

Information need, information seeking behaviour and participation, with special reference to needs related to citizenship: results of a national survey

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***Abstract:** This paper reports the results of the second stage of the Citizenship Information research project funded by the BLR&IC: a nation-wide survey, by personal doorstep interview, of the citizenship information needs of almost 900 members of the UK public. Major findings include: that the public obtain most of their information on current issues via the mass media, and that they generally feel well informed on these issues. The public feel, however, that government is not doing enough to inform them on European Monetary Union and on local government cutbacks. Small proportions of the sample had encountered problems concerning employment, education, housing or welfare benefits, and had consulted a range of information sources in order to overcome these problems. Over a quarter of respondents had experienced disadvantage through a lack of access to information. The majority of respondents felt well informed about areas relating to citizenship, but significant proportions were poorly informed in legal rights, welfare benefits and local politics. A highly significant majority (91.7%) believed that freedom of information was important for exercising their rights as citizens. Respondents tended to overestimate their voting patterns, but there was little evidence of participation in other forms of political activity. Although access to computers in the home is presently limited, the majority of respondents would use computers to vote, convey opinions to government, and obtain government information. Public libraries were the preferred source of government information, and were seen as appropriate locations for a range of other types of citizenship information.*

Introduction and Methodology

The March 1999 issue of the *Journal of Documentation* contained a report [1] of the results of the first stage of the Citizenship Information research project funded by the British Library Research & Innovation Centre, a questionnaire-based survey of a sample of the UK population designed to elicit preliminary data on their use of and need for citizenship information, together with a full literature review. These questionnaires had been distributed in public libraries, Citizens Advice Bureaux (CABx), and other generalist information and advice agencies throughout the thirteen Government Office Regions of the UK.

This current paper reports the results of the second stage of the project: a complementary national survey of the UK public's citizenship information needs (in relation to national and local government issues and for survival information), this time by personal doorstep

interview. The second survey sought to probe further the concept of the 'well informed' and active citizen, and attitudes to the uptake and use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and of public libraries and other sources of public information. The interviews were designed to elicit more qualitative, extended and individual responses, and to form a more in-depth and less pre-determined set of data. In conducting the interviews at people's homes, away from the 'institutional' setting of the initial survey, it was expected that this would overcome any deficiencies in the first survey in reaching the less literate respondent and those from lower social grades.

It is perhaps worthwhile reminding readers that the authors have formulated the following definition of citizenship information:

Citizenship information is information produced by or about national and local government, government departments and public sector organisations which may be of value to the citizen either as part of everyday life or in the participation by the citizen in government and policy formulation

However, the survey was designed in order to elicit openly the views of respondents as to the nature of citizenship information, rather than impose a preconceived and limited conception: therefore, the interview schedule did not contain a definition. Prior to the survey taking place, the project team tested the interview schedule on members of the Aberdeen public; the final version can be found at Appendix I.

To conduct the interviews, the project team employed undergraduate and postgraduate librarianship and information studies students from library schools throughout the country. Interviews took place in 12 of the 13 UK regions, the one exception being Merseyside, where interviewer illness prevented the survey being conducted within the prescribed timescale. As Merseyside, in official terms, is a relatively new region, having been part of the old North West Standard Planning Region until 1994, it is believed that its absence does not severely affect the overall geographical coverage of the survey sample. With one exception (in the South West region), the interviews took place in the same towns and cities in which the Stage 1 questionnaires were disseminated.

Each interviewer was provided with socio-economic and population data for their allocated town or city taken from the 1991 UK Census Small Area Statistics [2], and was asked to identify five local government electoral wards in which the survey would take place. In an

attempt to reach a broad cross-section of the public, each interviewer was effectively asked to conduct interviews in the ward containing the highest percentage of residents belonging to Standard Occupational Classification [3] Social Classes IV and V (i.e. partly skilled and unskilled occupations), the ward with the lowest percentage of Classes IV and V, and three other wards spread across the cumulative population figures for the town/city. The full list of wards in which the interviews took place is shown in Table 1 (where ward category 1 is that containing the highest percentage of Classes IV and V, and category 5 is that containing the lowest percentage of Classes IV and V). Readers should note that the Standard Occupational Classification is to be replaced by a new National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC) in 2001 [4].

Table 1. Electoral wards in which interviews took place

<i>Town/city</i>	<i>Ward Categories</i>				
	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>
Aberdeen	Tillydrone	Quarryhill	Victoria	Duthie	Harlaw
Aberystwyth	Aberystwyth West	Aberystwyth South	Llanbadarn Fawr	Faenor	Aberystwyth East
Belfast	Duncairn	Woodstock	Water Works	Knock	Stranmillis
Birmingham	Nechells	Weoley	Oscott	Perry Barr	Sutton Vesey
Brighton	Moulsecoomb	Tenanry	Regency	St. Peter's	Westdene
Cambridge	Abbey	Arbury	Market	Petersfield	Trumpington
London (Camden)	Somers Town	Grafton	St. John's	Fortune Green	Chalk Farm
Loughborough /Charnwood	Woodthorpe	Birstall Stonehill	Shepshed West	East Goscote	Birstall Netherhall
Manchester	Benchill	Moss Side	Burnage	Rusholme	Didsbury
Newcastle	Sth. Gosforth	Wingrove	Fenham	Walkergate	Walker
Sheffield	Park	Brightside	Sharrow	Stocksbridge	Ecclesall
Weston-super- Mare	W-super-Mare South	W-super-Mare Ellenborough	W-super-Mare Ashcombe	W-super-Mare North	Hutton

Each interviewer was asked to complete 15 interview schedules in each of the five wards - a total of 75 interviews in each town/city. All were successful, with the exception of the Birmingham interviewer who fell two schedules short of the desired quota, therefore 898 interviews were successfully completed. The interviews took place between May and November 1998.

The interviewers were instructed to use the random walk sample method, commonly used in market research, whereby they randomly selected a starting point within each ward and proceeded to attempt an interview at every 7th household within that ward until the required quota had been reached. Detailed, printed guidelines were provided on how to deal with road junctions, vacant households, blocks of flats, offices and commercial premises etc. Indeed,

as well as receiving a copy of these guidelines, each interviewer was personally briefed by a member of the project team prior to commencement of the survey. The response rate of the random walk sample method in individual wards ranged from 31.9% (i.e. one successful interview obtained at approximately every third household visited) to 4.9% (one interview in every twenty homes visited). While the survey respondents were guaranteed anonymity, each one was asked if they could provide a daytime telephone number at which they could be contacted. A member of the project team subsequently rang a random sample of these numbers in each town/city to confirm that the interviews had been carried out satisfactorily.

Responses to the closed questions were coded and analysed using the statistical software package SPSS for Windows. Responses to the open questions were grouped together under recurring themes and, whenever possible, were also coded and analysed using SPSS. Significant statistical relationships between variables (at the 95% confidence level) were identified using the chi-square test. In particular, the response to each question was cross-tabulated with the demographic details of the respondents (see below) in order to establish whether there were any significant demographic variances. Any such differences are discussed throughout this paper in terms of percentage points.

Demographic details of respondents

Table 2 indicates the gender and age group of the respondents. As can be seen, 61.1% of the respondents were female, while 38.6% were male - a significantly greater female-male ratio than the national percentages of 51% and 49% [5]. The proportion of older respondents in the survey (i.e. 40% aged 55 or over) is substantially greater than the national percentage, in 1996, of 26% [6] and for the first survey.

Table 2. Gender and age of respondents

<i>Age Group</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Sex not specified</i>	<i>Totals</i>	
				<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
16-19	18	24	-	42	4.7
20-29	72	72	-	144	16.0
30-44	75	149	-	224	24.9
45-54	40	82	1	123	13.7
55-64	54	77	1	132	14.7
65-74	52	75	-	127	14.1
75 or over	35	66	-	101	11.2
Age not specified	1	4	-	5	0.6
Totals	347	549	2	898	100.0
	(38.6%)	(61.1%)	(0.2%)		

Table 3 illustrates the status of the respondents. Some 56.2% of the respondents were economically inactive (i.e. student, retired, running a home, or permanently unable to work), slightly greater than the national figure of 51.1% [7]. However, as the national figure also includes all people under 16, who were excluded from this survey, then it becomes clear that the respondents come to a greater extent proportionally from the economically inactive groups than for the UK as a whole. Indeed, these data would suggest that the doorstep interview methodology has reached a greater proportion of those not in active employment - women, the elderly, the retired, the unemployed and those running a home. However, given that these are age groups deemed in danger of social exclusion, then the results are especially revealing. They also complement those of the first survey where a more dynamic and arguably more ‘informed’ group of respondents was achieved.

Table 3. Status of respondents

<i>Status</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Sex not specified</i>	<i>Totals</i>	
				<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
In paid employment	113	146	-	259	28.8
Self employed	28	33	-	61	6.8
Seeking work	40	25	-	65	7.2
Retired	116	189	2	307	34.2
Running a home	10	109	-	119	13.3
Student	35	43	-	78	8.7
Status not specified	5	4	-	9	1.0
Totals	347	549	2	898	100.0

The 320 respondents who were either in paid employment or self employed were asked to specify their occupation. Those who did specify an occupation (288) were allocated a social class using the Standard Occupational Classification. These are detailed in Table 4. Compared with 1996 national figures [7, p. 46] the sample contained greater proportions of

professional and managerial occupations, smaller proportions of skilled occupations, but almost identical proportions of partly-skilled and unskilled occupations. As was expected, given the methodology used, there were generally higher proportions of professional and managerial occupations in ward categories 4 and 5 (see Table 1), and higher proportions of partly-skilled and unskilled occupations in categories 1 and 2.

Table 4. Social class of employed respondents

<i>Social Class</i>		<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Totals</i>	<i>% (of 288)</i>
I	Professional, etc. occupations	33	16	49	17.0
II	Managerial and Technical occupations	41	61	102	35.4
III(N)	Skilled occupations non-manual	18	37	55	19.1
III(M)	Skilled occupations manual	13	4	17	5.9
IV	Partly skilled occupations	16	32	48	16.7
V	Unskilled occupations	2	15	17	5.9
Totals		123 (42.7%)	165 (57.2%)	288	100

Respondents were asked about the highest level of education they had completed (see Table 5). Just over a quarter had completed an undergraduate or higher degree, while almost 23% had completed a further education course. Just over half had received no education beyond school.

Table 5. Educational attainment of respondents

<i>Level of education</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Sex not specified</i>	<i>Totals</i>	
				<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
School	165	295	1	461	51.3
FE college	73	129	1	203	22.6
University undergrad.	64	71	-	135	15.0
University postgrad.	43	47	-	90	10.0
Doctorate	1	2	-	3	0.3
Not specified	1	5	-	6	0.7
Totals	347	549	2	898	100

In total, 56 (6.2%) of the respondents belonged to an ethnic minority group, almost identical to the 1996 national figure of just under 6% [6, p. 31]. Respondents were asked if they would describe themselves as disabled, and in all 118 (13.1%) indicated that they were disabled in some way; again, this is relatively close to the most recent national estimate of 11% [8]. Of the 898 respondents, 150 (16.7%) resided in rural areas, slightly lower than the 1995 national figure of 18.2% [6, p. 30].

Current Affairs

Respondents were initially asked to identify what they believed to be the single most important issue in UK current affairs at the time of the survey. A wide range of issues were cited, and the top ten responses are illustrated in Table 6. Unsurprisingly, interest in the top issue, Northern Ireland, was greatest within Northern Ireland itself, where it was cited by 40% of the respondents, well ahead of the 23.1% in the Eastern Region and in Scotland.

Table 6. Most important current affairs issue (top ten responses)

<i>Current affairs issue</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>%</i>
The Northern Ireland situation	155	17.3
State of the education system	94	10.5
Health issues and the state of the NHS	94	10.5
The EU, and UK participation in EMU	76	8.5
State of the UK economy	43	4.8
Unemployment	38	4.2
Law and order issues	33	3.7
Football World Cup / English hooligans	24	2.7
Environmental issues	23	2.6
State of the Labour Government	16	1.8

There were some interesting differences between the sexes: when compared with female respondents, males placed greater importance on European Union issues (+6.0 percentage points) and in unemployment (+4.3), but less importance on the NHS (-8.6) and Education (-5.4). With regard to age group, the younger respondents appeared to have less interest in the NHS and (perhaps surprisingly) Europe, but more interest in the state of the education system. There were also some significant differences in terms of status. The proportions of retired respondents and those running a home who cited the NHS as the most important issue were basically double that of the other status groups. Education was cited least by retired respondents and most by students and those running a home; while, unsurprisingly, unemployment was cited least by those in paid employment, but most by jobseekers. There were also some interesting variances in terms of the educational attainment of the respondents: amongst the better-educated respondents there was more interest in economic and environmental issues, but less interest in the state of the NHS.

Respondents were asked where they obtain most of their information on the current affairs issue from. The media dominated overall for subjects, with at least one form (i.e. television, radio or the press) being cited by over 75% of respondents in each case. There is evidence here of very high levels of passive consumption of information from the media on subjects that respondents feel highly significant. In terms of age group, use of the mass media in

general was greater among the older age groups; while television, specifically, was cited more by the younger age groups, ranging from 12.9% of those aged 75 or over to 34.7% of those aged 20-29. In terms of social class, use of television as the information source was greater among the manual and unskilled workers, while use of newspapers was greater amongst the professional and managerial occupations.

Most respondents felt well or very well informed on the main issues identified, although over 15% in each case felt poorly informed about the EU/EMU, Northern Ireland, health, law and order, and the environment. Women tended to feel less well informed than men, while those who had received a better education felt better informed than the other respondents. However, despite feeling well informed, significant proportions (over a third in each case) felt that they would like to find out more about education, EU/EMU, the environment, health, unemployment, the economy, Northern Ireland, and law and order. The better educated tended to want to find out more. This would suggest active interest in these areas rather than the passive consumption of information, although it is not clear from this response if they would be prepared to go out and seek this information.

Those who indicated that they would like to find out more about their chosen issue were asked where they would most likely go to obtain this information, and it was notable that at this point, when actively seeking information, high proportions would approach public libraries. Indeed, the public library was seen as the most important single resource for the environment (46.7%), education (38.8%) and health (29.3%), and an important source of information on employment (31.3%), Europe (28.2%), law and order (27.3%), and Northern Ireland (24.5%). The mass media remained the most likely source of further information on Europe, Northern Ireland, law and order, and employment; while the Internet was seen as an important resource on economic issues. Interestingly, the less well educated tended to prefer the public library as a further source of information, while the better educated preferred newspapers which would suggest that they are content to consume information as governed by the newspapers' editorial policies.

Respondents were asked if their chosen issue significantly affected their own lives, and while the economy (76.7%), health (74.5%), the environment (69.6%), education (67%), Europe (60.5%), unemployment (57.9%), and law and order (54.5%) were deemed by the majority of respondents to have an impact on their lives, Northern Ireland, the World Cup, and the state of the Labour Government were felt to be less central. Of the Belfast respondents, however, 66.7% felt the Northern Ireland situation significantly affected their own lives.

The next part of the survey consisted of a more detailed investigation of three current issues: the Single European Currency, the BSE crisis, and local government financial cutbacks.

669 respondents (74.5%) indicated that they would like to find out more about monetary union. Interestingly, when compared with males, female respondents displayed a greater interest in finding out more (+10.2 points); while respondents belonging to ethnic minority groups also showed more interest than their white counterparts (+10.0). The mass media (38.7%) and public libraries (21.7%) would be the most popular sources of information, followed by a government information programme (8.7%), the Internet and an MP (both 4.3%); although rural respondents were significantly less likely to use libraries than urban residents (-24.5 points). The vast majority (80.4%) of the respondents felt that the government was not doing enough to inform the public about the Single Currency.

The majority of respondents (59.2%) felt that they were well informed about BSE. Again, the media (26.6%) and public libraries (19.4%) were the most likely source for those that felt that they were not well informed, with doctors and other health professionals (7.9%) forming the major alternative source. Greater proportions of women and the less well educated would go to doctors for such information. A slight majority (55.2%) felt that the government was not doing enough to inform the public about BSE. When asked how they might make their own feelings known to the government on this issue, the preferred methods were contacting a local MP (38.6%) or a government Minister or Department (10%), although a large proportion (35.6%) indicated that they were not interested in making their feelings known. There was a greater tendency to contact an MP amongst white respondents (+34.7 points).

On the subject of local government cutbacks, 63.4% felt that they were poorly informed. The most popular sources of additional information were felt to be local council offices (31.1%), local newspapers (11.6%) and public libraries (10.4%). At the local government level there is therefore a greater tendency to approach government direct than at the national level. Some 643 (71.6%) respondents felt that their particular council was not doing enough to inform them about cutbacks. In making their own feelings known on this issue, significant proportions of respondents would contact local councillors (20.3%), their local MP (19%) and local council offices (17.5%) although, again, a significant proportion (26.2%) were not interested in making their feelings known. Urban respondents were more likely to contact their councillor, while rural residents were more likely to contact their local MP.

Survival information

The next section of the survey focused on what might be termed survival information - i.e. information that might help people to overcome the problems that occur in day-to-day life. Respondents were asked whether or not they had ever encountered a problem regarding employment, education, housing, or welfare benefits; brief details were elicited on the nature of these problems, plus the information sources used to help solve the problems.

141 respondents (15.7%) indicated that they had had an employment problem. These included problems such as finding work (the most common problem, cited by 71 respondents), dealing with redundancy or unfair dismissal, sexual harassment or bullying in the workplace, stress-related absence, and obtaining childcare when at work. Interestingly, employment problems were cited by a significantly greater proportion of male respondents (20.2%) than female respondents (12.9%). Job centres and newspapers were the information sources used most frequently to help respondents solve these problems.

A smaller number of respondents (118, 13.1%) cited an education problem, such as selecting a school or university for the respondent or the respondent's child, obtaining funding and grants, restrictive curricula, special needs or health problems affecting education, bullying, and truancy. Local education authorities, schools and universities, and family and friends were the most frequently cited information sources. Unsurprisingly, education problems were cited most frequently by students and by those aged 16-44, and least frequently by the retired and those aged 55 and over.

Housing problems were cited by 122 (13.6%) respondents. These included obtaining council housing, getting the local council or landlord to repair or improve accommodation, obtaining residential care or sheltered housing, dealing with problem neighbours, and homelessness. Most of these respondents had approached council housing departments and local councillors for help. Housing problems were cited least frequently by the youngest and the oldest respondents (i.e. those aged 16-19 and those aged 55 and over) and most frequently by those aged 20-44.

Exactly 15% (i.e. 135) of the respondents indicated that they had had a welfare benefits problem. All were concerned with claiming, or establishing entitlement to, a wide range of benefits, including Attendance Allowance, Child Benefit and Disability Living Allowance.

The main sources of their information were Department of Social Security (DSS) offices, CABx, council social services departments, and family and friends. A significantly greater proportion of rural respondents (22.7%) cited a benefits problem than did the urban respondents (13.5%). Perhaps unsurprisingly, disabled respondents had encountered more problems than able-bodied respondents (+11.9 points).

In order to explore the concept that exclusion from information creates disadvantage, respondents were asked to give an example of an occasion when not being able to obtain information had proven a disadvantage. Over a quarter (26.1%) of respondents could cite an example, and these related to welfare benefits, education, employment, financial matters, housing, health, local planning, traffic problems, legal issues, consumer issues, and relationship problems. Interestingly, those from higher social classes and those with the highest level of educational qualification were more likely to be able to cite an example of disadvantage: contrarily this finding might suggest that these groups are more aware of disadvantage and its causes rather than providing evidence of greater disadvantage.

Well-informed and active citizens

The next section of the interview sought to measure how well-informed the respondents were about citizenship information matters, and to examine their levels of participation in the democratic process. Respondents were firstly asked how well informed they felt they were about five different citizenship topics. As can be seen from Table 7, the majority of respondents felt well or adequately informed about areas relating to citizenship, but it is notable that over a quarter of the population in each case feel poorly informed about legal rights, welfare benefits, and local government. Respondents felt best informed about national politics, although there was a significant difference in terms of gender: a greater proportion of males felt well informed about national politics (+14.7 points), while a greater proportion of females felt poorly informed (+7.3) or were not interested (+5.3).

Table 7. How well informed respondents felt they were about particular topics

<i>Topic</i>	<i>Expert %</i>	<i>Well informed %</i>	<i>Adequately Informed %</i>	<i>Poorly Informed %</i>	<i>Not interested %</i>
National politics	1.0	24.2	44.1	13.9	16.5
Local politics	0.6	16.5	40.5	27.2	15.0
Legal rights	1.1	17.7	40.9	31.3	8.6
Welfare benefits	2.1	17.1	31.8	30.7	17.8
Equal rights	2.6	22.0	41.8	20.7	12.5

With regard to social class and educational attainment, meanwhile, those respondents in professional and managerial occupations or who had completed a degree course felt better informed and more interested in national and local politics and in equal rights than the other occupational classes and the ‘school-leavers’. Status was a significant factor regarding equal rights: students were the best informed and most interested group, while retired respondents were the most poorly informed and least interested. With regard to welfare benefits, able-bodied respondents were less well informed (-16.9 points) and more disinterested (+10.8) than those with a disability.

Respondents were provided with a list of six types of group or association, and asked if they were a member of any. Overall there were low levels of participation in these groups. The highest proportions were for membership of leisure groups (32.4%) and charitable groups (25.2%), with only small minorities members of professional/trade associations (16.6%) and trade unions (13.6%). Fewer were members of political parties (6.7%) than of pressure groups (6.9%). Membership of pressure groups, charitable groups, professional associations, and leisure groups was significantly higher amongst the professional and managerial occupations; while membership of *all* types of group or society was higher amongst the better-educated respondents. When compared with the able-bodied, a higher proportion of disabled respondents (+10.0 points) were members of a charitable group.

Respondents were asked how regularly they vote at national, local and European elections (see Table 8). Twenty respondents (2.2%) were not eligible to vote, for reasons of either age or nationality; and interestingly, 19 respondents (2.1%) could not remember voting in a European election, or indeed were adamant that such a vote had never taken place in their area.

Table 8. Voting frequencies

<i>Type of election</i>	<i>Always</i> %	<i>Sometimes</i> %	<i>Never</i> %	<i>Not eligible</i> %	<i>Don't know</i> %
National elections	77.2	11.6	8.8	2.2	-
Local council elections	65.8	17.3	14.5	2.2	-
European elections	45.3	9.7	40.5	2.2	2.1

These figures compare with the 71.5% turnout for the general election of May 1997 [9]; the average UK sub-national elections turnout of 40% [10]; and the 36.1% turnout in the UK for the June 1994 European Parliament elections [11]. It would seem that respondents tend to overestimate their participation in this respect. In general, the proportions who always vote at all three types of election grew larger as the respondents grew older. Interestingly, disabled respondents, when compared with the able-bodied, were more likely to always vote at local elections (+16.1 points).

The survey also asked respondents whether, apart from voting, they actively participated in the political process. Only a small proportion (10.2%) participated in other forms of political activity, such as canvassing, campaigning, and attending political meetings. In general, participation was higher amongst the professional and managerial occupations, and those who had received a more advanced education.

Freedom of Information

Respondents were asked for their opinion on the importance of freedom of information, and if they felt that access to accurate and unbiased information was important for exercising their rights as citizens. The response to both questions appears in Table 9.

Table 9. Importance of Freedom of Information and access to accurate and unbiased information

	<i>Very important</i> %	<i>Quite important</i> %	<i>Not important</i> %	<i>Don't know</i> %
Freedom of Information	66.5	25.2	3.0	5.0
Access to accurate and unbiased information	72.0	19.7	2.7	4.8

As can be seen, the vast majority of respondents felt that freedom of information (91.7%) and access to accurate and unbiased information (91.7%) were important in exercising their rights as citizens. This reinforces the finding in the first survey which indicated that 94.3% of respondents believed that information access is important for exercising their rights. Compared with respondents in rural areas, significantly greater numbers of urban respondents felt that freedom of information (+14.2 points) and information access (+12.9) were very important. Generally, both issues were perceived as being more important by those of a higher occupational class and standard of education.

Respondents were also asked to explain why they had responded in the manner they did. In summary, freedom of information was felt to be: a basic democratic right; necessary to ensure politicians' accountability; necessary in the current atmosphere of corruption; and access to personal data was deemed a particularly significant issue. Some respondents felt that there was a danger of being overloaded with information, while others were cynical about the real value of a Freedom of Information Act. Respondents felt that access to accurate and unbiased information was essential to their capacity to make effective decisions or form opinions.

Use of ICTs

In a closed question, respondents were asked about current levels of access to ICTs. Access to computers (39.3%), the Internet (14.6%) and satellite/cable television (26.4%) in the home was limited, with higher proportions of students and job seekers having cable/satellite, while higher proportions of the better educated and those in Social Class I had a computer and access to the Internet. Only 12.6% of the respondents (35.3% of those in employment) had access to the Internet at work. Although the question was not specifically asked, 48 (61.5%) of the 78 students in the sample indicated that they had access to the Internet at their school, college or university. It is perhaps fair to assume that most, if not all, of the other 30 students will also have Internet access. Unsurprisingly, access to ICTs tended to decrease as respondents grew older.

The respondents were asked if they would use computers to take part in any of four different democratic activities, if computers were available for them to use, either at home, at work or in public places. Table 10 summarises the response. A slight majority in each case would be

willing to use computers to vote, make their own feelings known, or obtain official information, but there is a reluctance to use computers to participate in political debates.

Table 10. Potential use of computers for democratic activities

<i>Activity</i>	<i>Yes</i> %	<i>No</i> %	<i>Don't know</i> %
To vote in elections	54.7	44.2	1.1
To take part in political debates	35.0	63.5	1.5
To let Government know what you think about particular issues and decisions	53.5	46.1	0.4
To obtain official Government information	59.8	39.5	0.6

Compared with respondents in rural areas, urban respondents were far more willing to use a computer to vote (+18.5 points), debate (+12.3), make their own feelings known (+14.6) and obtain official information (+14.2). This is an interesting finding in light of the much vaunted potential of ICTs to overcome rural remoteness and isolation. With regard to age group, there was an increasing unwillingness to use computers for all four activities as the respondents grew older. Similarly, in terms of status, retired respondents were least likely and students were most likely to use a computer for all four activities. In general, those respondents with a higher occupational classification and/or a higher academic qualification were more willing to use a computer for these purposes. Interestingly, able-bodied respondents were more willing to use a computer to vote (+23.0), make their own feelings known (+26.6), and obtain official information (+29.1). These findings reinforce concerns over specific groups deemed to be in danger of exclusion by increasing emphasis on ICTs in communications with government.

Respondents were asked if they might have any concerns over confidentiality if they were ever to use a computer to vote or take part in a debate. Of those respondents who said they would use a computer to vote in an election, 47.7% were worried about confidentiality. Similar figures were found amongst those who would take part in computer debates (47.5%), and those who would use a computer to provide feedback to the Government on particular issues (50.6%).

From a list of six options, respondents were asked how they would prefer to make their own feelings known on a subject they felt strongly about (see Table 11). The majority of respondents (66.4%) preferred the more traditional method of writing to someone, although a

significant proportion of 15% were simply not interested in making their feelings publicly known.

Table 11. Preferred method of making feelings known

<i>Method</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>%</i>
Write to someone, such as the Press or my local MP	596	66.4
Speak at a public meeting	52	5.8
Take part in a debate by computer	49	5.5
Phone in to a radio or TV debate	42	4.7
Speak on a televised studio debate	21	2.3
Not interested in making own feelings publicly known	135	15.0

With regard to age group, unsurprisingly given the findings outlined above, there was decidedly less interest amongst older respondents (and, in terms of status, the retired) in taking part in an electronic debate. Indeed, amongst the oldest respondents (i.e. aged 65 and over) the proportion who were not interested (26.8%) in making their own feelings known at all was more than double that of the other age groups. Ethnic minority respondents, meanwhile, were less willing to write to someone (-11.7 points) but more willing to take part in a debate by computer (+11.3) than the white respondents. In terms of educational attainment, an even higher proportion of the better-educated (78.9% of those with a postgraduate degree) would write to someone; and indeed, in general, interest in making their own feelings publicly known was greater amongst those with a higher level of education.

Public Libraries and other information sources

From a list of 11 organisations, individuals and locations, respondents were asked from which one they would prefer to obtain official Government information, and the results are illustrated in Table 12.

Table 12. Preferred source of Government information

<i>Source</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
Public libraries	388	43.2
Post offices	132	14.7
Citizens Advice Bureaux	108	12.0
Local MP	52	5.8
Local council offices	49	5.5
Offices of Govt. departments and agencies	36	4.0
Schools	32	3.6
A computer in a public place, such as a shopping centre	31	3.5
Banks and building societies	18	2.0
Medical centres and doctors' surgeries	9	1.0
Community and leisure centres	4	0.4

As can be seen, public libraries were the most popular source, cited by over 43% of respondents. This is a significant reinforcement of the finding in the first survey, where over 77% of respondents had indicated that they would approach public libraries for information on at least an occasional basis. CABx were cited more by the older groups, ranging from just 4.8% of those aged 16-19, to 23.8% of those aged 75 and over. Post offices were most popular with jobseekers (20.0%) and least popular with students (6.4%). Educational attainment was also an important factor: a significant preference for approaching CABx and the local MP was displayed by the less well-educated. Disabled respondents, when compared with the able-bodied, had a preference for approaching CABx (+15.4 points) but were less inclined to visit a public library (-13.7).

The respondents were then asked for what reasons they would prefer to obtain information from their chosen source. For most respondents it was the accessibility of the public library and the fact that they visited it regularly that made libraries their preference. Public libraries were also seen as reputable and having an appropriate atmosphere. Those that preferred MPs and government departments were motivated largely by getting their information directly from the primary source. CABx and medical centres were felt by users to have particularly helpful staff (public libraries did not rate highly here). CABx were felt to be particularly reputable. Computers in public places were rated for their accessibility and the frequency with which respondents visit these places. Council offices were felt to have relevant material. Overall, the primary motivating factors appear to be accessibility and frequency of visit.

Respondents were asked if they were a member of a public library, and 651 (72.5%) indicated that they were; this is higher than the recent national figure of 58% cited in *New*

Library: the People's Network [12]. Membership was lowest amongst those running a home (63.9%) or seeking work (64.6%) and highest amongst the students (88.5%). Membership was also higher amongst the higher social classes and the better-educated.

The 247 respondents who were not members of a public library were asked what might encourage them to join. While over a third of these respondents indicated they were not interested in joining a library, the others indicated a variety of reasons for non-membership, the only one of which occurred frequently enough to be significant being that respondents did not have enough free time.

Respondents were asked if they felt that public libraries were suitable places for obtaining information on the following five topics: their local council; welfare benefits; job opportunities and careers; housing; and consumer advice. Their response is illustrated in Table 13. The vast majority (82%) believed that libraries were appropriate locations for local council information, while smaller majorities in each case felt that libraries should hold information on the other four topics. There appeared to be some doubts over whether libraries should hold housing information, with over 38% of respondents believing that libraries are not suitable locations for such material.

Table 13. Suitability of public libraries for obtaining information on particular topics

<i>Topic</i>	<i>Suitable %</i>	<i>Not suitable %</i>	<i>Don't know %</i>	<i>Not interested %</i>
Your local council	82.0	11.7	4.8	1.6
Welfare benefits	65.1	27.4	5.4	2.0
Job opportunities and careers	61.4	30.7	6.1	1.8
Housing	53.5	38.2	6.3	2.0
Consumer advice	67.8	23.6	6.5	2.1

Those respondents who believed public libraries were unsuitable places for these types of information, were asked to suggest more suitable locations. Local council offices were regarded as appropriate locations for local council information; CABx, DSS offices and council social services departments were felt to be more suitable for welfare benefits information; it was felt that jobs and careers information should be located in job centres; council housing departments were deemed appropriate for housing information; while it was believed that consumer information should be held by CABx and local Consumer Protection or Trading Standards offices.

The survey then investigated the respondents' awareness of the types of information that public libraries hold. They were asked if they were aware that most public libraries hold official government publications, health care information, and information on educational opportunities, legal rights, and the European Union. The response is illustrated in Table 14. Overall, 672 (74.8%) were unaware of at least one of the information types held by libraries; therefore there is evidence here of a real need for libraries to promote their collections more effectively. As can be seen, a small number of respondents stated that, while they did not actually know that libraries held this information, they would have presumed that they did so.

Table 14. Awareness that particular types of information are held by most public libraries

<i>Type of information</i>	<i>Aware %</i>	<i>Unaware %</i>	<i>Presumed %</i>
Official government publications	53.5	45.8	0.4
Health care	53.6	45.1	1.0
Educational opportunities	69.0	30.2	0.4
Legal rights	53.7	44.9	1.1
European Union	36.9	61.1	1.7

Interestingly, when compared with white respondents, a higher proportion (ranging from +13.4 points to +17.9 points) of the coloured respondents were aware that libraries held material on all five subjects. There was less awareness of libraries holding government publications amongst the lower occupational classes; and, with the exception of health care information, there was a greater awareness of library holdings amongst the better-educated respondents.

The 672 respondents who were unaware of at least one of the information types held by libraries were asked how libraries could let them know more about the types of information they hold. Publicity campaigns, leaflets/posters and mailshots were all recommended by respondents. Naturally, non-library members tended to emphasise the need for external publicity and mailshots, while library members felt that there should be more promotion of such materials in the library. Some respondents felt that libraries should not waste their resources by undertaking costly promotional activities.

Finally, the survey gave the respondents the chance to raise any points that had not been discussed. It is interesting to note that at the conclusion of a long and detailed interview 174 (19.4%) respondents felt sufficiently interested to make a further point. The majority chose to comment on their public library service: many criticised stock in their local libraries or the

impact of cutbacks and staff shortages. Some respondents reiterated their feelings that access to information was important to the citizen. Small numbers in each instance were conscious of the 'information rich/information poor debate' or of the concept of information overload. A number stated the importance of access to computerised information in public places, while others questioned the quality of information available on the Internet. Twenty-eight respondents took the opportunity to discuss a personal problem that had required citizenship information or an area of current concern upon which they would like more information.

Conclusions

Some 898 doorstep interviews were conducted throughout the UK. The response was representative in most respects, but held a greater proportion of the elderly, the retired, those running a home and the economically inactive than the figures for the UK as a whole. It is felt, however, that high representation amongst these groups that may be deemed to face barriers to information access reveals particularly interesting results.

Northern Ireland dominated respondents' perception of the most significant current issue. This result was affected by the Northern Ireland response, but still came top overall. Otherwise a wide range of issues emerged, dominated by education, health, Europe and the economy. The media was the prime source of information in each case. Most respondents felt well informed on the main issues identified, but over 15% in each case felt poorly informed about Europe, Northern Ireland, health, law and order and the environment. Significant proportions would like to find out more about education, Europe, the environment, health, unemployment, the economy, Northern Ireland, and law and order. Where such an interest is recorded, high proportions would approach public libraries for further information. The economy, health, the environment, education, Europe, unemployment, and law and order were deemed by the majority of respondents to have a significant impact on their lives.

In the more detailed investigation of three current issues, three-quarters of the respondents said they would like to find out more about European Monetary Union, with the mass media and public libraries providing the most likely source of information. Over 80% of respondents believed that the government was not doing enough to inform the public about the Single Currency. The majority of respondents (59.2%) felt that they were well informed about BSE, with the media and public libraries again proving the most popular sources for

those that felt that they were not well informed. A slight majority (55.2%) felt that the government was not doing enough to inform them about BSE; while the preferred methods of making their feelings known to the government on this issue were to contact a local MP or a government Minister or Department. Almost two-thirds of respondents felt badly informed about local government cutbacks, with local council offices, local newspapers and public libraries being regarded as the most likely sources of further information. Over 70% of respondents felt that their local council was not doing enough to inform them about cutbacks; while the most likely methods of making their feelings known on the subject of cutbacks would be to contact local councillors, their local MP or local council offices.

In terms of survival information, 15.7% of respondents had encountered an employment problem, usually utilising job centres or newspapers to find information; 13.1% had encountered an education problem, in most instances approaching local education authorities, family and friends, and schools/universities for information; 13.6% had encountered housing problems and had approached council housing departments and local councillors for help; while 15% had encountered welfare benefits problems and had approached the DSS, CABx and council social services departments. In none of these categories had public libraries appeared significantly in responses.

Over a quarter of respondents could cite an example of an occasion when not being able to obtain information had proven a disadvantage. Interestingly, examples were cited more frequently by those respondents that might not normally be associated with disadvantage - i.e. those in Social Classes I and II and those who had obtained degrees. This might relate more to lack of *awareness* of disadvantage amongst those in the lower social classes and the less well-educated.

The majority of respondents felt well informed about areas relating to citizenship. However, more than a quarter were poorly informed in legal rights, welfare benefits and local politics. Respondents felt best informed about national politics.

There were low levels of participation in groups and societies amongst respondents, with the highest proportions being for membership of leisure groups (32.4%) and charitable groups (25.2%). Respondents tended to overestimate their voting patterns, with national elections predominating over local and European elections. Very small numbers in all instances participated in other forms of political activity, such as canvassing or attendance at political meetings.

A highly significant majority (91.7%) of respondents felt that freedom of information and access to accurate and unbiased information were important in exercising their rights as citizens.

Access to computers (39.3%), the Internet (14.6%) and satellite/cable television (26.4%) in the home is presently limited; and only 12.6% of the respondents had access to the Internet at work. The majority felt that they would be prepared to use computers to vote (54.7%), to convey opinions to government (53.5%) and to obtain government information (59.8%), while a lower proportion would use them to participate in political debate (35%). Around a half of those who would use a computer to vote, provide feedback or debate were concerned about confidentiality. Significantly, older, disabled, lower class and less educated respondents, and those living in rural areas, were less willing to use computers in these ways.

Most (66.4%) respondents preferred to make their feelings known on an issue by writing to someone.

The preferred source of government information was the public library sector (43.2%) with only post offices (14.7%) and CABx (12.0%) figuring significantly otherwise. This is a significant validation of the first survey, where although a lower proportion is recorded in the second survey, the importance of public libraries is attested. For most respondents it was the accessibility of the public library and the fact that they visited it regularly that made libraries their preference. Public libraries were also regarded as reputable and having an appropriate atmosphere. Some 72.5% of respondents were members of public libraries.

The majority of respondents felt that public libraries were suitable places for finding information on their local council (82%), consumer issues (67.8%), on welfare benefits (65.1%), on jobs and careers (61.4%) and on housing (53.5%), although there was little evidence that many had approached public libraries for such information in the past. Very significant numbers of respondents were unaware that public libraries held European Union information (61.1%), official government publications (45.8%), health information (45.1%), and information on legal rights (44.9%) and educational opportunities (30.2%). There is evidence here of a real need for libraries to promote more effectively their collections and expertise in such areas. The survey reveals that staff in public libraries are not deemed particularly helpful (only 3.1% of respondents cited helpful staff as a reason for preferring

libraries as a source of government information), suggesting that there should be an emphasis on interpersonal skills training.

The results of the survey, therefore, have significance in two broad areas: in government information strategy; and in the future development and role of public libraries. They would suggest that while the majority of the UK population (91.7%) feel that access to information is important in enabling respondents to exercise their rights as citizens, significant proportions feel poorly informed on topics central to their lives, and are unaware that public libraries (despite their convenience) house materials which may satisfy such information need. Results would also suggest that fears that certain groups in the population may be in threat of exclusion from participation in the democratic process by a move to a greater reliance on ICTs are well founded.

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APPENDIX 1: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

BRITISH LIBRARY PROJECT: CITIZENSHIP INFORMATION NEEDS INTERVIEW SCHEDULE
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TOWN/CITY _____ WARD _____

STREET _____

Hello, I'm _____ from _____ and I'm carrying out a survey for the British Library and the Robert Gordon University in Aberdeen. I'm looking at the kinds of information people need to help make decisions and solve day-to-day problems, and I was wondering if you could spare between 15 and 30 minutes to answer a few questions. All of your answers will be completely anonymous, and you can refuse to answer any particular question if you want to.

Information about the respondent

[1] a) **Gender.** (*Observe sex of interviewee*) Male Female

Could you start by telling me a little bit about yourself.

b) **Age group.** To which one of the following age groups do you belong?

16-19	<input type="checkbox"/>	55-64	<input type="checkbox"/>
20-29	<input type="checkbox"/>	65-74	<input type="checkbox"/>
30-44	<input type="checkbox"/>	75 or over	<input type="checkbox"/>
45-54	<input type="checkbox"/>		

c) **Ethnic Group.** To which one of the following ethnic groups do you belong?

White	<input type="checkbox"/>	Pakistani	<input type="checkbox"/>
Black Caribbean	<input type="checkbox"/>	Bangladeshi	<input type="checkbox"/>
Black African	<input type="checkbox"/>	Chinese	<input type="checkbox"/>
Black Other	<input type="checkbox"/>	Other (<i>please specify</i>)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Indian	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____	

d) **Status.** Are you:

In paid employment	<input type="checkbox"/>	Retired	<input type="checkbox"/>
Self employed	<input type="checkbox"/>	Running a home	<input type="checkbox"/>
Seeking work	<input type="checkbox"/>	Student	<input type="checkbox"/>

(If in paid employment or self employed) Could you please specify your occupation:-

e) **Educational attainment.** What was the highest level of education you completed?

School	<input type="checkbox"/>	University undergraduate	<input type="checkbox"/>
Further Education College	<input type="checkbox"/>	University postgraduate	<input type="checkbox"/>

f) Would you describe yourself as a disabled person? YES NO

Current Affairs and 'Survival Information'

[2] a) What do you think is the single most important issue in current affairs in the UK at the moment?

b) Where do you get most of your information on this subject from?

c) How well informed would you say you are about the subject?

Very well informed Well informed Poorly informed Don't know

d) Would you like to find out more about this subject? YES NO

If YES, where would you most likely try to get this information from?

e) Would you say that this subject significantly affects your own life? YES NO

[3] a) There's a possibility that the public might eventually be asked to vote on whether or not the United Kingdom should join the Single European Currency. Do you feel you would like to find out more about the Single Currency before such a vote took place?

YES NO

If YES, where would you go to try to get further information about the Single Currency?

b) Do you feel that the government is doing enough to inform people about the Single Currency?

YES NO

[4] a) BSE / Mad Cow Disease is another subject that's being talked about a lot at the moment. Do you feel you're sufficiently well informed about BSE at the moment?

YES NO

If NO, where would you go to try and obtain further information about BSE?

b) Do you feel that the government is doing enough to inform people about BSE?

YES NO

c) If you wanted to make your own feelings about BSE known to the Government, how would you go about it?

Not interested

[5] a) Local government cutbacks is another subject that affects a lot of people. Do you feel you're sufficiently well informed about these at the moment?

YES NO

If NO, where would you go to try and obtain further information about cutbacks?

b) Do you feel that your local council is doing enough to inform people about cutbacks?

YES NO

c) If you wanted to make your own feelings about local government cutbacks known to the Government or your local council, how would you go about it?

Not interested

[6] A lot of people need information to help them solve problems that occur in their day-to-day lives. Have you ever had a problem with any of the following?

	YES	NO
Employment	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Education	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Housing	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Welfare benefits	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

If YES to any:

a) Could you briefly describe the nature of this problem?

- ***Employment problem:***

- ***Education problem:***

- ***Housing problem:***

- ***Benefits problem:***

b) Where did you get information to help you solve this problem?

- ***Employment problem:***

- ***Education problem:***

- ***Housing problem:***

- ***Benefits problem:***

[7] Can you think of an example of an occasion in which you have been at a disadvantage because you have been unable to obtain information?

YES NO

If YES, please give brief details.

Well-informed and Active Citizens
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[8] How well informed would you say you were about the following topics?

	Expert	Well informed	Adequately informed	Poorly informed	Not interested
National politics	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Local politics	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Legal rights	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Welfare benefit entitlements	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Equal rights and discrimination	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

[9] Are you a member of any of the following:

	YES	NO
Political party	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Trade union	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Pressure group	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Charitable group	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Professional or trade association	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Club or society (for hobbies & pastimes)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Any other groups (<i>please specify</i>)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

[10] How regularly do you vote at:

	Always	Sometimes	Never
National elections	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Local council elections	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
European elections	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

[11] Apart from voting, would you say that you actively participate in the political process?

YES NO

If YES, in what ways do you actively participate?

[22] From the following list, how would you prefer to make your own feelings known on a subject you feel strongly about? (*Select one answer only*)

- Write to someone, such as the Press or your local MP
- Speak at a public meeting
- Speak on a televised studio debate
- Phone in to a radio or TV debate
- Take part in a debate by computer
- Not interested in making own feelings publicly known

Public Libraries and Other Information Sources

[23] a) Government information is currently available from a variety of organisations and people, and the Government is considering making this information available in even more publicly accessible places. Which one of the following organisations or people would you prefer to approach to obtain official Government information? (*Select one answer only*)

- Post Offices
- Public libraries
- Citizens Advice Bureaux
- Offices of Government departments and agencies
- Your local MP
- Local council offices
- Schools
- Banks and building societies
- Community and leisure centres
- Medical centres and doctors' surgeries
- A computer in a public place, such as a shopping centre

b) For what reasons would you prefer to obtain information from there?

[24] Are you a member of a public library? YES NO

If NO, what might encourage you to become a member?

[25] Would you say that public libraries are suitable places for obtaining information on:

	YES	NO	If NO to any, where would be a suitable place to obtain information on this subject?
Your local council	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
Welfare benefits	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
Job opportunities and careers information	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
Housing	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
Consumer advice	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____

[26] Are you aware that most public libraries have:

	YES	NO
Official government publications	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Health care information	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Information on educational opportunities	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Information on your legal rights	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Information about the European Union	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

If NO to any of these, how do you think libraries could let you know more about what types of information they hold?

[27] Are there any points that we've not discussed that you would like to raise?

YES NO

If YES, details:

[28] Is there a daytime telephone number where you can be reached so that someone from the Robert Gordon University in Aberdeen can confirm that I was here?

Daytime telephone number (including National Code) _____

That completes the questions. Thank you very much for your cooperation.