freedom of access
research on public Internet access in Scotland

Summary of findings
June 2005

The Scottish Consumer Council (SCC) decided to carry out research in order to examine how far the policy commitments made by the UK government in the year 2000 and by the Scottish Executive in 2001 to achieving universal access to the Internet, either at home or by using a public computer terminal, by 2005 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 also how they provided public Internet access services in their area. 21 local authorities responded to our postal questionnaire.

• **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. 43 volunteers helped us with this part of the research.

• **The wider public** – we commissioned a quantitative survey of 1,042 members of the general public to obtain statistically representative data on both access to the Internet and attitudes to using the Internet.

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;

• identify any barriers that existed and how they could best be dismantled to ensure access for all.

Research findings

**Local Authorities – Policy and Practice**

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 to the range of additional facilities, such as printing, email 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;

• 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 overarching written policy.

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1 UK Office of the e-envoy, UK Online Annual Report, September 2000
2 Scottish Executive, Digital Scotland, Connecting Scotland’s People, September 2001
Issues

• Nine local authorities had no written policy on public Internet access. 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.

• 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.

• Most public Internet access terminals were to be found in libraries. 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.

• We were disappointed to find that 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 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 takeup. 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.

• Despite the fact that there are policy imperatives to both securing digital inclusion through local public Internet terminals and to continue to develop electronic service delivery, only one local authority had a written strategy for the future provision of public access to the Internet.

Public Internet Services – Consumers’ Experiences

The overall picture was 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 available in nearly half of the locations visited by our members and where these instructions were available they were generally very easy to understand.
Issues

- We found evidence 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 twenty-one 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.

The Bigger Picture from the Public

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, ranging from 71% in groups AB to 29% in groups DE.

There is 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.
## How interested would you be in having Internet access at Home?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interest Level</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very interested</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quite interested</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither interested nor uninterested</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not very interested</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not at all interested</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don't know</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Under half (44%) of our respondents had access to the Internet outside their home, with clear differences emerging in relation to socio-economic grouping, ranging from 62% in groups AB to 28% in groups DE.

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.

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.

We found little appetite for using online local authority services. For each potential service there was a strong preference for contacting the local authority directly (between 83-88%). For online contact, making a complaint was the least popular situation with only 6% reporting that they would prefer to contact their council online while paying for a service received the most, albeit limited, support at 12%.

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 online services, are those who already have it at home i.e. 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.
Recommendations

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.

2. There should be one clearly identifiable lead department for public Internet access and local authorities should have a clear, published written policy on public Internet access services, together with an agreed strategy for the future development of the service. Our checklist at the end of this summary contains the key features of a user-focused policy on public Internet access services.

3. The Accounts Commission should develop outcome-based statutory performance indicators for public Internet access services in local government.

4. Ofcom’s published updates on Internet and broadband uptake should contain dis-aggregated data on the Scottish market.

5. 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.

More Information


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The Scottish Consumer Council

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Published by the Scottish Consumer Council. June 2005.
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?
   - 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 bandwidth specification so that users gain practical benefits from access.
   - Provision of clear, accessible written instructions for users at all terminals.
   - Free access to the Internet and clear, accessible information for users on any other charges that may apply, for example, in relation to printing.
   - Consideration of the maximum distance that consumers should have to travel to obtain public access to the Internet.
   - The accessibility of all access points via public transport.
   - 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.

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?