

Digital Britain : The Interim Report

A response by the Scottish Library and Information Council and the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals in Scotland.

Introduction

The Scottish Library and Information Council (SLIC) and CILIP in Scotland (CILIPS) welcome the opportunity to respond to the DCMS and BERR interim report on Digital Britain

The Scottish Library and Information Council is the advisory body to the Scottish Government, its Ministers and its members on library and information matters. CILIP in Scotland is the professional body for individual library and information sector workers and is part of CILIP UK.

In March 1999 SLIC published Enabling Seamless Access

<http://www.slainte.org.uk/files/pdf/slic/enseamac.pdf>, which highlighted the need for a national information strategy and made the following conclusions which reflect many of the issues outlined in the interim report.

1. Put the interests of Scotland's citizens at the forefront of all new developments in Information and Communications Technology (ICT), ensuring that the information needs of citizens receive priority within Scotland's government;
2. Provide fast, convenient and seamless access for the public to information for citizenship, work opportunities, health and learning;
3. Assist the integration of the government's initiatives in learning, social inclusion, economic competitiveness, governance, health and urban and rural regeneration;
4. Provide an integrated networked environment, which will stimulate the development of Scotland's knowledge economy;
5. Co-ordinate existing and future public, private and voluntary ICT networks within the overarching framework of a democratic and accessible national information strategy;
6. Ensure that the public have the necessary 'digital literacy' skills to fully participate in the information society;
7. Ensure that all geographical communities and communities of interest are equitably served by ICT developments in order to avoid the divisive growth of 'information-rich' and 'information-poor' individuals and communities.
8. Use the strength of the strategic network to support greater inward investment into ICT based jobs and industries;
9. Use the strength of the strategic network to encourage greater participation in Scotland's political processes, and encourage forms of political debate and decision-making at all levels from the local to the global;
10. Avoid duplication of resources and infrastructure.

Whilst there has been significant progress in the past 10 years, the pace of technological change combined with the global financial marketplace is such that the issues need to be re-considered. In

the current economic climate, the cost of accessing broadband services for many may become a luxury and not “today what electricity was a century ago”.

The devolved context for Digital Britain

SLIC and CILIPS are disappointed that there is little reference in the interim report to the policy and strategy of devolved nations. Given that significant areas of the digital agenda are devolved, a review and consultation in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland should have taken place before the Interim report. We assume this will now be done with the relevant departments in the devolved administrations to ensure that any consultation is carried out in the context of devolved policy and that the final report will reflect these. SLIC and CILIPS agree with the five objectives but urge government to ensure that these are achieved through dialogue and in concert with devolved policies and within existing frameworks, experience (Digital Scotland) and programmes.

The Role of libraries in Digital Britain

It is extremely disappointing that the role of libraries has not been recognised in the Interim report. It is surprising, given that DCMS was a sponsoring department of the transformational change for libraries through the People’s Network, that libraries are not represented on the steering group.

Libraries have a unique contribution to make to promoting digital access and addressing digital inequities. They

- Are a trusted brand and have ubiquitous points of presence in many communities offering quality services. Further support is offered by the library networks in educational establishments, working together to share resources, expertise and support learners.
- Provide an established network for free access to digital content and other services. Free broadband access provides a base level of connectivity which all can access to enable the delivery of improved digital skills and e-government services through provision of WiFi, 24/7 access and introduction of Web2.00 services.
- Provide knowledge management and mediation skills to connect people to the global information society to enable them to improve their skills through purposeful use of digital technology, such as Access to Council, government and other services;
- Offer cradle to grave services and programmes, which have high number of existing users through choice;
- Reach the community – by the provision direct services to isolated users e.g. housebound service, mobile libraries, book collections to communities;
- Have well established network which supports the digital inclusion and all literacies and disseminates best practice, through a range of partnerships and services running across public library IT facilities.

The Library Infrastructure in Scotland

The People’s Network project from 2001-2003 was successfully implemented on time and in budget, funded by the New Opportunities Fund (now Big Lottery), it provided a transformational platform for libraries across the UK. Some 4000 PCs and peripherals have been installed in Scotland’s community libraries offering 8.5 million hours of free access to ICT facilities. Over 4500 staff have been trained to support users in the use of digital technology and they have also received training in additional skills, including supporting learners, adult literacy programmes, and customer care. Libraries of all kinds create and provide to a range of digital materials, provided by a range of suppliers and aggregators.

In Scotland, library services will be an integral service of the National Entitlement Card, and will give the opportunity to tailor the needs of the user to the range of services, both traditional and digital, on offer from libraries and partners, to play an active role in a public services delivery plan and e-government.

Across the UK, local authorities have built on this shared infrastructure and it is extremely disappointing that the Interim report makes no mention of the role which libraries have played in the past 10 years in enabling access to digital technologies. In spite of falling borrower figures, the number of visits to library services has increased in the last 10 years, with 65% of the Scottish population regularly using services of the public library. In Scotland virtual visitors to Scottish Libraries increased by 27% in 2007/8. Therefore, they are uniquely placed to support the aspirations of Digital Britain and provide and promote services which contribute to it.

Raising Awareness and Promotion

There are many programmes and promotions both local, regional and national to raise awareness of digital issues. SLIC and CILIPS endorse support for awareness raising for the issues linked to national and devolved policy frameworks. Government should support awareness raising and branding needs to be directly linked to quality and support. National promotions are still useful and are most effective when linked to local provision. Confusion and difficulty arises when programmes are branded UK, when in fact they relate to England only, e.g. UK Online. This is exacerbated when they are promoted on digital channels

Whilst recognising that there may be benefits of a Digital Champion there needs to be clearer definition of the role, remit and geographic reach of such a post holder and how they would interact with devolved policy.

Increasing Access

SLIC and CILIPS believe that the provision of equipment or pervasive broadband alone, does not improve take up or digital skills. A number of studies and evaluations have recognised that and indicated that users preferred venues where they had access to informal as well as formal support. This includes peers, IT buddies, library staff and staff from other organisations. Libraries based in the hearts of communities, with additional services like cafes, coffee machines and informal seating, prove to be the most popular venues. A relaxed atmosphere and ready access to supportive and skilled staff are critical success factors.

Users are motivated by the direct, personal benefits of using ICT will be, for example cheaper online shopping, increased range of leisure activities, access to health information and communication and engagement with others. Library services are working with community groups and individuals to develop meaningful services, such as local health information, community history, ICT familiarisation and skills development for increased employability. The benefits of this type of community-specific content are that it engenders local ownership, encourages uptake of digital services to develop skills necessary for access and participation and attracts sustained usage. Library services have become a ubiquitous free service in communities which offer opportunities for all to be active digital citizenship.

However there is growing concern that the connectivity currently offered by library services, which ranges from 2mb -10mb on average, will not be sufficient to meet users needs and demands for more interactive and live web services, such as IPlayer. Whilst a USC of 2mb would be a significant step forward, SLIC and CILIPS are of the view that this is not far reaching enough for future

provision. It would be useful to know how this level was set and what range of services was envisaged to be available through this connectivity. Consideration should be given to scalability of bandwidth and lessons could be learned from the Scottish Executive's Pathfinder projects. The public library service in Scotland and indeed across the UK has the potential to be able to increase this further, but only if local authorities are able to keep the service free and support hardware replacement to a standard, high level. SLIC and CILIPS advocate that the nurturing of this existing network through further funding or at reduced rates from a range of suppliers, will make a significant contribution to the delivery of improved digital skills and inclusion.

Building Support and Improving Skills

Library services across Scotland have been working in partnership with other key agencies such as Skills Development Scotland, Young Scot, Learning and Teaching Scotland, BBC and Scottish Qualifications Agency and others to develop programmes and services which encourage the use of ICT and develop digital skills. SLIC and CILIPS believe Digital Britain should recognise the contribution of strategic partnerships and well established networks and build on these. Working through these offers a sustainable path for the development of digital skills across Scotland and by extension the UK. Experience with this project demonstrates that building a digitally competent Scotland will take a long time and can only work in partnership with literacy strategies and the Skills for Scotland policy.

Unnecessary barriers imposed by corporate IT department are a serious matter blocking the achievement real digital inclusion. Consideration should be given to ensure that local authorities and other public agencies do not hinder the development of services by prohibiting access to key services and learning which promote digital skills. With the drive for shared services in Scotland there will be opportunities to address access barriers.

Developing Content

SLIC and CILIPS believe that the critical success factor in the development of content is its relevance to the end user combined with ease of access. We recognise the need for a business case of developing new industries and business opportunities, the economic benefits of exploiting ICT and increasing the functionality of copy by digitisation. Content should be socially inclusive and that there should be evidence of demand by individuals and communities. SLIC has been working with Strategic Content Alliance to contribute to their debate. Where content is developed by organisations to stimulate interest and develop demand from users, there should be associated promotions and programmes in communities which support education, social and cultural activity. Digitisation opens up opportunities for improving quality of life. The sharing of information on user-needs analysis is useful, whilst some issues may be similar, solutions and priorities for solutions action may vary from country to country and perhaps indeed from region to region. User needs analysis should reflect levels of literacies – reading, information and digital. . However it must be recognised that there are areas where devolved needs and policy direction may take precedent over an overarching UK content policy. It is important that the final report reflects this. Digital Access Scotland is a new Forum in Scotland which seeks to co-ordinate an approach for digital access and digitisation for libraries, museums, galleries and archives.

Content should meet agreed technical standards for quality. Scotland has already set out principles which were mandated in Open Scotland Information Age Framework. Digital Access Scotland is considering the issue of standards for libraries, museums and archives. Digital Inclusion Policies also need to ensure that re-use of material is understood by users so that issues of copyright and intellectual property rights are not infringed and that licensing issues are addressed through

schemes such as Creative Commons and Click Use. Librarians are trained and able to give support and training in these areas. SLIC and CILIPS recognise the intent of the proposed Action 13, however care must be taken to ensure that asking ISPs to police this does not increase the cost of pervasive broadband services.

Key Recommendations to the Digital Britain Policy Consultation:

- Ensure Digital Britain takes cognisance of devolved and regional policies and initiatives across the UK and take cognisance of global and European programmes.
- Ensure libraries services are able to access affordable, pervasive, high capacity broadband to meet user needs.
- Maintaining free public access and working to increase longer hours of access for the public.
- Support for accredited IT training qualifications for deliverers of support to ensure quality.
- Support for increased participation of partners in the Digital Inclusion Policy in developing electronic government services.
- A new training programme of appropriate mentoring and counselling skills for providers of IT support for the digitally excluded.
- Support for technical solutions developed to ensure compliance with Disabilities Discrimination Act (DDA) and Freedom of Information (FOI) legislation, so that corporate security issues do not conflict with these objectives and appropriate procedures.
- Encourage appropriate Acceptable Use Policies (AUPs), which maximise access and do not create barriers for users
- Encouragement of content developers funded to meet standards for quality to ensure interoperability
- Encouragement of content developers to be socially inclusive and demonstrate evidence of demand by individuals and communities.
- Support for information, digital and media literacy
- Support for the safe, legal and acceptable use material so that issues of copyright and intellectual property rights are not infringed and that licensing schemes such as Creative Commons and Click Use and takes cognisance of the recent consultations on copyright, licensing and IPR.