

**An Investigation into the Impact of Electronic
Resources on Public Library Reference Enquiry
Services**

A study submitted in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Librarianship

at

THE UNIVERSITY OF SHEFFIELD

by

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September 2002

Abstract

This study aims to investigate the impact that the arrival of electronic reference resources, including the People's Network, has had on public library reference enquiry services. It considers the effect that the new medium has had on the levels of enquiries recorded in both main and branch libraries over the last three years and investigates some possible reasons for the changes discovered. It investigates the current provision of electronic resources in public branch libraries and the attitudes of branch staff towards using them for answering reference enquiries. The study investigates the relationship between reference information seekers and branch staff in terms of staff as information facilitators. It also looks briefly at the information seeking behaviour of library users in relation to branch library facilities.

The study involved an e-mail survey of UK Public Library Authorities to gain an overall picture of the changes caused by electronic resources in both main and branch libraries. A more detailed picture of the current branch situation was obtained via case studies of six libraries in two convenient authorities; involving interviews with 19 front line branch staff and surveys of 170 branch users.

It was discovered that enquiry levels in main libraries have fallen over the last three years, but that branch enquiry levels have only fallen by half as much in comparison. Authorities believe decreases are partly due to the spread of the Internet in people's homes. Most branch libraries now have free public Internet access and the majority of staff feel that the Internet has made it easier to answer reference enquiries. It was found that branch staff were not necessarily adequately trained in ICT or reference work and suffered from low confidence and uncertainty in using the resources and helping users with them. Generally users were found to utilise the library most for learning and educational information, and the majority of them preferred to use their branch library rather than the main one.

The study concludes that the reference focus is shifting away from main libraries towards the branches. The libraries need to better publicise their services in order to reverse the declines in enquiry numbers and recruit new members. Further training for staff in ICT and reference, especially in branches, and a review of the branch library's reference role is needed. Information gateways to direct users around the Web and count them are required for library terminals. Libraries must also develop Web pages and services in order to compete as information providers of the future.

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Abbreviations Used

CAB - Citizens Advice Bureau

CIPFA - Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy

DWP - Department of Work and Pensions

ICT - Information Communications Technology

LISU - Library and Information Statistics Unit

NOF - New Opportunities Fund

PC - Personal Computer

PLA - Public Library Authority

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due first and foremost to the project supervisor Richard Proctor for his ongoing help and advice throughout the duration of the study.

Thanks go to all the staff at Sheffield and Derbyshire public libraries that were interviewed or provided invaluable information contributing to the study.

Especial thanks go to Mike Beach, Tommy Lau, Sean Bury, Tim Sutton, Peter Barr, Robert Gent and Mike Hewlett for giving their time and support.

Thanks to all the public library authorities who found time to complete yet another questionnaire and return it so promptly with helpful comments and observations.

Finally, thanks go to all the public library users who gave up their time to be surveyed for the study.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

There is no doubt that today we are living in an information society; demand for information is growing constantly and its value escalates in direct relation to that demand. Since the explosion in recent years, of the World Wide Web and other electronic resources onto the information scene (Williams and Nicholas, 2001), the breadth of choice available is positively overwhelming, even to those who work with information resources daily (Library Association Information Services Group, 1999:30). The general public are not necessarily aware of, or trained in, strategies to find and evaluate information, yet they must now cope with the multitude of extraneous data available and sift through it in order to acquire the answers to specific enquiries (Gessesse, 1997).

This study originally grew out of the author's previous experience with an information retrieval assignment which asked for both a print and an electronic answer to a number of reference queries. It is commonly supposed that it is easy to find *any* information that one requires by searching on the World Wide Web; but during the course of the earlier project it became evident that:

- a) it is not always 'easy' to find specific pieces of information on the Web and
- b) it is often very difficult to determine the authenticity of information that is found, due to the lack of bibliographical data on many web sites.

This experience led the author to question the role that information professionals, such as librarians, play in the acquisition of electronic reference information for members of the public. This is especially pertinent since so many people now have Internet information available from their own home. The Guardian (Snoddy, 2001) reported that in 2001 over a third of British homes were online, and this figure can only increase since, according to census statistics, the USA remains ahead of that with 41.5% of their homes connected in the year 2000 (Newburger, 2001).

The public library is a bastion of free information which is accessible to all who require it. Within the last three years especially, since the advent of the People's Network (Resource, 2002), there has been access to more and more information electronically from not only main reference libraries, but also many branch libraries. The public have higher expectations of their local library resources since the Government have raised the profile of libraries as information providers as part of their promotion of the People's Network (Resource, 2002). Whereas the job of searching for and vetting information was previously the province of the Reference Librarian, it is now common for the public to expect branch Librarians and Library Assistants to fill that role, especially since the introduction of electronic resources into branch libraries. Alternatively, the public are assumed to be capable of using the electronic resources available in branch libraries, such as the World Wide Web, to find their own information without assistance from Library staff (Ross and Nilsen, 2000:54), just as they would if they were using the Internet in their own home.

Ascertaining the impact of electronic resources on reference services is essential for the future of the library service as an information provider. It is evident from observation that the electronic resources in libraries are being used but it has not been ascertained to what extent. With the pressures on public libraries to be publicly accountable, to justify their role as a service for best value reports (Audit Commission, 2001a/b) and to compete for funding; it is crucial that they should be able to specify exactly how many people they are serving and in what capacity. It is no longer enough to know the circulation figures or numbers of people through the doors which are "traditionally... [the] indicators of library services usage" (Bertot et al, 2001:1). Measures of reference service usage, such as enquiry counts and (if available) Internet usage counts can produce trends which help staff to know how to allocate resources, provide data for benchmarking, provide a means to evaluate networked services and help to show to the public and politicians exactly what the library is doing (Bertot et al, 2001:1). Studies such as this one contribute to a pool of information which is

needed by public library staff at every level to plan for the future of their services.

1.1 Aims and Objectives

The overall purpose of this study is to provide a picture of the present situation in public library reference services, with regard to the electronic resources and discover what is required from library staff and managers for the future of the reference service. It reflects the current interest in the People's Network and the importance of access to information for everyone. It uncovers some of the knock-on effects of the computer's ability to deliver a wider array of information from a much smaller base than the traditional printed reference stock. The study aims particularly to discover how the electronic resources have affected branch libraries, their staff and crucially, their users.

1.1.1 Aim

- To investigate the impact that networked electronic resources have had on public library reference enquiry services over the last three years

1.1.2 Objectives

1. To identify changes in the pattern of reference enquiries over the last three years in the UK and investigate some possible reasons for any changes discovered.
2. To identify how many *branch* libraries now have access to networked electronic reference resources and the nature of these resources.
3. To discover the views and attitudes of *branch* library staff on their role as intermediaries between users and networked electronic reference information.
4. To ascertain the degree to which users are now utilising *branch* libraries for reference information services and, in light of this, come to some conclusion regarding the future provision and distribution of reference materials in the public library.

1.2 Scope of the Study

The study was carried out using a survey of public library authorities (PLAs) in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland; so all survey data is from libraries within the UK. The case studies were all done with the co-operation of two authorities, called throughout 'Authority A' and 'Authority B'. All branch libraries selected for sampling were within one of these two authorities

1.3 Definition of Terms

1.3.1 Reference Enquiries and Enquiries

Throughout this study the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) definition of the term 'enquiry' has been used and is interchangeable with the term 'reference enquiry'. This has been done because libraries are required to count their enquiry numbers according to the CIPFA definition and it is therefore impossible to alter the definition and still retrieve meaningful results in terms of this study.

CIPFA defines an 'enquiry' as follows:

"Any questions, however received (e.g. in person, by letter, by telephone) leading to the active involvement of staff in identifying and answering problems posed by library users". (Library Association Information Services Group, 1999:47)

The only things excluded by this definition are simple directional enquiries within the library, although these become included if it is necessary for the librarian to leave the desk and show stock to the user; and requests for items of library stationary or items for sale (Sumsion et al, 1995).

1.3.2 The CIPFA Sample Week

This is one week in October each year when public libraries are obliged to count their enquiries according to the CIPFA definition above. The figures are then multiplied by 50.2 to give an annual total which is used to compile the annual public library statistics for the Library and Information Statistics Unit (LISU). However, some libraries actually use quarterly week counts and multiply by 13

to get an annual total, and others have instituted continuous counting in order to get more accurate figures.

1.3.3 Electronic Reference Resources and ICT

Throughout the study the term 'electronic reference resources' has been used to refer to any reference information available through a computer. This is mainly CD-ROMs, the Internet and any free information found through it, subscription databases that the library pays for and any digitised information specifically accessed through the library.

Information Communications Technology or ICT has generally been used to refer to personal computers rather than telephones, faxes or any other communications format. It also does not include OPACs since the focus of the study is on the networked information that is now available outside the library catalogue. This does not account for the enquiry figures, however, which may include those relating to the OPAC depending on individual library counting policies.

Chapter 2 - Reviewing the Literature

The available literature discussing UK public library reference services is generally somewhat dated; an article on the testing of a public library reference service by Birbeck and Whittaker (1987) and an article considering the role of the past and future reference library (Duckett, 1992) are both now over 10 years old, which cannot possibly reflect the changes which are occurring now. It seems that discussions of the Internet in libraries have eschewed the specific effects on reference services in favour of data on its contribution to learning (McCormick and Sutton, 1998) (Webster and Dempsey, 1999). There is also an absence of literature on reference in branch libraries and this is partly due to the recentness of the phenomenon and partly because writers tend to concentrate on the main service. Despite this, important framework documents such as *Guidelines for Reference and Information Services in Public Libraries* (Library Association Information Services Group, 1999) published three years ago (mentioned hereafter as 'The Guidelines') and *Towards the Virtual Reference Library* (Insight Research, 2000) are still current.

The two definitive reports regarding the implementation of the Internet in public libraries are still *New Library: The People's Network* (Library and Information Commission, 1997), which sets out the original vision for the electronic transformation of public libraries and *Building the New Library Network* (Library and Information Commission, 1998), which translates the vision into a workable target plan. Other information on the effects of electronic resources on reference services comes from the USA where libraries are far ahead of the UK in implementing new technologies. A short discussion of this literature on virtual reference services is useful to show what the future has in store for the UK.

2.1 Changing Library Use: The Current Reference Situation

Bob Duckett (1992:4) notes the enormous changes that have occurred within reference libraries over the last 100 years, from "arthritic book mausoleums" to "proactive" and "demand-driven" information services. The arrival of electronic resources has fuelled that process, especially in recent years; Janes (2000), writing eight years on agrees, showing Duckett's comments on the advantages to the reference library to be still valid now.

"...the new electronic librarianship has seen a reduced emphasis on print-based resources (traditionally the hallmark of the reference library) and is seen to offer opportunities to solve the costly space and maintenance problems caused by long runs of little-used journals, classics, and ageing monographs". (Duckett, 1992:4)

Certainly it is true that the reference library and its stock has changed dramatically and is still changing, but Janes (2000:22) argues that:

*"The 'library' isn't the building, fetching and attractive as that notion is to librarians and users. The 'library' is the **idea behind the building** and what goes on inside."*

No longer do we have the leisure-rich Victorian gentlemen that Duckett (1992:4) pines for; the users have changed too and people do not have time today to sit with great volumes of text and copy out notes if they wish to take something away with them. He may also bemoan the rise in the term 'information', but that is what libraries do and that is what people need; information that they can take away with them. Janes (2000:23) sums up:

"Reference, for the last hundred years or so, has made libraries work and will continue to do so, because it will always be hard to find stuff (especially the right, best stuff)."

The Guidelines (Library Association Information Services Group, 1999) state that the mission of the 'information service' (rather than 'reference library') is:

*"To provide, without bias or discrimination, an accessible information service **responsive to the needs and interests** of those who live, work, study or visit in the area."*

Libraries are trying desperately to move with the times and provide a user-centred service; they would not have survived this far had they not made that effort. In one area Duckett (1992:6) is correct; there is confusion over the role of reference and many libraries have dispersed the section into general stock. Uncertainty reigns as to the exact mission of a reference service - is it to answer fewer enquiries thoroughly or more enquiries less thoroughly?

The unobtrusive testing of UK reference librarians by Birbeck and Whittaker (1987) suggested that an average of 5.3 minutes was taken per enquiry but that only 47% of the responses given were actually totally correct. A later study (Blake, 1995:61) suggests that the majority of public library enquiries do in fact take 3 minutes or less, which is quicker than previously recorded, but she notes all sources used as either printed or staff knowledge. The advent of electronic sources and generally better practice should have changed the success figures dramatically over the last 15 years, but there is no data on this available for the UK as yet. These findings also present the question, if reference librarians perform so poorly then what can we expect from branch librarians, untrained in reference but expected to take on a proportion of the reference role since the arrival of the electronic resources?

The statistics released annually by the Library and Information Statistics Unit (LISU) show that over a four year period, from 1996-2000, visits to the public library have fallen by 10.5%. Over that same four year period the statistics also

show that the numbers of enquiries made have only fallen by 2.5% (LISU, 2002). This suggests that although casual use of the public library is slackening off, perhaps due to factors like the cheaper paperback books now available, the use of libraries for the retrieval of specific information has not fallen in the same fashion. These figures however, do not include occurrences in the last 2 years although they have been a time of enormous change due to the arrival of the People's Network.

A further difficulty with the recorded enquiry figures for the UK is that most are counted with regard to 'all enquiries' rather than specifically 'reference enquiries'. This is especially true in libraries without a designated reference desk, so although the CIPFA definition of what constitutes an enquiry (see Definitions p14) should be used when counting, in practice it is frequently overlooked, as shown by Sumsion et al (1995). They also note that the CIPFA sampling method, using one week in October and multiplying it up to get an annual total, can be extremely inaccurate and produce some rogue figures. The CIPFA figures are used to get the annual LISU figures shown above, so it is necessary to proceed with a certain amount of caution as will be discussed later (See chapter 4, p46).

2.2 Electronic Reference Resources: The Effect on Branch Libraries

The rise of electronic information has seen branch libraries providing more and more reference information, and a move away from the exclusivity of the old reference library. *The Guidelines* (Library Association Information Services Group, 1999:12) state:

"The primary point of access to information for the majority of users will often be their branch or community library... Even in the smallest service point it is

therefore necessary to provide a core reference stock and ideally access to the Internet..."

Comments urging libraries to utilise their local branches as the most convenient resources for users have been similar from outside the UK, with conferees in California 8 years ago asking authorities to:

"Prepare local libraries to handle the bulk of reference questions, through... that new 'essential' resource, electronic access and delivery."

(Childers, 1994:35)

This attempt to redistribute enquiries takes the pressure off the central library which is often busy and suffering from staff reductions, enabling it to concentrate on the more specialised requests that branches cannot answer. Not only that but it is also far more convenient for users, many of whom may experience difficulties in travelling to their central library.

However, there are complications with this sort of strategy; libraries need to be technologically equipped to network their resources, such as CD-ROMs and databases, so that they are available at all branches. Childers (1994:35) mentions a Californian library that "shares CD-ROMs with all its branches through a multiserver" back in 1994, but there are still some libraries in the UK who cannot or do not do this now. Part of the problem has been the licensing arrangements required to share a product over several geographical locations (Insight Research, 2000:23). This means that many libraries still keep their CD-ROMs behind a counter and users are restricted to the ones that happen to be in that location, which is no different from access to the books. Insight Research (2000:29) suggests that:

"CD-ROMs as information sources are a temporary phenomenon, likely to be displaced in many cases quite rapidly, by Internet publication"

This is already occurring in libraries, with some choosing only to keep CD-ROMs for children. Commercial databases have also provided an addition and an alternative to the CD-Rom; for example, Sage Publications has created a new imprint 'Sage Reference' for 2002, which will be publishing reference works in print and digital formats. It will also be expanding into the public library market (Sage Publications, 2002), but products such as this will inevitably be restricted within the public sector by their cost and the cost of licences to network them across to branches. If they cannot be networked then they are hardly more useful than the printed version.

Some of the most useful publicly accessible databases are currently those providing local and community information, often over the library Intranet (Library Association Information Services Group, 1999:29), although more and more are becoming web based. Sarah Ormes (2001) predicts the death of Community Information within the next five years, on the basis that it will be replaced by commercial companies with more comprehensive and attractive web sites providing the same service. This prediction will depend on how quickly libraries can update their strategy, and also on the users; they may put a higher value than expected on the reputation of the library for un-biased information (Fritch and Mandernack, 2001:293). Most of the commercial sites will have a vested interest in making recommendations and deals with partner enterprises.

The Internet has brought ready networked information into libraries in the form of the People's Network. The original document, *New Library: The People's Network* (Library and Information Commission, 1997) says that "the smallest library should have three to four multimedia terminals and the largest over 40". This is backed up by *Building the New Library Network* (Library and Information Commission, 1998:8), which suggests an average of ten terminals in each library for the Network to "develop in its fullest form". We are some way off the final target but even as things stand now, a majority of libraries are connected to

the Internet. The wealth of uncharted information that it brings to users, and the format in which it operates, is something that carries even more challenges for libraries.

2.3 Between User and PC: The Librarian as Intermediary

The idea of putting the Internet into public libraries should have a major bonus for users in that there is a staff member on hand to help with any problems in finding information. Librarians have always helped with CD-ROMs (Library Association Information Services Group, 1999:23) and with library databases, so why not the Internet? Gessesse (1997:90) states that:

“The role of the reference librarian remains essential and the same - to help patrons fulfil their information requirements as an intermediary between resources and data search media”.

Partly the difficulties encountered are those of ability and unfamiliarity, the *Guidelines* (Library Association Information Services Group, 1999:30) say:

“Many staff feel overwhelmed by this vast influx of non-managed and seemingly non-manageable information”

It is therefore imperative that library staff are properly trained to assist users in locating electronic information (Ross and Nilsen, 2000). The New Opportunities Fund (NOF) launched a programme for public library staff to be ICT trained in 1999 to coincide with the arrival of the People’s Network. Staff will be instructed in how to act as:

“trusted guides, facilitators and developers of electronic content and services”
(Resource, 2002).

The problems occur when the training is provided too late or too early in comparison to the arrival of the equipment, which can damage staff confidence. The Hopkins and Sapiie (1999:119) survey of the confidence levels of US public service librarians showed a lower confidence level in using the Internet than the library catalogue. It also revealed a lower confidence level for public service librarians than non-public service librarians in using the Internet, despite their perceived advantage in having the capacity to use it daily at the reference desk. The confidence levels of UK public library staff in using the Internet have also shown to be lower than hoped (Dick, 1998), although more extensive surveys have yet to be undertaken to get a clearer picture.

Even when librarians have been sufficiently trained there is still a problem in some cases with guidelines on exactly how much help they are expected to give users who do not know how to use a PC, or are not familiar with the Internet. Generally the sources are agreed that librarians *should*:

"...ensure that the users know how to use the resources supplied... Learners of all ages... may require guidance and assistance"

(Library Association Information Services Group, 1999:15)

Although in practice this does not always happen; Ross and Nilsen (2000:54) observed a worrying tendency in the US, saying:

"...it is troubling that reference staff seem to regard the Internet as an external resource that users can search independently - at home or on the library's public access workstations - but not as a full-fledged reference tool that reference librarians should help users search and evaluate".

If this is a problem occurring with reference staff then it is even more disturbing to consider the difficulties with branch library staff, who are often the last to get training and are not specialists in reference enquiries, yet are now being expected to fill that role.

The sources are more divided on what level of training staff should be giving after that initial instruction. Meadows (2000:12) argues that spending the extra time teaching users to operate the technology involves "disintermediation" because once they have all learned then that "original people-intensive activity" will disappear and the time will have been well spent. This does not help however, if the staff cannot cope with demand in the first place or are untrained to do so. The library staff themselves are confused as to what is expected of them, with many in the US observing that their library's policies did not address this issue (Moore, 1998), although that may by now have been rectified. The huge debate between those who feel that librarians should provide users with pre-packaged information and those who think that users should be instructed in information seeking techniques to help themselves is beyond the remit of this study but can be found summarised in Moore (1998).

White (1999:58) goes even further and suggests:

"Our increasingly employed tactic of directing reference clients to terminals does not absolve us of professional responsibility..."

He is concerned about the quality of information that users are taking away with them when they are helping themselves and feels that it is the librarian's duty to advise on the authority and coverage of electronic sources. This is especially important since the library at present has no control over what reference information it is providing through the Internet (Fritch and Mandernack, 2001:293). Meadows (2000:10-11) specifically notes that:

"...information in libraries is highly systematised, whereas networked information is not - ...trivial or spurious information can be disseminated as readily as useful information and may indeed submerge the latter".

Ross and Nilsen (2000) disagree, observing the large amount of helpful information that can be found in the top ten hits after a Google search. This does not account for those, however, who are unaware of useful search engines or the best search terms and rely on those with little coverage, or those that do not update regularly. This highlights the need for library web pages to act as gateways, directing users to authoritative information sources; utilising such library based portals has been ranked as the third most frequent use of the Net by US users (Fritch and Mandernack, 2001). *The Guidelines* (Library Association Information Services Group, 1999:30) advise extending the library's IT work by:

"being more accessible to the community at large by setting up a home page for the library service on the world wide web, by developing links to other websites and by developing useful sign-posting for the web for users."

Childers (1994:34) was already arguing that point 5 years earlier, noting that:

"...effective self-help is virtually impossible [for the public] without more bibliographic instruction or better tools, such as electronic gateways".

Essentially it is often far too easy to forget that the public are not librarians and do not have their skills and information experience.

2.4 User Expectations and Behaviour

The Guidelines for Reference and Information Services in Public Libraries (Library Association Information Services Group, 1999:10) state one of their aims as:

"To provide a service that people living, working or studying in the local authority area regard as the first and most obvious point of call for information".

This is the ideal situation, but the reality is somewhat different due to a number of factors. Users do not always know what is available in their library or they may have been previously disappointed by a failure to find information. Herbert White (1999:56) says that:

"users cannot be trusted to define the expectations for reference service, because they will settle for far too little"

Essentially this is not strictly true now that the Internet is providing so much information directly to people's homes and workplaces. Users demand a greater level of service and better information than they can find by themselves at home, or they will not bother to come. *The Guidelines* (Library Association Information Services Group, 1999:49) note:

"Increasingly sophisticated user expectations are an additional pressure for the service to maintain good visibility within the community"

Even those who do not have the Internet at home have often heard about it and expect the library to provide. The users with low expectations are often now those who do not use information sources at all; they may not know how to use the resources available which further discourages them from an awareness of what is there. The library has pledged to provide "a service that is available to all members of the community regardless of... ability" (Library Association

Information Services Group, 1999:10) but this is not always possible as we have seen already.

Users who have the Internet at home or work may feel that it is unnecessary to use the library, although this is not always the case as is shown by Insight Research (2000:30):

"...if these users had their own Internet access at home or work and the information sought was freely available, they would not need to access this Internet information in the library. But information-seekers might need the help of trained and experienced staff in order to locate it. And if it was only available on subscription access, the library would probably have paid the subscription and they would probably have not".

A more difficult problem is to ascertain what it is that users are looking up on the Internet in the library, or whether they are just using the connection for e-mailing. Insight Research (2000:28) suggests that:

"public Internet access is serving two main functions:

- 1. Introducing new users to the Internet.*
- 2. Acting as an electronic post office for those away from home.*

These functions are valuable but are perhaps not too closely related to the public information function for which reference libraries exist".

Recent discussions on the Public Libraries Mailing List (JISC 2002) contradict the second statement and suggest that many librarians believe people are discouraged from using the library facilities away from home because of the compulsory registration procedures required by most to be logged on. Eve and Brophy (2001:38) go further and point out that the availability of e-mail is actually very important for job seekers, and in this case it could be considered a form of information resource. Their study of three library authorities also shows the types of information people look up on library terminals, with leisure top at 29%,

independent learning and research at 26%, studying at 20% and 'other' accounting for only 10% of the respondents. These results, although limited in scope, contradict the assumptions of the Insight Research report (2000).

2.5 The future according to the USA

2.5.1 Virtual Reference Services

As electronic information sources start to play a larger part in the services that are offered by public libraries, it is inevitable that we will see a time in the not too distant future when users expect to be able to access library resources and services from home. This will apply to general things, such as reserving and renewing books online rather than over the phone (this service is already available in some UK libraries) and also to acquiring reference information. Many UK central and reference libraries presently offer an e-mail enquiry service so that patrons can request information remotely and have it returned to them without ever entering the library. Sarah Ormes (2001) predicts that:

"in five years time all public library authorities will offer real time online electronic reference services. These services will give access to a reference librarian either in a real-time chat room or via some kind of video-conferencing. Fewer people will visit the library to have their reference query answered preferring the convenience of the online service."

Five years is an ambitious timescale, although it is five years since the first People's Network report was published in 1997 and we have over 70% of public libraries now connected (Resource, 2002); and such innovations will depend on availability of funds, staff training and also on the proportion of the skilled user population with access to the Internet from home. In this area, the US is far ahead of the UK with several pilot schemes successfully completed involving out-of-hours online librarians answering user reference queries. One such success was the "Sunday Night Live" programme run by the public libraries in

Suffolk County, New York, which offered live chat with a reference librarian and co-browsing capabilities where the librarian can 'push' web-sites to the client's computer. This was so successful that the service is now running during weeknights too and has been renamed "Live Librarian". All those who operate the service are professionals and the marketing has stressed "the confusion and frustration of finding what you want on the Internet" (Hoag and Cichanowicz, 2001) to encourage users to consult the online librarians.

Other US libraries also have similar services up and running; the North-east Ohio area offers a service called 'AskUsQuestions.com' (Joshi, 2001), as a supplement during the hours that the library is closed. This service is also staffed by professionals and offers chat and two-way web page 'pushing'. Further facilities are available, such as a 'repository' of frequently used sites, questions and answers. The patron can also leave an e-mail address and will then receive a transcript of the transaction complete with all the suggested links and sources (Joshi, 2001). This is often more than they would get from a face-to-face reference transaction and will help them to recognise sources for themselves over time. Saskatchewan Libraries (McClennen and Memmott, 2001) have a similar 'Ask Us!' online service and there are still more virtual services that are run by institutions rather than library authorities.

The Internet Public Library (IPL) is an entire virtual library service hosted by the University of Michigan, including reference enquiry facilities. It has patrons worldwide and therefore filters incoming questions, with only the complex ones going to professional librarians and the remainder to library students and library volunteers. Despite this two-tier service, enquiry figures have risen by 478% from 1995-2000 (McClennen and Memmott, 2001), so evidently the users are not concerned by the specific qualifications of their answerer.

2.5.2 Barriers to overcome

In terms of the barriers to creating services like these in the UK, there are three main obstacles to overcome. Training for the staff, funding for the staff and equipment and persuading users to try the service, assuming that they have access and enough Internet skills. The Suffolk County 'Live Librarians' have had to undergo six weeks of intensive training using the appropriate software and answering questions from other librarians; they are funded by the Suffolk Co-operative Library System and averaged about 30 enquiries a month in the first six months of full service (Hoag and Cichanowicz, 2001). The 'AskUsQuestions.com' service is better established and averages 30 enquiries per week. It is also looking to tackle the problem of users with no home Internet access by designating terminals for use in small libraries without a reference librarian, so that users can access professional help (Joshi, 2001). This is the only system that actively addresses the problem of those who are without technology, which is still a significant number in both the UK and the US. The fact that the service will be available to all may also warrant further funding for training and equipment from outside bodies.

Chapter 3 - Methodology and Methods of Investigation

3.1 Methodology

This study required the use of both quantitative and qualitative methods in order to satisfy the aims and objectives stated. The need to discover actual numbers and the large scale of the data being compared meant that a quantitative data collection technique was needed (Stone and Harris, 1984a). The first objective required the identification of changes in the pattern of figures over a period of time. It was intended to give an overall picture of the distribution of reference enquiries over the last three years so that any identifiable trends affecting the whole of the UK would be evident. Three years was chosen as a reasonable time span for which libraries may have figures to hand and also as a period which has seen the installation of most of the People's Network terminals (Resource, 2002). The second objective also required figures, this time showing the distribution of electronic resources in branch libraries at the present time.

Quantitative techniques were also used as part of the library case studies since Yin (1994:14) notes that "case studies can be based on any mix of quantitative and qualitative data". As part of the aim to build up a picture of changes in the reference service, it was necessary to gather data from a selected sample of library users to discover their information seeking preferences. This was to enable strategic and careful generalisation (Patton, 1990) to show what proportion of library users were taking advantage of branch library electronic resources and for what purposes in terms of objective four.

The third objective was concerned with the opinions and feelings of the staff in branch libraries. This information was gathered qualitatively (Gorman and Clayton, 1997:23) (Mellon, 1990:3) in order to establish a more complete picture (Patton, 1990:50) of the impact of electronic resources, not just on the numbers of users and where they go to obtain information, but why (Gorman and Clayton, 1997:26), and what effect that their behaviour has on the service itself. The use

of both data collection techniques meant that a more holistic study (Erlandson et al, 1993:8) (Patton, 1990:49) could be produced with a greater range of data helping to throw light on the question at hand. It also enabled three major public library stakeholder groups, authorities, users and staff, to have some input into the study and maintain its relevance (Gorman and Clayton, 1997:31).

An inductive approach to analysis of the results was taken, in order to allow the data to present the conclusions rather than attempting to impose them upon it (Neuman, 2000:145). This means that the researcher can begin with a question and develop theory through the data collection process; this is known as 'grounded theory' (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). For this reason, the incoming results of the primary survey of public library authorities were used to aid composition of the questions for the user survey and the staff interviews in an attempt to ensure that the most relevant data was gathered.

3.2 Methods of Investigation

3.2.1 Literature Search and Review

Searches for literature in the area of public library reference services and electronic reference resources were conducted on LISA (Library and Information Abstracts) and further searches were conducted on the University of Sheffield's library catalogue. This produced several key texts and library reports, plus a large amount of background information on public libraries and ICT. Previous dissertations from the Department of Information Studies at Sheffield (e.g. Dick, 1998) have provided useful insights and their bibliographies, along with those of other texts, have helped to broaden the search and uncover new literature. Sources on the World Wide Web (e.g. Resource, 2002) have proved crucial in the gathering of information and mailing lists have also been of use in alerting

the author to current debate in the sector (e.g. 'The People's Network' and 'Public Library' lists¹)

An attempt has been made to sift the mass of literature, much of which is peripheral to public library reference services specifically, and produce a review of the sources most relevant to this study, without covering too much old ground. This approach also helped to outline the questions and gaps in knowledge which are covered by this investigation (Gorman and Clayton, 1997:226).

3.2.2 Public Library Authority (PLA) Surveys

The first and the second objectives require quantitative data on public library services across the UK. Yin (1994:6) suggests that when the research question takes the form of asking 'how much' or 'how many' and the focus is on contemporary events then a survey is the best strategy for data collection. Surveys often take the form of self-completed questionnaires, since that format is ideal for obtaining information from a large number of geographically scattered people (Stone and Harris, 1984a:13); thus it was decided to undertake a questionnaire survey of PLAs in the UK.

The survey took place in late June using questionnaires designed to be distributed and returned as e-mail attachments. This was deemed to be a far more immediate medium than using the postal service, and it was also free both to send questionnaires out and for people to return them; thus encouraging responses (Roselle and Neufeld, 1998:157). All the surveys could be sent as four group e-mails (a list of PLA e-mail addresses was available from the University Department of Information Studies), helping to keep within the tight time schedule and it was felt that they were more likely to reach the relevant

¹ available from www.jiscmail.ac.uk

person rather than being filed with stacks of papers and forgotten. (Roselle and Neufeld, 1998:158).

One of the disadvantages of using an e-mail survey is the possibility of misdirected or failed addresses (Schaefer and Dillman, 1998), of which there were 13; six of these were sent again using alternate addresses found on the relevant library web pages. Another problem is the possibility that the recipient may not understand how to return an e-mail attachment; this was partially solved by the inclusion of clear, concise instructions, but it may have been off-putting for some respondents. The questionnaire had to be an attachment in order to preserve the formatting (boxes and spaces) which made it user friendly to complete (Stone and Harris, 1984a:15), but there was also a postal address given for respondents if they wished to print it out and return it that way (Schaefer and Dillman, 1998). In the event, 19 questionnaires (9% of the total response) were returned by post.

Out of 208 PLAs overall, there were 93 questionnaires returned which is a response rate of 44%, higher than anticipated and slightly higher than suggested for a two contact survey in the research by Schaefer and Dillman (1998:380). Of these, 2 were sent back too late to be included in the results. Responses were good all round with approximately 55 being returned within the first two weeks and the remainder arriving within the next week, after a reminder e-mail sent at that time as advised by Roselle and Neufeld (1998:157).

Some of the benefits of questionnaire use have already been outlined, for example, the ability to collect large amounts of comparable data through standardised questions to provide numerical evidence (Yin, 1994) (Stone and Harris, 1984a). The questionnaire was constructed in advance, so the researcher had time to consider exactly what information was required (Heather and Stone, 1984:4). In this instance, a mixture of open and closed questions (asking for both facts and opinions) were used, as recommended by Peterson

(2000:30). This helped to gather standard responses but also to illuminate the reasons why the data appeared as it did. Comment boxes and tick boxes with 'other' categories were provided to encourage respondents to mark something when they did not agree with any of the choices (Stone and Harris, 1984a:16). There is a possibility that the requests for figures in some of the later questions may have discouraged respondents, but wherever possible the figures were requested as an extra to avoid this and 70% of those who answered did include the figures. Explanations of terms used in questions were given and an attempt was made to be as brief as possible, as recommended by Peterson (2000:50) and Stone and Harris (1984a:15). SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Scientists) was used to analyse the results.

Originally it was intended to pilot the questionnaire (Stone and Harris, 1984a:18) to two pre-arranged PLA heads in order to iron out any problems with the phrasing of questions and layout of the questionnaire. In fact this was later deemed to be impossible to complete within the time allowed, so the questionnaire was examined by the project supervisor and re-written before being sent out to the PLAs.

3.2.3 Case Studies

The PLA survey provided data which gave an overall picture of services across the UK, but in order to explain and illustrate those findings (Patton, 1990:54) and fulfil objectives three and four, it was necessary to undertake case studies of six individual libraries - the number used being dictated by time constraints. Yin (1994:15) states that:

“the case study strategy may be used to explore those situations in which the intervention being evaluated has no clear, single set of outcomes”.

In this instance, the intervention can be defined as the arrival of networked electronic resources and there is no clear answer as to the effect on staff and users. The use of both qualitative (in the form of staff interviews) and quantitative (in the form of user surveys) techniques provides both comment and opinion and also statistical evidence on the situation (Erlandson et al, 1993:115).

Six branch libraries in the north of England (four in PLA 'A' and two in PLA 'B') were chosen to act as case study libraries for this project during July 2002. The sample was chosen with convenience in mind (Gorman and Clayton, 1997:128) as those locations kept travelling to a minimum; PLA A, being the closer of the two, was used more extensively. This was also because the researcher was able to utilise contacts there from a previous study, thereby generating more goodwill towards this project. PLA A is presently at a less advanced stage of ICT development than PLA B, which has been the recipient of generous funding over the last few years, generated by successful bidding to various challenge funds. It was felt that this would help to give the sample some diversity, as would the decision to include a selection of libraries situated in areas which range from highly deprived to highly affluent (see Profiles p40).

Both the interview guide questions (Gorman and Clayton, 1997:128) and the questions for the user questionnaire (Stone and Harris, 1984a:18) should have been piloted to a "sample of respondents similar to those on which the final version will be used" (Heather and Stone, 1984:37). This would have helped to discover any problems with question interpretation, or the clarity of the questions; but the time scale made it ultimately unviable to do this.

3.2.3.1 Interviews

Brief interviews took place with a purposive sample (Gorman and Clayton, 1997:127) (Erlandson et al, 1993:91) of 19 willing staff from the six selected libraries. As many as five were interviewed in a larger branch and as few as two from other branches, due to constraints such as staff availability on the prearranged day and other, more pressing events taking place in the library at the time. Every effort was made to find staff who had worked in that branch library for over three years (the average term of service was in fact 11 years) and who spent most of their time on the front desk dealing with users (the average was 63% of their time at work spent on the front desk). Out of 19 interviewees, 12 were Library Assistants, 2 were Senior Support Assistants, 2 were Senior Library Assistants, 1 was an Assistant Community Librarian and 1 was a Children's Library Assistant.

Interviews are a useful method of gathering qualitative information when, as in this case, the researcher has questions but is unsure as to the answers. Sanger (1996:61) recommends interviews for their flexibility and negotiability, saying that they can "gather many different kinds of data in a short span of time". For this study it was decided to use an interview guide (Gorman and Clayton, 1997:126) (Merriam, 1988 in Erlandson et al, 1993:86), so that the interviewer could run through the same questions for every interviewee and ensure all the points were covered, but also allow them to express opinions and answer questions out of order if they happened to do so. The interviewer could also clarify points and probe subjects gently if no answer was forthcoming, although care must be taken here to avoid unduly influencing the interviewee (Gorman and Clayton, 1997:125). The guide was altered slightly for library A3 (see Profiles p40 and Appendix 2b p134) because the PCs are only just being installed there, but it was felt that opinions on the imminent arrival of the Network would add to the findings of the study.

The emphasis was on the interviewees' views and how they feel about the situation, so it was necessary for them to feel as relaxed as possible. For this reason and the issue of transcription being very time consuming, a tape recorder was not used and notes were taken instead (Erlandson et al, 1993:90). Sanger (1996:67) observes that the benefits of recording are the existence of a complete record of both parties speech, but expresses a preference for note taking himself. In this case, many subjects appeared relieved and volunteered more readily when discovering that they would not be taped, so the decision was correct. Note writing can be distracting to both parties (Sanger, 1996) but here it gave the subject the chance to consider their next answer and think back, so the time was not wasted. Quotations were read back to the interviewee at the end to check their accuracy and permission was asked to use them anonymously in the study (Sanger, 1996) (Yin, 1994).

3.2.3.2 User Surveys

Library users in each of the selected libraries were surveyed using an administered questionnaire containing mostly closed questions because they are agreed to be easier to answer and help to aid recall (Foddy, 1993:128) (Heather and Stone, 1984:3). The researcher asked the questions and filled in the answers because it was felt that more responses would be generated within the short time available by such a pro-active approach. It also enabled clarification of the questions, which was required in some cases and prevented respondents from giving incomprehensible answers (Heather and Stone, 1984:3). In this instance elderly respondents were also grateful that the questions were read out due to problems with their sight. A flash card of five answer options was given to the user to help them to answer the second question, as suggested by Foddy (1993:59), which involved considering where they would go to obtain certain information. This was successful up to a point, although some people did not look at it and others still could not think of an answer at all, despite the presence of five easy options. Foddy (1993:60)

observes problems with respondents favouring the first answer on the card, but in this case the first answer was not applicable to everyone, which forced respondents to read on.

Users in each library were surveyed on separate, one day visits due to time constraints, which may reduce the accuracy of the sample (Stone and Harris, 1984b) since the amount and type of user varies depending on what day it was and how busy the library was (see Limitations of the Methodology p44). It was also impossible to survey those actually sitting at PCs because they have only an allotted time slot for access. Some were surveyed before or after PC use, but the sample generally covered those people present and available in the library.

Overall, 170 users were surveyed; thirty in each library except library A2 (see Profiles p40), where despite two visits, only 20 users could be found to participate. The survey for library A3 was altered slightly to account for the fact that the PCs were only just being installed, but this only affected two segments within the first question (see Appendix 3, p136). Once again SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Scientists) was used to analyse the survey results.

3.2.3.3 Observation

Observation as a method of investigation did not play a huge part in data collection for this study but incidents and comments observed during interviewing (Gorman and Clayton, 1997:44) and especially user surveying that may have a bearing on the results were duly noted since Sanger (1996:60) says that “interviews take place within an observational context”. This was useful in surveying incidences where people added a general proviso to their tick box answer which could be recorded, and showed that the decision to administer the questionnaire was correct.

Further to this, observation techniques were used to make brief notes on the interface provided by each PLA to help users to access the Internet. A staff member in PLA B showed their library gateway off without any prompting, but it was necessary to go to a library in PLA A as a user to observe their system. This information was used to support findings from the case studies rather than standing alone.

3.2.3.4 Library profiles

Out of the six libraries which were used as case studies, four of them were within PLA 'A' and two were within PLA 'B'; thus they have been labelled throughout as libraries 'A1', 'A2', 'A3' and 'A4' for authority A and libraries 'B1' and 'B2' for authority B.

Public Library Authority A is a city-based authority with all of its libraries concentrated within urban areas of that large city. The Central Library is in the city centre and has a designated reference desk/section with some specialities, including a Sports Library and a Women's Health Information Service. All libraries in the authority have access to community information via the Library Management System; this is accessible to the public from the OPACs. The Internet has been free across the whole authority since early 2002. The authority uses week long enquiry counts for each *quarter* in order to get its CIPFA totals for each year.

Library A1 is a branch library located in a local shopping centre, which serves an outlying district of the city. There is a council 'One Stop' information service in the foyer of the library. The ward containing the library has a deprivation index of 2800 (with 1 being the most deprived) out of a total of 8414 English wards. However the area has seen a lot of recent regeneration and the percentage of Income Support claimants is lower than average.

There is one general enquiries desk and a small section of reference books. There are 2 public access PCs with the Internet and 2 that are for CD-ROMs, which are kept behind the counter and not networked. Internet PCs need to be booked in advance and there are no networked databases or digitised information. The staff have private access to 2 more PCs for NOF training.

Library A2 is a small branch library located in an inner-city community and has community rooms upstairs in the same building. It has received a lot of Government funding over the years but the ward still has a deprivation index of 1787 (with 1 being the most deprived) out of a total of 8414 English wards and the percentage of Income Support claimants is higher than average.

There is one general front desk and a very small section of reference books, although an advice session is held once a week in the library by a counsellor. There are 5 public access PCs with the Internet and 1 which is used for a Learning Centre programme. CD-ROMs are kept behind the counter and not networked and Internet PCs need to be booked in advance. There are no networked databases or digitised information and the staff do not have their own Internet connected PC.

Library A3 is a small branch library located in an area of the city where there are several hospitals and medical establishments nearby, which means that it houses a lot of people who work in the health service. The ward containing the library has a deprivation index of 7953 (with 1 being the most deprived) out of a total of 8414 English wards, so it is the most affluent area used in the study.

There is one general front desk and a very small section of reference books. There are no public access PCs at all and the staff also do not have access at present. This situation will change shortly with the library being rewired at the time of the study in preparation for the installation of public access PCs.

Library A4 is a branch library located in an inner-city area. In the last few years it has completed a move to a purpose built new library building. The ward containing the library has a deprivation index of 129 (with 1 being the most deprived) out of a total of 8414 English wards, making it the poorest area used in the study. The percentage of Income Support claimants is over twice the UK average.

There is one general enquiries desk and a small section of reference books. There are 8 public access PCs with the Internet which have to be booked and the staff do not have their own designated access. Life Long Learning and children's educational CD-ROMs are kept behind the counter and not networked. There are no networked databases or digitised information. An employment advisor operates a service out of the library.

Public Library Authority B is a largely rural authority with large and small towns and villages to provide for. The Central Library is in a town in the north of the authority and it has enquiry desks on each floor, along with a specialised business service and an ongoing local materials digitisation project which will eventually be networked to all branches. The Library System is web-based and gives access to community information via the local council website. All the libraries also have access to some networked subscription databases, such as Grove's Dictionary of Art and access to the Internet has been free since early 2002. The authority counts its enquiries according to CIPFA regulations with an annual sample week count.

Library B1 is a large branch library located in a local shopping centre which serves the surrounding town. The ward containing the library has a deprivation index of 1248 (with 1 being the most deprived) out of a total of 8414 English wards. There is a problem with drug-induced crime in the town and the library is connected by radio to a Shopwatch programme. The percentage of Income Support claimants is higher than the UK average.

There is one general enquiries desk and a small section of reference books. There are 13 public access PCs with the Internet, 4 in a classroom that can be hired and 2 storybook machines for the children. There are no CD-ROMs because they have been phased out in favour of the Internet, to which staff have their own access behind the counter. PCs need to be booked in advance and there are some databases but no digitised information as yet.

Library B2 is a branch library located in a local shopping centre which serves the surrounding town. The ward containing the library has a deprivation index of 7131 (with 1 being the most deprived) out of a total of 8414 English wards, making it extremely affluent. The percentage of Income Support claimants is lower than the UK average.

There is one general enquiries desk and a small section of reference books. There are 11 public access PCs with the Internet and also some CD-ROMs, which are kept behind the counter. Staff have their own access to the Internet from behind the desk. PCs need to be booked in advance and there are some databases but no digitised information as yet.

(All statistics for library profiles have been taken from *Neighbourhood Statistics* (Office for National Statistics, 2002))

3.2.4 Triangulation

It was felt that using both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods would provide a range of the most useful data (Erlandson et al, 1993:115) and help to use the strengths and cover the weaknesses of each separate methodology. Gorman and Clayton (1997:31) note that a:

“counting’ approach is fine as far as it goes, [but] for many information professionals it does not go far enough in helping to understand the meaning behind the figures, or in addressing issues that are not readily quantified”.

For example, in this study, the issue of staff attitudes. Thus, triangulation has been used as a means of enriching the research and providing both micro and macro-level perspectives on the issue at hand (Gorman and Clayton, 1997:32).

3.2.5 Limitations of the Methodology

A major difficulty with the study was that there was no time to pilot either questionnaire, or the interview guide questions before they were used, although it had originally been intended that this should be done. All three were looked over by the project supervisor, as recommended by Gorman and Clayton (1997:128), but were not seen by anyone else prior to use. Despite this there were no real problems discovered when the responses to the PLA survey were returned, and no real problems when the researcher used the other two sets of questions; thus the omission had minimal impact.

The mention of a deadline for the return of the PLA e-mail surveys was omitted from the original request, although it was included on the reminder e-mail two weeks later, giving a week until completion. In fact this deadline was extended by another week and a good response rate was recorded, so the oversight was minor.

It was impossible in many cases to conduct the staff interviews in private, so they could have felt uncomfortable about giving their opinions; but most seemed forthcoming and the topic was not a sensitive one, and was unlikely to offend.

The user surveys could only sample people in the library on a particular day and these were all weekdays when the library was less busy. This was necessary in

order to interview staff, but may have skewed the user figures somewhat. Stone and Harris (1984b:5) warn of the danger of figures being distorted by the circumstances in which they are recorded, and this has been the most damaging limitation of the study. Despite this, a reasonable sample of users were surveyed and a reasonable spread of ages, genders and views were discovered upon analysis.

The samples of staff and users are not really extensive enough to allow completely confident generalisation (Patton, 1990:53), but it was felt that some careful generalisation was possible. An awareness of the impact of the sample size and its effects was kept throughout, to help the researcher and the reader to judge the sample in context (Patton, 1990 in Erlandson et al, 1993:84).

Chapter 4 - The Changing Pattern of Reference Enquiries

The last three years has seen a time of concentrated change within the ailing public library, the catalyst for that change being the introduction of the People's Network (Resource, 2002); bringing with it access to the Internet and other electronic resources that were not previously widely available. The trends recorded by LISU (Library and Information Statistics Unit, 2001) showing a 10.5% drop in library visits from 1996-2000, show that traditional usage is falling. The survey of PLAs undertaken for this study reveals the situation from 1999-2002 in relation to reference enquiry figures. Examination of the evidence from the case study libraries shows the local situation.

4.1 Main and branch library enquiry figure trends: The UK

	Overall change in BRANCH library reference enquiries 99-02					
Overall change in MAIN library reference enquiries 99-02		Increase	Decrease	No change	Unknown	Total
	Increase	14 (15.7)*	3 (3.4)	2 (2.2)	5 (5.6)	24 (27.0)
	Decrease	10 (11.2)	29 (32.6)	3 (3.4)	14 (15.7)	56 (62.9)
	No change	2 (2.2)	1 (1.1)	1 (1.1)	1 (1.1)	5 (5.6)
	Unknown				4 (4.5)	4 (4.5)
	Total	26 (29.2)	33 (37.1)	6 (6.7)	24 (27.0)	89 (100.0)

Table 4.1 Trends in reference enquiry levels in PLAs 1999-2002

*Percentages of respondents are all in brackets.

Out of 91 responses to the PLA survey, 2 were unable to answer this question due to the unique make up of their particular library authority; leaving 89 valid responses.

Immediately it is obvious that by far the highest number of main libraries have experienced a decrease in enquiries over the last three years; 62.9% of the total respondents, which is roughly double those who have reported an increase (27%). Those who reported no change or unknown amount together to only about 11% of the total as shown in Figure 4.1 below.

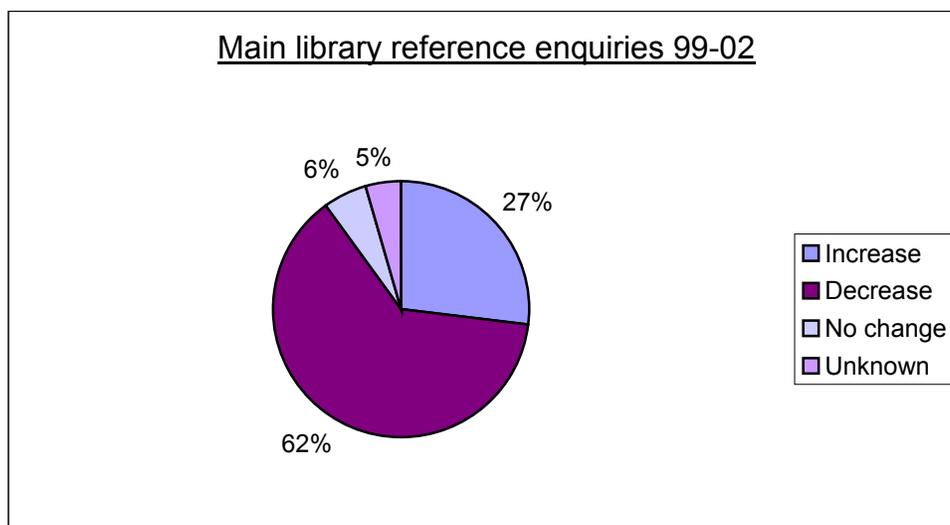


Figure 4.1 Main library reference enquiries 99-2002

The average change reported by the main libraries was a 5.4% decrease over the last three years. This figure was calculated from the enquiry numbers and percentage changes given by 63 out of the 91 responding PLAs. This average decrease is double the overall decrease recorded by LISU (2001) for the four years up to 2000, which suggests that the downwards trend is continuing in main libraries.

This is not the same as the overview for branch libraries (in Figure 4.2 below) where the proportions of those respondents reporting decreased, increased and

unknown enquiry levels are much closer together. 37.1% stated that there had been a decrease in enquiries, which is much lower than main libraries and 29.2% reported an increase, which is slightly higher than main libraries. The most concerning figure is that of the 27% of PLA respondents who do not know what is happening in their branch libraries in terms of enquiry levels at all. This differs greatly from main libraries where only 4.5% were unknown.

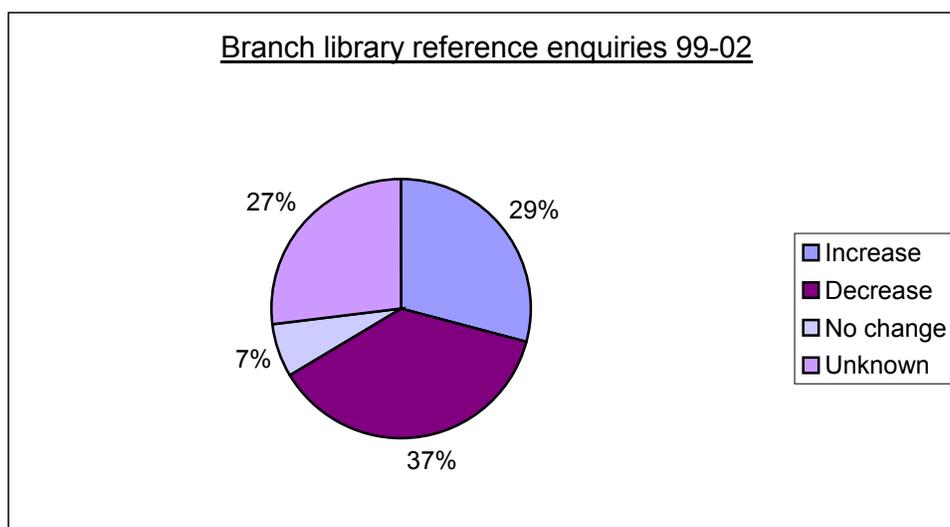


Figure 4.2 Branch library reference enquiries 99-02

There is a possibility that the reason for the large number of unknown responses for branch library figures was because the survey went to the head of the relevant PLA, who may well have had to ask colleagues for the data requested. Branch libraries by their nature are further away and more isolated with fewer staff, and obtaining the information may have proved difficult, as indeed a couple of authorities commented in e-mails accompanying completed surveys. However, a more common comment from PLAs who answered 'unknown' here was:

"We do not record enquiries in our branches".

Which is problematic in terms of obtaining a complete picture of enquiry levels.

The average change reported by branch libraries was a 2% decrease over the last three years. This figure was calculated from the enquiry numbers and percentage changes given by 28 (as opposed to 63 for main libraries) out of the 91 responding PLAs. This in itself illustrates that far fewer branches are recording their enquiry levels than main libraries. They also seem to be experiencing a less severe decrease in user enquiries. The average for this study sample shows a lower average decrease than that recorded overall by LISU (2001) for 1996-2000, which suggests that the branch libraries are not suffering from the same downwards trend as the main libraries.

4.1.1 The difficulties of counting enquiries

There are several problems that have come to light during this study regarding the counting processes used by libraries to record their enquiry figures. These problems become more evident when looking at branch libraries, because they do not usually have a separate enquiry or reference desk. As we have already seen, branch libraries do not tend to record enquiry figures at all in many places and in those where the figures are recorded, they are often of dubious authority. This is freely admitted by the library authorities themselves; for example the spokesman for one PLA noted on the survey:

“We recognised a long time ago that you cannot really draw safe conclusions from sample data, which is why we’re now moving towards more frequent monitoring. Any authority which supplies apparently cast iron figures based on CIPFA’s minimum sampling requirement is probably deluding itself.”

The factors to consider when looking at these figures are therefore:

- How often are enquiries counted?
- Has the method of counting been altered recently?

- What constitutes an enquiry?
- Do staff remember to count?

Some libraries use the CIPFA sample method of counting one week in October and multiplying up (e.g. case study authority B), whilst others do a count for one week in each quarter (e.g. case study authority A) and multiply that up to try and get a more accurate figure. Other libraries have instituted continuous counting policies which should give a much better result. It is unhelpful to compare authorities who use different counting methods, and it also skews the figures if an authority has changed from a sample count to a continuous counting strategy within the last three years, as noted by a PLA respondent:

“Increases could easily be the result of improvements in counting methods”

Sumsion et al (1995) observed these problems seven years ago and they are still not resolved, as the comments during this study show. Sumsion et al (1995:40) also noted that staff were unsure about what exactly constituted an enquiry and 26% of those they surveyed had never seen the CIPFA definition of one (see Definitions p14). A remark from a Senior Support Assistant in library B2 highlights some remaining confusion over the issue:

“Overall I’d say enquiries were definitely going up, but they’re not all what you’d consider reference enquiries really”.

This is exacerbated by the fact that busy staff often just do not remember to count the people they deal with. The survey by Sumsion et al (1995:40) showed that in one authority:

“...the count increased the more often they did it simply because staff got better at remembering to write everything down.”

This is borne out by evidence collected during the present study, with PLAs noting comments on their surveys such as:

“Assessment of the trend in enquiry numbers in both main and branch libraries is hampered by the method of collecting the statistics. This relies on staff remembering to log enquiries during the survey period. This means that there can be sudden falls and rises in the numbers of enquiries in particular libraries year on year that it would be difficult to explain as actual variation.”

“...our current staff are less mechanical in the way that they record enquiries”.

4.2 Enquiry levels in the case study libraries: The local picture

Interviews with branch library staff in the two selected authorities revealed further information with 14 out of the 19 interviewees stating that enquiries had gone up over the last few years, only 5 disagreed and thought that their library was less busy with enquiries. Comments included:

“There are more enquiries and less book borrowing... the paperbacks are so cheap that I think people tend to buy them now”.

(Senior Support Assistant, B1)

“We get an awful lot more homework enquiries now than we used to; it’s because of the National Curriculum I think, all that project work and stuff”.

(Senior Library Assistant, A1)

Out of the 5 who thought that their library had fewer enquiries, interestingly 4 of them were those interviewed from library A3, where the PCs have not been installed yet.

“We have less enquiries now because there are generally less users... well that’s true across the whole system really”.

(Library and Information Assistant, A3)

“Not many people use the quick reference section anymore and it’s just quieter, so there are probably less enquiries”.

(Library and Information Assistant, A3)

In actual fact, the official enquiry figures for those libraries are as shown below in Table 4.2. There were only 3 years of figures available for libraries A1 and A3 (1999-2002) but libraries A2, A4, B1 and B2 provided the last four years of figures.

Enq Nos	Case Study Libraries					
	Library A1	Library A2	Library A3	Library A4	Library B1	Library B2
1998-99	-----	2,483	-----	7,059	14,664	19,448
1999-00	6,006	2,769	3,801	10,933	23,504	20,124
2000-01	17,199	2,886	18,187	17,940	17,862	14,872
2001-02	9,919	1,667	5,044	10,985	13,728	16,900
Total % change	+65%	-32.5%	+32.7%	+55.6%	-6.4%	-13%

Table 4.2 Enquiry figures for case study libraries 1998-2002

The percentage changes can be misleading in relation to a small library with only a few thousand enquiries to start with, but despite this, it is evident that the impressions of the staff do not agree with the recorded statistics. Library A3 has in fact increased its enquiry numbers, although the staff all reported a fall and libraries A2, B1 and B2 have experienced a drop although the staff thought that enquiries had gone up. It is possible that the staff are reporting 'feeling' busier or quieter, which could be due to more complex or longer enquiries coming in, or staff shortages which have put more pressure on those remaining to cover the same work load. Several PLAs noted problems caused by staff reductions and a Library Assistant (B1) mentioned that understaffing made life "very hard" and that difficult enquiries took up too much staff time that they could not afford to give. An Assistant Community Librarian (A4) added, when asked about the possibility of an e-mail enquiry service in the future, that:

"I would expect that its a good idea but we can't staff the services that we have already".

Libraries A1, A3 and A4 are all showing a disproportionately large increase in enquiries in 2000-01, but the staff members responsible for collating and holding the statistics were unable to suggest why that should be so. The only comments coming from both authorities were that the figures were notoriously unreliable due to the sampling process used for counting enquiries, a problem discussed previously in section 4.1.1 above. Both of the libraries in authority B, which has had ICT for longer and is more technologically advanced, show a peak in the previous year (1999-00). This could indicate that the arrival of the ICT technology boosted enquiry figures to a temporary high in some libraries, which then settled out to a more sustainable level, although this is general speculation.

4.3 Summary of chapter 4

- The majority of main libraries (62.9%) have experienced a decrease in enquiries during the three years between 1999 and 2002 of double that recorded by LISU (2001) for the four years between 1996 and 2000.
- Branch libraries are more successful with only 37.1% reporting a decrease over the last three years and 29.2% reporting a positive increase. The worry is the 27% who do not know what is happening in their branches in terms of enquiry figures.
- Problems identified with the enquiry counting methods by Sumsion et al (1995) seven years ago are still just as much of a hindrance today. This renders important statistics unreliable and does not help the libraries to show what they are doing and how many people they are providing for.
- The case study libraries show enquiry figures that cannot be properly accounted for and are judged unreliable by the staff who need to use them. Front line staff have a different perception of the level of enquiries that often disagrees with the statistics.

Chapter 5 - Reasons for the changes in enquiry figures

5.1 Opinions of the PLAs and the library staff

PLA survey respondents were asked to write down their comments and opinions as to the possible reason/s for the changes in enquiry levels in their authority. 78 out of the 91 respondents recorded comments, with most giving several reasons for the trends observed. These answers fell into seven general categories, 5 being reasons for decreases in enquiries and 2 being reasons for increases in enquiries; these are shown in Table 5.1 and Figure 5.1 below.

Reasons given for change by PLAs	Respondents giving this reason
Decrease - due to home Internet use	38 (48.7%)
Decrease - due to a general drop in library users	20 (25.6%)
Decrease - due to competition from alternative resource providers	13 (16.7%)
Decrease - due to users finding their own information on the library Internet terminals rather than approaching staff for help	26 (33.3%)
Decrease - due to lack of publicity advertising library resources	3 (3.8%)
Increase - due to the Internet in the library attracting users in	20 (25.6%)
Increase - due to positive publicity increasing user expectations	11 (14.1%)

Table 5.1 Why have enquiry figures changed? PLA survey results.

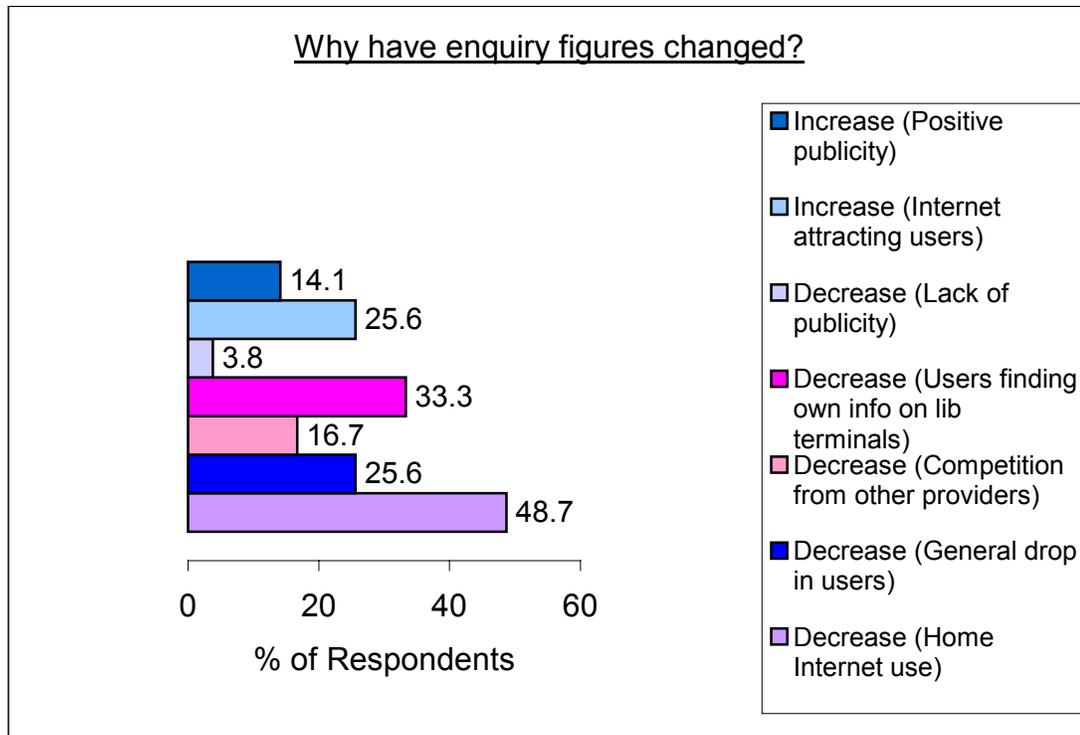


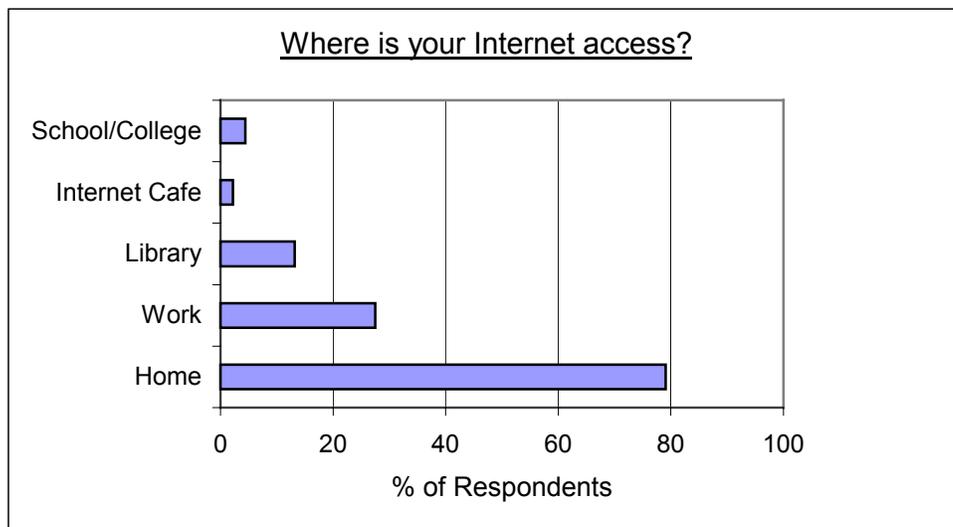
Figure 5.1 Why have enquiry figures changed? PLA survey results

5.2 Evidence from user surveys

Out of 170 users that were surveyed, 91 (53.5%) of them used the Internet. When asked where they generally used it, some people gave more than one answer but the results were as follows in Table 5.2 and Figure 5.2. Obviously it was not possible, within the limited time for this study, to obtain information on those who simply do not use the library at all, so we are limited to the views of library users.

Where is the user's Internet access	No. of Respondents giving this answer	% of Respondents giving this answer
Home	72	79.1
Work	25	27.5
Library	12	13.2
Internet Cafe	2	2.2
School/College	4	4.4

**Table 5.2 Where is your Internet access?
Answers from Internet users**



**Figure 5.2 Where is your Internet access?
Answers from Internet users**

From this it is evident that by far the largest proportion (79.1%) of library and Internet users have access at home; actually 42.3% of the whole sample of 170 library users have Internet access at home. This is substantially higher than the third of British homes reported in 2001 (Snoddy, 2001), so figures have either gone up in the last year or the sample included a larger proportion of affluent

people; probably a combination of the two. Only 27.5% of Internet users said that they have access through work, and those who have access through the library are around half of that number.

Prior to these users having Internet access they must have obtained their information from somewhere else. When questioned, the same sample of 91 users gave answers as to where they had previously looked for information. Replies (sometimes several from each respondent) fell into five categories; the second one of 'books and magazines' generally does not refer to library books. The 'go to source' category, refers to things such as travel or health information which were previously obtained from primary sources such as a travel agent or doctor.

Before the Internet, where would the user have found the information that they now get from there?	Respondents giving this answer
Library	42 (46.2%)
Books/Magazines	32 (35.2%)
Wouldn't have bothered	12 (13.2%)
Asked someone else	8 (8.8%)
Go to source	27 (29.7%)

Table 5.3 Where did you previously obtain information before you had the Internet? Answers from Internet users

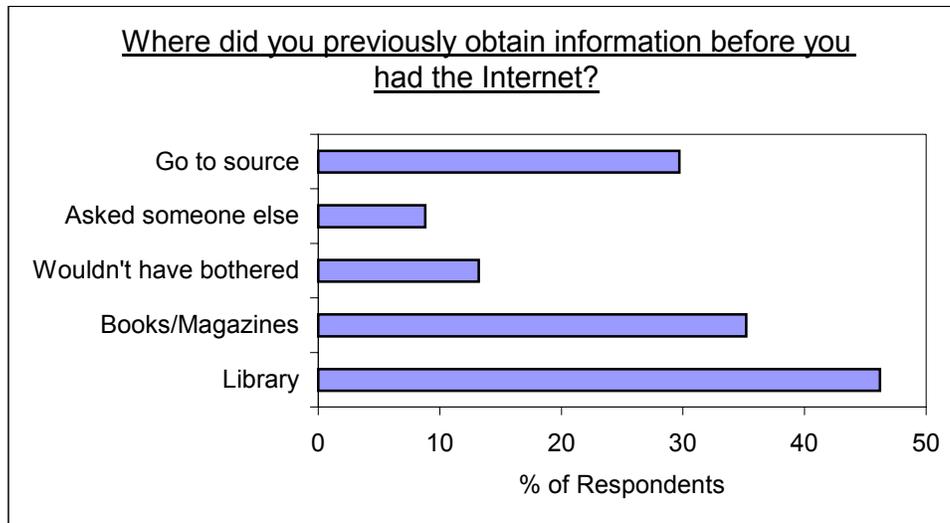


Figure 5.3 Where did you previously obtain information before you had the Internet? Answers from Internet users

From this it is easy to observe that Libraries are the biggest losers now that people have the Internet, especially in a situation where the majority have access at home. This would probably not be true of course in a survey of only deprived areas, where home access is less likely, as noted by staff;

“In this area not many folk are likely to have computers at home”

(Library and Information Assistant, A2)

and people tend to have jobs which do not include PC access. Despite these potential losses to the library however, others are also losing - bookshops and other information providers. Libraries are not alone.

5.3 Overview of reasons for changes in enquiry levels

5.3.1 Home Internet use

The most popular reason by far that was given by PLAs for a decrease in enquiry figures (48.7% of respondents) was that people now have the Internet at home so they do not need to use the library for information. The case study library staff disagreed, with only 2 out of 19 giving the use of the Internet at home as a reason for fewer users making enquiries. Both of those were from library A3 which does not have PC access yet. However, this may be because the staff generally thought that enquiries were going up.

The user survey which sampled those who used the Internet show that 46.2% of them used to get information from the library but now use their PC. Of that same sample, almost 80% have home Internet access. This would agree with the PLAs ideas on enquiry decreases; ideas that are not shared perhaps by staff because they do not see people who are not coming into the library. The PLA has a wider view, and the staff are also perhaps under pressure from cuts in their numbers (as mentioned previously in section 4.2, p51).

5.3.2 A general drop in users

The PLA statistics are the only real evidence for this, since staff believe that they are busier than ever and it is impossible to measure people who are not in the library within the scope of this study. According to the survey results there is a fall of 5.4% in main library enquiry figures and 2% in branch enquiry figures, which is both higher (main) and lower (branch) than that recorded overall by LISU (2001) from 1996-00.

5.3.3 Competition from other resource providers / lack of publicity

These two items actually link together, since they are complementary causes. People will only get their information from the library if it is the first place that comes to mind. Both were only mentioned by small percentages of the PLAs and neither were brought up at all by staff. User information seeking behaviour is discussed later in more depth (see section 8.3, p99) but it bears out the idea that the library needs to be the first place that is thought of in terms of information. This could be partially achieved by improved publicity for library resources.

5.3.4 Users searching unaided on library terminals

This was a popular reason for decreases in enquiries given by PLAs (33.3%) and is also supported by evidence from the front line branch library staff in the case study libraries; although only 13.2% of the users surveyed suggested that they used the Internet in the library at all. A large number of staff interviewed said that many users, especially children, were very proficient and tended to use the Internet by themselves.

“Once people have learnt to do the passwords they come in and use it on their own”. (Library and Information Assistant, A4)

“Users who are good with the net just look for themselves and if they can’t find it then they go away again”. (Senior Library Assistant, A1)

However, every single one of them also said that there was no way to know what people were accessing in terms of information, although they do keep an eye out for misuse. PLA B monitors user surfing from a central location but only looks into individuals if there is cause for concern; PLA A is in the process of getting a similar central monitoring system. Thus, it is difficult to know if people

are finding information themselves or just using other electronic facilities such as e-mail. Any form of monitoring is also hampered by privacy issues, as mentioned by a PLA:

“Reasons of privacy make it difficult to quantify enquiries satisfied in this way.”

Many staff thought that users tended to speak to them if they wanted specific reference information:

“Mostly they come to us if they want reference information”. (Library and Information Assistant, A4)

“I think it would be only occasionally [that people are accessing reference information alone].. usually they would ask one of us.” (Library and Information Assistant, A4)

“People do ask for help quite often”. (Senior Support Assistant, B1)

Suggesting that overall, staff are very unsure about what users are and are not doing by themselves.

5.3.5 ICT attracting users / positive publicity about the resources

25.6% of the PLA respondents thought that the ICT was attracting more enquirers into the library and this is allied with observations from 14.1% that the publicity about the new resources (usually ICT based) has also raised enquiry numbers and user expectations, as suggested earlier by the Library Association Information Services Group (1999:10). Despite only about 13% of users surveyed saying that they use the library Internet, the staff response was overwhelmingly in agreement with the PLA observations in this case. For example:

“The Government has been pushing libraries to the public... people’s expectations are high, they expect us to have the Internet”. (Senior Library Assistant, A1)

“The kids are always here needing help with homework because of the National Curriculum and public expectations of the library are ever increasing”. (Senior Library Assistant, A1)

“Enquiries have gone up since we got the Internet, it seems to encourage people in”. (Library and Information Assistant, A2)

“It’s probably all the Government publicity”. (Senior Support Assistant, B2)

“More people come in to use the machines now, and there’s been a lot of publicity about them”. (Senior Library Assistant, B2)

Interestingly, the staff interviews suggested two further reasons for rises in enquiries; the National Curriculum and its attendant project work and the fact that people are generally better informed now and are more aware of what is available for them:

“People are suddenly realising the library’s here and the kids use it constantly for homework”. (Library Assistant, B1)

“More people are asking for information about health and holidays and the like. They know what’s out there”. (Library and Information Assistant, A4)

“People are more aware of what’s available”. (Library and Information Assistant, A4)

“There have always been a lot of kids with their school projects here”.
(Children’s Library Assistant, A2)

These were not noted by the PLAs, but user survey questions on information seeking behaviour (see section 8.3, p99) suggest that children certainly are using the library more for work and need help to do so.

5.4 Summary of chapter 5

- The most popular reason (48.7% of respondents) for the changes in enquiry figures reported by the PLAs is that decreases are due to a rise in home Internet use, tempting people away from the libraries. Staff disagreed, with the majority saying enquiries had risen in their branches (no staff from main libraries were questioned) . Almost 80% of users surveyed have home Internet access and 46.2% reported that they now use it rather than visiting the library for information.
- PLAs thought that there was a general downturn in library use, which is supported by the overall enquiry figures from LISU (2001) and also from this study.
- A small number of PLAs blamed competition from alternative resource providers, such as Council One Stop Shops, and lack of publicity for library resources for falls in enquiry numbers. These causes are evidently linked since users must be aware of library facilities in order to choose to use them in preference to others. User surveys support this view.
- Enquiries may have dropped due to more users finding their own information through library terminals. 33.3% of PLAs thought this was so and many front line branch library staff agreed, although only 13.2% of

the users surveyed said they used the Internet in the library. Problems with monitoring what people are looking up by themselves came to light, as they do not always ask for help. Staff themselves do not know how many users are accessing information without them.

- The majority of staff held the view that increases in enquiries are due to the Internet in libraries and Government publicity of the new service, although only 25.6% of PLAs suggested that the Internet was attracting enquirers. 14.1% of PLAs thought that positive publicity was having a good effect, whilst many front line staff gave this as a primary cause for increases.

Chapter 6 - Branch libraries and Networked Electronic Resources

6.1 The UK picture

The PLA survey asked respondents to indicate which resources their branch libraries had available. Out of the sample of 91, 87 respondents answered the question. Those who did not, usually specified reasons such as the arrangement of their particular authority, which rendered questions on branches invalid. The results are shown below in Table 6.1 below.

*All percentages of respondents are shown in brackets.

	Staff Access	Free Public Access	Charged Public Access
CD-ROMs e.g. dictionaries / encyclopaedias	56 (64.4)*	73 (83.9)	----
Internet / World Wide Web	69 (79.3)	78 (89.7)	11 (12.6)
Networked databases	36 (41.4)	35 (40.2)	2 (2.3)
Digitised materials	20 (23.0)	27 (31.0)	----
Other Electronic resources	17 (19.5)	13 (14.9)	2 (2.3)

Table 6.1 How many branch libraries have access to networked electronic resources?

It is encouraging to see that almost 90% of public library respondents have free public Internet access in their branches in 2002, more than reported by Resource (2002), although this does not account of course for those PLAs who

did not reply to the survey. However, there are still 12.6% who are charging for it; the indication being that a few are charging in some of their branches, but possibly not all and so have ticked both boxes. Access is definitely improving but boosting the numbers of terminals in each branch is still an ongoing task. *New Library: The People's Network* (Library and Information Commission, 1997), says that there should be 3 to 4 terminals in even the smallest library, but the case study libraries have only 2 (A1) or even none (A3) in some branches at present. Others are doing better with 8 (A4) or 13 (B1) terminals in a branch. More worrying is that staff do not seem to always have their own designated access to the Internet. This question could in fact have been clearer, since some PLA have probably considered 'staff access' to be through the public terminals rather than separate.

CD-ROMs appear to still be widespread despite indications from the case study libraries (authority B has very few) and the literature (Insight Research, 2000) that they are being phased out in favour of Web information. There is little or no indication of CD-ROMs being networked (as advised by Childers, 1994), although this may be due to the non-specific nature of the question which could have been separated into networked and non-networked CD-ROM provision. Only about 40% of authorities have staff and public access to networked databases and some PLA comments indicated difficulties with subscriptions, licensing and funding:

"...there are still problems with funding. We subscribe to a very few online databases because of the high cost of subscriptions".

"...more expensive reference resources can be networked - but subscription and licence costs are still high".

"...it is now possible to access on-line versions of materials that were far too expensive to purchase in hard copy. However, the recent trend to charge for

access to the full versions of things like Britannica which were previously free may reverse this...”

These problems are well documented by sources such as Insight Research (2000:29). Only one respondent indicated that their authority was looking into ways of using collective purchasing to work with other libraries so that they could afford the more expensive electronic reference packages.

Digitised information is relatively popular with 40 (45.9%) libraries having free public access to either that and/or other electronic resources. In fact, 27 individual PLAs indicated that it was local history information that was available electronically, usually including digitised photographs. Four more expressed their intention to commence a local digitisation project soon. Surprisingly only three PLAs noted specifically that they had community information available over the Web, but several commented that it was accessible only through the OPACs. This tends towards supporting the views of writers such as Ormes (2001) who have predicted the death of community information in libraries.

6.1.1 Extra services provided by PLAs

The comments on the returning PLA surveys showed that some authorities have moved forwards into providing specific e-mail and telephone call centre services for users with reference enquiries, in order to help the branches to cope with demand and channel questions to the trained staff:

“Our Library and Information Service set up a telephone/e-mail enquiry service... to support branch libraries with limited information resources about three years ago”.

"...our enquiry service, available via telephone, textphone [sic] and e-mail, 7 days a week... figures have shown a steady increase since the service was launched in September".

"The number of enquiries received via our self service machines, introduced about 3 years ago, is increasing".

Strategies such as this can also be useful for getting round the problem of affording multi-site licences for electronic resources.

"Last year we set up a central enquiry centre to answer enquiries which branches can't answer, for whatever reason. It is also open to the public by phone, fax and e-mail. We are in the process of cutting back on printed material in the branches in favour of Internet resources now that the NOF terminals are coming in. The Enquiry Centre has single site licences to several on line subscription sites".

These kinds of programme are following in the footsteps of the 'Ask a Librarian' scheme introduced in 1997 by EARL, the Consortium for Public Library Networking (EARL, 2002). One PLA in fact noted that they were still a part of that programme and that electronic resources helped immensely with the e-mail enquiries received through it. This is still a long way off the virtual library programmes in the USA (Hoag and Cichanowicz, 2001) (Joshi, 2001), with their co-surfing and web page-pushing, but it is heading in the right direction. Most front line staff believe that an e-mail service is the future and will happen:

"...more people using the library in whatever way is good - anything that makes us less dispensable is good". (Library and Information Assistant, A3)

but expressed concern at the idea of losing the personal element; a drawback noted by Fritch and Mandernack (2001). Staff comments included:

"I suppose it's a good thing but it seems a very insular way of doing things... I mean there's no client participation". (Library and Information Assistant, A2)

"Often you have to ask them supplementary questions because they're not always very clear, that would be difficult over e-mail" (Senior Support Assistant, B1)

6.2 Electronic resources: Contributing to branch reference success?

When asked if they thought that having electronic resources available in branch libraries had contributed to more enquiries being successfully answered, the results were overwhelmingly positive. 85 PLAs answered the question out of the 91 available and 63 (74.1%) of these confirmed that the resources led to greater success. Only 6 (7.1%) answered negatively and 16 (18.8%) were uncertain, mainly because they had not had the resources long enough to judge. Figure 6.1 below shows the replies.

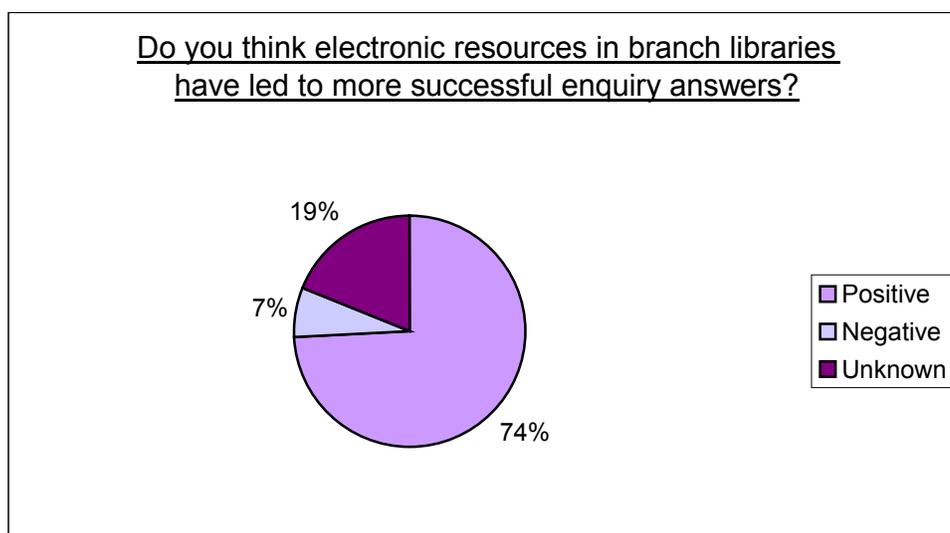


Figure 6.1 Do you think that electronic resources in branch libraries have led to more enquiries being successfully answered? Answers from PLA survey.

When asked to comment on the reasons for their opinions, out of those who did so, the responses fell into seven broad categories, 5 generally positive and 2 generally negative; as shown in Table 6.2 below.

	Respondents giving this answer
POSITIVE - Greater range of information on the Internet	47 (72.3%)
POSITIVE - Faster access to information on the Internet	8 (12.3%)
POSITIVE - More current information on the Internet	6 (9.2%)
POSITIVE - More flexible searching capabilities on the Internet	3 (4.6%)
POSITIVE - Internet in branches means less referrals to central	29 (44.6%)
NEGATIVE - Slower access to information on the Internet	4 (6.2%)
NEGATIVE - problems with authenticity of Internet information	3 (4.6%)

Table 6.2 Why do you think the electronic resources in branches are / are not leading to more enquiries being successfully answered? Answers from PLA survey.

The most popular answer by far (72.3% of respondents) being that the range of information available electronically was much greater than anything a branch library could ever house on paper.

“There are now no geographical limitations as to where we search for information. Our printed materials have a national bias, for example we could offer information on UK but little on foreign companies. We are now able to track down companies worldwide on the Internet as most will have a web

presence. The Internet is also the ideal place to look for the esoteric and obscure.” (PLA response)

Respondents also liked the speed of access to information (12.3%) although that is dependent on technology, which explains why some respondents complained of the opposite, that it is too slow.

”Sometimes it can be quicker to use the Internet, but not always, depending on the speed of the connection!” (PLA response)

”All branches have Internet access, but the current slow response times are a negative factor in encouraging branch staff to use the Web to answer enquiries”.
(PLA response)

A large percentage (44.6%) observed that there were now far fewer referrals to the central library, because branch staff had the means to find answers themselves at their location. This signifies that the reference focus is in fact being shifted towards branch libraries as the *Guidelines* (Library Association Information Services Group, 1999) and Childers (1994) suggested that it should be.

”Referrals have been significantly reduced”. (PLA response)

”Previously we would have referred a lot more enquiries to central, but now we have the sources at our fingertips”. (PLA response)

This view is supported by comments from front line branch library staff:

”We probably tackle more of our own now because Central will ask if we’ve tried the Internet”. (Library and Information Assistant, A4)

There was some concern as to the authority of information available on the Web but this is more evident in views from the front line staff, which will be discussed in section 7.2.1 later.

6.3 Summary of chapter 6

- Almost 90% of public libraries now have free public Internet access in their branches; although there are still a small minority who are charging for it. Only about 40% of authorities have staff and public access to networked databases and there are problems with the subscriptions and licensing. Digitised information is a growth area and mainly consists of local history information and photographs which are available electronically.
- Some library authorities are running value added services such as e-mail enquiries and call centres, following on from the 1997 'Ask a Librarian' scheme (EARL, 2002). Electronic resources are especially helping with the e-mail enquiries.
- Asked if electronic resources are leading to greater success at answering enquiries in branches, 74.1% said yes and only 7.1% said no. 18.8% were uncertain, due to the recent nature of the acquisition in their case.
- The PLAs felt that the range of information available on the Internet and electronically was the biggest bonus. Some thought it was faster than using print sources (12.3%), others do not have up to date hardware and suffer from slow connection speed. 44.6% said that referrals had decreased due to electronic resources in branch libraries.

Chapter 7 - The Librarian's role as information intermediary

Gessesse (1997), Resource (2002) and the Library Association Information Services Group (1999) are just a few of the sources in the literature who maintain that library staff should remain as the intermediaries and guides between users and information, irrespective of the format of that information. However, the fact that information is now found inside a PC, which requires different access skills, is causing inevitable difficulties, especially amongst branch library staff who are not necessarily trained in reference. Interviews with these front line staff revealed some insightful opinions and attitudes on both electronic resources and their impact on user services.

7.1 Branch library staff confidence

Several studies (Hopkins and Sapiie, 1999) (Dick, 1998) have shown that library staff in general are not confident in using electronic resources, especially the Internet. This is borne out by the comments of staff from the case study libraries who said things like:

"I find it a bit difficult to find things on the Net, perhaps because I'm not as experienced with it". (Library Assistant, B1)

"I feel good if I find something but I would say I'm perhaps not as confident as the others". (Library and Information Assistant, A4)

"The Net is my third option to try, after the books and the community resources on the OPAC, because I'm not too familiar with it. If I was, it would probably go higher up my list". (Library and Information Assistant, A4)

"I'm put off really because... I'm not sure where to look or how to phrase the question". (Children's Library Assistant, A2)

Many of these difficulties could be solved by training programmes and regular practice, as has been previously suggested (Ross and Nilsen, 2000). The PLA survey comments revealed that this approach works very well:

"...all of our staff have been trained (or are undergoing training) to ECDL standard which has given them much more confidence in searching the Internet on behalf of users and helping them to use it themselves".

"...staff have been through NOF training and one of the main impacts of this has been their enthusiasm for using the Internet for enquiries..."

However, this training does not appear to be getting through to everyone at present judging by the observations of the selected branch staff:

"...the staff don't always know enough themselves to teach people. A staff member who used to work in the University is considered to be the expert here".
(Senior Support Assistant, B2)

This comment reveals a gap between levels of training in public branch libraries and the academic sector. Others are being expected to answer enquiries whilst still awaiting the training for it:

"I've not had my full NOF training yet so I'm not completely confident". (Library and Information Assistant, A1)

Library A3 was in the process of having PCs installed but the staff had not yet been trained:

“My first instinct would be to use a book, but after the training I might use the computer”. (Library and Information Assistant, A3)

and some staff seemed to think that they would not be trained at all, implying that they would be doing the job without it:

“Staff are trained to use reference books so they know where to look in them”.
(Library and Information Assistant, A3)

It is a cause for concern that only 6 staff out of 19 mentioned that they had been trained to use the PCs at all, when they are all supposed to have gone or be going through the NOF programme. It is also particularly disturbing that there are a substantial number of branch libraries (see section 6.1, p66) where staff are expected to share terminals with the users, making it impossible for them to use the Internet as a resource or practice any skills. One staff member commented:

“...if we can actually ever get onto the Internet... if we had our own staff terminal it would be brilliant”. (Library and Information Assistant, A4)

7.2 Branch library staff attitudes

7.2.1 Authority

The findings of this part of the study generally uphold the view set out in the *Guidelines* (Library Association Information Services Group, 1999) that the unregulated nature of Internet information is a problem for staff. This is probably even more so for branch library staff, who are not specialist trained in reference (as pointed out by a PLA survey respondent). The literature (White, 1999) (Meadows, 2000) expresses a fear that users do not know how to find quality information online and should therefore be encouraged to ask library staff, but

that is useless if the staff do not know how to find authoritative information either:

"I still slightly shy away from the Internet myself. It's not always easy to find things and you can't tell who wrote it really". (Assistant Community Librarian, A4)

"Sometimes when you go on the Internet there's too much conflicting stuff and you don't know who has written what". (Library and Information Assistant, A3)

Encouragingly, most staff that were interviewed seemed to have ideas on what was reliable and how to go about checking information:

"I often wonder at the accuracy of information on the Internet. You can't always source it so it may be a bit dubious, but on the other hand, sites like the BBC are very reputable". (Senior Library Assistant, B2)

"...it's another bigger option to try, as long as you use it sensibly and stick to the UK sites... with books you are immediately sure of your source whereas the Net is so big and essentially uncontrolled... there's a problem with verifying Net information". (Senior Support Assistant, B1)

"You just have to beware of what you are using, look at the dates and who wrote the sites etcetera". (Senior Library Assistant, A1)

7.2.2 Books versus the Internet

It is true that printed resources are being reduced in branch libraries in favour of space saving electronic resources (Duckett, 1992) and in most cases this appears to be a success, as one Senior Library Assistant (A1) remarked:

“The information held on the Internet is so much more than anything you could fit into a building”.

Some staff however, were upset about the idea of ‘replacing’ books:

“Money spent on the Internet means we will go without other things and if those are books then that’s not good”. (Library and Information Assistant, A3)

Although generally staff found that using the Internet alongside their remaining book stock was useful, especially for things that they knew were not available in book format:

“...only when your book stock fails do you tend to use the net, but when you’re looking for very up-to-date information then the net is good for checking the book answers because it gets updated all the time”. (Senior Support Assistant, B1)

“If it’s something that’s a bit obscure, like words to a song, then we don’t have it in books here”. (Library Assistant, B1)

“When we first got the computers I would still go to an encyclopaedia but now if it’s not straightforward I will look on the Net”. (Library and Information Assistant, A4)

The main complaints about using the Internet to answer enquiries hinged on it being time consuming to set up and use, although this may be partly to do with inferior technology and slow connection speeds:

"I don't find the Net all that useful to be honest, the amount of sites makes it time consuming so it's sometimes easier to just phone someone up - people don't want to be waiting half an hour for something". (Library and Information Assistant, A2)

"I know how to use the Internet but if there's an enquiry and I know we have a reference book on it, then I'll use the book because it's easier than booting up the PC and it's there in black and white". (Library and Information Assistant, A3)

Those staff who preferred to use books seemed to be referring to difficulties with search strategies and reference interview techniques, rather than actual problems with the electronic format:

"The Internet is quick to use, but isn't a success every time. You can be searching a while sometimes and not come up with an answer". (Library and Information Assistant, A1)

"...although sometimes if a user is not very specific then the Internet can be useless". (Senior Library Assistant, A1)

All in all, there does not seem to be a problem with the staff in the case study libraries overusing the Internet, a worry that was expressed by a PLA respondent:

"...there is the suspicion that some staff, especially less experienced staff, may be relying too heavily on the Internet and ignoring book stock and periodicals as

sources of information. As a result we fear that they may start to think that 'if it ain't on the Internet, it ain't there at all' [sic]".

In fact the opposite was true in some cases:

"Almost all the enquiries are book related so there's no real need to go to the Internet to answer things". (Library and Information Assistant, A2)

"We refer a lot of people who are doing college courses because there are no reference books here". (Library and Information Assistant, A2)

The second Library Assistant worked in a library with 5 or 6 People's Network terminals yet did not use them at all for users who wanted information that was not in the book stock.

The attitudes of the users also affected the format that the staff chose to find information for enquirers. There were several observations that people, and children especially, wanted the electronic information in preference to anything that could be found in a book, even at the expense of efficiency:

"You find that kids will only accept it off the Internet. They think it's better somehow". (Assistant Community Librarian, A4)

"Kids nowadays immediately think Internet; it's computers before books".
(Library and Information Assistant, A2)

"Some people only want it off the Internet, they think it's quite alien to look at a book when in actual fact a lot of it is there in a book like an encyclopaedia".
(Library and Information Assistant, A4)

The demands of schools were blamed for some of this, since many children come into the library with a list of Web sites to look at in order to find the

information for their homework and are not interested in the same information in a printed format.

7.2.3 Answering reference enquiries

When asked about their feelings towards answering reference enquiries, despite being branch staff and not trained reference staff, most interviewees felt that it was part of their job:

"It's part of the job, whatever they want, we provide". (Senior Library Assistant, A1)

"It was part of our training to answer reference enquiries". (Library and Information Assistant, A2)

A majority also said that they positively enjoyed it, which is encouraging in terms of the proposed swing towards branch libraries handling more general reference enquiries (Childers, 1994) (Library Association Information Services Group, 1999). Comments from respondents included:

"I like it, it's a challenge to see if you can find something. The motto is never to let them leave with nothing". (Senior Library Assistant, B2)

"I quite enjoy it, it gives quite a buzz and you learn yourself if you manage to answer a difficult enquiry". (Library and Information Assistant, A4)

"You do feel a little bit more empowered to have a go at things". (Library and Information Assistant, A4)

Those interviewees who were not as happy about answering enquiries, had mixed reasons. One popular responses was that they felt under pressure to do too many things at once:

“In principle I don’t mind but when we are very busy we don’t have the time to spend looking at web sites and so on”. (Assistant Community Librarian, A4)

Another seemed to be primarily a concern that the expectations of users were too high and that the staff may not be able to satisfy them:

“Yes it bothers me, there is a concern that you won’t be able to find the answer, even with the Net and you feel that you are letting the user down”. (Senior Library Assistant, A1)

“Sometimes we feel that we don’t always have enough to offer and worry we are not giving out the right information”. (Library and Information Assistant, A1)

“You can’t help everyone but you do as much as you can, There are a lot of professional people around here and they know what they expect from a service”. (Library and Information Assistant, A3)

This is something that could almost certainly be rectified by training and helping staff to gain more confidence in answering enquiries and searching for information for users.

7.3 Instructing and guiding users

The literature agrees that library staff should “guide” and “assist” users (Library Association Information Services Group, 1999) in using the electronic resources available, but also observes that this does not always happen (Ross and Nilsen, 2000). This limited part of the study shows various attitudes from branch library staff towards teaching and assisting users with electronic resources. Generally they separated out the Internet as a problem when expressing concerns about actually having to teach users, although the role of guide and information facilitator was one that was felt to be far more acceptable.

A small number of staff felt that it was not their job to ‘instruct’ users in how to use the Internet, despite the fact that they were obviously used to helping people with CD-ROMs and other equipment. Lack of time came up as a big factor which contributed towards this kind of attitude:

“We don’t have the time and we are not paid to train people to use the Internet. We used to have two workers funded to do that but once the funding ran out we don’t provide that service anymore”. (Library and Information Assistant, A2)

“If they want the Internet then they tend to access it themselves, we don’t really have time to spare”. (Library and Information Assistant, A2)

Other staff were concerned about exactly who they would be helping:

“When the Internet comes we will end up working longer and later and it won’t really be for the benefit of our regular users”. (Library and Information Assistant, A3)

and felt that it would be mainly students (who have alternative University access) and people who were away from home wanting to use e-mail facilities that they would be serving. These user groups have been suggested by Insight

Research (2000:28) as large beneficiaries of public library Internet access, but the above comment comes from the library that has not yet got PCs, so it is speculation as to what 'may' happen and no other staff mentioned this as a problem.

Another major concern, voiced by over half of the interviewees, was that users may expect them to provide pre-packaged information, rather than guidance to find their own information:

"I worry that people will think that the librarian is here to look stuff up for them and do their work for them and we don't have time for it. You wouldn't expect a librarian to read a book for you would you?" (Library and Information Assistant, A3)

"I feel that my job isn't to find information for them but to help them to find it themselves". (Library and Information Assistant, A3)

"...people are already losing the ability to look things up for themselves and find information themselves". (Library Assistant, B1)

This seems to signify a difficulty with a lack of official guidelines as to what exactly is expected of staff. An in-depth discussion of this issue is found in Moore (1998), which goes beyond the remit of this study.

Although there were some negative attitudes expressed towards the idea of instructing users on the Web, there were also many positive comments about the librarian's role as an information facilitator. When asked if they could think of any reasons that users may have for coming to the library for information despite having Internet access at home, a significant number of staff observed that their own role as guides and assistants may be an attraction; as suggested by Fritch and Mandernack (2001).

"We do get people coming in who say they have looked for things on the Net at home but can't find it and want help". (Library and Information Assistant, A4)

"...because the staff are helpful and friendly!" (Library and Information Assistant, A3)

"Possibly they know that we're on hand if they get stuck". (Library and Information Assistant, A4)

"Generally people have already looked themselves and can't find it". (Library and Information Assistant, A3)

"I think that some people don't know how to surf the Net properly so they will still come and ask". (Library and Information Assistant, A3)

"If they don't know where to look for something then they can come to the library and ask and we will know". (Library and Information Assistant, A3)

The comments show that these staff do not have an aversion to guiding users around Web information, but the question implies that the users already know the basics of Internet use and therefore does not tackle the problem of what to do with those users who are completely unfamiliar with the technology and actually need a 'teacher' rather than a guide.

7.3.1 Information gateways

The literature suggests the use of electronic gateways (Childers, 1994) and library home pages (Library Association Information Services Group, 1999) with links to authoritative sources, as ways to help users to navigate the Web without as much assistance from library staff. These are innovations which have already been made in some authorities, utilising the expertise of library staff, and were mentioned by PLA respondents on their surveys.

"We... now are able to offer a far wider range of material via our Online Reference Service (over 1, 500 sites selected by professional staff as good)".

"Library staff have developed web pages and links tailored to the needs of each [library] site so that not only do we offer access to the equipment but we also provide some content, mainly for local history, and important navigation aids to users".

"We also have an excellent list of 'Links' to help customers".

Other authorities have developed a similar system specifically for staff to use when answering enquiries from the public:

"We have also developed a database of nearly 2, 000 websites for staff support - to use to answer enquiries".

Generally it is accepted that there needs to be some sort of guidance actually in place on the network to help users and also staff to find appropriate information. One PLA respondent observed that:

“In general the Internet has given users an alternative source of reference material. But I also feel that reference provision needs to be developed more to make it more attractive / accessible for the public to use”.

The creation of library homepages with useful bibliographic links also helps to raise the wider profile of the library and advertise to more people the services that are available. In fact, the two case study library authorities are at different stages of development in this area. Authority B requires people in the library to log onto the system and has a gateway created by the authority that takes library Web users through a series of graduated links to sources of authoritative information. For example, clicking on links labelled as ‘healthy eating’ takes the user to a site created by BBCi with plenty of helpfully organised information.

Authority A, however, has no logging on procedure so the user is confronted by whatever homepage was set up by a previous user. There is no helpful set of links and the user is left to search undirected, which is fine for experience and knowledgeable users, but can be problematic for new or inexperienced users. The absence of a password procedure also means that it is more difficult for staff to monitor who exactly was on the PC at changeover times, although they do have to produce a library card as identification. The authority has recognised that this is a problem and is in the process of upgrading the PCs, so that logging on procedures can be introduced and homepages can be set and password protected to prevent users changing them.

7.4 Summary of chapter 7

- Interviews with front line branch staff suggest a lack of confidence in using the Internet to answer reference enquiries. The solution to this is training and regular practice as revealed by comments from PLAs who have taken this approach.
- Training programmes that are in place are not getting through to everyone and public library staff are worse trained than those in the academic sector. Some staff are expected to answer enquiries before full training and others do not believe that they will be trained at all; many failed to mention any training that they had. Staff are hampered in some cases by having to share terminals with users.
- Branch staff are concerned by the difficulties of finding authoritative information on the Web, although many are re-applying their previous evaluation skills to the new sources and are aware of the need for caution.
- Staff generally prefer to use electronic resources in conjunction with print, although they note several areas of information that are only available over the Internet. A few staff avoid Internet resources altogether, and there is no evidence from the sample that they are relying solely on the Internet as mentioned by a PLA respondent. The expectations of users also influence the format staff choose to use.
- Most branch staff feel that answering reference enquiries is part of their job and enjoy the challenge, although some are anxious that there is not enough time to do it properly and that users expect too much.

- Staff distinguished between 'instructing' users in how to operate the Internet and 'guiding' users in finding suitable information. They felt the former was not their responsibility but that the latter was and were happy to act as facilitators. They expressed some concern about whether their regular users would be the ones to benefit from the new services. Worries were also expressed that users were starting to expect pre-packaged information and did not want to learn to search for themselves.
- Information gateways have been accepted by PLAs as a helpful tool to assist users in finding authoritative information. Several authorities already have them and others are acting on plans to develop homepages, which will then be accessible through the Web to everyone online, raising the public profile of the library.

Chapter 8 - Users and branch libraries

The sample of 170 users that were surveyed provided 46 (27.1%) male respondents and 124 (72.9%) female respondents. The proportion of female respondents was much higher than expected, despite the fact that women tend to use the library more than men. This may be partly due to the fact that the surveys took place during the week, rather than at a weekend and many of the respondents were mothers with children and therefore not in work.

8.1 Local branch library or central library?

All the 170 users surveyed were asked whether, if they were going to use the public library to find some reference information, they would go to their local branch or to the Central library. 139 (81.8%) of the 170 said that they would visit their local branch, but the majority added a proviso that if the information could not be obtained there, then they would go to Central as a second option. However, they all thought that it would be reasonable to try the branch first and expected the branch to have access to all but very specialised information. 25 (14.7%) respondents said that they would go straight to Central because they did not think that the branch would have much reference information. 6 (3.5%) people said that they would go to both, this was often because they worked near Central and lived near a branch library. The results are shown below in Table 8.1 and Figure 8.1.

	Number of Respondents
Local / Branch library	139 (81.8%)
Central library	25 (14.7%)
Both	6 (3.5%)

Table 8.1 Would you go to your local branch library or Central library to find reference information? Answers from users.

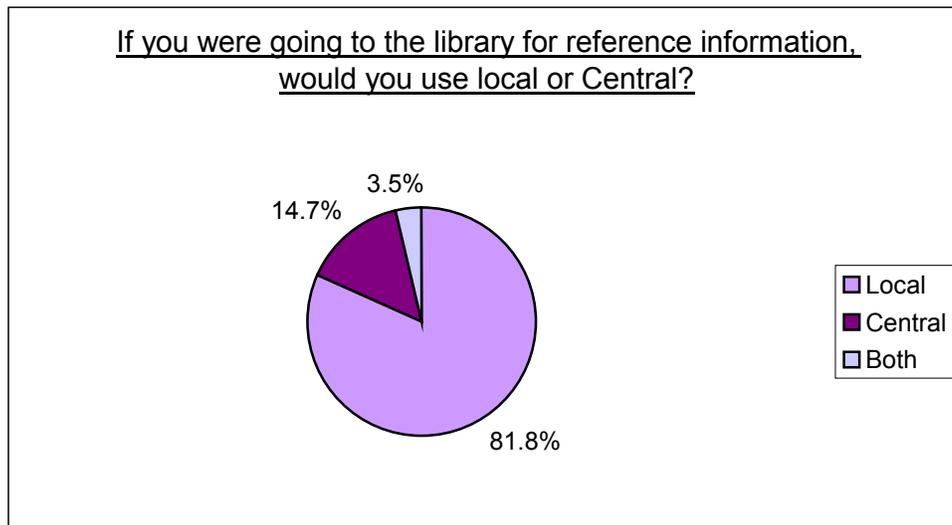


Figure 8.1 Would you go to your local branch library or Central library to find reference information? Answers from users.

This shows that the large majority of users would use their branch first for information enquiries. The fact that it is closer and more convenient weighs heavily in its favour and users expect the branch library to be able to provide for their general information needs. The elderly especially mentioned difficulties in travelling to the Central library and needed to be able to access information from their nearest branch.

8.2 Internet use in branch libraries

Table 8.2 below shows the figures over the last two years for the number of Internet users in each branch library in PLA A. Unfortunately there were no more than two years figures available because the technology has been so recently installed, so caution must be used in comparing them. There are also doubts once again as to whether staff always remember to record the users and there is no way as yet of knowing whether users were accessing reference information or other Internet services (see section 5.3.4 p61). Therefore, the figures are viewed here only as a general indication of the take-up of electronic resources against the respective issues figures from the same period. PLA B was unable to provide figures for Internet use.

*bracketed figures in italics refer to total issues for the same period.

Case study libraries	April - June 2001	April - June 2002	Total % change
Library A1	117 <i>(53909)*</i>	432 <i>(50103)</i>	+269.2% <i>(-7%)</i>
Library A2	238 <i>(8244)</i>	324 <i>(7751)</i>	+36% <i>(-7%)</i>
Library A3	----- <i>(37263)</i>	----- <i>(37279)</i>	----- <i>(+0.04%)</i>
Library A4	2182 <i>(50394)</i>	2514 <i>(47454)</i>	+15.2% <i>(-5.8%)</i>

Table 8.2 Figures for Internet use in authority A case study libraries against *total issues* for the same period.

From this it is evident that whilst the issue figures generally seem to show a slight fall, the numbers of Internet users have risen dramatically, although whether they will continue to do so is unknown. Meadows (2000:12) suggests that as people become more familiar with finding information on the Internet,

they will not need the same degree of assistance from people such as librarians to use it and therefore enquiry levels will fall. A PLA respondent agreed, saying:

“Staff can now show a member of the public how a PC is used and the individual will often access information directly which would have necessitated a number of enquiries at the counter for help in locating written information”.

This is supported by the evidence obtained during this study, as the majority of users surveyed had only been using the Internet to find information for 2 years or less - 61 (67%) of the 91 Internet users. This figure will obviously fall over time and take the enquiry figures down with it. Obviously a way must be found to count the enquiries made by users over the Internet connection in order to keep track of service usage. This could be done using the gateway technology or by giving each user a roaming profile, which the system can then count when they log on and use the resources independently of the staff.

It is also clear that Library A4, which has the most terminals is benefiting from the highest usage and indeed was observed to be very busy when the survey was carried out. Library A1 has only two terminals and would benefit from more, since their presence seems to be attracting users. Libraries A2 and A4 are both in less affluent areas and so would be expected to have higher usage of library ICT facilities (as previously suggested in section 5.2 p56). In fact the survey revealed that in library A4 (in the most deprived ward in the study) there were only 16 Internet users out of the sample of 30 and that only 9 (56.3%) of these had home access. This compares with 22 Internet users out of 30 at library A3, in the most affluent area, and 18 (81.8%) of these had home access. Members of staff in library A3 observed:

“I do think in this area that lots of people already have the Internet at home”.
(Library and Information Assistant, A3)

"I would imagine that most people in this area have their own". (Library and Information Assistant, A3)

This explains why, when asked if they would use the library Internet access when it arrived, 27 (90%) out of 30 library A3 respondents said no. Thus, it seems that the public branch library is helping to narrow the digital divide between those who have and those who have not. More information on ICT use and deprivation can be found in the Department of Trade and Industry (2000) report, but is beyond the remit of this study.

Despite the evidence above that people will not use library terminals if they have their own access, there is a suggestion that this is not always strictly the case (Insight Research, 2000). Staff mentioned occasions when users with home access have also used library terminals and this is often to make use of the other library resources in conjunction with the Internet:

"There is always the back-up of the books for homework and so on". (Library and Information Assistant, A4)

People also have other reasons, such as needing to access databases that only the library has subscriptions to, or needing the help of staff to locate information (as suggested in section 7.3, p84), or just needing some study time:

"If there's a family at home then they may want peace and quiet and the knowledge that they've got it for a full hour". (Library and Information Assistant, A4)

8.2.1 Reasons for non-use of ICT

The results of the user survey showed that 79 (46.5%) people out of 170 do not use the Internet to find information, a figure that is just under half of the sample. When questioned, these people gave reasons for their non-use of the Internet which fell into four categories which are shown below in Figure 8.2.

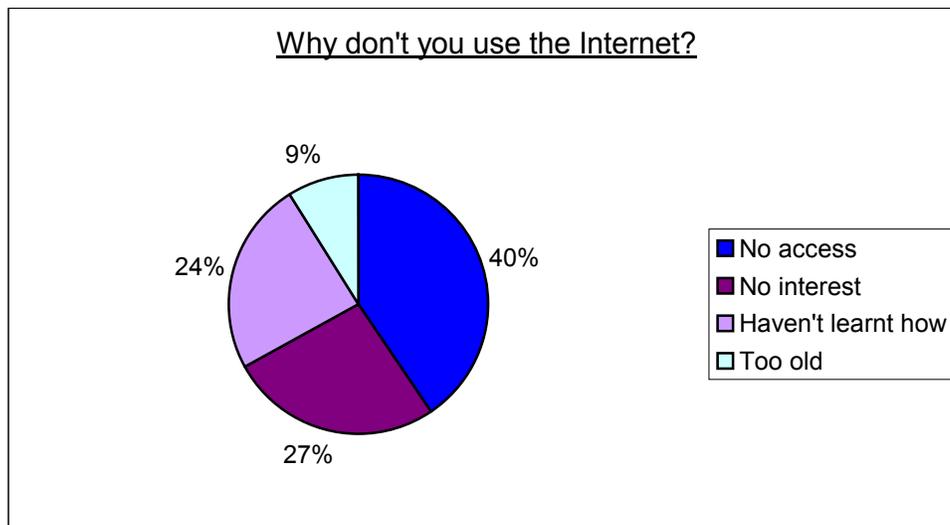


Figure 8.2 Why do you not use the Internet? Answers from users.

By far the most common response (40.5%) was that they did not have a computer and therefore did not have access to the Internet. The other two equally popular categories were those who expressed no interest in the Internet at all (26.6%) and were not likely to want to learn to use it and those who had not yet learnt how to use it (24.1%) but were planning to do so in the future. These figures are similar to those recorded by Eve and Brophy (2001:37) for respondents across three authorities, of 26% 'no interest' in ICT and 18% 'don't know how' to use ICT facilities. Proctor and Bartle (2002:94), in a survey of respondents across two authorities, also recorded that almost a third agreed or strongly agreed that they avoided using electronic information resources because they did not know how to use them. There was a large majority of the non-users in this study who stated that they had not learnt how to use the

Internet yet, who expressed an intention to sign up for a course or get a relation or friend to teach them within the next year.

The minority who felt that they were too old to learn or use the Internet (all in the over 65 age group) often said that they had a relation who used it and found information on their behalf. They therefore knew broadly some of the things that were available online despite being non-users themselves. They also often said that sight problems prevented them from becoming primary users. This is evidence that agrees with Proctor and Bartle's (2002:77) findings that elderly people (0.8% of over 60's in this case) make "negligible" use of ICT for learning, and perhaps suggests that the reasons for that may be to do with physical difficulty as well as general reluctance. The Library and Information Commission (1998:25) states that the Network will help to overcome accessibility problems experienced by people with visual impairments, but this is not happening at present due to the lack of specialist equipment with sound translations of text etc. *The Guidelines* (Library Association Information Services Group, 1999:34) describe these as necessary for all main reference libraries but the cost precludes branches from having access to such facilities.

The non-users also indicated whether or not they were aware of the Internet access available in the library and the responses are shown below in Figure 8.3.

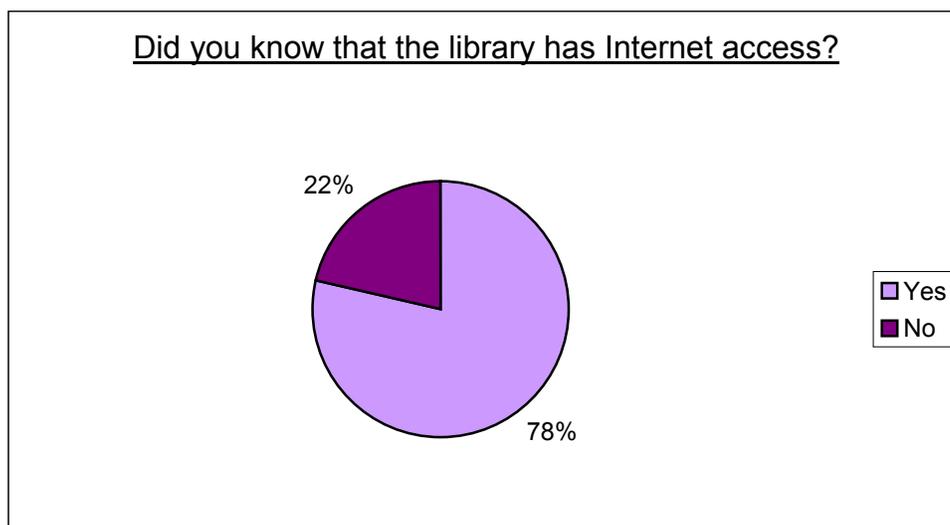


Figure 8.3 Are you aware that the library has Internet access? Answers from users.

Encouragingly, 78.5% of the non-users were aware that Internet access was available in the library and some expressed a definite intention to use it once they had learnt how.

The two above sets of responses from Figures 8.2 and 8.3 are shown combined below in Table 8.3.

*percentages of total respondents in brackets

Why don't you use the Internet?	Are you aware that the library has Internet access?		
	No	Yes	Total
No access	7 (8.9)*	25 (31.6)	32 (40.5)
No interest	4 (5.1)	17 (21.5)	21 (26.6)
Haven't learnt how	3 (3.8)	16 (20.3)	19 (24.1)
Too old	3 (3.8)	4 (5.1)	7 (8.9)
Total	17 (21.5)	62 (78.5)	79 (100.0)

Table 8.3 Why do you not use the Internet and are you aware that the library has Internet access? Answers from users.

We can see that of those 32 people who specified that they had no access to the Internet, 25 of them were aware that there was access at the library. This suggests that they do not consider, for some reason, that access in the library is suitable for them. The same observation was made by Proctor and Bartle (2002:91) regarding low achievers; where 71.6% of those surveyed said that they had no access to computers yet were using a library where they were provided. They concluded that computers were “perceived as a tool for learning rather than leisure or information”, which may partly account for the results, but in this study it was also found that many people were unaware that the Internet was now available free of charge. A significant number expressed the intention to use it once they had been made aware of that fact. This suggests that more publicity is required to advertise the service.

8.3 Information seeking behaviour

8.3.1 Internet users

Those users who said that they did use the Internet (53.5% of the 170 surveyed) were asked what they mainly used it for. This was to try and gain some clues as to what those who use the Internet in the library might actually be doing on it, since staff and library PLAs presently do not know (see sections 5.3.4, p61 and 8.2, p92). It was not possible to limit the survey to only library terminal users, as there were not enough of them, so all Internet users were asked regardless of their access location. Most respondents gave more than one answer and the results, which fell into 7 categories, are shown in Table 8.4 below.

	Respondents giving this answer
1. Work related information	28 (30.8%)
2. Holiday information	32 (35.2%)
3. Educational information	29 (31.9%)
4. Information on hobbies	39 (42.9%)
5. Health information	4 (4.4%)
6. General / Reference information	45 (49.5%)
7. E-mail	4 (4.4%)

Table 8.4 What do you use the Internet for? Answers from users.

This shows a marked preference for research usage (**5** and **6**), with leisure pursuits (**2**) coming a close second, although there is a possibility that the percentage of people looking up 'holiday information' may be slightly higher than usual due to the time of year that the study took place. The category of 'information on hobbies' (**4**) could be construed as research or leisure, depending on its context, but is a popular choice either way at 42.9% of respondents. Learning was also a use cited by a large proportion of people (31.9%), although it was generally independent voluntary learning as opposed to

a formal course. The results above are broadly similar to those recorded by Eve and Brophy (2001:37), showing leisure, independent research and formal learning as the most popular uses for ICT facilities within the library. However, there is no real comparison beyond that as they used preset categories, distinguished types of learning and used only library facility users.

The most surprising result was that only 4 people specified e-mail as a use of the Internet. This is because those few did not use it for anything else besides e-mail, whereas other respondents probably take e-mail access for granted and do not consider it separately from their information uses. If these patterns of use apply to public library terminals, as well as other locations, which there is no reason why they should not, then the assumptions of the Insight Research report (2000:28) are shown to be unfounded. People probably do use the Internet for information and education within the public library.

8.3.2 Branch library users

The competition between the library and other information providers and the lack of publicity for library facilities was mentioned previously by PLAs as contributing to the fall in reference enquiries (See section 5.3.3 p61). Both of these factors are interlinked and show the importance of the library being “the first and most obvious point of call for information” (Library Association Information Services Group, 1999:10).

The 170 users surveyed for this study were asked where they would go to find six different pieces of information. Four answers (Internet, Visit library, Phone library, Ask friend) were set on a flashcard (See Appendix 3 p136), along with a free option for them to specify any other answers. These were organised into further categories for each question and the results are shown in Figures 8.4 to 8.9 below. The original figures can be found in Appendix 4 (p139).

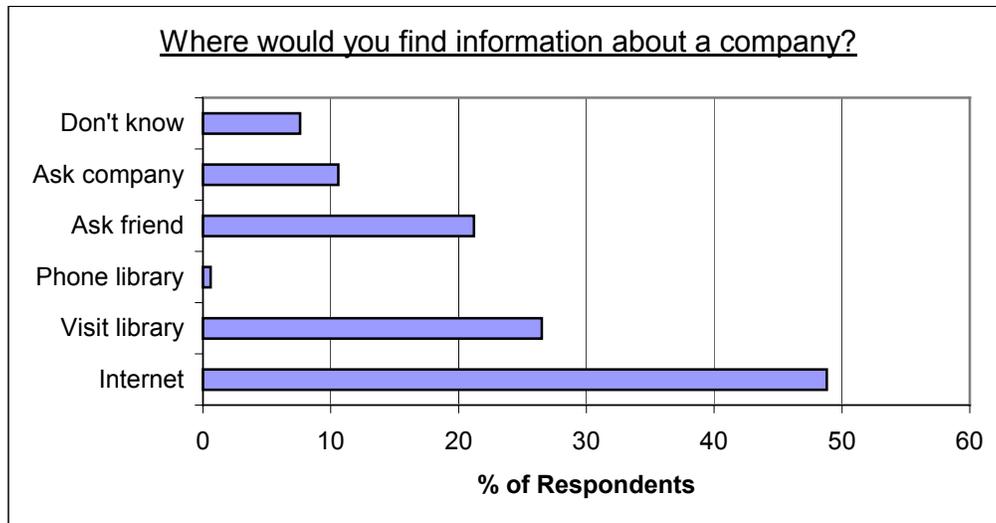


Figure 8.4 Where would you find information about a company? Answers from users.

The Internet was by far the most popular answer here, with a visit to the library about half as popular. This is probably due to the fact that even the librarians tend to find the Internet easier for this kind of information, especially overseas companies, as shown by a comment from a PLA respondent:

“We are now able to track down companies worldwide on the Internet as most will have a web presence.” (PLA response)

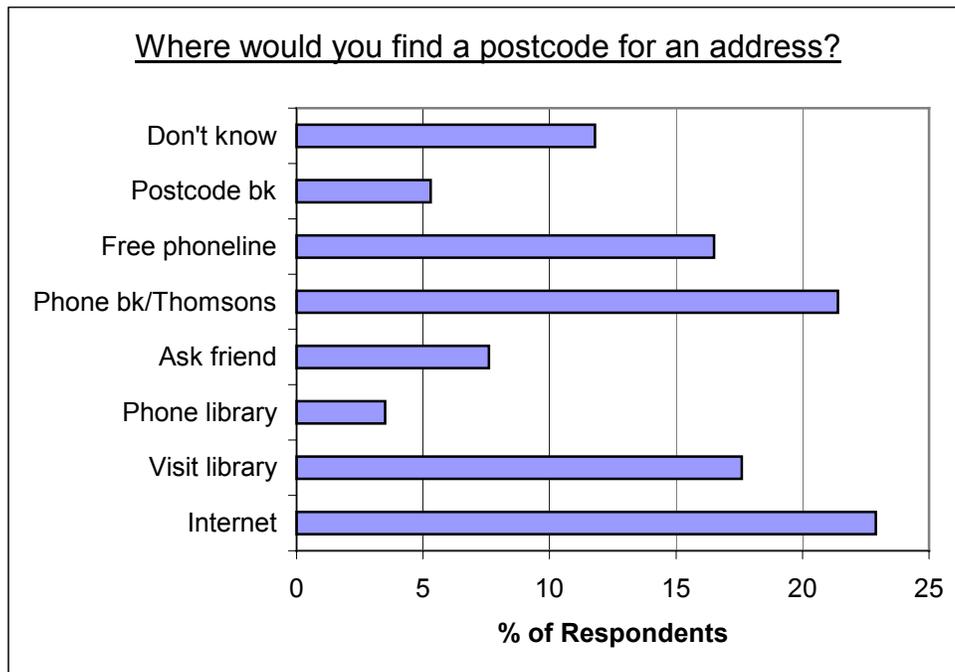


Figure 8.5 Where would you find a postcode for an address? Answers from users.

Answers were much more mixed for this question, although the Internet was the most popular answer again, followed by the phone book or Thomson's directory. This is despite the fact that the phone book does not in fact provide postcodes. The library was ahead of the free phone line available and also ahead of the designated postcode book. This was also the only question for which people really considered telephoning the library, probably due to its brief nature.

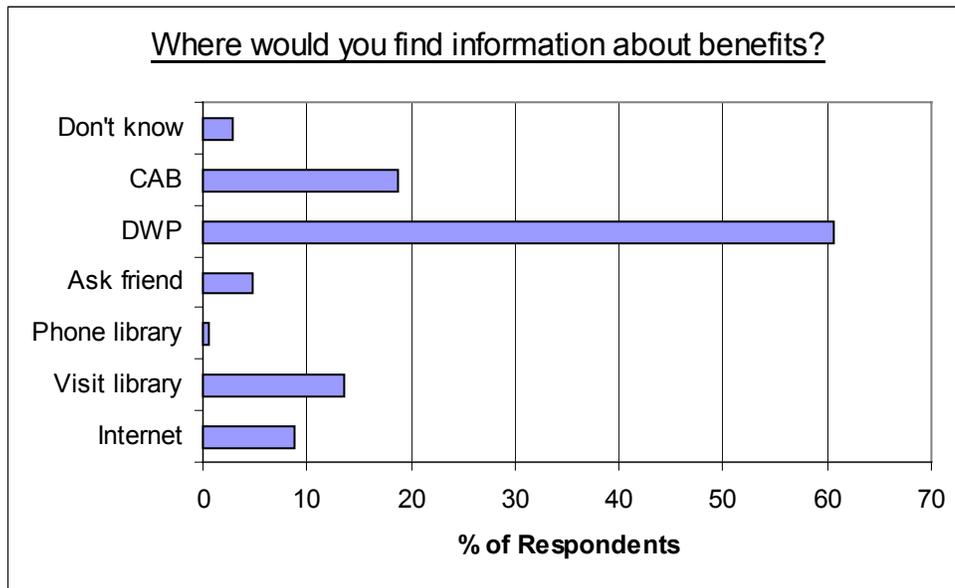


Figure 8.6 Where would you find information about benefits? Answers from users.

This question showed a high number of respondents who would go directly to the Department of Work and Pensions, because they considered that the enquiry probably required specialist advice and tailored information rather than general information. The Citizens Advice Bureau was second choice for the same reason.

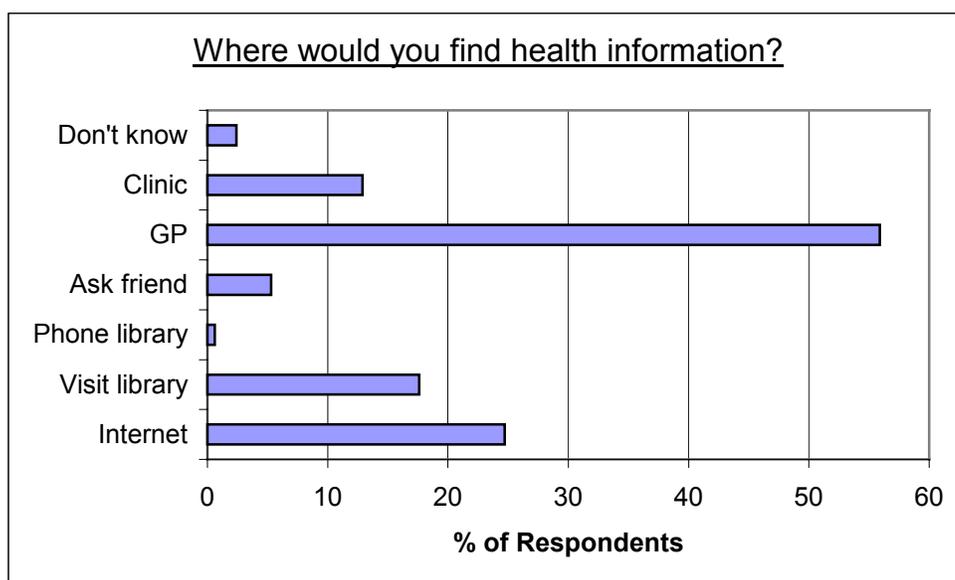


Figure 8.7 Where would you find health information? Answers from users.

Health information was another area where respondents chose a professional as their primary information source. Second choice was the Internet, for finding out more about general health matters - often because it was considered to be very up-to-date. A visit to the library was still third choice and staff also mentioned that users requested more health information since the installation of the PCs:

“More people are asking for information about health and holidays and the like. They know what’s out there”. (Library and Information Assistant, A4)

This may signify another instance of multi-resource use, with people wanting to utilise both the print and electronic resources in the library to find this kind of information.

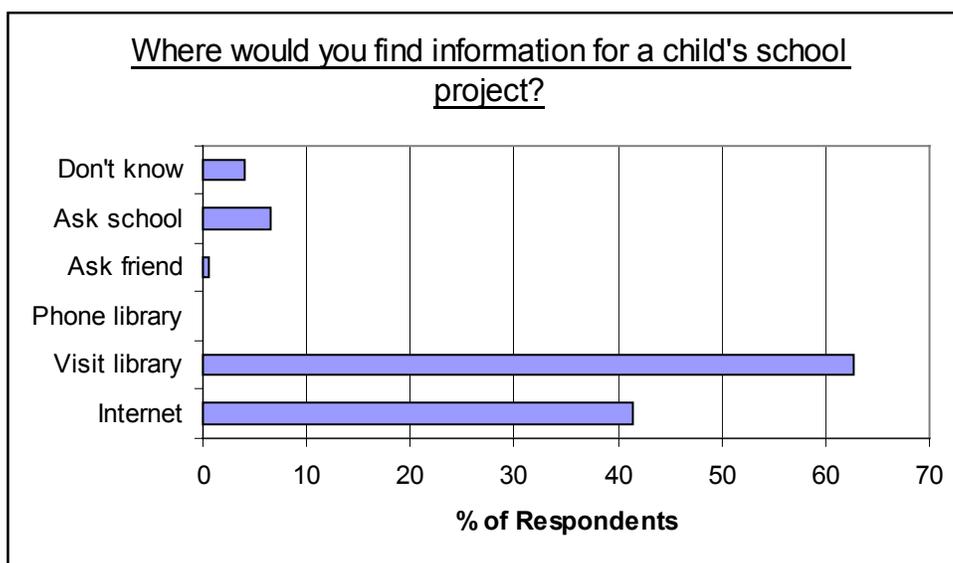


Figure 8.8 Where would you find information for a child's school project? Answers from users.

This shows that the majority of respondents (62.7%) still value the library service more than the Internet for their children's educational needs. The library is regarded as the specialist service in this instance and this is supported by the comments from staff (see section 5.3.5 p62):

"The kids are always here needing help with homework because of the National Curriculum". (Senior Library Assistant, A1)

"...the kids use it [the library] constantly for homework". (Library Assistant, B1)

"There have always been a lot of kids with their school projects here".
(Children's Library Assistant, A2)

This also ties in with the recommendations in *the Guidelines* (Library Association Information Services Group, 1999) that libraries should try to provide reference

information appropriate for children doing projects under the National Curriculum.

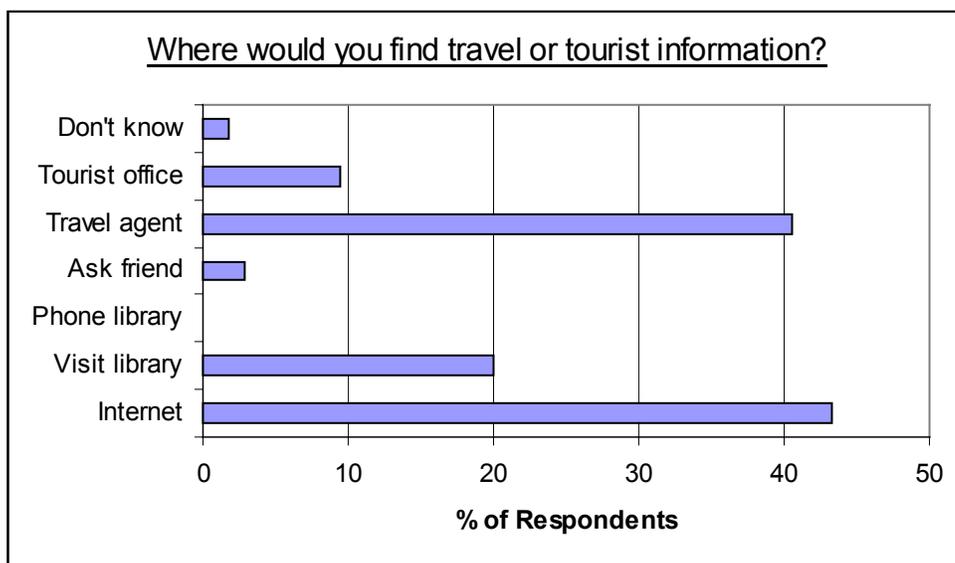


Figure 8.9 Where would you find travel or tourist information? Answers from users.

The Internet was very popular for this type of information and people stated that this was because of the proliferation of cheap package deals only available over the Internet. It was also because people could actually book the holiday online and cover related issues, such as insurance, at the same time. Travel agents do not appear to be losing much by this however, because most have a Web presence and users often said that they browsed the travel agent's Web site and then went in person to book. This is supported by evidence from library staff that people use their Internet connection for travel information:

"More people are asking for information about health and holidays and the like. They know what's out there". (Library and Information Assistant, A4)

Travel guides from the library were still popular, although currency was noted as an issue. The results for this question show the benefits of having a Web site to support the main service that is being provided, something which libraries need to address (Library Association Information Services Group, 1999).

8.4 Summary of chapter 8

- There was an overly high (72.9%) proportion of female respondents in the user survey, possibly caused by the timing of it to coincide with working hours. This should not have had any real effect on results however, as they are not gender related in this study.
- The figures provided by PLA A of numbers of library Internet terminal users were treated with caution as there were only two years available for comparison, staff are not 100% effective at recording users and it is unknown whether those users were accessing reference information. They show issues down by up to 7% and Internet use up massively - up to 269% in one branch.
- The literature agrees that enquiry figures will fall as users become more skilled at accessing Internet information alone; this is supported by the survey which found that the majority (67%) of Internet users had only been using it for 2 years or less. There is a definite need for a system to count those enquirers who use the library terminals alone, so that the library can keep track of what level of service it is providing. This could be done through gateways or roaming profiles.
- Libraries in less affluent areas are providing more Internet users with access - as expected the public library is helping to narrow the 'digital divide'. More affluent areas have a higher proportion of users with home

access, although people do still use the library access in order to get guidance, quiet study time, access to databases and the chance to use books in conjunction with electronic resources.

- 46.5% of those surveyed do not use the Internet to find information and 40.5% of these say it is because they have no access; this is despite the fact that the majority of them were aware that their library provided access. Those people who specified 'no interest' and 'haven't learnt yet' as reasons for non-use accounted for about 25% each of the respondents. The latter category included a majority who said that they planned to learn soon. Elderly non-users often have sight problems that are not being addressed as yet but 78.5% of the total non-users were aware that the library had Internet access.
- Of the 53.5% of survey respondents who accessed the Internet, the main usage categories were independent research, leisure and independent learning; similar to those reported in some of the literature. Very few use the Internet solely for e-mail.
- The library is considered to be the best source of information for children's school work, above the Internet. Many users wish to use both books and electronic resources and the demands of the National Curriculum is behind that need. The Internet is the most popular resource for information on companies and finding postcodes, but specialists are still consulted for health and benefits information. The innovations of travel agents in combining Web services with traditional shops are an example for libraries to follow if they are going to keep their place as a future information supplier.

Chapter 9 - Conclusions and Recommendations

9.1 Introduction

This study was undertaken in order to establish the impact that electronic resources, and especially the arrival of the People's Network, have had on public library reference services. It has concentrated specifically on:

- Identifying changes in the pattern of UK reference enquiries over the last three years and investigating possible reasons for those changes.
- Identifying the present situation with regard to provision of electronic reference resources in branch libraries.
- Discovering the opinions and attitudes of branch library staff towards using electronic resources, providing reference enquiry services and their role as intermediaries between users and electronic information.
- Discovering the extent to which users are utilising branch library reference facilities and their awareness of the existence and extent of those facilities.

These are areas which it was crucial to investigate and document if we wish to continue to provide a public information service that people value and use in the future. Policy makers must be aware of the present situation during this time of transition and of any steps to take in order to rectify problems and improve the service and its delivery for both the staff and the users.

9.2 Reference enquiry patterns

Over the last three years there has been concerted change within public libraries, mainly due to the emergence and take up of electronic resources and the implementation of the People's Network (Resource, 2002). This study shows that these changes have produced a knock on effect on the public library reference service, because there is now so much more information available and it is not restricted by geographical location.

Main library reference enquiry figures are falling, in the last three years the average drop has doubled from that recorded by LISU (2001) from 1996-2000. The picture in branch libraries is better, with only a 2% average fall in enquiries over the last three years shown by this study. This signifies that branch libraries are becoming more important in the eyes of users as convenient information providers. They now have access to the electronic information of a main library and reference enquiry patterns are shifting accordingly as predicted by Childers (1994). Front line branch staff were found to support this view, reporting in most cases that they were busier than ever and now dealt with more involved enquiries and more people needing help with the electronic resources.

This study suggests that these changes are a result of the increase in home Internet use (79.1% of the sample of Internet users had home access) and the fact that many users can now make their own enquiries through library Internet terminals without consulting staff as noted by Meadows (2000). There is also a strong probability that although the library services have been publicised at Government level, they have not been publicised enough at authority level and so people are not considering the library to be the premier and most obvious information provider. This suggests that PLAs need to address their marketing strategies in order to alter the present trend; something which has already been made clear in case study authorities A and B by their Best Value reports (Audit Commission, 2001a/b).

On a more encouraging note, the reference enquiry levels from both LISU (2001) and this study, show a smaller drop overall than the 10% decrease in library visits recorded by LISU (2001) for library visits from 1996-2000. This shows that reference information is still needed and valued by users, perhaps more than traditional lending services, and that libraries need to capitalise on this. As commented by a PLA during this study:

"People are beginning to think libraries information rather than libraries just books".

9.2.1 Enquiry figure statistics

A major problem encountered during this study was the absence and unreliability of data on enquiry numbers, more so in the branch libraries than in main libraries where they usually have a designated reference desk and are more used to recording enquirers. 27% of the PLAs surveyed in this study answered 'unknown' when asked to indicate whether branch library enquiry levels were rising or falling. It is impossible to know whether the services are being used, and therefore to justify their continuation, if there are no measures in place to do so and libraries must develop strategies to confront this problem.

Sumsion et al (1995) identified shortcomings with the current CIPFA sampling methods seven years ago, and these findings seem to have largely been ignored. Some PLAs have instituted continuous counting methods, but not nearly enough to produce any reliable statistics. Some have instituted quarterly counts, like case study authority A, but this study has shown that these are just as problematic as the annual ones; a fact which is already known to library staff who collate the figures and to PLA heads. The Best Value report (Audit Commission, 2001b) for PLA B stated that there must be "close monitoring of requests for library information" in order to plan service improvements, but this is

pointless unless the monitoring is done more accurately and provides a more realistic picture.

9.3 Branch libraries and electronic resources

90% of the PLAs surveyed in this study indicated that they now have free public Internet access in their branch libraries. This shows the rate at which the People's Network has been installed and indicates that they will reach their target of connecting all the libraries by the end of 2002. The main work still to be done is boosting the numbers of terminals in each branch, in line with guidelines set out by *New Library: The People's Network* (Library and Information Commission, 1997), especially where demand is high and the library is not yet equipped to cope; a situation discovered in some case study libraries (e.g. A1). There is also a definite need shown by this study for staff to have behind the counter access to the Internet. It is not sufficient to expect them to share public terminals and still answer enquiries in the most comprehensive way.

Surprisingly, the study has revealed that there is still widespread usage of un-networked CD-ROMs, which is restricting their use to their physical location. This contradicts statements from Insight Research (2000) that suggested they would be rapidly phased out in favour of Internet information. PLA B has in fact almost done this, but still retains some CD-ROMs for children - a strategy which may account for some of the high figures. Only about 40% of PLAs surveyed had access to networked databases and the reason for that appears to be due to the high subscription and licensing costs. Libraries must therefore look towards future strategies such as purchasing collectives, if they wish to obtain this kind of information. Local history information and digitised local photographs seem to be a growth area, suggesting that libraries could tap into this and exploit it; especially as they are used to playing the role of historical information custodian.

The value added services being provided by some PLAs in the study are showing increasing usage figures. This suggests that e-mail enquiry services and central call centre services are being taken up by users and could be considered for wider use in the future.

74% of PLAs surveyed thought that the introduction of electronic resources had improved their branch libraries' enquiry answer success rates. This proves beyond doubt that the resources are needed and therefore plans must be made to sustain them in the long term. It also suggests that since fewer referrals are being made to the central library, that libraries need to reconsider the role of the central reference service as it is at present.

9.4 Branch library staff

9.4.1 Attitudes and training

The study supports the views of previous writers such as Hopkins and Sapiie (1999) and Dick (1998) that library staff are not as confident using the Internet to answer enquiries as they are using printed resources. This is certainly true in the case of branch staff whose comments showed that they were often uncertain as to the authority of Internet sources and of efficient search strategies. Encouragingly though, branch staff seemed to be learning now to recognise authoritative sites and useful search engines, aided by NOF training and general familiarity with the resources. There is no reason therefore, why they should not continue to improve if given enough help and support to do so.

The majority of staff interviewed enjoyed answering reference enquiries but some were concerned that they were not giving an adequate service in comparison to a reference library. This finding suggests that libraries need to develop guidelines as to what should be expected from a branch information

service in terms of depth of information and at what point the user should be referred to the central service. Staff time was also an issue and so it may be necessary, in light of the branch libraries' new larger role as information provider, to reconsider staffing strategies or compile guidelines on how long staff should spend on one enquiry in a branch situation where there is limited back-up.

Using electronic resources in conjunction with print was found to be the most tried and tested strategy amongst branch staff interviewees and there was no evidence found that staff were relying too heavily on the Internet. A minority in fact avoided using it and the general comments suggest that branch staff require more training on the use of the resources, which will improve their confidence. Problems encountered during the study were that training is not timed to coincide with the arrival of PCs and staff are having to answer enquiries on them before they are confident to do so. Effectively this means that the best possible service is not necessarily being provided at present. If branch staff are going to be providing reference information then PLAs must train them to do so, as they already do with their reference staff.

9.4.2 User education

The branch library staff interviewed for this study made a definite distinction between instructing users to operate the PC and use the Internet, which they felt was not their job and guiding users to find suitable information on the Internet, which they felt was their job. The staff indicated that their role should be as information facilitators, rather than computer teachers, which suggests that there are difficulties being experienced in catering for those users who are totally unfamiliar with Internet technology. By the nature of the format, such inexperienced users cannot search for information themselves and staff do not feel equipped or able to give the time to instruct them. This means that the statement by the Library Association Information Services Group (1999) that

users of all ability should have access to reference information is, as things presently stand, not being fulfilled.

Essentially, as time goes on and more people become familiar with technology, there will be less of a problem in this area; as observed by Meadows (2000). Evidence from this study also shows that at present the majority of users have only been using the Internet for two years or less. However, in order to speed the process up some libraries are already running joint programmes of computer instruction with outside partners, using library facilities and initiatives like this could be extended wherever possible. It may also help if library authorities produced some form of guidance for staff on what exactly is expected of them in this area so that they can be clearer about their role. This would also allay staff concerns raised in this study about the extent to which they should pre-package information for users, rather than guiding users to locate their own information (Moore, 1998).

One way in which users can be aided to find their own information is by the installation of information gateways and library Web sites with appropriate links to authoritative information. This study suggests that where this has been done it has proved a success for both staff and users. The evidence from the USA (Fritch and Mandernack, 2001) also concludes that gateways and library Web sites are a definite success for the information seeking public. Therefore, libraries need to look at these innovations as ways of improving their service provision.

9.5 Branch library users

This study provides some evidence that libraries are losing information seekers to the lure of the Internet. Around 46% of survey respondents indicated that they now used the Internet to find information that they would previously have obtained from a library and coupled with the high numbers of users who reported that they have home Internet access, this is cause for concern for libraries. However, other information providers such as travel agents, who are also threatened by the Internet have engaged the problem by developing a Web presence to capture those users whom they would otherwise have lost. The suggestion is that the library needs to follow suit.

On an encouraging note, the study shows that 78.5% of Internet non-users were aware that they could access it in the library and a significant number of those expressed an intention to do so once they had learnt the ropes and now that they had been informed that it was free. The library needs to ensure that everyone is aware of free library facilities in order to encourage use and then those non-users who stated that they have no access, despite being aware of library facilities, may become users. The figures for Internet use in PLA A are somewhat dubious in accuracy but show a large rise in numbers of users accessing the Internet in branch libraries. The increases in library Internet users also show that branches in deprived areas (e.g. A4) are being heavily used and consequently suggest that they are helping to narrow the digital divide and address some social exclusion issues.

Internet users were found in this study to consider their branch library the first port of call for most of their information needs, rather than the central service. They also were found to be using the Internet to access mainly reference information, leisure information and information relating to their hobbies. Using it solely for e-mail was rare, suggesting that it is probable that users in libraries are also accessing information rather than, or as well as, e-mail or games. The

library was second most popular choice for locating information on a company. Learning and education were also popular pursuits, with the library coming out as first choice for the majority of users when they were searching for information for children's schoolwork. This suggests that children and education are areas that the library can capitalise on, providing information tailored to the National Curriculum to encourage users in. The Best Value report (Audit Commission, 2001a) for PLA A already stated that strategies should be developed to work with the Education Department and help more children and young people to use the library.

The branch staff in the study felt that people do utilise the library facilities in preference to the Internet at home when they wanted help or guidance with information seeking. Users also were felt to need the quieter library atmosphere for study and to appreciate the opportunity to use the print resources in conjunction with the electronic resources. These are all strengths that the library service can push to encourage users, and to advertise the skills of their staff as information guides. The previously mentioned gateways would also help users to navigate the Internet information, and could provide the added bonus of counting those presently unseen enquiries from self-service users. It may also then be possible eventually to quantify how many users look up reference information independently on library terminals, which would be invaluable for evaluating library services and arguing for their continuation in the future.

9.6 Recommendations for the library service

9.6.1 Short term

- That library authorities should review the role of branch libraries in relation to reference information now that they have access to electronic resources.
- That library authorities should ensure that enquiries are counted in branches as well as main libraries, using the CIPFA guidelines that define an enquiry. Preferably this should be done with continuous counting methods rather than sample weeks.
- That library authorities should develop strategies to update hardware in branch libraries and therefore speed up connection times to the Internet and provide staff with their own terminal behind the desk.
- That libraries should network CD-ROMs if they are still required and investigate the possibilities of collective purchasing with other PLAs in order to manage the cost of subscription resources.
- That libraries should investigate the use of information gateways to organise information for staff and users, answer frequently asked questions, provide links to community information and count the enquiries made through it.
- That library authorities should focus on improving staff training programmes, especially for branch staff, in both ICT and reference information enquiries.

- That library authorities should consider issuing guidelines to staff on how much instruction they should be giving users on ICT.

9.6.2 Long term

- That library authorities should develop marketing strategies to publicise their services to users, including advertising any digitised local history information.
- That library authorities should plan to develop Web sites to raise the library's public profile and appeal to children who need Web and library resources for the National Curriculum.
- That library authorities should look into more ICT user education programmes in partnership with other organisations.
- That library authorities should consider the development of further e-mail and call centre enquiry service initiatives.
- That library authorities should start long term planning towards the metamorphosis of the main reference service into a specialised reference service, also running online enquiry services with chat, co-browsing and Web-page pushing facilities.

9.7 Recommendations for further study

- It would be useful to widen the scope of the investigation into staff attitudes to using electronic reference resources by questioning central service staff and a larger sample of branch staff. More PLAs could be

used for comparison and the views of management staff as well as those on the front line could be considered.

- Staff training issues and investigations on the effect of training on staff confidence in the UK could also be looked at further. This would be useful in relation to developing some guidelines on user education in libraries and how far staff should go in teaching users to use PCs.
- A wider investigation into the views and behaviour of non-library users in relation to electronic information sources could be useful. It may help to discover ways in which they could be persuaded to become library users and may indicate how many people actually know what the library provides. More people who already use libraries could also be surveyed and preferably over a longer time period.
- Users of ICT in libraries could also be investigated to discover what they are using the Internet in libraries for. This may also help to discover what information resources users find most useful and which ones they would like to see developed.
- An investigation into information gateways could be undertaken to find out which are most useful and whether there are ways of making them count user enquiries.

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Appendix 1 - Public Library Authority Questionnaire

Reference Service Enquiries Questionnaire

I am an MA Librarianship student from Sheffield University's Department of Information Studies. I am investigating changes in the provision of reference services in both central and branch public libraries and would appreciate it if you could spend a few minutes answering 6 questions on public library reference services to help with the research for my dissertation.

Simply insert your answers where indicated, save the file and return the completed questionnaire as an email attachment to **liq01clg@sheffield.ac.uk** or you can post a print copy to the address on the final page. The identities of individual authorities will not appear in the report.

Thank you for your co-operation.

Notes

(Where the question specifies the 'main reference library' service, this is defined as the largest designated reference library in the authority, if it has more than one. If there are subject reference departments within the main reference library then please combine them to produce an overall main library result)

Section 1 - changes in enquiry numbers

Q 1. Has a change been observed in the number of reference enquiries received by your main reference library service over the last three years?

Please place an **X** in the box next to option a), b), c) or d) below.

- a) Increase []
- b) Decrease []
- c) No change []
- d) Unknown []

If it is possible to quantify the change then please add the % increase/decrease next to the relevant box above.

Q 2. Has an overall change been observed in the number of reference enquiries received by your branch libraries (i.e. NOT the main library) over the last three years? Please place an **X** in the box next to option a), b), c) or d) below.

Note (*This should be a total for all branch libraries combined, excluding the main reference library*)

- a) Increase []
- b) Decrease []
- c) No change []
- d) Unknown []

If it is possible to quantify the change then please add the % increase/decrease next to the relevant box above.

Q 3. If there has been a change in enquiry numbers, please say why you think this change has occurred; indicating whether you are referring to changes in the main library or the branch libraries. Please write in the space below.

Answer:

Q 4. Do you think that the provision of electronic resources in your branch libraries has led to more enquiries being answered successfully and why? Please write answer in space below.

Answer:

Section 2 - Electronic resources

Q 5. Is there access to any of the following electronic resources in your branch libraries? Please give the total number of branch libraries in the authority and then complete the table with the number of branch libraries with access to the stated resources.

Total number of branch libraries in the Authority []

	Staff Access	Free Public Access	Charged Public Access
CD-ROMS e.g. dictionaries/encyclopaedias			
Internet/World Wide Web			
Networked databases			
Digitised Materials			
Other Electronic resources			

Please specify here what any digitised materials consist of e.g. if it is local studies resources then briefly describe them and describe the nature of any 'other electronic resources' available below.

Answer:

Q 6. If available, please give figures for the number of reference enquiries recorded over the last three years in your authority's main reference library. Type numbers in spaces provided below.

1999-2000 =

2000-2001 =

2001-2002 =

If you would be willing to help with further information, please give a contact name and email address or telephone number below.

Name:

Telephone number:

E-mail:

Thank you very much for your help.

Please return this questionnaire as an e-mail attachment to:

liq01clg@sheffield.ac.uk

Or alternatively return a print copy to

**Cheney Gardner
71 Salisbury Road,
Crookes,
Sheffield,
S10 1WA.**

Tel. 07808403647

Appendix 2a - Interview schedule

(Libraries A1, A2, A4, B1 and B2)

Before the interviews:

Are the numbers or types of reference enquiries in the library recorded?

(Are figures available?)

1. Discover whether the branch has public access PCs.

- How many?
- Are they free or charged?
- Do they have to be booked in advance?
- Are the numbers of terminal users recorded? (Are figures available?)

2. Does the library have access to

- CD-ROMS?
- Internet/Web?
- Networked Databases?
- Digitised Information?
- Anything else

Are these for staff/users or both?

Interview topics to follow

Establish what the interviewee does exactly (e.g. how much enquiry desk work), their official job title, how long they have worked at this branch library and what the study is generally about.

1. What changes have you noticed in the volume of reference enquiries received at this library over the last 3 years or so?
2. Why do you think this has happened?
3. Has there been a change in the amount of enquirers that have to be referred to the main library reference service?
4. When reference queries come in, what kind of resources are you likely to consult to answer them? (which formats and why?)
5. To what extent do you think that the electronic resources available have helped you to be more successful in answering reference enquiries?

Tell me about how you use electronic sources to answer reference enquiries.

- What search engines?
- What kind of enquiries?
- Pros and cons?

6. How do you feel about answering reference enquiries and using all the resources, since you do not specifically work in a reference department?
7. Do you have any evidence that people are accessing reference information over the Internet from home rather than visiting the library?
8. When people come into the library and use the public access PCs, do you know if they are using them to access reference information? Is there any evidence of this since they are bypassing the librarians?
9. If they do have access at home then why should they bother to come in to the library?
10. Do you think email queries will be a growth area in the future in line with the USA?

Thank you for your help

Names will not be used in the study.

Appendix 2b - Interview schedule (Library A3 only)

Before the interviews:

Are the numbers or types of reference enquiries in the library recorded?
(Are figures available?)

1. Discover when the People's Network will be installed in the library.
2. What printed reference resources does the library have access to?

Interview topics to follow

Establish what the interviewee does exactly (e.g. how much enquiry desk work), their official job title, how long they have worked at this branch library and what the study is generally about.

1. What changes have you noticed in the volume of reference enquiries received at this library over the last 3 years or so?
2. Why do you think this has happened?
3. Has there been a change in the amount of enquirers that have to be referred to the main library reference service?

4. Do you think that if you had access to electronic resources and the Internet here, that you would use them in preference to the printed resources?

Why?

- Pros and cons?

5. Do you think that having the Internet available would make you more successful in answering reference enquiries?

6. Do you have any evidence that users here want the Internet in the library or that having it available would bring in more users?

7. How do you feel about answering reference enquiries and using reference resources, since you do not specifically work in a reference department?

8. Do you have any evidence that people are accessing reference information over the Internet from home rather than visiting the library?

9. If they do have access at home then why should they bother to come in to the library?

10. Do you think email queries will be a growth area in the future in line with the USA?

Thank you for your help

Names will not be used in the study.

Appendix 3 - User questionnaire and flashcard

1. Do you use the Internet or other Electronic sources to find information?

No [] (go to Q a and b) **Yes** [] (go to Q c, d and e)

a) If not, why not?

b) Are you aware that the library has Internet access?

Yes [] **No** []

*(for **library A3** replace question b) with*

Are you aware that some libraries have Internet access?

When this library gets Internet access will you use it?)

c) If yes, is this mainly at

Home [] Work [] Library []
Internet cafe [] School/College [] Other

d) How long have you been using the Internet/electronic resources for? (e.g. 1 yr/2 yrs?)

.....

e) i) What sort of enquiries do you use the Internet for?

.....

.....

ii) How would you have answered these enquiries before you started to use the Internet?

.....

.....

2. If you needed to find information such as:

a) The details of a company that you are applying to for a job, how would you go about it?

1 [] 2 [] 3 [] 4 [] 5

b) The postal code for an address?

1 [] 2 [] 3 [] 4 [] 5

c) Information about social security benefits?

1 [] 2 [] 3 [] 4 [] 5

d) Health information?

1 [] 2 [] 3 [] 4 [] 5

e) Information for a child's school project?

1 [] 2 [] 3 [] 4 [] 5

f) Travel or tourist information?

1 [] 2 [] 3 [] 4 [] 5

3. If you were going to visit the **library** to find reference information, would you use the

Local Library [] Central Library [] Both []

4. What is your age group?

under 25 [] 25-45 [] 45-65 [] 65+ []

5. Gender M [] F []

Answer options for Question 2.

You may choose more than one option.

- 1) Use the Internet.
- 2) Ask at the Library in person.
- 3) Telephone the Library.
- 4) Ask a friend.
- 5) Other

Appendix 4 - Information seeking behaviour of branch users

Where would you find information about a company?

	Respondents who gave this answer
Internet	83 (48.8%)
Visit the library	45 (26.5%)
Telephone the library	1 (0.6%)
Ask a friend	36 (21.2%)
Ask the company directly	18 (10.6%)
Don't know	13 (7.6%)

Where would you find a postcode for an address?

	Respondents who gave this answer
Internet	39 (22.9%)
Visit the library	30 (17.6%)
Telephone the library	6 (3.5%)
Ask a friend	13 (7.6%)
Phone book / Thomson's directory	41 (21.4%)
Free phone line	28 (16.5%)
Postcode directory	9 (5.3%)
Don't know	20 (11.8%)

Where would you find information about benefits?

	Respondents who gave this answer
Internet	15 (8.8%)
Visit the library	23 (13.5%)
Telephone the library	1 (0.6%)
Ask a friend	8 (4.7%)
Department of Work and Pensions	103 (60.6%)
Citizens Advice Bureau	32 (18.8%)
Don't know	5 (2.9%)

Where would you find health information?

	Respondents who gave this answer
Internet	42 (24.7%)
Visit the library	30 (17.6%)
Telephone the library	1 (0.6%)
Ask a friend	9 (5.3%)
GP	95 (55.9%)
Clinic	22 (12.9%)
Don't know	4 (2.4%)

Where would you find information for a child's school project?

	Respondents who gave this answer
Internet	70 (41.4%)
Visit the library	106 (62.7%)
Telephone the library	0
Ask a friend	1 (0.6%)
Ask the school	11 (6.5%)
Don't know	7 (4.1%)

Where would you find travel or tourist information?

	Respondents who gave this answer
Internet	77 (45.3%)
Visit the library	34 (20.0%)
Telephone the library	0
Ask a friend	5 (2.9%)
Travel agent	69 (40.6%)
Tourist office	16 (9.4%)
Don't know	3 (1.8%)