

Digital Britain: interim report Comments of Share the Vision

Introduction

1. Share The Vision [STV] wishes to comment on the contents of the Digital Britain: Interim Report.
2. STV is a UK-wide partnership of the main voluntary sector organisations which produce and lend alternative format content for visually impaired people and the main bodies for publicly funded libraries. Established in 1989, our aim is to enhance co-operative working within and between the sectors in order to increase access to content for print disabled people.
3. In recent years, our efforts have naturally focused on ensuring that print disabled people can fully participate in society by taking advantage of new digital technologies. Today only 4.6% of the output of UK publishers eventually becomes available in an accessible format, i.e. Braille, Large Print or audio books. That percentage could be greatly increased and produced without the current delays if digital re-engineering of the existing services were fostered by the removal of existing restraints and the establishment of new voluntary/private sector partnerships. The needs of print disabled people would be more easily met if, for example,
 - Electronic publications did not have technical protection measures [TPMs] applied to them. TPM's often disable the assistive technology used by print disabled people to convert content into a format appropriate for their personal needs.
 - Publishers did not impose licences which undermine copyright exceptions
 - Websites were designed to be accessible in accordance with Government policy
 - Accessible hardware and software was more widely available via public provision in appropriate locations. Many disabled people cannot afford the necessary technology. Research published by the Office for

Disability Issues in 2007, “Experiences and Expectations of Disabled People.” revealed that under 40% of disabled people had ever used the internet compared with 67% of the general population and that 76% of those who had done so were in employment. The report indicates that cost is a major deterrent. According to DWP research in 2006, “The Employment Rates of Disabled People.”, only 29% of disabled people aged 19-59 were in employment compared with 76% of the non-disabled population and RNIB research in 2002 found that 75% of blind and partially sighted people of working age were not in paid employment.

- The ODI research also found a lack of confidence was a major deterrent for disabled people. There is a need for training and support if they are to participate in Digital Britain.

It is from this perspective that we wish to comment on the interim report.

Section 1

4. We welcome the fact that this report is aimed at bringing together the various strands of digital policy work which the Government has initiated and commissioned in order to achieve an overarching National Digital Policy and Action Plan. We concur with the statement in Section 1, Introduction and Executive Summary, that “A successful Britain must be a Digital Britain.” We are pleased that the report quickly makes it clear that this includes the digital inclusion of all citizens as well as furthering our nation’s future economic prospects.

Section 2

5. We therefore welcome the commitment in Section 2, Digital Networks, to address the “gap between a widespread next generation broadband network and ...universal access to the next generation network for reasons of fairness and equity.” We agree that the Government should not unnecessarily invest in those infrastructure developments which the private sector will

fund and develop. However, it is important that Action 4 promises that there will be further consideration of the need for “public incentives to enable deployment beyond current market-led initiatives.” We believe that is the duty of Government to ensure equity in the same way it has done so in terms of the switch from analogue to digital television. Indeed, in terms of the needs and interests of disabled people, we would remind the Digital Britain Team that they have a Disability Equality Duty to ensure that they address all aspects of their work in a proactive manner to enhance the participation of disabled people in society.

Section 3.2

6. From our perspective, Section 3.2, “Investment in Content: Rights and Distribution.” raises most cause for concern. We totally agree that the creative industries are a vital sector in terms of our future economic prosperity and that piracy and illegal copying need to be addressed in order to protect the national interest. However, the whole thrust of this section is concerned with the interests of the producers. There is insufficient acknowledgement of the legal rights and interests of society as a whole. The report refers to the recent IPO consultation, “Copyright the Future” stating that it is “not limited to digital issues but highly relevant.” In our response to the IPO we pointed out that, unlike their earlier consultation on “Taking forward the Gower’s Review, their current consultation is too limited because it does not address the range of copyright issues. It is too narrowly focused on the interests of rights holders and does not also address the legitimate interests of users of copyright materials. This imbalance in favour of producers and rights holders is reinforced in this report. Action 11 proposes that a Rights Agency should be created to bring the industry together and Action 12 suggests that the rights holders should fund it. The section refers to the potential of DRM but, in our experience, DRM and licences imposed by rights holders can have the effect of undermining the legitimate interests of libraries and their users, whether print disabled or not, to access digital content. A Rights Agency must have user representation in order to ensure that the rights of legitimate

users are represented, so that the producers are not able, unwittingly or not, to over-ride the rights legislated by Parliament.

7. We would also point out that the Government is about to ratify the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Article 30[3] of the Convention addresses these issues stating, “States Parties shall take all appropriate steps, in accordance with international law, to ensure that laws protecting intellectual property rights do not constitute an unreasonable or discriminatory barrier to access by persons with disabilities to cultural matters.” At present rights holders have applied unreasonable and discriminatory digital barriers and the final Digital Britain report needs to address these wider societal interests or it will not achieve its overall objectives.

Section 4

8. We very much welcome the commitments in Section 4, Universal Connectivity. We support the promise in Action 17 to provide a Universal Service Commitment for broadband by 2012, following the Universal Service Obligation model which applies to Royal Mail and BT. We also support the Government’s proposals on digital inclusion and have set out our detailed views in our response to the DCLG’s consultation on “Delivering Digital Inclusion: Action Plan.” It is pleasing to note, therefore, that this report commits the Digital Britain team to work closely with the Digital Inclusion team and the Digital Inclusion Champion to ensure that all of the work strands are closely aligned to avoid the dangers of social exclusion referred to in this report. We are particularly pleased that this report reinforces the success of the UK Online Centres in addressing the needs of the most disadvantaged members of society and we trust that their work will be maintained and enhanced, as we advocated in our response to the consultation on the Digital Inclusion Action Plan and the earlier DIUS consultation on Informal Adult Learning. We also welcome the commitment in Action 21 for a Public Service Delivery Plan that will ensure that “public services online are designed for ease of use by the widest range of citizens.” In order that visually impaired and disabled people are able to access online services, it is

essential that they are designed from the outset to take account of their specific needs. As the DED emphasises the importance of involving disabled people and encouraging them to participate in public life it would seem logical to suggest that they are represented on the Digital Inclusion Champion's expert Taskforce.

Section 5

9. Section 5, "Equipping everyone to benefit from Digital Britain" categorises three basic requirements; digital life skills, digital work skills and digital economy skills. We agree with this analysis. This section goes on to state that "The Government must not ignore those adults who are disadvantaged because they lack these crucial digital life and work skills, we can address these through Media Literacy with which we deal in the next section." However, section 5.2 is devoted to child safety and online safeguards with only a passing reference to digital inclusion. Important as these matters are, we believe it is equally important to address the needs of people who do not have digital life and work skills and who need the informal approach which both the consultations on Informal Adult Learning and Digital Inclusion acknowledged. This is particularly important for older people and younger people who were disillusioned with formal education. The UK Online Centres in public libraries based in local communities are particularly suited to assisting many individuals from these groups to acquire these essential media literacy skills, in an environment they find welcoming and comfortable. This is especially the case in terms of providing access to and training in the use of assistive technology which is essential if disabled people are to be included but which most cannot afford to purchase for home use. Communal provision and friendly guidance close to home can make a major difference to life chances.

Notes

10. Our responses to earlier consultations referred to above can be found via our website www.share-the-vision.org.uk

- DIUS on “Informal Adult Learning”
- IPO on “Taking forward the Gowers Review”
- IPO on “Copyright the future”
- DCLG “Digital inclusion: action plan”

10. The membership of STV comprises

- Calibre Audio Library
- ClearVision Project
- RNIB
- British Library
- Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals [CILIP]
- Library and Information Services Council: Northern Ireland
- Scottish Library and Information Council
- Society of Chief [Public] Librarians
- Society of College, National and University Libraries
- Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (observer)
- CyMAL: Museums, Archives and Libraries Wales, a division of the Welsh Assembly Government (observer)

11. STV is happy for this response to be made public and would welcome an invitation to participate in the planned Digital Britain Summit in April and the similar events planned for Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales in April and May.

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