

## Dual use

# Worcester: an integrated service for education & community

Worcester has won £57m of public funds to develop a multi-agency, integrated service that will serve as both university and public library and council contact centre. **Anne Hannaford** reports on this putative role model for widening participation in education and building community cohesion.



WHEN I STARTED working in libraries in the late 1970s, public and academic librarians followed separate roads. My postgraduate course gave me a choice between specialising in public, academic or special libraries. Professional activity was segregated; now colleagues work hard to make and retain contacts between the sectors within their region, and the cross-sectoral (public/HE/FE) Inspire project has been a catalyst for invaluable initiatives.

And last year an international conference in Manchester on dual-use libraries signalled how far we have come both conceptually and in service development, with case studies from Australia, the US and Denmark among others.<sup>1</sup>

The Worcester Library & History Centre project has shown how a shared vision, and a belief that the local university and public library serve a single community, can attract support, with more than £57m forthcoming from public funds to develop a multi-agency, integrated service.

The story began four years ago with some good timing: Worcestershire County Council agreed funding for a much needed new public library for Worcester, and the University of Worcester acquired the site of the former Worcester Royal Infirmary to build a new city centre campus to accommodate expansion.

The possibility of using the university site for a shared facility seemed too good an opportunity to miss and, although early on we agreed that the new campus itself might not be the right place, we still wanted to do something together. Next to the new campus is Worcester City Council's waste depot, and the council, as enthusiastic supporters of regeneration of this part of the city, agreed to sell the site and relocate.

The concept of a new learning and cultural quarter for the city, and the strong connection between the city, the university and the region, has caught the imagination of funding bodies. In 2006 the Higher Education Funding Council for England & Wales allocated £10m from the Strategic Development Fund; the Department for Culture, Media & Sport has committed £40.4m

of PFI credits; and the regional development agency, Advantage West Midlands, is contributing £7m. That's more than £57m towards one of the most significant library developments in the UK.

### Partners in innovation

Once the strategic agreement had been made between the county council and the university to develop the library, we had to take a fundamental decision. Were we planning to share premises, open collections and co-operate, but remain essentially two separate entities? Or, were we taking what Sir Humphrey Appleby would have called a courageous decision, and going for total integration?

Perhaps strangely, we didn't hesitate. Both parties believed that to achieve an egalitarian, open and inspirational service we had to combine. We would still be separately accountable financially, and achieve our different sector quality benchmarks, but to our library users - students, children, academic staff, families - it would appear to be a single service.

Early on, the Worcestershire Record & Archive Service took part in the discussions about creating a library and history centre, to open up the primary source archive and make it accessible to the widest possible audience.

We began to think about who else we could involve to make this a really vibrant service, and two other elements became part of the mix: the City & County Council Customer Contact Centre (answering enquiries about everything from rubbish collection, planning applications to council taxes), and the County Archaeology Service. The County Archaeology Service and Record Office had a brief to work together and extend public engagement with heritage. Their partnership was a natural development.

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## References

1 A. Bundy (ed.). *Joint Use Libraries: an international conference, 19-21 June 2007*. Auslib Press, 2007.

2 Michael Savage. 'The big question: does the decline in book lending spell the end for the public library?' *The Independent*, 16 January 2008.

3 Philip Hensher. 'These temples of learning transformed Britain.' *The Independent*, 31 December 2007.

contact centre use cash rather than bank accounts; have lower formal educational qualifications; and are more likely to be socially disadvantaged. Many are not natural public library users, and they are even less likely to enter a university library, or a university campus.

### New and regained audiences

If we are to succeed, the services and experiences we offer must engage people who don't use any of our services, while continuing to attract our natural constituencies.

We also have to regain our traditional core users – the affluent and educated, who now use good bookshops instead of libraries to feed their reading habit. While in 2007 £1.8bn was spent on books – a six per cent increase on the previous year – Cipfa figures show a 34 per cent decline nationally in the numbers of books borrowed over the last 10 years.<sup>2</sup>

But visits to public libraries have continued to increase: we are reaching new audiences through free computer use, internet access and lending multimedia, but we can't afford to lose sight of our core values. Libraries are places to encourage learning, promote cultural experiences. When remembering the public library of his childhood, author Philip Hensher wrote: 'The great public library used to demonstrate that there was no distinction in accessibility between Ulysses and Mazo de la Roche, between that noble and honourable lady Catherine Cookson and Nabokov. You could get any of it.'<sup>3</sup>

The integrated university and public library in Worcester will bring a range of reading from the popular to the profound; access to information, advice and support; and technology that encourages creativity, extends the library beyond the building, and puts people in touch with one another and with new experiences.

At the same time, we want it to be a destination for casual meeting and enjoyment.

### Will it work in Worcester?

While I hope that we can offer a model for other universities and authorities, every situation is different. At Worcester, we have a particular combination of circumstances and need.

- The partners have a shared strategic vision: the commitment of the county to social inclusion is mirrored in the university's to widening participation in higher education.
- Sixty-five percent of the university's students come

from the region.

- Children's services are at the heart of a public library service, and Worcester University has a strategic focus on working with and for children across a range of academic disciplines.
- The university is sited near the local community.

### Where we are now

We've been working on this for a number of years, and there is still some way to go before we open in 2011. We are in the final stage of discussion (known as competitive dialogue) with the two remaining PFI bidding teams, and will have a preferred bidder and an agreed design by the end of March.

PFI has a mixed reputation as a means of procurement for public buildings. The press has carried some alarming stories about poor design and contracts that don't appear to offer good long-term value for money. While we entered the process with a certain degree of scepticism, we feel confident that we will get a well-designed, exciting building which will enhance the city and be a source of pride for the whole community, a destination in itself.

We've sought to strengthen our chances of achieving this at every stage. We prepared an extremely detailed design brief using our own external professional consultancy team – a first on this scale for a PFI project, we believe. Our discussions with bidders have been open, lively and demanding; and all partners have resourced the project team through secondment and new appointments.

Other things are happening in parallel: a research project on the economic impact of the new library and history centre which we hope will provide robust methodology for measuring the impact of other cultural centres; and the public library and the university are working on a strategic development plan to ensure that we move in with a thriving shared set of services.

There will be much to report on in the coming years: how we manage the expectations of users, such as ensuring that the needs of senior citizens and students are equally well served; the highs and lows of partnership working; and the realities of PFI procurement.

Above all, perhaps, we will see whether in an age of a cult of celebrity, soaps and *Big Brother*, there is still a place for somewhere that is unashamedly about learning, self-education and new cultural experiences – as well as a good cup of coffee. [7]

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