freedom of access

research report on public Internet access in Scotland
About the Scottish Consumer Council

The Scottish Consumer Council (SCC) was set up by government in 1975. Our purpose is to promote the interests of consumers in Scotland, with particular regard to those people who experience disadvantage in society. While producers of goods and services are usually well-organised and articulate when protecting their own interests, individual consumers very often are not. The people whose interests we represent are consumers of all kinds: they may be patients, tenants, parents, solicitors’ clients, public transport users, or simply shoppers in a supermarket.

Consumers benefit from efficient and effective services in the public and private sectors. Service-providers benefit from discriminating consumers. A balanced partnership between the two is essential and the SCC seeks to develop this partnership by:

- carrying out research into consumer issues and concerns;
- informing policy and decision-makers about consumer concerns and issues;
- influencing policy and decision-making processes;
- informing and raising awareness among consumers.

The SCC is part of the National Consumer Council (NCC) and is sponsored by the Department of Trade and Industry. The SCC’s Chairman and Council members are appointed by the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry in consultation with the First Minister. Martyn Evans, the SCC’s Director, leads the staff team.

Please check our web site at www.scotconsumer.org.uk for news about our publications.

Scottish Consumer Council
Royal Exchange House
100 Queen Street
Glasgow G1 3DN
Telephone 0141 226 5261
Facsimile 0141 221 0731
www.scotconsumer.org.uk

The SCC assesses the consumer perspective in any situation by analysing the position of consumers against a set of consumer principles.

These are:

ACCESS
Can consumers actually get the goods or services they need or want?

CHOICE
Can consumers affect the way the goods and services are provided through their own choice?

INFORMATION
Do consumers have the information they need, presented in the way they want, to make informed choices?

REDRESS
If something goes wrong, can it be put right?

SAFETY
Are standards as high as they can reasonably be?

FAIRNESS
Are consumers subject to arbitrary discrimination for reasons unconnected with their characteristics as consumers?

REPRESENTATION
If consumers cannot affect what is provided through their own choices, are there other effective means for their views to be represented?

We can often make our publications available in braille or large print, on audio tape or computer disk. Please contact us for details.

This report was written by Trisha McAuley, Andy Pulford and Gill MacGregor

Published by the Scottish Consumer Council
June 2005

ISBN 0-9549004-5-6
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contents</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local Authorities - Policy and Practice</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Internet Services - Consumers’ Experiences</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Bigger Picture from the Public</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusions</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Checklist for Local Authorities on a User-Focused Public Internet Access Service</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annex - Respondent Details</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Acknowledgements

The Scottish Consumer Council would like to thank everyone who helped us with the research for this report. We are particularly grateful to our Consumer Network Volunteers who undertook the ‘mystery shopping exercise’ of public Internet access services and who gave so willingly of their time to do so.
Introduction

The irony of the information society is that disadvantaged consumers who cannot afford to access the new technology face further marginalisation.\(^1\)

In 2002, the Scottish Consumer Council published its analysis of the communications market from the consumer perspective. The report, *Reaching Out, the Consumer Perspective on Communications in Scotland*, concluded that the knowledge revolution was having less of an impact in Scotland than in the rest of the UK and that consumers in Scotland were finding it harder to exploit new technologies. Access to the Internet was a key area of concern and one where there were marked divisions between different socio-economic groups. For the population as a whole, home Internet access was still only a reality for a minority. This was against the background of an increasing emphasis on the on-line delivery of public services direct to people in their homes as a key feature of public policy.

Prior to the publication of our report, the UK government and the Scottish Executive had set out their stalls on digital inclusion and their proposals for tackling it. In September 2000, the UK government announced its commitment to achieving universal access to the Internet by 2005.\(^2\) The Scottish Executive echoed this commitment and outlined how it would go about achieving it in *Digital Scotland, Connecting Scotland’s People*, published in 2001.\(^3\) However, it is important to note that, for both strategies, universal access did not mean having access to the Internet at home but to a computer terminal at ‘the time, place, method and price appropriate to their needs and lifestyles.’\(^4\) In effect, this meant a combination of home and public Internet access.

The main themes of the Scottish Executive’s digital inclusion strategy were:

- **Awareness and promotion**, with particular emphasis on reaching disadvantaged groups;
- **Access** – at an appropriate time, place, method and price, again with a focus on the needs of disadvantaged people;
- **Support** – provision of reliable and accessible sources of advice and support for people who wished to use new technology;
- **Skills** – developing IT skills and building confidence to use the web;
- **Content** – developing the on-line content and services that disadvantaged people needed; and
- **Community involvement** – ensuring the sustainability and sense of ownership of community ICT initiatives.

\(^1\) Scottish Consumer Council, *Reaching Out, the Consumer Perspective on Communications in Scotland*, January 2002
\(^2\) UK Office of the e-envoy, *UK Online Annual Report*, September 2000
\(^3\) Scottish Executive, *Digital Scotland, Connecting Scotland’s People*, September 2001
\(^4\) Scottish Executive, September 2001, op.cit
Key measures taken by the Executive have included:

- Awareness raising campaigns on the benefits of getting on-line;
- Increasing awareness of existing public access to the web by mapping locations and making them available on the web or through a call centre;
- Creating, through the Public Internet Access Points Scheme, over 800 new public Internet access terminals, by giving two-year grants to organisations in the private, public and voluntary sectors; and
- Investing in two pilot ‘digital communities’ by funding individual access to the web for every household that wished it, supported by the training and local support needed to ensure that people gained practical benefits by using the web and access to the opportunities that it created. The communities are Bellsmyre in West Dunbartonshire and the North Argyll Islands.

At the same time as it made the commitment to achieving universal access to the Internet by 2005, the Scottish Executive also announced, in its draft strategic framework document for e-government, its intention that all public sector services in Scotland that could feasibly be delivered electronically would be available on-line by 2005. The 2003 report on progress by Scotland’s local authorities, stated that ‘information was available online for 82% of services’. The Scottish Executive has recently updated its framework for e-government under the ‘openscotland’ brand. openscotland aims to:

- Provide the people of Scotland with better access to public services, and help improve the delivery of these services.
- Ensure that the people of Scotland have the access, skills and awareness to enable them to make beneficial use of computers and the web in their daily lives.

In November 2004, openscotland also published a strategic framework for all of Scotland’s local authorities that aims to ‘put the customer first in the design and delivery of public services’.

So, how are we doing now that 2005 has arrived?

---

5 http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Government/Open-scotland/17820/10759
8 Scottish Executive, Information Age Government in Scotland, A Common Framework, 2004
9 www.openscotland.gov.uk
10 Scottish Executive, Customer First, A Strategic Framework for the Scottish Executive and Scottish Local Authorities 2004-2007, 2004
While home Internet access in Scotland continues to grow, it remains a reality for less than half the population. The Office of National Statistics’ Expenditure & Food Survey\textsuperscript{11} for the third quarter of 2004 quoted home Internet access in Scotland at 44%. In 2004, the Scottish Executive Scottish Household Survey\textsuperscript{12} estimated adult personal use of the Internet at 47%.

2003 Scottish Household Survey figures\textsuperscript{13} showed marked variation in access to the Internet by net annual household income ranging from 21% for those in the very lowest income range to 84% for those in the highest range.

\textbf{Access to the Internet by net annual household income}

Column percentages, 2003 data Adult population

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Net annual household income</th>
<th>Yes (%)</th>
<th>No (%)</th>
<th>Don’t know (%)</th>
<th>Total (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>£0 – £6,000</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>79</td>
<td></td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>£6,001 – £10,000</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>82</td>
<td></td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>£10,001 – £15,000</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>73</td>
<td></td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>£15,001 – £20,000</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>58</td>
<td></td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>£20,001 – £25,000</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>48</td>
<td></td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>£25,001 – £30,000</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>36</td>
<td></td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>£30,001 – £40,000</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>26</td>
<td></td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over £40,000</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>16</td>
<td></td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All (income known)</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>55</td>
<td></td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Base 1,194 2,729 2,838 1,976 1,508 1,152 1,305 782 13,484

In 2004, the evaluation of the Public Internet Access Points scheme\textsuperscript{14} reported that 95% of people in urban areas were within one mile of public Internet access and 90% of people in rural areas within five miles. They relate to proximity to access points funded under the initiative for a two-year period. However, once the initial two-year funding expired, not all of the host venues opted to continue to offer public access.

However, proximity in itself is not enough. Effective access from the consumer perspective cannot just be measured by geographical location. Many other barriers could prevent consumers from accessing terminals even if they are located close by, for example, lack of awareness, cost, disabled access, or opening times.

\textsuperscript{11} Office of National Statistics, \textit{Expenditure & Food Survey},

\textsuperscript{12} Scottish Executive, \textit{Scottish Household Survey 2004, Quarter 2}

\textsuperscript{13} Scottish Executive, \textit{Scottish Household Survey, 2003}

\textsuperscript{14} Hall Aitken, \textit{Evaluation of the Public Internet Access Point Initiative, May 2004}
The majority of access points (62%) were provided by the business sector, with the voluntary/community sector providing 27% and the public sector providing 11%. Most of the users already had home access. However, the report did conclude that the initiative had been successful in increasing access to the Internet for disadvantaged and excluded groups.

The independent evaluation of the Digital Communities scheme\textsuperscript{15} found that the initiative did increase use of the Internet in the participating communities, together with increased levels of confidence in using ICT. However, it also emphasised that much more needed to be done to reach disadvantaged groups, that intervention should be tailored to the needs of targeted groups, and that measures of success should be based on outcomes rather than process.

The UK government’s assessment of progress in 2004\textsuperscript{16} reflected on the progress that had been made towards achieving digital inclusion but highlighted the fact there was still some way to go. It found that 42% of all adults in Great Britain had not used the Internet in the previous three months. This equated to 19 million people. It highlighted the lack of a ‘user-centred framework’ as a key barrier to digital inclusion and set out such a framework for the future.

The Digital Divide, therefore, remains a reality for very many people and while the gap remains, our 2002 analysis that the divide exacerbates social exclusion appears to still hold true for those who have examined the issue more recently.

\begin{quote}
\textit{As use of the Internet becomes more and more widely used, the problem becomes greater for those likely to be excluded.}\textsuperscript{17}
\end{quote}

As 2005 approached, the Scottish Consumer Council decided to carry out research in order to examine how far the policy commitments made by the UK government and the Scottish Executive to achieving universal access to the Internet had become a reality for consumers in Scotland, with a particular focus on those who were disadvantaged. Our research was undertaken in three phases with:

- **local authorities** – as they are key public sector providers of public access to the Internet, we asked local authorities to tell us about their current policies and how they provided public Internet access services in their area;
- **service users** – we carried out a ‘mystery shopper’ exercise, asking our volunteer network of consumers to use their local authority service and to tell us about their experiences in doing so; and
- **the wider public** – we commissioned a quantitative survey of the general public to obtain demographic details on both access to the Internet and attitudes to using the Internet.

\textsuperscript{15} DTZ Pieda Consulting and tns, \textit{Digital Communities}, July 2004
\textsuperscript{16} UK Cabinet Office, \textit{Enabling a Digitally United Kingdom, A Framework for Action}, 2004
\textsuperscript{17} John Huntley, Nick McKerrell & Shez Asghar, \textit{Universal Service, the Internet & the Access Deficit}, 2004, published in the SCRIPT-ed Online Journal, June 2004
In addition to obtaining the current picture on access to the Internet, we also wanted to:

• highlight good practice in the provision of public Internet access services; and
• identify any barriers that existed and how they could best be dismantled to ensure access for all.

Our report concludes with a list of practical, consumer-focused recommendations for central and local government, and also for the communications regulator, Ofcom.
Local Authorities – Policy and Practice

Research Objectives

We wanted local authorities to tell us how they provided public access to the Internet in their area. However, the emphasis is on the word ‘access’. We wanted to know more than just the fact that public Internet access terminals were installed. From a consumer perspective, we needed to find out if they could actually be used by everyone who wanted to. We sought to gain information, therefore, on:

• the practical facilities provided through public Internet services;
• whether support to consumers using the service was provided by local authority staff;
• the costs (if any) to consumers of using public Internet services;
• the degree to which public Internet access terminals were accessible to disabled people, now a legal obligation under the Disability Discrimination Act;
• the extent to which public Internet services were made more accessible to the community through pro-active promotional activity by the local authority; and
• good practice examples that could be shared by other service providers.

We also wanted to find out the extent to which practice was underpinned by current policies and future strategies that:

• ensured a consistent and sustainable, rather than an ad hoc, approach to public Internet services;
• took into account central government policy objectives in relation to digital inclusion; and
• recognised the role of public Internet access in making this happen.

Methodology

A postal survey was sent out to all 32 Scottish local authorities, with reminders being issued prior to the deadline for returns. A response of 21 completed surveys was achieved. A list of those local authorities that responded is annexed to this report and we would like to thank them for helping us with our research. We are, however, disappointed that 11 local authorities chose not to respond to our survey.

We sent one questionnaire to each authority. We did, however, receive more than one completed, photocopied, questionnaire from different people and different departments within three authorities. These returns contained different responses.
Only one return, completed on the original form, was considered for each. This suggests to us that there may be some confusion over where lead responsibility for this issue lies within an authority.

Research Findings

**General Background Information**
Local authorities were asked whether they had a written policy on the provision of public Internet access. We were pleased to find that 12 authorities indicated that they had a written policy. However, in view of the fact that digital inclusion is a recognised public policy objective and that local delivery of this objective will be very much reliant on local service delivery, we were concerned that the remaining nine authorities had no written policy in this area.

The number of locations in each local authority area providing public Internet access ranged from 7 to 69, while the total number of terminals ranged from 40 to 546.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of authority</th>
<th>Local authority</th>
<th>Number of locations</th>
<th>Number of terminals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Urban</strong></td>
<td>City of Edinburgh</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>370</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Clackmannanshire</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dundee City</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>no data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>East Renfrewshire</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Falkirk</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Glasgow City</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>546</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>North Lanarkshire</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Renfrewshire</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>233</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>West Lothian</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rural</strong></td>
<td>Comhairle nan Eilean Siar</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Aberdeenshire</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Highland</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Scottish Borders</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stirling</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>South Lanarkshire</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mixed</strong></td>
<td>Angus</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>North Ayrshire</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Moray</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>East Ayrshire</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Perth &amp; Kinross</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fife</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>395</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Our survey did not extend to finding out the exact location of every local authority Internet access terminal. However, we did note that several local authorities classified as having a rural or mixed population provided their service in a relatively small number of sites and we question the extent to which the service is physically available to all. There is a particular issue in relation to the local authorities who cover Scotland’s islands and the extent to which a terminal is provided on every island where even a small number of residents may have less access to basic services and thus require proportionally larger access to electronic services.

The following local authorities stated that they provided a mobile Internet access service:

- East Ayrshire
- Falkirk
- Glasgow City
- North Lanarkshire
- Perth and Kinross
- Scottish Borders
- Stirling

North Lanarkshire Council told us that their mobile Internet access service is provided through a Big Lottery Fund sponsored project run by the Council’s Library and Information Services:

Staff visit, on a regular timetable, community venues in a range of rural communities throughout North Lanarkshire up to three times a week. They are provided with laptop PCs equipped with mobile phone cards to provide Internet access. At each session they provide two hours ICT learning in a number of applications including Internet and e-mail and at each session also provide for half an hour free Internet access on a drop-in basis. The communities involved include Gartcosh, Muirhead, Calderbank, Auchinloch, Carfin, Salsburgh, Overtown, Plains, Allanton and Kilsyth.

Glasgow City Council told us:

We have a mobile learning center Real on the Road. The bus has been in operation for just over two years and was primarily operational in Gorbals and Greater Pollok areas of the city. The bus has 10 multi media PCs, smartboard technology and aims to make IT facilities available to those who have no other way of accessing IT. We use satellite technology for Internet access. Since September of last year the bus has been operating in the Pollok area.

These are excellent examples of local authorities reaching out into a range of different communities and providing not just Internet access but also pro-actively supporting users to learn how to benefit from it.
Unfortunately, when we followed up the survey to ask local authorities for more details about the kind of mobile Internet access they provided, we were disappointed to find that two of the original seven councils (Stirling and Falkirk) subsequently stated that we were given the wrong information and that they did not provide mobile Internet access after all.

If public Internet access services are to be truly accessible, then they need to be available at times which suit the service users rather than the service providers. For example, people in manual employment may have no access to PCs at work and could benefit from early evening or weekend sessions. All 21 local authorities reported that there were locations providing public Internet access open in their area after 6pm during the week and on Saturdays. Public Internet access was found to be less likely to be available before 9am during the week (five local authorities) and on Sundays (four local authorities).

Local authorities were found to provide public Internet access in a range of premises. The most common location was in libraries, in which all local authorities provided public Internet access. Internet access was also to be found in community centres and council offices in about half the authorities. Around one in five of the respondent authorities provided public Internet access in leisure centres, schools and healthy living centres. Other premises mentioned included information points and learning centres. This is encouraging but we would like to see the range of locations extended further and to see local authorities working in partnership with the private and voluntary sectors to install publicly funded terminals in the places that people go to on a daily basis, for example, corner shops or community cafes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Premises</th>
<th>Number of local authorities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Library</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community centres</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leisure centres</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healthy living centres</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other council offices</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Base=21

Local authorities were asked which, if any, of the following facilities they provided though their public Internet services: drop-in access, booking facility for terminals, printing and email. All 21 councils provided drop-in access and printing facilities, while all but one provided a booking facility for terminals and e-mail services. A range of further facilities were mention by authorities:
• scanning
• video conferencing
• Microsoft office
• CD writing
• software to download pictures from digital cameras
• the authority’s online systems

In 18 local authorities members of the public were also able to purchase goods or make payments over the Internet using a public access terminal. The remaining three authorities reported that they did not know whether this facility was available to members of the public.

We were pleased to see the range of facilities generally on offer that enabled consumers to obtain practical benefit from using the terminals.

Training and Assistance

A key strand of the Scottish Executive’s digital inclusion strategy is the provision of reliable and accessible sources of advice and support for people who wish to use new technology.

Local authorities were asked about what kind of training they provided for members of the public and also whether assistance was available to them should they have any difficulties using the authority’s public Internet access terminals.

All the authorities reported that they provided informal assistance from staff to members of the public, while two out of three also provided written instructions. Seven authorities made a CD-ROM guide available to users. Fifteen of the 21 councils provided formal training courses. Of these 15, four authorities charged for courses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Training/assistance</th>
<th>Number of local authorities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Written instructions</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CD-ROM guide</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informal assistance from staff</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal training courses</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Base=21

Authorities were asked whether they provided Internet training for staff working in premises where there was public Internet access, and also whether it was part of the job description of staff in these locations that they must be able to assist members of the public in using the Internet. Only one authority did not provide any Internet training for their staff in these locations. Fifteen authorities indicated that they gave all their staff training and a further five gave training to some members of staff.
Despite all respondent authorities reporting that they provide informal assistance to members of the public in using the Internet, one-third of authorities did not include this in the job descriptions of staff employed at these locations. One in three authorities included this in the job descriptions of all staff at these locations, while the remaining third indicated that the job descriptions of some members of staff included this duty.

Given the importance that the Scottish Executive attaches to the provision of advice and support to people who wish to use new technology, we believe that this should be more formally recognised by local authorities through including it in staff job descriptions. This would help ensure continuity and future sustainability of support for service users.

**Charging**

Local authorities were asked whether they implemented a standard charging policy for public Internet access. Seventeen of the 21 local authorities that responded to the survey indicated that they had free access at all the locations in their area at which they offered public Internet access.

One other authority offered free access in all but one location, which was scheduled to introduce free access later in the year. One authority did not know whether it had a standard charging policy.

There were two respondent authorities that did have a standard charging policy for public Internet access. One charged for use at their leisure centres at a rate of £1 per hour for non-members and 50p per hour for members/young people. The other authority provided free access for the first hour of use and 50p thereafter.

We are concerned that any local authority is charging service users for accessing the Internet. It goes against the grain of the concept of universal access to charge for that access and to effectively bar those who are least well off from using that service.

**Access for Disabled People**

We were concerned that only nine of the respondent authorities could reassure us that they had disabled access in all the locations at which they provided public Internet access.

A further five offered disabled access at over two-thirds of locations, while four offered access at between one-and two-thirds, and two authorities reported that they had disabled access in less than one in three locations.
Once again, these findings reveal that, in many areas, universal access is not a reality for some of the most disadvantaged people in our society.

Authorities were asked which of the following types of specialist equipment they provided for disabled people and we found several examples of good practice:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of equipment</th>
<th>Number of local authorities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All locations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voice recognition software</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Screen reader facility</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Braille keyboard</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keyboard guard</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specialist trackball/mouse</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word prediction software</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A range of other facilities were listed by local authorities. These included:

- Large keyboards
- Changeable fonts
- A-Z keyboards
- Magnification software
- Left-handed keyboards
- Talkback
- Left-handed mouse
- Cicero (text reader package)
- Touch-screen monitors
- Supernova (screen magnifier/speech/Braille support package)
- Document holders

Authorities were also asked whether they provided instructions in minority languages. Only four authorities indicated that they published instructions in minority languages.

Publicising Public Internet Access

All but one of the 21 authorities reported that they actively publicised public Internet access in their area. Of these 20, all produced posters and leaflets publicising public Internet access, while around three out of four also publicised the service in council publications and adverts in the local press. A number of other forms of publicity were listed by councils. These included the following examples of good practice using a variety of media to get the message across:
Monitoring and Evaluating Public Internet Access

Similarly, all but one local authority reported that they monitored and evaluated use of public Internet services in their area. However, of those councils who indicated that they did monitor and evaluate public Internet services, in 15 cases this was limited to monitoring take-up of public Internet access. Only three local authorities conducted any wider evaluation, for example, of the effectiveness of their policy or of the outcomes achieved.

Only one of the respondent authorities had a written strategy for the future provision of public Internet access in their area. This finding caused us concern given that the provision of these services has been highlighted, by government, as integral to the achievement of universal access and digital inclusion.
Public Internet Services – Consumers’ Experiences

Research Objectives

This stage of the research aimed to:

• Obtain a qualitative picture about the experiences of people who had actually used public Internet services; and
• Generally compare the experiences of consumers with the picture of current provision presented to us by local authorities.

Methodology

This stage of the research was carried out by the Scottish Consumer Council’s Consumer Network. This is a group of around 100 volunteers from all parts of Scotland. The network helps to keep us informed about consumer concerns at a local level. Members identify local consumer issues, and investigate local services and facilities for our research programme. We also have some associate community groups representing particular sections of the population, for example, disabled people and youth groups.

We asked our Consumer Network volunteers to carry out a ‘mystery shopping’ exercise to find out what public Internet access facilities were provided in their local areas, and what barriers there were (if any) to the use of these facilities. We then asked those who were able, to visit their nearest public terminal to see how easy it was to ‘log on’ to their own local authority website. Finally, our members were asked to complete a questionnaire to evaluate their experiences. Local authorities were given prior knowledge of our intention to carry out this exercise.

The Network is composed of volunteers who express an interest in helping us with our work. Although we aim to cover every section of the population, the self-selecting nature of the Network means that we would not claim these findings to be statistically representative of the views of all consumers across Scotland. Nevertheless, the Network provides us with a valuable insight into how services work at local level and for the individuals who use them.
Research Findings

Forty-three volunteers took part in our study. The majority of our volunteers (34) had access to the Internet at home. Nine people reported having no access at home. However, six of these did have access elsewhere library, work or college. Only three of our respondents had no access to the Internet at all.

We were hoping to gather information from all 32 local authority areas and we successfully covered nearly three-quarters. Surveys were returned from 23 council areas (72%), 17 of which corresponded with the local authorities that had completed our postal survey. This means that we were able to make direct comparisons between some of the information provided by 17 local authority respondents with the actual experiences of our mystery shopper service users.

Location and Provision of Service

In the areas covered by our survey only one volunteer was unable to access the Internet from a site provided by their local authority. This was on the island of Tiree in Argyll & Bute. The local access point was in an archive and information centre and had a charge of £4 per hour. However, it must be pointed out that our volunteers living in other areas of the same local authority area reported that there was council provision.

Thirty-six of our volunteers discovered that by far the most popular location for public Internet access was their local library. Other types of location mentioned were leisure centre (2), archive and information centre (1), chemist (1), council offices (1), hotel (1) and tourist board offices (1).

**How far is your nearest public Internet access point?**

- Less than 1 mile (61%)
- 1-5 miles (28%)
- 6-10 miles (2%)
- 11-20 miles (7%)
- Over 20 miles (2%)
The majority of our volunteers had access to the Internet close to their homes with twenty-six reporting a distance of less than one mile, and a further 12 living within five miles of their nearest public access point. One person had to travel 6-10 miles and three travelled 11-20 miles. Only one volunteer had to travel over 20 miles.

From the information gathered, 38 of the locations visited were well connected to public transport links.

For those travelling by car, 38 volunteers reported that the location provided free car parking facilities.
Although the majority of local authorities covered in our survey did not charge for Internet access, our volunteers discovered that they would have to pay in five local authority areas. The following table compares our mystery shopper findings in these five areas with what the local authorities themselves told us in response to our questionnaire, with regard to charges per hour.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Local Authority</th>
<th>Local Authority Response</th>
<th>Mystery Shopper Finding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>City of Edinburgh</td>
<td>Access through leisure centres £1/hr non-members, 50p/hr – members and young people</td>
<td>Variable (£1–£2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stirling</td>
<td>Free for first hour then 50p per half hour</td>
<td>£1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highland</td>
<td>No charge</td>
<td>£2 (if you forget your password)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argyll &amp; Bute</td>
<td>Did not respond to survey</td>
<td>£4 (archive &amp; information centre)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clackmannanshire</td>
<td>No charge</td>
<td>£5 (tourist board offices)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Only six respondents had to book a computer terminal in advance the majority had no problems in gaining access. All of the councils in our local authority survey claimed to have drop-in access for consumers. However, in four of these (Glasgow City, Fife, City of Edinburgh and Aberdeen City) our volunteers were told that they would have to book access and, in one case, even after booking, there was a wait of 70 minutes before the terminal was free.

Over half of the locations visited by our members had pre-requisites in place – most wanted people to join the library in order to gain access, others had age restrictions (over 12/over 16) and one required our volunteer to sign a disclaimer.
Well over half of the local authorities covered in our survey seem to be advertising the fact that they offer public access to the Internet. Our volunteers did, however, report that, to the best of their knowledge, the service was not advertised in Western Isles, Angus, East Dunbartonshire, Orkney, East Ayrshire, Highland, Midlothian, Aberdeenshire or Aberdeen City. In eight of these authorities this finding was contrary to the information given to us by the local authorities themselves.

**Disabled Access**

The majority of our volunteers noticed no barriers to those members of the public with restricted mobility. However, three people reported difficulties with stairs (no lift), one person came across a revolving front door and one location had problems with access getting up to the building.
The following table compares the responses of local authorities that stated they had disabled access at all public Internet access locations with the mystery shopper findings on accessibility.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Local Authority stating that disabled access was available at all locations</th>
<th>Mystery Shopper Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Angus</td>
<td>1 reply / YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City of Edinburgh</td>
<td>5 replies / 4 YES. 1 NO stating that there were steep stairs in a leisure centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clackmannanshire</td>
<td>1 reply / YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comhairle nan Eilean Siar</td>
<td>2 replies / both YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Ayrshire</td>
<td>1 reply / YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Renfrewshire</td>
<td>1 reply / YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moray</td>
<td>1 reply / YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Ayrshire</td>
<td>no data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Lothian</td>
<td>1 reply / YES</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Is there additional technology to assist those with sensory impairment**

- Don’t Know (14%)
- Yes (37%)
- No (49%)

Nearly half of our respondents (21) noticed no additional technology to assist people with sensory impairment. However, 16 locations did provide some of the following:

- Large keyboard
- On-screen help
- Rollerball mouse
- Large mouse
- Magnifier
- Narrator/talkback keyboard
- On-screen keyboard
- Zoom text
- Braille
- Large screened monitor
- Speech recognition software
- Various facilities available – but must be booked in advance
At the Computer Terminal

It is important for those who are not familiar with Internet technology to have assistance when actually using the facilities. Our evidence shows that in the majority of cases (35) our volunteers reported that library staff were available to assist if required. All of the Councils that responded to our local authority survey stated that their staff provided assistance to members of the public. However, one volunteer in Glasgow reported that no personal assistance was available and four volunteers in Clackmannanshire (1), Scottish Borders (1), and Edinburgh (2) said that they did not know whether assistance was available or not.

Our members noticed that written instructions were available at nearly half of the locations visited. The following table compares the responses of local authorities that stated they provided written instructions at public Internet access locations with the mystery shopper findings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Local Authorities stating that written instructions were available</th>
<th>Mystery Shopper Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aberdeenshire</td>
<td>3 replies – all YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City of Edinburgh</td>
<td>5 replies 2 NO/1 YES/1 DON’T KNOW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dundee City</td>
<td>No data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Ayrshire</td>
<td>1 reply – DON’T KNOW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Falkirk</td>
<td>No data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fife</td>
<td>2 replies – both YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highland</td>
<td>2 replies – 1 YES/1 DON’T KNOW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moray</td>
<td>1 reply / YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Lanarkshire</td>
<td>No data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Ayrshire</td>
<td>No data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renfrewshire</td>
<td>2 replies – both YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scottish Borders</td>
<td>No data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Lothian</td>
<td>1 reply / YES</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Where written instructions were provided our respondents found them to be user-friendly with no one having any difficulties in understanding them.

Instructions were available in large print in only six locations visited. Braille was available in only one location and other formats (for example audio tape, CD-ROM) were available in only three locations. This is a very disappointing result and one that needs addressed as a matter of urgency.

**Accessing the Internet**

Our volunteers were asked to find the address of their local council website by whatever means and then log-on.
Thirty-eight volunteers used a range of methods to find their local authority’s website address. Of these, 14 people used a search engine, 11 found that the Council’s website was already set as the home page at the computer terminal and seven respondents knew the address already.

Our volunteers gained access to their local authority’s website quickly with nearly three-quarters doing so in one minute or less. No one waited any more than five minutes.

**Comments**

I asked colleagues (27 in total) if they knew of the council’s Internet access service – none did!  

**East Ayrshire**

Much easier than expected  

**Highland**

The service is very popular with children who do not have home access and I was told that I was lucky not to have to wait  

**Renfrewshire**

Staff here excellent, patient and helpful  

**City of Edinburgh**

Library staff over-worked – computers always full  

**Glasgow City**

Opening hours very limited for access  

**Moray**

Free training courses provided to ECDL standard  

**Aberdeenshire**
The Bigger Picture from the Public

Research Objectives

This stage of the research aimed to produce statistically relevant data on the views and experiences of the wider body of consumers in Scotland with regard to Internet use by:

- Producing a picture of the current levels in Scotland of Internet access and usage;
- Placing the specific issues arising from the preceding stages of the research within a wider over-arching public attitudinal context; and
- Highlighting current attitudes towards Internet access and usage and views on the extent of their value as a means of using or receiving local authority services.

Methodology

The Scottish Consumer Council (SCC) commissioned TNS System Three to undertake an omnibus poll of 1,042 adults in July 2004, looking at consumers’ views and experiences of Internet access. The survey covered access to the Internet at home and in other locations, local authority public Internet access services, and local authority services on-line.

Research Findings

Internet Access at Home

The first section of the survey looked at access to the Internet at home. It asked whether respondents had home Internet access, whether they would be interested if they did not have it, and whether they thought it was likely that they would get home access within the next 12 months.

Respondents were asked whether they currently had Internet access at home. The response was split exactly between those who did and those who did not.

The biggest differences were found between socio-economic and age groups. Internet access at home was found to decrease steadily through the socio-economic groups. While 71% of households in group AB were found to have Internet access, this declined to 57% of group C1 and 50% of group C2. Only 29% of respondents from group DE were found to have access to the Internet at home. There was seen to be less variation between age groups with no obvious pattern except for a large drop-off in home Internet access among the 65-plus age group.
Men (54%) were found to be slightly more likely than women (46%) to have home Internet access. Similarly, respondents from the West of Scotland reported lower levels of home Internet access (45%), to those in the East/South (54%) and the North (53%).

n=1042 (all respondents)
Respondents who did not have Internet access at home were asked whether they would be interested in home Internet access. Twenty-seven per cent reported that they would be quite or very interested in having access to the Internet at home, while 66% were not very or not at all interested.

The large drop-off seen for home Internet access among the 65-plus group was accompanied by a lack of interest among this group. Only 8% indicated that they would be interested in having access to the Internet at home. In younger groups interest was almost double the overall percentage with 50% of 16-24 year olds and 53% of 25-34 year olds reporting that they would be quite or very interested in home Internet access.

Despite the differences in home Internet access levels between socio-economic groups, there was little variation in relation to interest in home access. Respondents from group AB showed the most interest (34%), followed by C1 (29%) and DE (27%). Respondents from group C2 showed the least interest with 23% indicating that they would be quite or very interested in having home Internet access.

Male respondents without home Internet access (30%), who in the overall sample had been slightly more likely to have Internet access at home, were found to also be slightly more likely to be interested in home Internet access than women (25%). Conversely, respondents from the West of Scotland, which had a lower percentage of home Internet access than the East/South and North, were found to be more interested in obtaining home access. Thirty-two per cent of respondents in the...
West who did not have access to the Internet at home reported that they would be interested in having, while in the East/South and the North the figures were 20% and 27% respectively.

Those respondents who did not have access to the Internet at home but were interested in doing so were asked how likely they were to get Internet access at home in the next 12 months. Sixty-one per cent of respondents indicated that it was quite or very likely, while a quarter felt it was quite or very unlikely that they would have home Internet access in the next 12 months.

While the levels of interest acquiring home Internet access varied little between socio-economic groups, respondents from group DE (51%) were less likely to report that it was likely that they would get access in the next 12 months. There was little difference between groups AB (68%), and C1 and C2 (both 67%).

There was no overall pattern with regard to age groups. Respondents aged 25-34 years old were found to be most likely to think that they would have home Internet access within the next year. The least likely age group was 65-plus, with 44% reporting that it was quite or very likely that they would have access to the Internet at home within the next 12 months.

Respondents in the East/South of Scotland (71%) were found to think it more likely that they would get home Internet access in the next 12 months compared with respondents from the West (57%) and the North (53%).
Finally in this section, respondents who reported that they were not interested in Internet access at home were asked to give a reason based on a list of options. Forty-three per cent of respondents indicated that they did not want to use the Internet, while over a quarter did not feel they needed access to it. Fourteen per cent reported that the main reason they were unlikely to get Internet access in the next year was that they did not know how to use it.

Why would you not be interested in obtaining internet access at home?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do not want to use the internet</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do not need the internet</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do not know how to use the internet</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cannot afford to use the internet</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have internet access elsewhere</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too old</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not interested</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worries about children using it</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of time/too busy</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n = 345 (all those not interested in having Internet access at home)

Internet Access Outside the Home

Respondents were also asked whether they had Internet access outside the home. Under half (44%) had access to the Internet outside their home, with clear differences emerging in relation to socio-economic grouping and age. Respondents from group AB were found to be most likely to have access to the Internet outside their home, with 62% answering yes to this question. Levels of Internet access declined steadily through the groups, with only 28% of respondents from group DE indicating that they had Internet access outwith the home. A similar trend could be seen for age with under a fifth of respondents aged 65-plus (19%) having access to the Internet outside their home, compared with 62% of those aged 16-24.
Respondents who had access to the Internet at home (50%) were found to be more likely to also have access outwith the home than those who did not have home access (37%).
A number of locations were presented to respondents who had access to the Internet outside their home. They were then asked at which, if any, of these they accessed the Internet. The most common location was the workplace with just over half of respondents (51%) reporting that they accessed the Internet there. Other locations included libraries (25%) and relatives’ homes (16%).

Respondents from lower socio-economic groups were found to be much less likely to have Internet access at work. Seventy per cent of those from group AB had access at work. This declined steadily through the groups with 61% of C1 having access to the Internet at work, 46% of C2, and only 14% of respondents from group DE.

Respondents who reported having Internet access at school or college/university were, unsurprisingly, most likely to be aged in the 16–24 age range. Respondents from the middle age ranges were most likely to have access to the Internet at work, while older respondents became more likely to access the Internet at a relative’s home (63% of respondents aged 65–plus).

**Local Authority Public Internet Access Services**

As we have said, public Internet services provided by local authorities play an important role in the Scottish Executive’s policy on universal Internet access. The omnibus survey asked respondents whether they had heard of public Internet access services provided by their local authority, whether they had ever made use of public Internet access services provided by their local authority, and their reasons for not having used a public Internet access service.
Only 38% of respondents had heard of public Internet access services provided by their local authority. Respondents were found to be more likely to have heard of local authority provided public Internet access services if they had access to the Internet at home (44%) or outside the home (46%).

Respondents from the higher socio-economic groups were also more likely to have heard of these services: 44% of respondents from group AB compared with 36% of group DE. In relation to age, the youngest (31% of 16-24 year olds) and oldest (23% of the 65-plus group) age groups were found to be least likely to be aware of public Internet access services provided by their local authority.
Respondents who had heard of public Internet services provided by their local authority were then asked whether they had ever made use of them. Only one-third reported that they had made use of public Internet services provided by their local authority (13% of the total survey sample). Again, there was found to have been less use among the lower socio-economic groups, with only 27% of respondents from group DE having used public Internet services provided by their local authority. The age group found to be least likely to have used these services were the 65-plus group, although there was no clear pattern of use overall in relation to age.
Thirty-seven per cent of respondents who had access to the Internet at home had also used local-authority-provided public Internet services, compared with 28% who did not have home access. Under half the respondents who reported that they have Internet access outside the home (45%) had used public Internet services provided by their local authority.

Respondents who were aware of local-authority-provided public Internet services but had not made use of them were asked to give a reason. By far the most common reason for not having made use of local-authority-provided public Internet access services was having Internet access at home. Almost half of respondents gave this answer (46%). Other reason included not wanting or needing to use the Internet (both 15%), not having had reason to but would consider it in the future (11%) and having more convenient access at another location (10%).

n=397 (all heard of public Internet access)
n=266 (all who have ever used a public Internet access service)

**Local Authority Services On-line**
Local authorities are increasingly making services available on-line as part of the drive toward e-government. A list of situations were presented to respondents who were then asked whether they would prefer to contact their local authority directly (in person or by phone) or on-line. The situations given were:

- a general service enquiry
- paying council tax
- making a complaint
- requesting a service
- paying for a service
- seeking advice
- making a planning objection.

The following chart shows that for each situation there was a strong preference for contacting the local authority directly (between 83–88%). For on-line contact, making a complaint was the least popular situation with only 6% reporting that they would prefer to contact their council on-line while paying for a service received the most, albeit limited, support at 12%.
Respondents were then asked how confident they would be that the quality of service received on-line would match that provided via telephone or in person, and also how confident they would be that using local authority services on-line would protect their privacy. Around one-third of respondents expressed low levels of confidence.

n=1042 (all respondents)
A number of trends could be seen in relation to levels of confidence that echo other findings from the survey. Better-off respondents, those from the lowest age group, and those with Internet access either in or outside the home were all found to be more likely to feel either quite or very confident that the quality of service received on-line would match that provided via telephone or in person, and that using local authority services on-line would protect their privacy. However, these groups were seen to have lower levels of ‘don’t know’ being reported, rather than lower levels of being quite or very unconfident.

How confident would you be that the quality of service you received on-line would match that provided via telephone or in person?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>AB</th>
<th>C1</th>
<th>C2</th>
<th>DE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quite/Very</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>40</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither confident</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quite/Very</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

How confident would you be that using local authority services on-line would protect your privacy?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>AB</th>
<th>C1</th>
<th>C2</th>
<th>DE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quite/Very</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither confident</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quite/Very</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Conclusions

Our research presents a positive picture of the way in which local authorities provide public Internet access services. In most areas, the services are generally well-integrated, and seen as part and parcel of local library service provision rather than an add-on extra because:

• They are free at the point of access;
• They extend the range of additional facilities, such as printing, e-mail and purchasing, needed to enable consumers to obtain practical benefit from using the computer;
• They are supported by investment in staff training and a commitment to offering assistance to users; and
• Pro-active attempts are made to promote the service to as many people as possible.

Within this framework, our research found many examples of good practice and innovation at individual council level, and most of these had been developed within the context of an over-arching written policy.

However, we remain concerned that such a policy did not exist in nine of the local authorities in our survey. This leaves the service at risk of being developed in an ad hoc fashion and applied inconsistently by frontline providers. It gives no solid foundation to maintaining and developing a service that is sustainable into the future. And it does little to encourage, from corporate level, the sharing of good practice or provide the impetus or rationale to continuously improve the service and reflect technological progress.

Authorities generally provided a significant number of individual terminals across a varied range of sites. Our survey did not extend to finding out the exact location of every local authority Internet access terminal. However, we did note that five local authorities with a significant rural and/or island population provided their service in a relatively small number of sites and we question the extent to which the service is physically available to all. There is a particular issue in relation to the local authorities who cover Scotland’s islands and the extent to which a terminal is provided on every island where even a small number of residents may have less access to basic services and thus require proportionally larger access to electronic services.

Local authorities need to reach out to disadvantaged groups and coverage could be enhanced by providing a mobile service, currently provided by only five local authorities in our survey.
A more imaginative approach to premises used would help ensure that services reached excluded groups. For example, we would like to see local authorities work more with community groups, churches and the voluntary sector whereby excluded consumers could use local-authority-provided equipment in their local community café, neighbourhood drop-in centre or church hall. In addition to widening access, this would help build the capacity of local communities, a key feature of the Scottish Executive’s strategy for digital inclusion. We would also like to see local authorities work with local businesses in placing terminals in premises where people go on a day-to-day basis, for example, local shops.

We were encouraged by the general flexibility that we found in opening times, thus making services more accessible to a wider group of people. Nevertheless, we would like to see more local authorities follow the lead of the four who provided a Sunday service. This need not necessarily be more expensive. It could be done by using more locations that are already open, such as leisure centres, rather than extending the opening hours of those that are not.

We remain disappointed that a minority of local authorities are continuing to charge for basic access to the Internet. This is of some concern in the light of the Scottish Executive’s drive towards universal Internet access by the end of this year and its reliance on public services to ensure that this policy objective is fulfilled.

We were also concerned that only nine local authorities could confirm to us that every public Internet access terminal was accessible to disabled people. This is unacceptable and needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

We were also disappointed at the lack, in most local authorities, of any consistent evaluation of the effectiveness of their service provision in relation to public access to the Internet, other than through limited, process-based monitoring of take-up. Only three authorities adopted a wider approach to assessing whether the service being provided met the needs of the service users, a clear requirement of Best Value, or that it was successful in meeting policy objectives. And despite the fact that there are policy imperatives to both securing digital inclusion through local public Internet terminals and to continuing to develop electronic service delivery, only one local authority had a written strategy for the future provision of public access to the Internet.

We were disappointed that 11 local authorities failed to respond to our survey.

Although our sample of volunteer mystery shoppers was relatively small it covered nearly three-quarters of the local authority areas in Scotland (23 out of 32 - 72%). The overall picture was again very positive. Public Internet facilities were generally situated in local authority libraries and were very well used. These facilities seem to be
situated within easy reach of most of our volunteers, whether they were using public transport or their own car. Internet access was largely free of charge and available on the spot without need for prior booking. In many areas, our volunteers were aware of measures taken by their local authority to advertise their public Internet access facilities. Some local authorities had made significant investment in ensuring that terminals could be used by people with a sensory impairment and our volunteers reported that in most cases there was help available from library assistants for people with no experience of Internet technology. There were written instructions in nearly half of the locations visited by our members and where these instructions were available they were generally very easy to understand.

However, this ‘snapshot’ survey of consumers’ experiences at local level did highlight some issues of concern, particularly in relation to meeting the needs of disabled people, and confirming the concerns we had found in this area in the local authority survey. This is particularly relevant in the light of the new obligations to service providers under the Disability Discrimination Act to ensure that their facilities are accessible in practice and fit for function by everyone who wishes to use them.

We found evidence in many cases that public Internet services were not universally accessible to people with a disability. This included:

- Five instances of physical barriers to access for people with restricted mobility, involving premises having stairs and no lift installed, inadequate front entrances and uneven approaches to buildings.
- A worrying lack of additional technology to assist those with sensory impairment in 21 locations.
- Little evidence of written instructions being available in alternative formats such as large print or Braille.

Our concerns about the charging practices of some local authorities were reflected in the experiences of volunteers in three areas. Universal Internet access will not be achieved where services are only available at a cost.

While over half of the local authorities in our mystery shopper survey were found to be taking steps to advertise their Internet access facilities, we were disappointed that, in nine local authority areas, volunteers reported that, to the best of their knowledge, the service was not advertised. Pro-active, targeted and imaginative promotion of access to the Internet has to be an essential part of a service that is accessible to all parts of the community and, in particular, excluded groups.

We were pleased that local authority responses were generally substantiated by the experiences of our mystery shoppers, with the notable exception of advertising, mentioned above. However, there were still some discrepancies in relation to having
to book, charging, provision of written instructions, staff assistance and disabled access. We urge the individual authorities mentioned in the report to address these issues now and to ensure that they are indeed practising what they preach.

Our quantitative survey confirmed that, in Scotland, the Digital Divide still exists with marked disparity among socio-economic groups regarding access to the Internet and the confidence to use it. Findings were similar for older people. The development and implementation of policies regarding on-line service delivery or universal Internet access must be tempered by these findings and by the reality of disadvantaged consumers’ experiences.

Just as important is the evidence of a real lack of interest by many people in obtaining access to the Internet in the future, or in believing that they have a need for it at all. Policy development and service provision must continue to take account of these choices.

But we should aim to make sure that these choices are as informed as possible. There is some evidence that people are more concerned about the risks rather than the potential benefits of using on-line services.¹⁸ openscotland correctly emphasises the importance of having on-line services that are trustworthy and reliable. However, perhaps more could be done to highlight how using on-line services could actually save people time and money as well.

Of prime concern to us is the evidence that the people most likely to be aware of, and use, public Internet access points, and to be confident in using on-line services, are those who already have it at home, that is, those who are better off in society. Public Internet access is not plugging the gap in the Digital Divide if anything it is consolidating the barriers on each side. This echoes our earlier statements that local authorities need to do much more to promote their Internet access services, to target services to those most in need of them and to disadvantaged groups, and to evaluate service provision from the perspective of the service users.

Finally, in returning to the themes of the Scottish Executive’s strategy for digital inclusion, our research findings lead us to make the following assessment of current progress:

¹⁸ See Gilbert, Balestrini and Littleboy, Barriers & Benefits in the Adoption of e-government, published in the International Journal of Public Management, No 4, 2004
**Awareness and Promotion**
While some local authorities were using imaginative ways to publicise their Internet access services, the experience was not borne out by our volunteers. Our quantitative survey showed low levels of public awareness, particularly in relation to disadvantaged consumers. Much more needs to be done in this area using a wider range of methods targeted towards those who need it most.

There is scope for examining good practice in other countries. Our background research uncovered the fact that in Estonia, which has a relatively high level of Internet penetration, street signs give the direction and distance to the nearest public Internet access point.

*The signs are marked with @Internet, an arrow and the distance to the nearest of 700 public Internet access points across the country.*

**Access**
There has been a significant increase in the number of public Internet access terminals but too much reliance on assessing success through proximity, a superficial indicator of success, and take-up, a measure based on those who already know about a service. The low levels of interest in using public Internet services by disadvantaged groups may be an indicator that terminals are not accessible ‘at an appropriate time, place, method and price,’ and that more needs to be done to explore what barriers exist and what action should be taken to break them down.

**Giving Support and Building Skills**
We found widespread recognition by local authorities that users who wished to use new technology needed advice and support, and examples of good practice in how this was provided. But this did not go far enough in relation to the needs of disadvantaged consumers, and was of particular concern in relation to disabled people. Our quantitative research showed lower levels of confidence held by those in lower socio-economic groups. We would like to see local authorities adopt a more pro-active agenda in ensuring that those who may have less confidence, or who have specific needs, receive the help that they need.

**Developing the On-line Content and Services that Disadvantaged People Need**
This was beyond the scope of our project but we emphasise again our findings that many of the most disadvantaged people in our society are still largely disengaged from the information society.

---

19 OECD, *Regulatory Reform as a Tool for Bridging the Digital Divide*, 2004
Community Involvement
This too was beyond the scope of our project, although we are well aware that much good work is being undertaken at community level across Scotland by very many agencies involved in social exclusion and capacity building, and by communities themselves. We would like local authorities to do more in the way of outreach and partnership work to get core public Internet access services into communities.

The recommendations that follow present our suggestions for a consumer-focused, practical agenda for policy-makers and service providers to work towards making universal access a reality rather than an aspiration.
Recommendations

To the Scottish Executive

1. The Scottish Executive should strengthen the focus of its policy on universal access to the Internet towards the needs of disadvantaged consumers and excluded groups. The targets for measuring achievement of this policy should be refined accordingly in the light of our research findings and in reflection of the continuing, significant disparity in access to the Internet between different socio-economic groups. These targets should be based on indicators that incorporate a definition of ‘access’ in its widest sense, based on the reality of consumers’ experiences in relation to Internet access and the barriers facing those who are currently excluded.

Quantitative, process-based indicators will give only a superficial picture of progress towards universal Internet access, based on a provider rather than a user-centred framework of assessment. Proximity as a measure of access is a geographical definition of a service installation and not of its actual accessibility. Take-up as a measure of access is confined to those who already know about and use a service. Indicators of progress must be able to give a picture of whether policy and practice have enabled all groups to use services and to feel that they have obtained benefits from them.

To Local Authorities

2. Local authorities should have a clear, published written policy on public Internet access services. This over-arching policy should include individual policies on all of the following items:

- Pro-active provision of assistance and support to users by staff and its inclusion in staff job descriptions and training and development programmes
- Provision of supporting technology (for example, printers), hardware and software with a minimum specification, and an agreed minimum bandwith specification so that users gain practical benefits from access
- Provision of instructions
- Approach to charging
- Distance travelled by people who wish to use the service
- Transport links
- Best practice in accessibility for disabled people
- Promotion, outreach and targeting of disadvantaged groups
- Partnership provision
- Flexible opening
- Out-of-hours use of schools
- Imaginative use of locations
- The specific needs of ethnic minority groups
- The specific needs of individual remote and island communities
- Evaluation of the effectiveness of the service in meeting the needs of all groups in the community
- A written strategy for the future development and provision of public access to the Internet.

3. Local authorities should have one clearly identifiable lead department for public Internet access.
   In the case of three local authorities, we received returned questionnaires, containing different responses, from different departments and also different locations within the same departments. This suggests to us a lack of clarity over who has the lead role in policy terms.

To the Accounts Commission

4. The Accounts Commission should develop outcome-based statutory performance indicators for public Internet access services in local government.
   The existing performance indicators are focused on process and limited to measuring take-up and usage. Indicators should incorporate a wider approach to assessing whether the service being provided meets the needs of service users or is successful in meeting policy objectives. The Scottish Consumer Council’s 2004 research report *How do you Rate your Council?* used research with consumers to set out how local government performance indicators could be made both useful and relevant to consumers, service providers and policy-makers.

To Ofcom

5. Ofcom’s published updates on Internet and broadband uptake should contain disaggregated data on the Scottish market.
   Our report outlines the particular issues in Scotland and the extent of the detriment facing disadvantaged consumers. Ofcom is undertaking ongoing measurement of uptake and publishes consolidated UK data on a quarterly basis. This gives stakeholders in Scotland no indication of progress and in effect means that the updates are of very limited value in the Scottish situation. If Ofcom is to truly fulfil its remit as a UK regulator, then it has to publish information that is useful and meaningful to Scotland where the responsibility for implementing digital inclusion and rolling out broadband both lie within the devolved responsibilities of the Scottish Executive.

6. Ofcom should ensure, and should be able to demonstrate, that its current, and all future, reviews of the universal service obligation (USO) in telecoms are informed by a particular analysis of the Scottish market and that, in the Scottish context, regulatory policy in Internet access is informed by social as well as economic factors.

There is a current requirement on BT to make available provision of functional Internet access to users on request. This provision is specified as a delivery obligation and is expressed in economic terms relating to minimum bandwidth and data speeds. This will do very little to counteract digital exclusion and yet, in name, Ofcom and BT can claim to have achieved universal access. Effective Internet access needs to go more than this. We expect Ofcom to conduct its reviews of the USO in liaison with the Scottish Executive, so that its regulatory decisions take account of the social implications for consumers in Scotland and have regard to the Scottish Executive’s role in delivering social, environmental and economic well-being. In order to command public confidence, Ofcom should be able to demonstrate evidence of its engagement with the Scottish Executive.

Provision, however, does not in itself, secure access for significant segments of the population…..It is a conflict between ‘e-policy’ and regulatory policy.  

---

Checklist for Local Authorities on a User-Focused Public Internet Access Service

1. Do you have one clearly identifiable lead department, and named contact, for public Internet access services?
2. Are all your staff made aware of the lead department and named contact for public Internet access services?
3. Do you have a written policy on public Internet services?
4. Is your written policy given to all staff?
5. Is your written policy made available to the public?
6. Does your written policy include all of the following?
   7. Pro-active provision of assistance and support to users by staff and its inclusion in staff job descriptions and training and development programmes.
   8. Provision of supporting technology (for example printers), hardware and software with a minimum specification, and an agreed minimum bandwidth specification so that users gain practical benefits from access.
   9. Provision of clear, accessible written instructions for users at all terminals.
   10. Free access to the Internet and clear, accessible information for users on any other charges that may apply, for example, in relation to printing.
   11. Consideration of the maximum distance that consumers should have to travel to obtain public access to the Internet.
   12. The accessibility of all access points via public transport.
   13. Best practice in accessibility for disabled people
   14. Promotion, outreach and targeting of disadvantaged groups.
   15. Partnership provision.
   17. Out of hours’ use of schools.
   18. Imaginative use of locations.
   19. The specific needs of ethnic minority groups.
   20. The specific needs of individual remote and island communities.
   21. Do you evaluate the effectiveness of the service in meeting the needs of all groups in the community?
   22. Do you have a written strategy for the future development and provision of public access to the Internet?
### Annex – Respondent Details

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Local Authority</th>
<th>Responded to LA survey</th>
<th>Locations covered by mystery shopper volunteers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aberdeen City</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>yes (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aberdeenshire</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angus</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argyll and Bute</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>yes (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clackmannshire</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comhairle nan Eilean Siar</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dumfries and Galloway</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>yes (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dundee City</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Ayrshire</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Dunbartonshire</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>yes (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Lothian</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Renfrewshire</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City of Edinburgh</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Falkirk</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fife</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glasgow City</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highland</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inverclyde</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midlothian</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>yes (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moray</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Ayrshire</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Lanarkshire</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orkney Islands</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>yes (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perth and Kinross</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renfrewshire</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scottish Borders</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shetland Islands</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Ayrshire</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Lanarkshire</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stirling</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Dunbartonshire</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Lothian</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes (1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>