

Forward thinking for the Peoples Network

– Ambitions, obstacles, solutions

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Introduction

Talking with our customer libraries and discussing their ambitions for the future, it's clear that there is great scope for how public library computers can be used in new and forward-thinking ways. At two events in 2024, Libraries Connected seminar in June and joint CILIP/LAI conference in April, views on the importance and uses for the People's Network were inspiring, signalling that libraries are keen to expand the range of opportunities available to those using their computers and digital resources.

Already, computers and printing services are a key reason for users visiting libraries. From our own survey findings, we know that PCs are popular in libraries for employment related queries, benefit applications, other government services, and for learning basic digital skills. In fact almost [80% of libraries](#) saw growth in these areas in 2023.

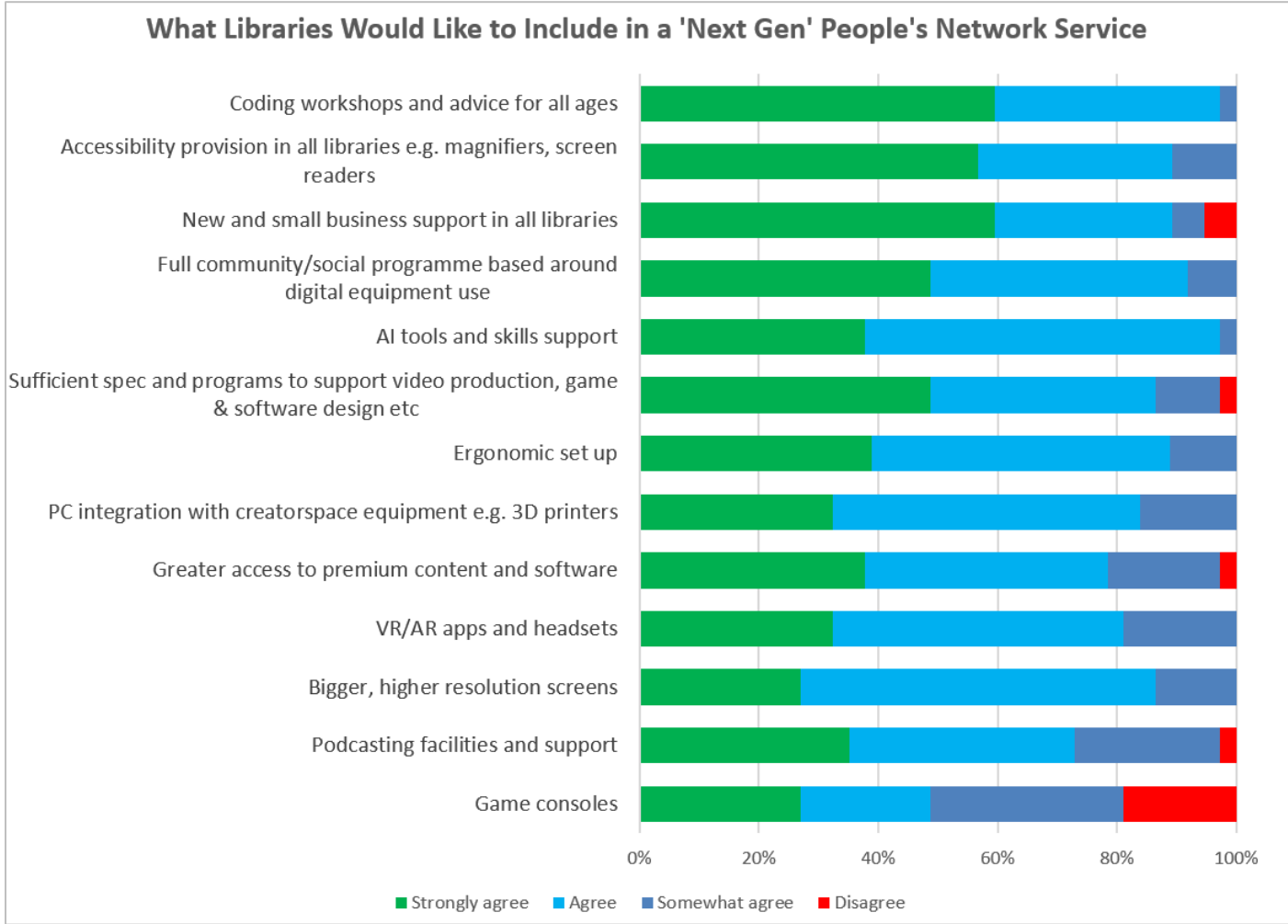
From the 2024 Participation Survey from the DCMS, Arts Council and Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, around a quarter of those using libraries make use of PCs, Wi-Fi and printing. It amounts to 7% of all adults in the UK in the past year.

With the right support and realisation of library ambitions, the People's Network can reach even more users and enable a broader range of opportunities. From essential tasks like job searching and housing applications in an

increasingly digital landscape, to building new skills and exploring fresh career pathways, libraries can drive personal growth and economic participation. The benefits are clear: stronger prospects for UK productivity while easing pressure on other public services.

Ambitions

A People’s Network survey was conducted at the Libraries Connected seminar 2024 with over 30 libraries taking part. From the results, you can see that between 70% and 95% of libraries agree that with the right funding a range of new opportunities and technologies should be included to develop the People’s Network:



Source: Lorensbergs People’s Network Survey 2024.

Why are these ambitions important?

The People’s Network is a national infrastructure that libraries have long experience of providing and maintaining. It is the only reliable and affordable point of online access for the millions who rely on it and one that is widely used to achieve tasks that are critical to personal and economic wellbeing.

With adequate capacity at times in many libraries, the People’s Network could be used in ways beyond basic digital competencies and the ability to get online. It could be used to develop and practise more advanced

skills. This would add significant options to users' life chances and career trajectories. Not least, it would bring greater benefit to the UK economy as a whole.

Many of the types of software, hardware and associated activities rated by libraries in the survey relate to areas where the UK economy has the greatest prospects for growth:

Technology and software

The UK tech sector is growing rapidly, with a strong emphasis on software development and AI. It's combined market valuation at the start of 2024 was £1.1 trillion, making it top in Europe and 3rd greatest worldwide. However, [Tech Nation's 2024 report](#) highlights recruitment as being the greatest challenge amongst UK startups and scaleups (i.e. fast growing companies), with engineering and development skills the hardest to recruit for by some distance. Software engineers are the second most difficult position to fill (after CTOs).

Tech hubs are increasing outside of London, in places including Manchester, Birmingham, Bristol, Edinburgh, Leeds, Cambridge and many others. Beyond these, there are start-ups recruiting across the country. So there are career opportunities nationwide for those with the right skills. For several years now, public libraries have made it possible for thousands of children and families to get started with programming. They have already been provided by [Code Club](#) in 800 public libraries across the UK. However, more could be done to engage and upskill users of all ages, with the clubs currently aimed predominantly at schoolchildren (accompanied by their parents) and young people. They also struggle to continue while looking to recruit more volunteers.

Creative industries and multimedia skills

The UK has a strong sector which covers film, television, music, and publishing. It is home to major studios and production companies. Job opportunities are growing but more skills support is needed.

In [Our creative future: the manifesto](#) from Creative UK, The independent network for the UK's Creative Industries, the first objective is to grow the workforce of tomorrow by prioritising creative skills and education. There's a target of one million new jobs by 2030, an ambitious goal and one that the library network could help support:

"75% of 18-25 year-olds want to work in creative sectors, but more than 42% say it's too hard to break in."

Small business growth

Success of the [BIPC](#) (Business and IP Centre) network is illustrative of how successfully libraries can support small businesses when they have the right funding, support and formal remit. Along with Makerspaces and the provision of multimedia software and CAD (Computer Aided Design) applications and equipment, libraries are providing access to resources that would be prohibitively expensive to most individuals. They offer scope to produce prototype products, leading to growth and new product or service creation. They also enable new businesses to produce digital marketing content and website designs.

These kind of use cases for libraries – the combination of computers with media software and equipment connectivity, along with the IP and business databases provided by the BIPC – is already generating massive opportunity for those wishing to enter and thrive within the media and technology sectors. In fact the BIPC network of 22 centres throughout UK libraries is already having significant impact according to the [British Library's Democratising Entrepreneurship 2.0](#) report:

“The highest proportion (27%) of businesses supported by the BIPC (Business & IP Centre Network) is in the creative, media and technology sectors.”

Essential relationship between library IT, social inclusion and health

The fourth ranked area of ambition for the People’s Network has been identified as a *Full Community/Social Programme based around digital equipment use*. It empowers patrons to increase their social engagement each time they use their local library, supporting improved mental health. It also offers opportunity to improve health literacy.

Library staff have long witnessed how use and interest around IT is a predictable catalyst to more social interaction. When users enter the library to attend a technology focused group or class, they usually chat and share experiences with other users. Likewise, non-tech events will make use of the PCs when conversation turns to technology-related topics and it develops into a peer group for making sense of today’s IT difficulties.

This is what our customer libraries have told us during a 2024 People’s Network focus group:

“We have family history groups that people attend – it’s mostly about helping them to understand how Find My Past and Ancestry work. The research in family history is largely a digital help class. They come in and make friends while talking about each others’ families”

“We also have Age UK volunteers coming into some libraries – it tends to be more of a social chat around a table with tea and cake, then someone says something and someone else says ‘that’s a really good idea’ and then everyone starts looking up whatever it is on the computers – or learning to do it, because it was something they didn’t know”

“This is about attracting footfall. Who knows what a sharp member of staff can do once these people are in the library and feeling confident and included...? I miss attending a knit and natter evening, when someone will pull me to one side and say I can’t remember how to do this and then we have a mini-tech session”

“We had dip-into-digital sessions which aim to have something for all the age groups, from very young children to adults. We had 3D printing and makerspaces on the public PCs and we had Sphero robots... it’s something that can get very hands-on and bring groups of people together all at the same time”

“[Library groups] are very much social meetings that suddenly switch to computers. It’s fun to watch. It turns into an information session or an IT session”

“It’s about people working together in a fun way”

Policymakers have already taken note of the greater potential for library services to help address social inclusion, as taken from the Foreword of a recent CILIP report:

“Come rain or shine’ rightly identifies the greatest threat to be the long-term decline in library visits and suggests that the key to success should therefore be visit growth.

“It pinpoints digital skills as being increasingly core to library services and I endorse its vision of a ‘People’s Network 2.0’ which would be a digital enabler and a social connector simultaneously”

Baroness Sanderson, [Come Rain or Shine Report](#), CILIP, February 2024

Social isolation has been identified as a serious contributor to poor health. The fact that IT skills development and social interaction combine so well in the library is something of importance to Government strategy for better health and wellbeing.

More specifically, access to health services is being greatly improved by libraries, with users gaining support in using NHS online resources & services. Interactions between library users and with staff supports users to help themselves, reducing dependency on state services that involve greater costs and labour.

This contribution to health is a growing trend in libraries and one that should be acknowledged in support of meeting their needs for better funding.

Obstacles to progressing ambitions

So what's holding libraries back in realising their potential for the People's Network? Training, funding and PC specification are all important areas to tackle. Talking with our customer libraries, there are a number of approaches being taken to help make progress in each case which we'll discuss next.

Staff training and digital skills

It is difficult to recruit library staff that have all the required skills to support the library ambitions identified. A lot depends on the training provided to new staff, as a participant at a recent People's Network focus group commented:

“Library assistants don't have this level of training: we train them to deal with email and Internet queries, etc. If they had to have those additional skills, it would make recruitment even more difficult”

Regular training of library staff is also an important consideration. This isn't easy with staffing constraints. At a focus group last year, we explored best practice around digital skills training for library staff. This section summarises the findings from this work, firstly for new starter inductions, then for ongoing training of all staff.

Recommendations of best practice for new starters:

- **Formats:** Use a combination of formal and informal formats
Formal: demos, online modules, videos, manuals – mostly library specific, some council-wide
Informal: hands-on including observation or shadowing. Place importance on this training format as an essential supplement to formal and online formats
- **Checklist:** Use a checklist of tasks and skills new staff should learn, usually combining customer-facing skills and systems related or office processes
- **Expectation:** Expect staff to be proactive in ensuring their training checklist is all ticked off
- **Goals:** Stick to time defined goals – e.g. knowledge after 4 weeks, 9 weeks, 12 weeks, 26 weeks
- **Review:** Organise one-to-one follow ups and Q&A after formal module completion to identify inaccuracies and gaps

Ongoing or top-up training approaches should include the following:

- Assess staff competence by conducting regular quizzes then providing refresher training where needed

- Conduct digital skills audits: typically, staff are given a list of digital skills and indicate their confidence level for each
- Delivering training via Microsoft Teams to include as many staff as possible
- Disseminate know-how via 'Digital Champions' or 'Digital Smarties' – with visibility of each post holder's particular areas of expertise

What works really well for both this last point and for new staff shadowing opportunities is to draw on your staff's existing interests and hobbies. This is particularly important in the context of People's Network ambitions. There is a wealth of knowledge waiting to be surfaced with the right encouragement and opportunity. Hobbyist enthusiasts can easily motivate other staff and be the source for cascading knowledge and training. This was emphasised by a library authority that is progressing in introducing podcasting activities to their libraries. [More information is available](#) in the *Further reading* section below.

Funding

Funding is foremost a matter of councils investing in their libraries with the foresight of the return this investment will bring. It is a question of taking a 'Libraries First' approach. For the majority of libraries, a continual push is required to ensure they remain front and centre for public service planning. Good communication is central to success and works best when there is early involvement with other service leaders throughout the council.

There are a number of recommendations based on libraries' experiences in our Libraries First briefing here: [Achieving a 'Libraries First' Approach: Latest Findings - Lorensbergs](#)

External funding sources are also important to consider. Every time we talk to our library customers we're interested in hearing about the latest funding ideas and successes. As a result, we're accumulating a long list of sources and a wide range of ideas for making the most of the grants that are out there for libraries to tap into. Talk to your [Netloan account manager](#) for information on these sources.

PC specification

Libraries are forging stronger relationships with their IT teams (both Council in-house teams and outsourced IT support). It is leading to greater opportunity to achieve an improved PC specification – both hardware and software – to support library services, especially when developing their offer in the ways suggested by Lorensbergs' People's Network Survey.

Changes to public computers most often occur as part of PC hardware refresh projects. These projects typically take place every 5-6 years, and are often prompted by changes in operating system support. 2025 is a critical year for these projects, with the widely used Windows 10 going out of support in October of this year.

Findings from over 30 library authorities address how to work with IT teams to deliver the People's Network they need. The report is available here: [Working with IT – PC refreshes and everything in between - Lorensbergs](#)

For a quick 8-point summary, read the 5 minute briefing here: [Working with IT: Library Guide for the Year Ahead - Lorensbergs](#)

Conclusion

The growth potential for achieving a more forward-thinking People's Network is substantial. With the right ambition, funding and support, growth will be realised in a number of critical ways: in library use, the number of patrons served with improvements to their wellbeing and career potential, and for the UK economy as a whole.

The recommendations in this paper to embrace and invest in this potential are critical to follow this year, as libraries look to renew and improve their People's Network delivery. It's an opportunity that deserves to be explored and realised, with libraries working in close partnership with departments across local authorities and with support from central government policymakers.

Further reading

[Our new report reveals public libraries are 'backbone of creative economy' | Libraries Connected](https://www.librariesconnected.org.uk/news/our-new-report-reveals-public-libraries-are-backbone-creative-economy)

<https://www.librariesconnected.org.uk/news/our-new-report-reveals-public-libraries-are-backbone-creative-economy>

[FEATURE - Why Your Library Needs a Multimedia Studio and How to Add One](https://www.infotoday.com/cilmag/jul24/King--Why-Your-Library-Needs-a-Multimedia-Studio-and-How-to-Add-One.shtml/) *David Lee King, Digital services Director, Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library in Topeka, Kansas, Information Today July/Aug 2024:*

<https://www.infotoday.com/cilmag/jul24/King--Why-Your-Library-Needs-a-Multimedia-Studio-and-How-to-Add-One.shtml/>

[Podcasting in Libraries: New Opportunities at South Lanarkshire - Lorensbergs:](https://www.lorensbergs.co.uk/podcasting-in-libraries-new-opportunities-at-south-lanarkshire/)

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