



# A fresh start

At a time of declining use and cuts in library services, with library authorities across the UK considering the future of their mobile services, it might have seemed a strange time to be replacing an entire fleet of mobile libraries but that's exactly what Warwickshire decided to do. AYUB KHAN and JANET EVERETT describe how they went about designing and delivering a new fleet.

**M**obile libraries offer an important and much-valued service to many people living in rural or remote parts of Warwickshire, particularly to those who don't drive or who rely on public transport. Warwickshire's mobile library fleet was showing its age and the service was ripe for a makeover. So, in 2006, we stood back and looked at what we had, and what we were doing.

### About Warwickshire

The county covers an area of 736 square miles and has a population of around 527,000, of whom around 20% are over retirement age and 15% live in rural communities.

Warwickshire is sometimes referred to as the 'leafy shire' and certainly boasts some green and pleasant parts. In reality the county is a rather a mixed bag. There are several large towns, each with its own distinctive character, from Stratford and 'Shakespeare country' in the south to the former mining communities of Nuneaton and Bedworth in the north. There are some very affluent parts but also deprived areas, and a very real north-south divide.

### Problems and opportunities

Warwickshire was struggling to maintain a consistent mobile library service with an ageing fleet of five large vehicles that were reaching the end of their leasing period and in urgent need of replacement. This was an opportunity to move to

smaller vehicles more suitable for country roads and potentially tight parking places. Running smaller mobiles would also address the problem of recruiting HGV licence holders.

The service was operating an historic network of stops with gaps in coverage which could not be served within current schedules. Changing to a three-week cycle would enable new stops to be added and match the loan period operated in Warwickshire's 34 static libraries.

There was a further opportunity to integrate the Rural Mobile Service with the Community Mobile serving sheltered accommodation for the elderly. These services were operating with different types of vehicles and were separately managed. The idea was to merge the two under one manager and establish a centralised depot to support the new service.

Most importantly, and the main reason we were granted funding for the project, we needed to secure online access to our Library Management System, Vubis, together with internet access for mobile library customers.

### Corporate priorities

Our proposals to change and improve the mobile library service met four key Warwickshire County Council priorities:

- Raising levels of educational attainment, by offering access to learning
- Caring for older people, by bringing services to them, both our own and those of stakeholders such as Primary Care Trusts of the Benefits Agency.
- Pursuing a sustainable environment and economy, by taking services to people
- Protecting the community and making Warwickshire a safer place to live, through relationships with the Police and the ability of Community Officers to use the ICT for this purpose.

### Method: The Fresh Start Project

The project was planned using Prince 2 methodology. A small team of staff identified a set of workstreams to take the project forward. These included:

- specification and procurement of new vehicles
- design of a new livery
- integration of the two separate mobile services
- establishment of a centralised mobile depot
- review of our existing network of routes and stops
- redefinition of our service offer and target audiences
- development of a marketing and communications strategy
- provision of public access ICT and community-based information

Each of these workstreams represented several months of work for the team, and specialist staff were co-opted for support as required.

### Specification and build

Our first priority was to produce a detailed specification for the new vehicles, in consultation with our Client Transport Manager, and with considerable input from the Mobile Driver Team. The document was used for the subsequent tendering process.



**Pictured: Left, Mobile users and ICT in use  
Below, Romeo and Juliet with 'their' library  
Right, Mobile on the road**  
**Pictures: Warwickshire County Council**



Our priorities for the new vehicles were:

- improved access for all, especially customers with a mobility problem
- improved efficiency – particularly in relation to maintenance and fuel costs
- a welcoming and safe design
- vehicles better equipped to promote council services and campaigns
- vehicles less than 7.5 tons gross laden weight better suited to rural roads
- improved facilities and comfort for staff

Following lengthy research our final choice was a Peugeot Boxer van conversion, designed and built by Torton Bodies of Telford, and similar to designs adopted by a number of

libraries in the UK. This vehicle has all the required features. Improved accessibility has been achieved by the low floor, shallow entrance step and rear ramp for wheelchair users and customers with walking aids or pushchairs.

### Livery

The design specification also identified the need for a highly visible mobile library fleet. The project team brainstormed a number of potential livery ideas for with our in-house design team.

We finally agreed to capitalise on the fact that Warwickshire is well known as Shakespeare's county. Each vehicle's livery has a specific theme around a well-known Shakespeare play. The project team received support with the design from the Shakespeare Library in Birmingham and the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust in Stratford upon Avon, who researched suitably short quotations from each selected play to use on the livery of each vehicle.

The team also involved customers in the design process by inviting them to take part in a competition to name each of the five new vehicles. They were asked to choose between two main characters from each of the plays. The final selections were Cleopatra, Titania, Othello, Romeo and Hamlet. Each of the five is based at a different Warwickshire library.

Naming each vehicle individually has proved very successful. Customers as well as staff now affectionately refer to the vehicles by their Shakespearean names rather than by their base as before. The ultimate accolade for the team came when the fleet won the award for the Best Livery at Mobile Meet 2008.

### Target audiences

We acknowledged early on that the revamped mobile library service could not serve everyone and that there were segments of the population whose needs it should not try to meet. Most five to 16-year-olds, for instance, would be at school when the mobile library called, and the majority of 16 to 55-year-olds would be at work.

Information from our most recent Mobile Users Survey and existing customer data showed that the majority of our customers were elderly. It was therefore agreed that our new target audiences should be:

- current rural mobile users who were mainly 55+
- current Community Mobile customers, mainly 70-85+
- under-fives with parents/carers who were at home during the day



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- 16-55s working locally, many in agriculture or home-based, or job seekers.

Developing partnerships was an important element of the new service and a number of other Council departments and outside agencies have already taken the opportunity to work with us, as a way of reaching out to new client groups – especially those that are rurally isolated.

### Communications strategy

The team recognised the importance of keeping our customers informed as the Fresh Start project moved forward and a Communications Strategy was developed to engage with current, lapsed and non-users, together with all those affected by the changes.

The team wrote articles for regional newspapers and 'Warwickshire View', a Council magazine delivered to every household in the county. Newsletters were delivered to all existing customers and briefings were arranged for County, District and Parish Councillors. We ran the competition to name the new mobile libraries and posted news updates on the Warwickshire website. Finally, once the first mobile library was received from Torton, visits were arranged to new communities that would be receiving a mobile library service for the first time. Promotion of the new mobile service is ongoing at events around the county.

### Information and Communications Technology – solutions

The brief for mobile connection was that staff should be able to connect to Vubis, the live library management system, as well as giving the public access to the internet that mirrored the Peoples Network access enjoyed by the public in Warwickshire's static libraries.

We wanted the mobile IT hardware to be as unobtrusive as possible – no trailing wires and a sleek look. Other factors taken into account included drivers' needs, desk space issues, the needs of customers with sight or manual dexterity issues, printer connection and ease of maintenance.

Each of our mobile libraries now has an on-board public computer. Due to cost considerations, we decided to use Site Kiosk software and 3G to provide public access to the internet. Site Kiosk is similar software to that used in Internet cafés.

### Network and routes

By far the biggest challenge for the project team was designing the network of routes for a really fresh start. More than 700 locations were assessed including existing rural and sheltered stops, plus potential new stops identified using demographic and community data.

The team also took the opportunity to rationalise. Rather than visiting several stops within a small area we identified one central location where the mobile could stop for a longer period. Careful consideration was given to length of stops and time of day – and the importance of retaining some stops as they were. Finally the team looked at the potential to transfer some customers from underused stops to our Home Library Services.

A further logistical challenge was the need to redefine the areas of operation – and secure storage – for each mobile library. We received assistance from a specialist routing firm and from colleagues in the Council's Environment & Economy directorate. However, it soon became clear there was no substitute for local knowledge and the Mobile Drivers completed the final stages of the routing themselves.



Inside a new mobile

### All change

Our mobiles now visit 514 locations, of which 399 are rural stops and 115 are sheltered housing. Stop times vary from 10 minutes at a farm to 75 minutes at a large sheltered housing complex where three levels of service are provided:

- personal selection onboard for those who are able to visit the mobile
- exchange collection of 60 books left in the residents' communal lounge
- housebound visits to customers who are unable to visit the mobile library due to illness or disability

There are now 65 routes operating on a three-week cycle with one common off-road day for servicing, training and meetings, and one individual off-road day for stock refreshment. This is particularly important as the reduced selection on the new, smaller vehicles needs refreshing regularly.

Customer feedback to date has been generally very positive, particularly considering that virtually every aspect of the service has changed. Most existing customers have seen new days and/or times of visits, altered frequency, new and smaller vehicles and in some cases even a different driver.

### Stock

The Mobile Library Service is now managed by a single dedicated unit, with better selection, stock management and improved turnover. Although the new vehicles carry a smaller stock it is more focused and better matched to customer needs. The new fleet also has access to online resources.

The interior of the new vehicles is bright and airy with space for more than 1,200 stock items including fiction and non-fiction, both hardback and paperback, spoken word tapes and CDs, jigsaws and a good range of picture books suitable for under-fives. Stock varies according to the demands on each vehicle. For example, those which serve a large proportion of sheltered complexes carry more large print titles.

Customers who can't find what they want on board are encouraged to request individual titles or books on particular subjects. This service is completely free and drivers aim to provide requested items at the next visit. Books can be reserved on the mobile library either by asking the driver or by using the onboard public access PC. Customers can also phone the Mobile Library Depot, in advance of a visit, to request books to be brought next time the mobile library calls.

Refreshing the stock every three weeks has enabled us to meet the needs of even our most demanding customers. Some say the selection is better than in their local branch libraries.

Ayub Khan is Head of Libraries (Strategy) and Janet Everett is Mobile and Community Services Manager at Warwickshire County Council.  
ayubkhan@warwickshire.gov.uk ; janeteverett@warwickshire.gov.uk