Practicalities –
Operational considerations in running a LoT.

We got our shelving sorted, labelled our stock, figured out the borrowing/ returning processes on our catalogue platform, lined up our volunteers, opened the doors and thought - terrific! We know it all! Well, not so fast my friend. There have been a LOT of moments someone's asked, what do we do about volunteer expenses/ walk-in donations/ and we've had no answer.

- A 'to-do' list for volunteers
  Volunteers like to be busy. There can be lots of down-time at an LoT, especially when you first open and people don't know about you. It's been useful for us to have a 'volunteer intro pack' that we keep under the counter, that includes things to do generally - explain the concept to people who wander in, process borrows/ returns, clean items that need it - but also when it's slow. Things like dusting, window-cleaning, checking items are indeed where they are listed as being.

- Volunteer expenses
  We were originally very keen to give our volunteers a blanket £4 per shift - no assessment of need, no gathering of receipts, nice and simple. Until our treasurer pointed out that this would appear to HMRC as an income, and therefore possibly requiring registering as employees, with all the admin that entails. Sigh. So instead we ask volunteers to bring in receipts for bus fares or car-parking spaces, and then collect the slips and repay them out of the till.

- **Internal communication - managers**
  If you're open more than one day a week, then chances are you'll have different people in charge on different days. We've found that the basic borrow-use-return process creates a substantial amount of complexity, which makes it essential that the people in charge have lots of communication to update each other on issues that span more than one day.

  So far we've encountered borrowers who let us know they'll be a day late returning something; borrowers who want to swap a borrowed item that they've had issues with for another model; people who want to pick items up half an hour before or after opening; people who offer to donate things to bring in another day; the list is endless. In each case, people will expect the person standing behind the desk to be up to speed with what's going on.

  We started with notes in a diary which we still use for scheduling actions and reminders (e.g. archiving emails), but the manager's WhatsApp group has quickly become the default method of updating each other and keeping that communication flowing.
  We also have a Managers crib sheet (the Read Me document available in the conference pack) that details the days activities in order that should we have an inexperienced manager come in (say to cover sickness) they have a something available to help them through the activities of the day. This was especially useful early on when things were changing almost on a daily basis as we evolved and learnt and tweaked to deal with unexpected situations (and so much was unexpected!)

- Stock management
  This is a biggie - lots of the conversations at this conference have been about your organisations preferences and choices but here is one of the few absolute rules you need to follow.

  "A place for everything, and everything in its place"

  No matter whether you have 8, 80 or 800 items for rent or if you choose to follow a dynamic or static stock management strategy, if you cannot readily find the things, you will waste a mass of resource time and create a lot of customer dissatisfaction.

  When donations come in or items are returned, they need to be allocated to an identifiable location within your storage, and they MUST be put back in the correct place.

  In addition, if the item has loose accessories vital to its functioning (eg power supplies, hoses, adaptors etc) it's very helpful to have this recorded so that you can check that the accessory goes out with the item and just as importantly that it comes back (never underestimate the customer's ability to misplaced a vital part of the equipment!).

  For our operation we try to get out the following days loans before the end of the days business, this also highlights any issues before the customer comes in for their things - for example an item due out that has not yet been returned. This has given us the opportunity to chase late returns, thus heading off potential problems.

- **Donation management**
Another biggie - the presumption is that you will have rules and guidelines about what you are prepared to accept and what you will not take.

For example,our rules are that we should not accept :-
   - Anything petrol or gas powered (for insurance reasons)
   - Anything requiring specialist skills/training to operate safely (e.g. welding equipment) or solely for the use of a trade professional (e.g. 110v site equipment)
   - Anything requiring licence or insurance to operate (e.g. electric wheelchair)
   - Anything with personal hygiene implications
   - Anything for daily domestic use (kettle, microwave, coffee machine)
   - Anything too bulky to fit in a standard hatchback or too heavy for easy transportation
   - Any battery powered tool using NiCad technology (the battery life is poor and the cost of replacing batteries high)

Even then you will be surprised by the items people offer to donate, on many occasions we have had to research what the item is as we had never encountered it before (what even is a Raclette Grill!).

You need a clear process in place to define what to do with donations. They need to be PAT tested (if electrical), photographed, catalogued and allocated a specified storage location. If the item is damaged, unsafe or doesn't work you need a process to recycle it or dispose of it otherwise you will quickly become overrun (the same applies to items returned that are broken). You are likely to get donations from family clearances which may well include a lot of items that you want plus a lot of items that you don't want; in our case we take the lot and sort it from there. Once you are established you will also get duplicate items - just how many jigsaws does your library need? 😳 so you will need a process by which you can sell or pass them on to others who may be able to make use of the equipment. In our case we do not sell items from the shop as it confuses the messaging and its taken us some while to get the community to realise that we are not a charity shop.