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Using Evidence in Practice

Reading Ghosts: Monitoring In-Library Usage of 'Unpopular' Resources

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Setting

Keyll Darree Library is situated opposite Noble's Hospital in Braddan, on the Isle of Man. It is the only health and social care library on the island. Keyll Darree Library is responsible for supporting the entire Department of Health and Social Care, nursing and medical education departments, health and social care related charities, private care facilities, and any other groups with a need for these services.

Not all library users are library members (with some using the facilities for reference purposes only, or mainly accessing the computers), and they vary widely in age and discipline. Many

of the most regular users are students actively engaged in a degree or other qualification, although this is often seasonal with peak usage around January, April, and November – tying in with exams, and essay deadlines.

Problem

In 2010 library staff started to realise that they were removing items from the collection which library users would then claim they had regularly engaged with. This made no sense, as the record in Heritage (our library management software) was always checked for loan statistics prior to the removal of any resources. It then came to light that some library members, especially students, had been

using the books in the library to allow them to share more effectively, and thus there were no loan statistics.

When this was combined with the fact that not all library users were actually members, so were unable to physically borrow books (even if they were reading them in the library), and the issue of swiftly reducing budgets it was decided that we needed to capture these statistics. At this time, our Heritage library management software did not include a function for recording this data, thus, the team devised a method of creating a 'dummy account' for our ghosting procedure in order to work around this system limitation. This has now been rectified in the latest software update and the system now has a specific function for recording in-library usage. Once we knew what was being used, we would be able to make more effective choices, and not have to replace books we had removed from the collection. These objectives have been met over the six years since implementation.

Evidence

Effectively, the aim of our procedure was to keep track of all resources being used, not just those on loan. This would mean that all relevant well used resources would be kept, ultimately ensuring our user needs were engaged, and our collection was relevant for them. We have termed this procedure 'ghosting'. All library users (members and non-members) are asked to leave items they have used but are not borrowing on the tables. A member of staff collects these items twice daily and issues them to our dummy "Writer Ghost" account in Heritage and returns them to the library. This ensures that we gather statistics for items used within the library as well as those borrowed by users.

The statistic gathering ghosting process was implemented in a variety of ways, as this was a big change for a lot of people. Initially, staff put out signs asking library users to leave their books on the tables once they had finished using them, and highlighted the new policy

during orientations. Luckily natural instinct also played to our favour as many of our users were pleased at not having to tidy up.

Staff also had to consider stealth ghosting. Some users who felt untidy leaving books out (but weren't dedicated enough to re-shelve) would leave piles of books on trolleys, shelves, and under cubbies in an effort to be tidier. We still find piles like this to this day, and now ghost these too.

Initially we compiled the data collected from our ghosting procedure into yearly amounts; we then compared this to loan values for the comparative years. This general overview of total resource (from both print and audio visual collections) usage and the breakdown can be seen in Figure 1. The general trend across total usage is quite interesting in itself, with the average usage remaining relatively constant between current values and those from the start of the statistical recording in 2010. Similarly, Figure 1 also demonstrates how significant the ghosted resources are in the total library resource usage, making up 28% of the total resources used in the most current years data, 2016/2017, a significant amount of our yearly loans, a similar trend to a study by Rose-Wiles & Irwin (2016) which also found that nearly 30% of their circulation transactions were used 'in house', a significant amount of usage which potentially might have been overlooked if not, for the implementation of 'ghosting'.

Another trend we have been able to use ghosting to identify is the shift away from the traditional build up to April. Historically, there has been a dip in usage from the middle to the end of the year, as shown in Figure 2 with January to March showing a marked increase in usage before a high peak in April.

Staff have traditionally assumed that as April is a dissertation deadline it will be the busiest for ghosting, and the early figures seemed to fit with this. However, by considering the ghosting statistics in Figure 3 we have been able to see that this trend actually changed in

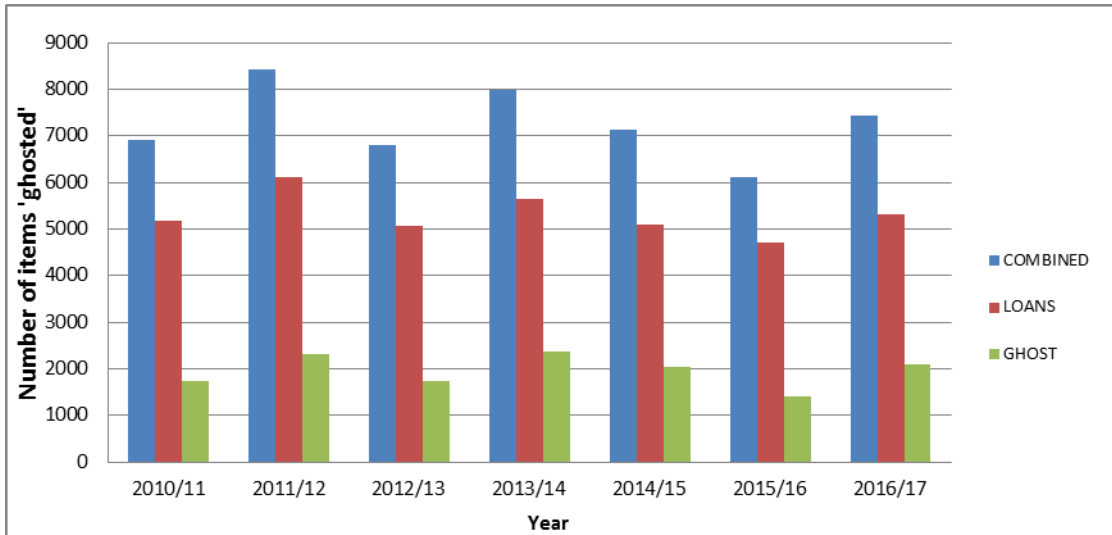


Figure 1
A breakdown of resource use at Keyll Darree Library 2010 – 2017.

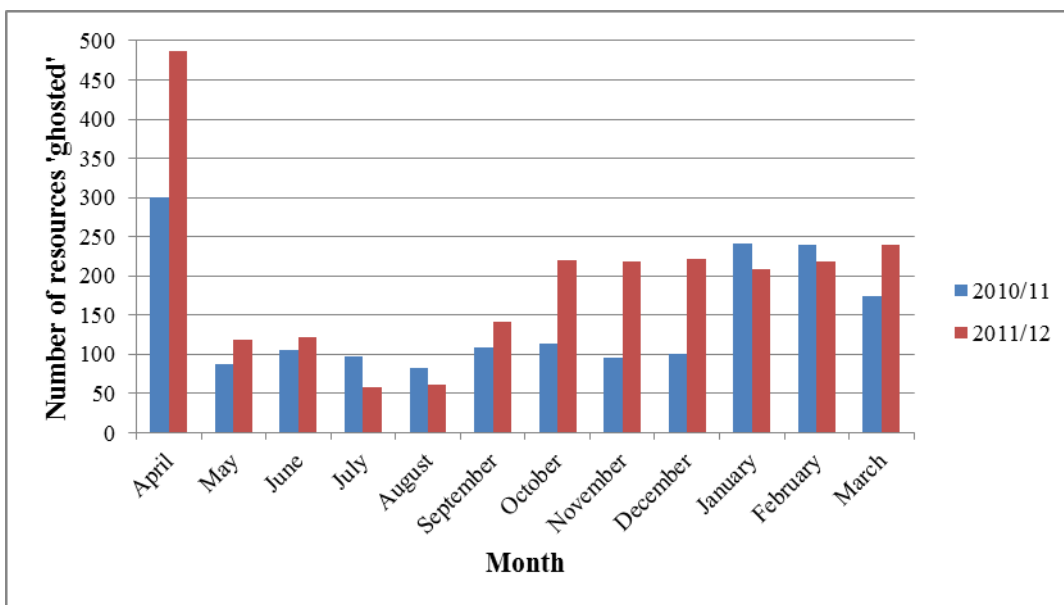


Figure 2
2010/11 and 2011/12 monthly ghosting data.

2013 – yet this has still not filtered into staff consciousness. By reviewing the statistics from Figure 3 we observe that from 2012 until 2016 this altering trend which has seen a second peak in October continues through the later years (which has sometimes become the heaviest period of usage).

Implementation

Due to these observed trends, we are able to plan the library’s summer tasks more

effectively. In previous years, we had budgeted time from May to November for large scale projects such as stock taking, and collection weeding - these are obviously processes which benefit from having a quiet library as they are disruptive to users. Since 2013/14 we have seen a second yearly peak taking place in October, and therefore we were able to schedule our project between the end of May and mid-September. This transpired to be a beneficial course of action as the October ghosting for 2016/17 transpired to be

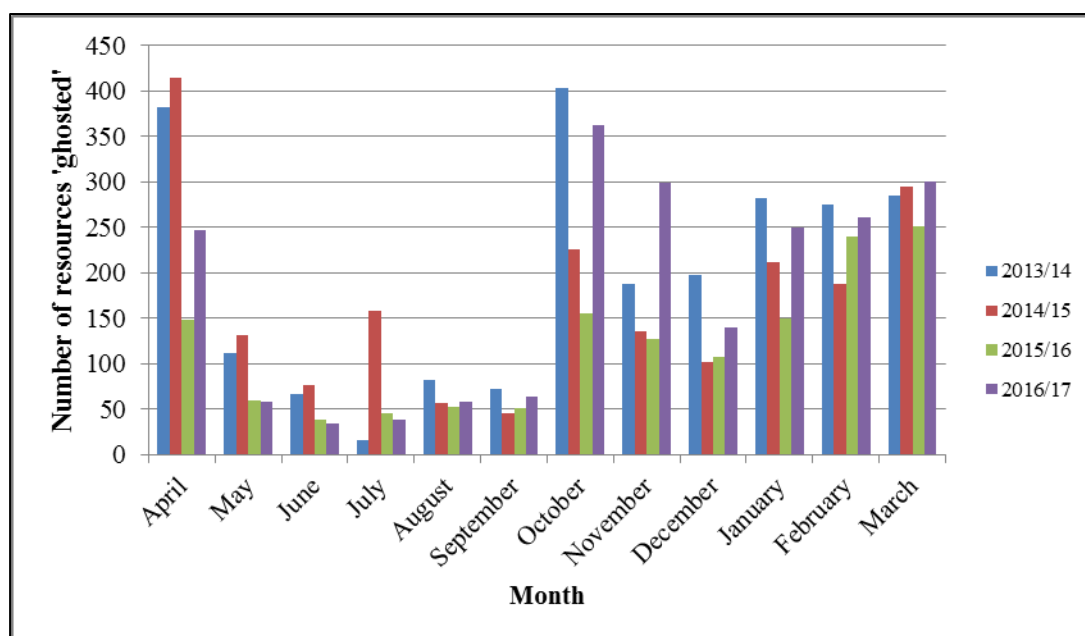


Figure 3
2013/14 onwards monthly ghosting data

significantly higher than the peak in “dissertation season” (February to April).

Outcome

Overall, the process of ghosting is suited well to our service. This process was introduced to allow monitoring of in-library resource usage, and does so.

Alongside the variety supportive measures used to ensure that we are tracking resource usage within the library, the library has a final fall back for the library users in the form of a withdrawn book for sale shelf – if a book is somehow withdrawn despite regular usage then it is possible for a library user to purchase it.

As a small library with a strong core of regular users we are highly able to engage with them regarding their reading habits, ask questions about the resources, and understand what they want from our service. Because of the benefits we have seen, such as a reduction in the removal of well used items; better tracking of busy periods for study desk use (allowing us to plan staff projects); and a fuller picture of resources usage as a whole, ghosting is a process which we will continue.

Reflection

It is important to note that ghosting is most effective because it is used in tandem with other methods. The process itself is not without limitations and therefore other safeguards must be in place. It is possible that users are leaving them because the items are not useful and there are more relevant resources which they then borrow from the library. Purely because an item has been taken off the shelf, we cannot actually guarantee that it is being used on every occasion. However, to combat this issue there is a suggestions box in the library where users can mention limitations or benefits of certain resources. Staff are often approached by users who want to provide feedback about the resources they have been using. We also have a system of online reviews to support user feedback, although this is underused at present. Staff are working to continually promote it, and encourage users to provide feedback via a text review, or a star rating system (1-5). When verbal reviews are given, staff (after gaining permission) will write these up and add them to the catalogue.

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