

Government policy and community technology: a briefing note

Kevin Harris, CDF, June 2002

Various government technology programmes are now underway and it may be a good point to put them into context. While doing so, we should keep in mind that community and voluntary agencies have independently been working to adopt and exploit new technologies for years, and continue to do so, often with impressive impact but sometimes getting damagingly over-stretched.

This brief note is not an attempt to provide an exhaustive review but is intended to draw attention to some of the trends. There are two dimensions of interest. First, in what ways might programmes be targeted, at local level? The table below suggests four categories of recipient for funded programmes, with some examples.

| | <i>examples</i> |
|----------------------------------|--|
| Local centres | UK online centres (England); Information Age Community Support Centres (Wales) |
| Local groups and agencies | |
| Neighbourhoods | Wired Up Communities (England) |
| Local champions | Connecting Communities (Ngfl Scotland) |

Thus policy could be oriented towards creating new ICT centres, and investing in existing ones. Alternatively, it might invest in the ICT capability of existing community organisations, with a more explicit objective of developing an effective and efficient community sector. This approach seems not to have been tried, although the work of the Direct Support Consortium¹ in England, for the UK online centres programme, has been aimed at local agencies seeking to establish centres. (The primary objective in this case has been to use the centres to provide access to citizens, not to develop the capacity of the community sector agencies themselves). A third approach would be to saturate a locality with ICT equipment and online access, for example free computers, with a certain amount of support and some local access centres. The Wired Up Communities programme, currently being piloted in several areas in England to wire up 14,000 homes in seven localities, is an example of this approach.² Alternatively, policy might focus on the *individuals* who tend to drive local ICT initiatives, investing in their skills and providing them with equipment: the 'Connecting Communities' programme in Scotland is using this approach.³

This typology is not intended to imply that the orientations of these programmes are entirely discrete or mutually-exclusive. There can be

¹ www.ictcentre.org.uk

² www.dfes.gov.uk/wired/

³ <http://www.ngflscotland.org.uk/communities/training/connectingcommunities/>

considerable overlap, for example, between supporting community organisations and investing in local ICT centres, or in developing ‘community portals’ and training local ICT champions. Nonetheless, the programmes have different objectives and it is not always clear how their emphases dictate their impact at local level. This brings us to the second facet, which is about the thematic orientation of the programmes.

The online centres programme in England evolved from the recommendations of the Social Exclusion Unit’s PAT15 (Policy Action Team on Access to IT)⁴ and thus began with a strong emphasis on social inclusion. Its focus has shifted somewhat towards learning and skills more generally. In addition, the government’s efforts to reach its e-government target of 100% access to electronic services by the end of 2005 can be expected to influence the level of support which centres continue to receive. It is in no-one’s interest to underestimate the continued contribution of these centres in providing access for people in low-income neighbourhoods. We can therefore anticipate an ‘e-governance’ theme in support for community technology over the next few years.

By contrast, what distinguishes the recently-published Welsh programme⁵ is its strong emphasis on linking closely with regeneration initiatives. It’s also worth noting that the Welsh programme is unambiguous about seeking to create ‘an audience’ for e-government services.

CDF will continue to monitor these initiatives, where possible placing them in a broader international context to help us learn what works and what doesn’t.

[Kevin Harris](#), June 2002

⁴ www.pat15.org.uk

⁵ Wales Information Society, e-Communities Report & Business Plan, May 2002, www.wis.org.uk/english/whats%20new/docs/PDF/index2.htm