

The Provision of Public Internet Access Points by Community Centres

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Summary

This paper explores the relationships between state and community with respect to public internet access points (PIAPs) in community centres in the UK. Such provision in community centres or village halls is particularly apposite to rural areas where few other local public facilities exist. The main argument is that while there is a government policy and associated initiatives, community centres are appropriating the support government provides for internet access into their own organisations, and acting independently to shape the provision of ICTs at the local level.

Introduction

In parallel with much of the developed world, the last twenty years has seen the UK moving increasingly from state provision to a diversity of providers, including the community and voluntary sector (CVS). The role of this sector in delivering services was given further prominence by the 'Third Way' approach of the new government from 1997, and the associated policy documents which proposed a self-help approach, and ways of empowering communities (HM Treasury, 2002; Home Office, 1999; Home Office, 2003). Compared with many other developed countries, the UK still has a strong central state, and a local state that, although democratically independent, is in most cases quite heavily controlled by the centre in practice. However, for the purposes of this paper, it is the central state's relationship to the CVS that is the focus.

The need for developing different means of delivering services is particularly acute in rural areas; the provision of some services to remoter areas has always been problematic, and has declined over a number of decades (Countryside Agency, 2004). The "higher levels of self-help/community delivery of services required/expected — for historic reasons and in order to make services viable" — is cited as one of four reasons why rural areas should be treated differently with respect to community capacity building (DEFRA, 2003, p4).

The UK government, along with many others, is committed to providing access to the internet to everyone who wants it, and as part of this policy aims to ensure that Public Internet Access Points (PIAPs) are provided at the local level. The notion is to base these in existing institutions: "community centres, libraries, shops and many other places where the people who need to use them can easily access them" (Office of the e-Envoy, 2002, p80).

For rural areas, where decline in key service outlets is notable (Countryside Agency, 2004, p67), the option of basing a PIAP locally in a public or private sector facility is not often available. This means that in rural areas the 'community centre' is central to the development of local PIAPs. The term 'community centre' is used here in a generic way to refer to a group of local institutions with a number of common features, in rural areas typically bearing such names as village hall, community centre, or parish rooms:

- charitable in status and independently run by local people;
- serving the community in which they are situated, and are not exclusive in terms of social groups;
- providing a building for public use;
- hosting a range of activities

The following commentary on the provision made by community centres is based on interviews with eight centres in a rural area in NE England that suffers from industrial as well as agricultural decline. One of these centres, referred to as Centre A, has been the subject of intensive research to tease out, additionally, meanings and lines of argument that explain the provision. This is part of an on-going research project that will develop a number of these centres into detailed case studies.

UK 'Digital Divide' Policy

UK government policy addressing the lack of ICT access that was afforded to some social groups took a significant step forward at the end of the last millennium:

- In 1999 the Office of the E-Envoy was set up with a remit to maximise the opportunities which new technologies open up for every individual and business in the UK (Office of the e-Envoy, 2003, p4). Of particular interest for this study, it has the role of co-ordinating work across government in the promotion of internet access, and to meet the Prime Minister's target of internet access for all who want it by 2005 (p5)
- The DTI developed a report 'Closing the Digital Divide' (DTI, 2000) which included recommendations that by April 2002 each deprived neighbourhood should have at least one publicly accessible community-based facility to complement any home access which is available (p61)
- The Government Department with responsibility for education (DfES) launched the UK Online Centre initiative in 2000, which partly rebranded ICT Learning Centres and included not only the centres provided in libraries (the People's Network) but also funding for about 3,000 local centres to act as public internet access points (PIAPs) (Wyatt, et al., 2003, p11). Funding was available to organisations from all sectors.
- The publication of the policy document 'Modernising Government' (Cabinet Office, 1999) included a commitment to using new technology to meet the needs of citizens and businesses. Although this policy document concentrates on what government will deliver electronically, the move towards e-government has become another impetus towards initiatives to ensure that access to ICT at the local level is available to all who want it.
- The 'Skills Strategy White Paper' (DfES, 2003) states that "we shall offer basic ICT skills as a third area of adult basic skills alongside literacy and numeracy within our *Skills for Life* programme." (p62), with delivery being via public internet access points (PIAPs)

The government's key concern is with the 'digital divide': the divide between the people who are the 'haves' and the 'have nots' of access to the internet, and the recognition that take up by certain social groups — "those on low incomes, the elderly and people with disabilities" (Office of the e-Envoy, 2002, p76) — is low. There is also a particular concern for those living in 'deprived areas'.

The government aims to encourage internet access through addressing motivational barriers, promoting affordable access and investing in a network of Public Internet Access Points (PIAPs), by improving ICT skills, and building trust in the internet (Office of the e-Envoy, 2002). In 2003, it shifted from this 'access' focus to address as well the benefits afforded by 'effective use' (Gurstein, 2003) of the internet "such as e-learning and transactional activities like buying, banking and accessing government services" (Office of the e-Envoy, 2003, p11).

PIAPs are seen as a delivery arm for the hands-on activities that the government wishes to promote, not simply as the providers of the technology. This would include developing ICT skills at both the basic and more advanced level — "DfES' aim is to enable all adults to have the ICT skills they need to learn effectively online, become active citizens in the information age and ... contribute productively to the economy" (Office of the e-Envoy, 2003, p11). In terms of the effective uses that should be supported by PIAPs, the government emphasises the provision of e-learning and supporting e-government services (Office of the e-Envoy, 2003, p12).

The government's rationale for investing to overcome the 'digital divide', in parallel with EU policy, is twofold: "for society, our goal has been to ensure that the benefits of Information Communication Technology (ICT) are spread equitably and fairly. For our economy, the challenge has been to use ICT to increase the productivity and competitiveness of UK business and to maintain macroeconomic stability." (Office of the e-Envoy, 2003, p3): both a social inclusion argument and an economic argument.

There is one government initiative that is dedicated to the development of local PIAPs: UK Online Centres. Through an investment of over £400 million, this initiative created a network of 6000 centres (Office of the e-Envoy, 2003). About a half of these were existing PIAPs that were 'branded' as UK Online Centres; about 3000 existing organisations received capital funding to incorporate a PIAP (Wyatt et al., 2003, p11); a small number of these also received some revenue funding. The government's fact sheet on UK Online Centres explains that a range of ICT skills courses are available to all users, and that the centres also give users the opportunity to progress to further learning opportunities through e-learning (Help is at Hand, 2004). Its criteria for UK Online Centres stresses the link to the e-government agenda (DfES, Accessed 10.3.2004). In their study, Wyatt et al estimated that about 45% of the funded centres were in the Community and Voluntary

Sector, but obviously only some of these would be located in the community centres which are the focus of this paper.

The government’s rural policies cross-reference to these policies and initiatives on the local provision of PIAPs. The most recent Rural White Paper (DETR and MAFF, 2000) was followed up with the Rural Service Standard (DEFRA, 2002), which made a number of references to the provision of PIAPs. These would be housed in schools and libraries (p5); local authority kiosks would provide access to e-government services (p6); and one of the target locations for UK Online Centres would be rural areas with significant transport deprivation.

Policy Goals, Local Provision

Meeting the government’s activity goals

The government sees PIAPs as local outlets that will help with the development of people’s basic and more advanced ICT skills, and support and encourage e-learning and active citizenship through e-government. The following table provides a synopsis of whether or not each of the 8 centres is providing services related to these priorities.

	Government priority activities		
	ICT skills development	E-learning	E-government
Centre A	✓	(✓)	(✓)
Centre B	✓	(✓)	
Centre C	✓		
Centre D	✓		(✓)
Centre E	✓		
Centre F	✓		(✓)
Centre G	✓		
Centre H	✓		

- The development of ICT skills

	No. of computers	Structured skills development				Unstructured skills development	
		ICT basic skills classes	ICT basic skills one to one tuition	ICT advanced classes	ICT classes leading to recognised qualification	Supported drop in	Unsupported drop in
Centre A	10 (+3)	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Centre B	12	✓		✓	(✓)		✓
Centre C	2 (+1 laptop)		✓			✓	
Centre D	2		✓			✓	✓
Centre E	2 (+1 laptop)		✓			✓	✓
Centre F	7	✓	✓			✓	✓
Centre G	9 (+4)	✓		✓		✓	
Centre H	9	✓				✓	✓

Developing the basic ICT skills of adults in a structured way is central to the computing activities of all the centres. The centres with six or more computers all aimed to provide regular classes; those with fewer computers ran one-to-one tuition sessions, and Centre F ran both, when it could get the local college to provide class tutors.

Basic skills classes were provided regularly by five of the centres; more advanced classes — working through a wide range of packages, with around 100 hours of contact time — were less prevalent, running only in Centres A, B and G. The advanced course at Centre A was leading to the well-recognised European Computer Driving Licence qualification; the training provider at Centre B had an in-house qualification that the students were awarded; the course at Centre G did not lead to a qualification.

Advanced classes, though, were not the only way that people could be helped to move beyond basic skills level. Seven of the eight centres provided supported drop-in sessions for their residents. In these, people would attend to use the computers for a purpose — to send an email, to produce financial accounts, to write a letter, or find information, for example — but technical help would be available if required. These were different from the one-to-one tuition sessions in that their primary intention was to make effective use of the computers rather than acquire ICT skills, and the support

required was normally intermittent and much less intensive. In the cases where the centre employed a manager (A and H), this was run on a drop-in basis, with the managers providing ad hoc help alongside their other duties; where the support was provided by volunteers, this was either alongside the one-to-one sessions scheduled into the community centre timetables, or by arrangement with the volunteer concerned.

Six of the centres also provided unsupported drop-in sessions for people who were confident enough to use the computers without help. This did not necessarily mean they were unsupervised; in Centres E and F, users were allowed access only at times when the volunteers were running their scheduled sessions, and hence their usage could be controlled quite closely. Nor was the type of access unchecked in the other centres: filters were installed on machines so that unsuitable internet sites were inaccessible, Centre B limited this use to educational purposes, and Centre E 'discouraged' game playing.

- *E-learning*

The government's agenda for e-learning focuses on providing courses at a distance, via electronic means. These might be ICT skills development courses, but ICT are also seen as an important means of accessing other educational courses (DfES, 2003). In particular, it promotes the publicly funded Learndirect programme of courses, and a network of centres where access is provided to those who cannot learn electronically from work or home.

None of the centres reported any use of the internet for distance learning courses from their centres. Two centres had been asked to become Learndirect centres by the local college, and had promoted this e-learning. However, in the event there was no take up.

Some centres were using their computers to support educational purposes in a structured way, such as through homework clubs, or leisure interest classes and groups, but the government's definition of e-learning is far narrower than this, referring only to distance learning that is delivered electronically.

- *E-government*

The e-government agenda is intent on providing public services electronically, and in using technology to enable more active citizenship and participation (Office of the e-Envoy, 2003). This could be through a range of technologies but the most appropriate means in terms of what PIAPs provide is via computer internet access. This was not an important part of the use in any of the centres but some of the activities, discussed below, had a connection to this agenda.

Community Information Points (CIPs), which was an initiative with links to the e-government agenda was underway in three of the centres (A, D, and F). This was a local government scheme, made possible by UK regeneration funding that: provided computing equipment and a broadband internet connection to the designated centre; supported more traditional information-giving about services (leaflets, talks etc); and supplied a peripatetic member of support staff, covering all 17 CIPs in the scheme. All three centres already had computing facilities that they made available to the public for informal use with some level of support, so this scheme was supplementary to this. The CIP support officer visited each centre once a fortnight, and was prepared to help users with whatever they wanted to do — often accessing games, or pursuing their leisure interests — rather than steering activities towards government services or e-democracy sites. This project added extra support personnel in the community centres while the funding lasted and attracted a few new users but did not introduce activities that were significantly different from the informal activities already provided in these, or the other, centres: people who came for the established informal drop-in sessions always had a purpose for their visit, a few of which, like job searches, did have e-government focus.

Videoconferencing facilities were also available from each of these CIPs, and a number of demonstration sessions were organised in each centre. In Centre A, residents were invited to the community centre to talk to a Council Officer, via the CIP, about housing, council tax, or benefits. Despite being well-advertised, no one attended any of the sessions. The interviewees in Centres D and F did not know about attendance at these demonstrations which suggested that these, too, had not been noteworthy in addressing e-government through a different medium.

Other local provision

Most of the centres also provided, in addition to the drop-in sessions, a number of activities that were not made explicit in government policy and where people used the computing facilities for a whole range of purposes:

	No. of computers	Supporting leisure Interests	Supporting general teaching	Provision for children	Staffed services	Supporting outside use
Centre A	10 (+3)	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Centre B	12					
Centre C	2 (+1 laptop)	✓				✓
Centre D	2	✓	✓	✓		

Centre E	2 (+1 laptop)				✓	✓
Centre F	7					
Centre G	9 (+4)	✓				✓
Centre H	9			✓		

- *Supporting leisure interests*

Two of the centres (A and G) run courses where people's recreational interests are developed through, or with the help of, computers. Both centres run courses on digital photography which develop people's skills in taking photographs, and in manipulating the images electronically to obtain the best picture. Centre A was also running a course on Tracing Family Trees, where specialist sites on the internet provided important sources of information.

For those centres that supported the development of basic skills via one-to-one tuition sessions, the importance of using examples and exercises that related to the interests of the tutees was often stressed. The voluntary tutor at Centre C would take tutees to his home to get experience of graphics programmes (his specialism) if their interest lay in that direction. Linking teaching to the students' interests was also stressed in the two basic skills classes observed at Centre A; when introducing students to the internet, the tutor found sites that students had expressed interest in for the class to explore — Friends Reunited in one case, and a travel and holiday booking site in the other.

In two centres, the computers were regularly used by community interest groups. At Centre C, the Local History Group owned a scanner and one of the two computers. They used the equipment mainly to scan old photographs and to build an electronic database for their material. Centre D's local history group also use the computers and scanner during their group sessions to build up an electronic archive of material.

- *Providing a resource for teaching*

As well as using computers to support 'interest' classes, a couple of centres (A and D) stressed that the computers were a resource for other classes to use. Sometimes the students in Centre A classes would be asked to use the computers for a session or two in a course, or for part of a session. In the case of Centre D, the basic skills class tutor now adds to the centre provision by bringing laptops to some sessions so that basic IT skills can be added to the curriculum. Centre A also made a computer available to tutors in other parts of the building if they required it, in much the same way that they might provide him/her with a flipchart or video player

- *Provision for children*

This was an important scheduled and supervised provision in Centres A, D and H. The provision varied between centres. All three centres allow the children to play games during some, if not all, of their youth sessions. Centre A had also run a homework club (now moribund) where children were provided with a quiet supervised space, including access to computers for educational purposes.

- *Providing staffed services*

Not all use of the computers by members of the public was hands-on. For example, the manager of Centre A had a scanner installed in his office, alongside the photocopier, and would himself scan documents and photographs for members of the public. Centre E used their computing resources in a more commercial way, charging to provide a local service to other societies, using the computer's capabilities and the IT volunteer's skills to produce high quality promotional materials. In Centre A, the manager would also help a few people make effective use of the internet by finding them information, or carrying out correspondence for them under their supervision.

- *Encouraging use outside the community centre*

There was a number of ways in which community centres were supporting home use of computers. Through the development of ICT skills, centres were indirectly encouraging people to make more use of computers at home. There were also practical support measures in place to facilitate this more directly in a number of centres. The IT volunteer at Centre E provided a technical advice service to members of the public who had home computers, on the whole to people who had attended the skills training sessions in the past. Centre G ran computer maintenance classes for its members so that home users could be confident about dealing with day to day problems, and knowing when to call in an expert. Centre C did not have broadband access, but as part of the one-to-one tuition, the tutor would take people to the nearest library and demonstrate use there. This familiarised users with the library's resource, where they would be provided with better access for making effective use of the internet.

Meeting the government's client goals

The government prioritises provision for those on low incomes, the elderly and people with disabilities. There was no evidence that any of the centres were striving to reach these particular groups, at the expense of others. As the activities above demonstrate, some make provision specifically for children, which is not part of the government's targeted client groups. The only

centre that monitored use by social groups was the UK Online centre (H). They explained that, by luck rather than management, they were doing well in meeting the government's 'elderly' target – their catchment happens to have a high proportion of elderly residents. In the same way, the location of some centres (A and G) was in areas with high levels of deprivation, meaning that those on low incomes were provided with the opportunity of ICT access, although actual usage by this group was not monitored. Centres C and E felt that they were providing for something of a 'niche market': those who wanted local supported, informal provision rather than the more formal classes laid on by traditional providers.

Summary

The community centres are reflecting some of the government's agenda (ICT skills development) in their action on the ground, albeit through a range of means. However, there are other parts of the government's agenda that hardly feature in the provision made in the community centres, and activities are provided that are in addition to the government's purposes.

State Influence

In order to see its ICT policy in PIAPs implemented, the state needs to enrol the community centres to its agenda — these are not state structures set up for this purpose. One means of doing this might be through grant funding to the community centre; another by involving the centres in other schemes to support the local delivery of ICT services; or by less direct or less tangible means of exerting influence.

Funding

Only one of the eight centres was supported by the UK Online initiative (Centre H), and this centre only received capital funding for equipment and their telecoms connection. This is broadly representative of the area as a whole in which 23 community centres with computers were identified (there are no definitive lists), of which only two had UK Online status. All centres had received some funding for equipment and/or telecommunications from public bodies, but this was linked to much broader initiatives — for rural development, for area regeneration — or to the local tier of government.

Perhaps in line with the capital nature of the funding, seven of the centres (including the UK online centre) perceived government 'digital divide' policy to exert little or no influence over how they used their publicly funded computers — they viewed the funding to be primarily for equipment. The only centre which understood the public sector support to be accompanied by direction on use was Centre G. This centre had been supplied with computers by local government on the

understanding that the government department would use these for its own staff training, leaving them available for community centre use at other times. However, these computers were restricted to educational purposes.

Monitoring requirements were not onerous. It was often simply to report that they had acquired and installed computers. Some funders were interested in use, requiring usage figures; the UK Online centre had to provide a breakdown of users by socio-economic group. No centre had been asked to monitor what the computers were used for, and none had received feedback or sanctions associated with their monitoring data.

Support schemes

Centres might also have been influenced by government schemes that provided broad support, without direct funding, to their activities. They could have applied to be a 'branded' UK online centre — only about half of UK Online centres received capital funding (Wyatt, et al., 2003) — and taken advantage of the support offered such as online advice, guidance and resources (Help is at Hand). This offer of support, which would have put government in a position to influence their activities, was not taken up by any of the centres.

The government's Learndirect scheme is another way in which it enrolls local centres in implementing its policy. Two centres had taken on Learndirect centre status but had not been successful in getting students. The Centre A manager explained that the failure was not simply because of a lack of demand, and went on to talk about the difficulties the community centre experienced in helping people make informed choices when the options were so wide, and they themselves had little knowledge of course contents. They also anticipated that the levels of supervision and monitoring demanded of them would be problematic when they could not dedicate staff to the e-learning activity. They felt that the scheme was designed to be provided from much larger centres, such as colleges, and that it would be very difficult to run it from a community centre in its present form. The design of the scheme meant that the state was unable to influence community centres in this way to deliver its e-learning agenda.

Communicating the government agenda

The government's agenda was not directly communicated to individual community centres. The manager at Centre A gave a broad definition of the government's 'digital divide' agenda, but it turned out that he had learned this from the TV rather than from any more direct communication. The government's e-language was at odds with the language used by all interviewees, and their definitions of what a category might describe also differed. To the community centres, a child researching a topic over the internet for their homework was as much part of electronic learning as

distance learning courses over the internet (what the government means by e-learning). The government's agenda is also difficult to capture because it changes, particularly over time — acknowledged in the 2003 policy document (Office of the e-Envoy, 2003).

Indirect influence

There was no evidence that the state was exerting direct pressure on the community centres to provide ICT services in a certain way, except in the case of Centre G. However, there were ways in which it was less directly shaping of provision.

An example of this was in the relationship that a number of centres had with local training providers. These are dependent on both core funding from government and winning grants for specific activities, and this did help to shape provision (or non-provision) in centres. Centre F was not running ICT skills classes because the college could not provide a tutor. When training was provided, the providers' agendas played a part in determining what was laid on — the length of courses, the content and so on — which in turn was partly determined by state funding.

The central state also provides core funding and project funding to local government, which in turn was playing a lead role in the development of the broadband telecommunications network available to most, but not all, of the centres. The local government's roll-out was clearly influenced by state area-based funding, leaving a few centres providing internet access via a basic dial-up connection.

State funding was also influential in shaping a number of local area organisations in the study communities. As it was common for staff and volunteers in the community centres also to be key players in other local organisations, it would be difficult for them to be uninfluenced by these agendas, which, in turn, were influenced by the state.

CONTRASTING DISCOURSES

Identifying discourses

It is relatively straightforward to identify the discourses that run through government thinking. By contrast, community centres have a more practical agenda, being much more concerned with making provision than talking or writing about it. Understanding the way they constructed meaning was derived as much from what they did as what they said. Although all centres gave insights into what they considered significant and prioritised, the following section draws heavily on the detailed work undertaken with Centre A.

Overview

The following overview summarises the different meanings and priorities given to various aspects of ICT provision by the government and by the community centres, which contribute to the disparities between government policy and provision on the ground. Each of these is discussed in turn.

	Government	Community Centre
Purpose of the ICT provision	For specific uses	As a resource, a facility
Priority aspect of ICT	The internet	Computers
Constructs of the computer suite	As a PIAP	As part of the community centre facility
ICT for whom	Target social groups	All the local community
Main purpose of education	Employability	For leisure, pleasure and 'lifeskills'

The purpose of the ICT provision

The government's ICT policy comes imbued with purpose and specifies the services that it would like to see on offer: local public centres are needed to develop ICT skills, to provide e-learning and access to e-government. The example of Centre A draws out a contrasting discourse. The primary service they were offering was the use of their computing facility. These would be deployed as they, their members and residents required, and they did not have a set agenda for use. Sometimes the computing facility would provide skills development, at other times it was there for fun; now it was a teaching aid; and next it might be used by the manager to provide a resident with information. At certain times they might be actively pursuing one purpose more than another, but in the long run they were agnostic: they had a resource that provided opportunities for their residents, and as long as people made use of the facility they did not mind what form that took. The funding for computing facilities, and the monitoring of spend that was required of them, endorsed the notion of a resource: some funding was simply for capital acquisition; other funders might ask about usage, but only in terms of numbers of users, and not the use to which the technology was put.

Priority aspects of ICT

The access on offer in community centres is to computing facilities, not just to the internet. People drop in to use the computer for numerous reasons, some of which, such as producing well laid out text for a letter or an assignment, do not involve internet use. Likewise the digital photography

course in Centre A hardly needed an internet connection. The Local History groups in Centres C and D were scanning images, and using the computer as a digital archive for their material.

Constructs of the computer suite

Government policy is focused on providing public internet access points (PIAPs) at the local level, which need to be located in existing institutions. The community centres see this from the opposite perspective: they are a community centre that provides, amongst other things, some computers. These resources and the associated activities are woven into the existing institution rather than being treated as a separate entity. Interviewees in Centre A hinted that they thought the notion of researching how community centres accommodated computers was somewhat ill-founded. Their argument was that it was part and parcel of being a community centre, it was all very 'normal' to them, and that an artificial divide was being introduced.

One aspect of this integration is the way the computing facility is incorporated into existing structures. There are no separate accounts, or cost centres, for the computing facilities and activities — they are only accounted for separately with respect to any external funding that may apply. In the case of Centre A, they often had secured external grants or support to develop the computing resources and activities which had not been dedicated solely to ICT. Grants, including a computer and running costs, were secured for the homework club, for the youth club, and so on, with computing expenses being spread among them, reinforcing the integration of ICT into all activities. The 'IT leader' in each centre is, in almost all cases, a central player in the community centre for other reasons. In three, this is the employed manager; in three others, the role is undertaken by a key member, or former member, of the committee; in another, the computer champion is married to the secretary/treasurer and leads the centre's local history group. The computers are used as another means of pursuing the general purposes (providing a facility for educational, recreational and social pursuits with the objective of improving the quality of life of inhabitants) of the centre.

ICT for whom

While the government is concerned to target the elderly, the disabled, and those on low incomes with its 'digital divide' policy, community centres are intent on providing access for all. Their constitutions bind them to making provision for the whole community, and in order to do this, a number of centres are intent on trying to attract under-represented groups. Those which cite the problem of an imbalance are dominated by an elderly clientele. Centre A is not alone in wanting if possible to attract more men, children, and pre-retirement adults, and has noted that the computing facility has played its part in redressing this balance.

The main purpose of education

The government's rationale for supporting skills development has both an economic and social inclusion argument. However, it stresses the relationship between skills and work, and therefore puts emphasis on qualifications and educational progression. By contrast, the community centres' emphasis is on education as an interest, often pursued informally, as part of lifelong learning. The centres stressed the need for ICT skills training to reflect the interests of the students; some courses — digital photography, for instance — taught computer skills, but skills that were unlikely to be of direct use in a work setting; people were encouraged to use the computers to follow up on leisure interests. Little emphasis was placed on courses that led to formal qualifications. Almost all centres took the opportunity in the interview to complain of recent changes in what they viewed as a recurrent government grant for the (educational) provision they made. A new government agency and new rules meant that education was defined as a more formalised, goal-oriented activity than in the past. Many activities that community centres would classify as education — the informal group learning of the local history society, or people dropping in for help in developing their computer skills — did not comply with the government's definition.

Shaping of ICT Provision by the Community Centre

The differences between state policy and provision on the ground can also be explained by the role community centres play in shaping that provision. Rather than being passive implementers of government policy, these organisations are active in shaping what is provided. Arriving at a decision over what activities to provide, and the means of delivery, meant consideration, implicitly or explicitly of a whole range of factors — some internal and some external. One such factor was state policy as translated through funding, but this was considered and prioritised alongside a range of other factors.

Community centre institutionalised priorities

Activities had to be appropriate to the purposes of the community centre, as set out in their constitutions. The formal purposes were open to interpretation, with the various centres prioritising different aspects — some might give more emphasis to education and others to recreation provision, for example, where both were stipulated as formal purposes. The formal objectives were often stated as high level rhetoric, such as to improve the quality of life of the residents. Again, how the centres chose to operationalise these on a more day to day basis influenced how they shaped their activities. Centre A was clear that the best way of assessing their achievements in a tangible way was whether or not they had attracted new people into the centre, while at the same time keeping their existing membership. The way they approached decisions was influenced in all centres by the priority given to financial viability; another priority of all the centres was to bring about change, and clearly the introduction of a computing facility was one way of doing this. For

some, the emphasis was on introducing new activities; for others it was trying to attract groups of people who historically would not have used the centre; another theme was updating the building; some wanted to exploit the building far more efficiently, particularly by hiring it out to obtain an income. But this modernisation could not be at the expense of the traditional members, their activities and ways of working; their interests were also considered, and changes were introduced carefully.

Internal management

Part of the community centre's decision-making process depended on assessments of how to manage the activities. All had to address issues of finance, personnel and facilities, but there were differences in the available resources between the various centres, and the ways they chose to prioritise and deploy them. Financial strategies varied, with some concentrating on cutting costs, some on obtaining external funding, some on raising income through charging for activities, others through increasing room hire to outside organisations and taking in tenants. The levels and types of paid staff in the centres differed, with three having a full time paid manager for the centre, and others relying on volunteers for most of the management functions. Some of the latter group envied those that could afford paid staff, but others appeared wedded to the ethos of mutual aid and voluntarism. All of the volunteers who were used to support the computing facilities and activities were competent, but in addition, some brought specialist skills which their centres were able to capitalise on. Some volunteers were more available than others — some had full time jobs and fitted their voluntary activities around these; others were much more available and were flexible about the times they were on duty. The buildings and the space available varied greatly between centres: from purpose built to refurbished traditional building; from old to new, from large to small, from needing a new roof to structurally sound. The management of space was a core activity for each community centre, which again led to different outcomes. For computer activities the location of the computers — in a dedicated room or in a space shared with other activities, in spacious accommodation or cramped conditions — also influenced how the activities were chosen and shaped. Those with a suite of six or more computers were in a position to run classes; those with less computer tended instead to run one to one tuition sessions. The speed of telecommunications available, the position of connection points in the building, and whether or not the line was shared, were all considerations that affected whether or not a centre deemed an activity to be practicable

Local issues

All centres articulated the needs of their local community, and felt that these should be reflected in their decision-making. Although all eight centres were within an area of 250 square km, they focused on the localised needs of their village or town and differentiated themselves from other

places in the area. Meeting the demand of residents, and assessing latent demand, was a central concern of the centres which might lead to different outcomes in different places. For instance, some assessed that many of their residents would avoid any activity that reminded them of formal education, and would not want to pay for training courses, while others came to different judgements about what would be unattractive to their potential clients. Getting the balance right between providing for needs and responding to demand was a thorny issue, with some centres being more prescriptive about what was provided than others. All recognised that in the final analysis an activity would only be successful if people wanted to attend, but some felt that the initial trigger for setting up something new had to come from the residents. The Centre A manager was insistent about this in terms of running ICT classes: he would only contact the college if someone had come in and asked for the activity.

Relating to external organisations

Community centres also involved external organisations in the shaping of provision. All centres agreed that external project funding was essential for the upkeep and renewal of their computing facilities, and the deprived area focus of much of the funding meant that these opportunities were not evenly spread. Centres in more deprived areas found attracting external funding relatively simple; some centres, though, reported major difficulties in obtaining external funding, and because of the limited nature of their own finances, this might make it difficult to go ahead with a project, or might delay it until funding became available. Activities that did not need external funding might be prioritised over those that did. Funding and support came with requirements from funders, and the impact of these had to be considered in terms of the bureaucratic load, and the extent they might divert the community centre from what it wanted to do. Some activities meant an external organisation coming into the building to provide classes, the Youth Club, etc. Some centres had a regular relationship with the external provider, and seemed to have little difficulty securing an activity when they wanted it; others reported difficulties — for example, the fact that the college had not been able to provide Centre F with a computer course tutor for the past year was an important factor in shaping what was (and was not) on offer. When an external provider's staff are the main contact point with the users, then their interests help shape the local provision. In some areas there is active co-ordination of community activities, in particular via Area Partnerships. Some community centres, their staff and volunteers, are intimately involved with these organisations; some have a more formal relationship; in some areas the co-ordination is so new or weak as to be of little interest to the community centre. The coming together of community organisations can influence activity in a number of ways: broadening the way the centre perceives its purposes, demonstrating what is being done elsewhere, helping with local prioritisations, flagging where a proposed activity might be duplicating provision by other local organisations, etc. Some community centres also have stronger links than others to a whole range of advice and support organisations, and where used, their help can also influence what provision is made on the ground.

Conclusion

While there is a state policy that sets out what the government sees as the priority services that should be provided in PIAPs, there is not a direct relationship between this, and what is provided at the local level. This is in part due to the weak influence that the state brings to bear on the local PIAPs, in part to the differences in discourse at the state and community centre level, and also to the range of factors that cause each community centre to shape provision as it does.

This should not, however, be perceived as failure. What is clear is that there is willingness on the part of community centres to make computing facilities available, to make provision for the development of ICT skills, and through a range of means and activities to encourage the effective use of computers. This is being developed, though, in a very individualistic way. Each centre is taking ownership of the resources in its possession, and using them to fulfil their own purposes. This could be argued to be a mature approach to the utilisation of ICTs, and one that might be more sustainable in the long run than the centre which has painstakingly implemented government policy, divorced from the real purposes of their organisation, only to find that further funding is not forthcoming.

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