

The future of community-based UK online centres

Discussion paper to Dfes

Direct Support, October 2002

1 This paper is based on the work of Direct Support (DS) in the UK online centres programme over the past 18 months. It also reflects the experience, over the past 10 years, of Ruralnet UK and CDF in working with local ICT centres (including telecottages), evaluating their activities and assessing their potential sustainability. The paper has been prepared in response to invitation to comment on the 'sustainability' of the community-based UK online centres. For the purposes of this paper we refer to them as 'access' centres. Our main points are summarised here:

- Centres that predominantly provide informal access for people who experience exclusion are very different from facilities that offer quasi-college provision or outreach training, and it is a good time to recognise such differences formally in policy;
- Access centres function best as part of wider generic community resources that attract local people for a range of activities. It is not realistic to expect them to become financially self-sustaining without distorting their roles, although they do tend to add value to whatever funding they receive;
- Where they are part of generic community resources, access centres fulfil fundamental social roles that contribute to government objectives on community cohesion, social capital, and community capacity building. They reach parts that other agencies cannot reach, and seen in this context they justify public funding. Such funding would need to reflect recognition of their role as community sector resources rather than as centres of formal learning.

2 The government's current stated policy is "to provide access to the Internet to everyone who wants it and to enable him or her to use it." Access centres feature centrally in this agenda, offering access to people who cannot afford it, or who for other reasons require supported provision. These centres emerged in the sparse soil but encouraging climate of the social exclusion agenda outlined in the work of PAT15, and we discuss this specific line in section 4 below. The diversity of centres is hugely valuable, and the fact that there exists a wide range of centres from the most informal (such as INNIT or the Leadgate Tea-Rooms) to the more institutional surroundings of libraries and the more formal context of colleges, is healthy. So too is the relative coherence of a single UK online branding. Nonetheless, there is a widespread perception in the field that the UK online centres movement has drifted away from social exclusion towards 'learning for earning'. This may be a misrepresentation, but it reflects the widely-acknowledged tension between the drop-in role and the formal learning role in centres. For example, the clear potential for centres to work with asylum seekers and refugees seems to have been under-exploited. Similarly, one of the TargIT centres that works with homeless people has found that, if they offer courses, no-one is interested: their constituency does not trust formal provision and is only prepared to use informal access.

It is important to acknowledge that some centres can and do carry out both roles. However, usually this is with uncertain sustainability and the risk of permanent distortion of style, and is likely to be followed by the disenchantment of the more disadvantaged members in the constituency. Centres at the forefront in this field, such as those under the SCOL umbrella (Shipleigh Communities Online) depend heavily on external sources of funding like ERDF. The fact that a number of commercial UK Online centres have failed, albeit in a mixed market, does suggest that the term 'sustainability' needs to be used somewhat less uncritically. We should draw attention to the fact that the operation and survival of many centres depends on the commitment and involvement of

volunteers, whose time is typically invisible in the account sheets. The question arises as to whether it is not time to disaggregate some kinds of centre from others.

- 3 The notion of a coherent UK online centres movement was valuable while centres were becoming established, and may remain so while many of them have yet to establish reliable contact networks. Their set-up was part of a general campaign to raise awareness and provide opportunities for people to connect. Set-up was expensive and the effort for many centres was huge. Most of them are now beginning to shift their attention from the dominant technological problems, to issues of use and constituency. As they approach this more mature stage, the distinctions between centres become more apparent. In our view there is now a case for clear categories based on declared roles, constituencies, and organisational structure. We would be happy to contribute to work on definitions.
- 4 The e-envoy has said publicly that UK online centres “have not delivered on social exclusion.” With Dfes working towards the handover of centres in April 2003, it is an important time to consider this contention, and we have three points to make:
 - (i) given the timescales and the fact that many centres have barely begun operating, it’s very early to be making this observation as a criticism;
 - (ii) it would be unreasonable to expect much progress in this area given the context in which the centres have been trying to establish themselves, with strings attached to revenue funding and a requirement to work with educational sector partners to deliver courses;
 - (iii) as early work with pioneer centres showed, the key to reaching the most excluded people is through the agencies that work with them. This takes time, dedicated partnership work, and often calls for a community-sector-friendly support network that can draw on appropriate mentors and resources.
- 5 Here we think that it could be worthwhile revisiting some of the issues about ICTs and social exclusion that emerged prior to and during PAT15. For example, the imperative with regard to people who have been failed by the education system, not to refer to use of the technology as ‘learning’. Similarly we should recall that informal use of ICT is associated with enhanced confidence and employability, and the technology stimulates engagement because it is not associated with previous failure in the classroom. If the UK online centres programme is to address social exclusion it has to be accepted that people who experience exclusion tend to be reluctant to go into formal or institutional contexts; and that their need for informal access justifies public funding.
- 6 From the government perspective there is a simple argument for keeping access centres open until 2005 at the least, to help meet the e-government targets. But we would hope to see a more robust rationale and ongoing justification. While libraries and CABx may take on much of the responsibility for public provision in terms of government services online, for many people meaningful access to those services will require extensive support for community provision. It may be a good time to consider incentives that bring about lasting connections and partnerships between those agencies and the access centres.
- 7 From our argument above it follows that there is an urgent need to review appropriate governmental responsibility for ‘access’ centres. Our suggestion is that discussion might begin with the Active Community Unit of the Home Office, since the role of these centres can be seen as part of the infrastructure of the community sector and feeds into the remit of the Community Capacity Building Review. The OeE and DCMS should be party to these discussions.

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