



CULTURE AND LEISURE

## Scimitar - Promoting Access to Libraries in the East Midlands

Libraries & Information East Midlands

### Summary

The Scimitar project was a partnership of all public, higher education and further education libraries in the East Midlands, under the aegis of Libraries and Information East Midlands, the strategic voice for the library and information services domain in the region. The aim was to investigate the feasibility of creating a single interface which would give library users, wherever they were, access to the resources of all 300+ libraries in the region.

The outcomes of the feasibility study are described in more detail later. In summary, it was apparent that a branded regional portal to library catalogue data would be of limited value. Instead, therefore, the region's libraries are playing a leading role in the development of the national *UnityUK* service, which will enable library users to identify material in all UK libraries through a single search engine.

### Quote

***“Resource sharing and inter-lending is a cornerstone of the UK library system. The experience we have gained through the Scimitar project will feed into the national UnityUK service to greatly enhance the ability of library users to identify, locate and obtain the material they need.”***

Robert Gent,  
Vice Chair, The Combined Regions

Improvement through efficiency



Centre of  
Excellence

East Midlands

emce.gov.uk

## Partners in the project

- Libraries and Information East Midlands (LIEM)
- Nine local authority library services, with over 300 libraries
- Eight universities
- Thirteen Colleges of Further Education.

## Aims of the project

Scimitar's long-term aim was to open up access to resources not just in libraries, but in museums and archives. Currently these resources are recorded within each organisation's data systems, but these ICT systems are not joined up. The aim was to ensure that anyone searching from anywhere could immediately find the item they needed through a single search via the Scimitar portal.

**Scimitar was envisaged as a real-time one-stop shop, using cutting-edge interoperability technology, giving access to:**

- Bibliographic data on books and journals
- Audio-visual materials, photographs, and video and sound recordings
- Maps, plans and drawings
- Local and family history resources, manuscripts and archives
- Online digital resources and websites
- Community information.

## Project Background and Outcomes

Previous mapping exercises had demonstrated the wealth of resources in the region's libraries and the commitment to partnership working on the part of libraries in all sectors.

However, there was a need to foster greater awareness amongst potential users, to encourage self service with the aim of reducing staffing costs and to reduce the time taken to identify and supply requested material. In addition, a single portal would make more effective use of resources and encourage greater coordination of purchasing, and improve the quality of information available to learners and enquirers of all ages.

It was recognised from an early stage that, while technical solutions might be in development or already available, the crucial element of the project would be to secure the commitment of all the potential partners. With increasing pressure on budgets, partners needed to be convinced that the initiative would offer genuine scope for economies, and the higher education sector in particular needed to be sure that improved access to information would not lead to increased demand from the general public which could not be met.

A full tendering process was undertaken, with the support of Derbyshire County Council's corporate procurement service, and consultants Education for Change Ltd (EfC) were appointed to conduct the feasibility study.

**Their work consisted of two main strands:**

- Extensive consultation with a wide range of partners and stakeholders
- A review of the technical solutions available and under development

It became clear that a regional solution alone would deliver some of the projected benefits, but that more could be achieved through the library and information sector working together nationally.

During the lifetime of the Scimitar project this began to be addressed by The Combined Regions (TCR), a cooperative of public, academic, regional and national library bodies. TCR's national *UnityUK* service aimed to link the catalogues of libraries of all types. Less than a year old, it currently includes over 16,000,000 holdings, including those of the national libraries of England and Scotland, data is being added constantly and a public interface is under development for launch in 2007. LIEM's Regional Librarian and its Honorary Treasurer have played leading roles in this national venture and the Scimitar feasibility study concluded that *UnityUK* was a more cost-effective option than developing a stand-alone solution for the East Midlands.

## The Way Ahead

**Moving into the implementation phase, LIEM has identified four main strands of activity:**

- Complete the addition of East Midlands data holdings to Unity UK
- Implement public access module in a pilot group of local authority library services
- Support the future development of the service through representation on the Management Board of The Combined Regions, participation in a national forums and facilitation and leadership of regional user group.
- Work with system supplier OCLC PICA to develop interface with proprietary library management systems, facilitating seamless exchange of information and streamlined workflow.

## Benefits

The feasibility study helped raise the profile of resource sharing and has encouraged the region's libraries to contribute to the development of the national solution. The emphasis has been on ensuring that all of the region's data is included, three East Midlands public library services were among the earliest contributors.

### **Benefits anticipated from the roll-out of the *UnityUK* service, and in particular its public access module, include**

- An increase in self service transactions to around 100,000 across the region
- Reduced cost in obtaining requested items
- Faster supply of requested items
- Participation in the national scheme at lower cost than would be possible in the region – saving £103,000 over three years.

## Lessons learned

The employment of a high quality consultancy with specialist knowledge of the library and information services sector undoubtedly helped address the concerns around buy-in from potential partners. The consultants were rigorously objective, honest and realistic in their evaluation of the options.

The rapidly changing environment in the sector meant that the project had to be flexible; it became evident that there were other options to deliver similar benefits to those originally envisaged, and at lower cost, and that the development of a prominently branded regional service might not be the best way forward.

Financial and organisational pressures differed across libraries in different sectors; the project prompted a greater understanding and sharing of these issues which will strengthen cooperative working across the region in the future.

## Role of the EMCE

LIEM and its partners gratefully acknowledge the assistance of the EMCE in providing funding of £13.6k for the initial feasibility study.

## Contact

### **Robert Gent**

Assistant Director of Cultural and Community Services  
Derbyshire County Council  
tel: 01629 580 000 ext 6574  
email: robert.gent@derbyshire.gov.uk

### **Chris Allison**

Regional Director  
East Midlands Centre of Excellence  
tel: 0115 977 4921  
email: chris.allison@nottsc.gov.uk