

A friend in need is a friend indeed

The M25 Consortium's preparations for disaster management

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Collaboration has existed in one form or another in the library sector for decades, but as ongoing (and increasing) austerity measures tighten the budgets every year, libraries look to established consortia to provide a vehicle for cost-saving shared services.

There are various consortia in the UK and beyond that provide these types of service, and their membership can be defined by a range of parameters, such as geography, library type or specialism. The M25 Consortium is the regional group for academic libraries in London and the south east of the UK and currently has 55 members. Of these, 45 are university libraries, and ten are from outside the higher education sector: museum, special and national libraries. The M25 Consortium has existed since 1993, with slight variations to the name and a growing membership.

Because of the small geographic area that the M25 libraries cover, the Consortium is an ideal vehicle for schemes that involve physical travel and contact between libraries, such as service continuation in the immediate aftermath of disaster.

The M25 Consortium's interest in shared approaches to disaster planning was established when the M25 Disaster Management working group was set up in the late 1990s. This was one of a number of working groups that have existed over the years to promote awareness and best practice for shared services in various areas. Part of the group's brief in looking at disaster control management was to cover disasters affecting IT-based services. As the working group comprised ten library staff from across the M25 membership, it was able to build its work on 'real' experiences of disasters and disaster planning in the sector, as well as being of benefit to the diverse range of M25 members. The working group produced three main resources for the M25 member libraries' use: a Mutual Support agreement, an IT Preparedness template and a Disaster Control Plan template.

The Mutual Support agreement takes real advantage of the physical proximity of many libraries in the M25 Consortium. As part of members' rights and responsibilities, in the event of disaster at an M25 library, the agreement can be invoked to arrange for temporary physical study space at another M25 member library. Access to resources can usually also be expected at the host library according to the normal arrangements of their participation in the SCONUL Access and / or M25 Access and Borrowing schemes.

The agreement, approved by the M25 Consortium in 2004 and last reviewed and updated in 2014, can be invoked for one month and is designed to allow staff at affected libraries to prioritise disaster recovery by providing their students with access to space and resources elsewhere. Affected institutions with multiple sites and libraries are expected to use their own (unaffected) libraries first.

The initial period of one month can be extended. In all arrangements, the agreement recommends a formal exchange of letters. It is founded on goodwill rather than legally enforceable obligations, but all M25 libraries are expected to participate in it by virtue of their membership of the Consortium. It has been encouraging to see the spirit of goodwill pervading on the rare occasions when physical disaster has struck in the last decade.

The M25 Consortium members will be aided in their use of this agreement by Search25 (www.search25.ac.uk) – the Consortium's service for searching the catalogues of member libraries and providing information about access to those collections for visitors. In addition to this (and with the Mutual Support agreement in mind) libraries register their subject strengths on their individual library information pages on the Search25 site. This helps disaster managers to identify Consortium libraries that will best suit the resource needs of their

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library users. Users can of course use the main search function to locate specific resources that may no longer be accessible in their home library where disaster has struck. The access information, including nearest public transport options, is also helpful to users planning to make a visit to another library.

Since all discussions stemming from the agreement are intended to take place at director level, the Consortium's email discussion list of all M25 directors is an additional tool that we would expect to be used at this time, particularly when making the initial appeal for help.

The Disaster Management working group also created, for exclusive use by M25 members, an IT Preparedness template and Disaster Control Plan template. These resources are available to members to help them in preparing institutional disaster plans, making them aware of the complete range of issues to consider and stakeholders to include.

The IT Preparedness template advises that several key staff members be identified and recorded centrally: disaster manager, systems librarian, IT department representative, network representative and server administrator. All such staff should be authorised to shut down library IT systems when advised to by the relevant authorities. The template advises recording practical information such as the location of library servers and other IT equipment that may need action in the event of disaster, and their proximity fire exits and air conditioning systems etc. Recording the location of fuse boxes, stop cocks and isolation valves will also help to allow speedy action to shut down vulnerable systems during a disaster.

This template also considers external stakeholders in the library IT systems, such as insurance providers and contractors for maintenance and data recovery. It allows for a priority list to be created for service continuity, including identified alternative IT access for staff and any mutual support agreements available, such as M25's own one.

The Disaster Control Plan template is a much lengthier document, covering all aspects of disaster prevention, preparedness, reaction and recovery. The Prevention section advises a risk assessment be carried out covering several areas, including building maintenance, security measures and fire hazards amongst many others.

The Preparedness section gives a model for a written disaster plan, setting out a chain of command at the institution and designating disaster reaction teams. Advice is given for their training, for insurance and for setting both salvage and IT priorities. Detailed consideration is also given to the external operators who may need to become involved during a library disaster. Suggestions (explicitly not endorsements or recommendations) are given for firms offering specialist disaster recovery services, general archival stationery and supplies, removals firms, specialist equipment suppliers, drying facilities, photographic conservation, film treatment, microform services and shelving.

As with other sections in this template, the aim is to be comprehensive in coverage, and thus not all topics will necessarily be of relevance to all libraries, particularly considering the diversity of the M25 membership.

The Reaction section of the template deals with courses of action after disaster has struck. It contains possible procedures for initial action on discovering the disaster, and advises recording contact details for disaster managers and other members of the disaster reaction teams. A disaster should have an initial (and immediate, insofar as circumstances allow) assessment, and detailed questions are provided for this purpose, in addition to a disaster report form. We then come to the procedures for salvaging library and archive materials. Several different types of materials are considered, and the recommended procedures

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after water damage, fire damage and for air-drying are given for each. In addition to advising about books, the template considers a variety of formats including, amongst several others, archives, maps, microform, photographic material, paintings on canvas and computer hardware. Other more cumulative types of calamity are also considered, including mould and pest infestation and advice is given.

Considerable provision is made in the template for dealing with bomb threats in library buildings, including providing a standard form for reacting to bomb threats made via telephone, and for dealing with suspicious objects and packages, including those arriving in the post.

The fourth and final section of this template concerns recovery after disaster. It outlines the disaster recovery manager's function and provides advice on giving opportunities for counselling, and for making revisions to the library's disaster control plan in the light of lessons learnt from a particular event.

The templates were produced several years ago, and it will be interesting at the next planning day of the M25 Consortium to see whether the directors on the Steering Group feel that these resources for disaster planning should be revisited and updated. At the very least the templates could be modified to reflect current trends such as the merging of library and other service departments etc. throughout the Consortium.

All these resources are available for the use and benefit of M25 libraries, and are marketed as one of the benefits of membership to potential new members. It is pleasing that, although produced a few years ago now, they are still of benefit to the current M25 membership. Some M25 libraries have incorporated the agreement and the templates into their institutional disaster plans, and indeed the documents have been referred to as an example of best practice by trainers in this field. So far as the Mutual Support agreement is concerned, we of course hope that it need never be invoked. However, when London Metropolitan University was struck by fire in 2008, the library was glad of the proactive offers of help received from fellow M25 member libraries. This enabled them to help their students at that difficult time and allow some business continuity. Such a spirit of communal support is one of the driving forces that keeps the M25 Consortium going, and gives foundation to that old proverb that a friend in need is a friend indeed.

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