uk/servlets/home

3   LISU, INSPIRE: *a referral and access service to users: procedures manual*, LISU: Loughborough University, 2004

4   Hamlin, Y., *INSPIRE England: Project report*. LISU: Loughborough University, 2004 available at http://www.inspire.gov.uk

5   Research Centre for Museums and Galleries, *The generic learning outcome system: measuring the outcomes and impact of learning in museums, archives and libraries*. The Learning Impact Research Project (LIRP) Short Project Report, Leicester University: Resource (MLA), 2002. http://mla.gov.uk/action/learnacc/lirp.asp