

John Rylands Library special collections process review

The Challenge

The Special Collections of the University, held at the John Rylands Library, Deansgate, contain some of the world's most significant rare books, maps, manuscripts, archives, and collections of visual culture. The library aims to make these unique collections as accessible as possible – both to the scholarly community and the wider public.

As part of a wider drive to modernise the Reader Service and improve the customer experience, including the time taken to retrieve material from storage areas for consultation in the reading room, we commissioned this project to map and understand if the current processes met our customers needs. One of the aims was to free up staff time, allowing us to improve customer service and respond to customer requests in a faster and more efficient way.

What happened?

- A project team of seven from across the collections care and archivists teams was established.
- Prior to the two-day event the CMPI team visited us in the workplace,
- The project team visited reading rooms at comparator institutions, including the University of Cambridge, in order to enable us to benchmark best practice in Special Collections.

Key Benefits

- Putting the readers at the centre of the service made it crucial to increase the speed of our retrievals. To achieve this we needed to ensure we were using appropriate equipment. Making sure this was available and fit for purpose, made an immediate impact on retrieval times and the service we offer our readers.
- Putting initiatives in place to reduce the administrative load on staff thereby allowing them to engage with our customers and, through their engagement, learn more about how to improve the experiences of the reader service.
- Introduced a faster new customer induction.

The Verdict

“The Library was delighted to work with the Process Improvement team in reviewing the complex processes which underpin the delivery of its Special Collections Reader Service, placed firmly within the context of service standards and expectations. The review was rigorous and necessarily challenging, with excellent guidance and support from Mike and Sarah for the team carrying it out. The results are impressive: a more outward, customer facing service with significant efficiency gains, ownership and buy-in to the changes from the whole team, and the development of a culture of continuous improvement (lessons learned from the review mean we can't stop questioning what we do, how we do it and why). The results also fed into a wider service review in which staffing levels, collection security, building access, staff duties and administration were all changed.”

Rachel Beckett, Head of Special Collections and the Project Sponsor