Communications Consumer Panel and ACOD comments on the development of a national strategy for Scotland's public libraries

Introduction

The Communications Consumer Panel and the Advisory Committee for Older and Disabled People (ACOD) welcome the opportunity to comment on the development of a national strategy for Scotland's public libraries.

The Panel works to protect and promote people's interests in the communications sector. We are an independent body set up under the Communications Act 2003. The Panel carries out research, provides advice and encourages Ofcom, government, the EU, industry and others to look at issues through the eyes of consumers, citizens and microbusinesses. The Panel pays particular attention to the needs of older people and people with disabilities, the needs of people in rural areas and people on low incomes, and the needs of micro businesses, which have many of the same problems as individual consumers. There are four members of the Panel who represent the interests of consumers in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales respectively. They liaise with the key stakeholders in the Nations to understand the perspectives of consumers in all parts of the UK and input these perspectives to the Panel's consideration of issues.

There is also cross-membership with Ofcom's Advisory Committee on Older and Disabled People (ACOD). This means that Members, in their ACOD capacity, also provide advice to Ofcom on issues relating to older and disabled people including television, radio and other content on services regulated by Ofcom as well as about issues concerning the postal sector.

Context

The National Strategy for Scottish Public Libraries Working Group has been tasked with the development of a national strategy for Scotland's public libraries. It notes that public libraries are changing. The opportunities offered by digital technology and the challenges of reduced local budgets make 'business as usual' increasingly unsustainable.

Public libraries are one of the most effective ways to support and improve the wellbeing of communities. The case for a national strategy - which has been made by the Scottish Library and Information Council ('The Case for a National Strategy for Public Libraries') and the Carnegie UK Trust ('A New Chapter') - is an opportunity to ensure public libraries continue to deliver for future generations.

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In order to draft a national strategy, the Working Group has invited views on the following questions:

·   what the visions, values and aims of the public library service should be;

·   what the public library service should look like;

·   the services it should deliver and the skills staff will require;

·   the practicalities of how and with whom services could best be delivered; and

·   how they should measure the impact of public libraries.

The Panel would like to concentrate in particular on the role and importance of the public library service in promoting and enabling digital inclusion.

Comments

Background

As the Carnegie UK Trust has noted in its report *A New Chapter: Public Library Services in the 21st century*[1]: public library services face considerable challenges, but also huge opportunities. Aside from public spending cuts and public sector reform, there have been "changes in the needs and expectations of service users, with people's behaviour as readers and information seekers changing as a result of developments in technology..." And libraries have also evolved; many "are offering online services, making use of technology to improve the way they provide services and providing information in new formats, such as ebooks. They support access to computers and IT, and provide training and advice for those who need it. Public libraries are also important as community spaces which can be used to provide other local authority services, to provide space for community activities, or simply as neighbourhood centres where people can go without any requirement to spend money." The report notes that "Technology allows public libraries to provide new and innovative services such as providing facilities for video-conferencing, providing net-based workspaces or e-learning facilities".

The Trust's research found that there are still relatively high levels of use of libraries, with 61% of the population in Scotland visiting a public library in the previous 12 months. Although library use by 15-24 year olds was slightly below average (54%), 25-34 year olds used libraries slightly more than average at 64%. The report also noted that libraries can become particularly important at different life stages – for example for families with young children.

The research found that 76% of people in Scotland felt that libraries were 'very important' or 'essential' for the community – although less than half (47%) said that they were 'very important' or 'essential' to them personally.

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[1] http://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/changing-minds/knowledge---culture/the-future-of-libraries

The following table from the Trust's report highlights the strengths that they believe the library service and library buildings have, for individuals and communities. They highlight the strong links between library services and education, digital participation, access to information, the promotion of literacy and social inclusion.

Public library service	Library buildings
Access to material for education or leisure: books, newspapers, journals and reference material.	Safe, neutral spaces within communities which can be used by people without any requirement to join, spend money or communicate with others.
Access to information which can support people to lead independent and fulfilling lives, for example information about job opportunities, health, benefits, or training.	A very extensive network of buildings and spaces which can be used to provide a wide range of public services.
Access to IT and online services, both by providing the use of computers and IT without charge, and by providing the support needed to enable people to use this technology, which is increasingly the main way of accessing services including job applications, benefits, and travel.	Spaces within which communities can create and provide their own services and organise community activity.
Can contribute directly to many of the social priorities and agendas of local and national government.	Public libraries can contribute to social cohesion and the integration of new communities.
Services provided in other settings, for example in schools and prisons.	
The presence of qualified staff to support library users.	

Overall, the Trust's research data showed that four possible improvements would make a difference to more than half of those surveyed, with the others appealing to less than half. The most popular improvements to the service in Scotland would be providing more information about the services available at the library, being able to look for or reserve books online, and improving the range and quality of books. As all library authorities do already provide the facility to look for or reserve books online, these figures suggest that a lot of people are unaware of the kind of service currently offered by public libraries.

It is also worth noting that 52% of people in the most deprived areas of Scotland felt that IT improvements would encourage their library use, compared to 38% of those within the least deprived areas of Scotland. People who were unemployed were significantly more

likely to say that they would use libraries more often if they were open for longer (53% cf 43%) or if they provided other council services (69% cf 51%)[2].

The Trust highlights an initiative in Denmark whereby local authorities are encouraged to work through libraries to provide 'citizen services'[3]. This is described as decentralisation, and is closely linked to the digitisation of public services, with librarians seen as having the skills to facilitate and support this move to online services.

In relation to libraries in England, following its research undertaken in 2012/13 *Envisioning the library of the future[4]*, the Arts Council set out four priority areas for development:

➢ Place the library as the hub of the community

➢ Make the most of digital technology and creative media

➢ Ensure that libraries are resilient and sustainable

➢ Deliver the right skills for those who work in libraries

The Scottish Library and Information Council[5] suggest that a national strategy has the potential to enable library services across the country to identify opportunities for partnership-working and forming strategic alliances, which could save money and prevent duplication of effort. The Council also state that a single strategy would have the benefit of ensuring a consistent 'digital offer' – outlining a core level of digital provision - for all citizens across the country.

Libraries are often at the heart of their communities and are trusted institutions but we would question whether their offer has been unduly limited previously, whether they have always fully utilised their physical spaces and facilities and whether they have promoted their services and expertise to best effect in the past.

Digital Engagement

Why digital engagement matters

In April 2009, the European Commission noted that "the internet has become a basic utility for homes and businesses in the same way as electricity or water"[6]. In 2010, the Digital Agenda built on this, stating: "As more daily tasks are carried out online…using the internet has become an integral part of daily life for many Europeans". Referring to those Europeans not online, and the professional ICT skills shortage, the Commission stated that: "these failings are excluding many citizens from the digital society and economy and are holding back the positive impact that ICT can have on productivity growth."[7]

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[2] http://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/CMSPages/GetFile.aspx?guid=570b3e65-e42f-4954-9370-241c12142c9f
[3] Services through which the state and citizens interact, such as social security, tax passports, driving licences, change of address and change of GP.
[4] http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/what-we-do/supporting-libraries/library-of-the-future/
[5] http://www.scottishlibraries.org/storage/Case_for_a_National_Public_Library_Strategy_Final.pdf
[6] http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/newsroom/cf/itemdetail.cfm?item_id=4838
[7] http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-10-200_en.htm?locale=en

It is the Panel's belief that unless fundamental action is taken, the digital divide risks becoming an ever greater digital gulf as the distance increases between those who are online and those who remain firmly anchored in the offline world. We live in an era in which we are seeing many Government services become "digital by default" and where being online is becoming more and more a necessity of life and less and less of an optional extra. An increasing number of commercial services are only available online - or delivered offline in a way that effectively penalises users, through high cost or lower quality.

Those people still functionally offline will be at an increasing disadvantage and risk being left behind in terms of ease, convenience, inclusion, speed and cost. As the Scottish Library and Information Council note, digital literacy support in communities will be particularly important as more government services are delivered digitally, meaning that the consequences of having no access to technology and/or lacking digital skills will be more marked. This support, they suggest, contributes to the digital economy by facilitating the development of ICT skills and enhancing employability.

Levels of Digital Engagement

Ofcom's 2014 Communications Market report highlighted that the number of adults with household internet access has grown to 81% in Scotland at Q1 2014 (via broadband, mobile phone or narrowband)[8]. However, there are large differences between the younger and older age groups: in the UK overall, 94% of those aged between 16 and 24 had access to the internet, while only 32% of those aged 75 and over had access. Just under a fifth of adults (19%) did not have household access to the internet in Q1 2014. The majority of respondents without internet access claimed that they do not intend to get access (14% of all adults).

Out-of-home internet access still remains important for certain groups of people. The 2011 OXIS Report, *Next Generation Users: The Internet in Britain* showed that access via mobile devices, at another person's home or at libraries tended to be more important for people with lower incomes, whereas work and home access were more common among the higher-income groups[9]. The more recent OXIS Report in 2013, *Cultures of the Internet: The Internet in Britain,* found that 10% of all internet users said they use a public library to access the internet – and this rises to 21% amongst the most engaged users. This level of internet usage suggests that libraries remain an important route for online access[10]. 7% of current internet users said that in the past year they had asked for help to use the internet at a public library. Although students are the group most likely to ask for help at the public library (14%), employed people and retired people are less likely – at 7% and 4% respectively.

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[8] http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/market-data-research/market-data/communications-market-reports/cmr14/?a=0

[9] http://oxis.oii.ox.ac.uk/sites/oxis.oii.ox.ac.uk/files/content/files/publications/oxis2011_report.pdf

[10] http://oxis.oii.ox.ac.uk/sites/oxis.oii.ox.ac.uk/files/content/files/publications/OxIS_2013.pdf

While the advantages of online connectivity apply to all groups in the community, they are especially relevant to disabled people, those on a low income and older people - many of whom may be less mobile than younger people. And yet we know that the take-up and participation in the digital world is unequal and levels of use of the internet vary significantly across the population. Older and disabled people, and those in low-income households, are much less likely to use the internet at home. Ofcom's 2013 research *Disabled consumers' ownership of communications services* found that for older (65+) less affluent disabled people, internet access levels are at their lowest (23%) which is significantly lower than among non-disabled people of the same age and socio-economic group (37%)[11]. Recent BBC/Go ON UK research has found that 21% of the UK population lack basic digital literacy skills[12]. The potential consequences of this exclusion are serious: for individuals, especially those who are more vulnerable; for society; for business; and for the UK economy.

We note that the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) argues that the presence of libraries in residential areas is of importance particularly for more vulnerable users as they are often less able to travel, and more likely not to be able to afford IT.

Consumer Framework for Digital Participation and Bridging the Gap: Sustaining Online Engagement

The *Consumer Framework for Digital Participation*[13] was developed by the Panel in 2010 to help government and others increase the number of people using the internet. Against this background, the Panel's 2012 report *Bridging the Gap: Sustaining Online Engagement*[14] was designed to consolidate stakeholders' experiences and learning in supporting online participation among people who are less digitally engaged, and also to gather information about supporting people to take the next steps online.

Building on both the *Consumer Framework* and informed by our *Bridging the Gap: Sustaining Online Engagement* research, the Panel identified a number of areas for strategic focus and made a series of recommendations for government, policy makers and those delivering on the ground.

In the Panel's view:

➢ the challenge to increase participation is underestimated;

➢ meeting the challenge is underfunded; and

➢ people who remain unable to access online services will suffer increasing detriment if the challenge isn't met.

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[11] http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/market-data-research/other/telecoms-research/tce-disabled-13/

[12] http://www.bbc.co.uk/learning/overview/assets/bbcmedialiteracy_20130930.pdf

[13] http://www.communicationsconsumerpanel.org.uk/the-consumer-framework-for-digital-participation/the-consumer-framework-for-digital-participation-1

[14] http://www.communicationsconsumerpanel.org.uk/bridging-the-gap-sustaining-online-engagement/bridging-the-gap-sustaining-online-engagement-2

One of the Panel's key recommendations highlights that "The tactics used to reach people who are not yet online need to be re-thought; and it is important that there is co-ordination between stakeholders, and agreed strategic aims. The potential role of local authorities, housing associations, employers and other related agencies and workers in the community (e.g. care workers) should be fully exploited, to embed awareness and an understanding of the possibilities online."

Bridging the Gap: Libraries and digital engagement

We believe that a key role of public libraries is to highlight and even showcase the opportunities offered by digital technology and ensure that those within the community who are currently unable to go online or are not confident about going online are fully supported. The support that libraries can offer micro-businesses is also key. The Panel has just published research into how micro-businesses engage with communications services and how these businesses can be further supported to exploit digital opportunities to maximise growth[15].

In our 2012 *Bridging the Gap: Sustaining Online Engagement* research, the evidence from the consumer interviews suggested strongly that libraries are not widely considered by non internet users as a starting point for online training. The problem appears to be rooted in a misconception by consumers, rather than a lack of awareness.

People who are less digitally engaged, and who may not be predisposed to wanting to learn, say that libraries, along with other community based services, are too formal. Some of the least confident believe that the library environment is unsuitable for them and is even intimidating. The library can be perceived to be more suited to the needs of more advanced users and those with a stronger educational background.

Quotes from respondents in relation to library use included:

"You need to be very quiet. I couldn't take my kids with me" (Consumer, female, 46)

"Computers are there for people who know how to use them" (Consumer, male, 64)
And a stakeholder said:

"I've never understood why libraries were not part of the Digital Britain report"

It follows from this that internet-related services offered by libraries appeared to be relatively poorly promoted. Indeed, many stakeholders believed that libraries are underutilised across the UK. Some expressed quite strong views in this regard given the locality, range and quality of resources that are in place and made available to consumers:

➢ well-trained, dedicated staff (many with digital training);

➢ secure online access;

➢ informal help and advice;

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[15] http://www.communicationsconsumerpanel.org.uk/research-and-reports/realising-the-potential-micro-businesses--experiences-of-communications-services

➤ a good range of structured courses and taster sessions; and

➤ good reach into local communities.

Subsequent to this, we are pleased to note that organisations such as SCVO and the Tinder Foundation now advertise where people can go to improve their skills – which in many cases are libraries.

The report also highlighted a good example of best practice from a city centre library that typically did not attract people not disposed to go online. It is particularly well resourced in terms of internet access and training courses designed to support absolute beginners through to those who have a more developed need to learn a particular skill or capability.

The library runs a series of co-location initiatives, giving over part of its space to a wide range of local entities, e.g. charities, health organisations and community initiatives working with minorities of various kinds. These entities run non-IT-related events which incidentally expose a variety of people to what the library has to offer.

Bringing people into the library environment who might otherwise be unwilling to go there works well to challenge misconceptions, giving library staff an opportunity to encourage take-up of online and computer-related training. This kind of holistic, wide ranging, thinking is important to bear in mind when considering the future potential of libraries in delivering the benefits of digital participation to a much wider audience.

We also commissioned research amongst people who are currently not online, and living in an area of extreme deprivation, in order to explore whether there are any key barriers other than financial deprivation. We selected Glasgow for this research because it has a high level of offline households. Ofcom's 2014 Communications Market Report for Scotland notes the percentage of Glaswegians in households with broadband at 63%, 66% if mobile is included.

The research found that Glasgow was particularly well served by local libraries that offer free internet access, with 33 local libraries in the Glasgow City area. Most in the consumer sample said that there was a library within walking distance of where they lived or worked. However, most said they had not considered using the internet services offered by these libraries. Very few people, and particularly the disinclined group, had considered using any formal sources of support. The library was the default option for those who were more predisposed to go online. But notably, two of the more predisposed in the sample had tried to sign up for a course – but were told they would have to wait at least 4-6 months due to demand.

When prompted, there was widespread awareness that libraries had computers. But many of the disinclined thought that the computers were there for established users rather than to support beginners. Others claimed that they did not feel comfortable about the idea of learning in a library environment.

The researchers concluded that: "Despite this, given the number of libraries in Glasgow and the fact that there was one within walking distance for everyone in the sample, libraries would appear to offer an excellent starting point. Misconceptions need to be

overcome; the associations with "dusty books" and "clever people" using computers tend to be very off-putting."

Conclusion

In conclusion, the rapidly changing nature of the delivery of both commercial and government services means that enabling people to interact confidently with these services on-line is more crucial than ever.

Digital engagement can no longer be seen as a standalone initiative – it must be embedded in every element of civic participation. It is a means to an end, rather than an end in itself and should be integral within public sector areas including, but not limited to: health; housing; and education provision.

As Government services increasingly move online under the digital by default initiative, libraries offer an ideal hub to bring together the state's engagement with the individual citizen and offer support – via digital means. This would also offer an opportunity to address the disengagement of some sections of the community who, whilst believing in the philosophy of libraries, would seem to find less to involve them personally. There would be a greater range of high-quality services offered, which would be more individual, more local and cost less to deliver. In this scenario, there would also be an improved return on investment of public money in a multi-faceted resource.

We would also encourage the much greater availability of free public wifi, together with appropriate advice about relevant security. We understand that the *Schools for the Future* programme had hoped to extend free wifi to parents and local citizens but was unable to fulfil this ambition for funding reasons. This appears to us to be an interesting initiative for libraries worthy of further investigation.

We also believe that libraries have a vital role to play, in conjunction with other locally based agencies, in supporting and encouraging people who are not fully digitally engaged. They have the potential to deliver a well-supported, safe and sustained learning environment that excludes no-one. As society changes, this is more important than ever before, so that we ensure that more vulnerable consumers and citizens are empowered and are not left behind. It would be counter-intuitive not to fully utilise an established infrastructure with trusted and trained staff in this context.

Recent work by Dundee Library Services and a range of partners are good examples which highlight the approach that we advocate. The Opportunities Project and the two Reaching the Hard to Reach projects were aimed at engaging such groups as digitally excluded job seekers and housebound people who had no internet access at home.

Alongside this however we would stress that none, or very little, of this will come about without adequate funding, probably from the government rather than local authorities, given the current financial situation. The Dundee Opportunities Project showed that much can be done with volunteers,(and this is probably the only way to provide support for digital learners in small libraries that may only have one or two full-time staff) but there needs to be funding for co-ordinators in the long term. Equally, staff training is an on-

going need which requires stable funding. Although welcome in the short-term, relying on one-off or occasional grants is not sufficient to ensure a sustainable offer.

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