

Blackburn Wired Up Community

1 The background

The Wired Up Communities Initiative

Wired up Communities is a DfES initiative that used £10 million to pilot connecting homes in seven disadvantaged communities to the Internet. The objective was to assess how individual access to the Internet can transform opportunities for people living in these communities by developing new ways of accessing learning, work and leisure services.

The initiative used a variety of technologies (e.g. standard telephone lines, broadband technology, digital TV) to link households in the selected communities to the Internet. The aim was to enable them to access a wide range of local and national services and to develop links with local schools to test the part that the Internet might have to play in helping to deliver the National Curriculum or develop home/school links more generally.

Blackburn's involvement

In May 2000 Blackburn Council put together an outline bid as a response to the first call for expression of interests from the DfES. They involved a local community umbrella organisation called Beach as their main partner for this. Beach (Blackburn East Area Community Help) was set up in 1996 by 12 local community organisations to enable them to work together to develop the social, recreational and economic status of East Blackburn.

In October the DfES approached Beach to work up a full bid and Blackburn Council funded IS Communications to help them to do this. IS Communications were already working in Blackburn to help develop community ICT provision. We had:

- Undertaken an audit of community ICT provision in Blackburn,
- Written a report on the ICT opportunities facing the voluntary sector in the borough and what support was needed to enable them to exploit these.
- Conducted focus groups to gain a picture of what was needed to help some of the key excluded groups to benefit from new technology
- Run a web design day for the community in one area of the town and a planning day for community ICT provision in another
- Written key parts of the borough's bid for European URBAN funding.

Because of this we already had a clear picture of the local situation and good relationships with the relevant public sector bodies and community organisations

2 Putting the bid together

We worked closely with the secretary of Beach to put together a bid that was visionary, realistic and firmly embedded in the local situation. Together we met with leaders of key local community organisations to gain their commitment and input and ran several consultation meetings for interested residents. We also considered which local public sector agencies could add real value to the implementation of the project and visited as many of them as possible to identify what their role might be. We found that, without exception they were enthusiastic about the proposal and we were able to build a large portfolio of letters of support to strengthen the bid. We also were able to set up a steering group, made up of many of these partners to agree the final bid.

Out of this widespread discussion, we were able to gain consensus as to the focus of the bid and what technology solution would be most appropriate. We agreed that, while the equipment should be provided on free loan to participants, it was important that they should contribute something to show their commitment to it. Given that this was a deprived community we felt that the most appropriate way for this to be done was to require all recipients to commit to take part in an interview to identify their skills and support needs and an initial training session, before they could receive their computer.

We also felt that it was vital for a fully featured local neighbourhood website to be developed as part of the project. We felt that it was essential to provide useful content for the new computer users to give them reasons to go online. We also felt that the project provided the potential for developing a strong online community in the area to provide service providers with the opportunity of talking directly with their users and, more importantly, for local residents to be able to make friends and discuss and debate local issues. We therefore made provision for the costs of designing, hosting and content development of the site within the budget.

3 Managing the project set up

Working through options and detailing procedures

- Preparing a detailed project plan with key milestones and reviewing progress against those milestones and modifying plan as new issues emerged
- Requirements on recipients
- Detailing the processes required – For recipients the process to get a computer, for staff the process to deal with the distribution, for UK Online call centre the script to deal with enquiries, including all the possible queries they might receive
- Equipment needed
- Training and support provision

- Internet access

Specifying the website and managing the procurement process

Working with the council on the procurement of the PCs

Staff–Job descriptions, person specs, adverts, interviewing panels –
and office – visiting potential office spaces

Setting up the partnership board and its terms of reference

4 Providing ongoing support

Business case and developing sustainability strategy

5 What our client said