



Empower, Inform, Enrich Report: A Response from UKOLN

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Summary

This document presents a brief response to the Empower, Inform, Enrich Report published by DCMS in December 2009.

Table of Contents

| | | |
|----------|--|----------|
| 1 | About this document | 1 |
| 2 | The Empower, Inform, Enrich Report: scope and content | 1 |
| 3 | Gaps..... | 2 |
| 3.1 | Digital Citizens | 2 |
| 3.2 | The Mobile Web | 2 |
| 3.3 | Community Participation..... | 3 |
| 3.4 | Citizen Science Hubs | 3 |
| 4 | Learning Lessons from the Past | 3 |
| 4.1 | Practicality and Technical Issues | 3 |
| 4.2 | Restricted Access..... | 4 |
| 4.3 | A National Digitisation Strategy..... | 4 |
| 5 | Summary | 4 |
| 6 | About UKOLN | 4 |

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1 About this document

This document provides a formal response from UKOLN to the Empower, Inform, Enrich Report published by DCMS in December 2009.

2 The Empower, Inform, Enrich Report: scope and content

UKOLN welcomes the current focus on the role of public libraries in a democratic society and the variety of ways in which they can deliver their services. The 'Empower, Inform, Enrich' Report is a consultation document that aims to capture the findings of the Library Review process so far. The report was designed to generate discussion, so the contributions from "a range of thinkers, commentators and leaders in library services, as well as individuals working in retail, digital media, education, publishing and local government" and the case studies of successful public library innovations are necessarily brief but also wide ranging in the topics they address. It is reassuring to see that most of the contributions acknowledge, albeit to varying degrees, the need to engage with the digital environment, and some ideas feature in several responses.

It is good to see Digital as a section within the Consultation Questions. The three questions focus on the future of library services in a digital environment, the use of digital technology for administrative and service delivery functions, and Local Authority IT strategies. The digital environment is also referenced in two other sections of the Consultation Questions. 'Role for Libraries' raises the issue of the provision of e-resources and digital inclusion initiatives while at 'What Services Should Be Available to Users?' the issues are whether services such as e-content should be free at point of delivery and if they should form part of a national offer.

The People's Network is seen as a successful modernisation initiative which achieved a great deal with mostly national funding and local delivery but now needs new goals, strategic direction and technical infrastructure to ensure that the same level of service is available everywhere. Despite the rise in digital access and the move towards e-citizenship, 21% of the population are not digital enabled. As a way of addressing this issue, public libraries offer a free and trusted environment to bridge the digital divide and deliver successful ICT skills learning opportunities. As the digital environment increases in complexity, there is a need for faster broadband access with greater capacity, perhaps using the JANET network, and wifi access. However, references to new delivery methods focus on the physical (e.g. mobile library service points which can reach disadvantaged sections of the population), but fail to mention other technologies, such as the mobile Web, that are now widely used by much of the population.

The Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 is seen as outdated in its focus on book borrowing rather than the provision of a range of information in both physical and digital formats. E-content in various forms (e-books, e-audio, online reference sources, etc. and perhaps a range of devices), are all seen as part of a comprehensive content provision, though issues relating to IPR and licensing are important and will need to be resolved. The virtual library service is envisioned as available 24/7 and offering online transactions (requests and renewals), as well as access to online reference resources and a national, publicly searchable database of resources. It is important to note that some libraries are already starting to build elements of a digital service and to learn from their experiences. It is notable that mentions of successful initiatives to encourage reading (e.g. Summer Reading Challenge and HeadSpace) ignore the equally-successful Stories From The Web (<http://www.storiesfromtheweb.org/>), which combines library-based meetings and access to a virtual environment.

Various factors are seen as impacting on delivery models, with a corresponding need for information on the digital consumer and new delivery methods (e.g. public library virtual learning environments), so that libraries can make informed choices. Libraries will need to operate in the social networking environment as people move 'their reading, study, leisure and information seeking activities into the virtual space' and current institutional barriers will need to be addressed. This is a significant issue that will need to be addressed if libraries are to move forward.

There was mention that as a publicly funded service, performance measurement will be required. Performance measurement can be a useful tool in improving services but care needs to be taken in the choice of data collected. The fact that simple count numbers are easy to collect, does not make them the right choice, since they provide little real information about the user experience.

There is some championing of a national library card but it should be noted that for this work, agreement between individual library authorities or a mandated national offer of a basic set of services and issues over content licensing, are as important as the technical issues, such as creating a user identifier that will work with all library management systems.

Alongside purchase or subscription of digital content there is also a perceived need for a national strategy for local digitisation (e.g. digital community archives) and encouragement for local contributions to national initiatives (e.g. the British Library's collection of dialect recordings and the digitisation of local newspapers). While this is a vital element in preserving our national cultural heritage, it will be important to learn from the mistakes and omissions in past initiatives.

3 Gaps

While many of the contributions to the Report make reference to the digital environment, there are key points that have not been made. These aspects were also covered in a presentation at the LGA/MLA Conference in London in December 2009¹. We would like to see the following items addressed in future work and final policy

3.1 Digital Citizens

The concept of the digital citizen is already well-established; the BBC ran a piece in January 2006², proposing that 2005 was "*the year of the digital citizen*". A proposal for a "*Bill of Rights for digital citizens*" has been published³ and nine elements of digital citizenship have been presented⁴ (digital etiquette, digital communications, digital literacy, digital access, digital commerce, digital law, digital rights and responsibilities, digital health and wellness and digital security (self-protection)). Whilst some of these areas clearly require specific professional expertise e.g. digital law, others offer opportunities for public libraries to provide valuable community support and information as part of a 21stCentury library service.

3.2 The Mobile Web

Today's digital citizens are highly mobile, work on the move or remotely from their employer or designated place of work, and rely on robust communications technologies for business, work and leisure. They use a variety of mobile devices (smartphones, laptops, tablets, iPods etc.) as personal tools to deliver a wide range of services and functionality. The Mobile Web is a significant growth area in 2010 and a number of media statistics support this position e.g. the Nielsen Wire blog reports a 34% spike in mobile Web usage between July 2008-July 2009⁵ which was largely fuelled by "*women, teens and seniors*".

There is an exciting opportunity for public libraries to reach audiences more effectively by providing content for mobile devices. One example is the District of Columbia Public Library (DCPL) which was the first US public library to provide an application or "app" for the iPhone⁶. Users can access and search the DCPL CityCat catalogue and further developments for mobile users are planned.

Many publishers and content providers are exploring the opportunities to deliver e-content through smartphone applications. Time Magazine has proposed the "*appgazine*" concept where a whole issue of a magazine is delivered to mobile phone users in this way⁷. There is also accumulating evidence of a sustained growth in e-book apps. The Sunday Times reported in November 2009 that "*1 in 5 new apps in the Apple Store last month was an electronic book. There are now 10,000 ebooks for the Apple iPhone and iPod Touch*"⁸.

This type of statistic gives a clear steer to public libraries to provide content for the Mobile Web to meet a growing demand from consumers. Issues such as co-ordinated wi-fi access policy, will need to be addressed in this context.

3.3 Community Participation

Public Libraries have begun to make use of social networking platforms and technologies to disseminate information and to reach out and engage with their user communities e.g. Milton Keynes Libraries on Twitter. There are also opportunities to use social media to promote associated initiatives such as local history resources and services e.g. Sandusky History blog⁹ in Ohio, and the Yarra Plenty Library Local History blog,¹⁰ both run by Library staff.

Taking these ideas a step further, there are very interesting possibilities resulting from community participation in library development and content curation. An example is the Trove¹¹ service from the National Library of Australia, which provides the digitised content of Historic Australian Newspapers from 1803 to 1954. Readers / users can help to correct digitisation errors through an interactive interface, thus the community is helping to curate online content for the wider public. This community curation or peer production approach, makes use of the current socialisation of the Web and the collaborative capacity and capabilities of Web-scale services. Community participation is clearly adding value to established library services and content.

This is a fast-moving area and new social networking tools are emerging all the time. Public libraries need to monitor these developments and seek opportunities to apply new technologies such as Google Wave, in innovative ways.

3.4 Citizen Science Hubs

There are a range of examples of successful mass / large-scale community participation in the context of citizen science, where the public engages with scientific initiatives, research and analysis in a variety of disciplines: for example in astronomy (GalaxyZoo), ornithology (Audubon Christmas Bird Count) and behavioural psychology (BBC LabUK). The growing functionality embedded in mobile devices also offers new opportunities for the public to participate in scientific monitoring and dissemination initiatives e.g. the participatory urbanism described by Eric Paulos¹², where mobile devices are used by the public as sensors to record and share air quality data in urban areas.

Given the growth of citizen journalism in recent years, there appears to be great potential for a similar growth in engagement and participation in citizen science. Enterprising public libraries could act as citizen science hubs, providing a central repository of citizen science information, opportunities and links. This is the type of innovative and creative initiative that public libraries need to demonstrate in order to transform their service offering and to continue to be relevant to 21st Century digital citizens.

4 Learning Lessons from the Past

Past initiatives in the public sector digital arena have been successful, but often limitations emerge after a period of time. Failures to address technological issues in full, to address access issues and to plan for long-term preservation of resources are all factors that compromise otherwise successful ventures. It is vital that any large scale plan for the digital element of the public library service learn lessons from past experiences.

4.1 Practicality and Technical Issues

A national, publicly-searchable database of content is envisaged by contributors to the Report. Practical issues will influence if and how this can be achieved. One method is cross-searching existing public library OPACs. Here the potential problems concern interoperability (a range of library management systems from different vendors are currently in use), and performance (the more catalogues you search at the same time, the longer the search time). An alternative is creating a central catalogue with each public library contributing a copy of its catalogue. Practical considerations are that this requires constant downloads of data as items are added to and withdrawn from stock. Another route is to build on existing common practice. Many public libraries already participate in the co-operative catalogue UnityUK; national coverage could be

achieved if everyone participated. But significantly, this is primarily a backroom service and access is restricted to library staff.

4.2 Restricted Access

It is notable that the RevealWeb catalogue of resources for visually impaired people was initially publicly accessible (when hosted by the National Library for the Blind) but when it was moved to UnityUK, the failure to give these records a public-view licence meant that the visually impaired community was deprived of a valuable resource they could access directly and were forced back to using library staff as intermediaries.

4.3 A National Digitisation Strategy

A national digitisation strategy has the potential to identify and prioritise the digitisation of resources. It will, however, be important that lessons are learnt from previous activity. The NOF-digitise programme (April 2000 to March 2004, New Opportunities Fund) had 150 digitisation projects, including some by public libraries. Although initially these resources were accessible through the EnrichUK web site, this site is no longer available. Work is underway to assess the current status and availability of the underlying NOF-digi data¹³. From a content preservation perspective, it will be important that any new digitisation strategy is comprehensive and covers long-term access, curation and preservation, alongside the policy and advice on the digitisation process.

5 Summary

UKOLN welcomes the Empower, Inform, Enrich Report as an initial stage in the development of new policy for public library services in the UK. A virtual library service will be an essential element in the modernisation process but it will be important to address the issues noted above and to learn from past mistakes and failures. Since a comprehensive plan will be needed, we have highlighted a number of areas which will need to be addressed. We look forward to seeing further work on the Library Review and chances to contribute in areas in which we have expertise.

6 About UKOLN

UKOLN is a national centre for excellence in digital information management based at the University of Bath. UKOLN is core funded by the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) and the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA), and serves the higher and further education communities and the cultural heritage sector.

More information is available at www.ukoln.ac.uk.

¹ Liz Lyon, Serving Digital Citizens: Public Libraries in the 21st C? Presentation at the LGA/MLA Conference, London 2009. <http://www.ukoln.ac.uk/ukoln/staff/e.j.lyon/presentations.html#2009-12-14-LGA-london>

² BBC News. The year of the digital citizen. (2006) <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/4566712.stm>

³ Westen T. and Stern, R. A Bill of Rights for Digital Citizens (2009) <http://journal.webscience.org/211/>

⁴ Mike Ribble, Nine themes of digital citizenship. http://www.digitalcitizenship.net/Nine_Elements.html

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- ⁵ NielsenWire blog http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/online_mobile/mobile-web-up-34-percent-july-09/
- ⁶ District of Columbia Public Library app for iPhone <http://dclibrarylabs.org/projects/iphone/>
- ⁷ Time Magazine Josh Quittner (2009) The Race for a Better Read. <http://www.time.com/time/business/article/0,8599,1877161-2,00.html>
- ⁸ Sunday Times, Planet of the Apps: eBook readers. (2009) http://technology.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/tech_and_web/personal_tech/article6924261.ece
- ⁹ Sandusky History blog <http://sanduskyhistory.blogspot.com/>
- ¹⁰ Yarra Plenty Library Local History blog <http://yplocalhistory.blogspot.com/>
- ¹¹ Trove, National Library of Australia <http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper>
- ¹² Eric Paulos, Citizen Science: enabling participatory urbanism. (Book Chapter In Press). <http://www.eecs.berkeley.edu/~honicky/CitizenScience.pdf>
- ¹³ <http://web.me.com/xcia0069/nof.html>