

## Event summary

***eBooks: the last page or a new chapter for libraries and publishers?***

**A summit from the Libraries All Party Parliamentary Group  
Wednesday 24<sup>th</sup> October, House of Commons**

### Introduction

The summit explored how to respond to the growth of digital literacy and the rise of eBooks. How do we ensure that library users, the digital have-nots as well as the digital haves, can still access to the world of published writing. Are eBooks the last page or a new chapter for libraries and publishers?

Chaired by Justin Tomlinson MP, Chair of the Libraries APPG, the panel members were:

- Richard Mollet, Chief Executive of The Publishers Association
- Steve Potash, Chief Executive of Overdrive, a global leader in digital distribution of ebooks
- Olivia Cole, Literary Editor of GQ, Editor of Spectator Life, poet and contributor to The Standard
- Christopher Platt, Director of Collections and Circulation Operations at New York Public Library

After short introductions, the panellists answered questions from the audience as part of a chaired debate.

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**Working together** – There was consensus from all those on the panel that it was important to work together.

Steve Potash and Christopher Platt provided examples of how libraries and distributors can work with publishers and content producers directly. Both OverDrive and New York Public Library have initiatives with publishers, offering e-lending and looking at things that do and don't work. This approach is helping build a strategy for successful e-lending that will benefit all interested parties.

**Revenue fears** – Richard Mollett of the Publishers Association said members were worried that e-lending would impact directly on sales. *“The key concern for publishers in this area is that in a world where it could be as simple to borrow a book as to buy a book remotely, the concern is that a great many people will borrow and not buy.”*

Libraries understand the need for publishers to protect revenues. Schemes such as the HarperCollins 26 loan model, or price increases that compensate for the fact that replacements are not needed (physical books wear out and therefore need to be replaced, a digital file does not) are valid models to explore.

Click-to-buy from library websites are also being run in certain locations, giving publishers/booksellers direct access to potential customers.

**Evidence and research** – Participants were keen that any strategy should be based on evidence and real-world data, not ‘what ifs’. Pilot schemes and models that are currently running are already collecting and sharing data amongst members.

There was a feeling that research should be carried out and the results made available to all stakeholders, although no specific areas of research were mentioned.

**Discovery through lending** – E-lending should be viewed as an asset and as an effective marketing tool, according to Christopher Platt and Steve Potash. Both believe that e-lending (in the same way as traditional lending) helps to drive readers to seek out new authors and subjects, which in turn leads to more sales for authors and publishers.

**E-lending is a similar model to traditional lending** – Misconceptions over the e-lending model persist. Most models follow the one copy/one loan model that is recognisable in traditional book loans.

**Payment for content producers** – Author representatives were keen to ensure an extension of the Public Lending Right (PLR) payments or a suitable alternative that recognises and remunerates them.

**Back listing** – Blockbuster sales will not be affected by e-lending as demand will always outstrip supply – if users cannot get a copy of a specific blockbuster at their library they are reasonably likely to buy a copy, it was claimed.

Older books are less likely to be treated in the same way – if a user cannot find a title they are looking for in the library, they are more likely to settle for a similar title that is available rather than purchasing it.

**Charging for e-loans** – Suggestions that e-book loans should carry a charge, based on the assumption that people who are able to purchase an e-reader are therefore able to pay for content. It was pointed out that e-book readers are becoming less expensive. (Currently the cheapest models are around £30, but next year will see the introduction of a sub £10 model). E-books can be read on existing devices, such as PCs, tablets, smartphones and featurephones – all of which are widely available and already in many homes.

Possible ways to pay for e-lending – central government pays, local authority increases funding, library diverts budget from traditional books to e-books, charging for e-loans, or publishers give e-content for free.

It was claimed that if charging was introduced today, there would be no going back on that in the future – even if e-books become the dominant and normal way of borrowing.

A two-tier model was suggested with people able to ‘queue jump’ if they were willing to pay a fee. Those who didn’t would have to wait longer.

**Status of e-books** – a change in the way e-books are viewed legally could help bring clarity to the issue. They are currently digital services. A move to create a ‘digital product’ category could help for tax and legislation.

**Legislation** – Any legislation must be for the here and now. It is difficult to try to ‘future proof’ legislation by predicting where things will be in 5 or 10 years time. Better to amend in the future.

**Benefits for people with disabilities** – e-books are an opportunity for people with sight impairments. The Publishers Association is working to include features such as text-to-speech in e-books to help open up reading to blind and sight-impaired people.

**Digital exclusion**– concerns were raised that a rise in libraries purchasing e-books would eat into funds for traditional books. This in turn could lead to those unable to afford e-book readers being priced out of library lending.

CILIP President Phil Bradley pointed out that costs were falling with plans for sub £10 e-reader planned for 2013.

Christopher Platt said the decision to invest in e-books was not easy for libraries as current prices mean multiple physical books can generally be purchased for the equivalent price of one e-book.

**Central or local e-book service** – The question of should there be a national e-book library was raised.

Having a Central e-book library would be more efficient than a series of local e-libraries, through shared back office and increased purchasing power.

Smaller regional and local e-libraries should be more nimble and better able to innovate to meet demands of readers and new technology.

## **Government review of eBook lending**

Government has recognized the developments in eBooks and their potential impact on the libraries sector. Culture Minister, Ed Vaizey, announced a review of e-books in public libraries in September 2012. The review will issue a call for evidence and will report back in early 2013.

## **Libraries All Party Parliamentary Group**

The Libraries APPG provides opportunities for discussion and debate about the role libraries play in society and their future. It exists to promote and discuss themes in the wider information and knowledge sector including the impact of technology, skills and training, professional standards and broader issues.

*Rob Green, Senior Reporter, Update magazine, The Chartered Institute of Library Information Professionals*

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