

## **Computing developments**

It has been one of the intentions of this project to discover in particular low-cost solutions and thus to encourage every library to consider that they might offer appropriate services. However, it is perhaps through computer developments that the biggest impact will be made in the next few years. A few of the possible applications were listed in Section 6 of the survey results above. There has been rapid growth in the amount of material which is available electronically, and thus is suitable for adapted output to speech synthesizers, large print or display and Braille. Even more important perhaps, progress in networking and remote access will help to bring the university and its library to the student, rather than requiring the student to come to the university.

## **Footnote**

After the presentation of the main results of the survey at the Annual General Meeting of LIRG, it was suggested during the resulting discussion that it may be appropriate to develop an electronic bulletin board for librarians to exchange ideas on improving access for users with disabilities. This project is now underway and a mailing list is being set up.

This report summarizes the main points only of the project. The full text may be requested from the author.

## **Project EARL (Electronic Access to Resources in Libraries)**

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Public libraries are facing significant challenges over the next decade and into the 21st century, brought about by the reexamination of the role of public libraries in society; government legislation; the increasing demand for information and knowledge; the raised expectations of users; the on-going information explosion and the need to offer coordinated, cooperative, economic and efficient services.

The need for public libraries therefore to network their services is now increasingly becoming the focus of attention, and LASER, in conjunction with Public Library Network Awareness Steering Group, UK Office for Library Networking and interested public libraries, has contributed to and facilitated the debate on the need for a networking strategy for public libraries.

Recognizing the increasing requirement for provision of information services by public libraries, LASER organized a workshop sponsored by UNIPALM/PIPEX in Cambridge in May 1994, on public libraries, networking and the Internet. Some 40 senior librarians from public libraries and key institutions across the UK attended.

One of the proposals outlined at the workshop led to the setting up of Project EARL. Project EARL will examine the services, technical infrastructure, and application/communication software required to network public library information and resources services. It will also produce a networking strategy with associated costs for providing public libraries with access to the Internet.

Following the workshop, 14 libraries - Berkshire, Birmingham, Brent, Cambridgeshire, Clywd, Croydon, Essex, Hereford and Worcester, Kensington and Chelsea, Suffolk, Surrey, Norfolk, Westminster and the BBC and IT Point agreed to fund a scoping study which would draw up recommendations and produce costed options for the future funding of major developments. A Steering Group, with representation from LASER, Essex, Surrey, Croydon and Birmingham and observers from the Library Association, Kent, IT Point, UKOLN, with Peter Stone as Consultant, has overseen the scoping study, which began in August 1994.

The objectives of EARL are:

- to define the range of services required
- To examine interconnection of bibliographical/resource sharing services viz:
  - a) VISCOUNT/BLDSC
  - b) Local systems
  - c) International - ION, OCLC, others
  - d) Guidance user interface and routing for a), b) and c)
  - e) Development requirements and standards
- To examine interconnection of information services viz:
  - a) Local (by type and subject)
  - b) Other local
  - c) Regional
  - d) National
  - e) International
  - f) E-mail/fax/EDD
- To explore the communications/network/infrastructure for supporting services above
- To consider the choice of application software (eg Z39.50, SR protocol, X.500 and related user interfaces)
- To explore access to the proposed network via:
  - a) PC configuration
  - b) Multi-user access
  - c) OPAC
  - d) Bibliographic systems
  - e) Information servers
  - f) WAIS/GOPHER utilities
  - g) Project LIRN x.500 directory services and supporting referral and switching services
- To explore a proposed research/development test-bed

- To consider appropriate deliverables:
  - a) Network architecture and costs for UK wide network for public libraries
  - b) Report on proposed models for access services and information networking for public libraries within the UK
  - c) Technical specifications and test plans
  - d) Communications plan and network infrastructure
  - e) Equipment/software schedule
  - f) User evaluation reports and recommendations
  - g) Costing document
  - h) Recommendations for further development

The overarching objective of the project is to support the networking interests of public libraries, (their users and other libraries and organizations within and outside public library authorities).

It is essential that the project covers the promotion of library, cultural and leisure services. For example, already in the USA many museums illustrate treasures from their collections alongside details of opening hours and educational facilities.

EARL intends to provide a supportive environment for participants and a core function will be training in all aspects of the growing network resources and the role of libraries. There is a need also to apply the collective skills of librarians in the development of 'navigational' tools to enable users of network services to find information and resources on 'the NET' in an efficient, organized way.

Public libraries have considerable experience of designing and making available public access terminals, and have a long history of automation. Virtually all public libraries have in-house automation systems and many have public access terminals offering local information as well as library information. Libraries also have a long history of working with and developing standards in IT. For instance a number of libraries are using EDI for ordering, chasing and receiving bookstock. There are also pilot projects and significant research and development in the area of electronic document delivery.

The information superhighway is a vision at the moment, not a reality. It is the object of media hype, and government aspiration. It is a political as well as a service and a technical entity, but it still has to be planned, built and paid for. Libraries have already started the process, as in Project EARL, and are prepared to work with other partners to deliver the vision:

- an innovative approach is required, but we must avoid the hype;
- the highway is not a panacea for society's problems;
- we need a common network, a national grid;
- we need a test bed for networking;
- there has to be a coordinating structure to enable Government departments and other organizations in the public and private sectors to work together to take forward a strategy for use of the superhighways.

There is an infinite amount of information and public libraries have a major role in enabling access to it by:-

- providing that access
- providing the navigational tools
- acting as a pilot
- acting as facilitator, bridge and intermediary
- assisting in educating and guiding the public.

However this does not exclude those who have home or business access, and are able to navigate the network, from using libraries as sources of information, and as facilitators and enablers.

But we do need:

- to coordinate the initiatives
- to plan the infrastructure
- to secure the funding
- to remember that applications and people are as important as the infrastructure.

Public libraries can provide an excellent delivery mechanism to ensure public access to the Net. The plan for the future needs to identify what the public library contribution should be to the 'digital-based public services for the citizen', the infrastructural construction that is necessary to realize it, and an organizational framework which can carry it out. This would form the basis for the necessary political argument for investment and coordinated activity.

Quoting again from the US example, earlier this year Edward Kennedy stated that 'public libraries are a vital information link between the Government and the public ... libraries must continue to play a critical role in providing broad access to the public ... libraries will make Government less remote and more responsive to the needs of individual citizens.

In the UK the public library network is willing and able to act as the central hub linking community, government, private sector and the world at large.

A presentation day for EARL sponsor libraries and representatives from the British Library, Department of National Heritage, academic and special library sector, UKOLN and other representatives from the networking community was held on 6 February 1995 at LASER, during which proposals for developing EARL and undertaking research and development associated with its progress were discussed. Further progress reports will be made available as the development proceeds.

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