Down-to-earth vision

Community based IT initiatives and social inclusion

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Acknowledgements

We wish to thank the following people who have contributed to this study:

Preface

This report is based on research into community-based IT initiatives, with the purpose of trying to identify factors which might be critical to their more strategic development through policy. The research involved project visits, in-depth interviews, informal interviews, a literature review, and a seminar with practitioners. Not all of the projects which we visited have been described in detail here, and because of constraints of space a great deal has been left out. We also need to record certain constraints placed on the data gathering process.

Some projects using ICTs for socio-economic development and regeneration have gained a high profile, sometimes because of sponsorship and the publicity associated with it, sometimes simply because of a level of innovation which attracts attention. As a consequence, some have had to endure a constant stream of visits from International VIPs, civic dignitaries, local government officers, politicians, academics, researchers and students. Hosting such visits is time-consuming and a drain on resources that they can ill afford. For this reason, one request to visit was turned down, another proved impossible to arrange in spite of the greatest willingness, and one interview took place off-site and was unsatisfactorily hurried. At the Manchester EVHs, visits from researchers when permitted are restricted, as a matter of policy, to one hour's duration.

There can be positive benefits from such demands, of course, as noted by project workers from the Learning Shop in Dundee:

'There were times when visits from interested parties seemed almost to take over from the actual work of the Learning Shop. The interest shown, and the questions raised with regard to our styles and methods of work have allowed us to challenge and assess our work and philosophy continually.' (1)

One further constraint was experienced at the field-trip to the Women's EVH. The nature of this project, which is to provide a secure, non-threatening environment for women to gain access to training and technology, meant that staff felt it inappropriate for a male researcher to meet and observe the users of the EVH. Such restrictions mean that the WEVH is portrayed from the natural bias of the staff and management committee's perspective of its activities.

We have four points to make about these understandable limitations placed on interviews and observation.

First, the geographical coverage is, unfortunately, very much biassed towards England, although we have drawn on our knowledge of initiatives in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales (as well in the USA and Scandinavia). At the same time, the representation of projects based in rural areas is refreshingly high.

Secondly, we have been able to augment our field trips with knowledge gained from the literature, from the World Wide Web, and especially from contacts made at events around the country. In this respect we would like to pay tribute to two agencies: the Telecottages Association (TCA)(2), which has played a key role in disseminating information and

experience about teleworking and telecottages in the UK and overseas; and UK Communities Online, an organisation which is seeking to bring together and promote the experience of community networks. (3)

Thirdly, in spite of the limitations there is still a huge amount of activity to be described. What we have prepared in this report gives an indication of the variety of the work and the constraints involved. There is a constant trickle of information on the grapevine about new developments, giving the sense of a gathering movement which makes this field increasingly important.

Fourthly, given the acknowledged inconvenience of having to accommodate researchers, it is all the more important for us to thank those working at local level who have shared their time and experience with us to help draw attention to the developments described in this report. All have responded unfailingly to telephone and email requests for more information or to check certain details. As we point out elsewhere, in many cases the efforts made have been downright heroic, and we wish to pay tribute to the commitment and stamina of the project workers, who have led the community networking movement, often fighting isolated and unrecorded battles against considerable odds.

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3 UKCO is at www.communities.org.uk, tel 01273 677377.

Introduction

The context for this report is an ongoing debate about social inclusion in the information society. The terms of the debate have been outlined in the INSINC report (1) and they include complex social changes; increased information-intensiveness in everyday life and in the workplace; and radical new options for communication. An important thread in the debate has concerned public access to the technology and to the information highway. Although costs in this respect are falling, it is clear that inequality of access will remain a policy issue for the foreseeable future. We judge the importance of it as an issue according to how useful or empowering we think the technology can be. We are not talking about electric toasters or calculators here: access to the new information and communication technologies (ICTs) is a major policy issue because it is widely believed that they can make a significant difference in a very broad range of social situations - that they can contribute to self-confidence and strengthening communities, that they can enhance democracy by increasing participation, that they can improve employment prospects and release people's creativity, and so on.

Much of this might remain untested speculation, vulnerable to the cynic's dismissal, were it not for the fact that increasing numbers of people are getting together, applying their energies and skills to explore this technology at local level, because they believe it can offer them something. Most of the people we have talked to have shown a kind of down-to-earth vision - a practical commitment to an unrealised potential, which brings to mind Paulo Freire's memorable claim about adult literacy work: 'To undertake such a work ... it is necessary to be utopian.' (2)

Community initiatives which explore ICTs merit attention because they now constitute a movement. This movement reflects a vague but genuine sense of potential, coupled with a fear that 'ordinary people could be excluded' from the benefits which the technology offers.

One obvious way in which people could be excluded is by being denied access, through cost or through lack of awareness or opportunity. The INSINC report highlighted this threat and drew attention to efforts to provide public access through schools, public libraries, community centres, kiosks in public places, and so on. Subsequent developments, such as the National Grid for Learning (3) and the Public Libraries Networking initiative (4), are highly encouraging. But there is still insufficient appreciation at policy level of the extent to which people in communities might have influence and ownership of such access points.

There are now numerous examples of local initiatives around the country, and there is an air of pioneering excitement which is reflected in some of the comments reported in our case studies. Nonetheless, it is worthwhile putting them into some sort of historical perspective and offering a rough typology, so that we can better appreciate what we suggest is an increasingly important social role.

There are four points which we wish to make about the tradition to which these projects belong. First, community resource centres are not new - indeed they were widespread in the 1970s and 1980s as activists sought to exploit reprographic technology for community

benefit. One of the key lessons from studies at the time was that such a community facility uncovered the need for general support work:

'Most of the resource centres found themselves taking on much more neighbourhood work than they could really manage. Although they were designed originally to supplement neighbourhood-based community work, they often had to do it themselves - because of the lack of local resources and the variety of needs thrown up by increased community activity on all kinds of issues. Eventually they were forced to find other ways of tackling demand from individual groups - and the solution lay in helping groups to help each other through networks.' (5)

The centres in question were mostly large facilities serving a region or city (south Wales, Manchester, Leeds, etc). Most CRCs, particularly the more local ones, have a drop-in function and tend to be recognised as a place to which local people are attracted, a place they go to with their concerns and their ideas or just for a chat, a place where they choose to spend some time, because it is non-threatening and may give them a sense of belonging.

The local 'reach' and geographical scope of CRCs is an important issue for further research, which should take account of the experience of public libraries, schools and shops for instance. Questions are raised by the findings of a survey of users of the Powys telecentres in Wales, an extensive network serving small rural communities. It was found that 80% of users lived within walking distance - only 5.7% were travelling over 5 miles.(6)

Secondly, there is within this tradition, another thread comprising community computing projects. Many of these will have been established in the mid 1980s with the advent of inexpensive stand-alone computers. As organisations of all kinds gradually adopted computer technology, the demand focussed very much on training and the acquisition of skills for employment. Projects such as the Barton Hill Workshop in Bristol and the Burley Lodge Centre in Leeds earned considerable reputations for their training in computer skills in their communities. The fact that neither was quick to change to being a public access point for the information highway is an indication, we suspect, of the unproven economics of the latter role. It seems to be hard to sustain an initiative which offers online access, without considerable subsidy of some kind, where the demand is uncertain.

Thirdly, tribute must be paid to the early vision and experience of teleservice centres in Scandinavia. In the UK, the development of telecottages owes much to the work of the TCA (the Telework, Telecottage and Telecentre Assocation). Another, more recent development has been the coordination of 'Local Support Centres' by the government's Information Society Initiative. These are centres aimed at small businesses, providing a mix of demonstration, advice, training and services.(7)

The fourth point to be made about the tradition of resource centres is that while they appear to reflect a clear and widespread social need, they have featured only fitfully in social policy. Centres which in the 1970s might be offering reprographic facilities for a women's group and helping to establish a newsletter for residents on a housing estate were unlikely ever to gain sufficient status in the eyes of policy-makers to survive any reduction in local government expenditure.

In this respect, it is worth drawing attention to a key recommendation of the INSINC report. The Working Party argues that community resource centres (CRCs) are of such fundamental importance for the development of a socially-inclusive information society that they should be established across the country and they should be publicly funded. In other words, there is a social policy responsibility to ensure that what CRCs can offer is offered, to ordinary people at local level: that such facilities should no longer be experimental and forced to sink or swim in the fickle currents of the project culture, but that they should be integrated, like schools and libraries, as a basic device to promote social inclusion.

For such an argument to be accepted, there needs to be supporting evidence of (a) the potential of the ICTs to make a significant difference, and (b) the inadequacy of the commercial, the voluntary, or the discretionary public funding models, to sustain CRCs. Comprehensive structural investments of this scale in the past, such as the network of railways, drainage, schools or public libraries, required such justification and the political recognition that there was an exceptional social need to be met and / or an exceptional social value to be gained. Our understanding of the practicalities of CRCs suggests that the costs involved, in this case, are small by comparison; and that the price of inaction could be exorbitant.

This report, then, forms part of the process of accumulating the evidence which is needed. Other evidence is now being collected, particularly through the work of UK Communities Online and UK Citizens Online Democracy.(8)

Technology

The main lessons of this research are not about what can be done with the technology or the difficulties encountered in using it, and we have not included details of the variety of equipment in use at the projects. However, two points have emerged to which attention needs to be drawn.

First, there is a general issue to do with the development of the infrastructure of the Information Society, specifically the broadband Intranets which are being developed in local areas, usually led by local authorities. There is concern that these high-speed systems are often not being made available to community and voluntary organisations, that in effect they constitute 'broadband islands' giving privileged access, and the options for community use are overlooked.

Secondly, at the Manchester EVHs and in Wiltshire in particular, it was felt that up-to-date equipment was important to give users the best possible introduction to the Information Society, and there was some disillusionment with having to work on out-dated machines. The potential of multimedia, in particular, calls for fast processors and high quality displays, without which a demonstration or practical session can be offputting. The same is true of slow transmission rates for modems. If initiatives are to address local needs and remain relevant in a rapidly changing environment, technology policies must be given a higher priority than usually has been the case.

Social Inclusion

Much of the work which is described in this report is about social inclusion, whether or not the initiatives pre-dated fashionable use of the term. The establishment of the Manchester EVHs in the early 1990s, for instance, was emphatically about confronting social exclusion. The community resource centres (CRCs) which have been running since 1980 in Herefordshire and Worcestershire may have been more subtle and bottom-up in their implementation, but their purpose is clearly very similar: the CRCs leaflet claims that 'The principle is to bring access to modern technology to disadvantaged groups.' (9)

Where there is social exclusion or the threat of social exclusion, some of the initiatives constitute community responses. In Grimethorpe, for example, the computer user group has gone from its first meetings, in a very few hectic years, to a substantial Lottery grant and an innovative deal with an Internet Service Provider, almost entirely without the involvement of any local authority regeneration agency, partnership board, quango, or rubber stamp. Similarly the Newtel project in East London was set up by an independent community development agency which ensured that it retained control of the partnership which was established to maximise the initiative.(10)   Again, a crucial factor in the success of the Barton Hill Workshop in Bristol has been its basis and credibility in the local community.

Elsewhere, responses have come from authorities themselves. In Newcastle for instance, it was seen as appropriate for the city council to take the lead in exploring models for community use of the Internet which are low-cost, independent and sustainable. Newnet (11) was established to provide a place for community organisations to contribute their information and views and from its inception was exploring ways in which it could become a self standing organisation.

A key impetus for local authority activity has been the move towards electronic delivery of services, for improved efficiency and cost savings. Some authorities have recognised that this objective need not invalidate, and perhaps need not dominate, other concurrent objectives, such as community involvement and empowerment. Thus Bristol City Council, beginning to develop a new IT strategy in 1996 which would be driven 'largely on the basis of opening up ... our internal computer systems and networks,' noted 'IT in the community as a political priority'; said so publicly; and its first public access points, to be established early in 1998, will include community and voluntary agencies.(12,13)   Local groups are already contributing data, (eg material from a recent black history project), to the Digital Bristol site.(14)

Another clear example of a public authority taking an enabling role is seen in the case of CINNI, the Community Information Network for Northern Ireland. Through its partnership with the Northern Ireland civil service, CINNI 'has free access to web and mail server as required.' (15)

Other examples abound of authorities taking the lead at a crucial time or in a crucial way. Pioneering work was carried out by the Highlands and Islands Region in the early 1990s on community receptivity, for example. More recently, Hull Task Force has funded IT in

the Community Ltd 'to help residents in the West Hull area learn about and use computers,' with a strong emphasis on the development of content:

'By using existing centres it will be possible to train local people to develop their own content and then pass that up to the central server for everyone to access.' (16).
The London Borough of Brent, through an initiative based in Harlesden library, is among other authorities working along similar lines. (17)

Community Involvement

Notwithstanding such examples, it is worrying that some authorities seem to have failed to recognise the potential of these technologies beyond their own office networking and information provision. A recent study of local authority web sites in the UK concluded:

'In the vast majority of cases local authorities regard the Internet simply as the latest device for the one way transmission of information to the public.' (18)

It is not just the corporate IT strategy which matters: corporate strategy also has to focus on community involvement; and the two elements - IT and community services - have to know of each other's existence.

This is a critical issue for social inclusion in the Information Society. As the infrastructure of digital networks is being planned and put in place, usually by local authority-led partnerships, the early involvement of community and voluntary agencies is essential to ensure the widest possible access, development of content, acquisition of skills, and distribution of benefits.

Where authorities are overlooking their potential role here they may be failing on three counts:
•	failing to engage with the community sector in establishing the information infrastructure, for example with regard to public access points
•	missing the opportunity to include interactive communications facilities for citizens and community groups
•	overlooking opportunities for community organisations to publish their own information in electronic form.

Community practice

In considering social inclusion and community involvement in the Information Society we can draw on a framework suggested by Andrew Glen for 'community practice'. (19) He distinguishes three forms of community practice and gives their aims as follows:

	Aims
community development	promoting community self-help
community action	campaigning for community interests and community policies
community services approach	developing community oriented organisations and services

We should add that community involvement is by definition a feature of each approach. The initiatives which we describe in this report offer some examples. Thus the CRCs in Herefordshire and Worcestershire exemplify the community development approach, in which an administering agency, the Community Council, is working in a non-directive way to help people in communities to meet their own needs. The Grimethorpe EVH is an outstanding instance of community action in this field, a community group which has organised effectively for a particular purpose. The community services approach is seen in the examples from Manchester, including the Community Information Network. Also, Barnsley College of the Web may prove to be a particularly good example of this approach in terms of community involvement and inter-agency links. We understand that Barnsley MBC has been active in strategic work on Information Society issues with a range of partners.

These are experimental models which we have been investigating, and several have been fraught with complexities and local political difficulties which cloud the lessons they have for us. Nonetheless our contention is that the models which emerge in the future will necessarily be mixed models: community development, community action and community services approaches will all have their place in the development of CRCs, because CRCs are becoming an essential feature of policy for social inclusion.

The 'community services approach'

A huge amount of resources and energy is currently being invested in the community services approach to the Information Society. Numerous local authorities and other public agencies in the UK are struggling with the niceties of partnership, the technicalities of network definition, and the bureaucracy of large funding bids. It is therefore sensible to consider in a little more detail what our research has to suggest in this respect, particularly with regard to public access points in communities. There are three broad issues to discuss.

First, we should draw attention to the dangers of the 'grand-scale' top-down approach. The Manchester EVHs, for example, reveal a considerable level of disaffection with the clumsy handling of the city council's policy requirements. Funding-related distortions are

one aspect of this and are considered below. But there are other issues, to do with the political expediency of flagship projects and the seductiveness of the technological possibilities, for example. Since the mechanisms of genuine partnership are so persistently difficult for many authorities, it is justifiable to express concern over the rush to develop extensive, grand-scale projects in response to challenge funding opportunities which are unlikely to have the kinds of timescale needed for community initiatives. (Experienced practitioners noted clearly at our seminar in October 1997 that appropriate timescales were approximately three years for gestation and, possibly, sustainability in six years. Funding policies need to reflect this).

Secondly, we can learn from a consideration of the origins and evolution of projects. Here we describe two models to clarify what we mean: the evolved model and the custom model.

An example of the evolved model is the Learning Shop in Dundee. This initiative grew out of a well-established adult basic education (ABE) project, based in a shop with a drop-in facility, which offered 'a variety of opportunities using the computers as an attraction and as a tool.' (21) The Herefordshire and Worcestershire CRCs described in this report are also examples of the evolved model. Like the Learning Shop, they have proved their appropriateness for local need, have adapted to changes, and have addressed needs at a pace which can be matched by their communities. Another example might be public libraries, which have evolved a form of service which is occasionally fiercely defended by local communities. The introduction of community computing facilities, as at The Hit Zone in Brent for example,(22) should be a natural evolution of their role rather than a radical experiment.

One interesting aspect of the studies reported here is that two initiatives - SCIP and SPEC - are fairly recent but show acute awareness of the time it takes to develop community involvement and to establish an appropriate community identity.

At the other end of the spectrum is the 'custom' model, with community projects being designed (not necessarily top-down or on a grand scale) and constructed as if in a race. Initiatives which survive such circumstances do so, we suspect, in spite of and not because of the momentum they receive. Obviously, customised projects, such as the Wiltshire Telecottages Network or Barnsley-Net, ran great risks through forcing the pace - the pace at which workers can achieve tasks, at which managers can oversee, or users can absorb, or communities can accept.

One of the classic dangers of the custom or tailored approach is the 'community-hopes-raised-and-dashed' syndrome. In this respect perhaps it is valid to restate one of the truisms of community development - that local people will be more prepared to defend and support an initiative over which they feel some sense of ownership, than for one which is planted on their patch without clear appreciation of the implications.

Thirdly, in our consideration of the community service approach to community-based IT provision, there is the question of the extent and duration of an authority's role. We can suggest three models here.

- Those which continue to be nurtured by a public authority (eg SPEC, Newnet in Newcastle)
- Those which were enabled by a public authority, but which are now autonomous (eg Herefordshire and Worcestershire CRCs, Barton Hill Workshop)
- Those which are locally grown and community managed (eg Grimethorpe, Newtel in Newham).

It is probably of little value to indulge in definitions here: there are degrees of 'nurturing' for example, but this is not the point. We should note also that what might be an appropriate model for one area may be far less appropriate in another. What matters, we feel, is commitment to the objective of autonomy, of community responsibility for the resource; and sensitivity to its timing. Again, funding regimes which commit all partners to a breathtaking relationship followed by abrupt divorce can do great and lasting damage: just as uninformed and distant management can do, as the story of Wiltshire network demonstrates.

A discussion of the community service approach, then, reveals numerous complexities for policymakers and managers. The complexity increases, because three significant patterns overlay Glen's framework: funding, partnership, and sustainability. In our discussions with practitioners since carrying out the fieldwork, these three themes have emerged as being the most critical issues, and we address them now.

Funding

Our case studies reveal a wide range of funding bases, from the low cost basic model in Herefordshire and Worcestershire, to the substantial City Challenge and Lottery grants attracted in Barnsley. Our fundamental position conforms to the statement made by the INSINC Working Party in The net result: CRCs require core public funding on an ongoing basis. This could, of course, come in the form of a contribution in kind, such as rent-free premises. What matters is the reliability and permanence of the contribution. In this section we expand on these statements by reflecting on what our research has shown.

First, we need to clarify some distinctions. For CRCs to have core public funding does not mean funding has to be taken away from other public services, such as libraries (although it might mean, obviously, that services might need to adapt where appropriate to accommodate CRCs). Secondly, it does not mean that all the funding required to run a CRC should come from public sources. Thirdly, it does mean a policy requirement to support CRCs on a permanent basis. Fourthly, 'to support CRCs' does not mean 'manage and control' them.

All of the project workers we visited used a mix of funding to achieve their objectives, and were seldom far from the treadmill of proposal-writing. Some (eg in Wiltshire) were subjected to unrealistic financial objectives. Others (eg Grimethorpe) have achieved a great deal with almost nothing. While we question the value of extravagant pump-priming, however, we acknowledge the example of the South Bristol Learning Network.

SBLN have had no core funding since the £750,000 TEC Challenge grant which began in September 1993 and finished in September 1994. But this was the platform for an extraordinary range of initiatives which now includes a highly successful trading company. Furthermore, apart from training a large number of people who might otherwise not have had the chance to learn about the technology, SBLN has kept 16 people in employment. (23)

The effect of the 'project culture' was evident during the seminar for practitioners which we ran in October 1997 as part of this research. The seminar took place shortly after the announcement of National Lottery funding grants. While several delegates had received good news and were looking forward to getting the money to achieve some of their aims, others showed all the symptoms of excessive grant-dependency. From the point of view of many people working at local level, the uncertainty of large grant schemes such as the Lottery does not compensate for the decline of the local authorities' discretionary grant structure. It is felt that any large funding scheme, such as those offered by the European Union, tends to require a disproportionate amount of investment, and favours those who are articulate in its culture. In our view, this is no way to prepare for a socially-inclusive Information Society. The unevenness and short-termism are both extremely negative aspects of these social policy mechanisms, and they can have the effect of demoralising members of the community and practitioners.

Big funding distorts. It can distort agencies in their ambitions, their outlook and their energies. It can exhaust and it can inflate. Great things have been achieved and great hopes have been dashed. The issue here is about the appropriateness of large-scale funding schemes for a sensitive and crucial area of policy. In spite of the example of SBLN (which is arguably a special case because of its timing and because of the particular attributes of its first director) we do not believe that most CRCs can become successful businesses or that they can be run at a profit without ongoing subsidy.

The implications of the pressures felt on rural centres, such as Codford and Standon, are that the community development function is subordinate to the financial targets. This is obviously so for the practitioners because that's the deal they got. Our point is that it should not be: because, for the reasons expounded by INSINC, CRCs are fundamental to a socially-inclusive Information Society. Two questions arise: what organisational and partnership structures might be appropriate to run CRCs; and what measures are needed to ensure their sustainability?

Organisations and partnership

Increasingly, the organisation and management of partnerships is central to community practice and to regeneration, and yet little attention has been paid to the range of skills required of those involved. As Andrew Glen argues, community practitioners need:
'to have expertise not only in facilitating but also in inducing agencies to co-operate. Where they have appreciable financial resources, possess political, ideological or professional credibility, are able to gain access and entry to influence other organisations and are knowledgeable about community networks, they will be more influential in promoting interagency collaboration.' (24)

The key points to reflect on are that agencies working in partnership are likely to have different but overlapping objectives; and that each brings to the partnership something (skills, resources, experience) which none of the others has to offer. (25) Thus in the Coventry Community Network, the relationship between the three key agencies helps to explain the project's success this far. Again, at SPEC, the crucial role of the private sector has been recognised but the partnership has been managed around mutual benefit and with an essential pragmatism.

Given the length of time which these initiatives require, the loyalty of partnerships may be an issue. We note that SBLN has benefited particularly from the consistency of its partners' support - ICL, BT, CompuServe, South Bristol College and Westec have all been associated with SBLN for some time.

In many community IT initiatives, a more organisationally supportive role could be provided by project partners. They have the resources and expertise to contribute significantly to the initiative's development. Local initiatives, overseen by management boards which consist mostly of people with jobs and responsibilities elsewhere, rely heavily on project staff and the project manager. The job can be very demanding, with expectations from the broadest strategic planning to highly specific operational work. Managers have to practice a wide variety of skills in areas as diverse as marketing, promotion, partnership building, fund management, building management, proposal writing, information service provision, administration and public relations.

Many of the partners involved in these initiatives have the resources and expertise to help projects with such tasks in a practical way. Unfortunately, large organisations often see their role in a partnership as part of a working group that ratifies things and provides occasional financial support, while the staff go off and do things. A more appropriate way of viewing both their role and responsibility within a community partnership is as a working group that does things. The current approach to partnership contributes to the continuation of the project mentality of short-term support. As one project worker put it, 'There is a project mentality which says anything new is good and can be funded, instead of making funding available to consolidate or improve what we already have.'

Our research does not throw up an ideal model, and this is probably because it's still too early to say in some cases. Certainly, the Herefordshire and Worcestershire examples seem to be extremely sound, whereas there is a strong sense of tiredness and resentment at one or two of the Manchester EVHs, perhaps reflecting the nature of the partnerships there. In our view, the models which seem to hold most promise are those at SPEC (public, private, voluntary); SCIP (public, academic, voluntary); and the three essentially voluntary sector-controlled initiatives in Codford, Grimethorpe, and Herefordshire and Worcestershire.

Practitioners at our seminar suggested some preferences for partnership and organisational collaboration:
• 	to involve existing organisations (not set up new ones)
• 	to work with an umbrella agency if it will allow sufficient independence (workers at Wiltshire telecottages may have disagreed with this!)

- to share experiences
- to have a business plan
- to use processes, not ready-made solutions
- to mix bottom-up and top-down approaches.

We have three further points to add here. The first is to register the almost complete absence of public libraries from association with these initiatives. We are well aware of a number of community computing projects which have involved or been led by public libraries. But their absence from so many of them is of concern.

Secondly, we feel that the academic sector in general has failed to make a significant contribution to social inclusion in the Information Society. We appreciate that there are certain conditions over provision of access to JANET for example, but the potential to offer inexpensive training to local community groups is enormous. The universities in particular seem to have been sluggish and unstrategic in this respect.

Thirdly, we have noted suggestions that mentoring should be a recognised contribution which partners could and should make towards local initiatives of this kind. In the case of Wiltshire telecottages for instance, such contributions could well have meant the difference between failure and success.

Sustainability

The sustainability of CRCs is critical for a socially inclusive Information Society. As our report shows, initiatives are highly vulnerable for a variety of reasons. Some only seem to survive through workers' efforts which are nothing short of heroic in the circumstances. Ensuring that worthwhile projects are nurtured through their early years if necessary, and given the strength and capacities to claim their own independence, is an urgent issue for social policy.

'A resource centre is essentially a long-term concept.' (26) In policy terms, there can be no defence for allowing short-termism to infect the community networking movement in its infancy. The project culture is intrinsically inconsistent with sustainable public initiatives of this kind.

Only two of the initiatives we report on here could be said not to have particular worries in this respect: Grimethorpe, which has a substantial Lottery grant on which to build its future; and SCIP, which is still essentially building a base. Even the Herefordshire and Worcestershire network, a model of sustained, manageable progress hitherto, may face a shift of emphasis as the numbers of computers and the Internet access points increase.

At the October 1997 seminar, practitioners were divided on the question of trading for sustainability. The telecottage movement has been unambiguous in promoting the business role of teleservice centres; but their commercial success tends to come at the expense of a community development function. As we have made clear, the balance depends on core public funding, possibly in the form of rent-free use of a public building. Considering the examples in our research, it would seem that for most of them, if one of the major costs (staff, premises, equipment depreciation) was covered, then making a

going concern of the basic project would be comparatively straightforward, and the funding system could then be used appropriately for special developments.

We have already indicated how significant we feel the individual project workers' contributions to be. A correspondent re-enforces the value of this role:
'Having voluntary workers, especially those who are able to present technical / computer language to those of us who are unfamiliar with the terms and equipment in a non-patronising manner was especially important. The Workshop is fortunate that its workers / helpers are committed to dispelling the mystique around new technology and have the necessary foundation of knowledge, excellent teaching and inter-personal skills, and equally importantly are good humoured and endlessly patient.' (27)

Among the hypotheses which were considered at the outset of this research work, was the question of whether the success of community computing initiatives tends to depend on the energy, dynamism, commitment, perhaps charisma, of one individual. We are not satisfied that this suggestion any longer reflects the truth, if it ever did. This may be because community practice and the management of regeneration initiatives generally is now a recognised area of specialist skills - albeit ill-defined and in many cases with tortuously deformed job descriptions. The message for policymakers is not: 'You can't plan strategically for CRCs because you have to have such exceptional people'. The message is: 'Community practice is a fundamental social role which requires adequate support.'

Community resource centres, and other community-based IT initiatives, require:
• access to the infrastructure of the information society
• a free public virtual space where people can congregate and interact informally
• skilled, communicative workers and animateurs
• relevant content, and the opportunities and skills to generate their own content
• systems which allow interaction and communication, not just one-way transmission
• human networks, intermediaries
• a non-threatening, community-managed public place to go to.

With such conditions in place, consistently across the country, CRCs will make significant contributions to social inclusion.

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The Manchester Electronic Village Halls (EVHs)

The three electronic village halls were developed in Manchester in the early 1990s, largely based on the Scandinavian model of rural community teleservice centres. The EVHs were set up to address social exclusion and they were seen as an attempt to address the long-term unemployment and skills shortages endemic to socially deprived communities. Despite having had to adopt a certain commercial realism in order to achieve sustainability, none can be described as commercial operations. They provide, for their specific communities, access to technology, training and information services, to contribute to social inclusion by providing the potential for employment opportunities, community development, and personal development.

The Manchester Host

The Manchester Host, which provides access to online communications and information services to local government, small businesses and the voluntary sector, forms part of a wider telematics strategy in Manchester. The Host was established in 1991 by a partnership comprising the Centre for Employment Research (CER) at Manchester Polytechnic [now Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU)], the Economic Development Department of Manchester City Council (MCC), and a workers' co-operative, Soft Solution. (1) At this time it was seen as an innovative system which provided low cost conferencing, bulletin boards and e-mail facilities, as well as giving access to external databases, fax and telex services. (2)

Description

A 1989 study into the socially deprived area of East Manchester, undertaken by CER for MCC, identified long-term unemployment and skills shortages as serious endemic problems. The report concluded that innovative measures such as the introduction of a new technology culture to the area were needed, and referred to community-based projects in the Danish 'Social Experiments with IT' programme.

CER recommended that the development of EVHs in Manchester should be encouraged and closely linked, so that access to disadvantaged groups could be ensured. One of the problems identified with the launch of the Host at that time was that it ran the risk of access being confined to those who could afford it. As an attempt to address this, funding was attracted, including capital funding from MCC and matched funding from the EC's Social Fund scheme, New Opportunities for Women (NOW).

Community and resource centres were asked to tender for the two year EVH funding, giving details of what targets they would set and how they would be achieved. Three were selected. The Chorlton Workshop EVH represented a geographic community in Manchester. The other two, the Women's EVH and the Bangladesh House (BH) EVH were drawn from communities of interest or need in the city, although today the BH EVH, being based in a Bangladeshi community centre, is more representative of a geographical community than a community of interest.

The importance of the EVHs has been their role of providing access to technology and training that people from socially deprived communities could not afford. The experience of the EVHs during the past six years however, has shown that whilst they have been able to meet the target driven training requirements of funding bodies, telematics itself has had little impact in terms of solving long-term unemployment.

Grounded in existing community organisations or networks, the EVHs were developed around a partnership approach to community development using ICTs. Although, in this respect, it is far from clear how the original vision of EVHs fits into the prestigious telematics programme. (3) The fact that the MTTP homepage has links to the EVHs suggests a role of some import. Indeed MTTP claims that it aims to explore and exploit the potential of new technologies in terms of both economic and community development.

However, the fact that the EVHs were not invited to participate in the processes of funding proposals development, or community development policy making appears to indicate a top-down approach on behalf of MCC and MMU. Certainly, the EVHs would appear to be the poor relation of local partnerships in Manchester.

Organisational Issues

All of the initiatives in the field-trip had management committee structures designed to suit there own specific environment and circumstances. However, with the exception of the WEVH, which gives the impression of being a very professionally run initiative, there appeared to be an absence of any clear direction in terms of developing mission

statements, aims and objectives, etc. The impression gained was that resources are so stretched that developing a formal business plan takes low priority.

Technology

Hardware and software platforms, especially at Chorlton and BHEVH, are ageing rapidly and the need for immediate upgrading cannot be over-emphasized.   This will require a level of investment beyond the menas of the EVHs themselves. If this issue is not addressed as a matter of some urgency the EVHs will gradually become irrelevant to the technology and information handling needs of citizens and community organisations in the information society. As Ian Dempsey, of Bangladesh House argues, EVHs are no longer leading edge initiatives.

Further, the rise in knowledge and use of the Internet will require EVHs to develop access beyond the limited scope currently available. Even under the current restricted access, demand is high. This trend will certainly continue for the foreseeable future and further connectivity is recommended.

Despite the dependence of the EVHs on technology, there appears to be no technology policy at any of the initiatives. The rapid pace of technological development means that it is essential for the EVHs to develop policies relating to the acquisition, implementation and upgrading of technology.

Staffing

The main problem in this area appears to arise from the problematic nature of funding. The tenure and stability of staff at such initiatives cannot be guaranteed because of the short-term nature of funding. In the case of Chorlton, which makes use of volunteers to a greater extent than the other two EVHs, the dependence on volunteers is pivotal to the delivery of many courses.

Funding

Many of the core services provided by EVHs are dependent on short-term funding from organisations, agencies and charities. It is important to note that the nature of this funding causes problems for all three EVHs in terms of the provision of training and services. In fact it often leads to initiatives chasing whatever funds are available, and undertaking work which does not necessarily meet their remit, simply to survive.

The retrospective payment of EC funding is a cause for concern. EVHs are dependent on the commitment of the staff, volunteers and management committees. Some of these funds are applied for and administered by MCC/MMU and sometimes appear to EVH staff to be driven more by research and prestige than addressing the needs of local communities.

Funding from such as the FEFC affords EVHs some stability. However, administrative requirements are so bureaucratic that they frequently place an intolerable burden on already stretched human resources. The bureaucratic nature of target driven funding is not restricted to the FEFC alone. Training agencies, TECs and the EC all appear to place more emphasis on meeting quantitative outputs than achieving qualitative results.

Sustainability

One of the interesting issues to arise from the data collection process was that all three initiatives view their long-term future in terms of survival. Funding is volatile and erratic which sometimes leads to disillusionment, especially among staff. Staff are very often highly skilled and committed people who, if working in either the private or public sectors, would earn significantly more than they do at the EVHs. Invariably this leads to a lack of stability and a high turn-over.

There is little doubt that EVHs have to be innovative to be sustainable. This applies as much to developing commercial uses, as it does to getting money from the funding bodies and has led to the community-based plus commercial approach. However, it is also important to note that sustainability cannot be guaranteed by financial targets alone. EVHs aim to meet a variety of community development needs within their parent communities. In order for such initiatives to be sustainable, communities must identify with and support that role within the community.

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Chorlton Workshop EVH (CWEVH)

Introduction

The EVH is located in a United Methodist Church building and is based on an adult education workshop established in the mid 1980s, which made extensive use of computers. The early days of the EVH were marked by a significant turnover in personnel, as funds for existing projects dried-up.

Shortly after the start of the two year EVH initiative, the EC New Opportunities for Women (NOW) programme funding came on-stream. Even though the workshop had not been involved in the bid process, they benefited from the EC funds secured by the city council. The workshop was expected to undertake a programme of women's training and pan-European networking. Oblivious to the programme's overall perspective, Andy Robinson recalls the welcoming but surprised response at the EVH:

'So that was some additional money in the budget but it also meant that we had to do this kind of bizarre project. Talking to women from different parts of Europe that didn't have much in common with the people that came in [here]. We did what was expected of us and at the end of the two years it more or less just finished. There was nothing really that came out of it because we were already doing women-only sessions.' (1)

Despite the lack of any obvious success from the networking aspects of the NOW programme, the unexpected funding enabled the workshop to secure and stabilize its strategy of providing basic education for unwaged people.

Aims and objectives

CWEVH has the following mission statement:
- to break down the barriers preventing people from gaining access to education, and to provide a positive learning experience in a supportive environment which will enable students to gain the confidence and skills to progress to further education, training or employment.

The workshop aims to:
- offer a first step into education or training for unwaged adults who have been disadvantaged or discriminated against and have not previously had access to educational opportunities.

The objectives through which the workshop's mission will be meet are:
- free classes for all, with free childcare
- small classes with volunteers offering individual support alongside tutors
- support for people with disabilities
- outreach and support for speakers of other languages
- provision of ongoing individual advice, guidance and information by a student support worker.

Funding

During the initial two year period the services provided at the workshop were secured by the city council EVH funding. Since then the situation has not been so secure and although the 1995-96 Annual Report lists successes in obtaining funding from a variety of sources, the uncertainty of the funding situation created tensions. The Workshop is sometimes forced to undertake work that does not fit its remit in order to survive.

'Over the last three years, the funding situation has been really difficult. To some extent, what we've done has been dictated by what money we can get to do things.' (Robinson, 1996)

One form of funding that has afforded the EVH some stability comes from the Further Education Funding Council. In the period between 1994 and 1995, an almost five-fold increase in funding has supported much of the computer training and literacy and numeracy work. However, many of the centre's core services appear to be dependant on short-term funding from a variety of agencies.

The temporary nature of much of the funding, whilst of strategic and operational importance to the continued existence of the EVH, causes problems for long-term planning and service reliability. Discussing the relationship between the EVH and external organisations, Robinson reveals an underlying frustration:

'If you follow the money, you'll see where the relationships are. I think that's been one of the fundamental problems with the initiative really. The primary relationship is between the EVHs and the funding.' (1)

Despite the financial instability, the EVH was able to run more classes and train more students whilst spending £3000 less in 1995 than in 1994. Notwithstanding the diligence and commitment of those involved with the project that facilitated such a feat, the Workshop continues to run a deficit budget. (2) The transitory nature of EVH funding is such that Chorlton is focussing attention on the education strand of the National Lottery.

Another important issue relating to funding is that in contrast to early recommendations that the EVHs should be linked together (1991), this has not been achieved.

'There's never been any money put into trying to build some type of common structure across the centres and so it hasn't happened really... because we're quite pushed for resources. Its very hard to put resources into that kind of thing [EVH networking], if nobody is paying you for it and there's no direct pay-back, and you've got a big stack of things you need to do.' (1)

Implementation

The problems of funding have forced CWEVH to undergo several periods of transition. However, the primary focus has remained one of providing educational opportunities for people who have been discriminated against and/or are disadvantaged.

The EVH occupies a key position in adult education provision by reaching, and providing training for, people who are unlikely to take advantage of other more formal educational programmes.

'By offering free education in an informal setting with individual support, the Workshop offers a real opportunity to socially and economically disadvantaged groups in the inner city area of Central and South Manchester.' (3)

The centre also acts as an informal drop-in centre 'for people not necessarily wanting to follow a particular curriculum but just wanting to have time and space to come in and chat with friends, play pool, socialise and get problems sorted or off their chest.' (4)

Education and training

Courses at the Workshop cover a wide range of subject areas, ranging from basic mathematics and English, to a variety of skill-share workshops such as machine knitting, sewing and drama, as well a number of Workers' Educational Association supported classes including, parents' education, women's' creative writing, and silk screen printing.

Most of the IT related courses at the Workshop are aimed at serving the needs of the target users and are provided free of charge. In order to raise revenue the Workshop also runs a number of computer short courses. It may be helpful to distinguish the courses as either community or commercial sessions.

There are five categories of community IT training courses at the Chorlton EVH.
- Computer drop-in sessions
- Introduction to computers
- Foundation Accreditation in Science and Technology (FAST) beginners' certificate
- Computer Literacy and Information Technology (CLAIT)
- Open Access.

For many students their first steps into computing training are by way of the 'Drop-in' courses. These are divided into a women's' and beginners' sessions. Students are provided with the support to progress at their own pace, usually over a one term period.

The emphasis of these sessions is on confidence building and that theme is evident in the Workshop's overall approach to training.

As the EVH only has two terminals with Internet connection, training in this area is restricted. This situation is under review but currently, Internet access is restricted to the 'Drop-ins', where one of the volunteer workers is able to incorporate his knowledge and

skills to whet the appetite of the beginners, and the "Open Access' sessions. The latter enable students on Workshop courses, and the general public to book the use of the computers and an Internet terminal free of charge.

'The computers are used for a wide range of purposes - by our students for extra practice, CVs and job applications, producing posters and leaflets, and publishing work. As ever, Open Access was very busy all through the year, with demand consistently exceeding the number of computers available. In particular, greater public awareness of the Internet has prompted many enquiries for access.' (2)

The Workshop offers a range of computer short courses aimed at the voluntary sector, business, waged individuals and the city council. Most courses operate as part of a regular programme but some are tailored to meet the specific needs of individual organisations. In 1995, the short courses generated an income of approximately £5,000 against an estimated cost of around £2,000. (2)

Staff

In addition to Andy Robinson and Cath Dyson, the Workshop currently employs ten members of staff. The centre also uses a significant number of volunteer helpers, which enables it to provide a lot of individual support to students. The workshop runs an eight place creche, with two qualified workers, which is free for the children of people on courses.

Users

With the exception of the computer short courses, users at the Workshop tend to be unwaged people who would not normally get access to IT or educational opportunities. These might include women with children, single parents, carers, unemployed people, people with mental health problems, people with disabilities, and retired people. The emphasis is on those who, for whatever reason, might feel discouraged from going to college.

'That's our target group. Some of the things we do here are very similar to things you'll find in further education colleges. The people we target wouldn't go there, or if they did they'd walk straight out again.' (1)

The informality and flexibility of the Workshop is designed to act as a counter to the formality of traditional educational institutions.

An example of the success with which the EVH caters for the needs of its users sympathetically is evident in the testament given by the Sign Project Manager in the Annual report. (Sign is an organisation providing support to young deaf people with additional needs, or who have experienced mental health problems and are trying to live independently in the community.)

'[CWEVH] is the only place students have really learnt something and enjoyed coming to. The Workshop should also be commended for the fact that no 'special needs' label has ever been applied to those attending and they have been fully integrated and able to participate with others on an equal basis.' (2)

Future

There is a sense in which the potential of the Workshop to function as a community-oriented resource (especially through its 'drop-in' role), as opposed to one which is oriented primarily to individual learning needs, remains undeveloped because of resource constraints.

'Survival really, if you look at the work over the past three years its been very reactive. Funding has been extremely volatile and erratic; people's hours have changed a lot. The people who work here and some of the activities have been entirely dependant on the funding coming in. There's no feeling of stability and it's very hard to plan in that kind of environment... One of the things we're looking towards is providing better and accredited volunteer training. I think the volunteers give a lot to the centre but we don't give much in return.' (1)

However, Robinson points out that such priorities can only be achieved in a environment of financial and organisational stability.

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Bangladesh House (BH) EVH

The BHEVH is based on an existing community organisation, the Greater Manchester Bangladesh Association, which has existed as a community welfare organisation since 1971. In 1987 the Association began exploring the potential of IT to help their constituency:

'They were looking to move beyond the boundaries of relaxation and cultural stuff, and decided to turn to training.' (1)

With a grant from the Tudor Trust, the Association bought three computers and became involved in a number of problematic, basic computer skills, employment training programmes. This was followed by a period with another training agency, providing training on a programme called 'Full Employ'.

'It turned out we ended up doing virtually their job as well... recruiting people and doing assessments from interviews when people first came in. That tends to happen down here because of the language difficulties.' (1)

It was against this backcloth in 1990, which the centre's manager describes as 'humble beginnings' (2), that GMBA became involved with the Manchester Host initiative. Dempsey secured a grant of £10,000 from the Urban Programme, and GMBA started to explore the potential of email by training people to use the Host.

Professor Bernard Leach of Manchester Metropolitan Univeristy, who had the responsibility for adjudicating the community group EVH bids, gives an interesting insight into the decision making process at the time:

'I knew from the beginning that this was no ordinary community group. For one thing, it clearly was a vibrant community, involving everyone from bewildered newcomers to established and wealthy businessmen. For another, after talking to Mr. Choudhury and officers of GMBA, it was clear that it was a community with a clear vision of where it was going.' (3)

Longsight, the area served by GMBA, is situated in the heart of the Bangladeshi community in the inner city and Leach describes the EVH as serving a community of interest rather than a specific geographic community. Today however, the centre is best described as serving a geographical community. Although Bangladeshi culture clearly still influences the centre, it is now multi-cultural, multi-racial, and multi-lingual. Citizens from all parts of the community are welcomed at GMBA and the EVH reflects these changes.

'When we started doing the computer stuff originally, we had lots of Bangladeshi people, mainly women... The women started bringing their friends, who were Indian or Pakistani, and from there it started to get a few men coming in. Then it just got more general.' (1)

This gradual process of widening the user-base was not aided by bureaucratic restrictions encountered through GMBA's experience as training provider under the old training agency schemes. Only people who were officially registered as unemployed were entitled to a place on a training course. This meant that, partly as a result of employment legislation and partly because of the complex social nature of the local community, a significant number of potential users from the local community were excluded from training.

People under the age of eighteen, women returners, people who could not undertake a forty hour week training course, those not registered as unemployed, people with short-term residency permits, and individuals whose immigration status had not been properly defined are examples of those excluded. For a variety of reasons, significant numbers of people in black and ethnic minority communities simply do not register. The EVH funding ennabled the training centre to widen its target user-base and adopt a more inclusive approach to training development.

The EVH's use of email came to be underpinned by the NOW programme funding requirements that groups of women should be enabled to network on a pan-European basis. Despite the fact that the centre's users were predominantly women at this time, the purpose of the project was unclear. Dempsey recalls that it was very general, and that it seemed to degenerate into showing people how to use e-mail:

'Okay, we can network people. People here can send email to people in Spain asking how the weather is... We began to wonder what the point was and became a bit disillusioned. We got through it, got all the statistics and ended up picking-up most of the performance indicators in terms of outcomes, through one-off training sessions and seminars.' (1)

The experiences gained from both NOW and the training agency courses stimulated the centre into thinking about how their expertise might be used to provide a service for community enterprises.

EVH students were increasingly used by the businesses for software installation, or as an IT consultancy service. Such activities were beyond their remit and led the EVH to identify an area of potential revenue generation. As a result, the Manchester Asian Trading Information Network (MATIN) was established in 1992, through a two year project funded by the ERDF through the city's Economic Initiative Department.

As well as providing software and hardware expertise, the main objective of MATIN, based on the EVH's newly acquired knowledge and expertise, was to link Manchester businesses with European and South Asian traders using email.

'The aim of the project was to boost local employment and expand on export-oriented trade to Europe and South Asia using the Manchester and Bangladesh Host Systems as gateways to a wider network of systems across the continent.' (2)

During this period, Manchester City Council committed itself to the development of the MTTP (Manchester Telematics and Telework Partnership). (4) Dempsey recalls how MTTP, the origins of which are to be found in the social needs ethos of the Manchester

Host, began to stray from the original concept of developing IT and telematics for community benefit towards developing projects of prestige that attract European funding, and commercial ventures.

'We are not going to build the big Science Park, they said, and of course that's what they have just done. Its going to be for the community... we don't know how we're going to implement it but we'll have a go. It's lurched from that, to well we can get some money so we can have this nice little prestige project that we can show our friends in Europe. It's gone from let's try and experiment, to well what can we get the money for this week.' (1)

Because most of the EVH's funds are attracted by proposals drawn up through MCC's Economic Initiatives Group and MMU, the projects tend to reflect the requirements of the funding body's programmes, rather than the needs of the local community. In terms of the MATIN project, this focus on telematics caused problems, and highlights the need to include community-based initiatives in developing funding proposals. The point that Dempsey is making here is that such projects might not to reflect the needs of the communities they are supposed to serve, although they meet the requirements of remote funding bodies with very little appreciation or knowledge of what is required at the micro level.

Aims and objectives

Bangladesh House EVH aims to:
- provide vocational training, short courses, drop-in access and support services on Information Technology to persons normally excluded from the labour market
- use telematics as a tool in social development, undertaking IT work in partnership with local secondary schools, colleges and universities
- use telematics to enhance existing networks of small ethnic businesses in the area via MATIN
- network with ethnic communities worldwide.

Funding

Since its inception in 1991, the EVH has participated in a variety of EC funded information and telematics projects. In addition to NOW, these include the Migrants Forum, Territorial Action for Social Cohesion (TASC) and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). It maintains established links with the DTI, DFEE, Home Office, the British Council, trade organisations and a number of overseas governments. Locally, the centre has engaged in a number of Training and Enterprise Council (TEC) projects.

 The EVH at GMBA faces similar financial problems to those experienced at Chorlton. Many of its activities are dictated by the funding bodies and are driven by the need to meet target performance indicators and previously specified outcomes. The field-trip did reveal some interesting issues which are described here to illustrate the types of problems faced by community-based ICT initiatives.

Dempsey explained the difficulties in trying to develop positive strategies for the future. 'You can't because you're continually looking at whether you've achieved your outcomes in the last three months. It's not like you've got a block grant. If you're working in a college or something you've got FE/HE funding. You've got some stability; you know you're in a regular job. I think most people around here are on monthly contracts.' (1)

This element of insecurity is exacerbated by the bureaucratic regulations and conditions which are often attached to grant funding. The European Commission's ERDF grants are paid six months in arrears. For community level organisations this mechanism can present a threat to service provision, if not their existence.

'When MTTP was first started in the beginning of 1995, it was suggested that the money [for projects] wouldn't come through till the beginning of 1996. We had to run for a whole year without money. We still had to show outputs for that year otherwise we wouldn't get the money for it - the £15,000. Basically, staff were working voluntarily.' (1)

This lack of security can lead to resentment, especially when the organisations managing the overall projects have financial reserves.

'Why was a community centre in Manchester financially supporting the City Council? The City Council's got financial reserves, why couldn't they use them? In the end they had to, they had to release interim payments but it wasn't until the last possible minute.' (1)

The training projects with the TEC are also dependent on meeting target performance indicators and outputs. The EVH doesn't get paid until students qualify, which impacts on the centre's financial situation. If a student does not get a job or go into further/higher education, or fails to complete the 32 week course, for whatever reason, then the centre does not get paid.

In a socially deprived area with high unemployment and social problems, performance related funding creates difficulties. Students obliged by the unemployment benefit office to attend training courses in order to qualify, under the law, as actively seeking employment, often simply don't want to be at the centre. This often results in absences. After a three day absence, students are deemed to have left the course. Despite the costs expended in training delivery up to that point, no remuneration for time, effort or resources is received by the centre, as it is deemed to have failed in obtaining its target outcome.

'It's cheap and nasty, bums on seats and at the end of the day we are paid on outcomes. Payment is by outcome, so there's no incentive to do anything other than outcome work. Everything's become how many jobs created do we get per pound?' (1)

Implementation

Despite significant problems Bangladesh House EVH aspires to be seen as part of GMBA's one-stop, self-help, grass roots approach to community development which enables local citizens to gain control of their future and participate in the regeneration of Manchester.

The EVH is situated in a large converted house which also houses a Community Link and Advice Office, and a creche; and gives access to the newer Arts, Theatre and Sports Hall which adjoins the rear of the building. Services at the EVH are provided for all the local community not just the Bangladeshi community. The emphasis is on developing a co-operative and integrated approach, enabling a diverse range of groups and individuals experiencing social exclusion to participate. A high proportion of the EVH's users have language difficulties, and very few have had any previous work experience.

As a result of some objections to GMBA's support of the EVH, attempts have been made to integrate a number of the centre's other projects with EVH activities, especially with young people. However, this requires a form of funding that is not dictated by targets. Like Chorlton, Bangladesh House EVH is focussing on a grant from the National Lottery to provide training and services for young people in the community. Short-term grant funding has provided the EVH with a lifeline enabling it to continue providing a service for the local community. However it does not enable it to address the needs of the local community in the manner that it would wish.

Dempsey explains that there are things that the community have asked for that he cannot provide because they are not included in the proposals, and which limited resources do not permit. Added to this problem is the fact that even if grant funding facilitated the flexibility needed to respond to community needs, the centre would only get one credit per task under the existing structure.

To highlight his point, Dempsey identified two examples of socio-economic need in the community that as yet remain unaddressed. The centre does a lot of work with the catering sector locally, who have problems with the training of their workforce. Caterers need to meet strict health and hygiene regulations but because staff in the industry tend to be highly mobile and casual, the provision of training can be problematic.

'They asked if it was possible to get a training course on CD-ROM so that when the staff member had completed the exams, the papers could be e-mailed for marking and certificates of qualification dispatched. We've also had people coming in wanting to make demo disks for Bangladeshi artists writing music on the Internet, to contribute to the Asian arts scene in Manchester... but we can't do it because its not in the proposal.' (1)

These examples are indicators of community need and show a growing indigenous awareness of how ICT might be used to stimulate and develop the local community in the area.

Services

The most obvious aspect of the EVH, as with Chorlton, is that it forms part of a bigger community project. The opening of the 350-seater Arts, Theatre and Sports Hall in 1994 enabled the centre to embrace a wide range of social development activities.

'This much needed expansion will enable GMBA to tackle many complex issues facing the community in terms of social development, leisure and sports activities, promotion of art and culture and, above all the gradual integration of communities through GMBA's Open Door policy of service to people of all faiths, colours and creeds without fear of being swamped by each others' traditions and cultures.' (2)

The training and education role of the EVH should be seen in the holistic context of GMBA's other activities (5) which include:

- Mother tongue teaching

- Youth activities
- Women and girls group

- Cultural group

- Welfare advice

- Holiday play scheme

- Creche facilities

- Sports

- Arts

Education and training

GMBA is now in its tenth year of IT training, and in its sixth year as an EVH. The courses run at Bangladesh House are very similar to those at the Chorlton EVH. As well as drop-in training and CLAIT, the Bangladesh EVH also runs RSA accredited NVQs in IT; and a Vocational Diploma in IT. Topics covered include:

- Word-processing
- Spreadsheets
- Databases and data communications
- Internet
- Health and safety
- Support studies (touch typing, file management, back-up procedures and fax transmissions)

Staffing

In addition to Ian Dempsey, the Training and Development Officer, the EVH employs four skills tutors, three of whom are women. Another tutor is available one day a week to provide student support, such as help with CVs, job applications and guidance on applying for college courses. Most of the staff are bilingual.

Monitoring and evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation plays an important role in the administrative duties of the EVH. However, Dempsey feels the administrative load is over burdensome.

'I spend half my time doing it. Certainly on the technical side, I spend more time monitoring what I'm doing than actually doing it! (1)

Future

When asked about the future of the EVH, Dempsey identified four needs.

- Capital funding to upgrade and/or replace the outdated hardware/software platforms

- Appropriate salary scales for staff
'I've got staff who are on £10K as a trainer and it makes no sense... If it's pay people less because they're in community centres... how can you expect them to work all hours of the day under these conditions?' (1)

- Proper staff development

- A funding regime that focuses on quality rather than quantity.

'At the moment it's how many people have attended your training seminars not how useful have their training sessions been?' (1)

Dempsey is also quick to point out the need for a more sensible approach at MTTP.

'They decided they're going to buy into Cyberskills (6) and spent around £50,000 on it. I went to the training course and thought, why weren't we invited to develop this? I'd have done it for half the price and it would have been a lot better. It's almost like someone has a brilliant idea, does it and we all have to follow.' (1)

As with the Chorlton EVH, Bangladesh House requires organisational and financial stability to enable it to fulfil its original remit, and its considerable potential, for community development through the use of ICTs.

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Women's' EVH

Background

Whilst the Chorlton and Bangladesh House EVHs developed from existing community-based organisations, the Women's' EVH emerged as an entirely new community group. That does not mean, however, that the group had no existing roots in community.
'A survey was done of women's' groups in the Manchester area about their IT needs and what kind of thing they would like to see. Out of that came the idea that there was a need for a women's' technology access centre.' (1)

A steering committee of local community representatives was established to address this need by developing the proposal for EVH funding, although this phase in their development was not without controversy.

Planning and strategy

Established in July 1992, the EVH became a company limited by guarantee. Based originally in a single room of a suburban community hall, the EVH moved to two roomed premises providing a training area and an open plan office, before moving to its current location in New Mount Street.

Operational and strategic planning is developed through a process of consultation between the volunteer-based management committee and the centre's staff.

Basically, the purpose of the EVH is two-fold. The first is strategic.
'At a time of rapid technological change, we are in a unique position to ensure that women's needs are included in policy making and debate about the 'Information Superhighway', and we will continue to work towards this.' (2)

The second is to provide a combination of technology skills training and a supportive resource centre for women. Although the centre works with women from the business community, its main focus is women from local communities. 'We like to be working with women who basically can't afford computer training, or haven't got the confidence to do it. Really, we're always looking for sources of funding that allow it to be free.' (1)
In addition, the project attempts to give support to women who work in IT, as well as those who are not.
'Its quite a scary world to move into and we see that as part of our role. We are here to support women in technology.' (1)

Aims and objectives

- To work towards the advancement of education amongst women in the Manchester area through access to information technology, telematics and allied subjects.

- To help women find satisfying and gainful employment, by the provision of education, training, counselling and advice.
- To help extend women's access to technology with the aim of increasing the influence of women over technological developments and their applications.
- To offer women the chance to return to the job market in the field of new technology by providing vocational training in advanced technologies, particularly in telematics and computer communications.
- To offer women support with their own business development, increasing the self-employment opportunities for women.
- To use telematics to give women the skills to communicate with other women locally and internationally and develop projects that respond to the needs of women generally. (3)

Funding

Since the original EVH grant ended in 1994, the centre has focused on funding related to training. Most of the training funds currently are attracted through a contract with the local FE college, and as such comes indirectly from the FE Funding Council. The bulk of the remaining income is linked to European money such as the ERDF and ESF.

Courses which are supported by the European Social Fund (ESF), are run free of charge, as most of the users are unemployed. However, in order to generate revenue, a sliding scale of charges is adopted when short courses are run for organisations.

Like the other EVHs in Manchester that rely on grant funding, the WEVH has encountered problems in their administration.

'When we're doing training projects we can get swept up in all the bureaucracy around delivering training outputs and so on. Its quite hard to keep a grip on some of the wider objectives, which are about providing a drop-in space and drop-in access. [This] has always been part of what we deliver but we've never really had funding specifically for that. Its actually been quite difficult to reconcile those two aims.' (1)

The centre also occasionally attracts revenue by undertaking consultancy or research work but these tend to be short-term, one-off projects.

Implementation

The EVH, as part of an ERDF project, is looking to develop ISDN LAN access to Poptel in order to become a multi-media centre. Because computers have become more prevalent in society Herman emphasises the need, both for its training courses and as a technology access centre, for the EVH to keep pace with technological development.

'I think its important that we are on the cutting edge of technology in some ways because otherwise there is no specific role for an EVH... we need to have things that people don't have or can't afford. That's important as a community resource.' (1)

Role in the community

Unlike the other EVHs, WEVH does not serve a distinct local community. Whilst drawn from a community of interest or community of need, WEVH acts as a hub both for women's groups and for women from community groups. The skills, knowledge, and networks that are developed at the EVH are then disseminated into local communities throughout Manchester.

Trainees set up their own bulletin board, 'FEMAIL' to provide a forum for Women in Manchester to share information about current events and issues of interest. (4)

Trans-national and networking projects, eg NOW, have been influential in establishing and developing both contacts and projects. The centre has also contributed to the development of virtual communities by establishing networks using, telematic applications, in east and west Europe, Africa, the Americas and India.

Services

When the EVHs were originally established, one of the key foci was for them to work closely with the Manchester Host to develop and promote the use of telematics. The centre's philosophy has been to give women a chance to sample telematics on all of its courses, even where this only plays a small part in the overall course content:

'Telematics training has therefore been the cornerstone of our training programmes regardless of the length or intensity of the course... By emphasising the potential power of telematics and its role in future economic and social developments, we have been able to equip our trainees with a wider context in which to place their newly acquired skills.' (5)

Education and training

Among its range of courses, WEVH offers two specialised courses. The first is the Telecottage Association accredited NVQ Level 2 - 'Teleworking', which covers the skills and issues involved in working from home as a teleworker, and as a self-employed teleworker. The second, Advanced Communications Course, focuses on LAN operation and has a quite technical content. This course is of great importance to WEVH because its the only course of its kind specifically for women.

'Its an area where women don't normally go into in terms of computing activity.' (1)

With all its courses, WEVH takes an holistic approach to the learning process. In order to achieve this the centre integrates the IT modules with personal development training. This seeks to provide support mechanisms in an informal environment by looking at issues such as personal skills development, working skills, time management, training opportunities, and advice on getting a job; all of which are important to women returning to work after a long period out of employment.

The centre also operates drop-in facilities where Internet access is free, as well as running short evening courses at introductory level. Recognising that travelling at night might in itself act as a barrier to women attending courses, funding has been put aside for the provision of safe transport for women attending evening classes, and for childcare facilities. (6)

In addition to this, WEVH also provides training at other sites, taking equipment to groups who have no access to facilities and are unable to travel to New Mount Street.

Staff

WEVH was established in 1992 with two full-time members of staff, the Project Co-ordinator and the Development and Training Officer. Additional part-time administrative, teaching and technical support staff are appointed on short-term contracts depending on the availability of funds.

'There's always been an overlap between people who are training and volunteering. A lot of trainees do some bits of voluntary work as part of their training programme. If we need a member of staff we would rather find the funds to pay them for their time.' (1) In addition to the two full-time members of staff, WEVH currently employs five people on a part-time basis.

Users

Users at WEVH come from a wide range of backgrounds. The majority of women who attend courses at the centre are people who face barriers of access to technology, including .poverty, lack of confidence, disability, domestic pressure, and the intimidating formal structure of traditional education institutions. Primarily, users at WEVH are people with no previous computer skills, who find the support provided enables them to develop at their own pace in a secure, non-challenging environment, without fear of not yet being ready for the workplace.

Explaining that access to telematics cannot work miracles in areas of long-term unemployment, Herman is keen to dispel the myth that centres such as WEVH can solve social problems through job creation.

'You can help one or two people break out of that but we wouldn't want to kid ourselves that we can tackle all of it... Telematics in itself doesn't create the employment. It allows people to work in different ways, or opens different opportunities for them.' (1).

Women returners constitute a significant element of users at the centre. A lesser number of employed women, or who come from community and voluntary sector organisations use the courses at WEVH in order learn computer and telematic skills for their work.

Future

Among plans to keep WEVH at the cutting edge of information society developments is one to aimed at getting the EVH to develop into what Herman terms 'a working community'. Building on their critical research into telework, WEVH have determined that despite a number of potential problems, telework does present the opportunity for flexible work patterns required by many women.

The intention is to establish the EVH as a place of work for small organisations to rent. For women just starting out and who might not be in a position to rent space, a series of flexible workspaces will be available in a 'hot-desking' environment.
'We want to develop it so it becomes a community of workplaces that is quite interactive and mutually supportive. With that comes other support activities such as setting up a creche, an in-house cafe. It's a vision about a women's technology centre.' (1)

Another aspect of these plans is to provide a networking and mentoring structure for women wanting to start their own businesses. Running business start-up courses, with support advisers on hand is seen as providing a major boost to women who want to start their own business but who are facing barriers which prevent them from doing so.

Combining these two strategies to form a Women's Enterprise and Technology Centre in partnership with the public, private and voluntary sectors of Manchester (7) is central to the future plans of WEVH. The achievement of such ambitious plans however, requires raising large amounts of capital and another move to larger premises.

'We've had lots of interest, we are working with a number of educational institutions. We are already beginning to develop a partnership approach. This is not something we can really do on our own. It would be within a larger structure, and the EVH would be a central feature in that.' (1)

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Manchester Community Information Network

Introduction

Manchester Community Information Network (MCIN) was established as a non-profit making company limited by guarantee in 1995 and as a charity in 1996. It grew out of concern within Manchester's voluntary sector that organisations were establishing 'community information' databases with little thought being given to their co-ordination for a community resource (1).

A competition seeking suggestions of how computers might best be used in the community was launched by the Manchester offices of Management Consultants KPMG. The winning idea was for a number of computer terminals or public access points (PAPs) to be located at sites across the City and networked to an online community information system.

In 1996, a pilot project was established as part of a regeneration project, locating computers at ten different sites in North Manchester. KPMG supplied most of the technological infrastructure and contributed technical expertise. The system's information is accessed from WWW pages located on the server of an Internet Service Provider (ISP), Poptel. Poptel, who provide technical support and Web space to MCIN free of charge, undertook much of the initial set-up work for the project. KPMG also produced a hard-copy user guide, and designed an off-line menu aimed at reducing the amount of time spent online.

As well as providing access to public information, MCIN was seen as a way of bringing community sector information providers together in order to eliminate duplication of effort, identify gaps in information provision, and generate support for and participation in establishing a co-ordinated strategy to develop a community information system in the City (2).

Aims

To provide an online Public Information System which is useful to the people of Manchester, and is free at the point of use.

Planning and strategy

MCIN has charitable status and the partnership comprises information providers from the voluntary sector, the City Council (MCC), Management Consultants KPMG, Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU), local businesses, North Manchester Healthcare NHS Trust, the public library service, and the Internet Service Provider, Poptel. Policy decisions are made by the MCIN Board which meets quarterly. As a means of support and a source of expertise for the Project Manager, Linda Doyle, a sub-committee was established in the early stages of the initiative, with responsibility for day to day decisions and urgent policy issues.

MCIN seeks to complement existing community information channels and forms. It is not intended to replace any other information service. The network operates as 'information holders' not information providers, although Doyle is flexible on this point.

'We do write some Web pages for organisations without resources but this is a short-term service. We aim to get the organisations trained and able to take responsibility for their own pages.' (3).

Data ownership, and maintaining the currency and accuracy of information are the responsibility of the information providers, although outdated material is removed if providers fail to update it.

MCIN seeks to operate an open-door policy towards organisations and groups wanting to put information online. In its early stages, the project tended to get information from the bigger organisations, such as CAB: they now have a more proactive approach and the number of smaller organisations contributing information is increasing.

No charge is made for putting information online, and despite commercial pressures, MCIN does not sell information. Doyle warned recently that, 'community information is increasingly being seen as a commercial commodity.' (4)

The Network has the active participation of information service providers in the voluntary sector, such as the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB), MIND, Voluntary Action Manchester; City Council departments such as Libraries and Theatres, and Social Services; as well as organisations such as MMU.

As part of the local authority's Corporate IT Strategy, MCIN has a place on a number of Council working parties which has led to the inclusion of two MCIN systems within the Council's Information Points. In this respect, it is suggested, 'There is ample scope for extending the partnerships within MCIN to include other information providers, private sector computer and other businesses and crucially to include users and potential users of information.' (2)

Implementation

The original ten public access points, and a trial terminal based in an ASDA supermarket, have now been supplemented by six multi-media, touch-screen kiosks as part of the EC-funded TARDIS project (5). Tardis is a partnership between MCIN, Sema Group UK Ltd (software company), MCC, a number of ISPs including Poptel and NEC.

Sites of original terminals
- 3 Public Libraries
- 1 Social Services Office
- 1 Community Resource Centre
- 3 Advice Offices
- 1 Patients Library

- 1 Mental Health Service
- Asda Superstore

Public access to these terminals is currently restricted to the opening hours of the locating organisation. Staff have been trained in all venues except ASDA where there is no supervision. The turnover of frontline staff has meant that training has to be r epeated. All systems offer public or service user access except the two Citizen Advice Bureaux, where because the system has to be located in staff offices, access is only available via an adviser.

Sites of new kiosks

- 1 Health and Community Resource Centre
- 1 Asda Superstore
- 1 Neighbourhood Office
- 2 Public libraries including a video lending library
- 1 The Big Issue Offices for the homeless

The TARDIS project aims to evaluate multi-media kiosks, known as MAGIC Touch, as a means of accessing public information, especially for socially excluded people. It is hoped that at the end of the project the kiosks will be donated for public use, although this is dependent on public feedback.(5)

Types of Information

MCIN provides access to a wide range of community information, having adopted a broad working definition of public/community information (2). The MCIN homepage provides links to the following categories of information.

- Advice, benefits, information and support
- Business Index
- Childline
- CAB online enquiry service and email links to information providers
- Childcare, education and play
- Health and mental health services
- Housing, planning and other council services
- Job vacancies and training
- Libraries, recreation and leisure
- Public transport
- Resources for local groups
- Tourist information and Year 2002 Commonwealth Games

Other links include:
- MCIN News and Local Events
- Index to all services
- All about MCIN
- We need your comments

Access to the Website is also available through the Internet and e-mail links to many of the information providers exist, so that Internet based users of MCIN can communicate directly. However, although public access users have access to e-mail links through the web pages, this access is not two-way. The kiosks are piloting user receipt of e-mail for which users need to register, although they can use pseudonyms.

Staff

The MCIN project had no paid workers until 1996. It is now staffed by a mixture of paid employees and volunteers. Students from local universities undertaking project work form a high proportion of the volunteer helpers.

Since its inception in 1996, staffing levels have varied depending on circumstances and funding availability. The original Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) and European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) funding, administered by Manchester City Council (MCC) met the costs of running the pilot research project in the North Manchester Regeneration Initiative area and paid for the employment of the Project Manager. The Manchester Telematics and Telework Partnership (MTTP) funded the post of Project Technical Assistant on a short-term 1 year contract, also through ERDF finances (2).

Apart from a one year secondment, the Project Manager has had to run the service without any administrative support. However, funds have recently been secured to employ a technical worker, and a training and development worker on a three day week, part-ti me basis, again on a 1 year short-term contract.

Doyle points out that staffing issues can be problematic. Short-term contracts leave staff feeling vulnerable, which can led to a high turnover in projects like this. Furthermore, the nature of the work can also be stressful.

'Staff almost need to be evangelical in their approach to this type of work. They need to believe strongly in the project. Initiating contact with community groups, finding public friendly settings, dealing with overworked staff who are unsure of the technology and often prefer print-based resources, takes a certain kind of personality. Maintenance and repair of systems and printers in busy, cramped conditions takes a certain kind of tenacity. When cleaning the Asda Touch Screen a child pushed me to one side shouting "hey, that's mine, I'm playing on that!" and in the libraries, books have been shoved into my hand by borrowers who assume I am a resident librarian. For those who aren't comfortable with this kind of work it would be easy to hide away in the office, concentrating only on the website.' (3).

Funding

Funding for the project has primarily taken the form of short-term ERDF and SRB4 contracts through MCC and MTTP. Other forms of funding have taken the form of equipment and web-space donation, and advice and technical support from organisations

such as KP MG and Poptel. Support in kind from supporters and student volunteers has also been crucial in keeping MCIN running.

Several sources of income have recently been secured to enable MCIN's continued operation. These include £10,000 from the TARDIS project, £20,000 from the EC's Information Cities programme, and £15,000 from the Manchester Telematics and Teleworking Partner ship.

Doyle, says that when she started at MCIN, she believed strongly that such projects should be funded directly by the local authority. However, she argues that Council bureaucracy would slow development down, that community information providers would be less willing to share their information free of charge and that it is safer to have responsibility for community information devolved, so that it is not relegated behind the needs of a single powerful organisation. She admits that this kind of partnership approach has a number of associated problems and demands a lot of hard work, but maintains that for projects such as MCIN to survive, they have to retain their independence.

Monitoring and Evaluation

When the project was first established, a student volunteer from MMU undertook an evaluation of the project and incorporated a User's Needs Assessment form as an html link on the Website (1). Although responses were limited during the research project phase, the researcher was able to make some significant recommendations, some of which are now being addressed by MCIN.
'This situation has changed ... significantly since the early days. We've had some really good feedback from the public. It has been very helpful and has enabled us to develop responsive policies.' (3).

As an example, Doyle cites the CAB's pages. Users who didn't know what the CAB offered experienced problems accessing information from that site. Following user comments, MCIN decided to improve the quality of the site by changing to a more user-friendly, subject focused interface.

Future

Now that MCIN has appointed additional staff, Doyle intends to address the issue of developing the membership. Meetings will be held and members will be encouraged to participate more fully. A facility enabling organisations to send in information for inclusion online via the public system will be introduced soon, encouraging regular updates of local activities and events in the Online News pages.

Two of the recommendations stemming from Ellen's initial User Survey (1) are currently being addressed by MCIN. Email receipt accounts for users of the kiosks are currently being trialled, and it is hoped that an intelligent agent will soon be incorporated into the system to make user searches easier and more effective.

MCIN is also considering allowing commercial information to be made available through its site, as a source of income generation, and is developing its approach to training. 'You can't just put machines out there and expect people to use them. You have to be supportive. You need to be proactive and go out there with training and resources. We've learnt that from the feedback from our users.' (3).
A recent survey of staff involved in the project confirmed this view. With that in mind, MCIN is currently developing a training and advice role for itself, helping the voluntary sector to develop and improve its skills as public information providers.

Conclusion

MCIN raison d'etre is still community information provision as opposed to facilitating community participation through the utilisation of both information and communication channels. The trials taking place with user email accounts might see this begin to change. There is also little scope at present for local communities, as opposed to the voluntary sector, to involve themselves in the management and development of the network. As such MCIN has some way to go before it can be deemed a community network, rather than a community information network.

However, there are clear signs that it is moving in a more participative direction, and strong arguments can be made to support claims that it constitutes an essential resource for Manchester's community sector. It is developing from a top-down electronic information network into something more responsive to the needs of the community sector.

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Wiltshire Telecottage Network (WTN)

Introduction

The emergence and decline of the Wiltshire Telecottage Network (WTN) has important lessons for the development of partnership approaches to community based ICT initiatives. In this section we map the development and demise of the WTN, and will focus on the relaunched Codford Independent Telecottage separately. It is important to note that the gathering of empirical data on the WTN has been limited by a number of changes to the network:

- The network now exists more or less in name only. It is owned by John O'Dea, private owner of the Goatacre telecottage.

- The other telecottages in the network have either ceased operation, operate as part of the privately owned network or, as is the case with Codford, have established themselves as independent telecottages.

- In all these cases, the original staff and enthusiasts are no longer connected with the telecottages and as such were unavailable for interview.

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, bold and exciting plans were developed by the Community Council for Wiltshire (CCW) for the creation of a network of telecottage initiatives across the county. Trevor Bailey, Assistant Director for Employment and Enterprise with CCW at the time, describes the circumstances which led to the development of the WTN plans:

'The history of the telecottages really ... goes back to 1981, not as telecottages but as a recruitment of myself... with an extraordinary experimental brief. Although I had no money to spend and had to create everything from scratch I was able to run any kind of employment experiment that I could get off the ground.' (1)

The concept of telecottages in Wiltshire emerged as a result of the personal enthusiasm of the Employment and Enterprise's Youth Services manager, and founder director of the British Telecottage Association, John Lakeman. Lakeman claims the aim of the initiatives were always perfectly clear.

'It was a county wide initiative with the aim of improving opportunities for young business people, as well as providing access to new technologies for rural areas - with the spin off of local employment and local economic benefits, which is why the County Council were interested. That was the thinking behind it and it was encompassed in the original mission statement, which was never altered.' (2)

However, Bailey argues that the greatest contact telecottage managers had was with local people with very local needs. He admits that these needs were often uneconomic but were none-the-less very important, especially to funding bodies. Pointing to the dependency of telecottages on subsidies from external funders and the need to meet their aims and

objectives, he argues that the aims developed from a youth employment project to a community development project very early on.

'The justification for any kind of subsidy funding is either that it will fit in with some existing system that they've got, or it is good for the community. Again, the community emphasis comes through very strongly.' (1)

A cultural dilemma for CCW was emerging as the agency had to become directly involved in community development work, in order to meet the changing aims and objectives of external funders.

Bailey highlights attendant problems by focusing on the top-down approach associated with CCW's traditional core work. The difficulties associated with the conflicting mind-sets of hands-on community development work and the intermediary role; the unrepresentative nature of CCW, highlighted by its lack of public membership; and the declining availability of funding, Bailey suggests, led to conflict within the organisation.

Telecottages were now quite clearly seen as community resources providing office facilities, IT related training, and information resources for community groups, citizens and businesses. However, it appears that these strategic changes were either not communicated, or not accepted by all the network's leading actors.

Aims and objectives

The original aim of the telecottage initiative in Wiltshire was:

* to improve opportunities for young business people in rural areas of the county by providing greater access to new technologies.

Planning and strategy

A steering group was formed to identify potential locations, undertake market research, develop and drive the plans forward. Fundraising was undertaken by a freelancer, employed specifically for the task. Sponsorship, to cover initial set-up and running costs, was attracted from a number of public and private sector sources, including: BT Community Trust, Barclays Bank Community Enterprise, the Rural Development Commission, and the district and county councils.

The plan was that after an initial period of pump-priming financial support, telecottages should have generated enough business to become sustainable. By developing the network on a gradual basis, the aim was that each telecottage reach sustainability within three years. (3)

Implementation

Although the WTN was originally to comprise five telecottages, one in each District Council area of the county, it only ever totalled four. It is also worth noting that the fourth telecottage at Goatacre, as a totally private enterprise, was a significant departure from the community based, partnership models of the other telecottages in the network.

The constituent telecottages

Mere

The first of the Wiltshire telecottages opened at Mere in February, 1991 in a small room in the back of the public library for a rent of £1 per annum. The telecottage provided one-to-one and groups-of-four training sessions in word processing, and dtp, and offered CV typing, photocopying, faxing, and binding facilities.

Use was evenly divided between business and community users at a rate of about 50-70 users per week, with 50% of user needs being related tophotocopying. (3)

Codford

The Codford telecottage was established in 1992, faltered for ayear because of plans to demolish the village hall, but from 1993 came close to achieving sustainability within its three year time scale. We describe this initiative on p000 below.

Crudwell

Enthusiasts in Crudwell leased a disused milking parlour and refurbished it for use as a telecottage, which opened in June, 1993. However, in February, 1994, the centre manager died. His death deprived the newly emerging telecottage of his technical skills but was to precipitate the emergence of a number of problems that were to impact on the local telecottage and the entire Wiltshire network.

John Lakeman is critical of CCW actions during this problematic time. Rather than creating job and person specifications and advertising the post, Lakeman recalls how a public meeting was called to discuss finding a replacement. After a significant period of time, during which the telecottage received very little support or leadership, an appointment was made. The appointee was, according to Lakeman, 'Very much the wrong person... with [poor] interpersonal skills and very little technical skills.' (2)

Lakeman claims that at a crucial time in its development, the telecottage was simply left to drift aimlessly whilst a successor was discussed. He suggests that, when those running the telecottage left the area, the entire village was to heave a collective sigh of relief. 'Basically by the end of the year they'd all left the village. They had no commitment to the village and were seen by the villagers as being fly-by-night outsiders. The telecottage was their product... they've gone, thank goodness!' (2)

Goatacre

A fourth telecottage was opened in Goatacre by a wealthy businessman with interests in healthcare related businesses. The TCA's Teleworking Handbook describes the nature of the work at Goatacre as 'confidential for commercial reasons, but involves a call-centre/customer service operation.' (4)

Issues
The next sections outlines some of the problems faced by the Wiltshire Telecottage Network as it attempted to develop and consolidate.

A question of perspectives
The very first telecottage to appear as part of the Wiltshire network was at Mere in the back room of a public library. Mere's ethos, rather than being solely to support young business people, was to provide IT based services and training for the whole community. This of course suited the remit of the CCW but was not entirely satisfactory in meeting the goals of the Youth Enterprise scheme. Youth Enterprise manager, John Lakeman reflecting on this situation describes the dilemma.

'Julia Dunn [manager, Mere telecottage] is very good with customers, she reflects the type of area that Mere is. It has the highest level of over 65s in the county and the lowest level of unemployed people under 25. So it's a stupid place, in one sense, put a youth enterprise motivated telecottage. But the point was that we were offered a very cheap room, £1 a year to include heating and lighting from the library service. So it was something that we couldn't afford to miss.' (2)

The tension between the commercial and community aspects of the partnerships, evident even at this early stage, was to play a significant role in the emergence of cultural problems between the strategic and operational management of the local telecottage.

Throughout the initial few years, responsibility for driving the network's development rested with the Employment and Enterprise department of CCW. The subtle complexity of the organisational relationships within CCW, and the confusion surrounding the purpose of the network, created functional difficulties in developing it.

'I was employed full-time as Youth Enterprise Project Manager, with another person working alongside me. The work of the telecottages was always added on. There was no allowance made for time, payment, or anything; it was always done as an extra. It soon emerged that it was much more of a community development activity than a youth enterprise activity. There was no support, not even extra secretarial help. They [CCW] did expect miracles, no bones about it, for two and a half years.' (2)

This situation is indicative of the lack of direction and clarity that appears to have existed, in respect of the telecottage network, at CCW at this time. Both Bailey and Lakeman were

employees the community council, and both held responsibility for aspects of telecottage development.

Lakeman is critical of CCW for lacking any strategic policies for telecottage development. It would appear that if strategic and operational policies for the development of WTN existed, they were not communicated very well. It is also clear that a conflict of interests and agenda existed. Bailey operated from a perspective of community development, whilst Lakeman, through his involvement with the Telecottage Association, focused on commercial aspects.

Bailey emphasizes the commercial problems the telecottages were experiencing:
'... there was not really any tremendous progress in terms of getting contracts from outside companies, which would provide a real income after initial subsidies disappeared.' (1)

Funds were provided by the local TEC to appoint a marketing manager on a one year contract, but this appointment was not a success. Very few external contracts were secured, and those that were, such as at Codford, were more as a result of the dynamic work of the telecottage manager.

Lakeman, however, does not accept that a distinction necessarily exists between community and commercial:

'I think that there's a joint role that we don't have a word for in English. I think it's a false dichotomy to have to say either-or.' (2)

Poor communications and a perceived lack of interest led to a growing resentment toward CCW from the telecottages.

'CCW was unable to offer anything tangible as a benefit of being part of the network.... Had the centre [CCW] been able to say this is what we're working towards, this is how we're going to do it, and this is where you fit into it, and in return for your contribution we can give you extra work... the idea was that CCW centrally should generate work... they [never] put any work out to the telecottages... because of the poor leadership from the centre and the feeling that telecottages were a nuisance... the headaches got bigger, the resentment got bigger.' (2)

There was very little willingness on behalf of the network's partners to support the telecottages by outsourcing work to them or running courses from them. According to Bailey, the biggest problem was deciding what telecottages had to offer partners.

'From a colleges point of view, some people [thought of] using telecottages to deliver education in some way to the village. But there are not enough people in any given group in a village to be worth taking an initiative over or a college unless its as a showpiece. In terms of local authorities it becomes a political and difficult issue.' (1)

In contrast, Lakeman claims CCW were incapable of developing plans for the development and sustainability of telecottages.

'The point was that the Community Council was reactive. Because it didn't know where it was going, didn't really know what the potential was, and its own practices were less than professional, I think that reflected on the telecottages which had a great need to be professional because they were pioneering projects.' (2)

The problem of attracting contracts from external partners centred around matching the indigenous skills of a rural village with the quality of work that potential partners required. Bailey argues that the best partnerships developed around using telecottages as local resource and training centres, although this requires ongoing subsidies. Bailey feels subsidies can be used by telecottage advocates to claim they are trading successfully in a commercial sense.
'If someone will pay for that of course, that's actually a source of income ... When you look at telecottages ... you don't need to know about their success rate, you need to know what element of the public's money there is, either a straight subsidy or as a bought service. That is an element of support and there's nothing wrong with that ... but it does distort claims that these things are trading successfully.' (1)

For Bailey, public subsidies are crucial to sustaining community telecottages. Without them he is unsure how they can be self-sufficient.

Education and training

The network partners placed training alongside telework as the strategic mechanisms which would provide the financial underpinning to ensure self-sufficiency in the county. During this period, CCW had attracted funding from a number of local authorities, the EC, and the local TEC to provide training programmes covering a wide range of socio-economic projects in the rural community. Included among these projects were a number of initiatives relating to women in rural communities. The telecottages were used to provide the computer elements of these training programmes. Both Bailey and Lakeman agree that the training aspects of telecottage activities were worthwhile and achieved a lot. However, 'the irony was that the skills in the telecottages were not such that the training could actually be undertaken by our own staff. We had to buy in people from outside. Therefore, most of the money that we already had for training and that could have been passed back through the telecottages ... went out of the system.' (1)

Office Services

The telecottages provided local businesses with a range of office services which were not widely available in the early 1990s. However, as Bailey observed:
'One has to face the fact that gradually small shops, estate agents, etc. in small villages and towns are beginning to get basic equipment like faxes and photocopiers, and frequently it actually costs less than the telecottages...If telecottages are to be relevant in the future they must keep abreast technologically....in terms of skills and developing appropriate services.' (1)

Users

On the whole the main users of the office services were local businesses such as farmers, the local veterinary surgeon, and so on. Non- business users tended to be community groups in the village, wanting to use the dtp to publish the parish magazine or programme for the local theatre.

Lakeman offers an interesting example of the value of the facility to an individual:
'The guy who ran the flower show suffered a stroke and was virtually house-bound. Using a lap-top, he trained at the telecottage, and is now still working on the flower show as the registration secretary.' (2)

This is a graphic illustration of how telecottages can fulfil a social or community development role as well economic, if they are to harness local community support.

Lakeman suggests it is a question of striking a balance between the economic and social/community aspects of community telecottage culture. Making coffee machines and kettles readily available in telecottages is important but he warns of cost-effectiveness problems when a user requiring three photocopies wants a half hour chat with the manager. He suggests that community groups might work with the telecottage and take over this social communications role.

'There's a problem there and I think that's where a community group can be helpful. You can have friends at the telecottage, to make coffee and have a chat. That's where a good telecottage manager can actually think and engender community spirit, if they're alert to the possibilities of it.' (2)

The tension between community and commercial aspects will never be far from the surface in community telecottages. One way of addressing these tensions is to run ongoing monitoring and evaluation exercises that enable users to feed into the operational and strategic policy making process of the telecottages, whilst giving the manager and policy makers mechanisms to ensure user relevance. However, there appears to have been very little in the way of monitoring and evaluation mechanisms in place across the WTN.

The decline of the network

Up to 1994, CCW had viewed the network as an experimental project, but it then began to take a more strategic interest in the network, establishing it as a company, Wiltshire Telecottages Ltd. (WTL) with its own Board of Directors.

What we had at that point was a network of two, and latterly three, telecottages equipped to a fairly reasonable standard... staffed by people who were very willing but for the most part did not have a high level of skill. We saw it as ... an experiment to see if it was a practical thing to link very simple community benefits, [such as] having a photocopier or fax machine, being able to design the parish magazine, theatre programme or whatever, with the opportunity to get in to negotiate contracts from outside companies which would give real income to local people.' (1)

The experiment had not been a success. Despite a number of small local contracts at Codford, and the limited revenue generated through the office services and training programmes, WTN was not performing well financially.

The situation, according to Bailey, was far from irrecoverable. He had been exploring ways that income could be used from other employment projects to fund a training programme for telecottage managers. The idea was that the managers should develop the requisite skills to run the IT training programmes themselves; generating a revenue source that would move the telecottages towards sustainability. For the Mere and Codford telecottages this should not have proven much of a problem, however, events at Crudwell were developing that would lead to dramatic changes.

Both Mere and Codford telecottages worked on what Bailey calls a 'bricks and mortar' basis. That is to say that Mere, operating out of a public library for a nominal rent of £1 per annum, and Codford, from the village hall, had limited overheads which proved advantageous to socio-economic enterprises attempting to establish themselves as sustainable community enterprises. By contrast, the conversion of the one-time dairy parlour at Crudwell had been expensive. While Crudwell appeared to be the best telecottage in the network; the one with most potential, it was a poor performer financially.

The operational problems at Crudwell were to show little signs of improvement, but it was matters of a more strategic nature that shook both WTN and CCW. A financial printout, picked up by Bailey by chance at CCW's central administration, indicated that more money had been spent on Crudwell than he had authorised, or provided for.

Bailey explains this in terms of unchecked enthusiasm in CCW for telecottages:
'It was for me and others to check that enthusiasm if it wasn't on course. Of course it was a company by this time with a number of directors, of which I was one. I think what happened was that they thought this is going to be successful, it's going to make lots of money ... I think they probably thought I was being terribly cautious ... I have always thought that these things had a very serious Achilles heel if their finances weren't kept under the strictest control... It was quite a shock to me. Nobody had even told me this money was being spent. I suppose it was about £12,000, not big money but enough with little projects of this kind to tip it into a problem.' (1)

The problem was that CCW was now forced to try and trade out of the debt. This meant that Crudwell had to become commercially successful before they had proven that this could be achieved.

Personal issues and tensions began to emerge within the network. The Codford telecottage, which was generating revenue successfully, felt their efforts were being absorbed into the debts of Crudwell. To Bailey such concerns were justified, and he points out that goodwill between telecottages was an element crucial to the success of the network.

Compounding this precarious situation was the marked lack of success of the marketing thrust. Despite the national hype surrounding telework and telecottages and optimistic local forecasts, few contracts had emerged. Bailey argues that the absence of any customers willing to experiment with telework at that time both exposed TCA's unrealistic forecasts and exacerbated the position of the network.

It was the precarious financial situation which, according to Bailey, precipitated the Board of Directors taking responsibility for financial decisions. The centralisation of decision making meant that debts accrued, after the initial £12,000 overspend, were the responsibility of the Board.

Bailey focused his attention on establishing a training programme for telecottage managers and succeeded in attracting European Social Fund money, through a training-the-trainers application. By this time however, 'We had this classic situation developing whereby the Board of Wiltshire Telecottages Ltd. was constantly debating with itself, as to whether it was better to go and try and trade out of the situation, or whether it was better to have a quick panic now and close it all down!' (1)
It became apparent that the network would only survive with another period of subsidy. Using the prospect of in-house training as the carrot, he started negotiating with local authorities, the TEC and other funders. He admits to being absolutely candid about the situation and realises that others felt that his honesty was perhaps not what was required at this time. Bailey believed CCW had the embryo of a successful project in the telecottages. With more than enough income being generated through other employment projects, he believed he had a convincing argument for a further period of telecottage subsidy.

WTL's Board of Directors had had over twelve months to address the problems facing the network but had achieved very little. Even though he had negotiated a potential support package for the telecottages, which he believed would see them through to successful sustainability, Bailey's position was now under threat and the network's accruing deficit, which was now the responsibility of the CCW appointed Board, was to prove a decisive factor.

John O'Dea, owner of the Goatacre telecottage, indicated a readiness to acquire WTL. A second rescue package was put together by CCW which involved raising £20,000 to write off the declared debt accrued by WTL. (5) The network was handed over to O'Dea as a commercial venture around the same time that Bailey left the Community Council.

When WTL ceased trading on March 31st, 1995, the telecottage at Codford closed. Despite a brief revival, Crudwell was closed by O'Dea shortly after the take-over, although Lakeman remains optimistic that it will be re-opened. Mere still operates at a low level but O'Dea has not, according to Lakeman and Bailey, invested in Mere since the hand-over.

Conclusion

It is clear that the WTN telecottages contributed to the empowerment of local villages through community development. The WTN was a brave and exciting initiative,

innovative in its attempt to combine commercial activity with community development, and sufficiently popular in the case of Codford to give rise to a successful local rescue camjpaign and ongoing independent facility.

To some extent, WTN was subject to external factors beyond its control. However, in our view the network failed because it was beset by poor communications; unrealistic expectations; conflicting agendas; and a degree of strategic and operational mismanagement.

- Fundamental to the network's failure was the tension existing between commercial and community aspects of the network. Evidence of this tension can be seen in the different roles of Lakeman and Bailey. Neither role was of necessity mutually exclusive, indeed the aim of the network was that they should be complementary.

- Poor communications between CCW and the telecottages led to a growing sense of isolation and resentment. However, it was the apparent lack of communications within CCW that astonishingly allowed the conflicts to develop unchecked from an early date, resulting in the debacle of Crudwell. We shoudl not lose sight of the irony here, for a networked project designed to focus on the primary role of information and communications as a means of socio-economic and community development.

- Unrealistic expectations of what could be achieved commercially in rural telecottages, were fuelled by unsubstantiated claims regarding the potential of teleworking. The financial performance of the network's telecottages, with the exception of Codford, was poor. Even Codford could only claim to be almost self-sufficient after a period of three years. The marketing of the telecottages was totally unsuccessful.

- The cost of renewing technology and skills became a problem which seems never to have been discussed.

- The project management is open to criticism. To have succeeded, the project, a network of dispersed and innovative initiatives, required significant support in terms of finance, resources, management, and strategy. It received limited financial and resource-based support.

- Business support mechanisms were almost non-existent. When managers left, their replacements were given no training in developing either IT or business skills. Consequently, income generated as revenue through the training programmes went straight back out to pay external trainers.

- CCW's culture was as an intermediary organisation, leaving the telecottages to their own devices. As a result of this virtual non-participation, the mounting problems experienced by the telecottages were not identified until late in the day, when CCW took responsibility. Even then, rather than expedite a rescue plan, they proceeded to debate the issues for a period in excess of twelve months.

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Codford Independent Telecottage (CIT)

The decision to privatise the Wiltshire Telecottages Network, taken with no prior consultation with those involved at project level, led to the withdrawal of public sector subsidies and grants for the telecottages. Lakeman is particularly critical of CCW's actions during the wind down of the network. Using what he calls 'the virtual seizure of all the equipment at Codford' as an example, he accuses CCW of causing considerable personal and community distress. The resultant closure of the Codford telecottage had 'a devastating effect on the local community'. (1)

Background

A public meeting was held in July 1995 to consider rescue proposals for CIT. The meeting decided a review should be undertaken to investigate the viability of operating it as a community venture run by and on behalf of the village and neighbouring communities, rather than allow it to be taken over, as had been proposed, as a commercial training franchise for nursing homes.

The review, carried out by a locally appointed steering group, concluded that a sound financial enterprise could be established, and by September 1995 under the control of the Village Hall Management Committee (VHMC), CIT opened on a morning only basis. It started modestly, providing basic services of photocopying, fax, computer facilities, typing, stationary sales and message taking.

The management board comprised a Director; a treasurer; a marketing officer - a local businessman paid on a commission basis and therefore with a vested interest in the telecottage's success; and the telecottage manager. In an address to the district council requesting pump priming funding, the Chair of Codford Parish Council, argued that CIT would succeed because it:

• has a strong local management board with experience in finance and management control, and effective monitoring mechanisms;

• has appointed a marketing officer who is paid by results and is well known in the local business community;

• is a competitive, reliable and convenient operation; sited on the doorstep of potential custom;

• has low overheads;

• and has the full support of the local community, Parish Council and VHMC. (1)

Aims and Objectives

The stated aim of CIT is:

• To provide a competent and reliable telecottage service to the local community, for both the private individual and the business community.

The objectives are:

'Through the door'
•   letter writing
•   photocopying
•   stationary sales
•   fax transmission

'Business support'
•   office services
•   word processing
•   advertising
•   telephone/fax answering

'Training'
•   individual/group tuition
•   basic IT skills training

'Teleworking'
•   recruitment
•   contract work
•   home working

Implementation

One of the most striking differences between CIT and the other WTN telecottages is the lack of hype surrounding telecottage potential. CIT's strategy appears to be based on starting from modest and practical beginnings, developing services when realistically viable.

This sense of realism took some time to become established. CIT's original business plan, for example, drawn up before the current manager was in post, committed the telecottage to breaking even within a one year period. This would have required a turnover of something in the region of a £20,000. Even when the relative success of the original Codford telecottage is considered, attracting business of £25,532 in the year ending 31st March, 1995, it was still some £4,000 short of breaking even after three years. (2)

To expect CIT to become self-sufficient within twelve months was over-optimistic. Links had to be re-established with old customers, and new business won. This process was undertaken with enthusiasm but suffered set-backs when two managers left the telecottage

in quick succession. During this period business inevitably suffered as customers grew dissatisfied both with the quality and turn-around of work.

A new business plan has since been developed which puts CIT in a more realistic framework.

Finance

Set-up and equipment costs were met by a loan of £5,000 from a local benefactor, which took the form of a debenture to be repaid out of future telecottage profits, and a one-off pump priming grant from West Wiltshire DC. As a not-for-profit organisation, CIT's assets are owned by the VHMC, and any profits generated by the telecottage will be channelled into the village hall, after the debenture is repaid.

With the exception of a small grant from the Rural Development Commission, the telecottage has to date received no other forms of subsidy. However, negotiations are currently taking place with a number of agencies regarding potential project costs, and a National Lottery bid is pending.

This lack of subsidies requires that CIT generate revenue through the provision of services and external contracts. Negotiating for external contracts is one of the roles of the marketing manager, whose pro-active marketing of CIT's business services is beginning to show signs of success. Current manager Sam Easton says:

'We're still hanging in there by the skin of our teeth, and sometimes I've not known how we managed it. However, a number of small commissions have just been generated which, if we can keep up, will see us break even on a month-by-month basis. (3)

As an attempt to distance itself from the bad publicity after the demise of WTN, CIT now describes itself as a business centre, with a listing in local directories. Easton suggests anecdotal evidence of an increase in enquiries as justification for the change, while adding that some people have commented that they liked the term telecottage. However, she suggests that more people will understand the type of services provided at a business centre as opposed to a telecottage. In addition, she is hopeful that funders will also prove more supportive.

Premises

CIT is located in a room at the rear of the multi-purpose village hall. Whilst sufficient for its present requirements, any expansion of services, workspaces or training facilities which require additional computer capacity would need additional space. It is here that the location of the telecottage is fortunate. The term village hall is misleading, it is in fact a purpose built construction comprising a sports hall, bar, restaurant, kitchen facilities, meeting rooms, storage room and the telecottage. A large sized storage room on the floor above which will double as a meeting / training room for the local community is currently being refurbished and will be available to CIT.

Having had its original equipment repossessed by CCW, CIT was obliged to invest in new computers. As part of a collaborative venture with CIT, West Wiltshire District Council recently paid for the provision of Internet access at the telecottage.

A number of training related project proposals currently under negotiation will require an expansion of the hardware and software platforms, as will the incorporation of the Internet into CIT's future plans and activities.

Staff

CIT's Management Board, which includes committed volunteers, deals with issues of a strategic nature. Day to day operations are the responsibility of the telecottage manager and a part-time member of staff.

Services

Of the services identified as objectives for meeting CIT's aim, the through-the-door and business support / office services still predominate. The telecottage / business centre advertises itself as providing:
- business and secretarial services
- photocopying
- letters
- price lists
- DTP - flyers, brochures, etc
- spreadsheets
- typing reports, theses, etc
- fax facilities
- stationary supplies
- computer hire
- databases
- basic accounting.

Jobcentre vacancies, updated every week, are displayed at CIT.
Training is seen as providing the local community and its businesses with a much needed service, as well as a source of revenue for CIT. Sam Easton currently has a list of thirty-six local people asking for some form of IT training. Most are women returners and older people, who want either to develop skills in preparation for a return to work, or simply want to know how to use a computer. Constrained by its lack of equipment CIT has submitted a number of funding proposals to address this issue.

The teleworking aspect of telecottage activities has yet to really establish itself at the centre due to restrictions of both human and technical resources. These limitations require CIT to prioritise its workload and service provision in order to establish itself as a viable community enterprise. However, the business and office services that the two staff

members provide are an embryonic form of telework and plans exist to develop this aspect in the future.

Users

Codford, with a population of about 700, is situated some seven miles from the nearest town and has a recognised tradition of social and economic activity. Easton stresses CIT's convenient location:

'The villagers still all see this as their project, part of their community, there for their benefit. Which is why you get the villagers in. I would say probably at some point or another, every single villager will come into this telecottage and use it to get a letter typed, some training, or just some photocopying. It's local, very handy for them, nobody wants to go the seven miles to Warminster.' (3)

For local businesses, community groups, and individual citizens CIT is perceived as a convenient community resource. The establishment of a training programme supported by appropriate hardware and software platforms will serve only to reinforce the existing sense of community identity and ownership.

Future

Training constitutes the major element of CIT plans for the future. Previously a significant part of activities under WTN, the removal of the technological infrastructure was a major setback for the telecottage, from which it is still trying to recover. There can be little doubt that establishing a training programme at the telecottage would provide a useful service to the community and should improve its financial performance in the process. Easton is involved in negotiations with Trowbridge and Salisbury colleges, through the Rural Development Agency (RDA), to provide accredited training courses at the Codford and Mere telecottages. It is proposed that RDA will fund the colleges to provide tutors, whilst the colleges hire the telecottages to provide the training direct into rural communities.

Historically, community telecottages in rural areas do not make huge profits. Income is constrained by population size and the services they require. In order to ensure financial viability, Easton emphasises the need for diversification.

'We really need to diversify our core businesses ... if we are going to keep our heads above water.' (3)

One of her proposed projects is for an after school club for children from the local comprehensive school. Students who have to use IT for homework and projects, but can't stay at school due to the timing of the school buses, will be able to use the telecottage. The project, which would fund the provision of three or four computers with appropriate educational software, could be linked to the newly acquired Internet access, as an additional information resource.

Another project proposal focuses on the development of a skills agency which will be linked into the training programme, developing a register to meet the temporary employment needs of businesses between Warminster and Wilton on the boundary of Salisbury.

One other area that Easton identifies as a potential source of work and revenue generation for the telecottage is its relationship with various public and voluntary sector agencies. She feels that by establishing the telecottage as a centre with a reputation for reliability, expertise and quality; and by building up a partnership of mutual trust and respect, local agencies could be persuaded to outsource work to them.

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Herefordshire and Worcestershire Community Resource Centres

"You can't keep telematics down can you?" (Ruth Reed)

Introduction

The Herefordshire and Worcestershire Community Resource Centre Network is a well-established, coordinated network based on a traditional local resource centre model. The network was set up by the county council in 1980. The idea was to make facilities such as typewriters, duplicators and low cost stationery available to voluntary groups in the county. (1)

Hereford and Worcester is very much a rural county with numerous small villages, relatively little large-scale industry and no university. In 1991 the Community Council of Hereford and Worcester took over administration of the network with financial support from the County Council and the Rural Development Commission. Thus the network was in place as a number of related community initiatives, administered by the voluntary sector itself after being nurtured by the local authority, well before the recent impetus given by the popularity of the Internet.

Ruth Reed, Development Officer for the network, established the Hereford and Worcester Telework Support Group as a result of her involvement with the Telecottage Association. She also served on the advisory group for the Golden Valley Information Project (now Library Online Information Service, LOIS) in Herefordshire. The gradual adoption of online information technology by the CRCs will thus be based on sound understanding of the potential of this technology, as well as on the firmly established local access points, each with their constituency of users in the community.

In about 1993, independently of the continued development of the CRCs, studies were carried out in three parts of the county, to find out whether a community telematics service would be viable and could be set up locally. The surveys asked about levels of experience with hardware and software and sought people's expectations about a teleservice centre. In one area, a nucleus of a dozen people out of 96 indicated an interest in helping to set up and run a telecentre. In another area, 'Of the 98 people interested in the project and likely to still be in the area in three years time, 18 expressed a desire to be involved in some aspect of managing or running the telecentre. The 18 included 12 men and six women.' (2). This is characteristic of the extent to which the development of the network has involved and reflected community interests.

There are now 24 CRCs across the county, with another due to open soon. The list of centres indicates where they are based and have links. These include, for example, a church, a volunteer bureau, a youth centre, a doctor's waiting room, council chambers, and primary schools. Several are in community centres or village halls, and one is hosted in a Portakabin in a caravan park. The centres have a range of equipment such as photocopiers, scanners, printers, duplicators, binding and stapling machines, slide projectors, typewriters, guillotines, etc. Two offer access to the Disablement Information Advice Line. Nearly all have computers, and three have Internet access and email.

The Hereford and Worcester CRCs do not offer full public access. Use is restricted to community groups, voluntary and non-profit organisations, unemployed people, and small businesses. These target groups were set by the county council, because of the issue of competition with local businesses, particularly the question of subsidised photocopying.

The CRCs are continuously developing, in a context of coordinated autonomy. As with all initiatives of this kind, opportunities come to some locations and not to others, for a variety of reasons: the network development officer is constantly exploring ways of raising funding and increasing resources, while ensuring that the relevant experience of each centre is shared with the others. Forthcoming developments include a new initiative, with European funding, known as the SMART (Southern Marches Area Rural Telematics) Project. This is based on the 'Objective 5b' area and applies to most of Herefordshire but not to Worcestershire. Among other things, the SMART project will give online access for seven or eight centres and will thus help the network to increase the IT options for the region.(3)

Development

Some of the CRCs may develop a role as local authority contact points, but none have done so yet. For example, there have been discussions with the anti-poverty worker in South Wychavon, concerning credit union information link-ups with the CRCs; in Evesham there will be another CRC having close links with an adventure playground for children excluded from schools. There have been discussions with credit union workers to link with CRCs in South Wychavon. One CRC has a meeting room used by district councillors, credit union workers and CRC training courses, at the back of the village hall.

One example of a quickly developing CRC is at Bewdley, where the local vicar runs a drop-in centre as well as the CRC in his church in the centre of the town. The CRC has only been part of the network for two years but already offers Internet access and email facilities to customers. Geoff Anderson, the coordinator, comments:

'It is, I feel, not down to individual CRCs in the end. We're talking about a whole nation's education in IT... We're in year zero of an incredible social revolution being brought about by telematics. Most people still have no idea. CRCs offering telematics are like coffee bars that had secret printing presses at the back. We're in at the start of a transformation in public awareness and it will take years still before what we offer is seen as normal.' (4)

The Larruperz Centre is a community centre on the outskirts of Ross on Wye which includes a CRC. In 1998 it is to have a new, purpose built IT resource centre as an extension of the centre, using ERDF monies. The centre will be employing an IT / administrative assistant who will work in the CRC alongside the present volunteers. There is already a cybercafe in the centre of the town, for business people and members of the public, with a drinks machine, and another room with an online shopping facility and pick up point.

Other potential new projects include one in Leominster with a school and the district council; and another one in Bromyard. A few schools are involved in CRCs. The Marches Consortium (of secondary schools) is working on IT and internet access in schools, to be accessible to the community.

Generally speaking CRCs have loyal customers but face problems where use decreases, for example when a major customer goes elsewhere.

The network has a Coordinator's Handbook, recently reviewed and in an easily updated loose-leaf format, which gives practical giudance to the coordinators on a wide range of issues. This handbook covers such diverse issues as stock control; responsibilities of volunteer helpers; health and safety; copyright, libel and obscenity; definitions of political, commercial and private use, and so on.

Training

Droitwich CRC was the first to offer IT training sessions, using a trainer from Worcester College of Technology. Courses were offered to voluntary agencies, women returners, and unemployed people.

In January 1998 a new initiative will see a basic IT skills course carried out at seven CRCs in Herefordshire by tutors from Herefordshire College of Technology using laptop computers. The courses will be for three hours per week for 10 weeks and will be fully evaluated. As part of the SMART programme, these seven centres will be connected online to Herefordshire College and will then be able to access software and other centrally-held resources. There are also plans for outreach IT training using mobile vans.(3)

Staffing

All of the coordinators are voluntary workers and about half are retired people. Some have been with their centres since 1980. The only paid worker is the Development Officer, whose post (25 hours a week) is funded by the county council.

In urban areas it might be relatively easy to engage sufficient volunteers for adequate levels of staffing, but in Hereford and Worcester some centres are not staffed as often as people need. The coordinator will only go in at times which are convenient to them, and therefore equipment is vulnerable. Some centres will have a helper who is on call in addition to the coordinator, someone who will go and open up if required and show a customer how to use equipment. At other centres, regular users can collect a key from a local point such as a shop, doctor's surgery, parish council office or volunteer's home, to use the equipment in their own time, returning the key when they have finished. It is clear that there is a considerable element of trust involved in the operation of the centres. In Tenbury there is a team of eight volunteers who work in turn to run the centre. Staff management can also be problematic because of the wide difference in the quality and ability of volunteers.

Funding

CRCs have to be based in publicly accessible rooms which are offered to them. The centres usually make a small contribution to their host organisation, such as an annual amount towards electricity use, but do not pay rent or rates. Most don't have phone lines.

All are run by volunteers and obviously depend heavily on this resource. The network continues to expand, with new CRCs coming onstream or planned. The basic requirement is reprographic facilities, and a balancing act is needed to be able to afford to introduce new equipment, because there is a significant economic shift from the basis of photocopying income, to the use and upkeep of a computer resource. The Community Council, as administrators of the network, have in the past received money from photocopier use at the centres, which has helped to support the network: but they will not receive money from the use of CRC computers, and will also have to supply, insure and upgrade them as well as providing training on them.

The income from the centres goes to the CRC's own accounts. The centres pay the Community Council 3p per copy produced; plus 1p per digital scan copy or the lease cost per quarter for the machine(s). The larger centres which produce a lot of copies help to subsidise the smaller ones, so ideally there will always be a balance in the network between the two. All are supposed to be self-financing but occasionally a cost may arise which can't be met. Insurance is now paid by the central administration, because better equipment is now in place and is more expensive to insure. Expenses to the CRCs are increasing. Again, the coordinators, although trained to use computers, are not trainers. As Ruth Reed says, 'Just offering access to a computer is only half a resource.' The question of paying trainers is a key issue for the further development of the network, because specialised work with computers requires paid trainers.(3)

In addition to the basic staff cost paid by the county council, to adminster and development the network, there is also money from the Rural Development Commission for widening the use of the network and for telematics development. Further funding is provided for example from Countrywork, BT, the Post Office, the district councils, and the European Regional Development Fund money. Most of this additional funding is for specific pieces of equipment.

All the centres are able to approach funding sources of their own. In Droitwich, for instance, the CRC receives regular contributions from the Town Council for new items of equipment.

Sustainability

The CRCs are given equipment and £100 to start with. The Community Councils seem to be the most logical organisations to run the network, ensuring the balance of autonomy, support, security, and community involvement.

One anticipated possible problem has to do with the need for dependable technical support to the CRCs, because there is no local university. However, relationships with the two county colleges of technology appear to be promising. The network has an arrangement with a local computer company, with a reduced call-out charge, and so far there has not been much call for it. The network has a much-valued arrangement with a photocopier leasing company.

Given the dependency on host organisations for the use of buildings, any centre might be asked to leave at relatively short notice. This happened in one case where a youth centre had pressure on room. There was considerable disquiet in the local community at the threat to the CRC, and an agreement was reached with the youth centre based on the mutual provision of services. The CRC is now looking for a purpose-built room in a new public centre.

Future

The introduction of computers into the CRCs has been a natural evolution: giving people opportunities to use databases, account software, wordprocessing, dtp, and to access online services, is seen as a natural development.

While managing the transition to being predominantly computer-based resources, with online access, seems critical to the future of the network, it would be a mistake to see them as previously just community-based photocopying bureaux. One of the CRCs' strengths is that they offer a mixture of facilities. Duplicating over 20 copies is considerably cheaper on a scan (digital) printer, and customers can access computer packages to produce original material, using printers, scanners etc.

The Hereford and Worcester network is a hugely successful and inexpensive way of running CRCs. Running on a countywide basis gives coherence, a degree of commonality, and the vital ingredient of mutual support. Each centre has a lot of autonomy, they are all basically self-financing, and they have excellent help and advice when they need it. While they may be vulnerable in some ways - through dependency on volunteers and on the availability of rent-free premises, for example - in other ways the network demonstrates a basic soundness and resilience which contrasts strongly with the short-term grant dependency of more glamorous urban initiatives.

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Barton Hill Workshop, Bristol

Introduction

Barton Hill Workshop is part of Barton Hill Settlement, which offers a range of community facilities including a day centre for older people, a family playcentre, a neighbourhood centre, and a photography project. The settlement (formerly Bristol University Settlement) has an annual turnover of £400,000 of which approximately half comes from local authority grants, 25% from earned income and about 25% from other grants. The workshop occupies rooms on the ground floor and is used heavily by projects based in the settlement. It is a well-established community education project which uses computers for group courses and individual use. Courses are also run outside the settlement, at local or in the community rooms of local flats.

The workshop's mission statement is as follows:

'Barton Hill Workshop aims to provide a comprehensive integrated package of training, education, advice and practical support, for people in the local community who wish to enter training and employment and thereby improve the quality of their life.'

The workshop's main objective is to provide a first step into education and training for local people. Originally they provided mostly leisure courses, but increasingly vocational courses have been offered. The workshop has confronted the access barriers which discourage people from joining courses, by offering language support, disabled access, creche, etc. They stress support for people during and beyond the course at personal level, one-to-one. A key element of their expertise is education, training and careers guidance.

Publicity for the workshop reads:

- 'This is a very well equipped project which is open every day providing a computer resource and training centre for local people.
- One-to-one and group training is available on a range of up to date software at all levels.
- Staff give a lot of support and have information on further training.
- People use the facility to work on a wide range of personal projects where there is usually help available.
- Training is often tailor-made for the individual or group after discussion about needs and past experience. (1)

The project works with voluntary organisations throughout Bristol in training and consultancy, and previously in database building (now dropped). A key element in their work is a collaborative and networking approach to guidance and lifelong learning. Among the identified needds which it seeks to address are:

- people with skills who are excluded from the labour market, for example those whose skills need updating, those who are unfamiliar with work, those not connected to networks which give them access to work;

- barriers to accessing training, such as low self-confidence, lack of numeracy and literacy skills, lack of childcare provision, fear of technology. (2)

Projects

At the time of the field visit in September 1996, the workshop was about to begin two new SRB-funded projects, the Family Learning Project and Connections.

The Family Learning Project is a 6 year partnership initiative with the Family Play Centre which is based at the settlement, with the aim of creating 'small friendly groups of parents and carers of young children who want to build their confidence in helping children to enjoy learning.'(3) According to Maria Clarke, IT Support and Development Worker, the workshop is contributing a strong IT element to this initiative.

The Connections project was established to explore the potential uses of multimedia in community settings. It has two elements:

- the development of multi-media productions by community organisations
- web and CDROM dissemination with the emphasis on the interface and its interactive capabilities.

In addition, Barton Hill Workshop is leading an SRB2 project bid called 'Inner City Lifeline' which aims to extend current guidance, education and training provision for adults in inner city Bristol.

Finance

The workshop originally received Urban Programme funding for one full time project worker, this then reduced to 6 months and then tapered. Capital funding came from the Task Force and from Bristol City Council's Equal Opportunities budget. Most of the community computing project is now funded by Westec (the local Training and Enterprise Council). Funding has also been received from BA, Lloyd's Bank and IBM for equipment. The project receives local authority funding from the community education budget for non-vocational courses; plus FEFC grants for vocational courses (paying for tutors and administration). They have benefitted from contributions in kind from Careers Service West. The workshop no longer receives funding from Bristol City Council. Income to the project is about £2-3,000 pa from use of the resource centre.

Equipment in the computer centre is up-to-date and the staff spend a considerable amount of time assessing new software for their courses. Maria stresses the importance of security for the smooth running of the facility, and notes that the project has had only one beak-in in 5 years:
'Getting security right is crucial.' (4)

Staff

Barton Hill Workshop has a Project Leader; an IT Support and Development Worker; and administrator; a part-time volunteer administrator; an IT Support Worker (who is part-time paid and also a volunteer); and a 12 month research student placement (for the Connections project) from the University of the West of England. They have also hosted 10 week placements from Avon & Bristol Training Associates for employment skills development.

Sustainability: Barton Hill Workshop is established with a good reputation, but still there is a problem with year to year funding.

Users

The project prioritises local people (the BS5 postcode area), an area with 41% male unemployment. Clarke drew particular attention to the project's development of women-only courses. These were begun for Asian women in relation to language work, and subsequently extended to other women. The feedback which the workshop gained from women-only courses was that:

- it's quieter
- they don't feel stupid
- they don't get irritated by 'men speaking technobabble'. (4)

At times, users asked for children to be excluded. Another specific trend among users was the demand from younger males (aged 20-30), associated with new small enterprises who were interested in using computers to generate publicity material.

One student who had suffered from ME (Chronic Fatigue Syndrome) and had to abandon her career, described the importance of the workshop in her life:

'Although seemingly confident, competent and articulate, this illness has destroyed my self esteem and the workshop has given me the opportunity to slowly regain my confidence by accepting my limitations and allowing me to work within my fluctuating levels of energy.'(5)

Open access to the computer room is timetabled (eg all mornings). Use of the workshop is not limited or defined by people's area of residence. Clarke felt that the workshop is exploiting its existing resources very fully. She noted that individuals using the resource are often respresenting groups with a community development role - campaigning groups for example. This confirms that part of the workshop's role is in enabling community development and community action. Clarke described the project's level of community involvement as being 'more broad than deep'.

Future

The project is looking at providing Internet access, but this is being approached with caution. Maria Clarke intended to make sure she was 'satisfied about controlling online costs.'(4) She noted that, apart from the Connections project, the workshop's main use of ICTs is not at the leading edge.

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Standon Parish Electronic Centre (SPEC)

Introduction

The parish of Standon in Hertfordshire comprises a rural community with a population of about 3,500, including the villages of Standon and Puckeridge. The telecottage which serves this area is a partnership with contributions from the public, private and voluntary sectors, offering a broad and imaginative range of services. SPEC has already undergone two significant phases in its development. It is now faced with decisions that will see it enter a challenging third developmental phase, or an uncertain future.

The idea of the Standon telecottage was conceived in 1994 by an employee of Hertfordshire County Council library service, Martin Dudley, whose responsibilities included the planning and development of IT strategies and community information systems. In 1994 Dudley was appointed as a 'friend of Standon Parish Council' by the County Council. At a parish council meeting, he gave a presentation of how a telecottage might be of value to the area.

The council's approval was based on an understanding that the telecottage should provide the community with a resource that would give local people access to ICTs and information sources, together with the skills to use them effectively. The unique selling proposition of the 1994-95 business plan was outlined in its mission statement:

'To provide the best possible public access to computer based facilities, in order to enhance the social and economic life of the Parish.' (1)

Fundamental to the idea was that it should pave the way to a 21st Century vision of life, one that that facilitated the development of the local community by addressing local needs whilst preserving the culture of village life. In addition to the mission statement, the business plan includes a vision statement which claims that it will 'provide a facility so central to local life that nobody could imagine how we did without it.' (SPEC, 1995, p5)

Planning and strategy

In 1994, a fourteen page business plan was prepared, focusing on three prime objectives for the centre:

- social - to support individuals and community groups
- economic - to support businesses and economic development
- democratic - to support access to information that allows local citizens to make informed choices.

A mailshot of the business plan was undertaken and used as the basis of fundraising within the community. The process of raising both funds and awareness in the telecottage's potential led to the development of a distributed network of contacts, and

resulted in a meeting with the Telecottage Association. A public meeting in October 1994.ratified the business plan.

Initial funding came from the Hertfordshire County Council's Community Initiatives Fund and East Hertfordshire District Council. A total of £5000 was used to provide a computer and network facility in a public space in order to facilitate:

- training for information technology skills
- access to networks for business support information
- shared use of information technology by community groups
- 'teleworking' facilities for those unable to travel
- fax, electronic mail, databases and bulletin boards for local access to information services. (1)

The Parish Council set aside a budget of £6400 for 1995-96 to cover the centre's running costs in the first year. Parish Council subsidies would be provided over a three year period, by which time the centre was to be self-sustaining. SPEC opened in April 1995.

During the first twelve months SPEC identified problems in developing its business and community potential beyond its capability for faxes and photocopies. The initial funding and support from the parish council proved crucial to its overall survival.

'What you see today is the fruition of the more recent six months of effort... The first twelve months wasn't good enough! If we'd have been a business we'd have been out of business, but we're not.' (2)

The fact that SPEC was an innovative departure from the normal activities of a parish council contributed to a lack of clarity relating to its legal position. A number of issues became clouded by regulatory and legal interpretation and the council often failed to give any clear lead. However, the majority of the problems experienced during the initiative's first year stemmed from administrative and organisational inadequacies, primarily the lack of management skills.

During this period the management group, which was set up to represent user and partner interests, began to recognise the limitations of the existing business plan. The absence of specific and achievable targets had resulted in a lack of direction. Planning discussions became increasingly circuitous and confused, and technical expertise was also limited. It was recognised that the group of enthusiastic volunteers who initiated the project were unable to develop the telecottage beyond this point. A more professional approach to the centre's development, together with improvements in organisational structure was required.

Operationally, SPEC had been constrained by the fact that it was only ever staffed by volunteers. The centre's opening hours were dependant on the reliability of these volunteers, which could not always be guaranteed. In order to promote public awareness and create customer goodwill, it was agreed that SPEC should open and operate to a reliable and consistent pattern. This reliability was vital in building up the custom of businesses, community groups and individual citizens.

SPEC's management was taken over by Moat Services, an Internet services development company owned by volunteer helper Mike Harrison. In return for this service, Moat would use the centre as its organisational base, rent-free. This mutuality was viewed as providing a stable platform for the future development of the telecottage.

At the time of this reorganisation, Moat had developed an established client- base from the London area looking for Web development services. This provided the opportunity to employ and train some local people to undertake these contracts. After a six month period of intensive Internet and multimedia based training, the staff, who were also providing SPEC's management services, applied their newly aquired skills by developing SPEC's website. (3)

It soon became clear that the initial premises were inadequate for SPEC's requirements and in March 1996 the centre moved to a new location in the village. During the reorganisation three other areas of concern were identified:

- the local area network needed upgrading
- training and education programmes had to be improved and developed
- SPEC's public relations strategy was in need of a fresh approach. Raising awareness of the centre was to become a priority, this would include holding an open day in September 1996.

Aims and objectives

The 1996 business plan identifies SPEC's aims as follows:

Parish and Social Centre
To provide a centre for the parish that can act as:
- an administration centre for Parish business
- a contact and focal point for local government, as well as providing the necessary infrastructure to link to the local government systems
- a contact point for a local Citizens Advice Bureau
- an information centre.

Business Centre
SPEC aims to provide a key focal point for local businesses as well as to promote these businesses to a wider market. In particular, the role of SPEC as a business centre is to:

- act as an information centre for establishing and developing local businesses
- provide and facilitate employment opportunities in the area
- identify and secure investment into the local business infrastructure
- provide products and services to support existing businesses.

Education Centre

The resource and infrastructure available at SPEC are to be used by and be accessible to the local community for educational purposes, both school age and adult. A number of potential application areas exist in this area, including:

- a homework centre, where schoolchildren can attend after school or during holidays, to use IT resources, including connection to the Internet and online services. The development of self-help and collaborative workgroups can be envisaged

- an IT area for use by local schools, where resources are available that are not accessible within the schools

- a training centre for IT and multimedia skills development

- distance learning, where connection is available for local public access onto learning networks, such as the Open University, technology colleges, and even an emerging network of satellite schools

- reskilling, where specific programmes are run to develop new skills in the existing workforce

- support workshops for the overall development and consolidation of IT skills. (4)

Implementation

Originally, the underlying ethos of the telecottage in Standon was that the centre should be:

- multi-purpose to ensure viability
- driven by the needs of local people, and
- managed by local interests.

If SPEC is to become self-sustaining further expansion is necessary. To embrace the commercial/community model of trading outlined in the business plan, which includes broadband networking, multimedia and video conferencing, teleworking and other commercial forms of activity; existing space is insufficient.

'I think that the promising part about [SPEC] is the number of prominent local politicians who are beginning to see the opportunities. Maybe we can be influential in helping to shape some of the thinking about what can be made to happen but this centre in its own right wouldn't be big enough to support a full teleworking centre. All we can do therefore is to provide a support network to the local community where people can come in and have access to these things as and when they're needed.' (2)

To a limited extent, local people are involved in the running of SPEC through its network of volunteers. These either work at the telecentre, or serve on the management committee.

'To a large extent SPEC is subject to the democratic process. If people don't like what the councillors are doing with the money they can throw them off and get another set in; same as anywhere. However, our planning committee was supposed to turn into a user group, that's in the plan, but it hasn't happened yet.' (2)

Attempts by Dudley to widen the spectrum of representation on the committee have sometimes led to opposition. However, he remains convinced that the only way to achieve and retain a sense of community ownership and identity in SPEC is to encourage the community to participate directly in its management. Conscious that much of the community has yet to embrace the concept of a telecottage fully, he is keen to develop SPEC's use beyond its photocopy and fax services.

Despite the management of SPEC being put on a more secure and professional basis, much of the work and activities undertaken at the centre still depends on the contribution of volunteers. Moat coordinates these volunteers.

Moat's responsibilities also include the provision of office services, but volunteers undertake word processing and other computer work on behalf of the users. The monthly planning meeting is administered and co-ordinated by Moat, as are publicity and promotional events and activities. Moat also provides administrative support for the training workshops and the community information point.

Staffing

Moat employs one full-time and one part-time worker for the management of the telecottage. The intention is that as commercial contracts increase additional people will be employed and their skills developed on-site. The centre is still dependent on volunteers who develop their skills in the training workshops. This in turn is of indirect benefit to the local economy by contributing to the development of the local skills base.

Occasional difficulties over volunteer commitments and absence can draw Moat staff away from their contract work. This was anticipated but it can lead to tensions between the community and commercial aspects of Moat's work at the centre.

Finance

The Parish Council is currently responsible for the centre's building costs. Moat contributes to these costs through the quid pro quo management services arrangement. Other initiatives operating out of SPEC are charged rent directly by the Parish Council. After the initial three year subsidy period SPEC will also start to pay rent to the Parish Council. The plan is that SPEC's rent element will reduce in proportion to the number of

external organisations attracted to the centre. The Parish Council will continue to make a contribution in respect of its parish office.

This form of funding of a telecottage appears to be unique in the UK in that public/private telecottage funding normally takes the form of grants. The direct use of public funds in this way however, has not been without its critics.

'People said to us, why should we have something like this on the rates? We say, we've got park benches haven't we? We pay for them on the rates, don't we? What goes on on park benches? It not just people sitting there; they feed the ducks, have conversations, they kanoodle, they turn them into a ship and play on them. Park benches are multi-purpose, that's why we're quite happy to see them... and that's what we've got here, everybody finding a use.' (2)

Revenue costs - heating, lighting and telephones, materials and consumables, etc - are met directly by SPEC. Income generated through the provision of services is paid into a separate account. The long term aim is to generate an income which exceeds expenditure, through service charges which reflect increased usage. Residual revenue and capital from grants will be invested in upgrading the technology, and furniture.

Business plan

The 1996 business plan requires SPEC to generate an extra £5,000 revenue against a static expenditure in order to break even at the end of the third year. This could be achieved by renting space to external organisations and increasing the training programmes.

SPEC has no competition in the area at present but its main sources of income - which account for nearly 50% of current business - are open to external competition. To off-set this potential threat the plan suggests that new revenue streams, focusing on telematic applications, such as teleworking and video-conferencing, are required. Such applications are dependent on an increase in space, an upgrade of the technological infrastructure, and the ability to attract a new customer base. (4)

Clearly this is an area where medium and long-term strategic actions are required from all participating partners. Mike Harrison has little doubt that this third stage of development is crucial to SPEC's survival.

'If SPEC is to be successful then the model has to grow... We've got to go to a third development stage. Further increase the networking infra-structure that we've got in order to attract a wider audience. Unless we're successful in getting the local community to recognise the opportunity of that then we aren't going to get the sorts of numbers coming through the door that would substantiate that sort of investment. So the community learning, the community education and awareness task is in part to try and get more people coming through to recognise what could be done and then to get the funding for that. As an investment case in its own right its highly marginal at the moment as to whether you'd take the decision.' (5)

There are also plans to consolidate existing custom and business by improving existing facilities, enhancing the professional image, promoting existing products and services, and so on.

The business plan identifies a limited area of market research to have been undertaken immediately through monitoring and evaluation of existing users. A more comprehensive approach to market research was identified as a medium term action (within 3 - 6 months).

SPEC currently has a £140,000 borrowing licence to build or develop a property within two years. It is hoped that establishing a number of collaborative initiatives will stimulate closer partnership links with the County Council. If the Parish Council can then identify a plot of land in a suitable location, Dudley believes the potential is there to enter the third stage of development.

Thanks to the presence of Moat Services, SPEC now opens Monday to Friday, nine to five. To meet the needs of people who work during these times, the centre is advertised as being open on specific evenings and every Saturday morning between nine and twelve, although in practice it is only open on most Saturdays between nine and ten thirty when the volunteer has to leave. The management committee is exploring ways of reducing volunteer dependency.

Services

In addition to the core business of photocopying, faxing, wordprocessing, desktop publishing CVs, label runs and computer games, the telecottage provides a diverse range of services.

- The Book Request Service enables local people to order, collect and return books from the County's library service.

- The Community Information point provides a comprehensive range of current information across a wide spectrum of subject areas from personal health to taxation matters and beyond.

- The Oasis scheme allows mobile employees of the County Council access to remote office facilities from which they can work.

- Users can browse both the library service catalogue and the County Council's InfoCentre local information system.

- The Citizen's Advice Bureau uses an office at the centre once a week catering for local people.

- Local councillors hold regular surgeries for constituents.

- The centre provides local residents with Parish Council information and a democratic services contact point

- Catalogue goods can be ordered through a teleshopping application.

- Internet access.

Staff are working to stimulate interest in SPEC as a focal community resource. School children are encouraged to use the centre's computer technology for a nominal fee of 50p, and an Internet course for local children on Saturday mornings is planned.

Contact has been made with the Parent-Teachers Association of all local schools to promote the centre as a resource for all sections of the community. One of the difficulties has been in convincing schools that the centre is not a threat to them as educational institutions; that as a non-profit making organisation SPEC is a community resource that could be utilised by the schools for the delivery of IT and Internet related training courses.

Education and training

SPEC is currently improving and expanding its educational and training courses through a Rural Development Commission grant of £2000. Courses are run by volunteers with specialist IT skills. They are currently aimed at beginners but are being upgraded to include intermediate and advanced levels.

Telework facilities

Establishing SPEC as a teleworking centre remains part of the business plan, but it is far from certain whether further development can be achieved in the current circumstances. Mike Harrison suggests that the potential for widespread teleworking might not yet exist:

'Overall, people aren't yet embracing the concept to a very real degree. As a business man that's my area of potential development.' (5)

On the positive side SPEC has negotiated a contract with Hertfordshire County Council to participate in a scheme, called Oasis, whereby nomadic council teleworkers can drop in, use the centre's facilities, and connect to the council's intranet. However, lack of space and the technological infrastructure severely limits SPEC's ability to develop this potential growth area significantly beyond Oasis.

Users

A rudimentary form of market segmentation has been conducted for the purpose of identiying the potential customer base, but an acknowledged weakness of this initiative has been the lack of market research and of evaluation and monitoring.

One area where SPEC is beginning to increase its promotional activities is within the voluntary sector; especially amongst local community groups for young people. One such example is a recent approach from SPEC to the local cubs, scouts, brownies and guides groups. A major activity of these groups is badge work, and SPEC has offered its facilities to assist in the development of a computer badge. SPEC is also assisting the Parish Council in developing a youth programme. Discussions have focused on the potential of a youth parish council, possibly based at SPEC.

The promotion of teleworking forms part of the Parish Council's attempt to stimulate economic growth. The creation of new skills, in an area that is relatively low-skilled in terms of IT, is seen as an integral part of this strategy. It is is hoped that these newly acquired skills will act as a catalyst for attracting, and creating new businesses in the area, which in turn will improve local employment opportunities.

Community development

A key factor in SPEC's declared aim of stimulating community development is the presence of a Rural Enterprise project, run by Susan Clark. This project is a joint initiative between the District Council, the County Council, the TEC, the Community Development Agency for Hertfordshire (formerly the Community Council), and the Ministry of Agriculture. The idea is to develop environmental and economic initiatives with rural communities in East Hertfordshire. As a Local Agenda 21 type project, Clark's work focuses on issues of sustainability using tools such as appraisals and mapping community initiatives in the parish.

Another aspect of the community development work involves the Rural Action Network which provides support and advice for the network of village shopkeepers from the district by running training events, seminars, information evenings, and so on.

Clark argues that the training and community information roles of SPEC complement the community development work that she undertakes and in turn is keen to contribute to the development of the centre.

'Its been really important. Its a brilliant place for my project because it fits in with the essence of my project. The two are mutually beneficial, the people who come to see me are finding out about SPEC as a part of that, or are coming into SPEC and are finding out about my project. The two mutually support each other very well.' (6)

Future

It is difficult to predict how SPEC will develop in the future. Tensions existing between the private, public and voluntary sector partners remain. Martin Dudley is convinced that telematics will provide the key to the future, and that SPEC must be at the forefront of these developments by providing a diverse range of services.

'What will sustain it will be a variety of services, and a variety of demand. We're launching things today that are brand new, how long is it going to take before they get into people's consciousness? It'll take a bit of time, but once they are, once you've got a hundred regular people, those things are difficult to get rid of.' (2)

Mike Harrison argues that if SPEC is to develop into a telematics/telework centre from which local people run their businesses, the centre would need to expand dramatically. He is currently examining ways in which the funding might be raised to achieve the required expansion.

Harrison also raises concerns about the centre's sustainability potential based on the existing model. He suggests that SPEC's current development has been driven by contacts in various organisations, such as the County library services. Without this support Harrison is sceptical that the local community would be able to continue with the telematics project.

'From a commercial development [perspective], it will not get off the ground in rural development areas to the large scale extent, without government or central sponsorship. Certainly in terms of broadband networks.' (5)

Moat Services employee, Chris Harrison emphasises the importance of providing services to and for the local community but adds a caveat:

'From SPEC's point of view we're only going to survive here if we can pay our way. We need to be able to provide services to keep going, but people coming in to read the leaflets isn't going to bring the revenue that's going to keep SPEC surviving.' (7)

It is this point that highlights the dilemma facing SPEC in the future. Does its future lie, as Martin Dudley argues, as a multi-purpose centre which is meant to act as a public facility for the public good, which is not actually meant to make money? In which case it will continue to require an element of subsidy from the public purse. Or, is there another economic model that will enable a sustainable synergy between the community and commercial foci to develop? Mike Harrison suggests that there might be a need in the future to split the commercial and community aspects of SPEC.

'I would think they probably do need to split. If you want to get to a self-financing operation then you probably need to break the two. The community model, the community focus, the presence of the Parish Council Development Officer, the library services, all the other things that the telecottage does will then become useful on the premises because it's a useful synergy to have between the commercial arm and the other services.' (5)

By 1997 SPEC should be completely self-sustaining. On its current financial progress, it is possible that the centre will break even this year. There is currently no further space available to rent out, and the 1996 business plan identifies the photocopying and fax services as being open to possible threat from alternative providers in the village.

If the aim of the current partners is that SPEC should continue to develop and provide information and telematics-based services to stimulate economic and community development, then the current model needs close examination. Investment is required if SPEC is to be more than a convenient place to get a photocopy done.

Conclusion

SPEC differs from most UK telecottages, in adopting a more holistic approach to meet the social, economic and decision making needs of local people. It is a multi-purpose teleservice centre, providing the local community with three quite specific, yet interrelated sets of services. It provides directly, or gives access to a wide range of information services, both for citizens and for commercial activity. It provides a variety of office based services for small businesses, community groups and individuals. And it is developing an extensive curriculum of ICT based training courses.

During the first twelve months, SPEC was beset by poor management, unreliability of volunteers, and a Parish Council unprepared for the legal and regulatory issues thrown up by the innovative project.

The centre now operates to an established pattern of opening hours. It is run as a professional organisation by a commercial company who provide management services. A committed network of volunteers support the centre's activities and undertake work for local people.

Tensions between the commercial activities of MOAT services and reliance on volunteers seem not to have been too problematic. However, the main problem area relates to SPEC's aim of establishing itself as a telematics/telework centre. The lack of space, inadequate technology infrastructure, and an as yet unidentified market all present SPEC with major problems in achieving this part of the business plan.

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Coventry Community Network

Introduction

The Coventry Community Network (CCN) started life as Coventry Environmental Network (CEN), an amalgam of environmental groups in the Coventry area using electronic newsletters. In 1994, supported by BT, CEN held an Internet demonstration day in a local shopping centre. The event generated so much interest that the computer terminal was constantly in use throughout the day. It became apparnet that people were more interested in the potential of the technology than in environmental issues. As a consequence, it was decided that the network should expand its focus and adopt a more community oriented approach.

CCN was set up initially as a group of five or six enthusiasts, and 18 months later CCN is still going as part of the Coventry and Warwick Network (CWN), without funding.

'We tend to get e-mail asking why its not up to date because people think it's the council's website and assume that its heavily funded... but it's all done voluntarily.' (1)

CCN's interface enables visitors to link to a number of community organisations' home-pages, public library websites, and a Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) information site, as well as providing access to Coventry's Area Co-ordination sites.

Area Co-ordination is a partnership between local voluntary and community groups, local businesses, Coventry City Council (CCC), West Midlands Police, Coventry Health and Coventry Healthcare Trust. Established in the six areas of Coventry showing the highest levels of deprivation (2), Area Co-ordination seeks to achieve the following objectives:

- to attack poverty and inequality
- to make on the ground improvements to local services
- to generate practical solutions in response to particular local problems
- to empower residents through community participation.(3).

This case study focuses on an initiative currently being undertaken as part of the Foleshill Area Co-ordination Team (FACT), Information Action Group plans. The initiative, entitled Community Business Internet Project (CBI) represents a 'dual-track' approach to community development, and economic regeneration and employment.

Background

In Foleshill, the Area Co-ordination Team (FACT), led by Co-ordinator, David Galliers, distributed a draft Action Plan to over 400 individuals and agencies in the area. As a result, over 90 local residents, 80 local businesses, 20 voluntary organisations and community groups, working alongside the other statutory agencies of the partnership for a four month period, in seven Action Groups, developed the final draft.

The Information Action Group (4) Plans included actions for the following areas:

- Information needs survey
- Directory of agencies in Foleshill
- Electronic communications network
- Community newspaper
- An 0800 automatic telephone information service
- Project support training sessions. (5)

Planning and Strategy

A need for better communications between organisations in Foleshill was identified and formed part of the electronic communications network action. A range of strategies to improve inter-organisational communications were developed and included accredited Internet training for the staff of local groups and organisations. This led to the creation of the CBI project. A three year project (1995-97), CBI was developed out of a bid submitted to the European Commission's (EC) Horizon Fund. The bid focused on ways of developing and testing innovative ways of training people from disadvantaged community groups. Its purpose was to develop training in the use of the Internet from a community development perspective, whilst at the same time stimulating skills development that would improve the employability of local citizens.

In essence, CBI was a collaborative work approach, supporting other community development projects that were already underway. Its strategies were to both enable and empower local communities; encourage inter-agency work and partnerships; and improve and develop local services.

Whilst the need for the project was identified by the Information Action Group, its planning was undertaken by FACT, Ecosaurus and the University of Warwickshire. Ecosaurus provided technical support in configuring the hardware and software platforms of the participating organisations, as well as acting as an accredited trainer. The University of Warwick provided the 30 hour accredited training programme and support. FACT acted as project facilitator and recruited representatives from community organisations.

'The three partners actually depended on each other to make it work. Area Co-ordination couldn't do it on its own because it's an enabling organisation; Ecosaurus has the technical expertise about the hardware and software that we haven't got; and the University has the ability to accredit tailor-made programmes... so it was about pulling all those strengths together on the planning side.' (6)

Galliers maintains that the partnership approach to the project worked because everyone got something out of it. Chris Studman from Ecosaurus emphasises another reason for its success:

'The partnership doesn't have a feeling of competition within it. In some partnerships when you get partners of the same category there can be underlying tension and

competition but because there was only one partner from each sector, it works very well. It's been enjoyable.' (1)

In order to participate, each organisation had to sign a contract which required them to provide the hardware platform, the telephone line, pay the costs of telephone calls, and agree that a certain number of hours of their representative's time would be used to gain accreditation and use the technology. In return, the project met software installation costs through Ecosaurus, the cost of one modem, the cost of one year's subscription to an Internet Service Provider, and accredited training through the University of Warwick. (7)

Aims and Objectives

The CBI project aims to:
- establish not-for-profit organisations on the Internet
- train representatives of these organisations in the use of the relevant technology
- use the technology locally, nationally and internationally
- evaluate the effectiveness of this technology as compared to other media.

It seeks to achieve these aims by meeting the following objectives:

- to give access to more and useful information for organisations
- to give access to a wider market/network
- to provide representatives with skills that could be used in the employment market
- to give representatives more confidence in the use of the technology. (7)

Implementation

The training component of the CBI project was aimed not only at developing Internet skills for people from community organisations. It was also intended to help students to develop a critical assessment of the technology and information, and through this to be able to train others. In this respect CBI was very much about training the trainers.

Based on the small numbers of people completing the course in the first year, the contract was restructured. Participating community organisations were now expected to pay for their training, until their representatives qualified, when they would be reimbursed. This action lead to a dramatic increase in the number of people completing the course.

There can be little doubt that the lack of available resources restricts the development of CCN. However, a symbiotic relationship exists between CBI and CCN. The more community organisations that receive Internet training, the greater its potential relevance. Galliers detects that despite a slow start, support for the network is growing in the community sector which might have beneficial effects:

'There seems to be a growing [sense] of ownership now. I certainly welcome the feedback we got from the recent evaluation session. People were saying, 'I didn't realise what I could get out of this'. So now we're pushing the thing off and stepping back. The crunch will

come when we see whether the community network spreads at all, or whether it withers on the vine.' (6)

Staffing

As a partnership-based initiative CBI employs no staff. Project management forms part of Galliers's job as Area Co-ordinator. Administrative support is also supplied from his office. Advice, technical support and training for community organisations are provided by Ecosaurus and the University of Warwick. Having no staff means that project management and running costs can be kept to a minimum.

Funding

The project is funded solely through the annual £10,000 Horizon Fund grant. Matched funding is provided by the City Council in respect of the FACT offices, and Galliers's and administration support time. The other partners add a significant amount of in-kind contributions.

The absence of staff costs means that the annual grant covers the cost of modem provision and configuration, Internet subscriptions, software installation by Ecosaurus and course enrolment at the University.

Users

The population of Foleshill includes a high proportion (52%) from black and ethnic minorities. (8) This is eflected in the composition of the organisations and groups participating in the project.

Monitoring and Evaluation

As an EC funded project, CBI undertakes quantitative monitoring of the numbers of:

- training hours provided
- people gaining accredited qualifications, and
- competencies achieved by individuals.

This type of monitoring is viewed by Galliers as functional, part of the administrative requirements of the funders. He feels that the qualitative evaluation exercises undertaken are more productive and benefit the project's development. Evaluation takes the form of open discussions with students and community groups. The results are then fed back into project development to help improve the service.

Use of CCN is monitored by means of an online counter on every page. Ecosaurus also monitors instances of information downloading, with a view to determining how well used information is.

Future

Most of the community centres in Foleshill are already wired up. These networked computer terminals are used to provide training courses or for administrative purposes. Full public access in community centres is seen as a priority for the future. Phase three of the CBI project, which is nearing completion, developed a number of proposals for the final years. These include a scaled-down continuation of the training courses; targeted awareness raising seminars for specific groups; encouragement and support for the establishment of a user network; developing a new range of materials and information on the advice of the new local user group; developing a number of Public Access Points (PAPs) in a variety of locations in Foleshill; and monitoring their use.

It is unclear what level of success has been achieved in establishing the user support network but funding has recently been secured from INTEGRA which will enable the training of higher level trainees locally, and to develop public access points. As a result, two PAPs are currently being trialled in a youth centre and a community centre, although it is too early to have evaluated their success.

Conclusion

Throughout its two year life-span, CBI has had significant support from the project partnership. In fact it is fair to say that it has been driven by FACT, Ecosaurus and The University of Warwick. Now that the project is reaching its end, it is uncertain what will happen next. Galliers suggests he detects growing support for CCN.

Indeed, a successful and thriving CCN would be the logical conclusion to the Information Action Group's Electronic Communication Network plan of improving communication links between community organisations. However, the lack of official support for the development of CCN raises some concern. It will also be interesting to see, once the project has closed, how many community groups will continue to subscribe to an Internet Service Provider when it's no longer free.

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-   develop appropriate support to help local people take an active part in developing their community.

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Barnsley-Net

Introduction

The Barnsley-Net project, or the Barnsley College of the Web as it has now become known, developed as a two phase initiative of Barnsley City Challenge. (1)

The first phase comprised a number of research and development elements undertaken by the University of Sheffield's, Department of Information Studies in the summer of 1995. Their brief was to:
- analyse the needs of the user base in the local community
- raise awareness of and stimulate interest in the internet
- develop a Website for Barnsley on the Internet
- identify partners for phase two of the project. (2)

Three overwhelming issues arose from the University's research project which were fed into the development of phase two:

- very few organisations in Barnsley were utilising ICTs at this time
- the need for training was strongly expressed, to enable use of the technology
- sufficient interest existed within the city to develop a community information network.

The phase one project report was sent to City Challenge and the overall project given the name Barnsley-Net. Barnsley-Net was proposed as a charitable trust, owned and controlled by the organisations using it. Profits from any income generated were to be fed back into meeting the project aims.

Aims and objectives

The aim of the project was to:

- establish a Community Information Network for the city.

This was to be achieved by realising the following objectives:

- to provide the hardware and software required to establish Barnsley-Net
- to develop an organisation that could ensure the future of the network
- to provide training and support for business, the public sector, educational institutions, community groups and individuals to enable them to fully exploit the opportunities made available through the network
- to provide public access points to Barnsley-Net. (2)

Planning and strategy

From its inception, Barnsley-Net has always considered both the community development and commercial potential of the technology. Because the Network was seen as a partnership initiative, Director of City Challenge, Philip Moss recalls working the University's report up into something that could be used to develop a common strategy between the partners.

'It then became my job to customise it using my better local knowledge. For example, I know the grant aid mechanisms that we need to fund it... it needed tailoring to fit into the right categories.' (3)

A number of other IT initiatives began to appear at this time, and the need for co-ordination arose. This led to the Regeneration Forum (4) taking overall responsibility as the co-ordinating body for IT strategies in Barnsley. A consequence of this was the production of the Barnsley IT Strategy document. (5)

Implementation

Problems arising out of the co-ordinating actions of the Regeneration Forum's IT Group meant that phase two of the Barnsley-Net project was delayed. In fact it underwent a process of significant change as a result of the Forum's IT Strategy and finally resurfaced in the summer of 1997 when £190,000 of City Challenge funds were released to set-up the Barnsley College of the Web project at Priory Campus.(6) A departure from the original Barnsley-Net project, the College of the Web reflects more closely the three pronged approach of the IT Strategy. However, from the community sector perspective the project, which is in its infancy, is to focus on issues of training, public access points, and support for community groups.

Facilitated by Barnsley and Doncaster TEC, the IT Strategy developed by the Regeneration Forum's IT Group is directed at three distinct areas of Barnsley life:

- local businesses
- education
- the wider community.

The stated objectives for the wider community section are to:

- improve access to services and information provided by the public, private, voluntary and community sectors
- help the voluntary sector to provide the maximum service required to meet the needs of those who require their help
- improve information provision on training, employment and careers
- raise individual commitment to learning
- enable information from statutory bodies to be readily available to all those who wish to use it so that all may be aware of their rights, entitlements and responsibilities
- enable all to pursue the lifestyle they want and to meet their personal objectives
- help the voluntary sector to provide efficient and transparent reporting of both performance and finance to their funding principles. (5)

The strategy document itemises a number of action milestones which reflects in part the participative ethos of the original Barnsley-Net project, and ties in with the future work of the College of the Web project:

- publicly accessible electronic information
- training and skills development
- public access points (PAPs).

As part of this strategy, Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council organised a number of community-based events to raise awareness of the Internet as a learning and information tool, as part of the European 'Netd@ys' initiative. (7) Run at open-door locations throughout the city, local people were given the opportunity for hands-on exploration of the Internet, together with advice and information.

Staffing

In addition to the provision of courses addressing the training needs of local businesses and the education sector, the College of the Web project appointed a community development officer, on part-time secondment from Barnsley Libraries, to consider issues of public access points, training and support for community groups.

Funding

In addition to the City Challenge funding, Priory Campus has secured Lottery funding of approximately £150,000, which it is hoped can be used as matched-funding for an ERDF bid to develop Priory Campus's technology infrastructure and provide much needed public access points in the area. (8)

'It doesn't take a great leap of the imagination to realise that poor people wont have access to technology and that the more poor people you have in your area, the lower the levels of access.' (3).

Community Information Network (CIN)

The absence of the prototype Community Information Network from the local Council's Website does not signify its demise. As part of the ongoing IT Strategy, a collaborative approach to the development of a Barnsley CIN is being pursued. Miller suggests that the local TEC, the Metropolitan Council, the LEA, and Grimethorpe Electronic Village Hall (GEVH) will respectively be responsible for developing Business, Public, Education and Community and Voluntary Sector Information websites, which will be linked to one another. (8)

Sustainability

As the City Challenge project ends in March 1998, developing sustainability is essential for the projects linked to Barnsley-Net, and the development of sustainable cross-sector partnerships is being addressed.

'Developing a sense of community value from the projects is crucial. Initiatives should not die after two years due to a lack of funding.' (3)

Because of the delay in securing funding and the imminent conclusion of the City Challenge project, much of the future work will be on initiatives recently started at Barnsley College of the Web, which has recently submitted a proposal for the Priory Campus to become an accredited IT training centre.

It should also be noted that the project is eligible for RECHAR II ERDF/ESF funding and that applications have been submitted to continue eligible elements of the project beyond March 1998. (9)

Conclusion

The approach to the use of ICTs in Barnsley has undergone a process of rapid change since the inception of the Barnsley-Net project in 1995. The development of the Regeneration Forum's IT Strategy has resulted in some subtle changes of approach to community participation in the development of ICTs as tools for community development.

The ethos of the original Barnsley-Net project was to develop a cross sector community owned initiative that was set-up as a charitable trust, controlled by the organisations that use it. Any profits generated from activities on Barnsley-Net were to be used to further develop the project's aims.

Whilst the development of the Barnsley College of the Web together with initiatives such as Netd@ys still reflects such a strategy, the implicit promise of community participation and ownership found in the Barnsley-Net documentation (2) has given way to more of a service provision ethos. Such a claim may seem too critical but the IT Strategy document appears quite clear on the issue, when referring to Alliance [Partnership] milestones:

'to ensure that the IT strategy is endorsed and owned by the Regeneration Forum.' (5)

Indeed, the same document gives a page each to identifying milestones for the business and educational sectors, whilst only giving on third as much to the community sector. In addition to this, representation on the Regeneration Forum does not reflect the composition of the local population.

There has been a switch from the original concept of community ownership, to ownership by the City Fathers. It will be interesting to monitor the development of community-based initiatives against those in the business and education sectors. However, it should be noted that a programme of community partnership building is underway, with an

emphasis on developing community capacity. In this respect the conclusion of City Challenge, which supported the original Barnsley-Net project at local level, reinforces the need the develop sustainable initiatives which are not going to die after two years because their latest bid for grant funding was unsuccessful.

The final point which underlines the service provision ethos of the IT Strategy can be found in the proposed development of the Community Information Network. The potential use of such a resource cannot be contested but CINs are single-directional in their information flows. Generally speaking they do not offer multi- or even two way communication links. This means users tend to be passive recipients of other people's services.

However, City Challenge appears to be trying to supplement the CIN approach with Internet access facilities at the proposed public access points. This is dependant on cost and reaching agreements with access point managers and the project regarding the nature of public access. Despite these provisos, it will be worth monitoring developments in Barnsley after City Challenge ends, to see whether this philosophy continues, and what response it is met with.

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Grimethorpe Electronic Village Hall

Introduction

The Grimethorpe Electronic Village Hall (GEVH), is a particularly interesting example of a bottom-up community driven IT initiative. It is based in a community which was dependent on coal mining since the opening of the colliery in 1894 and was greatly affected by the closure of the pit in 1993.

'Grimethorpe, over the past decade, has seen the life and soul torn out of it!' (1) There is evidence of high unemployment, drug abuse, debt problems, and isolation. The former coherence of community activity has declined along with the common employment. GEVH is an initiative driven by people from the local community attempting to revitalise the village.

'The only way to solve these problems is by getting the people to be involved with the development of the community. This has to be done at grass roots level. We need to get people talking to each other again. The best way to deal with problems within the community is by the people that live within it.' (2)

GEVH was established through a chance meeting of two friends, with a common interest in computing and electronics, shortly after the opening of the Acorn Centre in Grimethorpe.

The Acorn Centre is a Community Resource Centre, established on the old National Coal Board (NCB) buildings in Grimethorpe. The centre provides advice and support for a wide range of issues, and provides opportunities for learning, training, involvement in local community affairs and business start-up help. Many of the activities available at the Acorn Centre are offered in partnership with other organisations and the Grimethorpe Partnership has been established to represent all sections of the local community in the economic, social and cultural development of the area.

An initial meeting with The Acorn Centre Manager to discuss ways of encouraging local people to use the centre's resources led to the formation of the Grimethorpe Electronic Village User Group (GEVUG) in September 1994.

'The overall philosophy was to create a friendly atmosphere and to try not to fill the group up with only technical experts... It was a hilarious situation. Anyone who joined became part of the committee. It was easy... ahh a new member, you're on the committee!' (1)

Aims and objectives

GEVH aims to:

- develop a community based Information Network, involving various departments and bodies within the Acorn Centre Site
- liaise with and promote other community groups from the Grimethorpe area

- form partnerships to ensure that adequate funds and expertise are available at all times

- provide access to information and help for everyone.

To achieve these aims GEVH has as its main objectives:

- establishing public access points so that the public may access electronic information easily
- network the different groups in the Acorn Centre using a radio-wave network link.

More recently, as a community driven initiative GEVH have developed an inclusive mission statement:

GEVH will endeavour at all times to provide access to information technology to whoever may need it: irrespective of race, religion, gender, social, or economic status. We recognise the need to be self-financing in order to provide a sustainable resource and will achieve this through a minimum contribution.
(3).

Planning and strategy

GEVUG started to develop an interest in the possibilities of developing a telecottage. However, the focus began to switch towards its potential for community and economic development.

The cost involved in accessing and using the Internet was prohibitive to the membership, most of whom were unemployed or on very low incomes. A decision was made to organise fundraising initiatives to purchase a computer, modem and Internet subscription for collective use. Donations, raffles and jumble sales provided the bulk of the necessary finances and in January 1995, GEVUG obtained its Internet account. Other resources for the office were acquired either by asking organisations for anything surplus to requirements, or repairing discarded broken equipment.

The growth in members resulting from a membership campaign meant that GEVH outgrew the accommodation provided by the Acorn Centre. A lack of funds and any formal structure saw the initiative given temporary accommodation at several locations in the Acorn Centre buildings.
'I suppose that if we'd had more structure, we'd have been in a position to negotiate better facilities.' (1).

This comment from GEVH Chair, John Foster, underlines one of the fundamental problems facing the development of GEVH. The group realised the need to develop a more formalised approach, if they were to attract support from potential funders. However, being mostly unemployed miners, they did not possess the appropriate expertise to develop business plans and mission statements, let alone fulfil the bureaucratic requirements of preparing project proposals and funding bids.

Through the support of Andy Kershaw, the Acorn Centre manager, GEVH were put in touch with David Miller from Sheffield University and Philip Moss from Barnsley City Challenge. Both were very enthusiastic about the initiative and were to provide support and encouragement to the group. Miller trained GEVH members in html and Web page construction, as well as providing equipment.

Although Moss was supportive of GEVH, seeing a strong affinity between it and the Barnsley-Net project, Grimethorpe did not fall within the boundaries of the City Challenge NE Corridor project. Consequently, Moss was limited in what he could achieve for GEVH. Attempts to integrate GEVH into City Challenge in conjunction with work being undertaken at the Priory Campus project (see p000) were rejected by GEVH, who wanted to protect their independence and association with Grimethorpe. However, the fact that Grimethorpe was just outside the City Challenge boundaries did cause some dismay.

'We accept that they have to draw boundaries lines somewhere ... its just unfortunate ... when someone drew the lines on the map, they obviously didn't live in Grimethorpe. They probably didn't even know that it existed... The north east corridor doesn't actually exist, its just on paper... It has incensed people that Grimethorpe was left out. (1).

It appears that the reluctance of GEVH to take-up Moss's offer of support resulted in its development being stifled for some time. Any visitor to GEVH will be struck by the strong sense of pride and dignity that characterises traditional mining communities. Whether that fierce sense of independence may have constrained the project's development is beyond the scope of this research. However, it should be noted that it is precisely these characteristics which have sustained the project through shortage of funds, equipment, and resources.

'It's the community spirit and the comradeship; the freeness of how we work which gives us best strength.' (1).

Encouraged by local demand, GEVH has evolved to meet the needs of the local community. They have extended their work from a local community group, developing into a community enterprise, specialising in the provision of advice and services to computer users. The underlying ethos of GEVH remains the utilisation of their skills to promote and enhance the community of Grimethorpe and its surrounding areas (3).

Funding

Originally, GEVH's only finance came from donations made anonymously by members, subscriptions of £12 per year, and its fundraising activities. Occasionally this income was supplemented by a small donation from the Acorn Centre, or a grant for some basic office equipment from Voluntary Action Barnsley (VAB).

Since that time, GEVH has been successful in securing a grant from the National Lottery for £112,000. Whilst this source of income has given the project some welcome respite, they are keenly aware of the need for sustainability.

Staffing

The development of GEVH has been entirely volunteer-led, but as the commercial side of its work takes off, staff will be employed.

Areas of interest

In keeping with the transformation from what was little more than a computer club with plans for a more formalised and professional community enterprise, GEVH developed a new Web site. (4) Still the focal part of GEVH, the computer user's club has about fifty members. It meets three times a week and plays an important social role in addition to its technical advice-giving and information sharing function.

The GEVH Computer Services arm offers advice, training and acts as a broker for local businesses and voluntary organisations with computer requirements.

Sustainability

In order to sustain its development, GEVH is developing as a community enterprise whose commercial activities underpin its community development ethos and role. It has neotiated with a regional Internet Service provider (ISP) to offer and support Internet access within the community.

Selling Internet accounts to the community sector has high marketing costs and low profits for ISPs. GEVH has an agreement with a Leeds-based ISP Planet Online whereby they buy Internet accounts at reduced rates. These may then be sold on to their contacts in the community sector.
GEVH 'will provide Internet connectivity and supply IT support and hardware to community groups in Grimethorpe and surrounding areas, connecting everything from youth clubs to libraries to working men's clubs.' (5)

This model of sustainable development has a number of benefits for the local community:

- Internet account costs are kept to a minimum
- money flows are kept within the region, (rather than flowing externally to national ISPs), stimulating the local economy
- as a not-for-profit network, any profits generated from these income streams are returned to the initiative to promote community development.

'Although in its infancy, this model heralds the evolution of not-for-profit community businesses in the area, which is similar to the growth of the Co-operative Movement'. (6).

Conclusion

From the modest origins of the GEVUG, and with little involvement from the formal agencies and organisations in the area, a group of local citizens with a passion for their community is in the process of establishing a model of social innovation for community development.

There have been occasions when the group's sense of independence, and cynicism about the motives of official organisations, may have held back its development. Nonetheless, those involved are acutely aware of the significance of what they are doing and the difficulties they face. Thus for example, they have recognised the emphatic male dominance of the project thus far, and their Lottery funding targets women as an 'essential prioirty', with steps already taken to identify women trainers and increase the number of women members.

With very little support, GEVH has developed from a group of unemployed miners from a socially deprived area into an exciting and innovative example of what can be achieved, with ideas and determination, at grass roots level.

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Sussex Community Internet Project (SCIP)

Introduction

The Sussex Community Internet Project (SCIP) is an independent partnership organisation established to explore ways in which ICTs can benefit local community development. Its approach is driven by the following principles:

- work in partnership, not competition
- be led by people, not technology
- learn from others and share experience and skills
- not exist for private profit
- empower users to be information providers
- be run at minimum cost to achieve maximum participation
- value all contributions from all parts of the community. (1)

Discussions about developing a community network in the Brighton area began with a number of meetings in 1995, and SCIP was launched in March 1996, using PACT as a host organisation. (SCIP, 1996) for a period of 12 months.(1) Legal and General donated £2000 to SCIP by way of pump-priming funding. The intention was for SCIP to function as facilitator and catalyst for the community sector use of the Internet.

The twelve month period with PACT as SCIP's host provided the project with an administrative base from which it could launch its campaign of awareness raising, training development, and policy shaping. At this stage the plan was for SCIP to become an independent charity by April 1997.

Driven by a not-for-profit ethos, SCIP's activities at this time centred around providing a focus for debate and exploring online opportunities for community groups; building a greater understanding of the benefits of the Internet for community development, especially through training events; and encouraging the sign-posting of information sources across the community. SCIP's web site was developed in April 1996 by a volunteer.

As a membership-based organisation, SCIP retains a direct link with the local community. There is an Executive Committee known as the Steering Group, which is responsible for co-ordinating project development.

Aims and objectives

Targeted primarily at voluntary organisations and community groups, SCIP aims to:
- provide training, advice and support for not-for-profit Internet users and information providers

- encourage the provision of useful and reliable community information on the Internet
- encourage the provision of public access points to the Internet
- provide a contact point for Community Internet interests in Sussex to prevent the duplication of effort, and to promote the sharing of best practice
- promote the interactive use of the Internet for the public benefit in Sussex.

As a responsive and flexible organisation SCIP maintains a twin-track approach to its activities by adopting the following objectives:

- to maintain grass-roots contacts through the provision of hands-on services
- to influence developments relating to the use of ICTs in the community at strategic level. (3)

Activities

Between June and August of 1996, SCIP ran a series of four pilot, Internet related training courses at different locations in Brighton and Hove.(2) Original plans for ten places on each course had to be expanded as a result of an enthusiastic response from community groups.

In September 1996, SCIP organised a free Internet forum at Hove Town Hall for people from communities across Sussex. Sponsored by BT, over 70 people attended the Forum to discuss ways in which the Internet could be harnessed to benefit local communities. Entitled, 'The Internet: when do ordinary people get a look in?' concerns relating to content, publishing, training, access, costs and funding, and community development were raised and have been used to influence and shape SCIP's direction and priorities development.

In December 1996, SCIP launched a monthly Community Internet Club. The club aims to provide a forum for community groups and individuals to develop non-commercial uses of the Internet. (4) Over 60 different people from more than 40 community groups have attended the club.

At the start of 1997 SCIP developed an online mailing list which now has over 90 subscribers.

Training and awareness raising formed the central threads of a Community Internet day ran in partnership with SCIP and the University of Brighton. Over 60 people, mainly from different community groups participated in a day of hands-on experience of the Internet, presentations and discussion.

During this period of SCIP's development, the new unitary authority of Brighton and Hove had been developing its own Digital City Strategy with plans to link all public libraries and secondary schools in the town to a fibre-optic backbone network. As part of its remit to help shape ICT related policy, SCIP has developed a good working relationship with the local council and has been able to contribute to the Strategy plans from a community perspective.

'The Digital City should be designed for the whole community, and with the involvement of the community.' (5)

A donation of £5000 from BT in April 1997 has enabled SCIP to launch a Community Internet Centre (CIC) in Brighton. The centre forms part of Community Base, a new facility for charities and community groups in the town. As a result of SCIP's move to Community Base in July, CIC is able to provide one on one, or small group training and support for community groups.

'We want to ensure that everyone in the community benefits from the Internet, not just those who can afford it.' (6)

SCIP has recently secured £12,000 SRB funding to deliver Internet training and support for community groups and voluntary organisations. The project, which lasts for six months, provides two one-day training sessions at local community centres, using a mobile suite of Internet ready computers provided by local Internet Service Provider, Pavilion; together with another two one-day sessions at the University of Brighton. Research into current use of the Internet amongst local community groups also forms part of the project.

SCIP has also recently been successful in an Arts 4 Everyone bid and will be running a project researching and developing community Internet applications using the arts of writing and story-telling. (7)

Funding

Apart from the £2000 and £5000 donations from Legal and General, and BT, and the SRB grant, everything SCIP has achieved so far has been resourced in one of two ways:

- the voluntary efforts of members and supporters

- contributions in kind, eg

  – Web space - Pavilion Internet
  – Mailing list - UK Communities Online
  – Training facilities - University of Brighton, Brighton and Hove Reference   Library; Pavilion; and Cybar

Staffing

Due to a lack of resources, SCIP has always relied on the commitment of volunteers to run its events. However, the SRB project required that arrangements be made regarding project management and support. Tenders were invited and whilst SCIP now has a project manager and a project support worker, the relationship is that of contractor/sub-contractor rather than employer/employee.

Users

SCIP's target audience is community groups, voluntary organisations and individuals interested in using ICTs for not-for-profit purposes.

Monitoring and evaluation

As part of its SRB project SCIP will have to undertake strict monitoring of training targets and outcomes. Evaluation usually takes the form of feedback from SCIP organised events which is then used to shape future activities.

Future

The early move away from establishing a community network was driven by practical necessity rather than any conceptual issues and SCIP remains committed to the development of a bottom-up community network, probably as part of the Digital City strategy.

SCIP has agreed to develop Web pages for the tenants of Community Base and will link these into the Community Pages of Virtual Brighton (8), which it is taking over. It is foreseen that as a result of these initiatives, a community information network (CIN) will emerge which will form the basis of a fully fledged community network.

SCIP is currently negotiating a role for itself as part of the local Council for Voluntary Service. Although no final decision has been made it is felt that for it to continue its work, SCIP needs the sense of security a larger organisation can give it.

Conclusion

SCIP is unlike most other IT initiatives in that it has adopted the role of facilitator and catalyst for the development of community sector ICT initiatives. It has established a town and county-wide credibility through its training, awareness raising and community sector advocacy work.

Brighton and Hove is a cosmopolitan town with two universities, and a tradition of innovation and diversity. These characteristics can lead to piecemeal development and exclusion. SCIP has been successful in influencing policy and developing a more holistic approach to ICT initiative partnership building. It has consciously sought to bring both bottom-up and top-down development approaches together with the purpose of benefiting the whole community.

Although much has been achieved through the goodwill and commitment of volunteers, the major challenge facing SCIP is that of sustainability. If SCIP is to continue and develop its role then it requires the resources that will enable it to undertake the tasks ahead.

References

1 Sussex Community Internet Project: Summary Business Plan and Introduction to SCIP, http://www.scip.org.uk/about/busplan.htm
2 PACT Community Projects is a management and development agency for community based initiatives in Sussex and is a registered charity (PACT, Annual Report 1994-95, Brighton, 1994).
3 Sussex Community Internet Project Business Plan. Brighton: SCIP, September 1997.
4 The Community Internet Club, http://www.scip.org.uk/club/about.htm
5 D Stokoe, Summary at Digital City conference, 29 April 1997.
6 SCIP Press release 8 May 1997.
7 Arts 4 Everyone Bid, http://www.scip.org.uk/bids/bid4.htm