

The Public Library, Social Exclusion and the Information Society in the United Kingdom

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The digital divide is now a commonly recognised feature of information society. This article explores recent developments in the United Kingdom (UK) which attempt to address this issue, and examines national and local information policy, community networking, and public library policy. It assesses the claim, common in the UK public library community, that the wiring up of the public libraries will have a significant impact on disadvantage, poverty and social exclusion. In particular, it analyses the process of public library networking as it has unfolded since 1997, drawing upon the empirical findings of *Open to All? The Public Library and Social Exclusion* (Muddiman et al. 2000), a research project

funded by the UK Library and Information Commission (now Resource). This research suggests that despite a rhetorical commitment to social inclusion, the technological transformation of UK public library services will result in little more than a modernisation of current services, with little change in overall strategy or user focus. Consequently, it is argued that if public libraries are to reach out to the excluded of the information society, they will need to move beyond a passive preoccupation with access and use technological change as a means towards more active engagement with local communities and disadvantaged users so that the public library will indeed be open to all.

Introduction: the information age, social exclusion and public policy in the United Kingdom

The information superhighway should not just benefit the affluent or the metropolitan. Just as in the past books were a chance for ordinary people to better themselves, in the future on-line education will be a route to better prospects. But just as books are available from public libraries, the benefits of the superhighway must be there for everyone. This is a real chance for equality of opportunity. Tony Blair, *New Britain: My Vision of a Young Country* (Blair 1996, 103).

The idea that an information society is, in itself, a route towards the elimination of social exclusion is one that has a powerful and highly visible public currency. For twenty years or so now, the evangelists of the information technology (IT) in-

dustry such as Alvin Toffler, Tom Stonier and Bill Gates have been claiming that we are entering an age where the wealth of information will provide access to knowledge for all (Toffler 1980; Stonier 1983; Gates 1995). Information and communication technologies (ICT) will abolish tedious and dangerous work. Opportunities will multiply for access to new modes of education and training, and people will be able to create new communities, and even new identities, in cyberspace. In this new society the distinctions and inequalities between social groups, and indeed, whole regions of the world, will dissolve. European Commissioner Martin Bangemann urges us “to enter the information society and reap the greatest rewards” (Bangemann 1994). Tony Blair wants to make London the “knowledge capital of the world” and Al Gore looks forward to an informa-

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tion age with “sustainable economic progress, strong democracies, better solutions to environmental challenges, improved healthcare and a greater sense of the shared stewardship of our small planet” (Gore 1994, 6).

Of course, not all commentators and interest groups have accepted this rose-tinted view of the coming information age. In the UK, a number of observers have adopted a more sceptical stance and argued that whilst an information intensive society is technologically inevitable, its societal effects are uncertain and need to be directed by rational and considered policy choices (Moore 1997). Others, more pessimistically, have argued that far from eliminating social exclusion, the transition to an information society is actually contributing to the widening rift between rich and poor. David Byrne contends that “post-industrial capitalism” (his preferred term for the information society) has actually exacerbated problems of social exclusion in the UK by replacing stable, relatively well paid, skilled industrial work with low wage, service-based, casual employment. Such poor work is for Byrne the big story of the information age, creating a large, insecure and poorly paid working class that drifts in and out of situations of social exclusion (Byrne 1999, 53).

Indeed, despite the election of New Labour in 1997, British society arguably remains more exclusive than ever [1]. Poverty is the most obvious cause of exclusion and underpins all other factors. In the year 2000, 14 million people in the UK live in households (after housing costs are deducted) where income is below half the average level. This is nearly 20% of the population (compared to 8% in 1979) and includes over 2 million children. Poverty has increased, not only in the number of people experiencing it, but also in its severity. The real incomes of the poorest 10% of the population actually declined by 17% between 1979 and 1995.

Issues of class, race, gender, health and geography compound the many forms of exclusion that result. Social class still matters. People in households headed by semi-skilled or unskilled workers (UK social classes D and E) are much more likely to be out of work. They are less likely to have educational qualifications and, even in work, less likely to receive training. They are more likely to die prematurely. Their children are likely to be bought up by lone parents struggling

on state benefits, and are also most likely to leave school without any qualifications. Young women from such backgrounds are much more likely to become pregnant in their teens. Working class pensioners predominantly rely on the state pension and means tested benefits.

Exclusion can be cultural as well as material. Discrimination and prejudice are issues that effect many different groups and individuals in UK society. Being Black or Asian; disabled; lesbian or gay; or a woman, for instance, will often accentuate material factors of social exclusion. The vast majority of the lowest UK wage earners are women. Disabled people are least able to obtain employment. Two thirds of all Bangladeshi and Pakistani households are in the bottom 20% of the income distribution. The children of African Caribbean and Bangladeshi ethnic groups are most likely to be excluded from school and to be unemployed in their teens. Furthermore, discrimination and prejudice will mean that even in employment few people with such backgrounds will reach positions of power and influence.

In the UK as elsewhere, exclusion has its geographical manifestations. The highest concentration of socially excluded people lies within certain regions of the country and then, within these regions, in particular neighbourhoods and excluded communities. This is especially true of the de-industrialised urban areas of the UK and parts of London, where the concentration of deprivation into clusters in inner cities and peripheral housing estates is well documented. There is also increasing evidence of more diffused social exclusion in many UK rural areas. Interestingly, the absence of easy access to many of the infrastructure features of society (public transport, shops, and financial institutions) is common to both rural and urban exclusion. The lack of a home or static accommodation marks the homeless, travellers and asylum seekers out for automatic exclusion.

The degree to which such exclusion has an informational dimension has become an important focus of debate in the UK library and information community. The UK National Literacy Trust estimates that 16% of the UK adult population is functionally illiterate (National Literacy Trust 1998). The notion of a digital divide, has also gained widespread currency, fuelled by evidence such as the 1999 government survey *Is IT for all?*, which found that only 39% of people in social

classes D and E had ever used a personal computer, and only 14% had ever surfed online (Department of Trade and Industry 2000, 23). As a result, the development of policies that promote a socially inclusive information society has, at least since 1997, been taken very seriously by UK central government. Many of the recommendations of a groundbreaking independent report – *Social Inclusion in the Information Society* (National Working Party on Social Inclusion 1997) – have been reflected in a series of government sponsored policy documents, reports and initiatives. For example, the UK government information strategy document, *Our Information Age* (Central Office for Information 1998, 1) notes that “the government’s role is to make sure that we do not have a society of information haves and have nots” and that “in the information age, the many, not the few, must benefit”. The document proposes a range of initiatives (such as *The National Grid for Learning*, *IT for All* and *New Library, the People’s Network*) aimed at improving access to information, developing electronic government and fostering information literacy and skills. It contends that “education and the information age will support and reinforce each other ... the information age will transform education, at all levels and for all ages ... education will in turn equip people with the necessary skills to profit from the information age” (Central Office for Information 1998, 1). ICT is therefore seen as a catalyst for addressing social exclusion through the creation of IT literate and employable individuals who will then be able to plug in to a cyberspace society through their work.

Notwithstanding these commitments, many of the more tangible initiatives aiming to tackle informational exclusion in the UK have their origins in local, not national, policy. In the early 1990s a number of pioneer UK local authorities began to develop urban telematics programmes as a response to local industrial and social decline. Such programmes generally involved the sponsorship of new local ICT based infrastructures; the retraining of local people in informatics related skills and the establishment of community ICT access centres offering a mix of training and information related activities (Graham and Marvin 1996). Often these programmes were developed in partnership with a range of local interests including education providers, businesses,

the voluntary sector and community organisations. Manchester Telematics Partnership (MTP) – a consortium brokered by the Manchester City Council in 1991 as a mechanism for economic regeneration – was typical of these developments. MTP has since promoted ICT infrastructure developments such as the Manchester “Host” initiative; electronic village halls – which provide ICT training and telework centres for disadvantaged groups and local communities; Manchester Community Information Network – an Internet-based city electronic information service; and Manchester Multimedia Network – an electronic arts and cultural industries initiative (Carter 1998).

Initiatives such as those in Manchester have been replicated sporadically across the UK, and in some cases their positive impact on local communities has been significant. In the main, however, UK local authorities have focused upon economic development outcomes and this has set limits on the relevance of urban telematics to the experience of many socially excluded people. Because of these shortcomings, organisations such as the UK Community Development Foundation (CDF) have argued strongly that *community* based ICT networks need to play a fundamental part in the development of a socially inclusive information society. CDF argue that such initiatives – where “members of identifiable local communities or communities of interest seek to exploit the information highway for their own benefit” – empower local people and can be designed on the basis of specific and identified local needs (National Working Party on Social Inclusion 1997, 3). They improve local communication and enhance community development; they help link excluded communities and people to the outside world; they facilitate skills and capacity building in disadvantaged people; and they improve the possibilities of local involvement in decision making (National Working Party on Social Inclusion 1997, 16). Kevin Harris (1999) argues further that community networks support the local information ecology and reduce the possibility that communication in excluded communities will stagnate, and in extreme cases, cease altogether.

A growing body of empirical evidence supports these claims. Most UK community networks have developed as much more than simply on-

line or cyberphenomena and have an offline existence in community resource centres, electronic village halls or other local buildings. They are characterised by a diversity of function as in the MTP model above; they are supported financially by a mix of national and local funders; and most attempt to involve a wide range of local groups and people in their management and decision making. Because of this capacity to involve and engage local people, a significant number of networking projects have succeeded in offering avenues to skills, literacy, employment, personal development and community regeneration (Shearman 1999). Nevertheless, it is also clearly the case that the distribution of successful community ICT initiatives is patchy and uneven, and not necessarily related to overall levels of exclusion or need. The non-mainstream funding position and poor financial sustainability of most community networks has also hampered their success (Day and Harris 1997).

Despite these problems there are now indications that community networks and ICT resource centres will become a more permanent feature of the UK information scene. An important recent report commissioned by UK government's Social Exclusion Unit, *Closing the Digital Divide*, argues that community based ICT initiatives "provide a vehicle for people living in deprived neighbourhoods to reconnect with society in a variety of productive and positive ways". The report recommends that by April 2002 deprived neighbourhoods should have "at least one publicly accessible community based ICT facility" (Department of Trade and Industry 2000, 57) and envisages a network of local ICT resource centres based in schools, libraries, community centres and other public locations. It estimates that a current UK total of approximately 6500 public ICT access points could eventually be expanded to a network of 31,000 centres including 19,000 post offices and 4716 public libraries (Department of Trade and Industry 2000, 25).

Closing the Digital Divide reflects an emerging UK policy consensus that suggests that tackling information poverty depends not simply upon local access to ICT infrastructure but also upon support, training and community involvement in the design of responsive service models. The implications of this consensus for the public library are significant. It suggests, positively, that libraries

have a major opportunity to position themselves as a core local provider of ICT access. However, it also implies, more problematically, that much more than technological modernisation will be required. If they are to reach out to disadvantaged and excluded communities, public libraries will clearly need to develop a presence as facilitators of ICT literacy and they will need to work effectively in partnership with other agencies already pioneering this field. The capacity of the public library service to accomplish such change is the concern of the remainder of this paper.

A people's network? Rewiring the UK public library for social inclusion

ICT has, of course, been an important influence on the development of the UK public library for many years. In terms of the impact of ICT on the public library there is a clear and unsurprising pattern: in the 1980s most of the development focused upon library management systems and a steady shift from stand alone to network solutions; in the 1990s, interest developed in ICT as a tool to improve public libraries' informational capabilities. The focus subsequently shifted to networking, especially after the commencement of the EARL project in 1995 (Smith 1995). By the late 1990s the public library sector was growing in confidence and articulating a core role for itself as an access point to the information superhighway. The Internet especially was seen as representing an opportunity, after years of relative decline, to restore the public library's position at the centre of a reconstituted "public sphere" of information for the twenty first century (Williamson 2000).

New Library: the People's Network (Library and Information Commission 1997) draws these strands together to produce a UK national strategy for the networking of public libraries and re-skilling of public librarians. This report, together with the subsequent *Government Response* (Department of Culture, Media and Sport 1998) and the eventual *Implementation Plan* (Library and Information Commission 1998) represents a significant point in public library history. *New Library* articulates a national role for public libraries with a confidence not seen in the UK for many years. In doing so it embraces New Labour's information age goals:

This report argues for the transformation of libraries and what they do; it makes the case for re-equipping them and re-skilling their staff so that they can continue to fulfil their widely valued role as intermediary, guide, interpreter and referral point – but now helping smooth the path to the technological future. (Library and Information Commission 1997, 2)

New Library argues for large scale Government investment in libraries to achieve this transformation because “public libraries are the ideal vehicle to provide ... access and support, and to foster the spread of vital new technological skills among the population”. The report is confident in claiming a central role for libraries:

The library is an enormously powerful agent for change: accountable to and trusted by people and integral to education, industry, government and the community. A UK-wide information network made available through libraries and implemented on the basis of a high specification central core could do more to broaden and encourage the spread of information and technology skills among the population – especially the young – than any other measure the government could introduce. (Library and Information Commission 1997, 3)

The *Government Response* buys into this central role for the public library in delivering its own information age objectives. It commits the Government to making libraries part of a universal ICT access strategy: “every public library should be connected to the National Grid for Learning by 2002” (Department of Culture, Media and Sport 1998, 1). It emphasises the public library role as a gateway to technology training and to information. Money is committed to re-skilling and training of staff, and to cutting edge projects (in conjunction with the Wolfson Challenge Fund, see below).

New Library makes a superficially compelling case. Public libraries are located across communities. They are often one of the few public services still located in socially excluded areas. It is persuasive in its claim that:

as a trusted intermediary, public libraries can span the present and technological future, ensuring no citizen is left behind, providing a safety net against alienation and social exclusion ... a route to universal access and opportunity (Library and Information Commission 1997, 16)

However, *New Library* and its companion documents are largely silent about the mechanisms for

tackling a “society of information haves and have nots”. Although full of the rhetoric of equality of opportunity, the documents are much more circumspect about the ways that libraries might engage with excluded communities or individuals within an ICT context: these seem, in the end, to rest with the financial and political circumstances of individual local authorities. Symptomatically, there is ambivalence about charging for access. Although *New Library* makes all the obvious arguments for a free service, it is ultimately equivocal on the issue:

Whether the service is free or charged for is an issue that will need further examination. Libraries already make charges for some things, and most people do except [sic] this (Library and Information Commission 1997, 16)

There is also little of note about the extra staffing support that might be needed in some libraries; the need for public libraries to develop community networking partnerships; or the whole issue of sustainability. Thus, whilst *New Library* acknowledges that a key principle of service must be equality of access, it also embodies an assumption that simply by their location in local communities public libraries are, by and large, already vehicles for inclusion. The shift to ICT thus becomes, primarily, a process of modernising and re-engineering a successful product rather than a fundamental challenge to any present failure to engage with excluded communities.

In material terms, the three years following *New Library* largely reflect this concentration on creating a networked infrastructure. During this period, the UK Department of Culture, Media and Sport, together with the Wolfson Foundation, invited bids from local authorities on a competitive basis for cutting-edge library ICT projects. Sixty-nine awards were made. An analysis of bids (Library and Information Commission 1998b, 1999) reveals that some were undoubtedly innovative and gave consideration to those most in need of access. Many more, however, were primarily concerned with creating ICT infrastructure and increasing the quantity and availability of public access PCs in libraries. Such activity undoubtedly reflects the preoccupation with universal access that is so embedded in the UK public library community and which has subsequently, through policies promoting the National

Grid for Learning and the commitment to wire all public libraries by 2002, become a cornerstone of UK national information policy. These policies, of course, are closely linked to the assumption that services providing universal access will provide a solution to social exclusion (Leech 1999).

However, in the developing debates on UK social inclusion policy, these assumptions have not gone unchallenged. In its *National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal* the government's own Social Exclusion Unit has argued strongly for the targeting of extra resources towards those who have the greatest social need (Social Exclusion Unit 2000). Public librarians have, on the whole, been slower to identify with these strategies which extend beyond universal provision and which focus on need rather than demand. Nevertheless, a number of innovative public library ICT based projects have begun to focus on the needs of disadvantaged social groups and communities, even though these are clearly exceptions to the mainstream. These highlight both the ways that libraries can use ICT to engage with socially excluded communities and also illustrate the barriers to be overcome. IT Point in Solihull, for example, was an early project in the mid-1990s which demonstrated a demand for ICT access in deprived communities and the value of community involvement (Solihull Education, Libraries and Arts 1998). Other projects, many small scale and time limited, include centres for homework, learning and family literacy (Botten 1999) and community information projects developing community on-line magazines and hosting web sites for community groups (Pantry 1999). Such projects continue: authorities such as Essex and Derbyshire are currently experimenting with ICT based access projects for visually impaired and housebound people, and Knowsley Metropolitan Borough in Merseyside has developed extensive ICT facilities and training programmes targeted at unemployed people (Raven 2001). Most recently of all, the Gates Foundation has earmarked £2.6m for the creation of ICT based learning centres in areas of social deprivation in the UK (Gilman 2001).

Some of these projects have clearly demonstrated success, and it is perhaps in these areas of linkage that libraries are beginning to engage in more creative ways of working in and with excluded social groups and communities. These

engagements, using ICT, start to articulate a different agenda and different priorities for libraries. This agenda is one that is seen as crucial for libraries by advocates of community networking if they are to have a productive role in addressing social exclusion. As we have already noted in the previous section, community networking developments turn the use of technology around: ICT can become a tool for engagement, community development and empowerment of excluded people rather than a source of alienation and mystification. Community Resource Centres (CRCs) can be potent enablers of the development of social capital. Libraries are seen as possible locations for CRCs, given the right circumstances, but writers such as Kevin Harris (1999) put more stress on the proactive work needed to use ICT as a mechanism for libraries shifting from being merely *in* the community to being *of* it. Such a change, writers like Harris emphasise, will involve a move from access to empowerment and from service to partnership.

Four years on from *New Library*, it is thus clear that UK public librarians are articulating two models of ICT provision which both claim to support the informatisation of communities and address social exclusion. The mainstream model prioritises universal access to networks and technologies, and puts a great deal of stress on updating the services provided by libraries: staffing, technologies and delivery mechanisms. The alternative model, in contrast, starts with the needs of communities and especially those communities with least access to ICT. It emphasises targeting those with the greatest need, learning and user involvement. The next section of our paper, which reports on field research undertaken in 1999/2000, explores the extent to which, and the ways in which, UK public library authorities (PLAs) are utilising these models, and it assesses their relevance to, and impact upon, social exclusion.

Open to all? UK public library networking in practice

Between 1998 and September 2000 the UK Library and Information Commission supported a major research project focusing on public libraries and social inclusion. The findings were published as *Open to All? The Public Library and Social*

Exclusion (Muddiman et al. 2000). One important aim of the research was to assess the potential of UK public library ICT developments for tackling social exclusion. This issue was investigated in a project working paper [2]; a survey of all 208 UK library authorities; and in eight detailed case studies of policy and practice in public library authorities [3]. The field research consequently provides some detailed empirical evidence of the manner in which UK public library authorities are managing the transition to ICT-based services and of the extent to which this transition is linked to issues of social exclusion. In this section of the paper we highlight four key themes of this research: the extent and nature of ICT services in UK public libraries; the concept of universal access and its limits; targeting services for social inclusion; and partnerships and project led approaches.

(i) The extent and nature of ICT services in UK public libraries

Conducted in the autumn of 1999, the *Open to All* survey provides a reasonably comprehensive, although rapidly dating, map of the extent and nature of ICT services in UK public libraries. It suggests strongly that almost all public library authorities (PLAs) will have some provision of Internet connectivity in the next year or two. 49% of PLAs who responded to the survey provide widespread access to the Internet (see Table 1). Most others are clearly developing access to networking technologies, although in around 40% of PLAs this access consists of isolated initiatives rather than general availability across a majority of service points.

From a social inclusion perspective perhaps the most significant figures in the table relate to the low number of authorities where the development of ICT access is focused upon socially excluded groups or communities. ICT developments do not appear to be commonly targeted at excluded neighbourhoods or groups: in the case of each type of initiative listed in Table 1, less than 13% of authorities target specific groups or neighbourhoods. In some authorities it is conceivable that an alternative method of targeting may be through the support of independent community networking or voluntary sector initiatives. However, evidence elsewhere in the survey

Table 1. Public Library ICT developments (n = 129)

Service development	% of UK authorities with examples	% where wide-spread	% where targeted at excluded groups or communities
Open access PCs	88%	53%	10%
Internet access	91%	49%	7%
E Mail	75%	37%	5%
Access to local authority information system	62%	46%	3%
Computer assisted learning packages	81%	16%	13%
ICT/ information literacy training initiatives	64%	15%	11%

suggests that support for such projects is confined to 24% of PLAs and that, whilst general public library-community liaison is widespread, formal partnerships involving funding, resources and service development are much thinner on the ground (Muddiman et al 2000, 2: 17–19).

The case studies reflect this picture of an uncertain focus on social exclusion. Three out of eight PLAs had already introduced a general ICT rollout across all their service points, while another two were imminently planning to do so. In almost all cases, the scale of ICT provision in a service point was dictated by anticipated demand rather than by social need. Most of the case studies also reflected the patterns of provision reported in the survey, with Internet access and open access PCs available or anticipated in all except an Outer London authority. E-mail access was being provided or considered in all services that offered the Internet except in one northern borough. Here, a rather narrow view of public access ICT prevailed: “we are trying to make sure that the community in [this authority] continues to have access to up-to-date information. It is the electronic extension of the reference library – not a replacement for the post office – so we are blocking out things like hot mail” (Muddiman et al 2000, 2:141). Chat lines and news groups were contentious issues and only in one authority (and then only in its study support centres, where there was extra supervision) was there access.

However, in all, five of the eight case studies provided some form of free access to the Internet.

(ii) Universal access and its limits

The provision of universal access was the driving philosophy in most case study authorities. All of the ICT policy documents examined in this research claimed that this was the key mechanism through which libraries would address informational exclusion. This reflects the philosophy of *New Library: the Peoples Network* – indeed, in the Scottish case study the authority had engaged in a community consultation based on the proposals in the report as a means of disseminating information about library networking and in a (largely successful) attempt to generate local support (Muddiman et al. 2000, 2: 145–61).

In a Welsh urban authority a clear strategy had emerged from this universal approach: the stated ICT policy aimed “to ensure that everyone in the borough has access to ICT facilities, the opportunity to develop ICT skills and to electronic information, free at the point of delivery” (Muddiman et al. 2000, 2: 93). Each service point was equipped with a learning centre consisting of at least two open-access PCs with Internet and networked CD-ROMs. All staff was being trained to European Community Driving Licence level. Public access to the network was free and this had a high level of political support. Library managers saw these developments as a natural extension of the core mission of the service: according to the Borough Librarian “it’s about ensuring equality of access to electronic information and the skills needed in being able to use that” (Muddiman et al. 2000, 2:92). Other staff commented that free Internet access was grounded in the traditional library ethos of providing free information, a sentiment reflected in the views of library staff in most of the other case studies.

However, the drive for universal access clearly has its attendant problems. Libraries are being wired up at some speed and services are expected to be provided within existing staff levels. Such rapid change can lead to real tensions and result, according to some librarians, in a very limited conceptualisation of access where “the staff are being stretched thinner and thinner to provide a larger number of services to a lower

quality” (Muddiman et al. 2000, 2:100). As one informant concluded:

at this moment in time we provide a facility, I don’t think we provide a service. What we don’t say to you if you’re using the Internet is “everything all right there? If you require any help come and ask us”. We don’t do that because generally as staff we are not confident. (Muddiman et al. 2000, 2: 93)

As this suggests, a key problem with public library ICT services is one of providing user support. All of the case study authorities recognised that the active use of ICTs for learning is essential if social exclusion is to be tackled. However, in the main they were unable to raise funding to support the staffing of such initiatives. Library workers also clearly understood that the confidence and expertise of ICT users varies widely. In some locations staff often help inexperienced users for long periods of time, resulting in them being tied up for long periods of the day. This problem is aggravated, in some UK PLAs, by the low levels of staffing in branch libraries; the practice of single staffing branch libraries; and the lack of confidence and ICT skills on the part of front line staff themselves. Lack of staff and skills deficits were thus issues in the majority of case studies. In one of these authorities a Principal Librarian acknowledged that without staffing or organisational change “something has to give ... whether it’s the quality of book service or the quality of IT service” (Muddiman et al. 2000, 2: 93).

(iii) Targeting ICT services for social inclusion.

For most UK public library authorities, the provision of networked ICT is seen as an addition to the present library service. This inevitably leads to calls for extra resourcing – more staff, equipment and so on – to cope with new demands. Such needs may be legitimate, but unless they are linked with strategies recognising the primacy of support to those who need it most – the government’s information poor – then there is a real danger that any extra resources will be sucked up by ever increasing demands from existing library users.

As we have already noted, targeted community initiatives are often advocated as a response to this problem. Some of the case study au-

thorities involved in the *Open to All* research had a tradition of such initiatives, although in three of the authorities studied there was little or no evidence of a community driven approach to ICT development. Perhaps the greatest recognition of the need for a targeted strategy was apparent in a large, metropolitan authority in Northern England. Here a number of homework centres had been established in the most deprived areas of a city where poverty is widespread. One homework centre studied in detail illustrated the importance of the many factors that make a community initiative a success: the environment of the library, rules and norms, staff attitudes, outreach methods and computer support skills. These factors were equally as important as technical factors such as the availability of PCs and access to the Internet. They were also crucial to the success of a learning centre in Northern Ireland. Here, as in the city authority, informal education provision was seen as a model for libraries' community engagement and as a key mechanism of reaching out to socially excluded groups such as alienated young people. In both these projects, too, there was some degree of separation between ICT resource and library, but it was important to the success of each that the library staff played an active part in the project.

What emerges from these targeted initiatives is a growing sense of how to engage with excluded groups and communities. All of the successful ICT orientated projects examined had extra staffing support. This support offered expertise not simply in the use of ICT but a range of teaching, community outreach and facilitation skills which enabled workers to engage with disadvantaged people and facilitate individual and community development.

(iv) Partnerships and project led approaches

In four case studies there were active partnerships between PLAs and other agencies that aimed to address social exclusion through ICT initiatives and projects. All of these initiatives were targeted and community based. Indeed, almost universally, targeting was linked to partnership and external funding and only rarely attempted by public libraries through their own mainstream budgets. Partnership brought numerous benefits for PLAs, especially in terms of ac-

cess to additional skills and expertise, links with local communities and local feedback and involvement. Crucially, partnership additionally brought access to external funding programmes, which facilitate development without impinging on mainstream budgets. Most of this funding, such as the UK central government Social Regeneration Budget (SRB), is conditional upon partnership working with other agencies and with local communities (Social Exclusion Unit 2000).

Partnership, however, is not without its problems. One detailed study of a community ICT project based in a market town in South West England revealed significant tensions between ICT staff, community representatives and library staff revolving around the joint use of space and a clash of priorities and institutional cultures. In spite of the fact that most members of the public are commonly comfortable with the public library as a neutral public space, ICT workers here argued that the public library could deter some excluded groups because of its baggage and traditional book culture (Muddiman et al. 2000, 2: 51). More fundamentally, financial instability, a constant quest for funds, and the need to charge for some access time and services hampered the project.

Indeed, all of the library based community ICT initiatives that we examined were time limited. Sustainability emerged consistently as a frustration and a challenge. Literacy workers in the northern case study homework centres argued that, if their project did not continue "it would destroy the [children's] trust, in us, in the system ... I'd hate to think what would happen to the children, because a lot of them that use it don't go to school and rely purely on [the centre] for access to computers" (Muddiman et al 2000, 2:123). In the end, as the City Librarian observed more generally, tackling social exclusion may involve difficult choices between continuing such initiatives and expenditure on more visible, more conventionally in-demand library services:

We mustn't let it happen that when the money dries up for the homework centres, we run them down...if necessary, we'll have to take something else out, otherwise we've learnt nothing. (Muddiman et al 2000, 2:111)

It is by no means clear that such lessons will be learned. UK public library resource allocation is predominantly performance and demand driven,

and such models tend to drive staffing and materials inexorably in the direction of existing services and users. However, these case studies suggest that if public libraries are to have a continuing and significant impact on socially excluded communities, then they will need to stabilise and sustain the hitherto marginal and transient projects and staff who have targeted the needs of excluded people. ICT services which in reality engage with the information poor may thus require a major rethink, and a redirection, of public library strategy and resources.

Conclusion: closing the digital divide?

Over the last year or so, the momentum of network developments in UK public libraries has gathered apace. The UK National Lottery supported New Opportunities Fund (NOF) is now providing £100 million of funding to complete the people's network through a series of local infrastructure projects in UK public libraries (New Opportunities Fund 2000). At the time of writing (October 2001) £46 million of this funding has been granted to 99 out of 208 eligible UK local authorities, and it is now a publicly stated target that by the end of 2002 all of the UK's 4300 public libraries will, as ICT learning centres, provide public access to ICT (Resource 2001, 8). This will consist of (in the main free or low cost) Internet access, use of applications such as Microsoft Office, and CD-ROMs. Many libraries will also offer e-mail facilities, but some will restrict access to services such as newsgroups and chatlines. An additional £20 million has been allocated through NOF to train staff to provide introductory support for these ICT services. However, no new money has been made available to cover the staffing and running costs of the learning centres, and it is clear that most PLAs will have to offer services within existing budgets and staffing levels. Furthermore, NOF funding makes no provision for the maintenance and upgrading of infrastructure and equipment, and it is clear that most local authorities will need to meet these continuing costs themselves.

Nevertheless, these developments amount to a major modernisation of the UK public library services, and they undoubtedly achieve many of the objectives of *New Library: the People's Network*. To its credit, the UK public library profession has

succeeded in linking the public library to a vision of the information age – a proposition that looked far from certain only ten or so years ago. It has convinced UK policymakers libraries' potential, and it has successfully promoted the image of thousands of information centres in local communities only waiting to be wired up. As we have suggested, the UK government policy documents *Our Information Age* (Central Office of Information, 1998) and its *National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal* (Social Exclusion Unit 2000) at least partially endorsed libraries' ability to be the accessible conduit to ICT for those without access to a personal computer or the Internet. At the basic level, such a people's network, comprising universal access to information resources in a wide and diverse range of locations now looks certain to be achieved.

However, the extent to which these developments will impact upon *social exclusion* is extremely unclear. UK public library policy, in essence, has been concerned primarily with the mechanics of developing a network which involves little more than the passive provision of access to ICT through existing library service points. Underpinning this development is a questionable presumption that public libraries already engage with the socially excluded through the current network of libraries. *Open to All* suggests that, by and large, this is just not the case. On the contrary, by far the most successful attempts at providing for the needs of the socially excluded by public libraries are labour intensive, require high skill and commitment levels and challenge some cherished concepts of universality and equality of access. Many are conducted well outside the walls of conventional library buildings.

Occasionally, UK public libraries have engaged in such targeted, proactive and community based ICT activities, some of which have achieved demonstrable success in engaging excluded communities and groups. However, resource and staffing problems are already limiting public libraries' ability to provide support or outreach work to aid those who are not information literate. If public libraries wish to develop an enhanced level of access to ICT, either by increasing levels of user support or by developing community based initiatives, they in practice need to continually search for external funding for short term projects, which raise expectations only to fold after a

few years. Such projects may well be appropriate as experimental prototypes, but are no recipe for a sustainable model of service.

For all of these reasons, UK public libraries have not so far been pre-eminent in utilising ICTs to empower excluded communities and social groups. Instead, as we have seen, a loosely defined community networking movement has led the way with the development of various kinds of ICT community resource centres based on local partnership and a mix of local authority, voluntary sector and sometimes private sector funding. *Closing the Digital Divide* suggests that such centres represent the most effective mode of ICT provision in deprived neighbourhoods. Public libraries, we believe, could play an important part in supporting such developments, perhaps as part of a federation of local agencies working to address social exclusion, able to offer a particular mix of skills, expertise and resources as best local circumstances dictate. On occasions, for a public library, this could result in a local leadership role; equally, however, it will mean working in support of a service delivered elsewhere.

The public library hence has a choice between simply modernising its existing provision to incorporate ICT and the much more difficult option of using technological transition as a means towards developing a more socially inclusive service. In the UK, our own research suggests that, despite a rhetorical commitment to social inclusion, the technological transformation of public library services is resulting in a modernised infrastructure likely to be utilised by much the same included clientele as at present. We would suggest, in contrast, that if libraries are to reach out to the excluded of the information society, they will need to move beyond passive conceptions of access and utilise ICT as a means towards a much more active engagement with local communities and disadvantaged users. Only then, it seems to us, will the public library of the twenty-first century begin to be open to all.

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Notes

1. The brief sketch of social exclusion in the UK which follows draws its data from the following texts: Social Exclusion Unit 2000; Walker and Walker 1997; Oppenheim 1998.
2. This working paper, prepared by us, explores in more detail some of the general matters raised in this article but does not examine the empirical evidence. It is published in Vol. 3 of *Open to All* as “Information and communication technologies, the public library and social exclusion” (Muddiman et al, 3: 362–384).
3. Case studies were based on interviews, observation and analysis of policy, strategy and working documents. A detailed methodological account of the research and the full empirical findings are contained in Vol. 2 of *Open to All* (Muddiman et al. 2000).

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