

Intelligent neighbourhoods and neighbourhood renewal



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Intelligent neighbourhoods and neighbourhood renewal

The National Strategy Action Plan provides the overall framework to transform deprived neighbourhoods. A key tool in enabling change is technology. Information and communication technologies (ICT) have a proven track record in enabling better and more effective ways of working across many areas of life. They also provide an important means to help realise the vision of the National Strategy: reducing crime; improving health; housing; educational achievements; and increasing the number of people in work. In short, ICT enables the development of 'intelligent neighbourhoods'.

IS Communications believes that to develop intelligent neighbourhoods in deprived areas, actions need to be taken on a number of fronts together:

- Providing convenient public access points
- Helping home access to be more attractive and affordable
- Supporting the development of content that is interesting and useful to people within those neighbourhoods
- Developing neighbourhood Intranets to enable individuals, businesses and agencies within those neighbourhoods to work together online
- Supporting general community building activities using new technology
- Supporting the roll out of broadband links to local residents, businesses and organisations
- Supporting local eChampions to energise the Information Society locally
- 'Move on' initiatives to facilitate the move from informal usage to more formal training.

1 Public access points

From interview and discussions it is clear that many community-based ICT providers are very focused on the idea of formal courses. This view is based partly on formal course models used by providers such as FE and Adult Education, who may deliver courses in community venues, and on the perception that formal training is the only way forward. This approach does not easily reach the socially excluded, particularly in the early phases of contact with ICT. To meet the needs of this group it is therefore necessary to explore alternative

methods of allowing exposure to and the development of awareness of new technologies.

It is important to ensure that first contact with ICT happens where people feel comfortable and secure. It is also important to give people space to experiment without feeling observed or pressured. This means that there must be unobtrusive support that can be called on, and that this support is passive – helping people to recover from difficulties by getting them to do it, rather than doing it for them. In ICT as in every community related project, the rule must be ‘doing with’ not ‘doing to or for’.

1.1 What is good practice?

Public access points may be called a variety of names, for instance UK Online Centres, Electronic Village Halls, Learndirect Centres and so on. They may be situated in libraries, community centres, even shopping centres. However the best of them have a number of characteristics in common. They:

- Are aimed at providing simple and easy routes into the use of new technology and multimedia, including word processing, creating and using data, creating and manipulating pictures and photographs, emailing, searching the web, creating web pages, producing video, film, music, or audio programmes
- Help local people to access new technology in informal and community settings, such as community centres, libraries and shops
- Focus on supporting the interests of users rather than on delivering formal courses. While they may deliver some formal courses, these are always in response to the demands of existing users. Their aim is to provide what the user wants and to respond to the user’s agenda
- Are rooted in the local community and see themselves as accountable to local people more than to external organisations
- Will always provide many drop in sessions where local people can come in at their convenience and do what they want to do alongside any formal sessions where the centre is used for particular groups or particular activities
- Will provide a significant amount of group activity as well as individual, with local community organisations using the facilities to work together on a project such as writing a newsletter or making a video related to their interests, or running sessions where users with a common interest can follow that interest together

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- Will use volunteers and promote a culture of peer support so that people help each other from the very beginning and can therefore easily move into more formal volunteering
- Will often be staffed, whether paid or voluntary, by people from the local community.

1.2 What is their role?

Public access points, particularly those following the model of good practice above have a key role in developing the Information Society locally. They help people to:

- access online information and services
- see the relevance of technology by using it to further their own interests
- get an easy introduction to learning about information and communication technology and multimedia
- test out whether or not a particular item of technology is useful to them before they buy it. This might be computers or the Internet in general or it might be specific software programmes and applications. It could be video production, web site building, community radio or television
- get informal technical advice from other users
- work with other members of their community on common projects.

2 Access in the home

Ways need to be identified to make home access easy and affordable. This is important to ensure that ICT can become a part of everyday life and not something special.

There are a number of devices that can be used to access online information and content:

- Computers. These are the obvious devices to use, as they are the ones that opened up the digital world and that have the flexibility to be used for the complete range of multimedia applications. They are, however, expensive and their very flexibility means that they can easily go wrong. Any strategy to accelerate home PC usage in deprived neighbourhoods needs therefore to address both cost and technical support.
- Digital televisions. These can provide an easy start for people who are not interested in computers. The problem here is that digital televisions provide only limited interactivity and there are comparatively few applications available for them. In general, interactive services on digital televisions are designed for the

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Information Society consumer and not for the person who wants to take a more active role.

- Computer games machines such as the Microsoft X- box and the Sony Play station. Some of these are provided with Internet access and can be used to browse the web and send emails. The reason they are provided with Internet access however is to permit online game playing. Because of this they are not really suitable devices for browsing the web and emailing. Computer games machines however do provide a useful set of skills to build on and, whether using specialised machines or games on a PC they form an important part of any strategy to engage people the digital world.
- Mobile telephones, personal digital assistants (PDAs) etc. These can be very useful for those people who have access to computers at home or work, but are of very limited use as a stand alone device. The one application that could be built on is SMS or texting on mobile phones as this does not depend on access to computers. However, most people who use SMS are young people who are already computer literate and so it would have only a limited role in helping people from deprived neighbourhoods to participate in the Information Society.

Digital televisions and mobile phones are probably of little use in getting people who have no experience of computers into playing an active role in the Information Society. However it is important to ensure that any content built for people in deprived neighbourhoods can be accessed from these devices.

When considering ways of providing affordable access devices for people within deprived neighbourhoods, it is important also to:

- take into account the cost of connectivity
- take into account the fact that a significant number of people will not have bank accounts
- take into account the higher support costs in that most people who buy computers at the moment use computers at work or have come into contact with them in some other way. Any initiatives that try to push up computer ownership will have to deal with a high percentage of households where there is no previous knowledge of computers.

3 Useful and relevant content

3.1 Why is this important?

While widespread access is clearly vitally important, we must not forget that we need to concentrate equally on content. It is pointless to ensure that everyone can have access to the Information Society unless there is such a range of interesting and useful content that

everyone can find enough of a reason to want to use it. Content therefore needs to appeal to a wide range of people. It has to cover the interests of every age group, and of a wide range of human situations. It also has to be immediately and obviously useful and add value to people's lives.

3.2 What sort of content are we talking about?

There is a wide range of content that can be provided using new technology such as the Internet and which will provide value to people within local communities. This might include:

- Information about local events and services
- Opportunities for local people to express their creativity - stories, recipes, pictures, articles, jokes
- Discussion and debate about local issues
- Local history archives and reminiscence sites
- The opportunity to do things of practical use – buy, sell and order from local organisations, comment on local issues and collaborate with other local people and organisations on issues of mutual interest.

3.3 What sort of media are we talking about?

The media that can be used to develop useful and relevant content might include videos, printed or photocopied newsletters, radio programmes, CDs and so on, but, in general, it will make sense to also put the content on the web. The cost of putting it online is minimal and it will provide a permanent and widely accessible record.

3.4 What is good practice?

In order for content to be useful and engaging, there are three simple principles that need to be followed. It needs to:

- be built by local people, or at least
- be specified by local people
- have interfaces designed by or with local people.

4 Neighbourhood Intranets

4.1 Their importance

We have already shown the value of putting locally developed content online. A neighbourhood Intranet site provides one place where all that content can be brought together and where people can be sure that they have the most up to date and reliable information.

It also provides a way for a community to act together online and thus potentially gain economic and social benefit.

4.2 Dial up or connected?

The most usual way for this to occur is simply by building a community website on the Internet focused around the needs and interests of local people. This may be completely open or may have some areas that are password protected and only open to local people. In any case the site will contain a lot of community building features such as discussion areas, local event calendars, web based email and online chat.

However, it is also possible for any community that physically builds its own network to have a fully functioning, always-on internal Intranet, which will allow even stronger community building and joint working initiatives.

4.3 Features

Effective neighbourhood Intranet sites will have a number of features in common:

- They will enable residents to see their own locality reflected online. From the home page, with a few clicks of the mouse, they will be able to find out all they could possibly want to know about what is going on - from local entertainment, to local businesses, local planning applications, local clubs and societies, right through to the catalogue at the local library.
- They will provide electronic public space where people can discuss and debate issues of local interest, and make their views known to local authorities, the local MP, and other agencies. A place where they can be creative and share their poetry, stories and art. A place where they can have fun, tell jokes and make new friends, whom they could also meet face to face because they live in the same community.
- They will have systems that make it easy for residents to 'do business' locally, not only to shop online, but also to pay their Council Tax, book appointments with their GP or the hairdresser, book to see local shows and visit the cinema - or whatever else they need to do.
- They will make it easy for local people and businesses to collaborate. They should support local exchange trading schemes, joint purchasing of goods and utilities and enable local small business to join together into virtual enterprises so that they could compete more effectively for business and achieve the costs savings that economies of scale provide.

4.4 Who should build and manage them?

Local neighbourhood Intranet sites are clearly best built by local people who know what information and services people in their neighbourhood need and who can ensure that the look and feel of a site is right. However, to build an effective site from scratch takes a great deal of expertise and a number of the community partnerships we talked to felt that they would prefer to join in with an area-wide initiative. It is also true that, while the 'bottom up' approach is necessary to ensure appropriateness and local ownership, a 'top down' aspect can help to ensure consistency of approach, ease of searching across several sites, ease of development, and the ability to access relevant information from a wider area. We therefore suggest that a combination is best, with a common framework but with content developed and managed within local communities.

4.5 The benefits

Setting up a neighbourhood Intranet site can have a number of spin-offs. These can include:

- improved communication between people in communities and families
- better access to public services
- stimulating the interest and intelligence of people who have settled for low aspirations
- allowing the development of interest groups
- supporting collaborative working by businesses and organisations
- supporting joint purchasing and joint action
- raising awareness of such issues as domestic violence
- providing access to information
- having fun!
- Empowerment.

4.6 Good practice

In order for a neighbourhood Intranet to be a useful and popular site, there are a number of principles that need to be followed:

- Decentralised control – with a team of web editors managing the site, each with editorial control, under clear guidelines, over specific parts of the site
- Wide as possible participation – the more people that are involved in providing the content, the more people will feel ownership and the more they will publicise the site to their friends and colleagues

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- The involvement of all key players - local newspapers, newsletters, voluntary organisations, faith groups, political parties, clubs and societies, schools, youth organisations
- An easy start to contributing content – People should not need to have complex web building skills before they can get involved. Rather a simple templated system should be used which allows the people who are expert on an issue to contribute content, rather than people who are expert on the technology
- Clear and properly enforced guidelines as to acceptable content so as to ensure that all sections of the community feel safe in taking part
- All content to be 'owned' by people, or organisations and dated
- Moderated discussion lists to ensure that discussion is fair, that it moves towards clear actions and that everyone feels able to contribute their ideas
- There should be fun areas on the site with games, competitions and jokes, so that people will visit it to enjoy themselves and not just to gain information
- Personalisation and accessibility so that people can alter the look and feel of the site and the way the content is presented to suit their physical needs and their interests

It is also important that local neighbourhood Intranet sites are built to common standards - specifically to the eGif (eGovernment Interoperability Framework) standards being developed by the UK Government. This will enable:

- easy links with neighbouring communities
- easy incorporation of useful 'outside' services such as eGovernment

5 Broadband connectivity

5.1 What is broadband?

Most people at the moment use a modem to enable data to be sent to and from the Internet down their phone lines. This is sometimes known as 'dialup'. The amount of data that can be transmitted per second is known as 'bandwidth' and is measured in bits per second. The amount of data that can be transmitted by dialup has pretty well reached a peak of a theoretical 56 Kilobits of data per second (56 Kbps), with an actual performance closer to around 40 Kbps.

Broadband refers to technologies that can provide much higher bandwidths of 500 Kbps or even higher. There are a number of different methods to provide this sort of bandwidth affordably.

However it is clear that broadband opens up a whole new experience of the Internet to people used to simple dialup connectivity.

5.2 Importance

There are two major advantages that broadband has over dialup: speed of download and the potential for new multimedia services.

Broadband allows even large files to be downloaded very quickly. This is not simply a matter of convenience, but it is likely to change the way we use our computers. It will allow us to treat the Internet as a gigantic hard disk. There will be no longer any need to download important documents and save them onto our own computer. It will be possible to just save the links, as clicking on them will enable virtually instant download.

Broadband doesn't simply mean faster downloads, it also allows a far greater amount and density of data to be transmitted. Broadband is needed for online multimedia training, and high quality video conferencing. Broadband allows fast interactive online games playing, and enables you to listen to radio stations from around the world and get high quality reception. It will also allow video on demand.

An increasing number of applications that are being developed for the Internet demand high bandwidth and so cannot be accessed by people with only dial up access. People with dial up access will therefore feel more and more isolated from the mainstream use of the Internet.

It is also important to remember that those areas which will have broadband access first will have the opportunity to develop new businesses that will exploit the benefits of broadband. The economy of those areas will be further strengthened at the expense of areas that are already lagging behind.

5.3 The problem

At the moment broadband for residential and SME use is largely delivered through cable and ADSL but this is not available everywhere and market pressures on their own are unlikely to provide universal coverage. The areas likely to be left out are small rural communities and deprived urban neighbourhoods, just the sort of neighbourhoods where the issue of social exclusion is strongest.

5.4 A possible model

There are indications from initiatives in different neighbourhoods around Europe that there could be a viable business model for connecting up a neighbourhood with broadband links and then connecting that neighbourhood to the Internet, to the public telephone system and to the cable networks. When this is done, bulk buying of telephony, data services and cable television becomes possible,

resulting in lower costs to the consumer as well as providing revenue streams to offset the initial capital costs of connecting the neighbourhood up.

In addition, doing this would open up the possibility of a whole range of other managed services, to provide additional revenue streams. For instance new community businesses could be set up or existing business could be brought in with an agreed revenue share arrangement to provide services such as home security, or monitoring of elderly and frail residents. Utilities would be able to monitor utility usage without the need of home visits. Public bodies would be able to deliver online services to every home in the area, and could offer video conferencing facilities with key staff, which could result in significant cost savings.

6 Supporting eChampions

eChampions are individuals who are actively involved in their local community and who have a vision for how ICT can help meet the needs of local people and a commitment to doing something about it. They may already be leading or playing an active role in a community ICT project or they may be waiting for the opportunity of taking part. In any case they have a crucial role to play:

- They act as role models for their neighbours and friends
- They have ICT skills that they can share
- They often have a good sense of what sorts of strategies and tactics would work best in helping people from their communities overcoming the barriers to active involvement in the Information Society
- They are often excellent teachers as they talk the language of their communities and are committed to helping their neighbours and friends.

What is important is that such eChampions are identified so that they can be supported to play their part in the development of the Information Society locally.

7 'Community building' projects

New technology has the potential not only to benefit the individual, but also to help groups and communities. An important part of building the Information Society in deprived neighbourhoods must include community building activities. These are projects that are undertaken by a group of people with the aim of strengthening the relationships within the group or strengthening the local community in general, or both. There are two types:

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- Projects based on common interests - football, poetry, history archives and so on. Here new technology provides a focus for the activities in that it provides groups with the opportunity to publish their ideas and knowledge. Collaboration using new technology is easy. Confidence is built as people have the opportunity to see themselves as 'experts'. This might include people working together on building web sites or producing videos, or programmes for community radio and television.
- Projects that help people to get more involved in their community. This would include online discussion lists on community issues, 'ask the expert' question and answer sessions online, information about local services, events and issues, and virtual community groups which enable people to join in virtually and maybe eventually join in face to face meetings.

8 Move on activities

The key role of regeneration activities is to help the people in deprived areas to advance to the stage when they can take full advantage of the opportunities open to the general population. It is therefore important to address the issue of how to help people who are developing skills and interest in new technology to easily move on to appropriate training and possibly jobs.

When planning 'move on' initiatives, the concept of 'distance travelled' is an important guide. Success should not be measured on the basis of qualifications gained, as this pressurises organisations to 'cherry pick' and focus on working with people who are already motivated and able, rather than on those who would most benefit from support. Success should rather be measured according to how much 'distance' beneficiaries have moved in their lives. In some cases for an individual to simply attend a course on time is a huge step forward. In fact the most important 'distance travelled' may well be the distance from the door to the computer, as for many people this is the biggest barrier to overcome.

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Further Information

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IS Communications is a company that helps partnerships and local agencies exploit new technology for the economic and social benefit of the area. It also advises local authorities on eGovernment