

## CASE STUDY: Setting up a chat service remotely

### University of Birmingham Library Services



#### Background

In early March 2020 we moved from using Question Point to using Springshare's LibAnswers to host our JustAsk! Service. Our JustAsk service is a busy chat, email and phone service averaging around 1200 enquirers a month. Pre-pandemic the service was delivered by a team of 19 library staff whose roles also included manning a busy help desk and roving our Main Library. We configured LibAnswers to replicate what we had used within Question Point and ensured the change over had no impact for our end users. However, we had just 10 days to get to grips with LibAnswers before the first National Lockdown was implemented. Initially all our services stopped whilst we started a plan of action on how we could all work from home.

#### Setting up Chat remotely – How did we start?

- Asked for volunteers from all Library Customer Support Teams and Site libraries.
- Check staff had sufficient IT support and devices, if not they were loaned library laptops.
- Assistant Managers rolled out training online.
- Assistant Managers to be on duty to help with support senior library assistants with enquiries.
- Shifts on the remote rota were initially 3 hours long and increased to 6 hours to meet service demands.
- Names were anonymised on LibAnswers so staff felt they had a level of privacy in their own homes.

#### The process

Once we had a team of staff able to work from home we relaunched our JustAsk! service within two weeks of the first national lockdown. We started initially answering email enquiries and upskilling the team with a wider knowledge of all University Services. This is due to the wide range of enquiries we were receiving, not just library-based questions anymore! After a week of staff becoming confident with answering enquires from their home we then turned on our chat widgets.

For those already in the Enquiry team they quickly got used to answering chats from home however newer members of the team were given extra support and told there was always the option of transferring more complex chats to more experienced colleagues if needed.

We continue to run our chat service remotely from 9am-6pm and use the help of the Academic Co-operative for all out of hours chats. Our service is now manned by a much larger pool of library services staff from different teams so they student experience is enhanced and access to advice is simpler for them.

We have found this process of answering enquiries has enabled us to involve other teams such as our Library Academic Engagement Team and Collection Management Teams by streamlining our workflows.

### Benefits

Springhare's option for 'internal chat' has been the real game changer for our service. Staff are able to talk between themselves whilst also chatting with students and answering enquiries. This has enabled them to help each other with the range of enquiries. However, the biggest benefit has been the community and social aspect that internal chat has offered whilst working from our own homes. In the early stages of the pandemic staff were able to talk to each other and catch up on all sorts of topics, mainly baking and Netflix! We have had lots of feedback on how this helped the team in times where staff may have been feeling isolated or missing working with colleagues.

The internal chat also worked as a core vehicle in establishing staff relationships. It has ensured service consistency across teams who may not have known each other before as they worked in different teams on multiple sites. This has resulted in much more of a one team culture which will enable us to deploy staff very differently post pandemic. It has also increased the capacity of teams since economies of scale have been found and duplication of actions/lines of communication are now more efficient.