

Foyle: inspiring improved healthcare support in North West Northern Ireland

Elaine Urquhart
Assistant Director Library
University of Ulster
Shore Road
Newtownabbey
Co. Antrim
Northern Ireland

Inspire and the Establishment of Foyle

A small group of libraries in the Derry area in the north west of Northern Ireland set up Foyle as a response to the Information Resource Sharing Partners in Resources for Education (INSPIRE) http://www.sconul.ac.uk/use_lib/inspire.html initiative in England. Inspire was established in 2002 to develop ways to improve access and referral between higher education, public and national library services. SCONUL (the Society of College, National and University Libraries), the Society of Chief Librarians for public library authorities in England and Wales (SCL) and the British Library jointly initiated the scheme and it is intended to build on existing collaboration arrangements as well as developing new relationships across the sectors. Key objectives of the scheme are to:

- Provide cross-sector access to information and knowledge for learners
- Organize managed access and referral to other libraries with relevant resources
- Link up the 875 Higher Education, 4610 public and three national libraries in the UK
- Establish a single access pathway irrespective of location and sector by linking up local or regional access partnerships

- Provide a library workforce aware of the information resources available across the UK

An important aspect of the scheme is to reach out to those who have not participated in learning opportunities and to encourage and develop their participation. In the last few years there has been a drive to widen access to education and this can be seen in the many reports and initiatives launched to improve access.

In 2000 the Library and Information Commission (LIC) published 'Empowering the Learning Community' and this has subsequently been further developed through first, Resource and now through the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA). The Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) issued 'Framework for the Future' last year and the associated actions to realize the vision includes a drive to improve access to resources in academic and public libraries.

There is a definite objective set that by 2013 any member of the public will be able to access materials held in higher education and further education libraries. The higher education sector have been set the challenge by the government of increasing participation in higher education to 50% for 18 - 30 year olds by the end of the decade. The white paper "the Future of Higher Education" published in 2003 highlights the need to provide the opportunity to all to participate in higher education, regardless of background. Aimhigher Partnerships for Progression (P4P) addresses the government's target to widen and increase participation in higher education, and the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and the Learning Skills Council (LSC) are working together to deliver an outreach programme to encourage young people with families with no background in higher education to enter universities and other institutions. Within the Department of Health and Personal Social Services (HPSS) there is also the drive for improving clinical and social care governance, which includes developing and nurturing effective partnerships for improvement.

These are just some of the initiatives being undertaken to open up access to learning and information to all in the community and therefore, there is a clear imperative on librarians to play our part in achieving better support, encouragement and provision for all.

It is set against this backcloth that Inspire and the Foyle took up the challenge to improve access to learning for everyone in the local Derry community.

Members of Foyle

Librarians from the local university, further education college, public library and trust library formed the Foyle group, which takes its name from the river flowing through Derry city.

The group members are:

- Altnagelvin Trust Library
- The North West Institute of Further and Higher Education
- The Western Education and Library Board Derry City Libraries
- The University of Ulster Magee Campus Library

Activities to date

It was clear from the first meeting of the group in April 2003 that there was much to be gained from working together, and it was possible to quickly identify areas, where we could collaborate to mutual advantage. It was decided to improve access arrangements and to introduce managed referral between the libraries thereby, opening up access to over 150,000 items to the local community. After much consideration we decided to take the next leap and offer limited borrowing. The libraries agreed to trial a borrowing scheme, which would allow two items to be borrowed. One library unfortunately was unable to provide borrowing but a

pilot scheme was run with the others. This pilot is just coming to an end with the three other libraries and we have now enough confidence in its feasibility that we have decided to fully launch the borrowing aspect of the scheme this autumn. Members of the community will therefore be able to consult and borrow books on healthcare matters as well on a wide range of other topics.

At an early stage the group identified two areas in which we were handling queries, which could benefit from closer collaboration. Firstly, the public library and the university library receive many queries relating to local history and secondly, all libraries were dealing with a wide range of healthcare enquiries. In both cases we could see direct benefits in working more closely together. We decided that our staff needed to establish direct links with their counterparts in other libraries who were grappling with the same type of problems.

Focussing on the healthcare enquiries, we identified the need to improve support for librarians handling these queries, as the skills and knowledge needed to accurately support healthcare enquiries need constant updating. Fortuitously at the same time a Medical and Health Care Librarians Group (NI) was being established, 2003, and through this group it has been possible to create a network of librarians across the different library sectors, not only in the Derry area, but also across the whole of Northern Ireland. This group plans to support each other and to organize events to keep staff up-to-date on developments.

The fact that there is now an email listing of healthcare librarians for Northern Ireland is a major step forward and has succeeded in linking up librarians working in libraries across the sectors. While it is appreciated that the kind of information required by a patient wanting to learn more about diabetes differs substantially for that required by medics and nurses, all librarians supporting these users can benefit from the help and support of others. The network is especially of value to library staff new to answering healthcare enquiries and to

those working on their own in relative isolation away from a major medical or nursing library. The group is still developing its activities and establishing itself but it has the potential to help improve the service received by people across Northern Ireland. In the Derry area we hope to provide some local training and support and this will be addressed once the borrowing scheme has been firmly established.

Conclusion

With the increasing emphasis now on opening up access to learning to all and the drive within the HPSS to raise the quality of services and improving performance, there is a clear imperative to provide better information services to everyone with healthcare enquiries. The Foyle scheme has taken some small steps in this direction, but much more remains to be done.