

Learning Towns and Cities

Good Practice Guides

Information and Communications Technologies

The purpose of this document is to draw out key lessons, illustrated with examples, from the three projects which linked ICT to learning and regeneration.

ICT - Projects	
<u>Sheffield</u>	CITINET Sheffield's Network of Private/Public and Community Based Learning Centres .
<u>City & County of Swansea</u>	Spinning a Learning Network New Learning and Communications Technologies
<u>West Berkshire</u>	New Information and Learning Technologies

Overview of Projects

ICT and its Potential What impact does or can ICT have on lifelong learning and regeneration within learning communities?

The impact of ICT has to date been limited, but clearly it has enormous potential. This can be seen, for example, in the development of the University for Industry concept (Ufi).

- 1. Easier access to learning materials and information through a PC, or through digital TV or playstation.**
This will ease access for isolated rural communities and for people working long hours, or who have to stay at home to look after children, who cannot find time to attend college etc. For example, the Thames Valley 'Virtual College' offers a range of courses that can be downloaded directly to people's homes as a precursor to Ufi.
- 2. Easier participation - because we can find out more information and send E-mails all round the world cheaply and efficiently.**
This revolution in global communication can mean a greater quality of participation (as well as quantity) at a far lower cost than very expensive and limited questionnaire samples and market research can support.
- 3. New technologies can stimulate the curiosity and desire to learn at all ages.**
When older people are given the chance to use laptop computers in the community, they become very interested in using the new equipment, despite not having seen a need for it before. Once people grasp its potential, they can get hooked!

Challenging some of the assumptions about ICT

Within the last year ICT has become a priority among all Learning City Network members and Pathfinder projects. The particular interest of the Government in ICT - which is clearly reflected in funding regimes, the priorities of regeneration bodies and indeed throughout the public sector, has provided an added impetus.

However, the variety and complexity of funding streams and the rapid development of ICT equipment makes the task of creating and developing an ICT infrastructure difficult. People and providers are wary of buying computers that can date so quickly. Technical hype can promise more (and more quickly) than it is possible to deliver. The result is that key people

such as head teachers become frustrated at the slow pace and the problems of sustaining PCs etc. We have all learned that we need to invest properly and not go for cheap, quick fix solutions.

ICT is not a quick solution or panacea. It can bring as many problems as solutions. It cannot be simply imposed. Communities need to feel some ownership so that the ICT infrastructure is developed both from the bottom-up as well as the top-down.

At the individual level, there are still many adults (though far fewer children) who do not have regular access to a PC. One of the key barriers cited for non-participation is lack of information. Many people don't know how or where to get 'user-friendly' information. There may also be a reluctance or inability on the part of many non-learners to go to traditional institutions.

An example of good practice from outside the Pathfinder Initiative, which demonstrates the functions outlined in Practice, Progress and Value is BRAIN.

The Brent Resource & Information Network offers a wide range of community information and interaction, covering areas as diverse as education, arts, social services, sports, health and government.

BRAIN was developed by Brent Council in consultation with the community of Brent for community and voluntary groups, and anyone living and working within Brent. BRAIN won the Local Government Association Community website of the year Award in 1999.

Common questions about the potential role and impact of ICT

- Can ICT 'trigger' the interests of those people who are currently not thinking about learning?
- Examples often look good on paper but don't deliver. How do we avoid disappointment?
- We need to establish hard facts rather than hype. How many machines? What are the technical difficulties? How many people use it regularly? Is the technology replicable?
- What role does the internet have to play? Can ICT be a further barrier for those at the margins or beyond learning?
- How can ICT help people in rural communities access learning?
- Personality and perceptions have a great impact on how potential learners make decisions - and with whom.

LESSONS

1 Lessons from evaluating Partnerships

1.1 Complexity of Partnerships

Few communities develop what might be called 'greenfield' partnerships. Most are based on, or have to take account of existing relationships and agendas. It is important therefore that in the early stages, partners have the chance to explore points of difference and to identify areas of work. Where partnerships already exist, it is necessary to discuss 'joined-up' work.

The aim of West Berkshire's Pathfinder project was to develop an electronic community network. This was achieved through a process of planning and review which was a direct result of the increasing activity around new technologies.

1.2 Different types of partnerships

There are many different types of partnerships: strategic, operational and community.

Whilst there are principles common to all types of partnership i.e. building trust, clear understanding of agendas and contributions, actions and protocols may vary, particularly across the different levels of partnership.

Communities are encouraged to map the work of all partnerships, and to tap into local knowledge, innovation and ownership. An accurate understanding of the types of partnership will in itself 'add value'.

West Berkshire

New Technologies and the West Berkshire Learning Partnership is a subgroup of the Learning Partnership. It focuses solely on using technology to increase participation and involve communities in debate. It is clear that, to be successful, technology needs people with the skills and confidence to engage in dialogue and debate through this medium. Key - and still unanswered - is the question of how to expand the numbers of people participating and to deepen the quality of participation.

The subgroup has launched a partnership website (EezEE Web) and takes responsibility for the content and links to other sites for information, advice and guidance about learning and support.

The subgroup have developed an action plan to address a common concern that, because of the limited access of those at most disadvantage, technology can emphasise and contribute to social exclusion.

Due to the vast array of existing ICT models, funded through a diverse array of public and private sector routes, a systematic review of individual projects is made very difficult.

The subgroup has begun to discuss the role of technology in providing information, not purely as a point of access, but also to encourage feedback. It believes however, that ICT is mainly primarily a 'social tool' within community networks.

Sheffield's CITINET believes that the function of the partnership should be 'doing things'. The Steering Group takes a very practical view of strategic issues - for example, provision is being mapped through the development of an online database of learning opportunities. This is of use to learners and referral agencies.

CITINET has succeeded in "maintaining momentum" through its practical approach, and, so far, has avoided falling into the trap of becoming a talking shop. The original plan was that an operational executive would be formed, allowing the Steering Group to take on a more operational role, allowing the Steering Group itself to focus on strategic issues. In fact, this was delayed since it was felt important in the first year to maintain the involvement of all partners by dealing with key issues through the Steering Group. Email list discussions were used as a backup for issues that could not be dealt with in meetings. Operational details were generally dealt with through the formation of ad hoc working groups.

Community organisations and public and private sector partners are able to participate through a forum. This meets three times a year and brings together the whole network to focus on three practical themes - sharing ideas, identifying common problems and working together on common solutions. The forum is also supplemented by discussion via email lists, which are well supported by member organisations.

CITINET tries to ensure 'strategic linkage' with local and national initiatives by putting energy into joint working - for example on Excellence in Cities and Single Regeneration Budget projects.

1.3 Partnership Champions

Successful learning partnerships frequently develop through the efforts of a single individual - a champion - who builds commitment to, and support of, the need for a common vision. This individual is usually well known and respected within the community and already acts as a well known ambassador for the community.

As things develop, it becomes necessary to broaden the membership of the partnership. Strategic partners are needed who can give authority to the partnership and represent the community. The need to ensure wide ownership is especially true, lest a 'leadership gap' develops if, and when, the champion moves on.

CITINET was launched by the three founding partners, Sheffield College, Sheffield City Council and Sheffield TEC. This has been crucial in providing a solid foundation within the city. The engagement of key organisations in other sectors - for example the Engineering Employers Federation, Sheffield Science Parks and Meadowhall Centre has strengthened this foundation. At an early stage, Sheffield First, the overarching body developing economic regeneration strategies for the city, endorsed CITINET, and this has also helped build a launchpad. Momentum has been maintained through a proactive policy of briefing key players in the city and by working on practical issues with new partners. There have been gaps in which certain strategic developments have failed to take account of the existence of CITINET, but this has generally been a temporary situation which has been remedied.

The fact that CITINET has been central to key strategic developments, such as Ufi, has helped consolidate its place in the city's 'strategic landscape'.

In contrast, not all ICT projects develop in this way.

West Berkshire

Generally ICT projects have not been led or initiated by individuals or been very community focused. They have been the result of funding bids by different organisations. One lesson that we have learnt is the need to find new and existing community champions who have a local vision for ICT and to support them via a network.

For example, a local Methodist minister in Hungerford started a Cybercafe in part of his church hall for community use. At first he struggled in isolation, but now has become part of an informal network involving schools, the local library and Newbury College which run courses in basic skills using the computers.

1.4 Communication is critical to successful partnerships

Partnerships - of all types and all levels - rely on effective and diverse methods of communications to sustain and develop their activity.

Effective communication is critical to all players involved in partnership activity: e.g. paid staff, volunteers, Steering Groups, informal/formal networks, public bodies, media and the broader community.

Effective partnerships use a wide range of tools to give, receive and reflect on information and activity.

A key component is a neutral individual or organisation to facilitate communication within partnerships. Sometimes such an 'outsider', can more easily spot tension or difficulty and may be better placed to tackle disagreements between partners.

Swansea

Led initially by the Community Education Service, the community wanted to ensure that disadvantaged groups were able to use and benefit from new technologies.

Specifically, they sought to:

- assess the need for a community learning partnership;
- identify how learning needs would be assessed; and
- establish an infrastructure for the learning community.

Representatives from all ICT projects, and from existing partnerships were invited to development meetings which mapped experiences and activities. A common vision was developed and an existing group - the Professional Support Group (PSG) which formed the basis of the new Community Partnership - agreed to operate under the broad Learning City initiative umbrella.

Those involved attend regular PSG meetings to maintain communications and update each other. Specific, project-related meetings take place with community members, drawing in other community-based partners as needed. Since the Pathfinder project, a collaborative Skillscentre programme has started, which is run by the local school, community organisations such as Communities that Care, and the Learning Partnership. This acts as another driver for this multi-layered partnership.

The partners believe that the foundations of a learning community are in place and that new learners are coming forward to use the Skillscentre and other informal learning opportunities. The increase in numbers of learners is being sustained and there is also evidence of progression.

Practice, Progress and Value has proved useful in addressing many issues around the development of partnerships and joint working.

2 Lessons from evaluating Participation

2.1 Participation is a challenge to *all* partnerships

Learning Communities are committed to sharing understanding and opening dialogue with their community. However, few have achieved this at any level beyond small-scale, in-depth studies into villages or estates. This is because such community consultation work is expensive and time consuming. Getting long-term feedback from local people is a real challenge and has long been a barrier to democratic processes and to true community participation in local decision making.

This drive for democracy and participation within local communities could be significantly improved with an increasing use of ICT.

West Berkshire sees the establishment of a simple but wide spread communications system as the key to achieving this and used part of its Pathfinder project to develop an action plan for 2000 - 2001, unlocking this potential. Such a system would aim to build upon existing community links that have not traditionally depended upon ICT.

2.2 Share examples of participation practice

All initiatives welcome the opportunity to hear about, and learn from, existing practice. It is a valuable learning process and provides ample opportunity for partners to think about replication within their own locality.

There are examples of good local forums, but these generally are not linked into a strategic partnership.

Citinet

The purpose of the CITINET forum is to act as a bridge between 'on the ground' issues facing learning centres and the organisations running them, and the strategic issues such as resource planning, funding and links with wider developments. It also tries to tackle the fundamental questions - for example, there was a recent discussion about "what's in this partnership for you". This aimed to draw out a debate about the benefits, but also the tensions involved in collaboration.

The format adopted for forum meetings, which combines an input from a speaker on a general issue with practical discussion around key issues, is another example of the attempt to bridge 'operational' and 'strategic' issues.

The issues that are raised in the forum are fed into the Steering Group, the members of which make a real attempt to respond to the questions that the forum raises.

2.3 Build on existing good relationships within partnerships

Human capacity, trust and understanding take a substantial time to build within partnerships and are key to their success.

It is important to acknowledge the success of existing partners or sectors, and openly to consider how to harness this expertise and trust in partnership activity.

New partnerships may not always be needed. An existing partnership may perhaps consider broadening its scope and altering its structure to take on changing local context or external challenges.

West Berkshire

As a result of the Pathfinder project, the potential of ICT for encouraging feedback - as well as disseminating information - has become a focus for West Berkshire.

One aim of public access to ICT is to help people see the potential of new technologies for themselves. It is to improve the quality of their participation in their various communities, both socially and economically - not just a matter of getting maximum numbers on ICT courses. This is an important aim for all regeneration projects and for Learning Cities

3 Lessons on evaluating Performance

3.1 When does evaluation commence?

Many projects do not feel they are in a position to begin to evaluate their work - even at board level. They acknowledge the importance of evaluation but it is not a priority. Evaluation tends to happen only by external forces i.e. funding regimes, governmental or legal requirements.

3.2 Use a range of evaluation methodologies

Almost all activity undertaken within a learning community will have its own performance measures and outputs. These are determined by a combination of the funding body and the partners.

Projects should have the flexibility to develop their own indicators, as well as using nationally or sectoral approved data.

Across West Berkshire there are many projects all with different methods of evaluation. Getting overall consensus even in the Learning Partnership is difficult. However, the methods of evaluation tend to reflect three different elements:

1. some measure of quality assurance - i.e. a basic level of availability to the public, minimum numbers of working PCs with Internet access (Sheffield's Citinet has been a useful example in categorising what each type of centre should provide)
2. numbers of people using the equipment -sometimes this is refined into target categories depending on the type of initial funding the project has. In rural areas or in schools with limited daytime use, these can be small numbers with only 4 or 5 people at each session; and
3. that they facilitate progression either by leading to a formal qualification or by preparing people to go on to further courses.

West Berkshire would like to move towards a quality mark, given the development of Ufi facilities, which will probably be very significant in evaluating local ICT centres. There may be problems if the Partnership has to pass a negative judgement on something 'owned' by one of its partners. However, being able to be honest and to survive criticism is seen as a mark of progress.

3.3 How to assess Performance

There is limited information on performance or participation within a Learning Community. This is a reflection of organisations and society as a whole, which as yet are not dealing with the diversity and challenges posed by true participation and democracy to current policies and to patterns of social activity and work.

Citinet:

Sheffield's Network of Private/Public and Community based Learning Centres used the LCN Practice, Progress and Value Guide in its application for external funding.

Citinet aims to extend access within the community and to co-ordinate learning centre activity.

The process of evaluation used a range of evaluation tools - Practice, Progress and Value, the Citinet Prospectus and questionnaires.

All aspects of the Guide were reviewed. The strongest results were recorded against the partnership criteria: protocols, representation on boards, benchmarking with peers (both strategic partners - TEC, College, Council and community, private and public sector partners) and applying the 'value added chain'.

Practical Tips in Information and Communications Technology

Emerging issues:

- Make sure there is community ownership - respect, participation, influence.
- Ensure that partners share an overview.
- Facilitate an appreciation of pressures and restrictions on all partners.
- Try to create 'real partnerships', a win-win for all partners
- Try to ensure that you are able to demonstrate cost effectiveness.

- Have a contingency for staffing - the loss of a key worker is often detrimental to the timing and momentum of activity.
- Paper based information should be reproduced in ethnic languages wherever relevant and feasible.
- Information services must be accessible to local people. They need to be easy to use, be provided locally, and open at convenient times.
- Having support workers or volunteers to help use IT equipment is essential.
- The use of ICT as a communication tool offers real benefits, but addressing access and confidence issues among all partners requires effort and thought.
- Be prepared to provide support to users.
- Is there a strategic group solely focusing on ICT issues?
- Little support at present for entrepreneurs. More is needed if ICT is not just to be a top-down activity.
- All volunteers/support workers will need training -allow time and budget for this.

Potential causes of conflict

- Different performance indicators for different partners.
- Meetings which are not well structured, well attended and have clear action points or outcomes.
- Lack of reliable backup for technical matters.

Comments relevant to all forms of ICT partnership activity

- Allow opportunities to build on existing strengths.
- Support the preparation of joint funding opportunities.
- Anticipate delays and teething problems both with funding and IT equipment.
- Budget for updating equipment.
- A maintenance contract is essential - but costs. Ensure to budget for this service.
- Be sensitive to training needs for any staff - use the most appropriate form of training.
- Market the service coherently, continuously and to the range of target audiences?

Learning Towns and Cities

Pathfinder Project Report

Sheffield - Citinet Project

Objectives

The development and extension of an electronic network of private sector, public sector and community based learning. The project expressed an interest in all strands of the toolkit in its application for funding.

The project is built around a partnership, which is to include all the organisations, large and small that are involved with the running of the Learning Centres in Sheffield. The idea of the project is to extend access and co-ordinate learning centre activity. The Citinet project itself was not a Pathfinder activity, but the Pathfinder project was one of the tools, which Sheffield used in its evaluation of the development of the Citinet network.

Cinetet has initiated a dynamic structure offering a hierarchy of learning centres, ranging from an information point to learning centres, which have a range of student support services. All centres have to comply with a required standard. The evaluation carried out was partly looking at progress to date with initiatives and partly looking at the challenges that were likely as a result of Ufi developments. The Sheffield evaluation had a number of strands itself, using the Guide 'Practice, Progress and Value', the initial Citinet prospectus and response to evaluation questionnaires sent to the Citinet Steering Group as tools in the evaluation.

Outcomes

The Guide was found to be a useful way of checking on the setting up of Citinet, its performance, progress and effectiveness. It was also found useful to see what had been achieved elsewhere and how value-added might be dealt with.

Using the partnership strand, it was clear certain desirable characteristics were present in the initiative. An agreement had been delivered and a number of key participants were involved, although it was felt that Trade Unions, Commerce and Industry and the Public Sector employers might need to be included. They were absent from the current Citinet partnership. There was an understanding that the participation strand was not well developed in the Citinet project and the performance strand in particular was not begun in the current initiative.

As a part of this three-stage initiative, it would seem from the Project report that the Guide was useful, including the recommendations of the consultant used through the Pathfinder funding. These were fed into the evaluation process and many of them have been taken on by the project.

Learning Towns and Cities

Pathfinder Project Report

Swansea

Objectives

To develop ways to ensure that communities in disadvantaged areas were able to use and benefit from the use of new learning technologies. The Guide was to be used in the establishment of the community partnership that would take forward proposals.

The key questions that the project set out to address were:

- will an informal community partnership sustain the development of a strategy for the use of ICT in community learning initiatives?
- how do we measure the effectiveness of community partnerships in regeneration?
- what is the potential to develop a Community Foundation model to underpin the partnership?

The themes to be addressed were:

- the desirability of a community learning partnership;
- how the learning needs of a community might be assessed; and
- the establishment and the responsiveness of the infrastructure of a learning community.

These themes were to be explored with a group of projects being set up under different initiatives in one area of Swansea. A number of the projects related to IT based learning initiatives.

Outcomes

Meetings of the projects facilitated by the Community Education Service were held in the Spring and a further workshop event in July established some key characteristics for a community based network that would act as a central focus for learning city developments in the particular area targeted. It was felt that the overall mission and strategy of the learning city initiative could be seen as an enabling framework within which each of the individual projects could make a useful contribution.

The activities of the project have very much been about the setting up of a partnership. The Community Education Service has taken the lead but others are active partnership members. An existing Professional Support Group in the target area will form the foundation for the partnership. The result of the July meeting was a shared understanding of the kind of partnership that would be effective and the characteristics of a partnership that would work for those involved.

The meeting in July also raised concerns about the structures inherent in the learning city initiative from both inside and outside the local authority. Within the authority there was a feeling that the Education Department dominated the initiative and outside there were issues about inclusiveness and representation. The interest in the initiative demonstrated is a positive sign and there are plans to address these concerns.

The Guide has been used in Swansea as a framework for setting up partnerships and provided useful ideas for dealing with the key issues involved. However there was a feeling that the Guide would have been more useful if it had been more concrete in guiding users through a series of questions. There was a need to develop local checklists, guides and tools that were appropriate for "field level" potential partners.

The project felt that the Pathfinder project had enabled progress to be made on a key area in learning city development. There had been clear gains in terms of partnership and commitment to joint working. The issue of assessment of community learning needs had not been addressed through the project as anticipated at the beginning, but the establishment of shared criteria for a community partnership and a commitment to such a partnership represented a significant move forward within the learning city initiative.

Learning Towns and Cities

Pathfinder Project Report

West Berkshire

Objectives

To facilitate the development of an electronic community network through a process of planning and review.

This was a direct response to the number of initiatives and actions that have involved the growth in new technologies in West Berkshire. The Project has attempted to take a strategic and reflective approach to co-ordinating these developments to ensure the maximum benefit for local people. The community network was to be guided by the principles of partnership, participation and performance.

Outcomes

The initial partnership involved in this project was the West Berkshire Targets Taskforce Partnership but in the final report it is clear that this group has been succeeded by the Learning partnership for West Berkshire. The Pathfinder Project has become part of the brief of this new partnership. The network is not yet a reality but the project has allowed planning which should make it real in this year. The project has been crucial in the development of the network and particularly in establishing the pace at which such development might take place.

The project did not focus on one specific strand of the Guide, feeling that improvement was more likely from tackling the interconnectivity of all three strands. At the heart of this thinking is the need to change and challenge partnerships with new and different members while at the same time building an atmosphere of trust and understanding. This is seen as a key need if Learning partnerships are to be successful.

The partnership involved with the project has progressed to a position that demonstrates a development of shared understanding. Changes in local partnership arrangements during the year have made progress slower than had been hoped and the period for reflection on roles and priorities hoped for has not been possible.

This project is unusual in having chosen to focus some of its activity on the participation strand of the Guide. It was made clear in the Guide itself that although many learning community initiatives were committed to working with local communities the examples of building shared understanding and a dialogue with communities were rare. Most examples in the Guide are drawn from experience outside learning community initiatives. For West Berkshire the changes necessary to approach such a dialogue would involve fundamental change although local individual examples of community consultation were prevalent. ICT is seen as an essential in setting up such communication.

The project was interested in the performance strand but was not able to deal with it within the time available.

As the project focused on ICT the key area of interest was participation and how ICT might be used to both widen participation in learning and also in active citizenship. Initial discussion was felt to be too academic and intangible to be of use and was replaced by a more practical project involving school sixth former video-conferencing with local councillors as part of a series of events for Local Democracy Week.

This project believes that its activities over the past year have resulted in substantial learning in relation to the development of ICT in local areas, which are likely to be of use to other Learning partnerships. The main recommendations are as follows:

- learning partnerships should have a sub-group that solely concentrates upon the new technologies to co-ordinate all the national ICT initiatives;
- there is a need to build an area strategy supported by the community that integrates and/or relates the welter of initiatives and national objectives engaging communities in the process of building a sense of ownership of public access ICT;
- some basic performance indicators that go beyond simple user numbers should be used to ensure that quality/best value/value added is provided from ICT infrastructure; and
- attention needs to be given to the need to invest in technical support, to ensure that systems placed in community venues and schools can achieve compatibility and to advances in digital television which could fundamentally change the availability of access to ICT.

The result of the project for the West Berkshire partnership was a chance to reflect on progress as a partnership with new technologies - an area seen as dominated by actions but enlightened by little proper research and reflection. The action plan developed from the project involves dealing with the development of the South East Grid for Learning, developing performance indicators, identifying progression routes from informal tasters to course provision and following up issues of democratic participation. It also includes more time, hopefully with consultants, for research and reflection.