



Department of Education and Science

Office of Arts and Libraries
From the Minister for the Arts

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Prime Minister

*You should see, in particular,
paras 7-9, on ministerial
responsibility for information policy.*

*Content with line proposed in draft,
and agree to*

8 April 1981

publication as a White Paper?

*Yes
no*

Dear Clive,

MA 13/x1

The Second and Fourth Reports of the Select Committees on Education, Science and Arts contained conclusions and recommendations concerning a number of matters relating to the British Library and to Government policy in respect of library and information services. Since the Fourth Report was published last October, we have been considering, with the other interested Departments, the form of the Government reply.

I now attach a draft of the reply proposed by Mr Channon after consultation with other Ministers concerned; he would like to publish it as a White Paper as soon as possible, in view of the time which has elapsed since the Fourth Report was published, and I write to seek your authorisation for this. We do not consider it necessary for any special arrangements to be made for the reply to be debated in the House.

Mr Channon agrees with the Select Committee that the handling of information, and the provision of access to it, is of importance to all aspects of society, and to our economic well-being, and that this importance is becoming widely recognised. The reply proposes a modest step forward in dealing with these issues, but it may be necessary to consider further steps later.

I am copying this letter and the draft reply to the Chief Press Secretary and to the Private Secretaries to the Leader of the House and the Secretary to the Cabinet. I am also copying it to the Private Secretaries to members of the Cabinet, for information.

*Yours ever
Mae Giles*

MISS MAE GILES
Private Secretary

INFORMATION STORAGE AND RETRIEVAL IN THE
BRITISH LIBRARY SERVICE

Observations by the Government on the Second and Fourth Reports
from the Select Committee on Education, Science and Arts
Session 1979-80

Introduction

1. In their Second and Fourth Reports of the 1979-80 Session the Select Committee reached conclusions and made recommendations concerning a number of matters relating to the British Library and to the storage and retrieval of information. The Government have given careful consideration to these conclusions and recommendations.

Second Report

Conclusion

That the services provided by the British Library to its users at home and abroad will substantially and rapidly deteriorate unless a decision is taken very quickly to proceed with phase 1 of the new building.

2. The Government announced on 28 November 1980 that a start would be made on this scheme as soon as possible.

Fourth Report

Recommendation

The problem of the implications for copyright of the new technology should be treated with the necessary urgency

3. As the Committee have stated, the responsibility for copyright matters rests primarily with the Department of Trade. It is the view of that Department that the copyright issues raised in the

Select Committee's Report can only be dealt with satisfactorily within the context of the overall review of copyright law which is now in progress. These issues will be discussed in a Green Paper shortly to be issued by the Department. The Government share the Select Committee's view that the development of information provision should not be hampered by copyright problems; the matter will be examined urgently by the Office of Arts and Libraries in consultation with other Departments and organisations concerned, and with the help of the Library Advisory Council.

Recommendation

The report on the future development of libraries at present being prepared by the Library Advisory Council (England) should be published as expeditiously as possible to assist the achievement of a national library policy

4. The Council hopes to submit its next report on this subject in a few months' time. The report will be published as expeditiously as possible.

Recommendation

The issues concerning the relationship between the cooperative library groups and the British Library should be given renewed attention by the parties concerned, and should be a subject for consideration by the network advisory commission which we recommend below

5. The Cooperative Libraries Group has been wound up and a new body, the Cooperative Automation Group, has been formed whose membership includes the British Library, the library automation cooperatives, the Standing Conference of National and University Libraries, the Library Association, the Committee of Polytechnic Libraries and ASLIB. Its terms of reference are broadly to secure the most effective articulation of the services provided by the British Library and the library automation cooperatives and of the plans for future development of these services. Progress so far has been promising; among other developments the British Library has

reviewed its policy in respect of royalties on computerised bibliographic records and henceforth will make no charge for the copying and re-use of these records by individual libraries, groups of libraries or bodies supplying services to libraries, subject to certain conditions being satisfied by those organisations.

Recommendation

An automated information network system should be developed, and coordinated on a national basis

6. The various automated information services that already exist, or are being developed, are evolving in response to specific information needs in particular fields or sectors of the economy. As the Select Committee recognises, different methods and approaches will be appropriate to meet different needs, and one essential requirement is that means should exist to link the various services into a system which permits ready movement by users between one service and another. In some instances the linkages are best provided centrally, in others the adoption of flexible arrangements by the user may be more efficient and economical. In either case the development of appropriate computer programs (software) is possibly the most important factor in achieving the necessary interconnection, and a good deal of effort is already being devoted to this with the support of the departments primarily interested in the fields concerned. The British Library has a general interest in watching and encouraging this process, and the Office of Arts and Libraries intends to take up with the departments and interests concerned any serious difficulties identified by the Library so as to ensure that special attention is given to them without delay.

Recommendation

As soon as possible the Government should appoint a Minister of Cabinet rank to take responsibilities for information policy, and should provide him with the necessary staff, as far as possible by appropriate secondments from within Whitehall departments

7. The term "information policy" is very wide and has no precise definition. In the context of this reply to the Select Committee, it is taken to exclude policy on such matters as the arrangements for the presentation of Government policy and access to official records.

8. The Government intend to follow as far as is practicable this principle running through the Select Committee's report, that libraries and information services should be regarded as a single area of concern. While many such services have grown up within libraries or sprung from them, others have developed more directly from the special needs of user institutions, for example in respect of scientific and technological information. Government responsibility for services of the latter kind clearly ought to remain closely linked to that for the related technological services. A number of departments are involved, including the Department of Industry where the Prime Minister has designated a Minister of State to be responsible for information technology. It would therefore be inappropriate to concentrate executive responsibility in the hands of one Minister. Close consultation will however be required between the Ministers and Departments concerned on policy for the development and operation of both kinds of information service.

9. In the view of the Government any national policy on information services must be of a very general and flexible kind, allowing the maximum freedom to individual departments to maintain and develop services for particular groups of users in the most appropriate way and in the light of a close knowledge of users needs and the information resources available. It follows that individual Ministers must remain free to take whatever decisions they consider necessary in their particular fields. To the extent that it may be necessary from time to time for an initiative to be taken on a matter not within a defined Departmental interest the Government will look to the Minister for the Arts to raise the matter with those of his colleagues who appear to have an actual or potential interest in the matter so that appropriate action can be taken. In order to provide the Minister for the Arts with expert advice

in this respect, steps are being taken to supplement the services of the professional staff of the Office of Arts and Libraries.

Recommendation

The Government should set up as a matter of urgency a Standing Commission representative of the wide range of interests concerned with the provision of information particularly by telematic means, to example on a continuing basis the problems of developing a national information network, to formulate national requirements, to relate them to international developments, to investigate possible solutions, and to make proposals for their implementation by appropriate bodies.

10. The Government accept that authoritative advice from those concerned with the provision of information, together with a continuing examination of the relevant problems, are essential to ensure a properly-considered Government approach to the future of information services. It would not be appropriate, in the view of the Government, to establish for this purpose a new and separate body dealing only with information services. The Library Advisory Council for England, which already advises the Minister for the Arts on a wide range of matters in the library and information fields, and is engaged on an urgent study of future development problems including those of cooperation and the use of new technology, appears to the Government to be capable of adaptation to provide comprehensive advice on the functions now under discussion. The Government intend therefore to review, and extend as appropriate the membership and functions of the Library Advisory Council. Its title will be changed to reflect more fully the range of its functions. The Council will be encouraged to establish machinery for expert consideration of special problems in the information field. Its work will be complementary to that of the Interdepartmental Coordinating Committee on Scientific and Technical Information, which has a particular concern for specialised information advisory services both within and outside Government, in the areas of interest of member Departments. The Committee will

be encouraged to extend its concern to services other than those provided by Government, within the areas of interest of member Departments. Arrangements for considering matters in this field on a coordinated United Kingdom basis where necessary are being discussed between the Departments concerned.