Communications Consumer Panel and ACOD comments on the DCMS and DCLG report considering the current structure and role of public libraries

Introduction

The Communications Consumer Panel (the Panel) and the Advisory Committee for Older and Disabled People (ACOD) welcome the opportunity to comment on the current structure and role of public libraries in England, as well as identifying any opportunities for future delivery of a library offering.

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 area and people on low incomes, and the needs of micro businesses, which have many of the same problems as individual consumers. Through its Members, the Panel represents the interests of consumers in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and England.

Following the alignment of ACOD with the Panel, the Panel is more alert than ever to the interests of older and disabled consumers and citizens.

Context

The Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the Department for Communities and Local Government has jointly commissioned an independent report considering the current structure and role of public libraries, including community libraries, in England as well as identifying any opportunities for future delivery.

Interested parties are invited to submit evidence to help inform considerations on the following areas.

1. What are the core principles of a public library service into the future?
2. Is the current delivery of the public library service the most comprehensive and efficient?
3. What is the role of community libraries in the delivery of a library offer?

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Comments

The research undertaken by the Arts Council in 2012/13 *Envisioning the library of the future[1]* found that "public libraries are trusted spaces, open to all, in which people continue to explore and share the joys of reading, information, knowledge and culture. It is clear that people value the services that libraries provide and will continue to do so. Indeed, there is a clear message that there is a compelling and continuing need for a publicly funded library service."

However the report also noted that "public libraries face many challenges in the coming years, including: advances in technology, which affect the ways in which people want to connect to information and culture; reduced public expenditure; the increasing involvement of citizens in the design and delivery of public services; and the needs of an ageing population."

In order to foster a successful, sustainable library service in light of these challenges, 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

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"[2]. 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."[3]

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

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[1] http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/what-we-do/supporting-libraries/library-of-the-future/
[2] http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/newsroom/cf/itemdetail.cfm?item_id=4838
[3] http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-10-200_en.htm?locale=en

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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.

Levels of Digital Engagement

Ofcom's 2013 Communications Market report highlighted that while home internet access among UK adults stood at 80% in Q1 2013, take-up varied across age, gender and socio-economic group. The biggest differences were between the youngest and eldest age groups: 91% of those aged 16-24 and 25-34 had access to the internet while only 31% of those aged 75 and over had the same.[4] In common with many other industrialised countries, the UK is experiencing a slow-down, almost a plateau, in internet take-up. 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.[5]

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. This level of internet usage, across all user-groups, suggests that libraries remain an important route for online access.[6]

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%)[7]. Recent BBC/Go ON UK research has found that 21% of the UK population lack basic digital literacy skills.[8] 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.

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[4] http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/research/cmr/cmr13/UK_4.pdf

[5] http://oxis.oii.ox.ac.uk/sites/oxis.oii.ox.ac.uk/files/content/files/publications/oxis2011_report.pdf
[6] http://oxis.oii.ox.ac.uk/sites/oxis.oii.ox.ac.uk/files/content/files/publications/OxIS_2013.pdf
[7] http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/market-data-research/other/telecoms-research/tce-disabled-13/
[8] http://www.bbc.co.uk/learning/overview/assets/bbcmedialiteracy_20130930.pdf

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

The *Consumer Framework for Digital Participation*[9] 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 *Bridging the Gap: Sustaining Online Engagement*[10] research 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.

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 is currently conducting research into how micro-businesses engage with communications services and how these businesses can be further supported to exploit digital opportunities to maximise growth. We would be pleased to share the findings of this study with you in due course.

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

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[9] http://www.communicationsconsumerpanel.org.uk/the-consumer-framework-for-digital-participation/the-consumer-framework-for-digital-participation-1
[10] http://www.communicationsconsumerpanel.org.uk/bridging-the-gap-sustaining-online-engagement/bridging-the-gap-sustaining-online-engagement-2

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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 appear 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;
> ➢ a good range of structured courses and taster sessions ; and
> ➢ good reach into local communities.

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

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other than financial deprivation. We selected Glasgow for this research because it has a high level of offline households. Ofcom's 2011 Communications Market Report for Scotland found that take-up is particularly low in Greater Glasgow at 50%, compared to elsewhere in the UK.

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."

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. We 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.

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