

Exclusion through Innovation

The Social Exclusion Unit (ODPM) has recently launched a project, 'Inclusion through Innovation: Tackling social exclusion through new technologies', that aims to explore the potential that Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) has to promote equality and improve life chances for disadvantaged people, and to transform the delivery of services to them.

The Unit is talking directly to disadvantaged people and to those who provide services to them, as well as many organisations with expertise in this field. As part of this information-gathering exercise, the Unit devised a public questionnaire asking a series of questions about improved service delivery and empowerment of service users. In the introduction to this survey some examples are given of existing good practice by government and local authorities. The People's Network is not mentioned.

This omission is concerning given that a recent MORI survey found that 16 per cent of the public aged 16 and over have used the internet at a public library. According to *The People's Network: evaluation summary* (Big Lottery Fund, 2004) "The People's Network has been markedly successful in broadening the library's user base" and "The credibility of the library service has been enhanced, helping libraries to reposition themselves at the heart of the local community."

On a less positive note, the evaluation noted that "the biggest challenge facing the further development of the People's Network is the need for organisational capacity to drive forward the vision of ICT within the modern public library". Another serious challenge to the development of the People's Network is the decision by many library authorities to introduce charges for public access to the internet. This creates a major barrier to internet use by disadvantaged people.

A survey carried out by the Society of Chief Librarians (SCL) in 2003 found that one in ten library authorities were charging for use of the People's Network. When this survey was carried out again in 2004, the number of authorities levying a charge had risen to 15 per cent. More councils are considering introducing charges in 2005, which could increase the total to 18 per cent of all library authorities.

Public libraries were given £100 million by the New Opportunities Fund (NOF) to install the People's Network and a further £20 million for staff training. The policy context in which these programs were implemented included three primary agendas:

- universal access to the internet
- take up of ICT among the digitally excluded and socially excluded; and
- lifelong learning.

For NOF, the programs were part of a wider suite of ICT initiatives designed to improve access to lifelong learning through the use of ICT. When the

People's Network was evaluated by the Tavistock Institute, they analysed the impact of these programs on library users, library services (including staff) and broader policy objectives (including social inclusion and lifelong learning).

The primary vehicle for gathering data for this evaluation was a set of 16 case studies: nine from England, three from Scotland, three from Wales and one from Northern Ireland. If these case study authorities are cross-referenced with the SCL survey of councils which charge for internet access, we find that: only one of the English case studies (Kent) is charging for access; none of the Welsh case studies are charging; we do not have data on the Scottish and Northern Ireland case studies. The authorities studied by the Tavistock Institute were not, therefore, typical in terms of charging for internet access.

The evaluation found that the People's Network was often used to improve or enhance an existing service. But they found fewer examples of more innovative services where the People's Network had added a quite new service not previously possible: "There was little evidence of initiatives around e-Government and the local economic development agenda." In terms of the effects of The People's Network on library users, the evaluation was constrained by the lack of data gathering and evaluation activities by libraries themselves.

The Tavistock Institute noted that "many libraries have had to find ways of rationing use, such as providing express terminals, advanced booking and enforced time limits on sessions". Another major rationing method – charges – was not mentioned in the evaluation report. The SCL survey indicates that councils who charge for internet access do so for one of two major reasons: to raise income and/or to ration demand:

- Buckinghamshire – "Have been charging since August 2003. Income of £10,00 per month, usage down by 30+%"
- Cumbria - "We have an income target of £82,500 for the County and are on target for reaching this"
- Milton Keynes – "We introduced charges in November 2003 as a result of budget pressure. It has had the result of cutting the queues. There has been a reduction in usage."
- Northamptonshire – "An income target of £50,000 pa was set. We achieve this target by charging £1 per session".
- Torbay – "We offer one hour per day free of charge, but charge at the rate of £1.50 per hour thereafter. This was introduced because of the demand for access, which we couldn't meet. This measure has not produced much income, but it was not intended to"

Most authorities which charge for internet access follow the Torbay principle of providing free access for the first thirty minutes or hour, and charging thereafter. This enables them to say that they provide free internet access and means they can meet the letter, if not the spirit, of the NOF grant which allowed them to offer the service in the first place. But anyone who sends or receives emails or surfs the net knows that this often takes more than thirty minutes, or even an hour.

By charging for access these authorities are providing a two tier service – one level of service for those who can afford to pay, and another level for those who cannot. People in the latter category need access the most because they often do not have a PC at home. The Tavistock Institute found that users were overwhelmingly positive about ICT in libraries, “especially the free internet access. A majority of users interviewed said it would be difficult or impossible to access the internet elsewhere.”

The Tavistock Institute found some users were concerned that book stock was being replaced by computers, while others “felt uncomfortable with the changing library atmosphere as a result of so many young people being attracted by the computers.” These concerns were shared by some staff who were anxious about “the influx of new user groups to the library”. The evaluation found that there was a widespread need to implement “strategies for managing new and unfamiliar groups of library users.” One of the key lessons and challenges was “managing new library user groups at the same time as the expectations of traditional groups.”

Other challenges include organisational capacity, strength of leadership, and “the workforce composition and ‘identity’ of the public library profession.” The evaluation suggests that “technology and training, on their own, are not sufficient if the People’s Network is to be a catalyst for modernising the public library service”. The People’s Network should be used to develop community based learning (as both an individual and a collective activity) and to support social and community objectives, responding to active community interests and agendas.

Most of the service planning and development of the People’s Network was provider-led. In terms of content, there was limited evidence that library services were addressing gaps in internet material for people whose needs are not served by mainstream provision, such as information geared to low literacy levels, minority languages and Black and Minority Ethnic groups.

In a follow up report, *Books and Bytes* (MLA, 2005), the Tavistock Institute reinforced many of its earlier findings: “The whole service needs to change and evolve, including the composition of the workforce and professional identities.” Library staff need to “get out from behind the desks and, preferably, to dismantle and burn them.” Technology alone does not solve anything: what we actually need is organisational and institutional change – “the strategic inertia has to be overcome.” The report calls for a ‘new paradigm’ shared by all stakeholders.

The report also recommends that the People’s Network “needs to remain a free service that people can turn up and use.” This is no longer the case in a growing number of authorities. Many councils now charge for internet access while even more have introduced booking and other rationing systems. If people turn up to use the service it is likely that they will have to book a terminal and, in some cases, pay for the privilege after 30 minutes or an hour.

This is a significant departure from the original vision of the People's Network to 'level the playing field' by expanding access to ICT. The intention was that every library, no matter how small or remote, should offer a similar standard of ICT connectivity and service. As a result, a citizen should be able to go to any public library in the UK and be confident of gaining access to the internet and of finding a standard platform and package of services free of charge.

This vision has been undermined by the actions of a significant minority of authorities who have introduced charges to raise income and ration use. It is to be hoped that this situation will be rectified via the Public Library Service Standards, Impact Measures and Comprehensive Performance Assessment which could specify free internet access among their criteria. Authorities which charge for the Peoples Network should be required to offer it as a free service, or be made to refund the NOF grant.

References

Books and Bytes: new service paradigms for the 21st century library (MLA, 2005)

Inclusion through Innovation: tackling social exclusion through new technologies (ODPM, 2004)

Survey of charges for People's Network (SCL, 2004)

The People's Network: evaluation summary (Big Lottery Fund, 2004)

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