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People's Network Enquire: virtual reference in England

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Introduction

Co-East's experience with collaborative web-form and chat projects and services has produced overwhelming evidence for the added value, both from the library and user perspective, virtual reference provides. Far from driving out traditional reference services, virtual reference is one more in a range of access points to professional guidance.

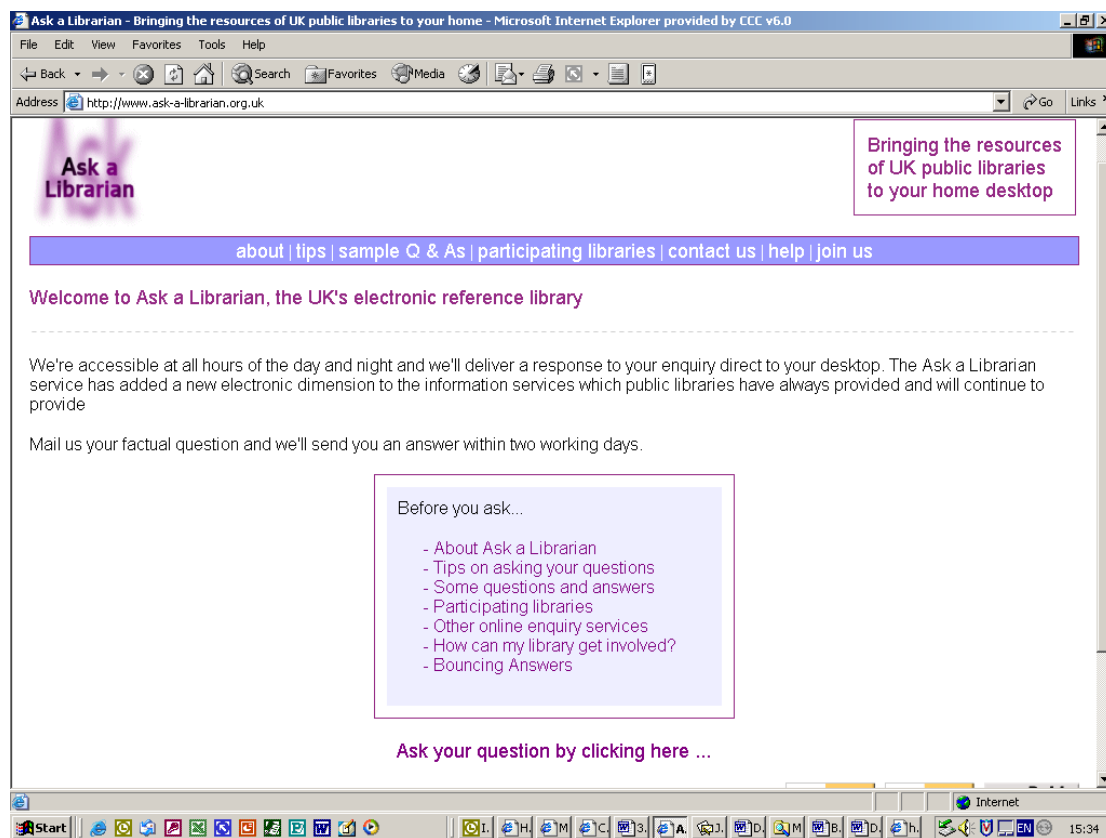
1. Background

Co-East is a partnership of the ten public library authorities in the East of England. Its core business is developing a peer-to-peer network for sharing resources and building services and content for that network. The management team and partners have gained quite a bit of experience in information service delivery, specifically digital reference, through the management and development of three national services: the two web form services 'Ask A Librarian' (<http://www.ask-a-librarian.org.uk>) and Ask Cymru/Wales (<http://www.askcymru.org.uk>), and the new English chat service, Enquire (<http://www.peoplesnetwork.gov.uk>).

2. Ask A Librarian

UK public libraries saw the benefit of collaborative digital reference early on, in fact before quite a few of them could even provide access to web resources to their own users. With the establishment of EARL (Electronic Access to

Resources in Libraries), the national public library networking consortium in 1996, collaborative delivery, not only of digital reference but also of collection description content, made eminent operational sense: in order to learn more about and exploit this new vehicle for reference service, it was necessary to aggregate what web resource there was and to spread the service across a number of libraries. It also made economic sense; for little investment, libraries without web access had websites, were able to provide web access to their local history and journal collections. Ask A Librarian was developed in 1997 by Robert and Sheila Harden. Evaluation of data from the service over the years can certainly attest that all kinds of users seek out a librarian's help: from university professors to schoolchildren, from business people to amateur family historians. This need has not abated over the years Ask has been in operation: if anything, and as demonstrated by a pilot virtual reference service, AskLive!, users are still searching librarians out, and, judging from such newer services as Google Answers, are even willing to pay for the privilege.



3. Ask Cymru

Essentially, for UK public libraries, Ask A Librarian is “the mother of all collaborative information services”, spawning at least three other services. One of them, Ask Cymru, is a Welsh/English language service, which Co-East designed, developed, and is maintaining on behalf of Welsh libraries. Aside from being a unique service in terms of its bilingual functionality, it is a UK first: the first cross-domain collaborative service, staffed by public, university, college libraries, as well as the National Library of Wales. Launched in

September 2004, it runs on the same operational and service platform as Ask A Librarian.



4. Enquire

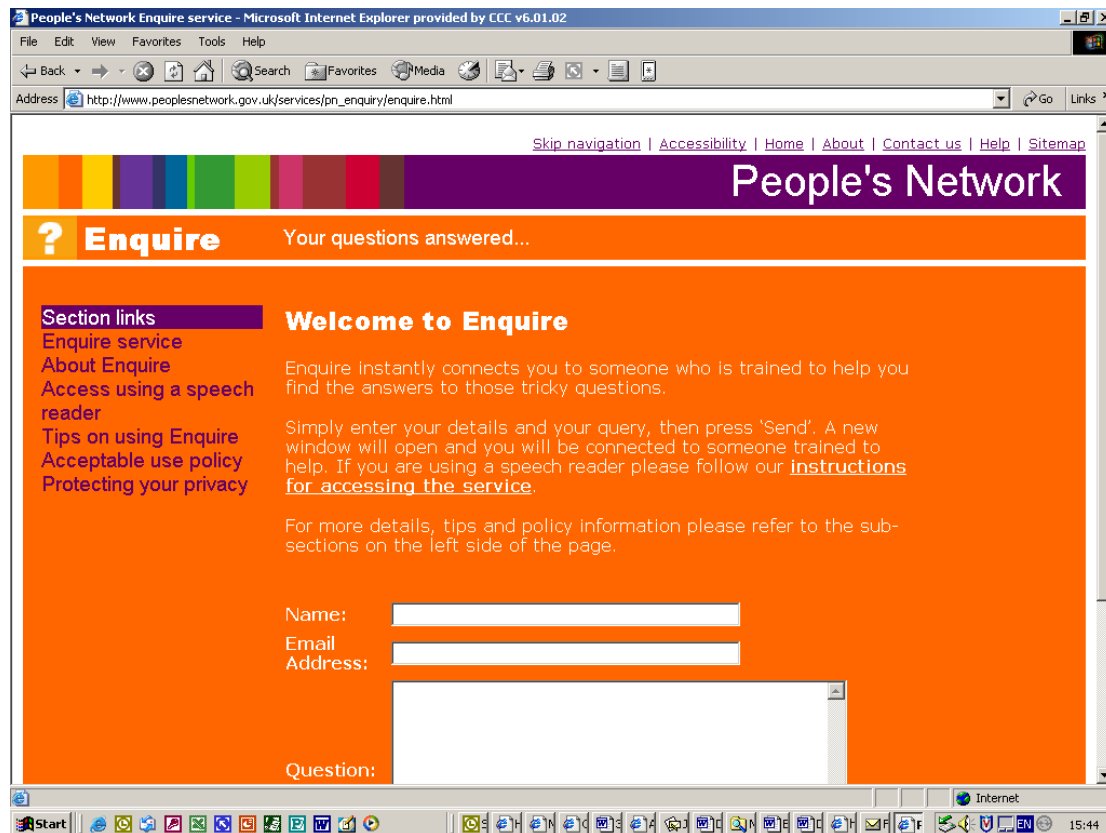
While some regional partnerships have developed collaborative networks through their own initiative, there has been quite a bit of support for introducing IT into public libraries at the national level.

The major initiative had been the People's Network (2000-2003), a £170 million lottery-funded programme, which included

- Infrastructure: £100m delivered 30K terminals in over 4000 public libraries
- Staff training: £20m trained 30K library staff in basic & advanced application of ICT skills
- Digitisation programme: £50m created EnrickUK gateway to c.2m objects & 1000 learning packages

The People's Network was an ambitious UK-wide implementation to create a technical infrastructure. However, the greater challenge has been to reach out to those disenfranchised users, and show them how the People's Network can make a difference. The UK government and UK public libraries are meeting this challenge head on in the Framework for the Future Action Plan, and specifically the People's Network Services. Enquire will be the first such service out of the gate, with a public launch in May 2005. Co- East is

developing and managing the service, and OCLC is providing QuestionPoint software, including 24/7 service. This will allow continued live service during high traffic periods when libraries are usually closed: in the morning before school and work, and in the evenings after school and work.



5. Virtual vs Face-to-Face

Far from believing that that librarians must make a choice of one or the other, in training librarians for the Enquire service, Co-East management counsels that they first look at their overall local information service delivery. Essentially, they must begin by asking themselves how they can manage all of their access points to information professionals more efficiently and more responsively. There must be concerted planning for a service, and part of that planning involves evaluating how virtual reference adds value to the other traditional reference services, chat, email, web-form, telephone, face-to-face.

In other words, chat or virtual reference does not drive out all traditional services; it is one of a range of access points to information professionals. In the UK, there are libraries, Essex (see “The Mortals in our Portals” www.mla.gov.uk/documents/pn_es_28octessex.ppt) for example, which have already taken this message on board, and have developed lean, mean information services agencies within their libraries, ready to take on any commercial competitors.

It is about providing a range of access points, not to information, but to information professionals who are guides to that information. Instead of the relatively passive and anonymous web-form, virtual reference brings users back in direct contact with librarians. Neither the user nor the librarian is invisible, no more so than with telephone reference, still by far the most inclusive form of reference, in its use of a technology that overcomes physical and geographic barriers. An effective information services department and plan will seek to exploit all of the communication mechanisms to hand, there by overcoming the inherent drawbacks in each to create a more accessible overall service.