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Library careers outside the box: Part 1. Partnership working in the UK

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Abstract

Part one of a three-part series taking a look at non-traditional librarianship opportunities. Examines *partnership working*, or *joint working*, in the UK through a successful collaboration between Barnardo's children's charity and Children and Family Court Advisory Support Service (CAFCASS). Explains how the system works and describes the author's personal experience working as a librarian for both organizations.

Introduction

In a three-part series, I'll be taking a look at non-traditional models of librarianship and information work. In part 1, I'll be looking at partnership working. Part 2 will focus on different aspects of librarianship, looking beyond the traditional public and academic library environments. Part 3 will take this further by looking at more unusual forms of library work.

Partnership working

'Partnership working' or 'joint working' may sound like business buzz phrases, but they are starting to affect the way libraries work. In an age where every department in an organisation is constantly having to justify its existence, few can afford to create and maintain a library if it is not their core business. Even if a need for a library or information service is identified, organisations cannot realistically spend money and resources on building a service from scratch. The answer is to pool resources and use an already established library. It does not have to be based in the same building, town, or city as the organisation. In fact, the library does not even need to be in the same country.

How does this work in practice? A small charity may want access to the latest books, journals, and electronic resources, but they may not have the office space or funds to build up their own collection. However, they know of a larger charity that has a well-stocked, up-to-date library and will offer a remote service for a fee. The organisation will have a contract with the library that may provide for a dedicated member of staff, a small acquisitions budget and administration costs, for example. This raises the profile of the small charity and in turn exploits the resources of the larger organisation.

Barnardo's and CAFCASS

In September 2006, Barnardo's children's charity (www.barnardos.org.uk) in the UK started providing a remote library and information service (LIS) to the Children and Family Court Advisory Support Service (CAFCASS). CAFCASS (www.cafcass.gov.uk) is a non-departmental government body, established in 2001 to represent families and children in the courts. It employs about 2,000 staff in 100 offices across 10 regions in the UK. Family Court Advisors (FCAs) need research to inform their practice and to help them reach decisions about the best outcomes for the children and families they are representing. To do this effectively, they need access to a library and information service. As the needs of the two organisations are closely matched, it makes sense for them to work in partnership. CAFCASS staff access the Barnardo's library catalogue online via an icon on their desktop or through their intranet. They can order items using a link in the catalogue record and an email is sent through to the central Barnardo's library mailbox. The current turnaround time for dealing with requests is two working days and users are informed when their requests have been processed. Books can be borrowed for four weeks and photocopies of articles can be kept by the user. Where possible, the library aims to send electronic (PDF) versions of articles by e-mail. This means that users get the article very quickly and this also saves paper and postage. The library also offers an information service, performing subject searches for people who are uncomfortable with using an online library catalogue or have a difficult subject to research.

My Experience with Partnership Working

This is where I come in—specifically, as a library and information services officer for CAFCASS. Although I am employed by CAFCASS I am actually based at Barnardo's head office in Essex. Although I am part of a library team at Barnardo's, they

all work for the charity while I am the only CAFCASS Librarian. The library subscribes to a number of databases and if people cannot find what they want in the library catalogue, we will do an external search, produce a resource list and order in any items they want that we don't have. As well as running the LIS, I catalogue books and articles, maintain usage statistics and help to write monthly reports about the service. One of the major challenges has been to encourage people to use the LIS. CAFCASS organises a number of conferences, both at regional and national level. I have been travelling around the country performing a short 10 to 15 minute presentation about the LIS to between 100 and 200 people each time. I also have an LIS 'stall' which I take to larger conferences, and I try to tailor the display to the theme of the event, encouraging attendees to follow up what they have learned by using the LIS. I also write articles about the LIS for the CAFCASS staff newsletter and produce a monthly current awareness bulletin which is published on their intranet site. In the first six months of the service I have dealt with 950 enquiries and sent out over 1,600 items.

It is inevitable with a remote service that not everyone will return their books when they should. Users with overdue items receive a reminder email and if these fail to produce a response offenders are banned from using the LIS until the item is returned.

Occasionally items go missing on their way to the user, or on their way back to the library. This is difficult to police and we accept that a small part of the library budget will be spent on replacing missing or lost items. We also limit the number of items that users can borrow at any time (12).

There is no limit on the number of articles that users can request. The availability of resources also needs to be considered. This isn't really a problem with articles but can be a real issue with books and we are buying second copies of heavily requested items.

A promising future

The CAFCASS LIS is still in its infancy but the signs are that the partnership with Barnardo's is working effectively. In an age where the viability of libraries is regularly questioned, partnerships are an excellent way of exploiting established collections to the full. Working for two organisations can be challenging and at present there is only one librarian for a constantly growing user base but if this partnership is a long-term success this could be the start of a number of opportunities. I see no reason why this model cannot be adapted and used by other libraries.

I am going to end this piece with a request. If you are interested in partnership working or already work in a partnership library I'd love to hear from you and share ideas:

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Author's Bio

Joanna Wood has worked for CAFCASS/Barnardo's since August 2006. Previously she worked at the National Maritime Museum (<http://www.nmm.ac.uk>) Library and the Oxford Union Society Library (<http://www.lib.ox.ac.uk/libraries/guides/OUS.html>). Joanna completed the distance learning Information and Library Studies postgraduate diploma at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth (<http://www.aber.ac.uk>) in June 2006, and is currently pursuing MCLIP (Chartered) status.