

# Civic and Community Technology

**Civic and community use of the Internet is important to Government because of its targets for moving services online, and to commerce because of the insights it provides into user styles and preferences. It is also crucial in the development and re-energising of our social and civic institutions. This article explores the potential of civic Internet use—but concludes that many of our institutions are failing to rise to the challenge.**

## Introduction

The civic and community use of the Internet reflects the enormous range of social activities that extend our lives beyond work, formal learning and consumption. Its use embraces government and charitable services, hobbies and leisure interests, and an increasing number of formal and informal networks that blur distinctions between global and local.

In using the Net this way we encounter sophisticated systems for delivering online services developed by government and non-profit organisations. We research information on the Web and may also develop home pages for ourselves, our local community, or our interest groups. As well as a mass of one-to-one email we may use mailing lists, web forums, peer-to-peer systems and other tools provided free by commercial suppliers, non-profits, or helpful tech enthusiasts.

Because of this diversity of use, understanding how we use the Net as citizens and social beings will be important in designing networks and appliances, software applications and support services. At the moment understanding is patchy, and there are few cross-overs between the worlds of government, charities, community groups, education, health and commerce.

The potential of the Net was recognised early in the life of the 1997 Labour government. 'The information age offers huge scope for organising government activities in new, innovative and better ways and for making life easier for the public by providing public services in integrated,

imaginative and more convenient forms like single gateways, the Internet and digital TV'<sup>1</sup>. The target set by Tony Blair was for all possible government services to be delivered online by 2008, which was subsequently revised to an even more ambitious target of 25 per cent of services online by 2002, extending to 100 per cent by 2005.

This article, through a review of research and interviews, examines that vision, not just in the field of e-government, but in the wider aspiration to use the Internet to empower citizens, enable non-profit organisations, help strengthen local communities, and enhance the effectiveness of a wide range of public bodies. We look at what has happened in recent years in several fields—particularly local government, non-profit organisations and housing. We identify problems in implementation and the common strands that emerge.

## Why 'Civic' Internet is Important

First we should touch on why the 'civic' use of the Internet is important—for industry as well as our civic institutions. Clearly government—local and national—is an important customer, together with education, health and the many agencies which will have to provide services online. Increasingly charities and community groups are in the same business. In addition we are seeing a wide range of initiatives which mobilise volunteers, call on government grants, and also develop professional non-profit services:

- community networks—portals and other services for local communities;
- wired-up communities—projects to saturate an area with home access through free or subsidised PCs and/or interactive TV;
- UK online centres—online computer suites and training facilities located in poorer neighbourhoods, or aimed at specific social groups;
- community media centres—providing people with the opportunity to develop their own broadcast-quality material;
- e-democracy initiatives which promote online participation in local and national politics, and in specialist interest areas;
- support programmes to help volunteers in community groups, and paid staff in

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David Wilcox is a consultant and Martyn Pearl is with Oxford Brookes University

larger non-profits, make full use of the Net in their day-to-day work;

- plus thousands of online communities serving people's passionate interests, life problems and hobbies. These may be hosted by BBC Online, independent TV companies, newspapers, or developed by enthusiasts using free or low-cost systems.

The 'official' initiatives—and the many informal, collaborative developments—variously seek to use the Net to benefit us as consumers, citizens and individuals.

We will explore these uses later in relation to government, non-profits and housing. We offer here two general perspectives on benefits: why 'civic' use of the Net is potentially of considerable interest to industry, but may be unrecognised; and how this use can help develop awareness and skills important to people both as e-citizens and e-consumers.

### Widening the market, educating consumers

The 'civic' Net developments outlined above may appear marginal to the mainstream of consumer and business development.

However, community technology specialist Terry Grunwald, who is based in the US but also works in the UK, argues that they can reach places that purely commercial or public service delivery won't.

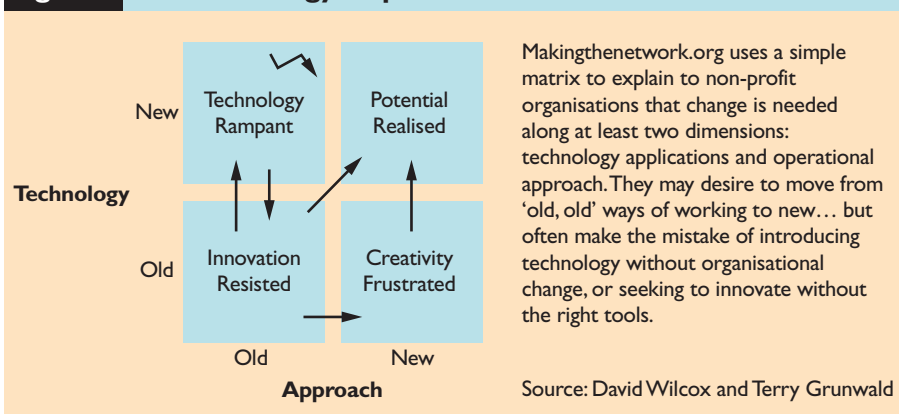
This may be particularly important when take-up of services by the early-adopters is slowing, and suppliers need a wider and deeper understanding of user interests and need. Terry argues that community and civic use of the Net:

- builds and aggregates demand in disadvantaged populations for a range of telecommunications-based services;
- demonstrates 'real world' experiences that provide a blueprint for 'customer-centric' service delivery;
- builds a body of knowledge about e-commerce;
- builds demand for broadband deployment—long term, it is those who experience literacy challenges in the Internet's text-based environment who may make heavy demand on streamed video/broadband services; and
- builds a body of knowledge about the learning styles, challenges, and opportunities of disadvantaged populations.

Kevin Harris, Information Manager at the Government-funded Community Development Foundation (CDF), suggests that when people use information and communication technologies (ICTs) they:

- acquire and develop technical, communication, learning, social and other skills;
- learn formally and informally, together or alone, by design and through serendipity;

**Figure 1 The technology trap**



- develop confidence and self-esteem;
- pursue leisure interests and opportunities; and
- publish and broadcast their opinions and ideas.

In short, community technology provides a test-bed for understanding many of the messy, cultural, 'people' issues that hinder deployment of even the best-planned technology project.

One possible route for companies to make links between commercial and civic developments is through support for community and voluntary sector organisations. BT and some other corporations have a long track record in the field. However, when the Internet charity Citizens Online undertook research into Corporate Social Responsibility in the IT sector last year they found that:

- less than 25% of IT companies have a clear strategy for corporate social responsibility;
- only one in six IT companies support Internet access initiatives for the disadvantaged; and
- most IT companies are scathing about the low level of charitable contributions made by industry as a whole and the IT sector in particular

Chief executive John Fisher says: 'The IT industry is a relatively immature sector and as yet has failed to recognise that it is no longer just a purveyor of boxes and techy solutions—it has helped to create a new digital society that has changed the way we do business, communicate and play—but has so far been reticent to address the social and cultural inequalities that have resulted.'

### How Civic and Community Use is Developing

In reviewing current developments in Government, local government, housing

and non-profits we found some common themes.

- Many organisations fail to make the necessary changes in their internal operations to accommodate new technology (see Figure 1).
- All organisations are finding it difficult to move from promotional and information-giving web sites to service delivery.
- While there is much rhetoric about empowering citizens through the Net—and some innovative projects—this usage is still relatively small in local government and housing associations.
- Lack of leadership in senior management is one of the main barriers to implementation.
- Capital investment is easier to find than revenue. Many projects—including local UK online centres—face uncertain futures because of the lack of earning capability or mainstream revenue support.
- At the same time that government and non-profits are struggling to make progress, individuals and small groups are using the many free—and paid for—tools on the Net to build their own online communities.

Below we deal in more detail with each of the sectors, and then touch on the use of the Net in local communities and online communities of interest.

### Implementing E-Government

The new Labour Government's approach to e-government was to be implemented within an environment in which 'public servants... have the opportunity to develop the skills and culture which will be necessary to work in new, often challenging, ways. There must be a clear lead from the top level of organisations'<sup>2</sup>, p.6.

Government aspirations are high, and the potential is considerable. But what is

## Sustaining resource

Adrian Hancock, of the Improvement and Development Agency, IDEA, has the practical task of supporting local authorities in implementing electronic government.

He sees the opportunities for local government and non-profits as social inclusive service delivery; efficient business process to obtain best value in procurement and information/data accessibility; effective networking; and in community education.

However, resources will be the major challenge. 'In the non-profit sector, efficient use of current ICT technology will primarily depend upon two key attributes: skills and finance'.

Adrian warns that project planning must go beyond the start-up phase, when initial funding may be available. 'If resource is only available in the start-up years, how will it be maintained and grow? These issues must be addressed prior to any project acceptance or rollout.'

happening in practice? A number of indicators offer an insight into progress:

- over 50 per cent of Government services are currently available online, and predictions are that by 2002, 74 per cent of services will be available<sup>3</sup>;
- over 99 per cent of local authorities in England have now submitted an Implementing Electronic Government (IEG) statement; and
- 25 Pathfinder projects have been initiated by Government involving over 100 local authorities, working in partnership with private and public companies.

Although nearly every local authority has developed an IEG and has a web site, there is relatively little evidence of services being delivered electronically at the present time. A survey of local authority web sites in 2001 found that 36 per cent were promotional sites, 41 per cent content sites, 18 per cent content plus, with less than 1 per cent representing transactional sites<sup>4</sup>.

### Main problems in implementing e-government

While finance is proving a major hurdle, the problems in the public sector run much deeper than those generated by resource constraints. Difficulties of a structural, cultural and strategic nature pose an even greater threat to the achievement of the 2005 deadline and the sustainability of e-government over time.

The IT Trends Report 2001/2 issued by the Society of Information Technology Management (SOCITM) indicates that although progress has been made, 'significant financial, organisational and cultural obstacles are hindering progress'<sup>5</sup>. Understanding of the Government's e-government strategy amongst elected members and chief executives is low in most authorities. This mirrors a cultural failure of change management that extends throughout the public sector, including managers, operational and technical staff.

## E-Enabling the Non-profit Sector

The lack of substantive progress in the implementation of e-government is even more clearly evident in the non-profit sector, particularly within housing associations. Although the Government's e-government programme has been focussed largely on the public sector, that is central and local government and related agencies, the non-profit sector is heavily implicated. 'There should be a new, mixed economy in the electronic delivery of government services in which the public, private and voluntary sectors can all play a role on the basis that what matters is what works rather than who does it'<sup>6</sup>.

### Nature of the sector

In discussing the role of non-profits, we should recognise that organisations range from large charities with professional staff to small local groups run by volunteers.

Kevin Harris, of CDF, says: 'Their developmental needs are somewhat different. For example, the economy of a community organisation may consist of 80% or 100% volunteering, with the controlling roles being voluntary; whereas professional voluntary organisations are more likely to consist of 60-100% paid work, with the controlling roles being professional. Different types of management, motivation and training are called for.'

Kevin contributed substantially to the Government Policy Action Team 15 research into social exclusion and ICTs, arguing that overcoming what is sometimes termed the *digital divide* involves more than providing access.

'We stressed that it is the *diversity* of information and communication applications which makes the difference at local level: people use ICTs and they acquire skills and confidence, they learn and

develop business opportunities, they become empowered and participate. One can neither prescribe nor predict the patterns of usage that will emerge.'

The PAT 15 report urged Government to support establishment of local ICT centres, particularly in poorer neighbourhoods. These UK online centres are now a central plank of Government policy to provide access learning opportunities.

Kevin suggests the following key areas where exploitation of ICTs by community organisations can make an important social contribution.

- **E-government:** Having community organisations and centres which function as conduits and facilitators can help people access government information, promoting citizens' use of government services.
- **Learning opportunities and employability:** Having people using local centres for learning creates a ripple effect, giving confidence and an appropriate context for those who have been failed by the education system or who for other reasons are reluctant to pursue opportunities through formal institutions.
- **Social inclusion and networking:** A strong community sector depends on networking opportunities and the ability to engage with residents on an informal basis.
- **Creativity and 'community content':** One misleading view of the community sector is that its strength necessarily comes from adversity. People often collaborate in response to some threat to their way of life, such as the closure of a post office or a proposal for a new bypass. But equally, community involvement can be related to creativity and celebration. It has become apparent that access to new technologies can release a great deal of creative energy, allowing local people to produce material of their own, and use this to promote a sense of cohesion.

### E-enabling report

A report on 'E-enabling the voluntary and community sectors', prepared for the Office of the e-Envoy by Hall Aitken consultants, reviewed benefits in terms of internal efficiencies, effectiveness in service delivery and wider networking benefits.

The study found that the Internet and ICT can improve the delivery of services to clients, and help organisations to deliver services in new and more effective ways, for example; online mutual support groups, videoconferencing in rural areas, and new types of learning opportunities.

However, the study found that overall the level of ICT infrastructure in the sector is poor and this prevents many of these gains being achieved

## The story from the front line

The National Association of Councils for Voluntary Service (NACVS)—the local umbrella organisations for the sector—carried out an informal survey of who was responsible for IT work within member organisations and reported the following typical comments:

- 'We don't have any IT staff—we just muddle through with a little help from our friends!'
- 'I don't know how I would manage without my own computer technician at home who has helped put me right on numerous occasions.'
- 'Previously we relied on management team members having this role added to their job descriptions, with mixed results.'
- 'Our folly [relates to] not building into job specs responsibility for IT maintenance because we felt we were too small to need it!'

Simon Pavitt, the NACVS IT development worker, said: 'It is easy to get hold of computers but hard to work out how to use them to develop services. This lesson may have been learnt in other sectors, but not generally by the voluntary sector or the agencies that fund it.'

'Most organisations don't currently have time to look at better use of IT—they can't stop doing what they're doing for long enough to find a different way of doing it.'

'It's people's heads that need changing—not their hardware or software'

Simon warns that the sector ignores the importance of ICTs at its peril.

'When there's "universal internet access" people will find the statutory and commercial services but will they be able to find the voluntary sector? If not they'll go elsewhere.'

'People won't be wandering up and down the high street looking for the voluntary sector anymore.'

'Although 82% of organisations have computers and 67% have an Internet connection, these computers are often at a level too low to make use of the opportunities of core cost savings, productivity gain and service developments that have been achieved in the public and private sector. The ratio of computers to employees is also low, for example 60% of organisations employing 25–49 people have fewer than nine computers.'

The report added: 'Surprisingly the picture does not change with organisational size, except for the very largest organisations.'

The report recommended assistance to the sector in terms of:

- a programme of awareness raising of the uses, benefits and barriers to ICT in the sector;

- a programme of training and related support to assist them integrate ICT into their operations and meet their organisational objectives of delivering services to client groups; and
- a programme of assistance to secure funding for equipment, internal networking and fast Internet connectivity.

In addition, the report recommended that the funding element of any support should only be provided in the context of technology plans for applicant organisations. It is clear from the report that few organisations make the most of the potential to network effectively internally and externally using a range of tools (see Figure 2).

### The view from the e-Envoy

Paul Farrell is responsible for community and voluntary sector in the Office of the e-

Envoy. He highlights two immediate initiatives:

- a voluntary and community sector portal, being developed by the Active Community Unit in the Home Office, 'that will become a vital resource for tracking down information on government sources of funding and accessing relevant application forms and criteria. Over time the intention is to broaden the scope of the portal so it might eventually become a one-stop shop for other information relevant to the sector's interaction with the Government.'; and
- new awards for the voluntary and community sector (<http://www.ecommerce-awards.co.uk/index.php>) will recognise and promote best practice in the sector, and at the same time give cash prizes to the winners

Paul added: 'We want to work in partnership with the sector to take these matters forward and address the ICT needs identified in recent independent research. To that end, the e-Envoy warmly welcomed a recent initiative of the sector in establishing a Voluntary and Community Sector Internet Task Force, set up by Joe Saxton and Caroline Pile. The task force will be a key intermediary for our liaison with the sector and we look forward to task force members helping us determine priorities for assisting the sector.'

### A new task force for voluntary and community organisations

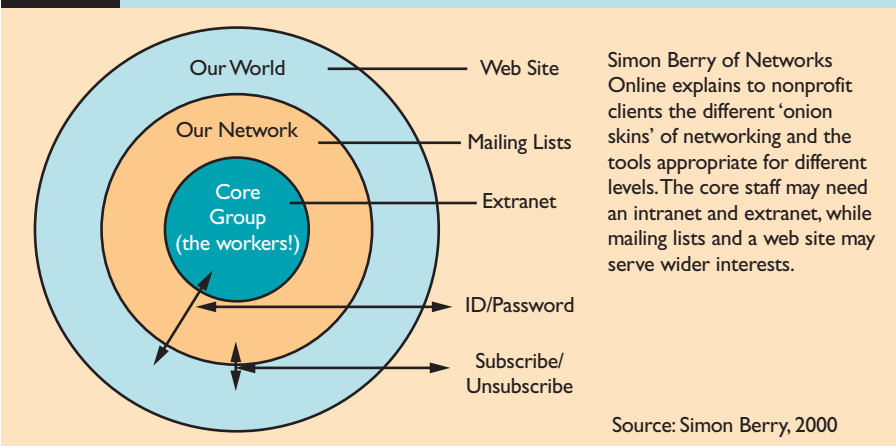
Joe Saxton is head of not for profit at the Future Foundation and with Caroline Pile has helped create the Voluntary and Community Sector Internet Task Force. He sees the main challenges as:

- firing up the imagination of the leaders of the sectors as a whole to the potential of ICT;
- getting the existing beacons of light in the sector propagated more widely; and
- seed funding to nurture the myriad of exciting initiatives to help voluntary and community organisations. For example, there are now ICT services that can help organisations to fundraise online, build communities, run e-raffles, advertise jobs, find volunteers, cut costs, build web sites, create networks, share information and best practice. But too many of them are struggling to make a living—yet they have a critical role in building not for profit use of the Internet.

### What's needed: the missing elements of success

A report earlier this year by Paul Ticher on behalf of the London Advice Services Alliance (Leading the way to IT success)

**Figure 2** Technology for supporting networks



examined the 'missing elements of success' for voluntary organisations using ICTs. Many would be familiar in public and private sectors.

Paul concluded: 'The involvement of senior managers in shaping an organisation's ICT development is not optional. To use ICT effectively requires a strategy, resources and a consistent approach to implementation.

'Organisations can only deliver this if the senior management understand and support the development of IT within the organisation.

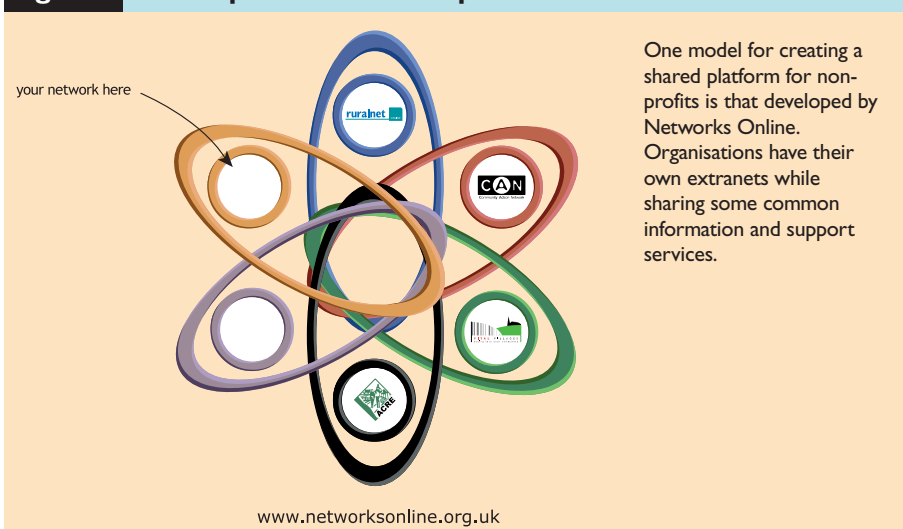
- First they must be inspired to see how technology could work to the benefit of their organisation and its mission.
- Then they need confidence to go ahead and implement their ideas. They need to know that they are making sensible decisions that will work.
- They need persistence to see projects through the problems that are likely to arise along the way.
- And they need practical help in the form of reliable technical support and advice, well-trained staff and the funds to pay for it all.

The report—which was funded by the Baring Foundation and the Worshipful Company of Information Technologists—recommended a number of actions for different interests:

- *Umbrella bodies and networks* should point managers in the direction of suitable inspiration and advice. Specialist providers of ICT support are needed across the country.
- *Management development specialists and trainers* should incorporate ICT management skills into their operations.
- *Professional publications* should alert managers to ICT issues in non-technical ways.
- *Funders* should expect the agencies they fund to take ICT seriously.
- *Individual committees or boards and managers* should realise that ICT problems are soluble and set about finding out how to solve them.
- *Pro bono schemes* should allow ICT professionals to offer support to charities through a structured, brokered process.

Some of the issues facing the community and voluntary sectors are being addressed by specialist suppliers. One of these, Networks Online, is a 'network of networks' providing services for a range of non-profit organisations and some 1800 subscribers. By using a common technology platform, pooling information resources, and centralising support services they can overcome some of the barriers facing individual organisations.

**Figure 3** Shared platform for non-profits



One model for creating a shared platform for non-profits is that developed by Networks Online. Organisations have their own extranets while sharing some common information and support services.

Networks Online (Figure 3) have also formed a consortium of organisations—DirectSupport—to help community-based organisations set up and run the UK online centres discussed later in this article. The package of a helpline, extranet, events and mentoring services funded by the Department for Education and Skills could be a model for wider application.

Other specialist suppliers in the area include two Internet service providers—Poptel and GreenNet. Makingthenetwork.org lists these and others in the field in a 'who's who' of community technology <http://www.makingthenetwork.org/tools/who.htm>,

## Housing Associations and the Net

One of the areas pivotal to the community and civic use of the Internet is social housing, provided in part by local authorities but increasingly by non-profit housing associations.

By 2010, associations will make up the largest of the rental sectors, having assimilated over 2 million local authority homes through the process of stock transfer. Currently, between three and a half and four million of the most vulnerable households in the UK will look to housing associations as the main providers of homes and services. For the Government's agenda of universal access to be viable, the association sector will therefore need to actively engage with the e-government programme.

Yet recent research, *Remote Control*<sup>8</sup> has indicated that housing associations are highly unlikely to achieve anything like the Government's 2005 target. On the contrary, as a whole, the housing association sector has under-performed in its exploitation of IT.

David Wilcox, reviewing the Remote Control research and other studies, and reporting on meetings with housing associations, developed the following interim findings for a project funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation:

## Tenants may be at a disadvantage

Tim Dwelly, in research for the Housing Corporation, highlights the problems that tenants are likely to have in making full use of the Internet for learning or working from home.

The overall take up of Internet use—now in over 40 percent of homes—has enabled one in four of the workforce to carry out some of their work from home. However, allocation policies and tenancy agreements usually means that tenants have no spare room for themselves or children to use a PC quietly, and are discouraged or forbidden to run a business from home.

'Put crudely, home owners can choose an extra room for work or study. They can afford to be online. Tenants are often prevented from having an extra room, are told that they should not work from home and are often unable to afford to be online. To deny one group of the population the chance to have a work room in their home is a form of active social exclusion.'

- Apart from a small number of exemplars, social landlords are lagging behind local authorities in the adoption of ICTs in ways that will directly benefit tenants, because of lack of vision, skilled staff, funding and the need for organisational culture change.
- There appear currently to be no strong drivers towards improvement—whether Government policy, financial incentives, or tenant action. Use of ICT is a low priority.
- By 2007—when Government expects all public services to be online—there will be many ‘smart’ homes, full of different ICT devices networked together and connected to the wider world by always-available connections.
- Tenants will be disfranchised as citizens and as consumers if they do not have similar types of home features and connectivity.
- If social landlords do not take action, it seems unlikely other solutions will emerge because of the lack of national public-sector coordination on infrastructure and services. Commercial organisations will only go for profitable market sectors.
- A culture change is required within landlord organisations to reap the benefits from ICT-led organisational restructuring including new staff responsibilities and roles, and probably outsourcing.

### Preserving choice

Nicholas Pleace, of the Centre for Housing Policy, University of York, has carried out research funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation into the early implementation of electronic service delivery by social landlords, social services and charities (social care, social housing and electronic service delivery).

He says: ‘The challenges are around ensuring accessibility and preserving choice. Every effort needs to be made to ensure that electronic service delivery is accessible to people who would find it difficult to use a web site via a PC. For those who cannot, or do not wish to, use electronic service delivery, an ongoing effort to provide alternative routes to services that provide support and assistance, rather than expecting individuals to ‘self-serve’ using interactive services, is required. Without this, there will be a risk that electronic service delivery increases marginalisation and exclusion for some elements within the population.’

Nicholas identifies costs to users and organisations as barriers to developing online service—plus the nature of the services. ‘Adaptation of public services is

costly and complex. It is much more difficult to automate social housing management than sell books over the Internet.’

## The Development of UK Online Centres

One major initiative to ensure widespread access to the Net, and provide learning opportunities for those who might not otherwise have them, is the Government UK online centres programme. These are new or ‘rebadged’ centres created in libraries, colleges, community centres and other public places providing drop-in facilities, formal courses, and a base for groups to explore how to use the net for community benefit.

The e-Envoy, reporting to the Prime Minister in February 2002 said<sup>9</sup>: ‘Providing Internet access to all those who want it remains a high priority. A substantial network of community Internet access points has been established to support this goal. Well over 2100 UK online centres are now operating and we are on track to deliver 6000 centres by the end of the year, when all libraries will also be online. Our research suggests that by the end of 2002, almost 99% of households in England will be within 5 miles of a public Internet access point and 78% within 1 mile.’

Many centres have professional staff. However Chris Swaine is Chair of the Southcote IT Experience, a UK online centre based in Reading, Berkshire, which is run entirely by volunteers.

The aim of community-based centres like Southcote is to attract people who wouldn’t normally go back into a learning environment—but Chris says it is difficult to get traditional educational establishments, business communities and funding bodies to recognise their value.

‘We continually hear of initiatives to try and attract the more traditionally hard to reach groups, such as those on low income, unemployed, part-time workers or even retired folk into some form of learning. We also hear of the business community saying that learners have not necessarily got the skills that they want.’

‘Therefore, it would seem logical that joining with us could firstly get at those hard to reach client groups, but more importantly train them with the skills that businesses need.’

‘Because we don’t have the levels of bureaucracy we can, in the words of the Director General of the BBC, Greg Dyke “Cut the crap and make it happen”’

Chris says the main lesson is to be innovative and try plenty of ideas without fear of failure.

What would help Southcote and similar centres most? ‘I call it the Heineken beer scenario whereby a funder or business finds us and says “Hey we think you are doing a great job—how can we help you”, rather than us having to scabble around in the mud tugging our forelocks—guy.’

## Getting Local Communities Online

David Greenop, writing in the IBTE *Telecommunication Engineering: A Structured Information Programme* (April 2001), describes how community communication networks have developed over the last decade, often to serve social excluded areas. Community networks have their roots in North American Free-Nets, developed in the 1980s and 1990s to provide local electronic information systems before Internet connectivity was widely available.

These days their focus has moved from access to web portals offering local information, services and forums, sometimes with training and support to help local individuals and groups develop their own content.

The Government is encouraging some further experiments by funding seven ‘Wired Up Communities’ in disadvantaged communities. As well as developing portals and other services, local people qualify for free home computers or set top boxes to access content through digital TV.

Rob Campbell, of Halcyon Consultants, works on the Wired Up Communities programme and recently reviewed projects. He confirmed the great potential benefits of community network initiative—but offered some warnings to local authorities and others providing ‘official’ support:

- some people may be suspicious and refuse to participate in a ‘government scheme’;
- the online views of local people can be challenging to the local authority; and
- if the activists ‘get out of control’ and post defamatory material, who takes control?

Rob suggests that for these local projects to be successful, the official sponsors must plan to ‘let go’ and operate at arms length. One of the challenges then will be to sustain the project once initial funding dries up.

Horace Mitchell is a board member of Communities Online, which promotes and supports local community networks. He also works as a consultant and parliamentarian.

tary advisor, and runs a web site for his village.

He argues that the use of ICTs in and for local communities and voluntary organisations has an important role in determining the pace and nature of ICT take up by individuals, families and local organisations.

'People who are still not PC or Internet users will respond to what they hear from friends and neighbours, from people in local pubs and clubs, from their day-to-day contacts, rather than to the technology-based sales pitch of the PC and Internet suppliers, or exhortations from Government.

'For the keen gardener the fact that their gardening club and its members are or aren't 'on the web' and actively using the Net will influence them more than the fact that Tesco or the Home Office or the county council are online.

'The real benefits of Internet for business, government and society will start to flow only when most people have 'got connected' and have high quality access. With only half the population connected, and less than half of them 'actively connected', anyone wanting to offer an effective online service has to also maintain all their existing offline ways of reaching people.'

Horace Mitchell offer three main lessons from his experience:

- many organisations (commercial and governmental as well as voluntary and community) waste a lot of time, effort and money on web sites that don't work for them, don't work for their target audiences and deliver more frustration than value;
- don't expect instant results from community and voluntary online activities—it takes time to build momentum; online initiatives need to plan on a two or three year time frame rather than trying to get quick returns; and
- an online presence shouldn't be seen as a 'big budget' item. The main requirements for a successful online presence are know-how and effort, not money.

## Communities of Interest

One of the great strengths of the Internet is the opportunity it offers to find and communicate with those with shared interests—wherever they may be. These online communities of interest may be based around an existing 'real world' organisation or network, or develop among people who have never met.

They are particularly important in the context of the 'civic' Net because they enormously extend our ability to share

ideas and develop new relationships, and create 'Net presence' without having to build a web site.

Online communities now have their own specialist managers, who may range from the enthusiast creating a web-based forum or a mailing list using free systems at Yahoo or Smartgroups, to a member of a professional team responsible for forums run by broadcasting organisations and other media.

The informal network E-mint (named after The Mint pub where founder members first met) provides a real and virtual home for these managers through its own forum and monthly meetings. Two E-mint members offer their perspective on the civic and community use of the Net.

### Enhancing democratic debate

Miranda Mowbray researches social and practical issues in running online communities at Hewlett Packard Laboratories

'The Internet is not just a library.

Although it's a good idea to put useful civic information online, it's a pity not to take advantage of the possibilities for two-way (and multi-way) communication. Similarly, although it's good to put educational material on the Internet, e-learning works best when there is also an opportunity to contact other human beings for discussion and teaching.'

The Net has a role in enhancing democracy, but not through simplistic enthusiasm for e-voting.

'To increase voter turnout, allow postal voting. It does increase turnout, it's accessible, and we know how to make it reasonably secure and private. E-voting is riskier.

'As for e-plebiscites, I agree with the e-Envoy, Andrew Pinder, that they lead to 'hastily-formed and ill-informed judgements'. Giving citizens the ability to make instant votes, and the ability to email their representatives rather than just writing a letter, won't do much for democracy. To enhance democracy, you need to enhance the quality of democratic debate—and the Internet can help with this.

'Online is not a substitute for offline. For best results in the civic use of the Internet, have offline meetings as well, and work with offline organisations.'

### Need for 'civic space'

Robin Hamman is Executive Development Producer for Communities at Granada Interactive as well as a part-time Ph.D. student and member of the e-mint group with Miranda Mowbray.

Robin highlights the need for 'civic space' on the Net, and the role of non-profits in creating that.

'The Internet is probably the most commercialised place on Earth! The US government, which originally owned or administrated important parts of the Internet, has given control of the high bandwidth backbone and top-level domain name servers to private companies.

'This has created a situation where it's actually impossible to go online without treading on corporate space. Obviously, this situation is dangerously open to abuse. But, it also represents an opportunity for non-profit and civic use of the Internet—we need public space online and it's non-profit groups that are most likely to provide this space for people to gather, meet, build communities, and exchange information.

'There is also a need for a non-profit or government created search engine—gatekeepers such as Yahoo and MSN hold too much power because they control which sites users will find and, ultimately, which ones they visit: it's like allowing these companies to ban books from the national library!'

Robin, carrying out research on AOL users, found that most people don't use the Internet in the ways that he would expect.

'An experienced user, I use the Internet to meet new people and build new communities of interest. Most users, however, use the Internet primarily to email mom and dad, and to conduct research for academic, work, or purchase related reasons. Very very few people are interested in joining an online chat or message board debate—they've got enough friends, thank you.'

## Conclusions: a Lack of Leadership

Martyn Pearl writes: The technomyopia we have reported earlier appears to reflect a common theme that runs through both the public and not for profit sectors. The findings in *Remote Control* and SOCTIM (see above), research conducted in 2001 among over 200 voluntary organisations<sup>10</sup>, and our other findings suggest a limited appreciation among many chief executives and directors of finance of the real benefits to be derived from IT. There is therefore a strong indication that leadership and direction is to a large extent absent in many public and voluntary organisations.

One consequence of this lack of leadership is that many organisations, both public and voluntary are failing to recognise the potential of technology to act as the catalyst for radical change. There is evidence that 'too many e-government initiatives ... are about automation, not re-engineering' with the objective being short-term savings rather than long-term

benefits<sup>11</sup>. If this is the case, many of the apparent achievements in the lead up to 2005 will be cosmetic rather than substantive. This rather negative generalisation should not, however, hide the fact that there are organisations in both the public and voluntary sectors that serve as exemplars of innovation and adaptation. In such cases, technology, data management and service delivery objectives have been considered in an integrated, strategic manner. The needs and aspirations of consumers have also been taken into account in shaping services, which has also often resulted in greater transparency and accountability. However, these are in the minority, with the majority of organisations placing greater emphasis on process and project driven initiatives rather than joined-up working and strategic planning.

In addition to the cultural and leadership shortcomings in developing e-government, other related factors also threaten to undermine the 2005 target. These include:

- A major skills shortage across both the public and voluntary sectors. This relates to skilled IT professionals for whom the public and voluntary sectors are in direct competition with the private sector. However, it also refers to a shortage of more generalist staff with the skills and appreciation of IT to relate it to service delivery.
- A lack of adequate and structured training for staff, users and board/elected members, particularly by voluntary organisations. Insufficient training inhibits organisational productivity. Inadequate training for users and elected/board members diminishes effective governance and dilutes the potential for capacity building.
- Inadequate consultation and involvement of users in developing e-strategies. Once again, this is less of a problem in local authorities where community consultation is likely to be better developed as the result of best value
- Inadequate systems of data collection and integration.
- A controlling approach to information and its ownership

Each of the above factors feature to a greater or lesser extent in inhibiting the effectiveness of integrating technology within the mainstream of organisational activity. Individually, they may not represent major obstacles. However, collectively, they spotlight the significant weakness in the Government's vision of a modern, technologically aware nation.

What is becoming increasingly evident is that at the heart of achieving a system of effective e-governance and e-government is

the need for a major reappraisal of cultural and professional values across the public and voluntary sectors. There is a need for greater vision, not driven solely by IT, but substantially informed by it. The evidence indicates that local authorities have at least made a start in this direction through the development of Implementing Electronic Government strategies. However, their challenge is to disseminate the vision throughout the corporate body rather than retaining it within a few IT champions.

Voluntary organisations, on the other hand, have much further to go in achieving such a vision and there appears little indication that it will happen in the near future. This would leave a significant gap in achieving universal access to electronic services and information. This might suggest that Government should consider extending additional support, guidance and perhaps direction, to prompt a greater urgency amongst the voluntary sector. The potential need for this has been recognised for some time: 'the e-Envoy should 'champion' the involvement of the private and voluntary sectors in the electronic delivery of government services'<sup>4, p.9</sup>. However, the substance has, to date, been lacking.

Politically, the greatest embarrassment for the Government would be if their 2005 target for e-government were not met. From the current performance data there appears every likelihood that this objective may be met in some form. For the neutral however, of even greater concern is if the target were met, but with little substantive change to services, governance, organisational structures or professional attitudes. Such a scenario would represent a considerable waste of resources and a major opportunity forgone.

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## Biographies



**David Wilcox**  
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David Wilcox worked as a journalist before becoming a consultant and trainer in the development of public, private, community partnerships and non-profit organisations. For the past seven years he has specialised in non-profit and community uses of the Internet, and runs [makingthenetwork.org](http://www.makingthenetwork.org) with UK and US colleagues. This article is based in part on research he is undertaking for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation—who are not, however, responsible for the content.

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Martyn Pearl is Director of Housing Studies at Oxford Brookes University. He has researched extensively in the areas of housing management and asylum seekers. In addition to his academic experience, he also has a background in housing practice, including time as Assistant Director of Housing in a London borough. He is currently Chair of an active housing association in Oxfordshire, a board member of Housing Potential UK and a fellow of the Chartered Institute of Housing.

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