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## Linking a Community of Practice by an Evidence Shelf OPAC: collaboration across UK Government and beyond

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### Abstract:

*This paper provides a case study of the collaboration between the Research Library of the UK Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and a Community of Practice (CoP) aimed at Labour Market policy. The background and context – including the need for specific information grouping for this CoP - and the initial role of the DWP Research Library in adding value to its existing knowledge base, is briefly considered. A more active role for the Research Library in meeting the specific knowledge management requirements of the CoP is then described, enhancing the original aim of supporting evidence based policy making and operational best practice. In particular, the creation of an Online Public Access Catalogue (OPAC) 'piggy backed' on the main DWP OPAC is detailed. The importance of strong collaboration between stakeholders is explained. DWP Research Librarians identified end-user information needs and interpreted the CoP requirements for the OPAC provider. Research Librarians also engaged with the OPAC provider to deliver organisation of knowledge and information retrieval that matches the information seeking behaviour of the CoP. This included customising MARC fields, converting spreadsheet data to MARC format fields for bulk upload and the creation of the new OPAC. The refinement and ongoing development of this OPAC is covered along with other developments in collaboration by the DWP Research Library, including the development of further new bespoke OPACs. Fundamental to the success are collaboration, end-user needs analysis and search capabilities.*

**Keywords:** OPAC, collaboration, Communities of Practice, evidence based policy making, search, end-user information needs.

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### Background to collaboration

Before turning to the main points of this paper some background must be given on the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), its Research Library and the United Kingdom's Government policy community.

The **Department for Work and Pensions** ([www.gov.uk/dwp](http://www.gov.uk/dwp)) is the largest Ministry of Her Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom (UK), with over 74,000 civil servants and an annual budget of approximately £170bn. Overseeing social policy from the cradle to the grave, the DWP will have numerous direct and indirect transactions with a UK citizen or resident over their lifetime, normally through Civil Servants working on the Department's operational side. Supporting operational staff involved in the day to day delivery of (for example) welfare payments and old age pensions are groups of strategy and policy makers, reporting to DWP Ministers. Within these groups are Divisions based on the main DWP policy areas, one of these being responsible for Labour Market policy and issues. Over the last few years the DWP Research Library has formed a strong collaborative partnership with this Division.

The **DWP Research Library** is based in the main Headquarters building in central London and serves DWP staff located all over the United Kingdom. Due to active exploitation of opportunities as they arise, plus collaboration with key Policy stakeholders, the Research Library has developed and maintained a role to support evidence-based policy making in the DWP. Indeed, in 2014 the DWP Library had "Research" added to its title in recognition of its enhanced role in this area. This was one of the outcomes of the Library Modernisation Plan which focussed future Library strategy on End User engagement, Research & Technology. Thus aligning the Research Library to the DWP strategic objectives (DWP, 2015).

**Evidence-based policy making** is facilitated in the UK Government by a range of resources and bodies. It is worth noting that increasingly a policy can be initiated by one of the devolved governments in Northern Ireland, Scotland or Wales (Pendlebury, 2016). It may then be adopted to varying degrees, by other parts of the UK, including the UK-wide (Westminster) Government itself.

One related development has been an increasing focus on sharing knowledge and mobilising evidence with end-users in policy or service delivery roles through the creation of a network of independent What Works Centres (WWC) (Cabinet Office 2011, 2013). Their functions include:

- Generating evidence synthesis, and
- Publishing and disseminating findings in user friendly formats

### **A Community of Practice for the Labour Market Division**

In 2014, inspired by the work of this network, the Labour Market Division adopted parts of the approach for use within UK Central Government, creating a Community of Practice (CoP), looking at ways to

- Identify and address new evidence needs,
- Make existing evidence more accessible, and
- Engage internal stakeholders in discussion of research findings.

### **2014 – Initial collaboration between Community of Practice and DWP Research Library**

We may now consider how collaboration between the CoP and Research Librarians was initiated back in 2014. The CoP was already aware of Research Library services through existing stakeholder relationships and individual research commissions. This meant Research Librarians were invited at an early stage of the project to input their professional expertise. Initially there were two components to this:

- i. eCAS – electronic Current Awareness Service (more commonly known as Selective Dissemination of Information - SDI)  
Research Librarians were asked to circulate monthly eCAS bulletins to the CoP. This would be a development of the existing eCAS service that had been offered across DWP Divisions for some years already. The CoP provided the Research Library with approximately a dozen topic themes they were keen to receive regular literature review updates on. Research Librarians compared these to pre-existing eCAS topics and adapted or created new alerts to feed into these bulletins accordingly. Bulletins contain references, abstracts and hyperlinks to full text (where available) of journal articles, reports from Think Tanks, Academia and other evidence that Research Librarians consider to be timely and relevant.
- ii. Evidence Shelf  
Besides the requirement for updates on new evidence, a need was identified for a subject based repository of existing evidence, to which could be added relevant new evidence harvested from the eCAS bulletins and other sources as the CoP developed. This was termed the ‘Evidence Shelf’.

The Evidence Shelf was initially created using a standard Excel spreadsheet, as it was required quickly. Hosted on the CoP web portal, it was agreed as the best option at the time. The software was familiar to users and it was also simple to update. However, although constructed by a very able member of the Labour Market Division, it did have significant disadvantages. It could be very slow to load, and the sort/filter options available on Excel provided limited search functionality. Despite this each record was well indexed with a range of access points that could be used to retrieve documents, given the right software.

Coincidentally, in March 2015 a new Cloud-based Library Management System (LMS) and associated OPAC using EOS software (<http://eos.sirsidynix.com>) was successfully launched by the Research Library, replacing the outdated Unicorn LMS and WebCat OPAC. It was clear that the functional capabilities of this LMS were considerable, and it was soon earmarked as having the potential to replace the Evidence Shelf spreadsheet, to overcome the above disadvantages. Importantly, it had the advantage of being Cloud-based and therefore potentially available on any device, anywhere – the CoP including members both within DWP and external to it, such as in other Government Ministries.

### **2015 – New Evidence Shelf OPAC**

Based on the successful deployment of the new Research Library LMS and OPAC in March 2015, Research Librarians were soon planning to convert the Excel based Evidence Shelf, consisting of over 450 records, to an OPAC. There were two key steps to achieving this:

**1. CoP agreement:** The first step was to discuss requirements with the CoP, who were enthusiastic about the possibilities. Also, at a training session on the Research Library LMS/OPAC, the EOS Account Manager demonstrated how the new Evidence Shelf OPAC could be ‘piggy backed’ onto the Research Library OPAC at no extra cost.

An options paper was put forward to the CoP, with the preferred option being an OPAC piggy backed onto the Research Library OPAC. The alternative was converting into an Access database. This could have assisted in the creation of evidence summaries – another aspect of the CoP’s work – and such a database was already in existence although not intended to host actual evidence documents. But there

would be several disadvantages. In particular, Access was not part of the standard DWP computer package so would need to be requested for every user, incurring a substantial cost in software licenses, apart from any training requirements.

It was therefore decided to proceed with the OPAC, with the Access database being retained as a separate repository for evidence summaries.

**2. Spreadsheet formatting and conversion:** It was now necessary to reformat the Evidence Shelf spreadsheet to make it suitable for conversion to Machine Readable Cataloguing Standards (MARC) records, using freely available MarcEdit software (<http://marcedit.reeset.net>). Some of the columns, notably the title field, could be converted with little or no need for reformatting. Others required more work. Virtually all documents included a column for the full text hyperlink, masked by “Click here” – this column needed to be split into one for the URL itself (856\$u field), and a second for the “Click here” text label to mask the URL (856\$y field). Converting the author column was the most labour intensive part of the process, with careful attention to MARC conventions being required. Essentially these had been entered as first name last name so needed to be swapped around and punctuation added to be MARC compatible. For similar projects where MARC conversion may be a future possibility, it is recommended that thought be given to such requirements at the design stage.

A further area requiring detailed Librarian analysis and professional input was the customised tags that the CoP was keen to retain, rather than alter to standard DWP Research Library cataloguing practice. EOS created custom MARC tags (59X fields) to facilitate this. These can be seen in the full list of MARC tags below:

001 Control number  
100\$a Author  
245\$a Title  
245\$c Statement of responsibility  
260\$c Year  
520\$a Summary  
591\$a Area  
592\$a Source  
593\$a Type  
594\$a Pillar  
595\$a Keywords  
700\$a Added author(s)  
856\$u URL  
856\$y URL text label

EOS was now able to do a ‘road test’ conversion of 25 records into the new Evidence Shelf OPAC, which was a success. The remainder of the records were then imported. Also, a new dedicated home page for the LMWW OPAC was created. Although some elements had to be shared with the main Research Library OPAC, a customised logo and introductory text could be successfully incorporated. This is considered further below.

## Screenshot of Evidence Shelf OPAC



Start Search Lists My Account Help

An offering from the DWP Research Library Online Public Access Catalogue

### [New books](#)

Search the print, online and digitised collections.

[Sign In](#) to renew and reserve items. Write reviews and recommend titles to colleagues.

Or [if the library doesn't have it...](#)

<a href="#">Advanced Search</a>	<a href="#">Browse Search</a>	<a href="#">My Checkouts</a>	<a href="#">My Checkout History</a>	<a href="#">Change Password</a>	<a href="#">My Reviews</a>
Simple Search <span style="float: right;">Powered by EOS</span>					
<input type="text"/>					
<input type="button" value="Search"/> <input type="button" value="Start Over"/>					
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Show search options					
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Show Tips					
<b>Search types</b>					
Browse Search	Use Browse Search to browse indexes (e.g., Main Title, Subjects, All Authors, etc.). Browsing allows you to scroll through or reposition an index to the nearest matching entry. Indexes may also be searched to list entries beginning, containing, or ending with a letter, keyword, or phrase.				
Advanced Search	Use Advanced Search to search one or more fields simultaneously. Keywords or phrases may be searched. AND, OR, or AND NOT may be selected as the operator between searches.				

The Evidence Shelf has been compiled and curated by experts to draw together the key internal and external evidence papers and documents relating to the Labour Market. They are intended to allow all staff in DWP to explore the available evidence, drawing out the key papers that relate to their interests.

Please be aware that documents marked "internal" should not be shared externally or quoted without seeking permission from owner. Due to copyright restrictions please do not change the collection setting from Labour Market What Works.

Documents included on the evidence shelves are drawn from a range of sources, including government departments, academic institutes and other external organisations. Findings and commentary within these documents do not necessarily represent the views of the Department.

[Help document](#)

For any additions to the evidence shelf or queries please [contact us](#)

## Feedback from the Community of Practice

A small focus group of CoP members were invited to test and provide feedback on the new LMWW OPAC. Overall, they were extremely impressed by its improved search functionality when compared to the old Excel spreadsheet. It included the best of the old spreadsheet – the specific CoP tags using 59X fields – combined with the improved capabilities of the OPAC search. The ability to perform a complex search was much improved, with the enhanced OPAC Search functionality being key to the successful outcome. The Research Librarians worked with EOS who created algorithms to suit Search requirements of the CoP.

However, there were also areas of the interface that CoP members felt could be improved. Piggy backing the Evidence Shelf onto the Research Library OPAC meant certain design elements had to be shared across both OPACs, even though they were not applicable to the Evidence Shelf OPAC. Members found this confusing, particularly on the front page. For example, both OPACs included a “Sign In” option for members to reserve or renew books, but this function was redundant on the Evidence Shelf OPAC as it was a ‘Virtual Collection’.

Unfortunately, software limitations made it impossible to totally separate the different OPACs and still share a single server. The solution to this would be to pay a small additional charge to create a completely standalone OPAC. Also, records could still be accessed across the different OPACs using the cross-library search function and Z39.50 protocols on EOS.

## **2016 – Refinement and future developments**

To assist with the future development of the OPAC and support the information needs of the CoP, a Librarian (formerly of the DWP Research Library) has now joined the Labour Market Division. The Labour Market Librarian maintains a close link with the Research Library which continues to have overall responsibility for the strategic development of the DWP family of OPACs.

As of June 2016, planning, preparation and coordination continues to create a totally standalone Evidence Shelf OPAC for the CoP. A completely customised OPAC with all design elements in line with the requirements of the CoP is now in sight. The other major difference to the first iteration of the Evidence Shelf OPAC will be the hosting of externally published full text documents on the OPAC server, rather than relying on external hyperlinks. The Labour Market Librarian will be responsible for ensuring copyright compliance.

Taking this project as a model, Research Librarians are actively exploring further opportunities to create special OPACs and information retrieval systems for other collections, Divisions and Communities of Practice. This is considered further below.

### **Next steps: Information Retrieval and organising knowledge**

By actively collaborating with its LMS provider and key stakeholders, the DWP Research Library has positioned itself as a strategic facilitator of bespoke OPACs and other information systems design for the Department for Work and Pensions. The DWP family of OPACs now consists of:

- i. DWP Research Library OPAC - launched March 2015, main OPAC and information repository for all major DWP collections, including digitised/archive collections.
- ii. Evidence Shelf OPAC for Labour Market division CoP - launched June 2015, undergoing further development June 2016, as described above.
- iii. Benefit Leaflets, Forms and Letters OPAC - created 2016: This was based on content already held by the Research Library OPAC plus newly uploaded content. It grew out of a clearly identified requirement for DWP staff to be able to quickly retrieve archived versions of welfare benefit Official Publications. The intention is to make these collections self-service to all DWP staff located all over the UK, rather than relying solely on the expertise and availability of Research Librarians/Archivist to retrieve. In future, the latter will only need to intervene to advise on complex enquiries.

With these three OPACs in place, we feel we have organised much of DWP's knowledge - but there is more to do. Already another specific OPAC to bring together the collections of DWP Research Reports is being worked on.

Also, much work is taking place to plan a Search solution across information repositories, not just within the Research Library collections but across DWP. The Research Library is closely involved in this, visiting several comparable organisations to look at what bespoke and search solutions have been implemented and to learn from them. Open-Source software solutions appear to be leading the landscape. Whilst proprietary LMS software with sophisticated MARC standards continues to deliver OPAC solutions for the CoP, Open-Source software could enhance the searching experience across repositories to enhance end-user experience.

## Conclusions

The collaboration between DWP Research Library and the Labour Market Community of Practice has delivered an 'Evidence Shelf' OPAC which users are able to easily search. The initial OPAC required further development - becoming a standalone product - to avoid the confusion of sharing elements with the DWP Research Library OPAC. It was not a simple project, but proved to be a rewarding professional achievement for the Research Librarians helping to meet DWP efficiency objectives.

This result was achieved through good collaboration by the three partners - the Community of Practice, the OPAC supplier and the Research Library as interpreter between the first two parties. Key to this success was the willingness of Librarians to engage with end users and apply expertise in bibliographic control to fulfil their needs and requirements.

To summarise, three key aspects to a successful collaboration:

**People** - take time to get to know your user needs

**Technology** - know your systems - work with your supplier

**You** - don't be afraid to experiment, learn new skills and try something new.

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