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Connected Community Organisations - Can They Help to Overcome the Digital Divide?

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Executive Summary

Around 40% of people in the UK have never accessed the Internet, often because they cannot afford it or the Internet does not seem relevant to their lives. Community organisations can help to reduce this divide by providing Internet access and training at local centres for people who cannot afford appropriate Internet access at home. Broadband connections can potentially help those organisations by reducing their cost of access (through sharing a single connection across a number of computers) and increasing their effectiveness, for example, by easier access to email or faster access to online information.

This study examines whether these benefits are being achieved. It has been financed by BT and has involved interviews with 23 community organisations which installed a broadband connection during 2002-3.

The first section of the report discusses the impact which broadband has made on the organisations studied, and finds that:

> Broadband does increase Internet usage by almost all the organisations, and by their users in half of cases.
>
> Broadband does not generally result in a different pattern of usage. Rather organisations and users tend to do the things they previously did without broadband – email and accessing information – more speedily and effectively.
>
> Most respondents felt that broadband has helped to overcome social barriers between users and had a very significant or significant impact on the community – although the forms this takes varies between organisations.

We classified the 23 participating organisations in terms of the success or otherwise of their use of broadband. We concluded that 9 were successes, 4 were failures, 6 had mixed results and 4 were difficult to classify. Table 2 summarises the factors which seemed to be associated with successful use of broadband.

The successful examples show that broadband use by community organisations can help to overcome the digital divide, as well as breaking down social barriers and improving organisational effectiveness. It can also extend and deepen their links with external bodies – but only if the organisation already has a culture which recognises the importance of organisational networking.

However, many community organisations are not achieving these benefits. The main reason is that computers and connections will not be successful by themselves – they require a 'wired culture' which understands the importance of the Internet, and how it can make a difference to the organisations and the individuals who use it. Programmes which aim to support the development of connected community organisations should therefore focus as much effort on training and other forms of support as on providing equipment and connections.

Introduction

The digital divide remains stubbornly persistent. Around 40% of people in the UK have never accessed the Internet. In some cases this is because they cannot afford it. In others it is because they do not see it as relevant to their lives. Of course, ignoring the Internet is a matter of personal choice. However, it may be that some individuals in this category do not fully appreciate the opportunities – such as accessing cheaper supplier of goods and services or information which can help to avoid or mitigate health problems – they are unable to take advantage of by not being online. In today's wired world, it is best if turning one's back on the Internet is an outcome of an informed decision, rather than ignorance of what is possible.

The widespread take-up of broadband – a fast connection to the Internet which allows data to be downloaded or uploaded 10-20 times more quickly than over a standard telephone line – that is now occurring in the UK could potentially widen this divide further. An increasing amount of web content may only be suitable for high-speed connections. Broadband can also enhance community development through enhanced access to information and other means (Alliance for Public Technology and Benton Foundation, 2003).

A number of UK initiatives have been launched in disadvantaged areas to try and encourage individuals to access the Internet from home. The largest and most studied has been the Wired-up Communities (WuC) pilot initiative of the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), which ran between 2000 and 2002. This provided free computers and Internet connections for homes in seven disadvantaged communities in inner city and suburban estates, rural communities and villages in the UK[1]. An assessment (Devins, 2003) found that this had been partially successful, with:

> 74.5% of survey respondents having accessed the Internet from home
>
> 85% indicated that their Internet use had increased
>
> Almost half used the Internet daily, about 40% to shop or bank online
>
> 82% continued to use the Internet after the WuC subsidy ended.

However:

> 25% of survey respondents had not used the Internet at all
>
> Although improving employment and training opportunities was a key aim of the project, only 6% of users stated that their employment situation had changed as a result of having access.

The study authors see the initiative as a successful example of 'joined up policy' between different agencies to address social deprivation. However, it is obviously an expensive means of tackling specific access issues – which is presumably the reason why it has not been followed up in practice.

[1] See http://www.dfes.gov.uk/wired.

An alternative or complementary solution to the digital divide is the provision of Internet access and training at local community centres which are easily accessible – both physically and psychologically – to people in deprived areas who cannot afford Internet access at home. A US report by Davies et al (2003) has highlighted the ways in which community technology centres (CTCs) fulfilling this and other ICT-related roles can increase people's knowledge and use of technology, and support and sometimes initiate broader community change. Another US study on the topic, by Wilcox and Pearl (2002), has also concluded that "civic and community use of the Internet is … crucial in the development and re-energising of our social and civic institutions." (p. 1).

Until recently community provision of this kind has been expensive because it has required a specific telephone line and Internet account for each connected computer. However, broadband makes it much easier because of the ability to share a connection between multiple computers. It also enables users to undertake some activities – such as downloading MP3 music files – which may be very expensive to do at home, even if Internet access is available.

Broadband can also potentially help community centres or other local organisations by making them more effective, for example, by easier access to email or faster access to online information. As organisations of this kind are generally cash-starved, and therefore needing to make the most from any resources which they have, broadband could have a disproportionate effect on their effectiveness in practice. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that the current position is not greatly dissimilar to that described in 2001 by Burt & Taylor, who concluded that many voluntary organisation in the UK were "under exploiting their potential for organisational transformation and organisational learning" through relatively low take-up of ICTs, including the Internet (p. 324). Ticher et al (2002) have also observed that voluntary organisations ignore the Internet and ICT at their peril (p. 1).

Table 1: Internet Usage in the UK

A 2003 survey found that:

In October 2003, 58% of adults had used the Internet in the previous three months, compared to 52% in 2002

84% of those accessing the Internet used it for email

80% searched for information about goods or services

68% searched for information about travel and accommodation

53% purchased or ordered tickets, goods or services.

Source: National Statistics Omnibus Survey: Individuals accessing the Internet, 2003

The Research

This study has tried to cast further light on these issues by:

> Examining whether the use of broadband in community organisations can help to increase access to the Internet, and in what ways
>
> Examining whether and how broadband can help to increase the effectiveness of community organisations in meeting their objectives
>
> Identifying 'best practice' community organisations which have made good use of broadband, and draw lessons from their experiences.

The study has been financed by BT. It has involved interviews with 23 community organisations which installed a broadband connection during 2002-3. All of those interviewed had been using the broadband for a year or less at the time of the interviews. All but two also provide public access to the Internet.

16 of the organisations were recipients of BT's Community Connections Awards, which provide an Internet-ready PC and a 12-month subscription to BT broadband for selected community organisations. The tendency for linking of broadband with the installation of more equipment and other IT changes is a common feature in most of the organisations studied, and makes it difficult to identify the unique effects of broadband. This needs to be borne in mind when reading the rest of the report.

The first section of the report discusses the impact which broadband has made on the organisations studied, and identifies those which have been successful in its use and those which haven't.

The second section explores the characteristics of these successful organisations and the lessons they hold for other community organisations wanting to make the most from broadband.

Section 1 The Impact of Broadband

Internet and Broadband Usage by the Community Organisations

Broadband is associated with high Internet use:

9 of 23 respondents use the Internet for at least 3 hours per day on broadband whereas only 2 (from 12 respondents) did so pre broadband

Only 1 of the organisations accesses the Internet for less that ½ an hour per day on broadband, and that is because they were still sorting out their connection

13 of the 19 respondents had more than 10 individual Internet users a week, and 4 had between 50 and 150. This compares to a pre-broadband situation of most organisations (7 out of 10) having only 1-10 users per week.

In terms of Internet content, Figure 1 shows that:

All of the responding organisations used the Internet for email

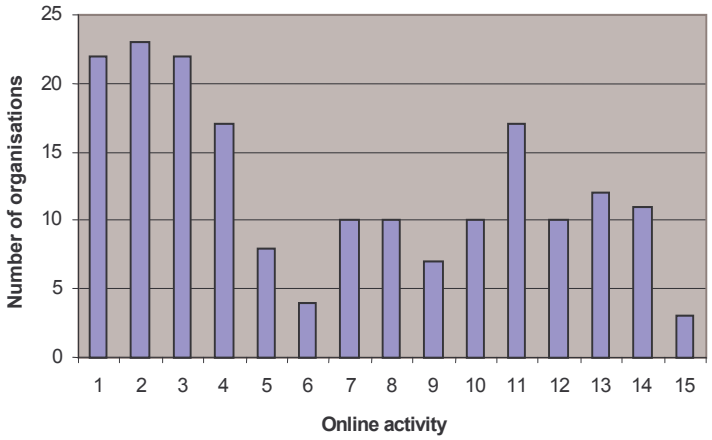
Finding information about goods and services and general browsing were also very common activities

16 of the 23 organisations used the Internet to access Government or official sites

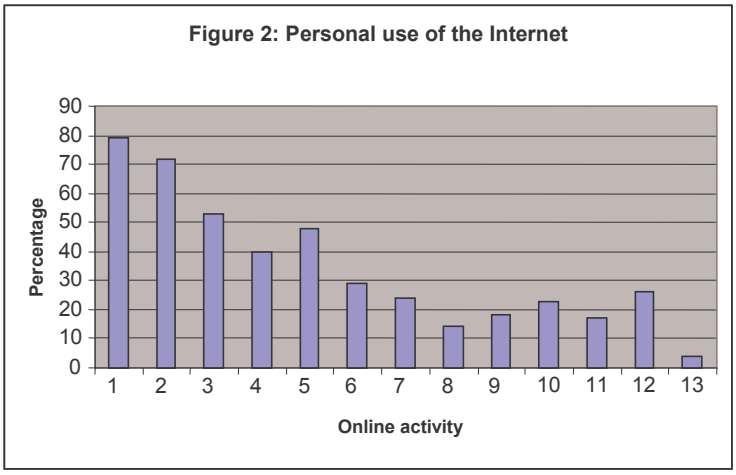
12 out of the 23 organisations use the Internet for searching for funding opportunities

Only 8 organisations are using the Internet for online purchasing with only 4 organisations engaging in online banking or investment activity.

Figure 1: Community Group Use of the Internet



1 Finding information about goods and services
2 Using email
3 General browsing and surfing
4 Finding information related to education
5 Buying or ordering online
6 Banking or investment activities
7 Looking for work
8 Downloading software
9 Using chat rooms
10 Playing or downloading music
11 Accessing government/ official sites
12 Conduct training
13 Finding funding opportunities
14 Creation of a website
15 Other



1 Finding information about goods and services
2 Using email
3 General browsing and surfing
4 Finding information related to education
5 Buying or ordering online
6 Personal banking or investment activities
7 Looking for work
8 Playing or downloading games
9 Using chat rooms or sites
10 Playing or downloading music
11 Accessing government/ official services
12 Reading or downloading online news
13 Other things

Source: Office of National Statistics, 2003

Figure 2 shows national figures for personal uses of the Internet. The main difference is with regard to use of e-commerce (buying or ordering online and personal banking and investment activities). Although some caution is needed because the categories we used are not exactly the same, and the answers of community organisations summarised both organisational and user access to the Internet, it nonetheless suggests that community access points of this kind are not increasing access to these activities. The likely reasons are concerns about security, and the fact that many users will not have credit or debit cards to pay with.

When we asked organisations to identify their top three uses of the Internet in terms of time the pattern was similar:

14 of the 23 organisations said email

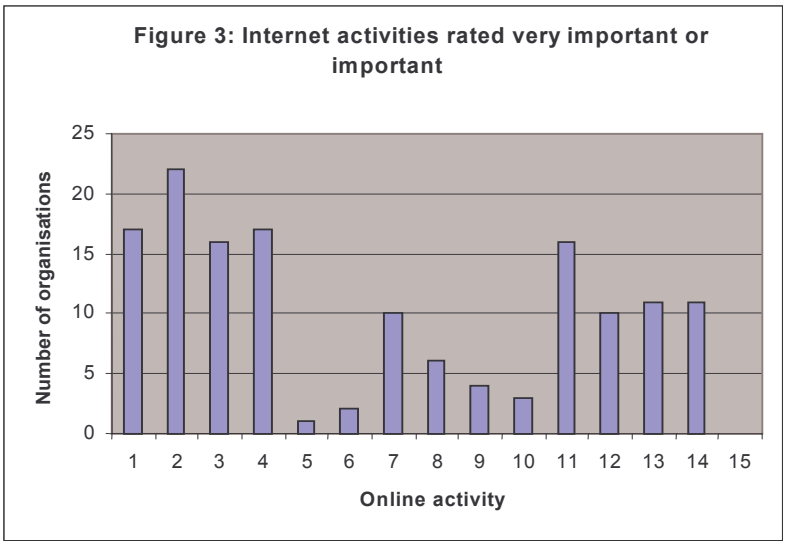
8 of the 23 highlighted accessing government/ official sites, searching for funding opportunities and general browsing

6 stated information related to education.

Interestingly, not one of the 9 organisations that occasionally use broadband for downloading software (one of the oft-quoted benefits of the speed offered by broadband) rated this as one of their top three uses of the technology.

We obtained information from 9 organisations on how broadband had changed their use of the Internet. In general, there was no difference in the pattern of use. However, two organisations stated that using the Internet for the creation of website and delivery of training has become more popular since the arrival of a broadband.

Of course, there is a big difference between idle surfing and critically important uses of the Internet. To explore this, we asked the organisations about the significance of various Internet activities. Figure 3 shows how many organisations rated the various activities as being important or very important.



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11 Accessing government/ official sites
12 Conduct training
13 Finding funding opportunities
14 Creation of a website
15 Other

We found that:

> Email was the most frequently mentioned significant activity, with 19 of the organisations rated using email as being very important
>
> Accessing information on goods and services and education, and on Government/official web sites was also a significant use for many
>
> Other applications ranked as not important or not at all important were banking, financial or investment activities (by 14 organisations), using chat rooms (14) and playing or downloading music (13)
>
> Downloading software was ranked not important or not at all important by 10 organisations, only 6 said it was very important or important.

This suggests that uses of the Internet that specifically require a high speed connection, such as downloading software and music and using interactive real time chat rooms are not key concerns of community groups. Instead, they appear to be much more interested in using the Internet as a resource for information on education, funding and official matters (such as legislation changes) and using email. A high-speed connection is not a necessity for this type of use, although it does appear to be making it easier and more effective.

Effects of Broadband on the Organisation

We found that:

> 16 of 20 respondents felt that broadband had made a (generally positive) difference to their organisation.
>
> 21 of 23 respondents felt that broadband saves them time because Internet access is quicker.

The majority of organisations also felt that broadband meant that they use the Internet more often, that it allows them to work more efficiently and that through broadband they now have a more reliable connection to the Internet.

Over half of the recipients (14) claimed that broadband has helped them to overcome certain restrictions, including:

> Difficulties in networking with other organisations
>
> Having to limit online time because of unknown costs
>
> Not being able to offer a reliable training programme because problems with the reliability and speed of a dial-up connection.

11 of 22 respondents said that broadband had no impact on organisational working practices. The other 11 felt that it had a generally positive impact, with the reasons including:

> Easier to building relationships (and in some cases partnerships) with other organisations
>
> More sharing of files both within and outside the organisation
>
> Faster processing of work - Cheltenham Community Projects found that tasks which used to take a week can now be done in a day
>
> Ability to increase their offering to users - especially where the broadband link has been used in conjunction with several PCs being networked together.

However, several mentioned another impact as being the need to implement more rigorous monitoring procedures to cope with increased Internet use and associated misuse.

Only 5 of the 23 organisations think that broadband has affected their marketing and promotion, in all cases because broadband has made it easier to create their own website and/or to update it regularly.

Effects of Broadband on the Organisation's Users

Of 22 respondents to a question on this topic there was an equal split between the number of organisations who felt that broadband had increased the numbers of their users and those who felt that it hadn't, whilst 4 said that they hadn't been using it long enough to tell.

For 9 of the organisations that felt it had increased their number of users, 2 suggested that this was because of the presence of a PC and not necessarily broadband.

We also asked whether broadband had changed the nature of interactions between them and their users and found that:

6 of 19 respondents that felt that it had

9 felt that it hadn't

4 felt that it was too early to tell.

The 6 organisations that felt that interactions had changed highlighted:

Increased skill sharing between staff and users

Encouraging users to use the Internet on their own more (because of improved reliability)

Amore informal atmosphere because activities fuelled by broadband (such as increased training facilities) has fostered relationships both amongst users and between users and staff.

When asked if they have noticed any other effects on users that have not already been covered, 6 said no, 3 felt that it was too early to tell and 7 replied yes. The answers suggest that users are more confident through achievement, largely by improving their ICT skills, and that more users are now happier using the Internet on their own at home. Another impact related to learning suggests that users are more satisfied with the educational offering of their community centre and therefore enjoy a better learning experience.

We also asked about the impact of broadband on the community. The organisation's answers are obviously influenced by their particular target groups. For example, most interviewees couldn't comment on the impact of broadband on disabled people, whereas Headway, in both Portsmouth and Nottingham cater only for people with induced head injuries. It is unclear therefore as to the reliability of the data for this question.

In most cases, the interviewees felt that broadband has created significant or moderate benefits for their users. Only one organisation claimed that broadband has been very significant in creating benefits for all groups (IT on the Loose – which has a number of PCs).

Interviewees were asked about the impact they felt broadband has had in creating a range of benefits to the community. Out of 18 respondents 11 thought that broadband

has had a very significant or significant impact on the acquisition of useful skills/ qualifications. Only 6 thought that broadband has a very significant or significant impact on their users becoming more involved in community activities. 8 thought that the impact here was only moderate or minor. 12 thought that the impact of the technology had a moderate, minor or no impact on their users becoming involved in other good causes (such as charity work). The answers were evenly spread across the board for the question of improving users' self esteem. 11 (of 17 respondents) felt that broadband has a very significant or significant impact on overcoming social barriers in the area with only 2 suggesting that the technology has no impact in this area. 12 of 18 respondents felt that broadband has a very significant or significant impact on avoiding travel to get information. Only 1 felt that the impact on reducing travel was minor or none existent.

Only 7 of 19 responding organisation regularly monitor content, 3 by personal observation and 4 by filtering software. 7 organisations (but not all the same) had experienced some element of misuse of the technology, in 2 cases picking this up through filtering software and in the remainder by regular or occasional personal observation.

Section 2 Making the Most of Broadband

We classified the 23 participating organisations in terms of the success or otherwise of their use of broadband (see Annex 2). We concluded that:

9 were successes

4 were failures

6 had mixed results and

4 were difficult to classify because it was too early to tell (3) or there was not enough available information (1).

One obvious difference was that organisations which had previously used the Internet before using broadband were more likely to be successful – 6 out of 13, compared to only 3 of the 10 organisations who were accessing it for the first time.

Table 2 summarises what we felt were some of the other key features of a successful connected community organisation. The following sections provide examples for each of these.

Table 2: Successful Connected Community Organisations

1. Don't rely on a single net enthusiast – if they leave then momentum will be lost. The commitment of a number of people is essential if the whole organisation is to benefit from broadband.
2. Establish an effective internal electronic network to maximise sharing of bandwidth and files, and spread access to more staff and users.
3. Use the technology to build and foster relationship with external parties.
4. Develop their IT and Internet competence steadily but surely by linking computers into networks.
5. Tap in to community issues and concerns to make themselves more relevant to users.
6. Unobtrusively monitor usage … because not doing so creates potential risks but being too obtrusive will alienate users.
7. Use a web site to market themselves to potential funders, partners and others who can help them to achieve their objectives.
8. Have access to IT support through training, networking and other means.
9. Don't appear to be 'techie' but are friendly and welcoming to all users.
10. Carry out a large proportion of their administrative activities electronically.

1. *Don't rely on a single net enthusiast*

   Analysis of several award schemes has found that some organisations (or individuals) hadn't even unpacked the ICT equipment they received. This is especially the case when the individual responsible for championing the use of ICT leaves the organisation, and the momentum is lost.

2. *Establish an effective internal electronic network to maximise sharing of bandwidth and files, and spread access to more staff and users.*

   The Thomas Gaughan Centre uses broadband as an integral part of a wireless 10 PC/laptop set up. Having laptops and a wireless network means that users are not confined to a 'computer lab' and can access the Internet simultaneously. On a sunny day users often pop into the centre for a cup of tea and a chat and end up taking one of the laptops out in to the garden area to surf the net in their own time in a comfortable environment.

3. *Use the technology to build and foster relationship with external parties*

   Headway in Nottingham provides training and rehab for people with induced head injuries. They have had broadband connection for nearly a year and have used the technology to build partnerships with other organisation in order to improve the training offering to their users. Through a partnership with Nottingham Community College, they have developed specialised courses that have resulted in 9 of their users gaining a nationally recognised IT qualification.

   Headway, Portsmouth & South East Hampshire has also used the broadband link to share volunteers with other community organisations in the area. This can only be done with a constant email Internet connection that allows staff to respond to emails as they arrive.

4. *Develop their IT and Internet competence steadily but surely*

   Thomas Gaughan Centre and Auchenback Active Limited use broadband as an integral part of a larger IT network to enable multiple, simultaneous connections to the Internet. In this way the training facilities they offer to users can be conducted in an informal atmosphere where users are encouraged to interact with other users and share experiences and skills. As well as increasing skill levels in the community this can help to break down social barriers between different user groups.

   Troon Youth Centre used their one PC connected to the Internet via broadband to attract new users in to the centre and on to the Internet. They realised that fast reliable connection was key to them 'staying ahead of the game' by offering a better, more reliable Internet service than some other local access points. The rise in visitor numbers to the centre helped them to leverage funding for extra IT equipment to augment the broadband connection. They now have 5 networked PCs and attract over 100 web users per week.

5. *Tap in to community issues and concerns to make themselves more relevant to users.*

Users at the Denham Road Community Centre had noticed a problem with skaters using the local streets as their playground. The centre's users became involved in a local community activity to revamp the local skate park to provide a designated area for the skaters. The skaters themselves used the centre's broadband facilities to download and swap information on ramps and jumps that they wanted the council to integrate into their plans for the park. The technology helped the locals to interact with the council on a subject that mattered to them and a big event is planned for next summer to celebrate the new skate park.

6. *Unobtrusively monitor Internet usage … because not doing so creates potential risks but being too obtrusive will alienate users.*

   Denham Road Community House received a free PC and broadband connection in October 2002 through the BT Community Connections awards. The number of users visiting the house soon increased as the Internet became a popular attraction but the centre's project manager soon became aware of some users accessing inappropriate content on the web. He decided to seek advice from the local library, which he knew had installed monitoring software to solve a similar problem. The house is now evaluating different monitoring packages and is drawing up Internet use guidelines for its users.

   The installation of monitoring software will alleviate the need for staff to monitor Internet use by personal observation. This means that the trust relationship between users and staff can be maintained, which has a big influence on the users' overall experience at the centre.

7. *Use a web site to market themselves to potential funders, partners and others who can help them to achieve their objectives.*

   Headway (Portsmouth & South East Hampshire) used the fast Internet connection offered by broadband to build their own website. In the case of Headway this has allowed them to increase their visibility in the local community. Other organisations – through searching for local news – came across Headway and got in touch which has led to a system by which Headway and other local community organisations share volunteers and keep in touch by email and even newsletters.

8. *Have access to IT support through training, networking and other means.*

   Having some kind of support for the ICT facility is key to getting the most out of it. This may be done formally or on a more ad-hoc basis through relationships with other organisation and individuals, but the key is being able to tap into this knowledge when it is needed most. In some cases Internet access has been withdrawn because the organisation didn't know how to deal with fairly minor configuration problem.

9. *Don't appear to be 'techie' but are friendly and welcoming to all users.*

   IT on the Loose takes technology to people who otherwise wouldn't visit access points, such as schools and libraries in the more deprived wards of Oldham. Taking the facility to places that locals are comfortable visiting helps them to feel at ease with the technology, thereby overcoming one of the main barriers of Internet usage.

This offering is made possible by the mobile broadband IT network which ensures that training is delivered in a familiar and friendly environment.

As an example, a 67 year-old female IT on the Loose user wanted to learn how to use email so that she could follow up an advert she had seen in the local paper. The advert was placed by a lady who emigrated to Australia asking a long lost member of her family to contact her by email. The IT on the Loose user recognised the name as an old neighbour, got in touch by email and is now in regular contact with her old friend.

At the Thomas Gaughan Centre users are attracted by the organisation's friendly atmosphere. In a deprived ward of Newcastle, where a recent influx of asylum seekers has led to social unrest, the centre offers a place where users from different cultural backgrounds can interact and learn more about each other's ways. One asylum seeker at the centre has made many friends with the locals and uses his knowledge to help them use computers and the Internet.

10. Carry out a large proportion of their administrative activities electronically.

The more successful organisations use the broadband to reconfigure their working practices and transfer some of their activities online. This can speed up the process of document sharing with other partners and in most cases organisations agree that this makes them operate more efficiently.

Conclusions

The examples of the more successful community organisations show that broadband can not only help to overcome the digital divide by enabling community organisations to offer greater access, but can also enable them to be more effective internally. It can also extend and deepen links with external bodies – but only if the organisation already has a culture which recognises the importance of organisational networking

However, many community organisations are not achieving this. The main reason is that computers and connections will not be successful by themselves – they require a 'wired culture' which understands the importance of the Internet, and how it can make a difference to the organisations and the individuals who use it. Programmes which aim to support the development of connected community organisations should therefore focus as much effort on training and other forms of support as providing equipment and connections.

Broadband does not enormously change the patterns of Internet use amongst community organisations and their users, but allows the main existing uses to be done faster and more effectively.

By increasing capacity, and therefore drawing in more users from a wider range of backgrounds, broadband can help to break down social barriers within communities.

Annex 1 Case Studies

Auchenback Active Limited (Ltd), East Renfrewshire, Scotland

At a glance

- Auchenback Active Ltd works in partnership to organise workshops, events and provides Introduction to IT courses in Auchenback, a deprived ward of Glasgow
- Broadband replaced a dial-up connection in the summer of 2003. They now have 20 PCs connected to the Internet
- The 'ARC' - Auchenback Active Ltd's new broadband–enabled Resource Centre, opened in February 2004 - will build on Auchenback's training opportunities
- Users now use the Internet more and feel more confident in doing so because of the faster, more reliable connection

The place and the people

Auchenback Active Ltd is a former Working for Communities Pathfinder project which is presently funded by the Scottish Executive, Levern Valley Partnership, East Renfrewshire Council, Scottish Enterprise Renfrewshire, NHS Argyll and Clyde, Communities Scotland and the Community Fund. It is based in Barrhead, East Renfrewshire, 10 miles South West of Glasgow City Centre. Auchenback Active Ltd is a partner in the delivery of the Community Learning Strategy for East Renfrewshire - a Social Inclusion Partnership (SIP) area.

Steven Dowling is the Centre Manager, one of four full time employees based at Auchenback's new resource centre (ARC). Staff works with the local community to help them access learning opportunities and improve their interaction with the local council. Examples of their activities are coordination of CV workshops, lessons in digital photography and IT introduction courses. The current premises are open from 9 am to 5 pm, Monday to Friday, with capability to extend beyond these hours to meet extra demand.

Barrhead is an area of over 17,000 people in East Renfrewshire, the 10th most densely populated council area in Scotland. East Renfrewshire has many prosperous areas with high levels of income and home ownership. However, there are areas of significant deprivation, of which Auchenback is one. Until recently it had low levels of community participation. Barrhead also has significant Jewish (6%) and Muslim (2.5%) communities.

The problem

In 1999 the neighbourhood of Auchenback in Barrhead was given Working with Communities Pathfinder status by the Scottish Executive in recognition of the high levels of crime, poor health, low educational attainment and high unemployment. In 2001, the

Strathclyde European Partnership also added Auchenback to the list of areas eligible for funding from European sources.

The plan

Auchenback Active Ltd has been connected to the Internet for about two and a half years now. Their mode of connection until a few months ago was a dial-up account. This was expensive as the Centre is a fairly heavy Internet user, and often unreliable. Broadband was seen as a solution to these problems which would also enable more users to use the Centre's facilities. It was also hoped that it would encourage local residents to become more involved in community activities, to take up online IT training and to interact more with the local council.

The progress

By November 2003 Internet access at Auchenback was up to between 5 and 6 hours per day, and although they don't have any pre-broadband figures, they believe that broadband has attracted more users to the centre, especially in the past 3 months.

The organisation's current location has 20 PCs connected to the Internet, a set-up that has been made possible because of the broadband link. The Centre Manager, Steven Dowling, notes "we are now able to offer training to our customers because they can all access the Internet at the same time. That just wasn't possible with the old (56k dial-up) system." Early figures suggest that the new set-up will attract around 120 people per week to the Centre to take part in various web-based courses.

Broadband has given Auchenback the ability to involve up to 10 individuals at once in online educational activities. Users can also simultaneously access the Internet to look for work via the public Internet access points - another popular use of the facilities.

Auchenback Active Ltd uses its facilities to focus on the delivery of educational material to its users and so general browsing and use of chat rooms are not seen as important online activities. Mr. Dowling believes that "our users are learning because of broadband and that is very important for the area. They are also learning more about each other through increased social interaction".

He feels that the main impact of broadband has been in the time saved by the organisation through speedier Internet access. He notes that "having broadband allows us to benefit from a more reliable Internet connection and offers our users a much more enjoyable online experience. Things happen so much quicker with broadband".

The Centre is also planning to use the new broadband capacity to build a website for the organisation.

As well as increasing the offering to existing users of the Centre, broadband has allowed the Centre to run more efficiently, particularly through ease of sharing files and information with other organisations. Steven Dowling notes that having access to broadband has improved their educational offering even further through the new resource centre. Such a resource with numerous PCs simultaneously linked to the Internet just would not be possible without broadband. "Although we will need extra

equipment to network the PCs together, the broadband, and what we have already done with it, has made the new resource centre a reality for us".

Cheltenham Community Projects, Cheltenham

At a glance

- Cheltenham Community Projects (CCP) have a dedicated IT Learning Centre with seven networked PCs connected to the Internet by broadband
- It has saved a considerable sum of money by switching to broadband
- It is looking into a Virtual Private Network (VPN) solution to combat security and misuse problems
- One benefits of broadband is improved document sharing with partner organisations

The place and the people

Cheltenham Community Projects (CCP) takes a holistic approach to helping young people (and their families) to realise their potential. They do this by providing accommodation, support, advice, advocacy work and access to employment, training, education and leisure activities.

CCP employs 53 staff over five sites that include the headquarters, Cheltenham Youth Information shop, two residential sites and an ICT learning centre. Dudley Newell is CCP's Information Officer.

CCP's users are young people aged between 13 and 25, equally split between males and females. The five sites currently attract 100+ users per week.

Turnover is approximately £1 million per year with income coming from various funding streams including the Basic Skills Agency, European Social Fund, Gloucester City Council, Gloucestershire County Council, and the Single Regeneration Budget.

Information on the CCP's four main projects (The Cheltenham Foyer, Family Support Services, Juvenile Support Team and Cheltenham Youth Information) can be found on their website - www.ccprojects.org.uk.

The problem

Cheltenham Community Projects aims to help young people to realise their potential. In 2000 it realised that it didn't have the facilities to deliver the necessary training provision to its users and, as training was seen as a key area, it looked into setting up a centre specifically to deliver IT training courses.

The plan

The ICT learning centre complete with seven PCs, that were donated by local businesses, and a broadband connection was hence established. The aim was to attract

users to the centre to take part in online learning activities, such as Learndirect courses and engage them in community activities.

The progress

CCP has been using broadband for three years at their ICT learning centre. They now have 46 PCs connected by broadband of which 12 are available to users - five at residential sites and seven at the centre itself.

CCP accesses the Internet for more than six hours per day and currently has up to 100 users per week. Staff access the Internet for many different reasons, but Mr. Newell notes that finding funding opportunities and uploading to the website are particularly important online activities.

The main reason for CCP installing broadband was the need for a fast, reliable Internet connection that would allow them to offer Learndirect courses. “Learndirect students are assigned a tutor who is a member of the CCP staff. Many of the students opt to get Internet access at home to aid their study, and can then be in regular contact with their tutor. They still come into the centre to learn though, as they prefer the friendly environment to studying home alone,” he said.

CCP monitors Internet usage – this is a requirement of the Learning & Skills Council – and has a firewall to protect against Internet misuse. They are currently looking to implement a Virtual Private Network (VPN) solution across their five sites in order to further protect their network from unwanted hackers.

Mr. Newell notes that communication has improved significantly with broadband as it offers a much more efficient way of sharing documents, such as reports, between themselves and partner organisations. “We can do things much quicker and more efficiently with broadband. What used to take days, even weeks, now can be done in half an hour.”

Although there are many benefits to CCP of having broadband Newell is keen to point out the potential problem of misuse. “We have noticed misuse of the technology and have taken measures to address it. Currently we are looking into a VPN solution that will hopefully eradicate the problem once and for all.”

Denham Road Community House, Burgess Hill, Sussex

At a glance

- Denham Road Community House exists to reduce the fear of crime and disorder, enhance the quality of life, provide support and information, and act as a focal point for the Denham Road area and Burgess Hill communities
- Broadband use has led to the House securing funding for three more PCs and a wireless set-up from the 'Communities Against Drugs Innovation Fund'
- Installation of broadband led to Internet usage increasing from one to two hours per day to five to six hours per day
- Broadband has improved user skills and increased interaction between different groups of people

The place and the people

Opened in April 2002 as a pilot scheme, the Denham Road Community House is a partnership between Sussex Police, New Downland Housing Association (the landlords) and Mid Sussex District Council.

Established to enhance the quality of life in the area and to reduce the fear of crime and disorder, the House aims to be a focal point for advice and services in the community and to offer various clubs for particular groups - such as a women's health club, a gardening club, a Homestart group for young parents, homework club and regular activities for younger people.

The success of the House has led to plans being developed to open two further houses in the area. The existing property is managed by Paul Myles, and run with the help of volunteers.

Typically between five and 30 people use the House per day, representing the broad mix in the community, although there is a higher percentage of young people.

The turnover of the House is 40-50k per annum, and the project is funded by 'Communities Against Drugs' and commissioned by West Sussex and Brighton and Hove Drug Action Teams.

The House is usually open Monday to Friday between 9am and 5pm, although it does open at the weekend for occasional activities.

The problem

Prior to installing broadband the House was connected to the Internet through one dial-up PC which severely limited its online activity. "Our use was very low level, general browsing and some email activity sums up what we used to do. We realised that with broadband we could make much more of the technology that is out there."

The plan

The House currently has 2 computers connected to the Internet, one using a dial-up connection with the other having been on broadband for the past 8 months. Due to the success of the current set-up, plans to increase the IT capacity at the House have been supported by the West Sussex Drug and Alcohol Action Team, which has funded three new desktops and a wireless network system.

According to Paul Myles “broadband is an integral part of the development as it will allow multiple users to access the Internet at the same time - both quickly and effectively.” The plan is to encourage local people to use the technology with support from members of the community including a local resident who lives in the same street as the House, and the IT support technician from the West Sussex Drug and Alcohol Action Team.

Mr. Myles notes “specific problems being addressed in our area are levels of deprivation, antisocial behaviour, substance misuse, domestic violence, racist incidents, arson attacks, a lack of basic literacy and numeracy skills and unemployment amongst young people. Fast, effective Internet access can certainly play a part in helping us and our community.”

The progress

Since the introduction of broadband the House has increased its Internet use from one to two hours per day to five to six hours per day. Before broadband the number of people accessing the Internet was between 2 and 5 per week. The House had some problems setting up the broadband equipment and so only had one PC connected to the Internet via broadband up until December 2003, although Paul Myles notes that user numbers had definitely increased (to between 7 and 10 per week). This number is expected to again increase with the introduction of the three new PCs that will be networked to the existing broadband-enabled PC.

With dial-up access the Internet was mainly used for e mailing and general browsing. With broadband users participate in many more online activities, although the use of chat rooms is discouraged. “With broadband we have been able to start our Cyber Pilots Traveller children’s web page sessions, introduce adults to the benefits of the web (such as emailing pictures to far away relatives), search for information for homework, jobs, health and social issues, as well as leisure facilities such as gaming, shopping and holidays. In this way our people learn about ICT and the Internet through topics that interest them. We have found this to be an essential way to engage them with the technology.”

In one case broadband access helped a local skating group work with the District Council on a plan to revamp a local skate park which they felt was no longer taxing their skills. The skaters used the internet to investigate different ramp and equipment designs that will now be incorporated into the revised layout. The group now plan to hold a skate competition event in the summer of 2004, which will include a skate stunt team as one of the attractions. “This is a great example of the potential of the Internet to create partnerships that are vital to our continued good work.”

Despite the advantages of the new set-up, trust and misuse have been issues for the House over Internet access. At one point broadband access was temporarily withdrawn

by the House's management after it was discovered that some of the younger users were accessing inappropriate material. To combat this, the House is looking at various parental control software packages to monitor and restrict online content and when the 3 new PCs are installed, the House's management will be obliged to report back to the West Sussex Drug and Alcohol action team with monitoring statistics. They are also working on developing guidelines and ground rules for users to ensure that misuse of the system is kept to a minimum.

Despite this, Paul Myles says people in the local community have benefited from spending time on the Internet and have overcome their fear of ICT through improved self-esteem and skill level. "Users are more IT aware now because they have been using broadband and they see its benefits. This has meant that people are improving their ICT skills through increase usage. This is one of the most significant impacts that broadband has had at the centre," said Mr. Myles.

Another positive impact has been the increased interaction between different Internet user groups at the House. Thanks to a shared interest in going online, nowadays it is common to see young people helping, chatting and sharing information with adults.

Having reviewed the benefits and challenges associated with broadband, the House is now in the process of installing the new PCs into a fully functional broadband-enabled wireless network. Construction of a website is also planned.

Headway Portsmouth and South East Hampshire, Portsmouth

At a glance

- Headway provides support, information and advice to adults who have suffered head injuries

- Installation of broadband cut the cost of Internet access whilst increasing use

- An 'online' relationship with other organisations in the area allowed them to share volunteers

- The Internet (delivered through broadband) offers a new form of communication to people with acquired head injuries, many of whom find it difficult or uncomfortable to use a telephone

The place and the people

Headway Portsmouth & South East Hampshire (P&SE H) offers support, information and advice to adults with acquired head injuries. The facilities on offer include drop-in services, support groups for family members, short-term advocacy services (relating to benefits) and various social activities. There is a resource library at the centre with many useful books, tapes, and other resources available for loan. All Headway's users are over 18 and most are under 65. Headway has 429 people on its database, 70 of which are in regular contact with the centre.

It costs approximately £55k to fund Headway for one year and money comes from various supporters including social services, the local health authority and national government grants.

Sharon Williams, Service Coordinator at Headway, is one of two full time staff working alongside one part time worker and six volunteers.

More information can be found at www.headwayportsmouth.co.uk

The problem

Headway has had Internet access for about 5 years (initially through a dial-up 56k account) and upgraded to broadband just over a year ago. The reason for the upgrade was the expense of dial-up access (Sharon Williams would do general browsing for Headway at home to save costs), coupled with the unreliability and slow speed of the dial-up connection.

The plan

Through the BT Community Connections Awards, Headway received a PC and one year's free subscription to broadband in November 2002. Ms. Williams reflects, "we realised the need for broadband in order for us to make the best of the Internet. With broadband we could spend more time online and not have to worry about cost. We also

felt that with a quicker, more reliable connection we could become more efficient as an organisation by conducting more of our operations online."

The progress

Since having broadband installed, Headway staff have overcome the need to restrict Internet access because of the fear of escalating costs – and yet have cut their online costs from about £50 per month to a fixed rate of £25 per month. Williams has noted that increased Internet use has been particularly useful in helping staff find new sources of much needed funding (they recently found about a new government funding opportunity called Future Builders), and tools to create their own website to promote the organisation.

Whereas staff previously only went online to check emails, they are now actively encouraged to spend time each day using the new technology and, in addition to staff, between 20 and 50 users and their families access the Internet at Headway per week. In one example, a local lady visited Headway for advice on a residential placement for her father, who had an acquired brain injury. Ms. Williams searched the Internet and quickly found extensive relevant material. "It is something that we probably wouldn't have done before (broadband) because it would have taken so long. Now we can help people get information ourselves without having to send them somewhere else."

Headway is now looking to utilise the broadband to move their payroll system online. "We are looking into this at the moment and believe that it will save a lot of time and make the process much smoother. It is something that we would not have considered with the slower Internet connection."

Broadband has also had a positive effect on the interaction between staff and users. With the faster, more reliable Internet connection and fixed cost, staff feel able to encourage clients to access the Internet themselves, with assistance if necessary. Previously users became frustrated with the speed of accessing information online. "This has fostered relationships, particularly between our users and the volunteers. They work together to find out information and the process is much more fulfilling for everyone," added Ms. Williams.

Users are now also happier using the Internet at home, making the most of the skills they have acquired at Headway. This is extremely important for Headway's users, many of whom are not comfortable using the telephone. The Internet, and especially email, allows them to communicate more easily with others and has become a key tool for their everyday life. "The information that our users get from the Internet gives them power and puts them in charge of their own lives. Frustratingly slow dial-up Internet access just wouldn't have had the same impact."

In one specific case, Headway staff talked to the single parent of a 21-year-old Headway user about his enthusiasm for the Internet and the technology skills he had learnt at the centre that were benefiting his development. This led to the mother installing a dial-up connection at home, which previously she had been reluctant to do because of concern that for her son, the Internet would be a passing fad. Nowadays the son still regularly attends Headway to see his friends and to go online using the faster connection.
For Headway staff, being able to respond to emails immediately thanks to an 'always on' connection has meant they have been able to build stronger relationships with other

organisations in the area. This has been the basis for allowing Headway to devise a system by which they are now able to share volunteers with Portsmouth Council Community Services.

In summarising, Sharon Williams notes: “Everyone should have broadband access – the Internet is a way of life now and broadband is by far the best way to access it. There is a need for financial assistance and to help potential users overcome the fear of IT. This fear is more pronounced with a dial-up connection because it is less reliable and people may feel that they have done something wrong and don’t have the skills to fix it.”

Headway, which currently has only one computer with online access, is now looking to network their seven PCs so that all can benefit from fast Internet access through broadband.

IT on the Loose, Oldham

At a glance

- Through a wireless broadband system IT on the Loose offers online learning opportunities to up to 100 users per week – some of whom would not access it elsewhere
- Some users have gone on to get Internet access at home in order to continue their learning
- IT on the Loose delivers the technology to people in environments in which they are comfortable e.g. church halls, youth clubs
- IT on the Loose has improved skill levels in some of the most deprived areas of Oldham through online training

The place and the people

IT on the Loose is a one-man operation run by Project Manager Bip Mistry of Oldham College who travels around Oldham to deliver free basic computing skills to people living and working in the area.

He visits local buildings such as church halls, community centres and youth clubs with 15 laptops offering access to Learndirect courses, usually on basic ICT skills and Office skills.

Bip caters for adults of any age and gender and his users are mostly from deprived communities within a three to four square mile area covering Hollinwood, Hathershaw Fitton Hill, Limeside and Coppice.

IT on the Loose is funded by New Deal for Communities (NDC) and Single Regeneration Budget (SRB).

The problem

Education levels and IT usage in the IT on the Loose area are below the national average. Several areas are deprived and home Internet access is also sub-national levels. Although Internet access, and related learning opportunities, are available in libraries in the area, many of the locals tend not to visit such places.

The plan

Oldham suffers from a history of racial segregation and there is recognition that education has a key role to play in developing a positive multicultural future for the Borough.

Rather than expect people to visit existing learning centres, there was a need to take the opportunity to the people and deliver training in an environment in which they are familiar and comfortable.

The progress

Bip Mistry successfully applied to the BT Community Connections Award programme and received a free 12-month subscription to broadband which was connected in July 2003. As of February 2004 the project, which is run through Oldham College, boasts 15 laptops and a fully mobile wireless network and router.

He now travels around the area with the wireless set-up to deliver free IT and Internet training to multiple users simultaneously. He conducts two sessions per day for around eight to 10 users, five days a week. The users access Learndirect courses online.

Mr. Mistry feels that the service offered by IT on the Loose – which is only possible using broadband - has had a huge impact in allowing people in the Oldham area to acquire useful skills and qualifications and consequently improve their self esteem.

“The people we attract tend to be from deprived areas of Oldham and often cannot afford Internet access in the home. They are aware of other Internet access points in their area – such as at libraries – but are unlikely to visit them. Taking the technology to a place that they feel comfortable visiting is the reason we are able to involve them in learning,” he said.

IT on the Loose has been extremely successful in promoting the benefits of the Internet to people who otherwise would dismiss it largely because they do not realise what the Internet can do for them. It has also promoted racial and intercultural understanding though linking schools in different parts of the Borough with different ethnic backgrounds.

Bip notes: “Some people who access our facilities have purchased their own PCs at home to connect to the Internet. About 12 people have done this as a direct result of attending our sessions. They mainly tend to be retired people who have found a way in to IT through IT on the Loose.”

Encouraging users to go online at home is a key benefit of IT on the Loose. As well as helping to reduce the access problem relating to the Digital Ddivide, it improves the relationship between IT on the Loose and its users.

“Those who get Internet access at home are extremely keen to continue learning. They use their home set-up to keep in touch by email which helps us to build a stronger relationship with them. They still continue to attend our session because their whole learning experience is much richer and more satisfactory with broadband. They also get to learn with their friends, as opposed to on their own at home.

“We recently had a 67-year old learner who had never used a computer, who came to one of the training sessions and told us about a personal message she had spotted in the local paper from someone in Australia looking for a relation to contact them on their email address.

“She told us that she thought that she recognised the name from some 35 years ago when they were neighbours and friends, and she wanted to contact them to find out if it was the same person she knew before they emigrated all those years ago. We were able to set up a Yahoo email address for her and she sent an email to them and got a response to say they do remember her. They are now in regular email contact.”

Nottingham Headway, Nottingham

At a glance

- Nottingham Headway provides training and rehabilitation for people who have suffered a head injury
- Broadband access has allowed Headway to offer IT courses for the first time, resulting in nine users gaining a nationally recognised qualification in IT
- The number of Internet users at Headway is increasing with around 20 people per week regularly going online
- The skill level and self-esteem of users has improved as they have become more Internet and ICT knowledgeable.

The place and the people

Nottingham Headway provides training and rehabilitation for people throughout Nottinghamshire who have suffered head injuries. Headway has six staff, including John Cooling and Patsy Saleh, and offers services to between 60 and 70 members aged between 18 and 65. Membership is split between city dwellers and those living in the more rural north of the county.

Its annual turnover is approximately £60,000 and Headway is open Monday to Friday between 9.30am and 4pm.

The problem

A year ago Nottingham Headway had no PC or Internet access at all. The centre was unable to offer training courses for their members or access valuable information which could help them to develop their skills. John Cooling reflects, “our members were becoming more aware and interested in the Internet and what it could do. They are always on the lookout to learn and now they wanted to learn about the Internet.”

The plan

In response to their members’ needs, Headway looked into how they could introduce ICT / Internet training into its offering and subsequently applied to BT for a Community Connections Award. The plan was to offer learning, training and leisure opportunities via high-speed Internet access to their members.

They now have five PCs offering broadband access, connected through BT Openworld.

The progress

Headway staff and around 20 members per week now access the Internet several times a day for between one and two hours.

Mr. Cooling notes that, as a direct consequence of Headway receiving the Community Connections Award PC and broadband link, additional funding (from three local charities) has been secured to pay for PCs and broadband equipment in the members’ homes. This is a major coup for Headway. “One impact of head injuries is that people tend to not be able to retain information in the long term, and this is especially noticeable with ICT and Internet skills. The funding we have received to put PCs and broadband in the homes of 6 of our members means that they can use what they learn at the centre as soon as they get home. This give continuity to their learning, and that is very important.”

One of the greatest benefits of Internet access has been Headway’s ability to work in partnership with a local college (Nottingham Community College), and with them develop accredited courses for their clients. This has led to nine clients studying and achieving a nationally recognised qualification in IT skills.

Overall Mr. Cooling feels receiving broadband has had a major impact on their clients’ acquisition of skills through their much improved training offering, and that this has had major beneficial knock on effects on users’ self esteem. “Email has been a particular useful addition to our resources. It is such an important form of communication for our members, many of whom can’t use the telephone. Emailing is exciting to them, so they want to learn how they can use it.”

One member has benefited from online shopping through getting broadband at home. “Before they had the hassle of going to the supermarket themselves, plus a £17 taxi trip to boot, now it’s all so easy, and they get to see a friendly face at the door too.”

“Our scope for providing training was severely limited prior to receiving the broadband set-up. This has now been resolved, although we are not sure how much of this is down to just gaining Internet access rather than broadband access itself,” he said.

"The Internet has transformed the offering to members who can find out anything about anything they want to. One user wanted to know more about the career of film actor James Coburn – at the click of a button, there it was, his life history. Our members relish learning for themselves, and the great thing about broadband is that they can learn both for themselves, and at their own pace."

Reflecting on the benefits and challenges associated with Internet access at the Centre, Headway is now developing support provisions and guidelines of use for their system.

Thomas Gaughan Centre, Walker, Newcastle-upon-Tyne

At a glance

- The centre runs courses, events and provides IT and other training in a deprived area of Newcastle
- 7 laptops and 3 PCs connected to a wireless broadband network replaced a single dial-up PC in March 2003
- Broadband has attracted additional, and more diverse, users to the Centre whilst cutting its telecommunications bill
- Increased use of the Centre's ICT offering has helped to reduce social barriers - particularly between asylum seekers and local residents

The place and the people

Thomas Gaughan Centre is a community centre in Walker, a ward of Newcastle-upon-Tyne 4 miles east of the city centre. The Centre is supported by the City Council and Government programmes targeting social deprivation and employs a full-time Project Coordinator, Gina Manning, and a part-time administrator. It is also the base for a number of City Council staff, such as Giles Carey, who works on the city's arts programme and plays a central role in the Centre's ICT strategy. The Centre has a turnover of approximately £11,000 per year.

Walker is an area of above average unemployment and a falling population that is characterised by below average levels of qualification and Internet use. The recent influx of asylum seekers and refugees has led to social unrest.

The problems

The 2000 Indices of Deprivation ranks the Walker ward 30 out of 8414 UK wards, 1 being the most deprived. Walker is characterised by high unemployment and poverty and the recent influx of asylum seekers has increased social tensions in the area.

As part of a restructuring programme the Council had penned the Centre for closure in 1995 but the enthusiasm of the local people led them to successfully petition for its continued existence and now around 7000 people per quarter regularly participate in activities run from the Centre, and many more visit on a more infrequent basis.

Although the area has a good ICT provision the equipment is not being used to its full potential partly because of its location and a lack of connection to the Internet. Consequently Walker has a very low level of Internet use (less than 25% use the Internet vs. 62% for the UK overall).

The plan

The Centre got its first web connection in 2001, when a single desktop PC was connected to Newcastle City Council's network via ISDN. But the limited availability, and the slow connection speed, restricted Internet use to only 1-2 hours a day. G. Manning therefore made successful applications for further equipment to BT's Community Connections Award scheme and the Learning & Skills Council (LSC). In March 2003 they connected one desktop PC to broadband and today, thanks to the LSC funding, the Centre has 7 laptops and 3 desktop PCs 'online' through a wireless (Wi-Fi) network.

The Centre aimed to improve or overcome the problems of poverty and high unemployment in the area by running courses, arts events, leisure and other activities, and by providing an information and IT resource that anyone in the area is free to use.

Gina Manning notes "We hoped that the additional equipment would allow us to improve the activities that we are able to offer".

The progress

By the summer of 2003 Internet usage at the Centre had increased to 6 hours a day or more. Between January and March 2003, just prior to the broadband installation, 126 people accessed the Internet from the Centre. The three month period up to the end of August 2003 saw 236 visit the Centre to go online.

There has also been a positive impact on the pattern of Internet usage. For example there is much greater use of email and downloading of large files as well as accessing information heavy sites such as Government and official websites. The area's asylum seekers can keep in touch with family and friends in their home countries more easily through the instant email access offered by broadband. For example, Robert Tshisekedi, who arrived in Walker 10 months ago, seeking refuge from his native Congo, visits the Centre daily to keep in touch with friends and colleagues and keep up his interest in graphic design.

Robert notes, "with broadband I can do what I want whenever I want and I visit the Centre every day to use the facility. It allows me to share large graphics files with colleagues back home which I could not do on the old system".

The installation of broadband has also had an impact at the organisational level. Gina Manning notes that "whilst it's early days, broadband has already allowed us to build a fixed fee for Internet access into our budget, and has made it easier for us to communicate and download information. I also feel that there's a more informal, relaxed feel to the centre. In addition, our wireless set-up means that users don't have to sit at a desk but can work where they want – such as out in the garden on a sunny day!"

The extra capacity offered by broadband has allowed the Centre to develop plans for a website to meet the growing demand for local information sought by the local

community. In this way, and through the ability to increase its service offering through new technology, there is a new confidence in the centre and its place at the heart of the community.

As well as increasing the offering to existing users of the Centre, the ICT facilities have attracted new ones (the number of Internet users almost doubled for the three month period immediately following broadband installation). In most cases the new users are people without Internet access at home. In others it is people that do have Internet access, but make use of higher connection speeds or the availability of software at the Centre. Many of these new recruits are teenagers but by no means all. For example, 59 year-old Mr. Eric Briton, now uses the Centre's ICT equipment to pursue his interest in music by designing his own tape and CD covers using a software artist package and freely available images form the Internet.

The influx of new users from a diverse range of backgrounds has also lead to increased cooperation and understanding between different social groups.
For example, there are some users who speak little or no English but are more technically advanced, and therefore able to offer assistance to other groups in the centre, thereby increasing social interaction between local residents and refugees.

As an experienced IT user asylum seeker Robert Tshisekedi's knowledge is of great value to the Centre's other users. Robert exults "Because I am here such a lot, many people ask for assistance in using computers and especially the Internet. I have made many new friends here through helping out wherever I can".

Gina Manning feels that "prejudices are starting to be broken because of this. The new facilities have been especially important in integrating asylum seekers into the local community, both by making them feel more comfortable with their new surroundings, and in helping locals to better understand why they are here and that they have things to contribute to society."

However, although broadband has had a generally positive impact, misuse of the Internet is a growing problem. Council employee Giles Carey, who is based at the Centre, believes that, "we need to become more effective in monitoring use and in setting up ground rules for Internet use. We're also looking into the possibility of installing some sort of Internet security information to protect users from unsuitable web material."

Gina Manning also warns that the growing, Internet-fuelled, attractiveness of the Centre could lead to people wanting the Centre to be open for longer hours, which could require additional resources.

Troon Youth Centre, Troon, Ayrshire, Scotland

At a glance

- Troon Youth Centre runs courses in which locals can learn general IT and Internet skills in a friendly environment, at their own pace, and around subjects that interest them
- The Centre currently has five PCs connected to broadband and are awaiting delivery of a further four
- The Centre has introduced young and older people to IT and the Internet through using their interests to teach them skills
- IT courses mix young people with older users, which has helped to overcome social tensions between the groups

The place and the people

Troon Youth Centre, which is wholly funded by the local authority, runs activities, workshops and events for both the young and elderly residents of Troon. Activities include sports, training courses, keep fit classes and band workshops. The Centre has an ICT suite and two full time and 10 sessional members of staff. James Forsyth is the Community Education Worker and has overall responsibility for the Centre.

The Centre's membership comprises approximately 100 boys and 66 girls aged between 11 and 17, and three men and 30 women aged 50 plus. It consistently attracts around 150 visitors per week from their membership base as well as occasional drop–in users. The website is available at www.troonyouthcentre.ik.com

The problem

Prior to the installation of broadband the centre had no Internet connection at all. Jim Forsyth recalls that the Centre wanted broadband to improve the range of services that they offered to users, and because they believed having Internet access would make the Centre more attractive to young people.

The plan

One key aim was to progress the agenda of promoting IT literacy - particularly amongst those not normally attracted to learning such skills, such as the elderly and those who do not feel comfortable in a formal learning environment.

The broadband PC, received just over a year ago as part of the BT Community Connections Awards programme, provided a stimulus for the centre to secure additional funding from the Scottish Enterprise Digital Inclusion Team and South Ayrshire Council, who provided three PCs and one PC respectively. All five PCs are now networked together and the Centre receives invaluable support and advice from an IT consultant appointed by Scottish Enterprise's, Digital Inclusion Team.

The Centre maintains a register of Internet users and has a stated policy that everyone must sign and adhere to.

The progress

From having no Internet access at all a year ago, Troon Youth Centre is now online for at least four hours per day and attracts around 100 Internet users per week.

The Centre utilises the broadband link for a variety of reasons, from general browsing to finding information relating to education, but most notably for conducting training and for website creation. A typical day at the Centre would include an adult computer class - mainly attended by senior citizens - at which users learn to surf the net, book holidays, email their families and share photographs across the Internet. This is a prime example of the approach taken at the Centre.

Jim Forsyth notes: “General browsing is an important way of getting users involved with the Internet but when it comes to teaching people ICT skills, it is best to teach them to do something that interests them – it’s not just about teaching them word processing and how to surf the net. Also, people can learn at their own pace, and are more comfortable and confident doing it this way.”

Forsyth also suggests that the excitement of up-to-date, high-spec equipment is very attractive to young people. “Broadband access has been the key reason why we have attracted new users to the Centre. In many cases, these are people that would not attend the Centre without the promise of fast, reliable Internet access.”

When posed with the question of the specific impact of broadband over the impact of the Internet in general, Forsyth explains that narrowband Internet access would have been much less effective. “Unless Internet access is fast and reliable, people will not have the motivation to visit the Centre to go online. With broadband we manage to stay ahead of the game, at least for now.”

According to Jim Forsyth the Youth Centre is much more attractive and vibrant since the broadband installation. It has also had a positive impact on the everyday lives of the users: “Broadband has been particularly significant in overcoming social barriers in the area, specifically between young people and the elderly. Using the computers and learning about IT helps to bring different types of users together, because they share a common goal. Our IT facility, of which broadband is an essential part, is an important catalyst in helping people get a better understanding of other groups in our community.

“We will shortly be reconfiguring a room to allow for a separate computer area. Thanks to broadband we have been able to undertake computer-training courses and our attendance figures continue to increase. Introducing new users to the Internet has had the knock-on effect of making them want Internet access in the home.”

Despite the positive impact of broadband at the Centre Forsyth cautions that sometimes it can be too popular. “Getting the young people off the machines is very difficult sometimes, but it is a small price to pay, and shows that people want what we are offering.”

Annex 2 Promoting the Internet and Broadband at Local Level

We asked the organisations for their views on local promotion of the Internet and access technologies such as broadband. Of 17 respondents only 2 interviewees felt that nothing more needs to be done to promote broadband in their area. For those who felt that more should be done, the most popular answer was through a reduction in the price. 2 felt that there should be more access points and 1 suggested more training on how to use the Internet.

Over 2/3 of the organisations felt that Further education colleges should take a leading role in promoting Internet use in their local area. 11 thought that community groups had an important role to play in helping locals gain access to the Internet. Schools and local council also rated highly (with 11 and 12 respectively). Only 4 of the 20 respondents felt that business should be most involved in promoting Internet access in their area. Other suggestions included libraries and drop-in centres.

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