

Why Suffolk Libraries provides free public access to the Internet

The Internet is the fabric of our lives....it is a communication medium, which allows, for the first time, the communication of many to many, in chosen time, on a global scale.
Manuel Castells¹

1. A public library

Suffolk County Council (SCC) has a statutory responsibility to provide people with a wide range of information and library services, delivered through Suffolk Libraries. These services inspire personal growth, enable social cohesion, promote economic performance and facilitate active citizenship. To do this, Suffolk Libraries provides access to the widest possible selection of books and information, conventional and unconventional, restricted only by the law, the avoidance of harm and the prudent use of public money.

2. The People's Network

Every public library in England and Wales is connected to the Internet, thanks to lottery funding between 2000-2003. A condition of this funding was that beneficiaries provided free access to the Internet. Suffolk Libraries has remained faithful to this condition, recognising that it is not possible to fulfil its statutory duty of access to a broad range of information without it.

Although they are funded at local level, there is a commitment across the majority of the public library network across England and Wales to provide free core services- so most will offer visitor services such as free access to the Internet and the facility to borrow books.

3. The Internet is a tool, which supports reading, and literacy Readers of all ages and abilities use the on-line library catalogue to explore and satisfy their reading choices. Suffolk people browse through a wide range of resources, via Suffolk Libraries Direct (SLD), linking then through to other virtual resources such as the Amazon website.

In 2007 there will be over 1,000,000 transactions on the SLD site with people taking charge of their browsing, and their library use. This is the most popular section on the SCC website.

The World Wide Web has a rich and growing library of resources to enhance the reading experience with websites about authors, about specific books and writers, different genres, chat rooms for communities of interest and many sites for people to use to buy books, DVDs, spoken word and games to increase their quality of life.

¹ *In his book **Internet Galaxy**, Castells suggests that the true impact of the Internet is as yet not fully understood, but that the impact can be compared to the invention of the printing press- by enabling communication to the many, and to the invention of electricity as a socially revolutionary tool*

4. It helps young people shape their learning, their sense of community and their relationships.

For many children, the public library is the only safe and trusted space that they can use a computer.

Learning through fun will prepare them to take part in a digital world of work and play

Children and young people use the Internet to communicate with each other, to browse for pleasure and fun, and to research for their formal and informal learning. It can be the place they go for peer advice and support, to ask for help when they don't trust those

around them, and find information to help them with their health and their maturing relationships.

5. It opens the door into the world of learning

Many adults use the virtual learning environment, which is the Internet; some through formal providers such as learndirect, and Open University, others self-directed. It opens up possibilities for personal development for people who did not find the school experience satisfactory.

The World Wide Web is also now the primary resource for people searching for courses and investigating further or higher education.

6. The library is a place where people can research a wide range of information and learn computer skills.

Increasingly there are resources, which are only available electronically or over the Internet. A good example of this is Times Digital Archive. Through subscriptions, and specially chosen websites grouped together for user convenience, the Internet offers people in the smallest library the same access to sources and information, as in the very largest reference library in a big city. And it's possible to provide access to a wide range of information in a diversity of languages and formats in a cost effective and user friendly way.

7. IT contributes to the economy

ICT skills are now a required for skill for life. People, who need to update their employability skills, or simply want to learn to earn more, use the Internet in a public library to access learning or to research the wide range of physical and virtual courses².

² *The LearnEast project found that many people who did not trust formal learning providers would go to a public library to learn computer literacy, and find help for their basic skills.*

By offering free access to everyone, it's possible to investigate local, regional and national e-commerce, to book flights and holidays to spend money by on-line shopping.

It also helps people, who come to work in the UK and contribute to its economy, to keep connected with their families, communicate with each other. and learn more about the place they have come to live.

8. Citizenship and democracy

There are an increasing number of websites and online services for people to use to help them renew their car tax, complete their tax return or register their benefit claim, report an Anti Social Behaviour problem. It is important that people learn these skills now if there is likely to be electronic voting in the future.

9. Fairness and equality

Many people can afford to link up to the internet at home, but not all. By providing free access, we are giving the less affluent members of our community a more equal chance to benefit from the information, learning and pleasure available through the web.

10. It helps us connect with our community, our culture and heritage

There is a treasure trove available on the World Wide Web, added to daily, with local, regional and national websites each featuring images, sound and text of cultural and heritage jewels.

In partnership with museums and other organisations Suffolk Libraries and Suffolk Record Office is contributing to this treasure trove by creating and hosting local heritage content for the EESOP website, making it available to both local communities and researchers worldwide

A wide range of information held on our own database; Infolink, and the many websites about individual villages, towns, local and county organisations, help people to learn more about their choices, access local services, and take part, volunteer or use free or commercial opportunities. A good example of this is the websites created by communities such as Surestart parents, and Travellers in North Suffolk.

11. In conclusion

A twenty first century public library needs to offer access to the Internet to offer the statutory range of information and facilities, used and expected by the modern citizen. It is needed to support the core services of reading, literacy and information, while enabling new services to develop.