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Citizenship Information and Public Libraries

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In its 1977 review of advice services in Britain, the National Consumer Council (NCC) maintained that access to information and advice should be regarded as the fourth right of citizenship:

People will not be able to get their dues as citizens of present day society unless they have continuous access to the information which will guide them through it and, where necessary, the advice to help them translate that information into effective action...¹

While the United Kingdom has no written constitution describing the formal rights of citizenship, the term has become increasingly widely recognised in recent years; and indeed the other three rights cited by the NCC - civil, political, and social - have been central to much of the literature on the nature of British citizenship since they were first defined by T.H. Marshall in 1950.² Marshall assigned the formative periods of these three elements to three separate but successive centuries: civil rights to the eighteenth century, political to the nineteenth and social to the twentieth. The civil element, he argued, consists of rights necessary for individual freedom, such as freedom of movement, freedom of speech, thought and faith, the right to own property and to conclude valid contracts, and the right to justice. The political element comprises a range of rights concerning participation in the political process, including the right to vote, the right to stand for election as a member of a political body, and the right to form a political group. The social element, meanwhile, includes the right to a modicum of economic welfare and security, the right to share to the full in the social heritage of the country, and to live the life of a civilized being according to the standards prevailing in the society. More recently, in 1990, the Commission on Citizenship³ (established in 1988 by the then Speaker of the House of Commons, Bernard Weatherill) also identified a number of basic responsibilities or duties of the UK citizen, namely to respect the law, to pay taxes, to serve on juries, and to refrain from treasonable activities. To these, Oliver⁴ added a duty to serve in the armed forces, and noted that, in the political climate of the 1990s, the duty to work and the duty to bring up children in an acceptable way have also been mooted.

With these points in mind, the Policy Studies Institute (PSI) has defined *citizenship information* as “the information necessary for successful, and if necessary critical, participation in the accepted rights and responsibilities of British citizenship.”⁵ More specifically, this includes:

- *Information about civil, social and political entitlements, rights and protections.* By this we mean information on the nature and extent of entitlements, rights and protections; information on the availability of services and procedures to secure these entitlements, rights and protections; information on the functions and purposes of different services; and information on personal eligibility.
- *Information to enable critical judgement of civil, social and political aspects of the state and the means for seeking redress where necessary.* That is information on the standard of

service to expect from providers of services; information to inform personal decisions about the best option; and information on how to hold institutions to account.

- *Information on the civil, social and political responsibilities of citizenship.*

The PSI also differentiates between the *citizen consumer* and the *active or participant citizen*. The citizen consumer model regards an individual's relationship with the state as that of consumer and service provider, and focuses on the consumer's right to exercise market choice over public services. The active citizen model, though, goes beyond the right to exercise consumer choice and instead identifies an individual's right to have a say in public service planning and decision making. The PSI, therefore, has identified the additional information needs of the active citizen:

- *Information on how services are planned and information about mechanisms for participation in planning processes and influencing decision making.*
- *Information about the process of service delivery and information about outcomes.*
- *Information about violation of entitlements, rights and protections.*

In many respects, the definition of citizenship information provided by the PSI is similar to some commentators' definitions of *community information*. The Library Association, for example, describes community information services as those:

which assist individuals and groups with daily problem-solving and with participation in the democratic process. The services concentrate on the needs of those who do not have ready access to other sources of assistance and on the most important problems that people have to face, problems to do with their homes, their jobs and their rights.⁶

While in the United States, community information has been described by Donohue⁷ as: (1) Survival information such as that related to health, housing, income, legal protection, economic opportunity, political rights, etc.; and (2) Citizen action information, needed for active participation as an individual or as a member of a group in the social, political, legal or economic process. In some libraries, however, community information services also include information on, for example, local history, tourism and sport. Therefore, while citizenship information and community information have many common elements, the former can be described as a more focused version of community information which excludes material that has no obvious democratic or welfare benefit.

Citizenship information and UK government policy

Until relatively recently UK government policy paid little attention to the concept of citizenship information. However, on 1 April 1986, the Local Government (Access to Information) Act⁸ came into force. It gave the public the right to attend council meetings and to gain access to relevant documents (i.e. agendas, reports, background papers and minutes) before, during and after these meetings. In addition, the Act aimed to ensure that registers of councillors, lists of councillors' delegated powers, and information on the public's rights of

access to meetings and documents were made publicly available. An early evaluation of the effectiveness of the Act in Scottish local authorities was carried out by the Scottish Consumer Council in 1987.⁹ It found that, with reluctance in some cases, Scottish councils had accepted the requirements of the Act and that many had adopted sound policies and practices to make improved access possible. There were concerns, however, that, in a number of cases, charges to the public for the right to inspect and obtain copies of documents were excessive and would act as a deterrent to public participation. More recently, in 1995, an evaluation of the Act in English local authorities, carried out by Jane Steele¹⁰ at the PSI, found that it had been largely effective in ensuring a basic level of openness and accountability. Indeed, it was found that 82% of the authorities surveyed were exceeding the Act's minimum requirements, by taking steps to ensure that information about meetings and rights was made more widely available in, for example, public libraries and the local press. While the public's take-up of its rights was perceived by the local authorities to be rather low, the survey found an apparent link between proactive efforts to encourage public participation and higher levels of public attendance at council meetings. As a result, Steele recommended that local authorities should review their approach to information provision and communication, and should make a move from passive to more active methods of dissemination. These thoughts were echoed by the national local authority associations in England and Wales who, in a 1995 good practice note on access to information,¹¹ commended proactive initiatives undertaken by some authorities, and recommended that all councils adopt and widely publicise a policy statement on access to information, which includes a declaration of their commitment to open access to information and the principles on which the openness policy is based.

With regard to UK central government and citizenship information, the Citizen's Charter initiative,¹² with its emphasis on choice, quality of service and information and openness, led the government to introduce, in 1994, a non-statutory Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.¹³ This Code (the principles of which have also recently been applied to information about the National Health Service¹⁴) covers almost all central government departments and agencies, and includes five commitments, to:

- supply facts and analysis with major policy decisions
- open up internal guidelines about departments' dealings with the public
- supply reasons with administrative decisions
- provide information under the Citizen's Charter about public services, what they cost, targets, performance, complaints and redress
- respond to direct requests for information from the general public

In support of the initiative the government's Central Computer and Telecommunications Agency (CCTA), part of the Office of Public Service and Science, has established a UK Government Information Web Server,¹⁵ which provides access to the Web pages of various government departments and agencies, local authorities and other public bodies.

While, perhaps unsurprisingly, the government's first two reports on the Code^{16,17} have been decidedly positive about its contribution to openness, other commentators have been less enthusiastic. For example, Maurice Frankel,¹⁸ the Director of the Campaign for Freedom of Information, described it as "depressingly weak" and believed it has one overwhelming flaw - that, when responding to requests for information, the government is not required to provide access to original documents, and can therefore omit inconvenient or contradictory information from its replies. Charles Raab,¹⁹ meanwhile, regarded the Code as somewhat arbitrary and piecemeal, and promoted by a government that takes its ideas about what the public needs to know from its consumerist philosophy rather than from the championing of the citizen against a bureaucratic establishment. Interestingly, Stephen Ward²⁰ pointed out that the government spent just £51,000 promoting the Code by disseminating leaflets in Citizens Advice Bureaux, law advice centres, etc. (This compares with the £2 million it spent in sending copies of the *Parents Charter* to schools in 1991²¹). Media advertising had been considered, but because no other countries with similar information access arrangements had carried out extensive publicity campaigns the government had decided to follow suit. This, Ward argued, had resulted in most of the British public being unaware of the Code's existence and of their rights to information. It would appear, then, that the implementation of the Code of Practice will require additional financial support if it is truly to lead to more open government.

Evidence of citizenship information need

When discussing the current nature and extent of need for citizenship information in the UK, the Policy Studies Institute²² pointed out that direct evidence of need can be found in the records of the number of enquiries made to information agencies and other service providers. For example, the National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux annual report for 1993/94 stated that 7.6 million members of the British public had made an enquiry - an increase of 40% since 1982/83; and the Federation of Independent Advice Centres annual report for 1991/92 indicated that agencies in the Federation had received over 2 million enquiries that year. (In comparison, UK public libraries, which in total have almost 33.9 million registered borrowers²³ - i.e. 58% of the UK population - dealt with 61.1 million enquiries in 1994-95²⁴). The PSI also believes that *indirect* evidence of citizenship information need can be drawn from various demographic, social and economic markers. For example, a population with a high proportion of elderly people will have a need for information on a range of social and welfare issues; and the presence of a significant immigrant population may lead to information needs relating to, say, civil rights and immigration issues. The collection and analysis of such socio-economic and demographic data (i.e. in the form of *community profiling*) has, of course, long been recognised by some information professionals as a method of identifying local information needs (see, for example, Beal²⁵).

Drawing on the experience of advice agencies throughout the UK, the PSI explained that much of the current citizenship information need is driven by factors such as: legislative changes to social security entitlements; problems with the availability of affordable, good quality housing; major reforms to the management and provision of health and social care; high levels of unemployment; and legislative changes which have transferred the responsibility for child maintenance issues to the Child Support Agency. The PSI also identified a number of factors which, it believed, would influence future citizenship

information need. These included: legislative changes, particularly those to the welfare state; demographic and social factors, such as the growing numbers of elderly people, single-parent families and divorcees; economic factors, including the issue of European monetary union; the introduction of market principles into public services; and the UK's membership of the European Union.

There is also a significant body of research-based work on information needs (including but not focusing on citizenship information), much of which has examined particular marginalised groups or particular localities, and a small number of examples are outlined here. For instance, in 1991, Bruce *et al.*,²⁶ whilst carrying out an interview-based social survey of 595 visually-impaired adults for the Royal National Institute for the Blind, found high levels of need for information on, for example, voluntary organisations and benefits and allowances, particularly amongst those who were not registered as blind or partially sighted. While in 1992, Tinker *et al.*²⁷ carried out an exploratory study of the information needs of elderly people, comprising two group interviews and 50 individual interviews with elderly people, together with interviews with 18 information-giving organisations. The organisations revealed that five topics dominated the enquiries received from the elderly: social security benefits and entitlement; health; housing; residential and nursing home care and how to pay for it; and support and services for people at home. However, it was also found that elderly people, particularly if disabled, often seemed unwilling to seek information and had a low perception of their own needs; and that the professional organisations sometimes did not recognise this need for information or were themselves ill-informed.

With regard to studies of particular localities, the most notable was that carried out in Baltimore, USA, by Warner *et al.*²⁸ in 1973, who interviewed members of almost 1,300 households. These residents were not asked directly to state their information needs, but instead were asked to cite recent examples of their own problems which required information. The ten topics most frequently mentioned during the study were: (1) Neighbourhood, (2) Consumer, (3) Housing/maintenance, (4) Crime and safety, (5) Education, (6) Employment, (7) Transportation, (8) Finance/public assistance, (9) Health, and (10) 'Miscellaneous'. However, the survey found that those individuals who were the most disadvantaged were least likely to indicate information problems, which suggested that they were perhaps less articulate or less willing to articulate their needs. Interestingly, the study also examined the ability of the city's information agencies to provide solutions to residents' problems; it was found, though, that there was something of a lack of knowledge of these problems amongst the information professionals (cf. Tinker *et al.* above). More than 20 years later, the Baltimore study is still regarded as a bench-mark for large-scale investigations of this kind;²⁹ and indeed its methodology formed the basis of a project carried out in 1977 by the Centre for Research on User Studies at the University of Sheffield, who conducted household interviews with 206 residents from a representative sample (i.e. according to socio-economic data) of Sheffield wards.³⁰ Here, the interviewees were questioned on their awareness of the city's information and advice centres, and on their possible courses of action when requiring information on consumer, legal, welfare and medical matters. The results indicated low levels of use of the city's information agencies, and suggested a lack of public awareness of the existence of these agencies and of their potential value in meeting information needs.

Citizenship information and the role of public libraries

Professional and representative bodies and other interested organisations have indicated the importance of public libraries providing what, in the terms of this paper, would be described as citizenship information. For example, the Library Association's 1993 *Charter for Public Libraries*³¹ states that public libraries should give everyone access to information which will "encourage them to take part in democratic activities" and which will "help them exercise their democratic rights"; UNESCO's Public Library Manifesto³² highlights the role of libraries in enabling "well-informed citizens to exercise their democratic rights and to play an active part in society"; and the *Public Library Review*³³ stresses the importance of public libraries providing effective access to information because "access to fuller information is an aid to democracy, and should increase a citizen's ability to exercise his or her franchise and to influence policy".

Meanwhile, Virginia Bottomley,³⁴ in her first statement on public libraries as Secretary of State for the Department of National Heritage, stated that one of the most important functions of the public library service is "to provide reference material including public information about local and national government". The importance of public libraries providing information "to enable individuals to be active as citizens" was also recently highlighted by John Palmer³⁵ in a report for the Scottish Library Association. Citing a Convention of Scottish Local Authorities³⁶ suggestion that councils should consider establishing the public library service as the information service of the authority, Palmer recommended that libraries should establish joint working and partnership arrangements with other council service departments and agencies, and develop the role of information intermediary between the general public and the council.

Clearly, then, there is a strong body of opinion which suggests that the provision of citizenship information aids the democratic process; however, there has been little active research which might support such an argument.

The extent to which public libraries are likely to be used by members of the public requiring citizenship information has been discussed by a number of authors. Bob Usherwood³⁷ believes that people are likely to channel their requests for information through public libraries and Citizens' Advice Bureaux because they are known and familiar institutions; and the 1993 Comedia report³⁸ indicated that, in the fields of welfare rights and citizens' advice, lack of funding for the generic agencies has resulted in public libraries, *de facto* if not *de jure*, picking up the policy responsibility. Swash and Marsland,³⁹ meanwhile, suggested that there has been a rise in public expectation as a result of the Citizens' Charter initiatives, and that this has encouraged more people to explore the provision of information on rights and opportunities from public library services.

Indeed, there have been some investigations of the provision and use of citizenship/community information in UK public libraries. For example, in 1987, White⁴⁰ carried out an evaluation survey of a computer-based community information service in an English county library authority, and found that the types of information in which the general public expressed most interest were: (1) Leisure/Recreation, (2) Travel, (3) Health, (4) Education, (5) Welfare, (6) Business, and (7) Planning. More recently, in 1993, Toop and Forejt⁴¹ surveyed the provision of community information (which they defined, perhaps rather

narrowly, as information “produced and disseminated by organisations directly concerned with people’s welfare and leisure activities”) in five public libraries, one in each of five social areas ranging from the most poverty stricken to the most affluent. On questioning library users, they found that 43% had previously used community information, with Department of Social Security (DSS) information being the most frequently used (by 36%), followed by bus timetables (31%), cultural/sporting information (21%) and health care information (12%). When asked what subject matter they would like more of, the responses were health care (29%), cultural/sporting (20%), DSS (15%) and bus timetables (15%). The survey found that the unemployed, the elderly and ethnic minorities were the heaviest users of the information; although, somewhat contrarily and without clear explanation, the researchers also claimed that the more affluent members of the population made much more use of it than the poorer groups who, they argued, really needed the information the most.

These studies, however, have focused on the collection of relatively simple and descriptive quantitative data, comprising users' expressed current and perceived future needs. Little attention has been paid to the use of more qualitative techniques, which might examine the reasons *why* users want certain types of citizenship information, or might aim to establish users' unexpressed or unmet needs. As citizenship information and its role in helping the public to participate in the democratic process, particularly via electronic democracy (Friedland, 1996⁴²) and EPI (Electronic Public Information), are currently being heralded as highly significant issues, both by the information profession and by those involved in political life, the time is perhaps ripe to investigate further the nature of the general public's need for such information. In particular, a person-centred, *phenomenological* approach should perhaps be adopted, which considers information needs in relation to the everyday life of individuals and the way in which they attempt to make sense of the world around them.

It will be necessary, for example, to explore the relationship between citizenship information and democracy, from the perspective of the ordinary man or woman in the street, and to establish whether the assumption outlined above - that access to such information aids the democratic process - is indeed correct. And it will be important to examine the nature and extent of problems or situations in which members of the general public might exhibit a need for citizenship information; and explore the possible impact of demographic factors (i.e. age, social grade, ethnicity, etc.) on the need for and the patterns of use of this information. Also worthy of attention will be the general public's preferred methods of citizenship information delivery (there is evidence, for example, that elderly people prefer to gain information by word of mouth from family and friends⁴³); and the public's views on the suitability and approachability of public libraries and other information agencies when seeking citizenship information. It will, of course, be necessary to explore the implications for public libraries, both of providing citizenship information and, perhaps more importantly, of *not* providing such information. Given the current public focus on the rights and duties of citizenship, this is a debate that is likely to continue, in particular in terms of the citizen's participation in the Virtual Society. This paper has reviewed the work that has been carried out to date and posed some challenging questions for the future.

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