The British Library
Providing services beyond the Reading Rooms

executive summary

1 The British Library ("the Library") is the national library of the United Kingdom and is sponsored by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). It had a turnover of £121 million in 2003-04 which comprised £89.3 million in grant-in-aid[1] and £31.4 million in income from other sources.

2 The electronic age has opened up new possibilities for people to benefit from the Library's immense collection without needing to visit in person. This report focuses on the effectiveness of the services that can be accessed remotely, in particular the document supply service and those that are delivered through the Library's website, including the products of the Library's programme of converting material into digital form (known as digitisation - see Figure 8 on page 16). The report also covers some broader strategic and user communication issues that have an impact on the effectiveness of these remote services. It does not focus on the other services provided within the Library's reading rooms at St. Pancras, Colindale and Boston Spa.
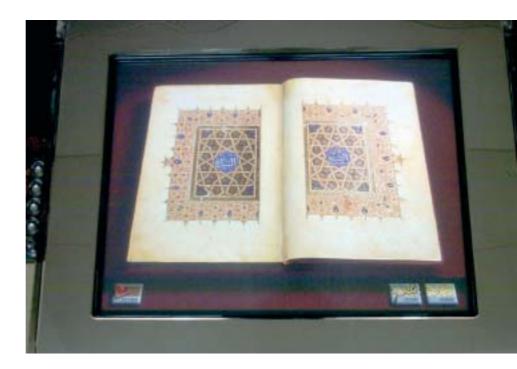

3 **Figure 1** (page 2) shows the range of services provided to different user groups nationally and worldwide. To illustrate the scale of the remote services: in 2002-03, 2.76 million items were supplied by the Document Supply Centre, and 2.3 million "unique hosts"[2] visited the Library's website.

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1 *Of which it earmarked £6.2 million for investment in modernisation.*
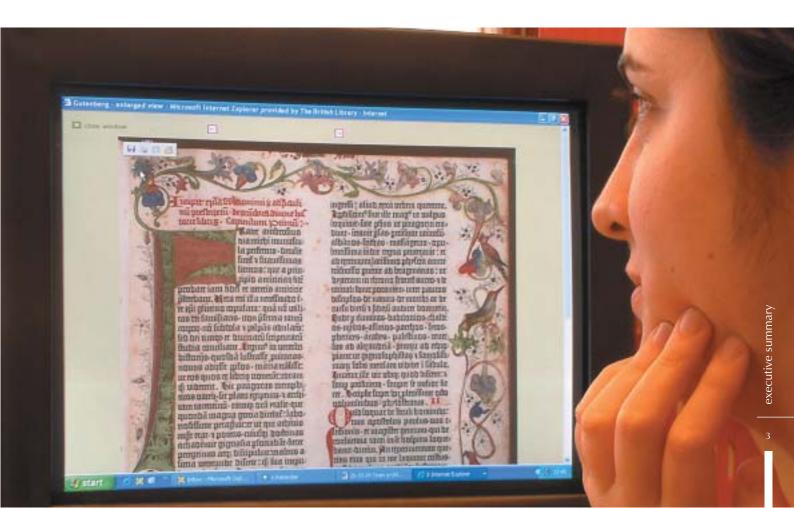2 *"Unique hosts" can be used as an approximate measure for the number of individuals visiting a website.*

1   **The British Library's services**

User Group	Onsite Services	Remote Services
Research Higher education Government Writers	Reading Rooms Bookshop Publishing services	Library catalogues on the web Subject resources Document Supply services Online bookshop and publishing Virtual reference library Bespoke research services Web resources
Business High research and development Technology-based small and medium enterprises Creative and media industries Science parks	Reading Rooms Advisory services Patent services Conference Centre/Corporate services	Library catalogues Document Supply Science, Technology and Medicine information services Reprographics Bespoke research services
Library and Information sector Higher and further education libraries Public libraries Health libraries Government libraries Other national libraries Special libraries (for example, membership, learned societies)	Reading rooms Training Visits Exhibitions Tours	Bibliographic services Library catalogues Document Supply Bespoke research Librarianship services Virtual reference library Web resources
Education Teachers Secondary school students (UK wide) Primary and secondary schools in inner city London Undergraduates Lifelong learners Further education colleges	Exhibitions School tours Bookshop	Education pages on the website Curriculum resources Online bookshop Web resources
Public	Exhibitions Events Tours Bookshop	Web resources Online bookshop

Source: National Audit Office

Key points on the strategic position of the Library

4   **The Library is trying to achieve a diverse range of objectives.** Through its Funding Agreement the Library has agreed to contribute to the strategic objectives of three Government Departments: Culture, Media and Sport; Education and Skills; and Trade and Industry. For DCMS, it is important that the Library promotes "wider understanding, appreciation and enjoyment of [its] collections to the general public, schools and lifelong learners" (one of five objectives set by DCMS for the Library - see paragraph 1.11 on page 9). This needs to be balanced against its other objectives, such as to preserve the national archive and to provide ready access for the researcher and business communities in order to underpin UK competitiveness and research excellence.

5   **The British Library operates in a complex environment.** One element of this is that within the United Kingdom there are two other national libraries (the National Libraries of Scotland and Wales) and two further 'legal deposit' libraries (Cambridge University Library and the Bodleian Library, Oxford). The British Library works in close co-operation with these libraries and with other bodies in the library and information sector, and this collaboration will need to continue if the Library is to address the many challenges posed by the electronic era.

6   **The Library has undergone significant and beneficial organisational change.** The Library is much of the way through a major reform programme and it is already clear that the changes will make the Library better able to meet the needs of users, including those accessing the Library's services remotely. The reform to the document supply services should also ensure that it has the flexibility to respond to changes in its volatile external environment, including a highly competitive market place.

executive summary

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Key points on the website and digitisation

7   **The Library is a front-runner among public bodies at ensuring that its website is accessible to people of all physical abilities.** It has consistently performed well in audits of accessibility, and overall its approach to ensuring that the site is accessible is robust.

8   **It has significantly improved the usability of its website in the last two years though some users still find it difficult to use.** While recent changes have made the site much more consistent and user-friendly, research among users has identified scope for improvement in terms of layout and usability. It is important that the Library continues with its programme of usability testing and ensures that users are thought about at all stages of design. We found that the Library follows good practice for maintaining its site.

9   **Digitised material has proved popular with user groups.** Data on numbers of users show that projects such as *Collect Britain* (with particular appeal to lifelong learners - see Figure 9 on page 17) and *The Lindisfarne Gospels* (with particular appeal in the North-East of England - see Figure 10 on page 17) have generated significant interest.

10   **The Library now has a more strategic approach to digitisation.** Initially, the conversion of parts of the collection into digital form was largely driven by external funding opportunities. However the Library now has a clear set of criteria that it applies to all proposals to ensure that all digitisation activity fits within its overall strategy.

11   **Access to digital material may be lost if there is no planning for sustainability.** Funding for digitisation is concentrated on the conversion of material into digital format, and has been provided through external sponsorship and funding. However, there are also costs associated with maintaining access to digitised materials and these will increase as the volume of material increases. If these cannot be funded, the benefits for remote users that were originally planned will not be sustained beyond the short term.

12   **Close co-operation between the major funders of digitisation and major digitisers (including the British Library) and other bodies involved in digitisation is important.** The absence of national oversight for digitisation creates a risk of incompatible technical standards, duplication of effort and failure to learn lessons. While we have found no evidence to date of this risk maturing, in view of the considerable investment of money, resources and human effort involved in digitisation projects, it is important that these risks are identified and managed.

Key points on the document supply service

13 **Document supply is a competitive and rapidly changing industry and the Library is responding well through modernisation.** It is forward-looking and is collaborating well to improve service delivery, though further opportunities for improvement are available.

14 **Most users are very satisfied with the Library's document supply service although they also highlight some areas for improvement.** Both our own research and the Library's customer surveys show that the service is held in high regard, particularly for its speed, customer interface and breadth of collection. The main area for improvement is that the service in general, and catalogue searching in particular, could be more user-friendly.

15 **The price of services has increased significantly in recent years and the way they are priced is complex and is not evident to users.** The price rises are partly due to increases in copyright charges (which are beyond the Library's control), but they are also a result of the Library taking steps to ensure the full cost recovery of the services against a background of declining demand for document supply. The system for setting prices is complex and users have limited knowledge of the basis for the fees they pay. It is reasonable for users to expect a more thorough explanation with respect to price increases.

Key points on customer research and communication

16 **The Library now has a good approach to seeking remote users' views and in general it communicates well with customers.** While some remote users still feel the Library could do more to facilitate dialogue and understand their needs, there is now an effective and appropriate range of mechanisms in place for this purpose. However, these could be improved and extended, and on one recent occasion the Library did not communicate a price increase adequately. The Library also needs to ensure that the financial and management information available on its customers reflects the rapid changes in its services and customer base.

17 **The Library's promotional information could be more targeted and specific, and more needs to be done to raise awareness of services offered.**

Recommendations

Library's website

i   The Library should continue to improve the usability of its website in terms of clarity of information, labels and navigation (paragraphs 2.12 and 3.17).

Digitisation

ii   When implementing proposals for digitisation projects, the Library should have a clear plan for assessing and managing the risk that further funding to secure longer-term access is not guaranteed (paragraph 2.23).

iii DCMS should include in its Funding Agreement with the Library and other relevant bodies in its sector a requirement that, where they are involved in digitisation, they should collaborate and share best practice with each other and with other Government departments (paragraph 2.26).

Document supply

iv   There is scope for the Library to achieve some 'quick hits' with users in advance of its planned major systems changes without incurring significant cost. Possibilities include, for example, being more transparent about sources searched and replacing coding and abbreviations with plain English. Where users' concerns are likely to be addressed by new developments, the Library should make users aware of this, including the likely timescale in which changes will be made (paragraph 3.17).

v   The Library should ensure that it assesses the financial impact of its pricing policy and price changes on key customer groups (that is, public libraries, university libraries, commercial companies, learned societies). This information should be presented as an annex to the pricing policy papers presented to the Library Board for approval. The information on price changes sent to customers should include (where appropriate) an illustrative example of what this might mean for a typical customer (paragraph 3.28).

vi   The Library should provide clear explanation for the basis of prices for different customer groups on its website and in its pricing literature (paragraph 3.29).

Customer research and communication

vii The Library should complete the evaluation of the financial and management information available on its customers as soon as possible, identifying any necessary changes together with a timetable for their implementation (paragraph 4.5 and Figure 23, page 30).

viii The Library should undertake an evaluation of its programme of customer visits and the appointment of specific accounts managers for corporate and higher education customers. This should identify the lessons learned and the effectiveness of these initiatives in improving sales and use of the Library's products and services, and of raising customer awareness and satisfaction. Subject to the conclusions, the Library should consider whether there are cost effective ways in which it might develop closer links with customers in other parts of the library and information sector. These might include replicating aspects of the approach through telephone and electronic contact rather than in person (paragraphs 4.7 to 4.9).

ix   The Library should provide more clarity in the labelling of its products and services to make these more comprehensible to the user, including clear concise information about what each will provide, to whom, and the difference between services that appear very similar in function (paragraph 4.18).

x   The Library should consider what more can be done, for example through direct marketing and events, to raise awareness of the full range of its services (paragraphs 4.20 and 4.21).