Open libraries: Self-service technology

Technology now exists that allows customers to access a library outside of opening hours when it is not staffed.

How does it work?
A library card and PIN allows library members to enter a library outside of opening hours through a secure entry system. There would be set times of day when library members would be able to use a self-service library. The lights, self-service kiosks and public computers automatically switch on when entering the building. Members can spend time in the library, choose and borrow books, relax while reading or use the computers, Wi-Fi and study facilities. Library members could meet or use the space for community activities, as well as access library services. When leaving the library, everything automatically closes down again (unless another member is still using the library).

Why?
This technology allows library members to access the library and its public spaces flexibly outside of normal staffed opening hours. It would enable us to operate our libraries at a lower cost, and if successful, it could allow much more flexible opening hours. We would like to carry out a pilot in two libraries in Somerset to see how this approach could work in practice. No decision has yet been made about which libraries would take part.

What if I need help and support?
Clear information would be available about when the library is staffed and when it is self-service, so customers could choose when they would like to visit. There would be times during every ‘open day’ when staff and volunteers would be available to support customers. The staffed hours would be chosen based on research that shows the times when most people visit the library and most help and support is needed. The range of staff run activities and events would continue during the staffed hours.

Is it secure?
Open libraries are monitored (by cameras) from a central point (within driving distance of the library). If a public computer or self-service kiosk stopped working a notification would be sent to this central point for action. Libraries already using this technology say that it works very well, customers feel secure using the service this way and stock and facilities continue to be well treated and respected. There are a growing number of libraries in the UK using similar technology successfully. For example, Peterborough City Council’s ten libraries all use this technology. Other library authorities working with this technology include Norfolk and Brighton and Hove. It has also been used extensively in Denmark.

Next steps
We want to pilot it to see if it works for Somerset communities. So, we are keen to hear your views through our Listening, Learning, Changing – the future of hubs and libraries - questionnaire.