



Review of Public Library Subsidy Scheme 2009

Background

A consultation has been launched to re-evaluate the Public Library Subsidy (PLS) scheme, which aims to facilitate public access to official government information. The scheme, last reviewed in 2004, is managed and administered by the Office of Public Sector Information (OPSI), part of The National Archives. It provides a 50 per cent subsidy to all local authority funded public libraries for official material. In 2004 investment was reallocated to enable free online access to legislation, reflecting demand for online access.

Since then, the volume of government information available online has steadily increased - Parliament, government departments and agencies publish a comprehensive range of documents, services and information online in a variety of formats and this is likely to continue. Online access has progressively improved through search facilities and indexing, increasing the range of information available to the public beyond that which individual libraries could be expected to hold. At the same time, overall demand for the PLS scheme has been steadily declining year on year. Many of the publications covered by the scheme are now provided free of charge on government websites.

Given the ever changing information environment, it is now appropriate to review the PLS scheme to ensure that it continues to be the best method of enabling public access to government information. Our aim is to encourage broader access to official materials via online sources and through the public library network. Today, users expect technological advances that continue to produce improved services. We must ensure that we meet user expectations and invest to deliver new solutions. In turn, libraries have moved increasingly towards online provision of information and have themselves invested in new facilities. The current economic climate further emphasises our responsibility to guarantee optimal use of the PLS scheme.

In the light of the increasing amount of official material available online, improvements to online access and the current economic climate, we are consulting with the public library community to ensure that the best value is

obtained from the PLS scheme. Our aim is to best serve end users by promoting and maximising their access to government information online.

Specific Proposals

The proposals below focus on promoting direct access to selected government material from government websites, and a review of the material being used within the scheme. The proposals have been developed with two underlying principles in mind: optimising public access to relevant official materials: and providing best value for money in achieving this.

In terms of accessing material directly from government department websites, we have reviewed and identified a selection of government material which is free and available online for anyone to access at any time. The proposals centre on promoting the availability of this material directly from these government websites and encouraging this route for access, rather than continuing to provide it via the scheme. The proposals are intended to utilise fully the capacity of public libraries to provide online access, the increasing ability of the public to access online material and changing user patterns. Material which is not available free of charge online under these proposals will not be taken out of scope.

We also wish to review whether the scheme is continuing to fulfil its original objective of facilitating access to key government information. Specifically, we wish to consult on whether subsidy for access to Ordnance Survey (OS) maps should continue in its current form.

The information contained within OS maps may have many potential uses. However, an analysis of the data suggests that the hard copy maps are obtained by libraries primarily for recreational use. Although the scheme has included Ordnance Survey maps within scope since 2005, the provision of government publications of primarily recreational use is not within the scope of the scheme. The demand for OS maps has grown rapidly over the last few years, prompting this review.

The specific proposals are listed below along with further information and links to websites, where you can view the material online.

1 Remove publications of the Office of National Statistics from the scope of the PLS scheme.

The Office of National Statistics now presents its current publications on a single publications hub. Online publications are available free of charge. Publications can be browsed by theme, or searched for by title or key word. Many of the tables are backed by spreadsheets, which are accessed by clicking and facilitate the use of the data. See <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/hub/index.html>

2 Remove Command Papers from the scope of the scheme

The Stationery Office Ltd provides a full, chronological listing of Command Papers from May 2005 and free online access to the PDF documents. The papers can be browsed by department or subject and searched by keyword at <http://www.official-documents.gov.uk/menu/browseDocuments.htm>

3 Remove selected categories of House of Commons publications from the scope of the scheme

Commons Hansard, Select Committee reports, bills, information bulletins, and a variety of Commons reports and papers are available free of charge online. For a list of what is available, see <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm/cmpubns.htm>

4 Remove selected categories of House of Lords publications from the scope of the scheme

Lords Hansard, research papers and a variety of other material are available free of charge online. For a list of what is available, see <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld/ldpubns.htm>

5 Remove Ordnance Survey maps from the scope of the scheme

The complete OS map is available online free of charge and small sections can be viewed and printed. See <http://getamap.ordnancesurvey.co.uk/getamap/frames.htm>

The number of Ordnance Survey maps ordered under the scheme has greatly increased since 2005 when the scheme was extended. The PLS data indicates a bias towards areas of recreational interest. The remit of the Public Library Subsidy scheme, however, excludes material of primarily 'recreational' use. The removal of OS maps from the scheme would be commensurate with a return to the scheme's original objective of facilitating access to key government information.

How to make comments and next steps

Please complete the response form by 8th January 2010. We would encourage you to do this online but if you prefer you can download the form from the OPSI website <http://www.opsi.gov.uk/official-publications/public-library-access-scheme.htm> and email the response to PLS-Review@opsi.qsi.gov.uk

Once all responses have been reviewed a report will be produced setting out the conclusions of the report which will be available on the OPSI website. Should any changes be made as a result of the consultation these will be sent to those directly affected by such changes.