VITAL issues: the perception, and use, of ICT services in UK public libraries

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1. Introduction

ICT (information and communications technology) facilities for public use in UK public libraries are set to expand rapidly in the next few years, providing a network of access to learning opportunities and services. Government policies to tackle issues of social exclusion and to stimulate the uptake of lifelong learning have prioritised the role of public libraries in being one of the key delivery points for ICT access. Most of the capital funding for ICT infrastructure has, to date, come from sources external to core library funding; the sustainability of services will be a key area of importance in the future. In order to prove the value and impact of providing access to ICT facilities and services within public libraries, measurements will need to be developed and implemented which can provide managers, funders, and policy makers with reliable information about the uses made of these services and how they contribute to the government's social agenda. Service continuation and development that matches the needs of users is essential if the public library is to thrive in an increasingly electronically delivered "information society". This paper presents the results from the VITAL (Value and Impact of IT Access in Libraries) research project, which set out to test methodologies – focussing on the need for qualitative indicators of value – suitable for providing evidence to support the role libraries have begun to play in delivering electronic services to the public in the UK.

2. Background

Advances in public access ICT services within UK public libraries have taken place at a rapid pace during the last five years. During the early 1990s, the provision of access to PCs for open learning, to networked CD-ROMs and to the Internet began to develop

throughout the UK, although on rather a piecemeal basis and at very different rates in different library authorities. With the publication, in 1997, of the vision statement, [New Library: the People's Network](#) (LIC, 1997), a new era of coordinated, strategic ICT provision was ushered in. The report was published by the then Library and Information Commission, a body established by the UK government in 1995, and was followed up a year later by [Building the New Library Network](#) (LIC, 1998), which set out in detail plans for implementing the vision, concentrating on three main areas: content, training, and infrastructure. Government support for the vision was evidenced through a favourable [formal response](#) (DCMS 1998), and, more significantly, the allocation of funding to each of the three main areas. Through the New Opportunities Fund (which distributes monies raised by the UK lottery), £20 million has been targetted at staff training, £50 million at content digitisation programmes, and £100 million is to be allocated to library authorities for the development of infrastructure. The roll-out of the People's Network is now being overseen by the [People's Network Team](#), part of a newly established organisation, [re:source](#), set up to bring together the former Library and Information Commission and the Museums and Galleries Commission in one cross-sectoral body. The drive from the public library community to take advantage of the opportunities offered by ICT has been matched by the UK government's enthusiasm to make the most of technological developments in order to support key points of its social agenda. The major policy directions are articulated in the policy statement [Our Information Age](#) (Central Office of Information, 1998), which was published in 1998, and set out the government's plans to exploit the benefits of the information age for all citizens in the UK. The key areas, outlined in this paper, and backed up by numerous other documents and initiatives (1), are:

- Lifelong Learning; the expansion of access to quality materials, and the encouragement to use learning opportunities;
- Increasing access to, and knowledge of, ICT facilities, both as necessary for the delivery of learning and training opportunities, and as essential tools for citizens to thrive in the 21st century in terms of access to services, and to work, cultural and leisure opportunities;
- Social inclusion, including via the uptake of the ICT and learning opportunities outlined above;
- Modernisation and delivery of government services, as set out in the [Modernising Government](#) (Cabinet Office, 1999) white paper, which focuses on five key commitments, including the use of new technology to meet the needs of citizens and business. It is envisaged that libraries will act as one access point for these services.

The UK, then, is moving towards the government target, set out in [Connecting the learning society: National Grid for Learning](#) (DfEE, 1997), of connecting all public libraries to the Internet by 2002. The vision of a public library network, as set out in [New Library: the People's Network](#), providing access to information, learning opportunities and government services is set to become a reality in the near future. The provision of ICT is generally perceived as a crucial development that will place the library service at the heart of the UK's emerging "information society". However, it will become increasingly necessary to set in place proper models of evaluation and assessment if the real value of providing ICT services and facilities to the public is to be demonstrated.

In order to support the demand for continued investment, libraries will have to be able to prove that ICT services are valued by the public and that the impact of these services justifies the cost. Once capital funding from central government has expired (in this initial round of funding at least) it will inevitably fall to individual library authorities to juggle existing resources or to make a sound case to local government – which funds the UK's public library system – to increase the revenue and capital budgets available. This in turn

will require either increases in local taxes, or cuts to other local authority funded services, such as social services, housing, road maintenance, et cetera. This future battle for funding will expose the tension and possible conflict between local and central government; central government has been clear in dictating policy which supports and expects the delivery of ICT services in public libraries as part of its own agenda, yet local government which funds the services has other, local agendas, to consider. Given the backdrop of resource cutting which has been a feature of public library funding over the last few decades, proving the value and worth of ICT services will become essential, particularly within local contexts where decisions about resources are made.

The UK government is also keen to implement indicators and assessments of library services, both to justify spending and to attempt to introduce standard levels of services across the country. Current measurements of library performance, as required by the [Audit Commission](#), and as part of annual library plans tend to be quantitative measurements and still focus on the traditional elements of library services such as book issues, et cetera. The recently published Department for Culture, Media and Sport [library standards consultation paper](#), for instance (DCMS, 2000), whilst recognising that “ICT development is a key issue” concentrates on standards which “recognise the importance and popularity of print-based services and community resources.” Community resources are, of course, increasingly electronically delivered; however, only two ICT standards are suggested, one relating specifically to the provision of online catalogues (OPACs), the other being a figure for total number of workstations (0.7 per thousand population) *including* OPACs. Whilst it is valid to state that the provision of ICT services is still very much in the developing stages, these do seem a little unambitious even for those libraries still to benefit from significant investment in this area. The standards also include a measure relating to annual visits to a library’s web site, although the DCMS acknowledges that no data is yet available to monitor this particular standard. It is notoriously difficult to gather such data reliably, as well as to interpret it in any meaningful way, as “hits” to a web site do not directly relate to individual instances of use, far less reveal anything significant about satisfaction, usefulness of the information, et cetera.

There are, however, signs of a growing awareness that some other forms of evaluation, particularly of a qualitative nature, are required to genuinely assess value and impact of all public services, rather than just levels of provision or service performance. Thus the [Audit Commission performance indicators for 2000/2001](#) (DETR, 1999) include the assessment of satisfaction levels of customers (those seeking a particular book or piece of information). As part of local government, libraries are required to participate in the ongoing [Best Value](#) programme, placing “a duty of best value on local authorities to deliver services to clear standards - by the most economic, efficient and effective means available” (Audit Commission, 2000). Best Value will be a continuous process of service improvement and includes consultation with users as a key component, something with which public libraries are very familiar (Liddle, 1999).

These developments combine with an increasing interest from library authorities themselves, particularly in light of a focus on more formal provision of lifelong learning opportunities and development of ICT learning centres, in finding ways of demonstrating the value of what public libraries provide and the impact of, particularly, ICT services on the individuals and communities using them.

3. Research context and areas of concern

One of the key issues for public libraries is that of proving that they are the most suitable

location, or at least one of the best placed, for ICT services to be accessed. Library usage figures interpreted broadly do support the claim that the public library is indeed a “democratic” institution, open to all:

Public libraries are already used by 58 per cent of the population. They are a first stop for information, they are widely used by children and young people as an adjunct to formal learning, and their reputation for supporting the knowledge-seeker is unparalleled. Their unique combination of resources, services and personal support attracts some 1.3 million visitors every working day, and 10 million users visit frequently - at least once a fortnight. Library staff respond to over 50 million enquiries each year, on a universal range of topics. (LIC, 1997).

Despite this glowing report, there is perhaps danger of a certain level of complacency developing within the sector as regards the privileged position of the public library. For example, one of the final policy statements from the Library and Information Commission on [libraries and social exclusion](#) (LIC, 2000) states that:

By their very nature libraries and information services already embody the values necessary to contribute to a socially inclusive society.

However, research [such as that carried out by Leeds Metropolitan University](#) into how and if libraries specifically tackle issues of inclusion is beginning to challenge this image of the library as an inherently “democratic” institution. Previous research has highlighted, for instance, that service provision for those from ethnic minorities may be less than satisfactory. The *Public Libraries, Ethnic Diversity and Citizenship* study (Roach & Morrison, 1998) found, for instance, that the “public library service has not yet managed to engage freely with ethnically diverse communities, and that its structure “is restrictive in terms of service access and denies ethnic minorities a stake in the public library system.”

One of the recommendations of the report related specifically to information technology, arguing that ICT would “become increasingly important ... and ... extend access and choice,” but warning that ethnic minority communities who do not currently use public libraries may not have access to new technologies:

Efforts should be made to lock community sector organisations into the growing information technology networks and to develop the capacity of those organisations currently seeking to address needs not being met by the public library service. (Roach & Morrison, 1998:173).

Projects such as those typically receiving awards in the annual UK “Libraries Change Lives” scheme also indicate that librarians are becoming increasingly aware of the need to target and address the needs of specific groups within their communities (Library Association, July 2000). These projects often involve the use of ICT.

It has also been suggested that libraries are trying to become “all things to everybody” (Comedia, 1993) delivering traditional core services (such as book lending) *and* becoming ICT learning centres within their communities. Some researchers have questioned the perception that ICT access points *automatically* belong in libraries, suggesting that libraries may not always be best placed to tackle some issues such as levels of user comfort with the technology or training needs, and, specifically, challenge the claim that libraries are the ideal – or only – location for such services.

More problematic to the library system’s claims to being the most appropriate site

for public internet access is the terms in which such claims are made. In addition to showing they are well trusted and frequently visited public sites the argument is usually made that libraries' core mission is information provision and that computers and the internet are merely the current means through which such needs can be satisfied. Thus the world wide web is sometimes described as simply a large library. Analogies are frequently employed to suggest that new technologies are merely new means of doing familiar things..... Such forms of argument are undoubtedly powerful but do have a number of limitations. Specifically they underplay the significance of the combination of elements and the qualitative developments that occur through the use of a new medium. They also tend to ignore 'those forms which are not in any obvious way derivative, and which can be usefully seen as innovating forms' of the media itself. By using such analogies to justify placing the technology within the remit of an organisation associated with one of the earlier forms, libraries risk exaggerating these tendencies by stressing some aspects of the use of the internet over others. (Liff, Steward & Watts, 1999).

In support of this, the authors comment that whilst librarians are comfortable with use of the Internet as an information or research facility, there exists some discomfort with other uses (e.g. e-mail, chat rooms), although these services are allowed. This is certainly a justified analysis, as is evidenced by discussion on the lis-pub-lis e-mail discussion list (archives available at: <http://www.mailbase.ac.uk/lists/lis-pub-lis/>) about "appropriate" use of Internet facilities, with some libraries seeking to restrict use to "serious" use.

As we do not charge, we feel that we have more rights to determine how the system should be used, and with limited facilities, prefer that the Internet is used to access information, whereas e-mail is often used for informal chat and its use and content may be open to abuse. Although Internet users have to sign our terms and conditions of use, which state that they cannot use e-mail, it is an area of confusion for members of the public and quite difficult for staff to enforce. The e-mail element of the program has been omitted from the public access browser, but use of HotMail is very difficult to spot. If we see someone obviously typing in more than usual, a quick glance over their shoulder and a quiet word is usually sufficient. We are also attempting to prevent the access to HotMail in the first place through the use of CyberPatrol, by identifying it as a forbidden site. (Walters, 1998).

Very few public libraries provide e-mail services through their own servers, preferring to allow users to access web-based e-mail such as HotMail. ([Croydon Library Authority](#) is an exception to this; in August 1997, private e-mail accounts for users were offered, using the 'library.croydon.gov.uk' domain).

3.1 User studies

Coles' study of *IT in UK public libraries* (Coles, 1998) identified evidence of a "wide and disparate group of library users who in turn displayed a variety of attitudes toward IT." The study revealed that although attitudes were generally positive towards the use of computers, people were concerned that without regular access to computers they would be unable to keep abreast of technology. The study identified public libraries as being the only viable option of access to ICT for some. Coles concludes that "public libraries have successfully promoted the book and reading since their inception. A continuation of that success must be in the promotion of the benefits of computers, in particular digital information sources and community networks." (Coles, 1998: 41).

More recent research carried out by Sheffield University and Somerset Training and Enterprise Council has suggested that “developments in information technology have resulted in some confused perceptions of the public library service” (Lilley and Usherwood, 2000). For example, members of the public were “led to believe inaccurately that a member of staff would guide them step by step” through an initiative “Computers Don’t Bite” created by the BBC and available in many public libraries. The research also found that a “book based perception of the library service persists,” yet “changing perceptions and higher expectations in terms of the provision of new technology” were also evident.

This lack of clarity on the part of the public about the role of the library is not surprising. As an institution, the public library has for 140 of its 150 years’ existence been primarily concerned with providing reading and information materials in print, and is still in its infancy when dealing with electronic materials and services. However, users in the above survey expected libraries to provide more ICT in the future and considered this a valid role “even if they themselves did not like it very much.” The emphasis on providing a core and much valued book-based service, yet also delivering access to ICT services seems set to last, particularly as government initiatives in the lifelong learning area, delivered largely via ICT, continue to develop.

4. The VITAL project

4.1 Introduction

The VITAL ([Value and Impact of IT Access in Libraries](#)) Project, funded at the beginning of 1999 by the then Library and Information Commission, set out to design a methodology for assessing the impact of ICT services in public libraries, drawing on a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, but focusing on measurements of *value*. The aims of the project were

- To develop and implement methodologies suited to the evaluation of end-user, ICT-based services offered by public libraries;
- To gather and disseminate information on the value of such services and their impacts;
- To advise policy makers on the value and impacts of different services and of how values and impacts can be measured.

The first phase of the project involved developing and pilot testing a set of methodologies, both qualitative and quantitative, in order to provide contextual data about ICT services (such as levels of provision and use, as far as this was possible) and detailed data on attitudes to, and use of, existing services. The methodology was tested in the three partner authorities involved with the research: Birmingham, Cheshire and Cumbria. Each library authority seconded an existing member of staff to work half-time on the project for a period of six months, beginning in July 1999. The members of staff had a variety of previous research experience and varying levels of responsibility within their library, reflecting the different contexts within which the methodology proposed would be utilised. At the beginning of the pilot phase, the researchers were invited to an initial training day, at which they were given a ‘workbook’ of methodologies and an opportunity to discuss any initial issues related to the project. The methodologies workbook provided a basic introduction to the research process and guidelines on how to implement the methodologies selected for use during the VITAL research. Chapters on quantitative and qualitative data gathering methods were included, with a focus on the methods to be implemented during the pilot phase. The workbook was designed to provide a directed approach to the research. Specific examples of quantitative data to be collected (for

example, number of PC workstations available, number of PC hours booked per week) were given, and prototype questionnaires and interview schedules were included.

Throughout the duration of the pilot phase, the researchers were provided with ongoing support in the form of additional appendices to the workbook (for example, guidelines on data entry of questionnaire results), site visits, and regular e-mail and telephone contact.

The methodology consisted of

- the collection of baseline statistical data about the demographics of each library authority, as well as the provision, and where possible, use of ICT services;
- a printed questionnaire, distributed to library users;
- a questionnaire to non-users, either asked on a face-to-face basis or over the telephone;
- a series of semi-structured interviews with existing ICT users.

This article focuses on the results from the library user questionnaires, exploring the attitudes of both ICT and non-ICT users to the provision of these services.

4.2 Methodology for library users questionnaire

A draft questionnaire was included in the workbook, and discussed during the training day. After the standard questions were agreed upon, some additions or slight alterations were included for each authority, dependent on the particular context. For example, it was agreed that questions relating to library OPACs would not form part of the standard questionnaire, but one authority inserted a section relating to its newly-introduced computerised OPAC as it seemed an ideal opportunity for this evaluation to be undertaken also.

Five hundred questionnaires were distributed to each library authority, which then made its own decisions about number and location of library sites to include in the research. The distribution methodology adopted was very similar to that recommended by the existing CIPFA PLUS surveys. [CIPFA](#) (Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy) has developed the PLUS ([Public Library Users Survey](#)) scheme, which distributes a standard questionnaire and methodology to member library authorities (67% of all authorities were members in 1998) to assess user levels of satisfaction with library services. It was felt that this approach would be familiar to the libraries involved and to future users of the methodology and has already proved to be successful. However, as this was a pilot, aimed at testing the validity of the methodology and the effectiveness of the questions, it was felt that 500 questionnaires would be a sufficient sample, and the library authorities were not required to issue the numbers usually required using CIPFA calculations (based on the number of library visits to a given site per week). The details of distribution varied slightly between each authority but included the numbering of the questionnaires and a timetable for distribution that would incorporate the widest range of users. The response rate from Cheshire was extremely high (92% of 459 distributed, across 4 library sites), from Birmingham also high (78% of 500 distributed, across 4 library sites), but less so in Cumbria (48% of 500 distributed, across 6 library sites). Variations in the way questionnaires were handed out within individual libraries as well as regional differences account for the different response rates; high response rates were achieved where questionnaires were handed to individual users and a place was provided for users to complete them. Overall, however, this was a successful approach in many respects: it enabled useful and comparable data to be gathered across all the authorities; it was

familiar to staff in the authorities and could therefore be delegated to branch libraries; and because it involved frontline staff it ensured that awareness of the project was high.

4.3 Results of library user questionnaires

4.3.1 Introduction

Results from the questionnaires were entered into a Microsoft Access database; the majority of questions (an example of the full questionnaire - from Cumbria - is provided in the appendix) yielded quantitative data about library usage, ICT usage and attitudes to ICT, but some open-ended questions were also included to allow respondents the opportunity to indicate reasons for their views. These questions yielded a useful quantity of qualitative data, which provided some valuable insights into attitudes to ICT provision in libraries from both users and non-users of the facilities.

Overall, 1041 questionnaires were returned, and out of these users, 231 indicated they used the ICT facilities in the library (excluding the OPAC), an overall usage rate of 20%. The individual percentage rates for each authority varied however, between 13% in Cheshire, 36% in Birmingham, and 18% in Cumbria. The relatively small numbers of library patrons using ICT facilities within the library indicated via the questionnaire (54 in Cheshire, 42 in Cumbria and 135 in Birmingham) would suggest that ICT facilities are not yet used by the majority of library users; this may be for a variety of reasons, including access elsewhere or lack of knowledge about the facilities. These findings suggest that library users are *less* likely to be ICT users than the general population. This fact may indicate that targetting libraries for ICT expenditure will be a useful strategy within the government's social inclusion agenda by providing non-ICT users with a comfortable place to learn about new technologies.

All results presented below are based on the 231 responses from ICT users, and 810 responses from non-ICT users. All figures are percentages and represent numbers of those answering any individual question.

4.3.2 Profile of respondents

The three sites selected for the pilot reflect the different types of library authorities within the UK – an urban, inner-city authority (Birmingham); a rural authority with high levels of tourism but also relatively large towns (Cheshire – total population over 650,000); and a very rural authority, geographically large and diverse with low population levels compared with the rest of England and Wales (Cumbria). The following tables present a breakdown of the respondents by sex, age, and occupation.

Respondents by sex		
	Male	Female
Birmingham	56	44
Cheshire	43	57
Cumbria	44	56
All 3 authorities	48	52

Table 1: questionnaire respondents by sex

As can be seen by the above table, overall, there was a fairly equal balance between men and women, although the pattern in Cheshire and Cumbria of more women than men is

reversed in Birmingham, which had a higher number of male respondents.

Respondents by age				
	Under 16	16-35	36-55	55+
Birmingham	8	57	19	16
Cheshire	3	27	38	32
Cumbria	3	21	36	40
All 3 authorities	5	35	31	29

Table 2: questionnaire respondents by age

Figures for Cheshire and Cumbria are again similar, whilst the age profile of Birmingham is considerably younger. Over half of all Birmingham respondents were aged between 16 and 35, whereas Cheshire and Cumbria had a more equal spread but more respondents in the higher age brackets. Although not shown in the table, the proportion of over 65s in both Cheshire and Cumbria was significantly higher than in Birmingham; a fifth of all respondents in both of the more rural authorities were over 65, compared with just 8% in Birmingham.

Respondents by occupation					
	employed	unemployed	student	retired	other
Birmingham	35	17	33	11	4
Cheshire	48	7	9	30	5
Cumbria	40	7	11	37	5
All 3 authorities	41	10	18	26	5

Table 3: questionnaire respondents by occupation

As can be seen in table 3, the largest group in each authority was made up of employed people (full-time, part-time, or self-employed), although this group was a smaller percentage in Birmingham than the other two authorities. Birmingham had the highest percentage of unemployed respondents (17%). The second largest group in Birmingham, almost as large as the employed group, was students, who represented 33% of the sample. Student representation in Cheshire and Cumbria was roughly a third of that in Birmingham. The second largest group in both Cheshire and Cumbria was retired people, making up 30% of the Cheshire sample and over a third (37%) in Cumbria, which reinforces the previous figures on age categories of respondents.

In both Cheshire and Cumbria, the overwhelming number of respondents (93% and 94% respectively) were white, whereas Birmingham boasts a multicultural, multi-ethnic population. The ethnic background of Birmingham respondents reflects this diversity; a slim majority (52%) of respondents was white, with the second largest groupings being Pakistani (16%) and Indian (13%). Other ethnic backgrounds represented included Black Caribbean (5%), Bangladeshi (2%), and Chinese (2%).

The profile, then, of Birmingham library users is significantly different than that of the more rural authorities. Users are ethnically diverse, younger, and more likely to be unemployed or students than users in Cheshire and Cumbria, where there are larger numbers of older and retired users and slightly more women represented than men.

4.3.3 Library use

All respondents were asked to indicate their main use of the library; in Cumbria and Cheshire, the overwhelming response was book related (e.g. borrowing of books, reading

for pleasure, et cetera.), with very few instances of another main use. For example, in Cheshire, out of 360 comments, only 3 specifically related to ICT, and a further 12 indicated study or research as the main use. Similarly, in Cumbria, out of 214 comments, 4 were ICT related, and a few again indicated study or research. In Birmingham, however, main uses identified correspond to the higher instance of ICT use indicated, and far more respondents indicated ICT related main uses of the library. Out of 364 comments, 127 respondents (35%) indicated use of CD-ROM, e-mail, or the World Wide Web as their main use of the library. A further 43 indicated study or research as the main use, which is most probably explained by the high percentage of students completing the questionnaires in Birmingham. These figures may also reflect the general demographic patterns of Internet use, which indicate that older people are less likely to be Internet users than younger people, and as has been noted above, the breakdown of age groups within the three test sites shows significantly higher numbers of younger respondents to the questionnaire in Birmingham and larger numbers of older people in Cheshire and Cumbria. Cumbria had the highest instance of older people in its sample, with 59% being over 45 (this figure was 51% in Cheshire, and much lower (27%) in Birmingham).

4.3.4 Attitudes to ICT provision

All respondents were asked to rate the importance of providing computer facilities in public libraries; 96% across the three authorities rated this as very or quite important. When asked to consider whether ICT facilities are: a) vital; b) an add-on service; or c) an unnecessary expense, again very few users (around 4% across the three authorities) considered them unnecessary, mostly due to the belief that people already had their own PCs, and therefore did not need to access such services in the library.

Table 4 summarises the opinions of all respondents on the provision of ICT facilities:

	ICT as vital	ICT as add-on	ICT as unnecessary
Birmingham	63	35	3
Cheshire	43	54	4
Cumbria	45	51	4
All 3 authorities	50	47	4

Table 4: views of ICT provision

Half of those answering overall (50%) considered ICT facilities as a vital service, although this varied between authorities, being higher in Birmingham (63%), and representing less than half in Cumbria (45%) and Cheshire (43%). Aside from the 3% regarding facilities as unnecessary, the remainder (47%) considered provision of facilities an add-on service; this again was different over the three sites, being a majority opinion in Cheshire (54%) and Cumbria (51%) but representing just over a third of responses in Birmingham (35%). Respondents were requested to give views to back up their answers, and the majority did. Typical responses from those considering ICT facilities as vital were:

It is growing increasingly important in modern society and access for all is essential.

Future developments will render access to computer/Internet facilities vital for isolated communities for educational and economic reasons. [Comment from Cumbria]

Libraries are the key to access for those without a computer at home.

Libraries should be modern and provide computer facilities as part of helping the community.

IT is part of a remit of libraries to provide information or to direct people to a source for information.

Interestingly, many respondents who indicated ICT as an add-on service also articulated similar comments, particularly about access for those without their own computers, but some also raised issues concerning the balancing of ICT with traditional services:

The main raison d' être of a library is its collection of books...

Provided it is not at the expense of more traditional methods.

Most people have access to computers outside of the library, but few people have access to such an array of books.

A library is mainly for lending books so anything else is a bonus.

I still feel we need a good range of books. IT services must not take over.

What is interesting about these results is the level of importance placed on ICT provision by library users who, for various reasons, do not actually use those services themselves. Among ICT users, as would be expected, ICT was perceived as vital by the majority (70%, averaged across the 3 authorities, representing the views of 215 ICT users). In Birmingham, this was the view of over three quarters of IT users (79%), and of over half in both Cheshire (57%) and Cumbria (56%). Non-ICT users were also highly supportive of the provision of ICT facilities. Just over half (51%) across all three authorities considered ICT as an add-on service, but a significant number (45%) considered it vital. Again, Birmingham respondents indicated a stronger level of support; a majority of non-users (53%) considered IT to be vital, compared with less than half in Cheshire (40%) and Cumbria (45%). IT as an add-on service was the majority opinion in Cheshire and Cumbria (56% and 51% respectively), whilst representing 43% of the non-users in Birmingham. These figures are summarised in tables 5 and 6 below:

ICT Users			
	ICT as vital	ICT as add-on	ICT as unnecessary
Birmingham	79	21	0
Cheshire	57	41	2
Cumbria	56	44	0
All 3 authorities	70	30	0

Table 5: views of ICT provision by ICT Users

Non-ICT Users			
	ICT as vital	ICT as add-on	ICT as unnecessary
Birmingham	53	43	2
Cheshire	40	56	4
Cumbria	45	51	4
All 3 authorities	45	51	4

Table 6: views of ICT provision by Non-ICT Users

Despite the regional differences, the figures indicate a high level of support for ICT facilities in libraries by both users and, significantly, non-users, in line with the findings of the Usherwood and Lilley study discussed above. The greater emphasis on, and higher indication of usage of, ICT facilities in Birmingham compared with the two more rural authorities may be a result of a number of factors, including

- Free access to ICT facilities throughout Birmingham libraries;
- The different needs of a multicultural, multi-ethnic urban population;
- The greater representation of younger people, and students in particular, within the Birmingham sample;
- A wider network of educational institutions within the Birmingham area, resulting in a higher concentration of learners and therefore a greater need for access to supporting ICT services.

4.3.5 Reasons for non-use of facilities

Table 7 below illustrates the reasons why ICT non-users do not use the facilities available; the main reason is having access elsewhere, whilst other respondents indicated they had no interest in using the facilities or did not know how to. Despite this lack of knowledge, very few respondents indicated that a lack of available help was the reason for non-use. In Cheshire and Cumbria, there is evidently a high awareness of the facilities provided by the library, although Birmingham users seemed to be less aware of offered services, with 15% indicating their reason for non-use was not knowing the services were available. There was a very high non-response rate to this particular question in Birmingham; out of 245 non-ICT users, 73 (30%) did not indicate a reason for non-use.

Reasons for non-use of ICT facilities						
	Didn't know available	No interest	Don't know how	Access elsewhere	No help available	Other
Birmingham	15	20	16	42	4	3
Cheshire	4	28	17	47	1	3
Cumbria	3	31	20	39	2	5
All 3 authorities	7	26	18	43	2	4

Table 7: reasons for non-use of ICT facilities

4.3.6 Use of facilities by ICT users

ICT users were asked to indicate their main use of the facilities, out of a choice of a) to support a course of study, b) leisure/general enjoyment, and c) independent learning/research. Table 8 below presents the results of this question; the figures are in percentages and indicate the totals out of the numbers of respondents who correctly answered the question (some respondents indicated more than one option). A small percentage of replies in each authority fitted into the "other" category; main uses were job related (either seeking work or using the facilities for work), and keeping in touch with family and friends (using e-mail).

Main use of ICT facilities				
	Study	Leisure	Research	Other
Birmingham	21	19	25	8
Cheshire	17	26	30	7
Cumbria	21	41	24	14
All 3 authorities	20	29	26	10

Table 8: main use of ICT facilities

The majority of ICT users also had access to facilities outside the library (65% in Birmingham and Cheshire, and 55% in Cumbria), mostly at home, although access was also available at work or at an educational institution. So, although non-users of ICT in the library were most likely to give “access elsewhere” as their reason for non-use, the majority of those using library ICT facilities do so despite having access to ICT at other locations.

4.3.7 Value placed on access to ICT services

When asked to indicate the *value* of having access to ICT facilities in the library, many users gave reasons that had already been picked up in other parts of the questionnaire. These included “only,” “free,” or “most convenient access,” as well as research and general information needs. The question, “How would the withdrawal of computer facilities affect you?” yielded answers which gave greater insights into the value and impact of ICT access for this group of users. Over 80% of ICT users answered this question, and although some indicated that loss of the facilities would not affect them particularly badly, many would be quite negatively affected, either having to find access elsewhere, paying (more) for access, or having to travel to find access. Although most users indicated in fairly straightforward terms that they would have “no other access to computers,” or would “have to find other facilities,” some had more ‘emotional’ responses, such as

This is UNTHINKABLE!!

I would have to give up my course and be devastated.

Others gave reasons relating less to the physical access to the technology, and more concerned with what they were able to do with it:

Harder to look for work.

I would feel isolated and I would no longer be able to communicate with friends easily.

[Would] lose social contact with friends from 20 European countries ... cultural isolation.

As well as affecting people’s ability to access information for reference and study, the comments indicate that the availability of e-mail facilities is very important for both social communications as well as for job seeking. Whilst the research by Liff et al. discussed above indicated that some librarians are unhappy with use of the Internet for e-mail, it appears to be a popular application with public library users. Although the data for the breakdown of ICT applications used is unavailable for the Birmingham pilot, results from Cheshire and Cumbria (representing 96 ICT users) showed that 33% had e-mail addresses, and 20% in Cheshire and 26% in Cumbria used e-mail facilities, with 59% and 48% respectively also using the World Wide Web.

5. Conclusions

The results above illustrate that libraries are increasingly becoming important locations for accessing ICT to support a range of activities, from formal study to job seeking to building and maintaining social networks using the Internet. Patterns of usage will probably continue to vary across the UK as the needs and priorities of different regions are accounted for. As illustrated by the VITAL pilot, support for, and use of, ICT facilities in public libraries may be different in urban and rural areas, where patterns of library use overall reflect the age and occupation of users and, thus, their different priorities. In Birmingham the pattern of a younger, more educationally active library user population emerges, where people associate the library with access to ICT, and use and support these services. Conversely, Cumbria library users reflected a pattern of more traditional use, with higher numbers of older users, giving more significance to book-related services. Further results from the VITAL methodologies (the revised and updated workbook has been distributed to twenty library authorities) will reveal whether the results of the pilot are duplicated across the country.

As government initiatives to deliver services and lifelong learning programmes develop and come on stream, and as the roll-out of the People's Network continues, libraries increasingly will be supporting a whole range of users in making the most of these opportunities. Evidence suggests that libraries are popular locations for ICT facilities and that support for fulfilling this role is very high amongst public library users, whether or not personal use is made of the services on offer. Public libraries are still in their infancy with regard to providing and developing electronic services and have some significant challenges to face, particularly in the areas of sustainability and widening access to currently excluded groups, but the enthusiasm and vision is certainly there. The service does have the potential to deliver the key aspects of the government's agenda in tackling social exclusion, in providing ICT facilities within communities, and in supporting learners. Continued evaluation of the use and impact of the services will be an essential component in developing the facilities and support that current – and potential – users require. The VITAL project has made a significant contribution to the development of robust means of gathering data, particularly qualitative evidence, to contribute to the ongoing evaluation programme.

Footnotes

1. For example, the establishing of a National Grid for Learning, as set out in *Connecting the Learning Society: National Grid for Learning* (DfEE, 1997), and the settling up of a Social Exclusion Unit, which set out a [strategy for neighbourhood renewal](#) (The Stationery Office, 1998), and established 18 Policy Action Teams (PATs) to investigate key areas, including jobs, community self-help and the role of information technology in neighbourhood regeneration. These reports are available at: <http://www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/seu/index/publish.htm#PATs>.

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Appendix: example questionnaire used in Cumbria Library Authority.

As part of the revised and updated workbook, the questionnaire has been slightly altered since the pilot; an updated questionnaire can be downloaded from the project website, at: <http://www.mmu.ac.uk/h-ss/cerlim/projects/vital/vitaldocs.htm>.

COUNTY COUNCIL

We are carrying out an evaluation of some of the library's services, to see if we can improve facilities and make them more relevant for our customers.

Thank you for taking the time to fill in this questionnaire; it should only take 10 minutes. Please return your completed questionnaire to any member of library staff. Your answers will be treated with complete confidentiality, and unless you choose to provide an e-mail address, will be entirely anonymous. If you have any questions about this questionnaire, please contact: [contact details].

Section A

1. Do you use the library, on average: (please tick one)

less than once a month	☐
once a month	☐
once every two weeks	☐
once a week	☐
two or three times a week	☐
daily	☐

2. Which library facilities do you use? (please tick all that apply)

books (lending)	☐
audio cassettes & music CDs	☐
video cassettes	☐
CD-Roms (lending)	☐
talking books	☐
reference books/information (e.g. newspapers)
(please give an example)	☐

other (please say what)	☐
-------------------------	-----------------------

3. What do you mainly use the library for?

4. Do you use any of the computer facilities in the library (other than the library catalogue)?

Yes ☐

No ☐

If no, please go to section B. and continue with question 14.

5. If you answered yes to question 4, what do (or have) you used the computer facilities for? (please tick all that apply).

word processing ☐

spreadsheets ☐

open learning courses ☐

Genesis ☐

CD-Roms ☐

World Wide Web ☐

e-mail ☐

other Internet application (please say what) ☐

other (please say what) ☐

6. a. Please say which application you use most: (please tick one)

word processing ☐

spreadsheets ☐

open learning courses ☐

Genesis ☐

CD-Roms ☐

Worldwide Web ☐

e-mail ☐

Internet other (please say what) ☐

other (please say what) ☐

- b. What is your main reason for using this facility?

to support course of study ☐

leisure/general enjoyment	☐
independent learning/research	☐
other (please say what)	☐

7. How often do you use the computer facilities?

daily	☐
once or twice a week	☐
once every two weeks	☐
once a month	☐
less than once a month	☐

8. Is the library your only access to computer facilities?

Yes	☐
No	☐

If yes, please go to question 10.

If no, please continue with question 9.

9. If you have access to/use computer facilities elsewhere, please say where:
(please tick all that apply)

home	☐
school/college/university	☐
cybercafé	☐
work	☐
other (please say where)	☐

10. Do you consider yourself:

a beginner	☐
an intermediate user	☐
a fairly experienced user	☐
a very experienced user	☐

11. What is the particular value to you of access to computers in the library?

12. How would the withdrawal of computer facilities affect you?

13. Do you have an e-mail address?

Yes ☐

No ☐

If you would not mind being contacted by us in the future, please leave your e-mail address below. Thank you.

Please now answer just a few more questions in sections C. and D.

Section B.

14. If you answered no to question 4 about use of the computer facilities in the library, could you please say why you do not use them:

didn't know they were there ☐

no interest/use ☐

don't know how to ☐

have access elsewhere ☐

no-one to help/reluctant to ask for help ☐

other (please say what) ☐

15. Would you be interested in training on how to use the computer facilities?

No ☐

Yes ☐

If yes, what would you like training in?

Please now continue with sections C. and D.

Section C.

16. How important is it for public libraries to provide computer facilities?

very important	☐
quite important	☐
not very important	☐
not at all important	☐

17. Which of these statements most reflects your view of the IT facilities?

a vital service	☐
an add-on service, secondary to other library services	☐
an unnecessary expense	☐

Please give a reason for your view:

Section D.

18. Are you a resident of Cumbria?

Yes	☐
- If yes, please indicate your postcode below:

No	☐
- If no, are you visiting from:
within the UK	☐
outside the UK	☐

19. Are you a member of Cumbria libraries?

Yes	☐
No	☐

20. Are you:

male	☐
female	☐

21. Are you:

full-time employed	☐
part-time employed	☐
self-employed	☐

unemployed	☐
student	☐
retired	☐
visitor	☐
other (please say what)	☐

22. Are you:

under 16	☐
16-25	☐
26-35	☐
36-45	☐
46-55	☐
56-65	☐
over 65	☐

23. How would you describe your ethnic background?

White	☐
Black Caribbean	☐
Black African	☐
Black Other	☐
Indian	☐
Pakistani	☐
Bangladeshi	☐
Chinese	☐
Other, please say what	☐

24. Do you consider yourself to have a disability?

No	☐
Yes (please specify)	☐

Are there any ways the library could improve your access to the IT services on offer?

Thank you very much for taking the time to complete this questionnaire.

If you have any other comments, please add them below:

End

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