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1. Introduction

“The library is literally a local service. The contacts it offers, however, bring the whole planet within reach so that a world without frontiers lies open.”¹

Public Internet access has rapidly become a standard service in public libraries in the developed world. Providing public Internet access presents public library authorities with opportunities and challenges both in terms of managing the service and in terms of the materials which users, in particular children and young people, can access over the Internet.

In order to deal with these opportunities and challenges public libraries need to adopt a policy which states why, how and under what conditions the service is provided.

This policy should be written and presented in such a way as to be easily understood by users and potential users and should be displayed so that users and potential users can easily read it. Consideration should be given to producing a version aimed specifically at children and young people.

Many library authorities already have policies and they generally cover the same ground. However, some differences, particularly in services for children, do exist.

The policy should seek to encourage the community to learn, to enjoy learning, and to explore how to make the best use of the Internet, in the public library

¹ Helsinki City Library, *Annual Report 1999*, p.6.

2. What a policy should cover

Public Internet access policies necessarily include regulations, but these should be balanced by statements which promote the use of the service as a valuable tool. Public Internet access policies should state:

- That the Internet is a very valuable tool which can contribute to the educational and personal development of users;
- That the library authority is providing public Internet access as part of its mission to deliver information, and educational and cultural resources to the community;
- Whether the service is open to persons who are not members of the library or whether users must be, or become, members of the library to use the service;
- How users may avail of the service, including any booking and time-limit provisos;
- What restrictions, if any, are placed on children's use of the service;
- What, if any, filtering software is in use and on what PCs;
- How the filtering software, if in use, operates;
- What level of assistance and/or training is available from library staff;
- What restrictions, if any, are placed on the use of e-mail, printing facilities, chat rooms, etc.;
- That the library authority cannot be, and is not, responsible for any information found on the Internet;
- A prohibition on users accessing and or displaying material that is obscene or likely to cause offence to other library users and/or staff;
- A prohibition on users attempting to violate security systems or interfere with the equipment/software;
- That material on the Internet is covered by copyright legislation and that users should not violate copyright laws or licensing agreements;²
- What steps, if any, are taken to protect the privacy of library Internet users or, in the absence of such steps, a notification that privacy cannot be guaranteed;
- What restrictions, if any, are placed on the use of floppy disks;
- What costs, if any, are charged for the use of the service or for printing.

² The new Copyright Act and related Statutory Instruments came into force on 1st January 2001. Details are given in the bibliography.

3. Promotion of the Internet as a valuable learning and leisure tool

Public Internet Access Policies are necessary but must be accompanied by positive actions on the part of the library service to:

- educate users, especially children, young people and late adopters of technology, in the effective and sensible use of the Internet;
- provide information on recommended sites for both children and adults.

Many public library services in Ireland are actively engaged in promoting and exploiting the Internet through a range of activities. These include:

- creating their own web sites;
- compiling lists of, and creating links to, quality web sites on a variety of topics;
- making library resources, including catalogues and local studies material, available on the library web site;
- using the Internet in literature and stock promotion activities;
- holding introductory sessions for members of the public generally and for targeted groups such as the elderly;
- taking part in initiatives like Netd@ys.

Such activities help educate and inform library users about the benefits and effective use of the Internet. Public Libraries should consider what steps they can take to ensure that as many members of the community as possible can take advantage of the opportunities offered by the new information technologies.

4. Guidance and Support for Library Users

The Internet has revolutionised the provision of information and its importance looks set to increase even more in the coming years. Although the technology to access the Internet has become cheaper, and awareness among the general public has grown, it is clear that many people will rely on public provision of information and communications technologies (ICTs) for access

to the Internet.³ The public library has been recognised as one of the main providers of Internet access points for the public.⁴ The public library network's position in this regard must be strengthened and the service integrated with the printed and multimedia stock to promote a cohesive service to our users and to attract new users. The Internet is an excellent reference tool and must be promoted as such.

The sheer mass of information which is available on the Internet poses problems for users in trying to identify sites which are useful and reliable.

As with traditional library materials, users seeking information on the Internet require differing levels of support from library staff. Many users will require expert help in identifying and evaluating material on the World Wide Web.

Public Library staff have long experience in selecting materials and guiding library users to the most suitable information and cultural resources. These skills and expertise must be applied to Internet resources also.

Guidance and support, to ensure optimal benefits for users, is the crucial role which public library staff can play in the exploitation of the Internet.

5.1 Challenges posed by the Internet

The Internet provides ready access to a vast amount of valuable information which can play an important role in the educational and personal development of users, adults and children alike. However, as a product of society, the Internet also contains some material which the community in general considers harmful, or which is illegal.⁵ **It is important to recognise that the amount of material which can be considered harmful or illegal is small:**

³ Information Society Commission, *Ireland's progress as an information society* (General Public 1, October 1999), p.2. [Note: URLs for documents referred to are, where available, given in the bibliography.]

⁴ Information Society Commission, *IT Access for all* (March 2000), p.11.

⁵ Department of Justice, Equality & Law Reform, *Illegal and harmful use of the Internet: first report of the working group* (1998), p. 14.

for example, research suggests that less than three percent (3%) of web sites contain pornographic content.⁶

Most of the concerns expressed about the use of the Internet relate to pornography and child abuse. The use of the Internet as a means of communication by paedophile rings is a major concern in all countries and is the focus of much attention.⁷ Of more particular concern to public libraries which offer public Internet access are the following issues:

- Children accessing unsuitable material over the Internet;
- Children giving out personal information over the Internet;
- Internet users displaying unsuitable or offensive material in locations where others (including staff) might view it.

5.2 EDUCATION AND PROMOTION OF BEST PRACTICE

With particular reference to usage by children and young people, the words of the American Library Association are apt:

“The very best way to protect children is to teach them to be their own filters – to teach them to make wise decisions about what they view – whether they’re at home, a friend’s house or the library ... Librarians help guide children.”⁸

In addition to adopting usage policies, libraries should engage in promotional and educational activities which will help parents and their children use the Internet wisely.⁹ Public library services should consider what steps they can take to promote the safe use of the Internet by younger library users. These could include:

- holding introductory sessions for children and their parents;

⁶ OCLC Web Characterisation Project Statistics (October 2000).

⁷ See, for example, *Illegal and harmful use of the Internet; Decision No 276/1999/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council ... adopting a multiannual Community action plan on promoting safer use of the Internet by combating illegal and harmful content on global networks* (1999).

⁸ American Library Association, *Libraries and the Internet toolkit* (January 2001), p. 11.

⁹ Some useful resources are given in the bibliography and in *Internet Toolkit*.

- providing advice to parents on setting rules for their children's use of the Internet (at home and in the library);
- producing materials outlining how to keep safe in Cyberspace aimed at **both** parents and children;
- developing lists of recommended child-friendly sites and making them available in the library and on the library web site;
- encouraging children to ask for help when using the Internet.

The role of user education and web guidance in helping all users, including children, young people, and late adopters of technology, to make the best use of the Internet cannot be overstated.

5.3 THE EFFECTIVENESS OF FILTERING SOFTWARE IN SAFEGUARDING THE COMMUNITY

Filtering packages are software products, provided by commercial companies, which work in a number of ways (often using a mixture of all three):¹⁰

- Keyword blocking: the software contains a list of words which it searches for in web pages, e-mail messages, or chat sessions. If it finds the word then the site or the relevant sections will not be displayed. The words are often set by the supplier but some packages allow the user add to the list.
- Site blocking: the software contains a list of URLs which it will not allow be displayed. The list of URLs is set by the software producer but there is usually an option for the user to add to the list. A version of this type of software allows a list of allowed sites be entered, and only those sites to be displayed.
- Web ratings: Web sites are given a rating according to a pre-determined scale which measure sexual and violent content. The ratings are built into the web browser.¹¹

¹⁰Ormes, S., *An Introduction to filtering* (prepared for Earl, the Library Association and UKOLN, 1999?) p. 1. See also DeCandido, G.A., *Filtering: no easy answers* (PLA tech note on filtering), and Harper, S. *et al*, 'Instant access: or filter?' in *Public Library Journal* 14 (2) Summer 1999, pp. 46-47.

¹¹ Ormes, p. 2; also *Illegal and harmful use of the Internet*, pp. 36-37.

There has been much debate in the library profession on the use of filtering, particularly in the USA, where the right to free expression is enshrined in the constitution. The American Library Association (ALA) and, indeed, the Library Association (UK) are against filtering, which they see as a form of censorship.

On the other hand, some librarians see filtering software as a useful tool in helping prevent users, especially children, from accessing unsuitable material on the Internet.

In these circumstances, library staff would continue to have the responsibility of supervising children, as is the practice in relation to other services in the library. Filtering does not remove the need for supervision.

There are very practical issues to be considered when examining the use of filtering software. Research carried out by librarians in the USA indicates that filtering software is inefficient, in that it often blocks out sites which are of legitimate interest and fails to block sites containing unsuitable or obscene material.¹² This could lead to parents believing that their children are protected from unsuitable material whilst using library PCs, when this is not the case.

The Consumers Union of the United States published a study of a range of filtering products in February 2001, remarking that 'Filtering software is no substitute for parental supervision'.¹³

There are arguments for¹⁴ and against the use of filters on public library PCs. There are indications that variations in approach to filtering software exist between public library authorities in Ireland. Library authorities must decide themselves whether to use filters or not, but in either case they should be

¹² Ormes, p. 2; also *Libraries and the Internet toolkit*, p.13.

¹³ Consumers Union of the United States, *Digital chaperones for kids* (Consumer Reports Online, March 2001).

¹⁴ For arguments in favour of filtering see Burt, D., 'In defense of filtering', in *American Libraries*, 28 (7) p. 46-48.

aware of the complexities of the issue.¹⁵ **The use or otherwise of filtering software should be stated in the library's public Internet access policy.**

6. Conclusion

According to the Information Society Commission an 'Information Society' is a society '... that makes the best possible use of new information and communication technologies (ICTs). In an Information Society people will get the full benefits of new technology in all aspects of their lives: at work, at home and at play.'¹⁶

It is clear that if the public library network is to play its part in bringing the benefits of the Information Society to the public, it must embrace the opportunities offered by new technologies, including the Internet.

The Internet is a valuable tool for the public library and an important resource for public library users.

In providing a public Internet access service, public libraries must aim to provide a safe, positive, and encouraging environment for library users of all ages.

¹⁵ Consumers Union gives a list of useful resources as do Ormes, pp. 6-7, and DeCandido, pp. 3-5.

¹⁶ Information Society Commission, 'What is the Information Society?' (<http://www.isc.ie/about_us/index.html>.)

7. Useful Resources

7.1 OFFICIAL DOCUMENTS, REPORTS, AND WEB SITES

Department of Justice Equality & Law Reform	<i>Illegal and harmful use of the Internet: first report of the working group</i> (1998). < http://www.irlgov.ie/justice/Publications/Internet%20Submissions/subnet3.htm >. <i>Press release about the establishment of the Internet Advisory Board</i> (March 2000). < http://www.irlgov.ie/justice/Press%20Releases/Press-2000/pr-0903.htm >.
European Union	<i>Decision No 276/1999/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council ... adopting a multiannual Community action plan on promoting safer use of the Internet by combating illegal and harmful content on global networks</i> (1999). < http://www.ispo.cec.be/iap/decision/IAP_Decision_en.pdf >.
Government of Ireland	<i>Copyright and Related Rights Act, 2000</i> (number 28 of 2000). < http://www.entemp.ie/copyright.pdf >. <i>Statutory Instruments 404-11 and 427 of 2000.</i>
Information Society Commission	<i>Ireland's progress as an information society</i> (General Public 1, October 1999). < http://www.isc.ie >. <i>IT Access for all</i> (March 2000). < http://www.isc.ie >.
Web site for the Internet Action Plan - promoting safer use of the Internet	< http://www.ispo.cec.be/iap/ >.

7.2 LIBRARY RELATED REPORTS, WEB SITES, AND ARTICLES

American Library Association	<i>Guidelines and considerations for developing a public library Internet use policy</i> (June 1998). < http://www.ala.org/alaorg/oif/internet.html >. <i>Libraries and the Internet toolkit</i> (January 2001) < http://www.ala.org/alaorg/oif/internettoolkit.html >.
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Burt, D.,	'In defense of filtering', in <i>American Libraries</i> , 28 (7) p. 46-48.
David Burt's pro-filtering campaign	< http://www.filteringfacts.org >.
Clare County Library	<i>Internet access policy</i> < http://www.clarelibrary.ie/eolas/policy_access.htm >.
DeCandido, G.A.,	<i>Filtering: no easy answers</i> (PLA tech note on filtering). < http://www.pla.org/technotes/filtering.html >.
Dublin City Public Libraries	<i>Computer reference service usage policy guidelines</i> . < http://www.iol.ie/dublincitylibrary/internet.htm >.
Harrison, J. and Ormes, S.	<i>Internet services: the range available to library users</i> (prepared for Earl, the Library Association and UKOLN, 1999?). < http://www.earl.org.uk/policy/issuepapers/range.html >.
Harper, S. <i>et al</i>	'Instant access: or filter?' in <i>Public Library Journal</i> 14 (2) Summer 1999, pp. 46-47. [Includes a brief review of the literature.]
OCLC Web Characterisation Project Statistics	< http://wcp.oclc.org/ >.
Ormes, S	'Internet services in Danish public libraries' in <i>Journal of Librarianship and Information Science</i> 30 (2) Jun 1998, pp. 123-32. <i>An Introduction to filtering</i> (prepared for Earl, the Library Association and UKOLN, 1999?). < http://www.earl.org.uk:80/policy/issuepapers/filtering.html >.
Rogers, M.	'Taking stock of Internet policies' in <i>Library Journal</i> 123 (20) 15 Dec 1998, pp. 67-8.
San Antonio Public Library	<i>Internet acceptable use policy</i> . < http://www.sat.lib.tx.us/inetuse.htm >.
Tipperary Joint Libraries Committee	<i>Guidelines for Internet use</i> . < http://www.iol.ie/~tipplib/reg.htm >.

7.3 GENERAL MATERIAL AND WEB SITES

Barnardos	<i>Barnardos family guide to the Internet</i> (leaflet produced by Barnardos and Eircom).
The Children's Partnership site for parents and children	< http://www.childrenspartnership.org/ >.
Consumers Union of the United States	<i>Digital chaperones for kids</i> (Consumer Reports Online, March 2001). < http://www.consumerreports.org/ >.
The Getnetwise site for parents and children	< http://www.getnetwise.org/ >.
Henry, M.	'Watchful parent still the first line of defence' in <i>The Irish Times</i> , Monday January 17, 2000. < http://www.ireland.com//newspaper/computimes/2000/0117/ctimes2.htm >.
Information Technology and the Law web site at NCI.	< http://www.ncirl.ie/itlaw/index.html >.
Lillington, K.	'Trying to limit access to Internet paedophilia' in <i>The Irish Times</i> , Saturday January 9, 1999. < http://www.ireland.com//newspaper/ireland/1999/0109/hom110.htm >.
	'The web and your business' in <i>The Irish Times</i> , Friday December 10, 1999. < http://www.ireland.com//newspaper/finance/1999/1210/tech7.htm >.
National Council for Technology in Education (NCTE)	<i>Internet Acceptable Use Policies: guidelines for primary schools</i> (2000).
The Net-mom site for parents and children	< http://www.netmom.com/ >.