

## CSGUK – Chat about chat webinar: May 2021



### Online chat services review of survey results

To coincide with CSGUK's May 2021 webinar, giving library colleagues an opportunity to chat about chat, a survey invited attendees to report on their own libraries current engagement with, and delivery of, online chat services. This report gives a summary of the responses.

The survey attracted sixty responses and reflected the breadth of institutions in attendance at the webinar, from St Andrews to Swansea and Belfast to Bedfordshire.

Over 80% of respondents were replying on behalf of a library service or institution currently offering online chat to library users. Springshare's LibAnswers is the most commonly used chat platform, in operation at three-quarters of those libraries offering an online chat service. The distribution of chat providers from our survey replies was:

Springshare LibAnswers (30); Library H3lp (6) and one each for Olark, Gecko Engage, Click for Assistance, Fresh Service, Comm100 and Google Hangouts.

With nearly a quarter of respondents indicating that their library had launched a chat service within the last 18 months, and nine replies received from institutions not currently offering or thinking about starting a chat service, this is clearly still an area under development and a new innovation for many. On the other hand, many of our libraries can draw on several years of experience in this field with around one-third of the responses having offered user support through online chat for five or more years.

#### **Chat Service hours**

Almost half of our respondents indicated that their library's chat service hours had changed in some way since March 2020. The most common change was an extension to provide extra coverage during evenings or weekends. Moreover, the survey clearly revealed that for many libraries, online chat is a new development and many have taken the chance during the past year of COVID adjustments to pilot the service and assess the most appropriate and manageable service hours. 15 of the 59 completed replies were from libraries that had introduced chat since March 2020. However, a significant number of libraries (7) have reduced their chat service provision in the past year, in some cases due to the practicalities of delivering this service while working remotely or having staff displaced from their regular duties on campus where they would normally support online chat.

#### **Staffing the chat service**

Given the breadth of service hours revealed by the survey, it is not surprising that this question in turn elicited a wide range of replies. The most common approach appears to be having 2 or 3 members of staff monitoring the service simultaneously.

In some cases, the chat service is delivered by a large collective effort involving 50, 55 or even 60 individual members of staff at larger libraries. Many responses also noted how staff engagement and support has been maintained through colleagues working on this service remotely during the pandemic. There is a wide variety of approaches to covering the service by a customer/user services team or function in the library, or involving other teams of staff. The different service models and organisational structures in place across our libraries make comparisons and conclusions to this question difficult, with each library obviously striving to deliver the most appropriate and manageable service.

### **Co-operative arrangements and future developments**

Co-operative services are generally provided by a third party supplier to cover online Chat services, typically out of core hours overnight and at weekends. Of the 44 responses to this question, 10 came from libraries currently using Co-operative arrangements. Of the 10 libraries who are using one of these services, 4 are using Springshare as a provider for Chat cover but none of these 4 are providing cover for other institutions. No other external services were mentioned by name. 6 of the 10 institutions mentioned using Co-operative services for out of hours cover at evenings and weekends and 1 additionally mentioned the service picks up missed calls after 20 seconds.

The survey also gathered 44 responses to a question about any added value features or enhancements currently being used or under consideration. Of the 32 institutions that responded positively to this question the following features were noted as being of interest for future development: Screen sharing (18); Chatbots (8); Co-operative service for out of hours monitoring (2); FAQ integration (1).

Screen sharing was being utilised by three libraries while others mentioned the use of canned messages as a useful additional function to help manage recurring questions on their chat service. Other notable comments in this field referred to concerns about privacy in relation to screen sharing and an observation that the use of a Chatbot would be a retrograde step for a chat service.

### **Conclusion**

Interest in providing chat services has increased in the last 18 months, with many library services recognising the advantages of offering instant and real time support to students away from campus, utilising staff working from home. In many ways, Chat technologies were the perfect service solution at the start of the pandemic, replicating on site enquiry services and seamlessly supporting the expanded provision of digital resources, as libraries closed their physical spaces and helped students adjust to unfamiliar ways of studying. The survey results – and the webinar presentations [[link to these](#)] - confirm how important online chat has become, not only as libraries respond to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic but as a longer term platform for user engagement and service improvement.