

FAQs

Contributed by Joanne John
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Frequently asked questions

1. What is the People's Network Enquire Service?

Enquire is a 24 hours a day, seven days a week (24/7), real-time reference service, which works like instant messaging or a chat session. Someone asks a question and there's a library staff member online (in England and Scotland or internationally depending on the time of day) who will answer it.

The software, OCLC's QuestionPoint, also enables email correspondence, giving users more than one way to access information with the help of skilled information professionals. Together, national real-time and email reference integrates perfectly with local desk and phone reference services.

2. How is the project related to other People's Network services?

MLA originally commissioned the service as part of the People's Network trio of services: Read, Discover and Enquire. The service plays an important part in Framework for the Future, the Government's 10 year vision for public libraries, managed by the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) and now sits within the Reference Online suite of products.

People's Network online services are a natural extension of the lottery-funded project to provide internet access for public library users. Digital services are not an add-on; they are an integral part of the public library offer, providing users with essential information at their point of need, and allowing distant and non-library users to re-connect with both the library and their local authority.

Enquire, Discover and Read provide a suite of innovative national offer digital services for libraries to benefit from and members of the public to use.

3. What do you mean, 'real-time'?

Real-time enquiry, or virtual or synchronous reference, operates on the same principal as Instant Messaging or chat rooms: users are able to log on and communicate through text messages directly with librarians. There is no delay in transmission of the request, as with email or webform services, and no delay in response.

4. Why do we need a 'real-time' service? Isn't email enough?

Users (especially our younger and more ICT-literate users) are becoming accustomed to more immediate forms of service delivery, for example, studies have shown that teenagers are more comfortable with texting, chatrooms, and other forms of live communication. Similarly economically, physically, and geographically challenged users would also benefit from the ease and comfort of live service from their own homes or elsewhere.

We can no longer expect that our users will come to us; we must go to them. This does not mean doing away with email, telephone, or onsite reference. Live online reference services should be integrated with other types of local information delivery, offering the user multiple access points.

5. Why collaborative?

Large-scale collaboration of online reference services happen for a number of reasons:

- * It makes the library service available 24/7 at minimal cost, with minimum local effort.
- * Joint buying power means doing it together is much cheaper than library authorities doing it alone.
- * There's less staff time involved.
- * It can still feel like a local service but there's all the back up of a national network.
- * The staff involved gain in confidence and improve their skills.
- * Participating authorities are part of a national marketing campaign and they're spotlighted as innovative, forward-thinking and customer-focused.

* Participating authorities hold a principal stake in the development of the service.

Public Libraries in the UK have a long history of collaboration and also collaboration in virtual reference since the Ask A Librarian service (developed by EARL) was launched in November 1997. Initially a UK wide email service, this service was at the forefront of UK collaboration and came at a time when Local Government websites were in their infancy. The service originally developed by EARL and Sheila Hardens, was then brought within the management of Co-East, where it was hosted and managed for the UK. When the MLA tender for a virtual reference service within the People's Network, it was a natural progression of this collegiality, and became the basis of the Co-East/OCLC PICA tender.

6. Does 24/7 mean participating libraries have to staff the service 'round the clock?

English and Scottish libraries generally staff the service from Monday to Friday from 9am-5pm, with some libraries staffing evenings and Saturdays, and OCLC's international partnership covers the hours beyond this, including public holidays.

It is important to keep in mind that research based on other collaborative reference services shows that high traffic periods include 6-12 PM and 5-9 AM; in other words before and after work/school.

As more library services take part, we want to staff as many hours using English library partners as possible, such as at weekends, thereby reducing costs for additional service buy-in from our international colleagues.

7. What are the duty-rota hours for libraries?

Libraries are on duty for half-day slots the frequency is dictated by the libraries themselves. As more library services participate; more time may elapse between library rota days.

Rota hours can be flexible depending on your library opening hours and local needs; we can adapt the rota accordingly.

8. Will we be overwhelmed with questions?

Research has shown that initial user take-up is manageable, with a current 2008 average of 60 questions per day.

9. Will we need to dedicate one staff person to covering only this service during our assigned period?

You will need to have someone logged in to and monitoring the service. Alerts will pop up on the chat screen (although not to the front of other applications you may be running). There is also an audible alert but this only works if the machine has a sound card and speakers.

10. How long is the initial service subscription for?

Service models are based on the subscription periods. We are now in the second phase of the live service contract, i.e. until March 2009. The next tender phase will run from 1st April 2009 - 31st March 2012.

11. What is included in my subscription?

Library subscriptions include:

- * software license

- * training and training resources

- * technical support

- * service management

See [Partner Roles and Responsibilities](#) for further details

12. Why QuestionPoint?

* Impressive functionality of QuestionPoint (for example, co-browsing to allow you to search databases while you chat to users; 24/7 live coverage).

* Good national offer deal for reduced subscription rates.

* History with using QuestionPoint for the Ask A Librarian service.

* Opportunities to set up local services as well as the national service (such as online surgeries or training sessions).

* Availability of onsite training suites in Birmingham.

13. How do we implement the technology?

The technical requirements for taking part in the service are minimal. See the [Technical Requirements](#) section for further details. OCLC will support library partners during implementation by liaising with relevant parties, such as corporate IT departments.

14. Is the technology accessible?

Yes, Enquire is accessible for patrons using screen readers and the form is customisable for different visual impairments

15. How to we access the software?

Enquire uses OCLC's QuestionPoint software, which is wholly browser based. Although called 'chat' it is not a chatroom, it is a discreet one-to-one interaction between a patron (citizen) and a reference professional. The software uses the standard Port 80, the service has the ability to push webpages to the patron and also offers the ability to follow up offline with an email at a later date (through the software).

Some additional software will need to be enabled to allow chat to work:

You must have Flash Player version 9 or higher and also your general internet settings should be set to 'every visit to the page' as opposed to the default of 'automatically', this enables the pages to be refreshed in the background without a visible refresh being apparent.

If you would like any further information, please contact us.

16. How does Enquire sit with local service?

In order for the service to be successful, it must supplement local service, not replace or be additional to them. There must be local, as well as national, ownership, in order for our users to have the best possible access to a diverse range of services and content.

Those libraries that have successfully integrated digital reference services so as to add value to their local information delivery are using the service as a means of achieving local targets.

There are several models for integrating digital reference into local service delivery:

* One-library team: made up from staff of the information services department.

* Multi-library team: made up from staff from several branches, all logged on at the same time and taking questions sequentially.

* Referral team: a core team, plus a wider team located in different departments or branches to which specialist questions can be transferred

* Integrated team: some libraries have standalone enquiry teams which receive questions from email, phone, text, chat, and from other departments in the service.

17. What do you mean by "in the UK"?

By "in the UK" we mean that many UK public library authorities staff and support this service. However, this service will take questions from anywhere in the world.

18. Is the Freedom of Information Act an issue?

Generally speaking, the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act states that if the information request is simple (contact numbers etc), it must be provided within 20 working days from receipt of question. Because of the immediate nature of the chat service, this time limitation should not be an issue as all questions are answered as soon as they are received.

As long as local questions are handled according to the guidance provided, libraries are not liable for failure to respond, especially as transcripts will provide evidence that information had been provided or the user has been recommended to the appropriate local contact.