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European information in public libraries in the United Kingdom The implementation of the Public Information Relay

Rita Marcella and Graeme Baxter

Development of the Public Information Relay

In the early 1990s, during the lengthy and often heated debate over the United Kingdom's ratification of the Maastricht Treaty, the European Commission became increasingly aware of a communication gap between itself and the British public. Mindful of the need to bridge this gap, the London Office of the Commission convened a National Consultative Conference at Stoke Rochford Hall, Grantham, in January 1993. This conference, entitled *'Britain in Europe - filling the information gap together'*, assembled a wide variety of information providers who recognised that if the lack of consensus between Brussels and the general public was to be overcome, then a more decentralised approach to EC information provision was necessary.

Later that year, the EC commissioned a Gallup poll⁽¹⁾ which examined the European information needs of the British public. It revealed that 72% of those questioned felt that they would like to be better informed about the impact of European Union policies in their region, and that 70% believed that their local library should be making more effort to inform the general public about European matters.

Prompted by these developments, the Federation of Local Authority Chief Librarians (FOLACL) began discussions with the EC, and in December 1993 it convened a seminar for nearly 30 of the key library authorities in the United Kingdom. At this seminar it became clear that there was considerable support for the principle of improved public access to European information. Indeed, many felt that this was an important part of the statutory responsibility of every library authority.

As a result of this positive response, the London Office of the EC, together with FOLACL, arranged a major conference in Manchester, in May 1994. At this conference - 'Communicating Europe through Public Libraries' - representatives of 44 library authorities met to discuss the proposed creation of a coordinated relay which would bring European Union information closer to the man and woman in the street. Delegates acknowledged that public libraries were particularly well placed to provide such a service. As Peter Beauchamp,⁽²⁾ the Chief Library Adviser of the Department of National Heritage, pointed out:

"There is no-one better placed than the public library network to take on the role of disseminating information about the EU and its activities. This is the role that public libraries must take up as part of their comprehensive and efficient provision. Let us not forget, however, that we are not talking about something terribly different. Public libraries have always been in the role of providing information. We are facing here a sensible extension to that role and the possibility of another productive partnership."

Again, the public library community reacted enthusiastically, and by the end of May 1994, 39 authorities had agreed in principle to join what was to become known as the Public Information Relay.

Membership of the Public Information Relay

Since then, the membership of the Public Information Relay has grown dramatically. Indeed, by August 1995, 154 of the 167 UK library authorities had joined. Understandably, these authorities are currently at various stages of implementing their Relay service: whilst some are still at the initial planning stage, others have already held formal launches in their locality.

But what of the costs and benefits of membership of the Relay?

Participating public libraries are entitled to receive:

- free copies of basic texts on the European Union, including the Treaties, annual reports, basic statistics, the Directory of Legislation in Force, and titles published in the Europe on the Move and the European Documentation series. Members can also receive free material published by the EC's London Office.
- a 50% discount on items produced by the Office for Official Publications of the European Communities (EUR-OP), such as the Official Journal and COM documents.
- a 50% discount on access to certain EU databases
- a stock of hand-out material produced by the EC
- a list of suggested basic publications

In return, Relay members are required to accept certain obligations:

- to continue to bear the costs of staff, overheads and the necessary discounted publications
- to make official documents and publications of the European Union available to the general public
- to establish links and cooperate with local members of other sectorally established relays (i.e. European Documentation Centres, European Information Centres, Carrefours etc)
- to report back on activities and feedback from information users on an annual basis
- to publicize the existence of the Relay by using a designated logo adopted by FOLACL, and through various local events.

In order that these obligations might be met, the European Commission has agreed to provide additional support for Relay members. For example, a training programme has been designed to acquaint library staff with the activities and publications of the EU's institutions, and to equip them with the skills required for answering basic European enquiries; a range of publicity materials has been produced; a directory of sources of EU information in the UK is currently in preparation; and a newsletter and annual meeting have also been mooted. In addition, through the EC-sponsored UK Network of European Relays (and, in particular, its recently-formed National Coordinating Committee) public libraries will have the opportunity to meet regularly with Commission officials and members of other relays.

Research project

As part of a project funded by the British Library Research and Development Department, the School of Information and Media at the Robert Gordon University in Aberdeen is investigating the current provision of European Union information by public libraries throughout the UK, and the extent to which this meets the needs of the man and woman in the street.

Particular attention is being paid to the implementation of the Public Information Relay and the project will identify the significant issues and concerns arising from the implementation for the public library sector. The difficulties which public libraries face in providing an effective European information service will emerge, and it is hoped that it will be possible to develop a model of best practice within the framework established by the Public Information Relay. The project should give a clearer understanding of the challenges facing public libraries and the National Coordinating Committee in delivering the Relay and highlight any resource or support issues which the European Commission may need to address in maximising the impact of the service.

Evidence will be drawn from:

- a questionnaire-based survey of all public library authorities in the UK participating in the Public Information Relay. This will focus on existing levels of provision, the manner in which the new service will be implemented, and potential problems and solutions. (Note: a separate questionnaire will be sent to those library authorities who have not joined the Relay)
- a case study of a representative sample of libraries, ranging from those where a well-developed form of European information service is already in place, to those with a relatively low level of service delivery. The sample will also cover both metropolitan and rural library services, and cover England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales.
- survey and observational techniques which will be used to gauge the present levels of need and use of EU information in case study libraries

In addition, comparative data will be obtained from other European information providers, particularly those serving the academic and business communities, in European Documentation Centres (EDCs) and European Information Centres (EICs).

When the project is nearing completion, on 25 July 1996, a seminar will be held to debate and discuss the results. It is hoped that a range of interested parties will attend this seminar, including representatives of public library authorities, FOLACL, the Scottish Library and Information Council, the Library and Information Services Council for Northern Ireland, the National Coordinating Committee of the UK Network of European Relays, the Offices of the European Commission, the European Information Association, etc. The final results of the project will, of course, be published.

References

(1) Commission of the European Communities. Information deficit highlighted by EC survey. Press Release, ISEC/18/93, 10 November 1993.

(2) Peter Beauchamp, quoted by Giancarlo Pau at the Public Libraries Conference, York, 28 September 1994.

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