Llywodraeth Cynulliad Cymru
Welsh Assembly Government

EVALUATION OF THE COMMUNITIES@ONE PROGRAMME

FIRST ANNUAL REPORT

July 2007

CONTENTS

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Purpose of the Report

Old Bell 3 Ltd. was awarded the contract to undertake a long-term Evaluation of the Communities@One Programme in June 2006, with the Inception meeting being held on 23 August 2006. The evaluation was commissioned early in the life of the Communities@One Programme, with the aim both of informing – and thus improving – the delivery of the Programme and of gauging the impact of what is a new approach to addressing what is also a relatively new issue – "digital inclusion".

The evaluation has four purposes:

i. To set up a clear monitoring and evaluation framework for the initiative, setting out arrangements at the local and national levels that can be used throughout the initiative to provide feedback, and to inform the final assessment of the impact of Communities@One (see iv).

ii. To provide a baseline position of the areas to be addressed by the initiative, assessing the ICT facilities already in place, the current levels and characteristics of ICT access and usage, and the levels of ICT awareness and skills.

iii. To analyse the relationships between community brokers, the central team, the Assembly Government, the Wales Co-operative Centre, community organisations and partnerships, and any other relevant parties, and to advise on maximising their effectiveness.

iv. At the end of the programme, to assess the extent to which Communities@One has been successful in meeting its stated aim.

In our first report in December 2006, we set out a monitoring and evaluation framework, provided an overview of the baseline (insofar as this was possible, given that the Programme began to be delivered at the start of 2006, while the study only commenced in September 2006) and provided an initial formative evaluation, particularly in respect of the activities and processes of the Programme. In that report we made a number of recommendations about the future implementation of the Programme.

In this report, which is based on fieldwork undertaken in May and June 2007, we provide an update on our Baseline report as well as providing a view of the emerging effects and impacts of the Programme.

1.2 The Communities@One Programme

In our Baseline report we set out the background to the Programme, its aims and objectives and the broader context of digital inclusion policy elsewhere in the UK. The relevant Chapter is reproduced at Annex 1 for those who are not familiar with the Programme.

1.3 Method

The work underpinning this report has – broadly in line with the Work Programme agreed at the Inception Stage for Stage 5 of the evaluation[1] – involved the following elements:

- Desk-based analysis of internal Programme papers including papers prepared for the Advisory Group, financial data and the Monitoring Framework;
- Facilitating a discussion on progress since the Baseline report with Communities@One staff in the context of a staff meeting on 14 May and separate informal interviews with the Project Manager and with the newly-appointed Monitoring Officer;
- Re-contacting and securing (via e-mail or through telephone interviews) the current perspective of a further eight key "central stakeholders", including Wales Co-operative Centre staff and Welsh Assembly Government and other members of the Programme's Advisory Group/Grants Panel;
- Undertaking additional fieldwork relating to the 12 case-study areas/projects[2] and updating the baseline case-study reports on these: this involved:
  - Telephone and/or face-to-face discussions with eleven Community Brokers;
  - Telephone or e-mail contact with ten local stakeholders interviewed during the baseline research (Communities First Co-ordinators and representatives from CVCs and local authorities);
  - Follow-up telephone or face-to-face interviews with a total of 22 managers and staff of Grant Fund projects who had been interviewed as part of the baseline research;
  - Desk-based analysis of six applications relating to the case-study areas which had been approved since December 2006; and face-to-face/telephone interviews with three additional project managers/staff[3];
  - Face-to-face interviews or small group discussions with 41 individual "beneficiaries" of 12 Grant Fund projects which are now fully operational[4];
  - Updating the 12 case-study reports.
- In each case, the fieldwork for each of the case-studies was undertaken exclusively by one member of the research team;
- Further contact by e-mail and telephone with five stakeholders across the three control group areas and updating case-study reports on these three areas.

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[1] Stage 5 - First Annual Report

[2] The case studies were selected in agreement with the Steering Group to provide a representative mix of experience of the Programme and included at least one area/project from the areas of responsibility of each of the Brokers.

[3] In two cases, the new project applications were new projects from groups who had already received Communities@One funding and whose staff had been interviewed during the baseline research; in the case of the final project (which had not yet commenced), it proved impossible to interview the project sponsor.

[4] These were not evenly distributed however, with two of the "project-based" case-studies accounting for 17 of the "beneficiaries"

1.4 Structure of the Report

To a very real extent, this report is intended as a "light-touch" update on the substantial Baseline Report prepared in December 2006. For this reason, in Chapter 2, we report on our findings, in each section summarising relevant findings from the Baseline Report and then presenting any additional material which has emerged from the latest round of the research. In Chapter 3, we present our conclusions and recommendations.

2.0 Findings

In this Section we report on the findings from the research undertaken in May – June 2007, drawing on the desk-research, on the case-study reports (for both case-study areas/projects and control group areas) and on discussions with staff and "central stakeholders". We consider in turn the inputs, the Programme processes and the way in which they are operating, the immediate effects (or outputs), both of the Programme's own activity and the projects which have already received funding, the longer-term effects (or outcomes) and the impacts of the Programme.

2.1 Inputs

2.1.1 Inputs at the Central Level

In our Baseline Report we noted that:

- the Programme has been able to draw on a degree of pre-existing expertise and enthusiasm from a range of organisations outside the Welsh Assembly Government, who had been brought into the process of developing thinking about the initiative early on and clearly made a very significant contribution.

- there were some concerns about what was perceived as a lack of engagement from the Department of Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills (DELLS), while at least one key stakeholder was concerned that the lack of a clear social inclusion strategy for Wales meant that the policy context for the Programme was not clear.

- most stakeholders felt that the targeting of the Programme on Communities First areas had either been a positive factor, in that there were established structures for the Programme, and more particularly the Brokers, to relate to and build on or at worst a necessary evil, given the limited resources available to the Programme and the short time-scales with which the Programme was developed.

- the skills and experience of the Wales Co-operative Centre - in particular in project management and, more specifically in managing European-funded projects - were seen to be another important resource behind the Programme and a key to the quick start which the Programme had been able to make.

- the mapping of facilities and capacity across the Communities First areas had, in reality, been "*quick and dirty"*, highlighting some generic lessons but not providing anything like comprehensive spatial mapping.

As might be expected, there has been little change in these underlying factors which may be expected to influence the outcomes and impacts of the Programme.

Central stakeholders generally continued to give a positive view of the Programme and their own commitment to it. Indeed, several stressed that the commitment required, particularly in terms of the work of the Grants Panel, had been far greater than originally expected (not least because of the virement of resources into the Grant Fund which had prolonged the "grant development" phase of the project[5]) and

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[5] For a fuller discussion of this see Section 2.3.1

that the willingness of the individuals concerned (and their employers) to undertake this was a key factor in enabling the Programme to succeed.

In terms of the Welsh Assembly Government, efforts have been made by the central team to develop closer links with both DELLS (now the Department of Education, Culture and the Welsh Language - DECWL) and with the Museums and Libraries Service. DECWL has nominated new members of the Advisory Panel (from the Community Learning rather than the E-learning Team), although a number of central stakeholders continue to believe that

"the problem lies much higher up"

in the sense that community learning itself is perceived as commanding a low priority in the Department's thinking.

A number of stakeholders voiced concerns that Ministerial changes and continued uncertainty following the National Assembly elections in May, combined with staff changes within the Social Justice and Regeneration Department might result in a loss of senior-level engagement with the Programme. At the same time, stakeholders confirmed that a successor Programme was now under very active consideration.

In terms of the relationship with Communities First, while this was not raised explicitly with stakeholders, none of the central stakeholders suggested that the targeting of the Programme on Communities First areas was causing problems, although several suggested that there needed to be some relaxation in this exclusive focus for any future Programme.

2.1.2 Inputs at the Local Level

In our Baseline Report we noted that:

- one of the key, if not the key, contextual issues shaping the work of Communities@One in the field was the way in which Communities First was working (or not) in the case-study areas. In four of the ten areas[6], the Communities First process and structures were highly problematic and divisive; in three, there were less serious problems and in three others Communities First was functioning smoothly.

- nevertheless, even where the Communities First process was problematic, Brokers were sometimes able to "*work round"* the problems while in the other areas where Communities First appeared to be working well or reasonably, this had not been a guarantee of easy going for the Brokers.

- in terms of the **broader community and voluntary sector "infrastructure"** which Brokers could build on, the position in our case-study areas was varied, with four of the areas having a large number of voluntary and community groups, and six only a relatively limited voluntary and community sector, with, in each case, only one or a handful of organisations with paid staff. Two of these six did not even have a single Community Centre with paid staff within them.

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[6] There are nine "area-based" case-studies but one of the three "project-based" case-studies is located in only one Communities First area, so the area is considered alongside the other nine for the purposes of the analysis

- in the majority of the case-study areas, interviewees generally characterised the coherence of the voluntary and community sector locally as average or at quite a low level but in two of the areas there were clear pre-existing networks/organisations (besides Communities First) which had helped to open doors for the Brokers, while in a further two, the Communities First accountable body or Co-ordinator had strong relationships with a range of voluntary organisations in the area.

- in terms of **ICT infrastructure**, there were considerable differences between our case-study areas, with four areas (the same four as identified as having a fairly large community/voluntary sector), having a number of reasonably well-equipped ICT facilities, open to the public or to particular sectors of the community (particularly young people) either within the Communities First ward or very close to it; four areas having more limited facilities, predating the Communities@One Programme, within the ward which provided some access to community organisations and individuals to ICT and the internet; and two areas having no publicly accessible ICT facilities within the immediate area although in both cases there were library-based ICT suites available within walking distance.

- All of the case-study areas appeared to have access to no- or low-cost ICT training from a range of providers within the area or in very close proximity but many stakeholders believed that the barriers to taking up learning opportunities by the socially excluded were not physical or even financial but attitudinal.

- in terms of the profile of the control group areas, in all three, there were only small numbers of active community groups but the "voluntary sector infrastructure" varied considerably. ICT facilities were relatively limited: in one case there were no publicly accessible ICT facilities while in the remaining two, PCs with internet access were available only in libraries within the area. In one of the control group areas, a small number of ICT courses were being run by the local College, using the PCs within the library/community centre, but in the other two areas no local ICT training was available.

- for the project based case-studies, the question of the targeting of Communities@One on Communities First areas was also an important contextual issue, with the limited number of Communities First areas within the County areas in which one of the projects was to operate causing particular concerns.

- these projects were in both cases building on pre-existing organisational infrastructure which had been funded by Objective 1 and on established ICT infrastructure, both in terms of hardware and training provision. It was clear that in the areas covered by one of the projects there was *"quite a lot of stuff going on"* even outside the boundaries of the organisations involved in the project. However, this was felt that this mostly consisted of formal training and was reliant on fairly low-level marketing which would be unlikely to overcome the reluctance or lack of interest of those least "switched on" to ICT.

- there was relatively little hard information about the about the numbers and profile of the **users of pre-existing ICT facilities and ICT training** in the case-study areas/projects. This would appear to relate to a lack of any real "mapping" having been undertaken by the Brokers.

- in terms of the **use of ICT by local voluntary and community groups**, while the picture was again somewhat mixed, in most areas, Brokers felt that this was limited to the use of PCs for fairly basic administrative tasks (e.g. writing letters and documents, book-keeping) on the part of organisations with paid staff. This also appeared to be the case in the control group areas. In two cases, however, both ones with a large number of community and voluntary organisations in the area, more groups were thought to use PCs for internal administration and in both cases there had been specific support for this in the past.

- in terms of the **use of ICT by the more general population**, little hard evidence was available from the fieldwork about this.

- **the prior experience of the Communities@One Brokers** themselves, particularly in terms of community development was also an important resource for the Programme.

Again, there is relatively little to add to the analysis presented in the Baseline Report. In terms of the key contextual factor of Communities First, there appeared, from the limited contact with Brokers and local stakeholders, to have been little change in the dynamics of individual Communities First areas/partnerships. In all four areas where Communities First was very problematic, internal relationships continued to remain strained and in one case at least had deteriorated with the Local Authority (the accountable body) having withdrawn from all participation in the work of the Partnership.

However, in terms of the project-based case-studies, one of these (which provides technical support to voluntary groups) which had previously been concerned about the constraining effect of targeting support on Communities First areas alone was now said to be more positive about this, in that it had forced them to be proactive, going to areas where people were not at a level where they were ready to engage i.e. those in greater need rather than simply responding to the more vocal groups who requested support.

In terms of the control group areas, there have been some changes in the local infrastructure: in one area, funding for the paid community development worker had come to an end, making it more difficult to progress a range of initatives, while in another an integrated primary school/library/community centre had opened. The new library had a small number of publicly-accessible internet-enabled PCs (which had previously been located in the old library premises), but opening hours remained limited to four half-days per week.

2.2 Processes

2.2.1 Communities@One and Wales-wide Stakeholders

In our Baseline Report we noted that:

- there was a clear view from stakeholders that Communities@One had established and benefited from excellent working relationships with external stakeholders, particularly those on the Advisory Group.

- there was a clear enthusiasm and energy about the Advisory Group members, with many of them commenting that the work with the Group was both stimulating and enjoyable, referring to the "*excellent personal relationships"* underpinning the work and there was evidence that the Programme team were also making connections with other relevant organisations outside the Advisory Group, such as voluntary sector organisations with the capacity to play a larger role on a regional/national level in digital inclusion, large ICT suppliers and with other Government departments and devolved administrations.

- interviewees also felt that the core relationship with the Social Justice and Regeneration Department were very well managed, with this partly being attributed to the fact that the project manager himself had previously been a civil servant but was rooted in a community development background but that the lack of any substantial relationship with DELLS was a weakness.

In general terms, the findings from our Baseline Report continue to hold true. As noted above, central stakeholders (both from within the Communities@One Programme team and from outside bodies) continued to stress the very positive way in which a range of key organisations were engaged with and contributed to the Programme through the Advisory Group and Grants Panel.

However, a number of interviewees alluded to a degree of difficulty which had emerged in respect of discussions about any successor to the Programme. This was being taken forward by the Social Justice and Regeneration Department (who were themselves both engaged with, and committed to, the Programme) but without direct input from the Communities@One Programme team, because the Welsh European Funding Office (WEFO) had advised this was inappropriate.

2.2.2 Broker Engagement with Local Stakeholders and Community Groups

In our Baseline Report we noted that:

- the vast majority of those who had had dealings with Brokers were highly complementary about the way in which the Brokers were doing their job. In areas where Communities First was divisive, Brokers generally appeared to have avoided being drawn into the conflicts, and in some of these cases, were praised by the warring factions, even as they attacked each other.

- different Brokers had adopted different tactics with regard to local stakeholders, with some cultivating close relationships with a wide range of partnerships and working groups relating to Communities First, regeneration and lifelong learning (which was positively regarded by all concerned, but which carried the downside that this could absorb considerable amounts of the Brokers' time), some working closely with Communities First team and others working fairly independently of the established stakeholders.

- there was only one case-study area where the Programme had run into some serious difficulties in terms of local stakeholders although in one of the project-based case-studies, the sponsor also felt that a potential "rival" project had been approved which cut across the work planned by the project, blaming this on a lack of shared information within the Communities@One team about the activities of funded projects.

- no interviewees identified voluntary and community organisations with whom any Broker might have worked who had not been engaged, and there were no suggestions that any Broker had given priority to some groups over others but in around half of the cases, the Broker had worked directly with only a relatively small number of organisations, suggesting a tendency to concentrate on working fairly intensively with groups who could deliver *"quick wins"* in terms of developing grant applications.

- in some instances the Brokers appeared to have relatively little contact with some key providers of ICT services, such as libraries, youth centres, family learning centres in schools, Further Education Colleges or the Digilabs, seeing their focus rather as working with individual groups who needed support[7].

The fieldwork undertaken in May – June 2007 again confirmed a broadly unchanged pattern here. Local stakeholders and community groups who had been in contact with Brokers generally gave a very positive account of their work and their commitment:

"the work [the Broker] has done with community groups has been brilliant",

However, in three of the ten areas covered by case-studies (two of them ones where Communities First itself was perceived as problematic), the Brokers had been relatively little in evidence over the last six months. In only one of these – the same one where there were significant problems reported in our Baseline Report – were there major tensions between Communities@One and local stakeholders (in this case the Communities First Partnership). In the other cases, the Brokers themselves felt that the case-study areas were ones which they had been unable to make much impact in (in one case, it would appear, because the Communities First Partnership and co-ordinator tended to monopolise activity, and in the other because of poisonous relationships between a number of key agencies), preferring to concentrate on other areas within their "patch" which offered more fertile prospects for delivering Grant Fund projects.

In the case of the two project-based case-studies contact with the Brokers had also been more limited since the projects were approved. In neither was this seen as a particular problem but in both it was a matter for some comment:

"I suppose I'd have thought they might have popped in to see how it's going now and again, but to be honest, we've not really needed it".

Discussions with the Brokers suggested that this lack of hands-on engagement with projects post-approval was the exception rather than the rule (and related largely to the capacity and competence of the sponsoring organisations to *"get on with it"*). However, both Brokers and other stakeholders emphasised the extent to which they were under severe pressure because of the continued flow of new projects as a

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[7] It is understood that as part of their initial training, Brokers were encouraged, quite understandably, to focus their efforts on engaging with the voluntary and community sector. Moreover, in the case of Digilabs WEFO have advised the project that double funding rules prevents joint working between the two projects. However, it is clearly essential for Brokers to have a good understanding of what provision and support is available from other sources in the areas in which they are working and for them and Grant Fund projects to work with these other bodies to encourage cross-referrals and prevent confusion or duplication of effort.

result of the increased resources which had been made available to the Grant Fund and which had undermined the expectation that the Programme would by now have moved into a "project support" rather than "project development" phase. This in the Brokers view had reduced the time spent working with local partners:

"we just don't have time to engage at the strategic level"

This appeared to find an echo from local stakeholders, who, while they were often aware of what the Brokers had been doing with specific groups, gave the impression that they were now less in evidence in terms of general networking and "proselytising":

" [The Broker] has little involvement with us on a day to day basis, and to our knowledge has not attended the local Communities First Partnerships"

This was echoed by a Broker who commented that they had not been in touch with a Communities First Co-ordinator in recent months because:

"I'm not marketing at the moment either"

Of course, this is in part simply a reflection of the current stage of the Programme. But, as Programme managers recognised, the original expectation had been that the flow of new project approvals would, by now, have reduced dramatically, freeing up the Brokers to undertake more in the way of project support (including exit strategies), networking and teasing out and publicising good practice.

In a similar vein, and again due to the pressure of project development activity, there was little evidence that Brokers had made further progress in developing contacts with key ICT providers within the statutory sector, although the Central team has been active in developing links and raising awareness of key organisations at a national level such as Cymal and FFORWM[8].

2.2.3 Grant Fund Processes

In our Baseline Report we noted that:

- almost all of the central stakeholders interviewed were convinced that the Grant Fund processes were not only working well, but represented an exemplar of good practice, with particular support for what was perceived as the very distinctive "Broker" model by which groups were given hands-on support to develop grant applications.

- those involved felt that the Grant Panel worked well, but stressed that its role was not to turn down poor applications (since the proactive involvement of the Brokers and the Central Team meant that applications which were not suitable were identified at a much earlier stage) but to examine critically how the project would achieve its ends.

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[8] Advisory Group Meeting, 18 May 2007, Paper 5.

- for the smaller groups, in particular, Brokers were very actively involved in developing projects, in advising on the specific way in which the project application should be completed and, in some cases, in actually writing the application on behalf of the applicant Groups. While all the Brokers saw helping applicant groups to develop applications as integral to their role, at least four of them commented that they felt the role had become too narrowly focussed on this aspect of their role.

- while the very hands-on nature of the Brokers involvement theoretically might risk depriving the applicant Groups of real "ownership" of the project, there was little evidence of this to date.

- a large majority of the Grant applicants who were interviewed (16 out of the 20) were very positive indeed about the application process in general and the role of the Broker in particular. There were, however, a small minority of groups (four in all[9]) who were more heavily critical of the process. Interestingly, three of these were larger projects.

- Few of the applicants had enough experience of the claims and monitoring process to comment but those who had gave somewhat mixed views.

Our recent fieldwork found that central stakeholders continued to hold very positive views of the processes surrounding applications for, and appraisal of Grant Fund projects despite the fact that the Grants Panel was *"snowed under"* with applications. One key stakeholder who had also been involved in a grant application in the period since our earlier report did, however, appear to echo the views of the minority of applicants at the time of the Baseline Report wondering

"if there aren't a few too many steps"

in the process.

At the same time, the majority of project sponsors continued to hold very positive views of the Brokers in terms of their involvement with the project development and application process and to feel that the application processes were superior to those of other grant schemes:

"*in terms of the bureaucracy, I'd give it about 8 out of 10*"

"I can't speak highly enough of [the Broker]…I wouldn't have been able to do the application without him"

A third project described the *"huge support"* they had received from the Broker and from Central Team staff in the Wales Co-operative Centre and described C@1 as

"one of the best funders".

There were much less positive views of the claims and monitoring process – though it appeared to be the Brokers themselves, rather than the project managers, who were most vocal about this, one arguing that *"about 70%"* of their time was spent on

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[9] A further group with a pending application was reported to be very unhappy with the process, but was unwilling to be interviewed at this stage in the research.

financial issues. This reflected the fact that Brokers continue to provide very hands-on support to many of the (particularly smaller) projects, a source of some frustration:

"with some of them, we are talking to them several times a day"

"one project rang me up from PC World to ask what he should do because he couldn't find the piece of kit he needed on the shelf"

Even those Brokers with considerable community development experience expressed surprise over the apparent limited capacity and professionalism of even fairly large and experienced groups to deal with basic project management and the amount of hand-holding they required, though in some cases this was seen to relate to the fact that the Grant Fund project was not perceived as central to the organization: to this extent it may be that the very proactivity of Brokers in developing project ideas has resulted in at least some projects which are given a relatively low priority by the sponsoring organizations[10].

Overall, it was clear that Brokers' focus on Grant Fund projects had, if anything, intensified rather than diminished since the fieldwork for the Baseline Report, leaving less time for other elements of their role as originally conceived (such as developing the role of key local agencies in promoting digital inclusion, promoting and enhancing the use of local facilities and resources amongst new and existing users, motivating and working with a team of volunteer community champions and activists and community tutors who promote interest in learning locally, and working in partnerships with local learning providers to create learning progression routes).

Some of the central stakeholders were concerned about the extent to which the demands of fuelling the Grant Fund process were absorbing the energies of the Brokers and felt it was necessary to provide a clear deadline after which no Grant Fund applications should be received and to be clearer about what support projects could expect after approval. One felt that projects demanded

"quite excessive hands-on support....It needs to be made clear that the Brokers are not there to manage projects for them".

In terms of the projects themselves, only a small minority actively complained about the quarterly claims forms (though this needs to be seen in the context of the fact that many of the projects were not yet fully operational), but the nature of these concerns were similar to one another and to the concerns voiced by Brokers, notably the extreme detail required in relationship to individual items of expenditure and the lack of flexibility to make alterations to these without the prior agreement of the Central Team. One manager of a small project cited an example of having budgeted for purchasing three memory cards for cameras: she had then found some very cheap cards at a lower specification but got into trouble for buying six cards even though they had the same memory in total as in the specification. Another larger project complained that the rigidity of the specification meant that it was in practice impossible to vire money (though in principle, projects are already to do so to up to 10% of a budget line), while a third claimed:

"it's hard work … the formula works out in the end, but there's not enough guidance and I have to trace back what I did last time to see how to do it every time"

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[10] See also 2.3.2

Echoing the views of Brokers, where projects did not find the claims process particularly arduous, this was sometimes because it was the Brokers who were doing the work:

"I've done a bit of book-keeping over the years, but it didn't help much with the claim form … [the Broker] does it for me … but if the form could be made easier, it would save [her] a lot of time … not that she minds coming … she seems delighted that the project is up and running"

The degree of involvement of the Brokers with post-approval projects did appear to vary considerably, with larger projects less likely to have had regular contact with Brokers.

2.2.4 Capturing Good Practice

In our Baseline Report we noted that:

- Central Stakeholders were not generally convinced that mechanisms were already in place to capture good practice, but felt this would assume increasing importance as Programme moved on from project development to implementation.

- the case-study fieldwork also suggested that sharing good practice between projects had, at this stage of the Programme, a fairly low profile although Brokers had developed informal ways of supporting each other and sharing good practice.

Despite the pressure of the Grants Process, most central stakeholders felt progress was being made on this. A series of workshops focussed on internet safety and new technologies had been held in the early part of the year, and although not explicitly marketed as promoting the sharing of good practice, were felt by several interviewees to have started the process and encouraged projects to share ideas. This was echoed by one of the projects which had taken part:

"it was fantastic … a really good opportunity to meet other projects"

At the same time it was notable that only one other of our projects spontaneously referred to these sessions, while a number of stakeholders, while being positive about the events, noted that only a minority of the approved projects (around 40 in total) had taken part.

Work was in hand to commission a much more inter-active website which would enable projects to communicate with each other and to record achievements. The Marketing Officer has already produced a number of information sheets/outline case-studies which are available on the current website and discussion is underway about commissioning a more comprehensive set of project profiles, recognising that projects themselves are likely to have little in the way of resource to undertake this. Advisory Group members had a number of positive suggestions about further action which might be necessary or desirable:

- One suggestion was to develop an inter-active map for the website showing the location of projects and linking to a brief description of, and contact details for, each project: this would enable projects to themselves make contact with other projects active within their areas;

- Another stakeholder noted that there was a problem of timing given the short life of the Programme, in that many projects would only be able to share their experiences after the end of the funding in June 2008. He argued that it would be sensible to earmark resources from any future Programme to fund existing projects;

- A third interviewee suggested that there might be some gaps in expertise within the team and that arguably it would be good to have the *"luxury"* of someone in post who had the sole responsibility of capturing good practice, as at present:

"everyone is doing a bit of it".

In terms of our case-studies, there were some further examples over and above those cited in the Baseline Report, where Brokers had facilitated joint working or contacts between projects though these were generally not explicitly focussed on sharing good practice (see 2.3.3). There were, however, efforts to bring together Communities@One projects working on digital storytelling in the context of a [Welsh] national conference which was being held in June.

In terms of the Brokers themselves, it appeared that there was even more interaction and learning from each other than was the case at the time of the Baseline Report: certainly, this was confirmed by comparing our experiences of two team meetings in September 2006 and May 2007. To some extent this was attributed to staff changes, which meant that there were no longer two Broker teams, and had also meant that Brokers were now "peer-reviewing" applications which had been developed by other Brokers.

2.2.5 Internal Management Processes

In our Baseline Report we noted that;

- while Central Team members were generally very positive about the arrangements which had been put in place for ensuring good liaison and support between the Brokers and the Central Team, Brokers themselves were less positive, with several feeling they did not receive sufficient information from "the centre".

- the "embedding" of Brokers in local organisations, but on the basis of common terms and conditions and employment by the Wales Co-operative Centre was seen to be a key to the success of the Programme.

- there were some concerns over a number of long-term sickness absences, in which elements of work-related stress appear to have played at least a limited part and over the existence of two Broker teams which it was felt might have led to a development of an "us" and "them" mentality within the Brokers.

- in terms of information systems, the systems for logging applications and initial project ideas and for drawing off financial data from this was clearly working effectively and was a subject of positive comment from members of the Advisory Group. However, it was less clear that Brokers kept file notes of meetings with groups and individuals, which might cause problems in the event of unforeseen staff changes or absences.

Following from the recommendations of the Baseline Report, new arrangements were put in place to regularly update the Brokers about developments within the Central Team. While this has not been a major focus of the recent work, this appeared to have addressed many of the concerns of the Brokers.

At the same time, some of the central stakeholders continued to express concerns about the pressure that Programme staff were under and the fact that there continued to be incidences of stress-related staff sickness absence which was unusual in the Wales Co-operative Centre's experience. One of the Broker Managers also resigned at the beginning of the year, and this was a source of concern to some

"we've had some unfortunate staffing incidents"

– not least because this left the current Broker Manager with line-management responsibility for 11 Brokers.

One response to the concerns about staff welfare had been to make some changes to the arrangements with regard to the location of Brokers in order to reduce the sense of isolation which Brokers could experience. Two Brokers in North-West Wales have been relocated to the Co-operative Centre's Bangor Office while two of the Valleys Brokers were now based at the Centre's Pontypridd Office. Plans were also in hand to rent an office in Swansea for a number of the South-West Wales Brokers. While these moves seem broadly sensible – particularly as they are generally understood to have related to Brokers who were previously operating from fairly isolated "outposts" of the "embedded" organisation - it is important that this does not undermine good working relationships with the key partners who have agreed to host Brokers.

There has been little change in terms of administrative systems relating to the grant applications and these continue to provide timely and relevant information on financial commitments and spend.

In terms of monitoring outputs, a Monitoring Officer has been employed and a Monitoring Framework adopted. This puts in place mechanisms to ensure that projects' quarterly returns are made and are checked to identify whether the delivery against the projects targets is falling short: where returns are not made or show insufficient progress, it provides for the relevant Broker (and where appropriate the Monitoring Officer) to visit the group to understand the reasons for the under-performance and to agree remedial action with the project. The Framework also provides for larger projects (those receiving grants of over £15,000) to receive at least two routine visits from the Monitoring Officer and the Broker over the lifetime of the Programme in order to check on progress, identify any problems or shortcomings and identify any "gaps or headaches" as well as drawing out examples of good practice.

The Framework appears to be appropriate and robust as a means of progress-chasing and identifying potential problems. It is less clear that it will be able to contribute to an understanding of the outputs and achievements of the Programme as a whole.

An output database is still being finalised and an administrative officer is being appointed to enter the data. Once these two steps have been completed, data from

projects' quarterly returns will then be fed into it the database. However, it is likely that the only, or at least the principal, aggregate data collated will refer to the planned and actual number of beneficiaries from the Programme as a whole. The system will not be able to give information on the background/types of beneficiaries or on how intense the support they received (e.g. it will not discriminate between an individual who drops in once for five minutes advice on an operating problem and someone who uses an ICT centre for two hours every day for several months). While this is not problematic in terms of the targets set for Communities@One as a whole and reflects the view of the Communities@One team that targets for each project need to be set in a way which reflects individual projects' aspirations, it may represent something of a lost opportunity.

2.3 Immediate Effects (Outputs)

<u>2.3.1 Development and Implementation of Grant Fund Projects: Overview</u>

In our Baseline Report, we noted that

- the speed with which the Grant Fund had been taken up, had exceeded all expectations, a fact which was seen to be linked to the proactive approach of the Brokers and which was seen as a critical success, given the very short time-horizons of the Programme.

- more than £2.7 million (of £5.05 m. then allocated to the Grant Fund) had already been awarded with project applications "in the pipeline" taking the total to more than £5.1m., with a reasonably good distribution across eligible areas, with the possible exception of the Valleys. This represented a major success for the Programme.

- however there was quite a low rate of conversion of commitments to spend (particularly given that projects receive funding in advance) which needed to be closely monitored.

- the high level of financial commitments had not simply been achieved by funding large, national projects: although the 12 projects over £100,000 which either had been funded or which were in the pipeline together represented some 43% by value of all projects, just over half of the projects (by number) were less than £15,000.

- the Advisory Group had agreed to vire more than £1 million into the Grant Fund from Technical Support and Central Services (marketing), since very little of the initially allocated funding for Technical Support had been required, a fact attributed by Programme managers partly to the recruitment of the Technical Support Officer (who had been able to offer advice and support direct to Grant Fund applicants and projects), partly to the way in which organisations represented on the Advisory Group had given additional more specialist support free of charge, and partly due to the fact that Grant Fund projects have generally factored in technical support (provided by local suppliers) to their applications, rather than seen this as a stand-alone issue.

- several stakeholders were worried about the quality of some of the projects and the (lack of) variety of approaches which had come forward. A particular issue was what was perceived as the high number of digital storytelling projects.

- Underlying this was a sense of some unease on the part of some of the interviewees about the clarity around the ultimate aims of the Grant Fund and the Programme in general.

The plans reported in the Baseline Report to vire additional resources into the Grant Fund have been taken forward, and the formal allocation for the Fund has now increased to £6.618 million[11]. In all, this represents an increase of some 31% over the original budget for the Grant Fund.

Most of the central stakeholders seemed relaxed about these changes, which were based not only on an estimate of the potential for increased spending through the Grant Fund but also on a thorough analysis of the requirements for Marketing and Specialist Support through to the end of the Programme in the light of experience to date. However, one central stakeholder and at least one local stakeholder felt that transferring resources from the Marketing budget had been a mistake and that insufficient resources were now being devoted to publicising the Programme. The same central stakeholder felt that the reduction in Specialist Support reflected a change in emphasis in the Programme away from building long-term capacity, arguing that:

"the money was put into technical support for a reason"

However, this interviewee acknowledged that a number of projects were coming forward through the Grant Fund to provide and build capacity in technical support to the voluntary and community sector and programme managers pointed out that several larger projects which fitted with the original purpose of the Specialist Support budget were now being funded from the Grant Fund as this provided a clear and straightforward mechanism for agreeing to release resources.

Tables 2.1 – 2.3 provide information on the current position with regard to financial commitment and spend. As will be seen, the Programme has already achieved a high level of financial commitment: more than 85% of the total budget has been committed (which in turn represents well over 110% of the original budget allocation). Once the Forward Plan is taken into account, the revised budget across the Programme as a whole should be fully, indeed over-, committed.

However, we understand that the Forward Plan includes a number of projects which have been on the Reserve List for some time. Some of these have not been worked up and some may well contain budgets for staff which cannot be disbursed within the remaining lifetime of the Programme. It is therefore quite likely that, with only one year of the Programme to run, some, at least, of the Forward Plan projects will not come to fruition.

On this basis, it looks likely that the Objective 1 is still likely to be fully committed, but that there is likely to be may be some shortfalls in commitment in terms of the Objective 2 Core, Rural and Transitional Areas unless additional action is taken. These are small in absolute terms – around £100,000 to £125,000 for the core area, £35,000 for the rural area and £15,000 - £20,000 for the transitional area – but are relatively significant in terms of the grant allocated (between 20% and 40%).

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[11] A virement ealier in the year raised the allocation to £6.4 million and a further virement from the Specialist Support budget line has been requested from WEFO.

Table 2.1: Funds Allocated by 26 June 2007 by Objective Area

Objective Area Allocated to Date	Non Obj	Obj 1	Obj 2 Core	Obj 2 Rural	Obj 2 Trans	Grand Total
Budget	£438,479.00	£5,450,670.00	£562,000.00	£91,647.00	£76,084.00	£6,618,880.00
Total Allocated	£412,265.76	£4,738,528.06	£387,680.37	£56,029.02	£49,796.11	£5,644,299.32
Forward Plan	£22,015.15	£1,194,020.53	£94,530.30	£3,303.03	£15,451.30	£1,329,320.31
Remaining	£4,198.09	-£481,878.59	£79,789.33	£32,314.95	£10,836.59	-£354,739.63
% Remaining	0.96%	-8.84%	14.20%	35.26%	14.24%	-5.36%

	Non Obj	Obj 1	Obj 2 Core	Obj 2 Rural	Obj 2 Trans	Grand Total
Budget	£438,479.00	£5,450,670.00	£562,000.00	£91,647.00	£76,084.00	£6,618,880.00
Paid to date	£210,791.73	£2,518,728.97	£142,738.58	£38,128.03	£27,520.52	£2,937,907.83
Remaining	£227,687.27	£2,931,941.03	£419,261.42	£53,518.97	£48,563.48	£3,680,972.17

Table 2.2: Funds Allocated as of 26 June 2007 by region

Allocated to Date	Cities	NE Wales	NW Wales	Other (Powys & Mon)	South (Valleys)	SW Wales	Grand Total
Budget	1,016,208.05	452,664.88	713,171.78	106,863.80	3,922,444.76	407,526.73	6,618,880.00
Total Allocated	952,904.65	596,519.38	752,393.17	59,212.81	2,710,446.69	572,822.61	5,644,299.31
Forward Plan	319,147.24	16,015.15	97,175.82	13,534.09	749,735.89	133,712.12	1,329,320.31
Remaining	-255,843.84	-159,869.65	-136,397.21	34,116.90	462,262.18	- 299,008.00	-354,739.62
% Remaining	-25.18%	-35.32%	-19.13%	31.93%	11.79%	-73.37%	-5.36%

Table 2.3 Project Size by Value as at 26 June 2007

Value	Awarded / Submitted		Forward Plan		Total	
	Total	Number	Total	Number	Total	Number
Less £5,000	£65,955.09	26	£30,996.00	12	£96,951.09	38
£5,000 - £14,999	£495,531.54	51	£267,064.08	31	£762,595.62	82
£15,000 - £49,999	£1,358,277.19	48	£526,413.03	22	£1,884,690.22	70
£50,000 - £99,999	£1,370,629.25	20	£302,000.00	5	£1,672,629.25	25
£100,000 +	£2,353,906.23	12	£202,847.20	2	£2,556,753.43	14
Total	£5,644,299.30	157	£1,329,320.31	72	£6,973,619.61	229

Table 2.4: Project Size by Value as at 15 December 2006.

Value	Awarded / Submitted		Forward Plan		Total	
	Total	Number	Total	Number	Total	Number
Less £5,000	£48,199.16	20	£34,199.02	15	£82,398.18	35
£5,000 - £14,999	£243,274.85	25	£236,469.23	32	£479,744.08	57
£15,000 - £49,999	£349,016.52	13	£589,075.99	27	£938,092.51	40
£50,000 - £99,999	£642,800.90	10	£936,179.33	14	£1,578,980.23	24
£100,000 +	£1,703,656.41	8	£634,379.93	4	£2,338,036.34	12
Total	£2,986,947.84	76	£2,430,303.50	92	£5,417,251.34	168

Nevertheless, managing a Programme with funding from so many different Structural Fund Programmes is highly problematic and the achievement in bringing forward so many projects and achieving such a high level of commitments overall in the relatively short period of 18 months since the Programme became operational is impressive as was widely recognised by stakeholders.

Table 2.2 shows the distribution of funding according to broad geographical area and generally confirms the picture reported in our Baseline Report of a good spread across the eligible areas. However, the Valleys do appear to be under-performing (though more detailed analysis at County level suggests that some areas, such as Blaenau Gwent and Merthyr Tydfil are performing well), with 70% of funding already committed compared to the average of 85% and (bearing in mind the comments about the Forward Plan above) the final level of commitments being likely to be around 80 – 85%.

In part, this results from the decision (in agreement with the local authority) at the start of the Programme not to pro-actively market Communities@One in Rhondda Cynon Taf, because of concerns this could lead to confusion with the separate, Objective 1-funded Shape-IT.org project. Since RCT has the largest eligible population of any local authority, this has inevitably had an impact. It is also the case that in some other Valleys areas (notably Caerphilly), large numbers of projects have been developed, but these have generally been only small in terms of financial value, reflecting perhaps the limited capacity of the voluntary and community sector organisations in these areas (something which appears to be the case from our case-study findings). Nevertheless, the relatively lower take-up across the Valleys may be a matter of some concern, given the concentration of poverty and social exclusion in this area.

In percentage terms, the under-spend in Powys and Monmouthshire is, however, somewhat greater than the Valleys (with only 55% of total funding committed to date): but this confirms the findings of our fieldwork that it may be more difficult to generate momentum in those areas where Communities First areas are thinly spread.

Table 2.3 highlights the fact that the high level of commitment has not been achieved by an excessive concentration on larger projects. The 12 large projects with a value over £100,000 still account for just over 40% of the total funding, while projects with grants of less than £15,000 account for almost 50% of all the projects funded. Compared with the situation as at December 2006, there has been a "bulge in the middle", with the number of approved projects in the £15,000 - £49,999 band having risen from 13 to 48.

Table 2.3 also highlights the management challenge facing the Programme: with 157 projects already approved, the administrative burden of ensuring that all are compliant and are running smoothly is clearly a great one. Moreover, comparing Table 2.3 with Table 2.4 (which shows data from December 2006) confirms that there has continued to be a massive investment of effort in project development over the last six months: the total number of approved projects has doubled since December, while it is clear that projects have continued to be added to the Forward Plan almost as quickly as they have been "translated" into approved projects (with the total of all projects having increased by more than a third). Indeed, it is clear that some of the projects approved since January are ones which were not in the Forward Plan: for example, in December there were 13 approved projects in the £15,000 - £49,999

category, and 27 projects in the pipeline, whereas the total figure of approved projects now stands at 48, with a further 22 in the Forward Plan. While this is a credit to the hard work of the Brokers, it does raise the question of whether the concentration on project development activity is squeezing out other aspects of Programme management, including crucially ensuring that projects are being implemented to plan.

Although the achievement in reaching this stage should not be underestimated, the figures for actual financial outlay as shown in Table 2.1 and 2.2 remain relatively low, given that projects receive funding in advance (with payments for equipment generally being made at the time projects are approved and funding for staff and other ongoing costs made quarterly in advance) – which means that a proportion of clawback cannot be ruled out. As yet, 52% of commitments have been translated into payments with 44% of total Grant Fund resources having been paid out. In the case of the relatively small budget for the Objective 2 core area, only 36% of commitments have so far been paid out. Given that the project has no more than a year to run (and no leeway for spend to be deferred beyond the cut-off date of 30 June 2008) this situation will need very close monitoring. A decision to provide accountancy support to projects should help to identify and (where possible) rectify underspends at project level.

Brokers suggested that delays in implementing projects were fairly routine, particularly in projects which involved the appointment of staff, and there were said to have been a large number of requests for virement from staff costs to equipment costs. One response to this was a suggestion (not yet formally agreed) that all projects which had end-dates of March 2008 and which involved recurrent costs to extend to the end of May 2008. As noted in 2.2.3 above, Brokers felt projects were quite often treated with quite a low priority by organisations who did not see them as central to their existence.

While the Central Team were generally confident that this situation could be managed in such a way as to avoid underspend (and were intending an over-commitment of around 10% in order to account for some underspend by approved projects[12]) other stakeholders were more nervous about this, particularly given the uncertainties surrounding the pipeline and argued that it was necessary to set an early cut-off point in terms of approving additional projects, even if this meant declaring an underspend to WEFO, since WEFO would be more forgiving of an acknowledged underspend now (which might be reallocated to other projects) than one which was only acknowledged at the end of the Programme.

In terms of project quality and variety, Brokers and other central stakeholders argued that more recent projects tended to be smaller and more varied, but increasingly focussed on equipment rather than staff, for the obvious reason that time was now too short to recruit staff for a meaningful period of employment. While this is undoubtedly correct, it does need to be borne in mind that the original conception of the project was that there was an imbalance between the extent of "kit" available and the degree of competence and expertise to use this effectively. Perhaps as a recognition of this, Brokers suggested that many of the more recent projects had an *"artificially short"* time horizon and were less likely to be sustainable without additional funding to take them beyond June 2008, but at the same time believed that

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[12] This was the position at the time of the fieldwork, though we understand that subsequently a policy decision has been taken not to make offers exceeding the budget limits agreed by WEFO.

they were more likely to have emerged from spontaneous interest from the applicant groups than from the proactive effort of Brokers themselves.

Concerns on the part of other central stakeholders about the variety of the applications coming forward had generally eased with one feeling

"*astounded by the quality*"

of the projects coming forward.

Another felt, however, that while the quality of projects had remained high, it was less clear that the quality of applications had improved, while a third felt that, with the benefit of hindsight, there had been too great a concern to

"*get the money out of the door*",

and, in the early days, there had been too little effort to prioritise between projects. Moreover, in his view, the lack of clear deadlines meant that projects could be left to drift and then find they had lost out. This interviewee argued that any future Programme should consider a series of bidding rounds with fixed deadlines.

2.3.2 Development and Implementation of Grant Fund Projects: Findings from Case-Studies

In our Baseline Report, we noted that:

- we had examined 21 projects which had already been approved and a further four[13] which were in the pipeline. However, in three cases the same organisation was responsible for two related projects. Apart from the project-based case-studies, three projects included in the fieldwork were County or region-wide, but had been included in order to ensure that the effects of such projects on local Communities First areas were not ignored.

- all except two of the 10 area-based case-study areas had seen at least one successful project developed. Both these areas were isolated from other Communities First areas.

- the three case-study areas where there was most activity (three projects in each case, with one area having also two projects in the pipeline) were those which were relatively large settlements and ones where there was a relatively large local community and voluntary sector (though in two of these cases, Communities First was not working well).

- ten of "our" projects had received grant of less than £15,000, five grants between £15,000 and £50,000 and ten over £50,000.

- the projects were quite varied in terms of what they were setting out to do but 19 involved paying for staff, either on an employed basis (the majority) or on a sessional basis: in the majority of projects, staffing was the largest element of the budget; 19 projects involved purchasing ICT equipment, with six projects consisting of

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[13] One additional project in development was identified but the sponsor was unwilling to speak to us at this stage in the research and it has been excluded from Table 4.4. and the analysis which follows.

equipment on a stand-alone basis; 13 projects provided resources for mentoring or training of individual residents or users (though in all but one case, it was intended that such support would be entirely informal, on a drop-in basis, rather than more formal); 12 projects were projects focussed on providing "drop-in" facilities with access to ICT equipment in a permanent physical location; eight projects were providing extra staffing resources to enable better use of existing ICT resources (including two which were focussed on Digilabs which were unable to open for sufficient hours because of lack of paid staff); and about seven projects either involved existing, or were seen to have potential to help establish, social enterprises which might aspire to be self-sustaining;

- smaller numbers of projects involved an element of digital storytelling (five projects) as a way of engaging individuals and/or community groups with ICT (though in some cases this was regarded as a secondary goal, compared to the primary aim of engaging with excluded individuals); providing community groups with assistance in website development (five projects); providing an external technical support resource to voluntary and community groups (four projects) - generally with the intention also to develop the capacity of organisations to meet their own technical needs in the longer term); providing technical support and servicing to individuals with problems with ICT equipment and training volunteers (two projects – both large); recycling equipment and providing them at low cost to members of the community (two projects);meeting the internal administrative needs of individual voluntary organisations (two projects – both small); and purchasing of recording equipment for a music project.

- three projects (all of them large projects) might be regarded as "cascading out" the function of Communities@One itself, in that they involved working with community groups to raise their awareness and use of ICT (albeit that one of them also involved digital outreach to individuals within the targeted communities).

 - none of our 25 case-study projects were supporting broadcasting and most of the projects were focussed on fairly conventional uses of PCs and Macs, and of the internet – with the partial exception of those projects involving "digital storytelling" – while content projects were generally restricted to the development of websites.

- in most cases, Brokers had played a significant role in developing the project ideas and in injecting elements which the project sponsor had not always thought of, in particular, flagging up the need to address issues around training or mentoring, rather than focussing on equipment

- in terms of the counter-factual, we identified four types of project: the first (with five projects) were ones where Communities@One was used as a funding source to implement pre-existing projects which might have secured funding from elsewhere; the second (with ten projects) were "opportunity led" projects, where the project itself was mobilised by the existence of the Communities@One Programme, but built on nascent ideas of things which the applicant group wished to achieve: in most cases, these organisations were used to accessing external funding and it is possible that in the absence of the Brokers, the projects might have materialised (though most applicants felt that the Broker had played a key role in making the process easier), but the Grant Fund provided the necessary spur to translate latent ideas into firm projects; the third category (with around four mostly small projects) category involved projects which would not have been developed without the direct contribution of the Broker and would probably not have happened in the absence of the Programme;

> with the final category consisting of around four "broker-driven" projects where the original idea had been formulated very much as a result of the interaction of the Broker with the group concerned.

As noted in Section 1.3, the fieldwork for the current report included reviewing the applications for six projects which had been approved since the original round of case-study work: however, one of these was included in the analysis of the Baseline Report[14], as it was sufficiently well developed to be included in the fieldwork at that stage. Of the five new projects one has a value of below £5,000, three between £5,000 and £14,999 and one between £15,000 and £49,999, thus in line with the bias towards smaller projects reported by the staff. One of the projects covers a County-wide area.

None of the new applications was in either of the two areas which had had no projects approved, and these two areas appear likely to remain without any funded activity (other than that provided by regional or national projects): in one of them a County-wide project which should apply to the area has now been approved but any activity within the Communities First area is being blocked by the Communities First Partnership in the area. By contrast, three of the projects related to areas which were already identified in the Baseline Report as being ones where most was already happening.

In terms of the type of activity, the new projects are less heavily weighted to the employment of staff, though one involves the recruitment of a salaried ICT mentor and two involve buying-in consultancy/sessional staff (one to provide mentoring, one to provide assistance with making a film).

All but one involve the purchase of equipment (and this one involves the hire of equipment), two of them on a stand alone basis. Only one is concerned with providing an additional open-access ICT facility (though in part using existing under-utilised ICT equipment) and this is the only one which has staff as the major element of its budget; a second provides ICT training, support and mentoring to job-seekers referred to the project.

Two of the projects appear largely concerned with supporting the "core mission" of the applicant voluntary organisations (but in both cases, the involvement of the Broker has helped to graft on a dimension which should clearly contribute to enhanced awareness of and skills in using ICT).

In contrast to the strong focus on "traditional" uses of PC/Macs, two of these five projects involve an element of film-making using digital technology, with one of them linked to a web-based television project.

In terms of the counter-factual, one of the applications was a pre-existing idea (and was one where the Broker was perceived as least engaged), two can be characterised as opportunity led and two as projects which would have been unlikely to have emerged without the active engagement of the Broker in shaping the project.

In our control group areas, although a number of ICT related projects had been considered, no new initiatives had secured funding since the Baseline Report.

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[14] The Baseline Report also includes two projects which had not been approved at that stage but for which the application was already available and one project which has still not been approved.

While the picture in terms of the development of projects to the approval stage is generally very positive, our fieldwork confirmed the impression of the aggregate financial data that moving from application to implementation is proving difficult in many cases.

In all, of 26 projects where we were able to secure information about progress, around half were now fully operational and were not reporting any on-going problems.

Eight projects had either not started at all, or had procured equipment but had not yet started to use it: four of these were projects which had only been approved since December and all were relatively small, but in three cases were narrowly over the £15,000 threshold. The reasons for this include:

- Delays in recruiting staff and securing CRB checks;
- Problems over securing insurance cover for equipment;
- Wishing to locate new premises before commencing;
- Underestimating technical support problems – in one case, a project had not been able to network PCs it had acquired and was awaiting the development of a technical support project to resolve this;
- Waiting for the opening of a new "PC World" to source the equipment;
- Pressure of other commitments leading to delays in moving the project forward.

This confirms the view of the Brokers that in some cases, the projects are given fairly low priority by the recipient organisations, but also (of course) needs to be set in the context of the demanding timescales for implementation and the fact that many of the organisations are small, operating on the basis of very limited resources and where delays in taking things forward are endemic. While we judge that only one or two of these projects are at risk of simply not going ahead, the delays do have implications both for overall Programme spend and effectiveness.

A further six projects (all of them larger projects) reported delays in implementing their project and in five cases this had so far had knock-on effects in terms of underspends. In four cases these were related to staffing difficulties, including delays in recruitment and in one case, the need to dismiss a member of staff who had proved unsuitable, in one case it resulted from delays in equipping suitable premises and in the final case, from unsuitable equipment having been purchased and then taken back. In general, these project sponsors believed that they could probably make good the underspends, but clearly this would depend on virement.

On the basis of our fieldwork we believe that there is a considerable risk of an underspend on approved projects at Programme level. The fact that timescales for implementing projects have often slipped also suggests the need for caution about the speed with which projects only now being approved can be implemented.

The 41 beneficiaries who we met as part of the fieldwork inevitably represented a range of characteristics and experience. In general, it would seem that projects were succeeding in accessing appropriate groups, but some interesting points emerged:

- There was a strong bias towards older or retired people – around half of all those interviewed – with children and young people accounting for most of the rest: there were relatively few individuals in the age-range of 25 – 49;

- Very few of those interviewed were in employment, with most of those of working age being inactive, either due to caring responsibilities or being on health-related benefits: very few were actively seeking employment;

- Most had either no or relatively low formal qualifications, though a relatively high proportion had some recent experience of undertaking often community-based learning;

- Many had PCs at home, but relatively few of these had internet access, and fewer still had broadband;

- A number (including those who had access to PCs at home) had clearly been extremely wary of ICT before engagement with the Programme: a common theme for these individuals was the fear of even switching on the Computer

" I used to think that I'd mess everything up"

- However, a significant proportion were already "switched on" to ICT, but were using the projects either to acquire new skills, to provide them with a social activity or simply to access facilities (e.g. broadband) which were not available to them at home.

2.3.3 Effect upon Local External Stakeholders and the Community/Voluntary Sector

In our Baseline Report we noted:

- it was generally quite difficult to identify effects on local stakeholders and the local and community sectors in our case-study areas, over and above the development of the Grant Fund projects.

- although Brokers had been very active at general raising of awareness about the "digital inclusion" agenda, there was no evidence of Brokers having so far helped stakeholders to develop a better understanding of the "landscape" or what was available locally.

- in some cases, Brokers had made linkages between different community groups who were receiving funding from the Programme, but these were rather isolated examples, and were related to specific groups receiving funding under the Programme. There was, as yet, little evidence of Brokers establishing better links between community groups as other than a spin-off from the grant development activity.

- there were some good example of Brokers injecting new elements into applicants' thinking – often in terms of the "softer" elements of the importance of mentoring or support for new users of ICT but also in terms of specific technologies or applications such as skype or internet trading.

In general terms, our conclusions from the Baseline Report still hold true, perhaps inevitably, as the Brokers have continued to be focussed on project development

activities. However, we found further examples of the Brokers making linkages between Grant Fund projects, for example:

- In one case-study area, the Communities@One projects were working together to develop a technical support application;

- In another, a County-wide digital storytelling project was working with a number of groups who were also beneficiaries of Communities@one;

- Attendance at one of the Communities@One training events had led to one project considering joint working with a similar project in a neighbouring ward;

- A group which had received Communities@One funding for equipment was "hosting" informal training sessions from another Communities@One funded County-wide project.

Moreover, as we noted in our Baseline Report, three of the larger projects are themselves to some extent intended to "cascade out" ICT support and awareness to the voluntary and community sector, and these projects appear to be working effectively with very small voluntary sector organisations (although this is not entirely problem-free as one of these projects felt there was a degree of overlap between their work and the continued role of the Broker in supporting voluntary and community groups in the same areas).

In the case of one of these projects at least, it has become obvious to the promoter that the original intention to help such groups develop a web presence may have been over-ambitious. In this project, it was initially intended that Outreach Workers would help groups to develop their own websites. However, it had become apparent that this was too advanced for the groups themselves to undertake (it was never the intention that the project would build websites for groups – more that they would do it themselves in order to be sustainable). The project has therefore introduced blogging as an alternative and this has been extremely effective (according to the Outreach Workers) in connecting such groups with the wider world - several well established blogging sites were now being used by project beneficiary groups (e.g. an elderly residents association, a guinea pig rescue and a horticultural group).

There is thus evidence of the Programme making a real contribution to improving the technical support available to small groups – at least in some communities – and in encouraging better links between community groups who are actively engaged in the Programme.

It is less apparent that the Programme has as yet been able to lead to a clearer picture at a local level for external stakeholders and groups not involved with the Programme about available ICT facilities and resources, although in at least one local authority, the Broker had been working with the local authority and CVC to map local provision which it was intended would be put on the local authority website.

In terms of Community Groups' own use of technology, while in a small number of the projects, the Programme has clearly already helped to raise community groups' game in terms of their use of technology (for example, the use of eBay for small-scale trading, more professional production of publicity materials, development of websites), for the most part there is little evidence as yet of major changes in the extent and level of use of ICT by voluntary and community organisations involved in

the Programme. Indeed, as an example, it is striking how few of the smaller organisations regularly use e-mail as a routine form of communication.

2.3.4 Effects upon Facilities/Services Available Locally

In our Baseline Report, we noted that

- Although most of the projects we had considered were not yet in operation, Programme funding had already safeguarded the operation of ICT suites in five existing community centres, enabling the continuation of both "drop-in" and more formal ICT training; an existing ICT suite, which had been grossly underused, was opening longer hours as a result of the recruitment of a mentor; and a Community Centre had been able to set up an internet-enabled PC for use on a drop-in basis on a large estate which had no other publicly accessible ICT facilities.

- at least a further four new facilities and eight existing facilities with higher levels of staffing/equipment were expected to come on stream in the next few months.

As we have noted above, a relatively high proportion of the projects which we have examined have still yet to get fully underway and a number of the envisaged facilities have not yet come on stream.

However, our case-studies highlighted quite a number of enhanced services which are now being made available within Communities First areas thanks to the Programme:

- In one case-study area, the recruitment of a full-time mentor has enabled much fuller use of a pre-existing ICT suite, enabling 53 individuals to undertake learndirect courses on a drop-in basis, and providing facilities for a large number of migrant workers to use e-mail to communicate with family, while another project in the same area has provided additional support to enable children and young people to make much more intensive use of a "digilab" which was underutilised because of lack of paid staff;

- In another, ICT equipment bought by the Programme for a church is being used to run a small number of basic ICT courses, which are in principle open to all, though attendance has thus far been limited to church members;

- In a third area, an internet-enabled PC in a Community Centre is now used quite intensively, with a volunteer providing a degree of support to individuals with little experience of using the equipment;

- In another case-study area, as part of a broader project centred on digital storytelling, a local website highlighting events and activities in the community is about to go live;

- The large project where Communities@One funding had already safeguarded five learning centres at the time of the Baseline Report and which also involves providing a diagnostic and repair service for individuals and community groups was said by project staff to have "*really taken off*", an assertion supported by evidence of nearly 200 individuals having used the service. The project has now developed to include "drop-in" sessions to complement the more formal learning provided by the centres;

- Another large project has now (albeit after some delay) opened a new drop-in facility which provides both a repair service and initial learning opportunities, and is also providing technical support to both individuals and local businesses;

- In a case-study area, a major refurbishment of an IT suite has attracted new users both for formal training courses and for casual use, although the use of a satellite centre has not yet taken off, due to delays in recruitment and sickness absence of an IT mentor;

- The third large project in our sample is providing technical support to a number of voluntary organisations within the areas covered, including assistance with developing websites, trouble-shooting and building the capacity of individuals within the assisted organisations to undertake basic maintenance themselves.

One issue which was apparent from a number of the projects within our sample (though it is not possible to be sure if this is a general trend) was a tendency in some cases for the facilities/projects to be centred on a relatively limited range of individuals who were already active within organisations which were the grant recipients. In some cases, this was the explicit intention of the Grant, but in others (such as the Church referred to above, or a digital storytelling project where it was members of the management committee of a Community Centre – itself a recipient of Community@One funding – who had taken part) this was less obviously the intention. While the individuals concerned were in most cases themselves *"digitally excluded"*, and had low levels of formal education, they were not socially marginalised. In similar vein, a number of projects commented that they had not publicised the resources purchased by Communities@One because they were afraid of excessive demand.

A second issue for consideration is the extent to which the support being provided by the Programme relates to increasing exposure to or experience of different ICT uses, or simply reduces the cost barriers for individuals who are unable to afford market provision. While it might be expected that a significant proportion of the beneficiaries interviewed would already have some familiarity with basic ICT (e.g in the case of projects concerned with providing care and repair services), it was notable that most of those we interviewed (particularly of those below retirement age) had some access to PCs at home or some experience of using them. For these individuals, the attraction of the Communities@One project was that it offered free access to services – for example, access to the internet.

Thus, in a Community Centre with an internet-enabled PC, a number of the users had a PC at home, but none had internet access (generally attributing this to the cost, though also in part to security fears). Some of these beneficiaries used the Community Centre PC to print off materials, because although free internet-access was available at the local library, printing was charged for.

Similarly, in the case of two of the projects which provided an advice, care and repair service for individuals PCs, one of the main reasons for uptake was the fact that alternative providers (almost exclusively perceived as PC World) were charged-for. At the same time, both of these projects seemed quite effective at developing

relationships with individuals who contacted them and helping them to progress in their understanding of and enthusiasm for ICT.

2.4 Intermediate Effects (Outcomes)

2.4.1 Policy Effects

In our Baseline Report, we noted that:

 - central stakeholders were unable to point to **specific** ways in which the Programme was already driving the digital inclusion agenda in Wales or elsewhere. However, a number of stakeholders, including those with knowledge and experience of the digital inclusion agenda elsewhere in the UK were convinced that the Programme was already demonstrating that applying a community development approach to digital inclusion was a viable and potentially far more successful way of tackling the issue than a physical centre-based approach which was seen to have been favoured elsewhere.

- the Welsh Assembly Government's "*Towards E-Wales: A Consultation on Exploiting the Power of ICT in Wales"* published in July 2006 provided clear and consistent evidence of the extent to which digital inclusion is seen as a critical element of harnessing ICT to produce economic and social change, though it was not clear this could be attributed directly to the Programme.

- the delivery model of Communities@one (with "embedded" but centrally managed Brokers taking a very proactive approach to project development) was seen as one that could and should inform thinking about other Programmes such as Communities First and broader policy agendas such as "Beyond Boundaries"[15]

There is relatively little to add to our findings in the Baseline Report at this stage. Central stakeholders continued to make the point that:

"it does feel like a ground breaking project…though we are making it up as we go along"

and argued that it was ahead of what was happening elsewhere in the UK. Linkages were clearly being made through the Social Justice and Regeneration Department to the thinking about the way in which future Convergence Funding resources might be used to promote digital inclusion, but there were (as yet) few concrete examples of any direct influence over policy. In programme delivery terms, the Central Team did, however, point to the example of a nascent large-scale basic skills project focused on the Heads of the Valleys area which was hoping to employ a similar approach (with Community Brokers proactively identifying and developing community based projects to tackle needs).

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[15] The Welsh Assembly Government's Response to the Beecham Review, looking at ways of improving integrated working across the public sector in Wales.

2.4.2 The Use Made of ICTs in Communities

> In our Baseline Report we noted that:
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> - it was too early to make any judgement of the results of the projects within case-study areas on the usage of ICT, since the majority of the projects were only just starting, though there were some individual examples of projects already making a difference to individuals lives.

As we have noted above, a fairly significant minority of the projects within our case-studies have not yet become operational and many of the others are still only in the early stages of delivering. It is therefore still too early to draw any firm conclusions about the nature and scale of effects on individuals and community organisations of the Programme as a whole.

Nevertheless, in terms of **individuals** we were able to identify a number of examples where projects were "making a difference":

- One of our large scale projects has already succeeded in recruiting 23 volunteers who are assisting with the repair, maintenance and operation of PCs: many of these were previous service users who had become enthused through their involvement with the project and had gained both skills and social benefits from the project;

- There was evidence from both this project and the other project with a significant "care and repair" element, of individuals who had been enabled to continue to use their ICT equipment who otherwise would not have afforded to have it repaired. In total over 500 people have made use of these two projects;

- We found numerous examples of individuals who had previously felt too scared to make use of basic ICT equipment having been encouraged to do so as a result of informal support at "drop in" centres, for example an ex-Steel Worker who *"wanted to belong to the 21st Century"* but who had felt too embarrassed to continue with a formal introductory course he had started, or a retired nurse who had been too afraid to undertake a course at the library but was considering buying a broadband-enabled laptop after her experience of applying technology in the voluntary organisation in which she volunteered;

- Many of the beneficiaries interviewed were using the facilities offered to access the internet for a wide range of purposes relating to shopping, leisure, hobbies and interests, who otherwise either did not have internet access at home or had only a dial-up modem which was too slow for many purposes;

- Although many of the individuals interviewed were already active in community organisations, in several cases projects were playing a role in combating social exclusion and isolation as well as combating digital exclusion:

"coming here helps with my depression … because I'm retired and on my own".

- A number of beneficiaries of digital storytelling projects gave very positive accounts of the effects on their self-confidence of engagement with these

projects, though here the emphasis tended to be on the storytelling rather than the technical aspects:

"*when you're like me, I've got no qualifications, writing a story alone was quite an achievement for me – I used to be pushed to the back of the class*"

- A 16 year old at a youth project had been using an internet suite to access GCSE revision websites which she said it was unlikely she would have been able to use otherwise;

- One individual was making use of a refurbished ICT suite in a Community Centre was learning how to access the JobCentre Plus website.

Many of these examples are, of course, of relatively modest benefits but many of the Grant Fund projects are also very small.

Despite the last example, from the evidence of our case-study projects we would not expect to see significant effects in terms of employment outcomes: only a handful of the beneficiaries we interviewed were considering returning to employment.

In terms of **voluntary and community groups** again a number of positive, but modest, effects were visible through our case-studies:

- A number of projects were enabling small community groups to develop an internet presence either through the development of websites, or as has been seen above, through blogs. For example, a website for a community festival group which had been developed with the assistance of a case-study project (but where the project had supported the group to develop and learn how to maintain the website rather than doing it for them) was seen as providing

"a lot of credibility in helping to get sponsorship from local businesses"

    In all this project was currently working on 29 websites for voluntary and community groups (against a target of 72 for the full-term of the project);

- The same project was also providing technical support and training in trouble-shooting PCs for a ICT learning suite which had lost its technical support because the provider it had contracted with had gone out of business;

- On a larger scale, as has already been reported, the funding of an in-house technical support service through Communities@One for a consortium of three voluntary sector training providers was enabling continued learning opportunities at five learning centres in Communities First areas;

- A cancer charity shop was using a PC purchased through the Programme to sell higher-value items through e-Bay and had so far (in nine months) generated around £800 of sales.

As discussed in Section 2.2.5, no aggregate data for the Grant Fund projects are yet available. Moreover, given the variety of different quantitative and qualitative

objectives set by individual projects, it may well be that this will not be particularly informative.

However, one issue which has emerged quite clearly from our fieldwork is the extent to which there is likely to be double-counting between projects supported by the Programme. To some extent, this is a by-product of what is a very positive aspect of the Programme – the extent of joint working between different Grant Fund projects – but it will be important to bear this in mind as data become available. For example:

- Learner support for a church-based ICT suite is being provided by another County wide Communities@One project, meaning users are likely to be counted by both projects;

- A County-wide digital storytelling project developed digital stories with three members of the management committee of a Community Centre, two of whom are regular users of the Community Centre's internet-enabled PC, which was also provided by Communities@One;

- The ICT learning suite which was receiving support from the large project because of the insolvency of the technical support contractor had been equipped as part of a Communities@One project;

- A project was being developed in one of the case-study areas in order to provide technical support to a group of Communities@One projects, some of whom were not yet operating because they had underestimated their technical support needs.

2.4.3 Effects on Community Infrastructure

In our Baseline Report, we noted that

- it was too early to comment on any effects on the coherence and effectiveness of community organisations in the case-study areas.

As will be apparent from Section 2.3.3, we feel it is still too early to comment on any significant effects in terms of the coherence of the community infrastructure. As will be clear, the vast majority of the effort of the Brokers on the ground over the last six months has been on continuing to assist individual projects – either those still under development or those struggling with implementation. While there are examples of Brokers encouraging networking and collaboration between different Grant Fund projects, this strong **internal** focus on projects means that it is unrealistic to expect (at least at present) major effects in terms of greater coherence of the sector at a local level.

2.4.4 Sustainability of Facilities/Services

In our Baseline Report, we noted that:

- while it was too early to reach definitive conclusions, there were questions about the potential of some of the projects for sustainability beyond the lifetime of the Programme, not least since so many were providing resources for staffing existing or (in a few cases) new ICT facilities and concerns about the short-term nature of the funding were already being flagged up

- at the same time, it might be argued that such interventions should of their nature be only short-to-medium term, given that it might be expected, once the benefit of ICT has been proved to otherwise sceptical or disinterested groups and individuals, most might be expected to acquire home-based resources.

- a small number of projects – particularly those involving technical support - were already focussed on developing the capacity of volunteers, as a key way of providing longer-term sustainability.

- a small number of stakeholders were concerned that the original focus on developing sustainable technical support services had been lost, although it could be argued that it was important not to undermine local markets. Nevertheless, it was not clear that the Programme was of itself now helping to put any new mechanisms in place which will ensure longer-term support being available.

Relatively few of the projects within our case-studies appear to be readily sustainable in the absence of further external funding after the end of the Programme, though there are some exceptions (for example, two small projects relating to a cancer charity where the running costs for the ICT equipment acquired is likely to be absorbed in the overall running costs; or a project designed to take inter-active educational materials on astronomy into schools which will rely on volunteers for its implementation).

As we have noted, the majority of the projects involve revenue funding of staff (either on salaried, fixed-term contracts or on a sessional basis): while this is wholly in line with the philosophy of the Programme and appears to be key to the success of many of the projects (since, as is clear from our work with beneficiaries, for the least computer-literate, access to kit is not the problem), there is no prospect of the majority of these posts becoming self-funding.

Moreover, for some of the beneficiaries, it is the fact that the services available from Communities@One projects (whether in terms of internet access, use of materials or technical support) are free which makes them attractive: these beneficiaries were (for the most part) clear that they could not afford to pay for them.

None of our projects had so far started to charge clients for services, even where (in one or two cases), this had been envisaged in the applications, so even where staff are not being funded from the Programme, there are likely to be issues in terms of meeting running costs such as internet access, consumables and insurance (which has proved a major headache for a number of projects). In the case of one of the larger projects, project staff seemed acutely aware of the longer term challenge which they faced:

"if B. [a local supplier of IT support services] folded, it would be lovely for us…..we need to generate income … to keep going as a social enterprise … we know that training isn't a money spinner, although we could sell training on the back of support contracts".

This comment perhaps underlines our concerns about the capacity for projects to distort local markets.

To some extent, the projects concerned with providing technical support to community and voluntary groups are focussed on capacity building, on enabling the groups to provide their own support in the longer term, but even these projects believed (quite rightly in our view) that they were unlikely to have reached a position where the short-term needs for support and training had been met by the end of the Programme.

2.5 Impacts

In our Baseline Report, we noted that it was too early to reach any conclusions as to the impacts of the Programme in terms of individual skills and outcomes or in terms of the effectiveness and cohesion of the voluntary and community sector:

To a very real extent, it remains the case that it is difficult, if not impossible, to reach any firm conclusions about the actual impacts of the Programme on individuals and on the voluntary and community sector. Indeed, quantifying these impacts is likely to be impossible, even at the stage of the final evaluation, because of the very diverse nature of the projects being funded, the difficulty of deriving meaningful aggregate data and the very strong influence of external factors (including the inter-relationship of different Communities@One projects).

Having said this, we have provided in Section 2.3.2 a number of examples of positive outcomes from case-study projects in terms of both individuals and voluntary and community organisations. Our analysis of the way in which projects have been developed suggests that in the majority of cases, projects were unlikely to have come forward in the absence of the Communities@One Programme (only six projects in total were "pre-existing projects" which were already seeking funding in advance of the Programme) and this appears to be confirmed by the (at this stage) very limited evidence from our control group areas: this suggests that deprived communities without access to the Programme find it difficult to develop and to get funding for digital inclusion type projects.

Taken together, we believe there is probably a relatively high degree of project-level additionality, in other words, that many of the Grant Fund projects would simply not have existed in the absence of the Programme.

However, it is also important to consider whether for the individuals and community groups benefiting from Grant Fund projects, there would have been alternative ways to achieving the same results, even in the absence of those projects ("beneficiary-level additionality").

Here it is more difficult to draw definite conclusions. In terms of the evidence from our beneficiaries, a relatively small number of individuals were able to point to alternative courses of action they would have taken in the absence of the project, for example taking a course at College, using the internet facilities at the local library, or going to a commercial supplier for repairs to a PC, while the majority did not.

But while for some, it was clear that having suitable opportunities in an environment where they felt comfortable and with appropriate support had been essential in getting them to engage with digital technology, this was not the case for all.

In one case-study area, although several local stakeholders felt that the target group for Communities@One were unlikely to use a computer suite in the library because

there was no learner support and because the atmosphere was felt to be unwelcoming, several of the beneficiaries of one of the projects which provided an internet-enabled PC had experience of using the free internet-enabled PCs at the local library and had found the service generally good (one user commented favourably on the support received when things had gone wrong and another commended the long opening hours): however, they preferred to use the Community Centre PC because it was nearer, printing was free, there were no queues and there was greater privacy.

In this example, clearly, though the Communities@One project was producing benefits it was at least to some extent displacing demand that might otherwise have been fulfilled through the library.

3.0 Conclusions and Recommendations

3.1 Conclusions

Our Baseline Report contained a summary of the strengths and areas for possible improvement of the Programme as we saw them in December 2006. For the most part this analysis (particularly of the strengths) remains valid, although it is clear that significant efforts have been made to address a number of the areas where we felt more needed to be done, for example, in terms of increasing the emphasis on good practice and strengthening communication between the Central Team and Brokers.

Overall, the Programme – and particularly the role and activity of the Brokers – continues to receive very positive endorsement from both voluntary and community organisations benefiting from it and from central and local stakeholders. Many aspects of the way in which it has engaged key organisations at both a national and a local level are exemplary and the extent of Grant Fund activity which has been generated is remarkable. Although it is too early to comment with any certainty about the **extent** of the positive outcomes and the impact of the Programme as a whole, our fieldwork suggests that Grant Fund projects are generally fully in line with the objectives of the Programme and that the right sorts of groups and individuals are being supported and has highlighted a number of examples of the beneficial effects which the Programme is having.

At the same time, and while we recognise the very major time-pressure which the Programme has been under from its original conception, it does seem that Grant Fund project development has continued to dominate activity over the last six months, to some extent overwhelming other intended aspects of the Programme. Moreover, our research has flagged up some concerns about the speed with which projects are being implemented and the certainty that all the financial commitments will result in spend. While many of the processes are in place to monitor this, we believe our fieldwork underlines the importance now of moving from project development and approval to ensuring that projects deliver and that lessons are learnt from what they achieve.

3.2 Recommendations

In terms of recommendations, we group these according to the four areas covered in our Baseline Report of Objectives, Policy Linkages, Delivery and Management and Organisation. In view of the ongoing work on a possible successor Programme, we have also added a fifth section relating to any future similar Programmes.

3.2.1 Programme Objectives

Recommendation 1: It is important to build on the efforts to increase the sharing of good practice both between projects and with other stakeholders. In particular, we recommend that:
   a) work to develop an inter-active website is continued and that this incorporates the idea of an inter-active map linked to project descriptions (and as far as is possible, also highlights other publicly-accessible ICT facilities not themselves funded by Communities@One)
   b) if resources allow, work is commissioned to draw up a comprehensive set of project profiles of approved projects

c) the possibility of factoring in to any successor Programme a series of workshops to showcase good practice, including funding the participation of project managers of Communities@One projects (which by then will have come to an end) is examined further.

3.2.2 Policy Linkages

Recommendation 2: Efforts to build appropriate linkages with learning providers and other key statutory agencies such as libraries need to continue, both at a central and a local level.

Recommendation 3: It will be important for Brokers and the Programme more generally to re-engage with local stakeholders towards the end of the life of the Programme to raise their awareness of what has been achieved.

3.2.3 Delivery

Recommendation 4: While we appreciate the importance of ensuring only eligible expenditure is approved in Grant Fund projects, Programme managers (in liaison with WEFO) need to consider whether it is possible to simplify the requirements for itemising each individual item of expenditure in applications and quarterly returns.

Recommendation 5: In view of the importance of redirecting Brokers efforts to supporting approved projects and ensuring that they are fully implemented, and the experience of projects to date which suggests that there are often delays between approval and implementation, a final cut-off for accepting new project applications needs to specified. This should be no later than 31 August 2007.

Recommendation 6: The Monitoring Framework provides an excellent basis for progress-chasing with approved projects, and, in view of the evidence of some delays and underspends in implementing projects, needs to be energetically put into effect.

Recommendation 7: Programme managers should factor in the likelihood that a proportion of Forward Plan projects can not be brought to approval within these timescales and that some of the approved projects are likely to underspend. In order to minimise underspends, the suggestion that all projects with revenue costs should be invited to continue until the end of May 2008 should be taken forward: it will be important to do this straight away, to allow projects the opportunity to plan ahead. Programme managers should discuss with WEFO the possibility of underspends, particularly in the case of Objective 2, and should agree a suitable date when any likely underspends should be formally notified.

Recommendation 8: Where appropriate, Brokers need to re-emphasise to projects the importance of broadening access to facilities and activities funded by the Programme beyond those already actively engaged in the organisations' core activities.

3.2.4 Management and Organisation

Recommendation 9: While we understand the logic for the relocation of some of the Brokers to Wales Co-operative Centre offices, it is important as far as possible to

retain the model of Brokers being centrally managed but "embedded" with local stakeholders.

Recommendation 10: Within the context of the Monitoring and Evaluation Framework, the evaluation team should work with the Monitoring Officer to ensure that the outputs database provides as much useful aggregate data as is possible, building on the fact that a number of projects are already collecting more detailed data on beneficiaries.

3.2.5 Future Programmes

Recommendation 11: In terms of any future Programme, there seems a relatively strong case for continuing to concentrate resources on areas which are objectively recognised as having high levels of deprivation, but some relaxation of the current exclusive focus on Communities First areas may be appropriate, particularly where Communities First areas are isolated from other such areas. Efforts may be needed in future to increase the level of activity in the Valleys.

Recommendation 12: While we acknowledge that it is inappropriate for Communities@One staff to lead on the development of a potential successor project to Communities@One (given that the Social Justice and Regeneration Department are the project sponsor and that contractual issues are involved), any new project/Programme needs to draw on the experience of those implementing the current Programme. It might be appropriate to hold a consultation event with staff and a number of current Grant Fund projects before finalising a project "concept" so that important operational lessons are factored into any successor Programmes.

Recommendation 13: For any future Programme, a guidance note for potential projects should be prepared which should set out the roles and responsibilities of Brokers in terms of ongoing support, and the limits to these responsibilities. In order to ensure that there is sufficient commitment from organisations applying for funding, Brokers need to make sure that applicants have real "ownership" of applications: in this context, it may not be appropriate for Brokers themselves to undertake the bulk of the work of drafting applications, for example, but this in turn may require making application forms still more simple (e.g. with regard to the degree of detail required on individual items of equipment).

Recommendation 14: Given the concerns over the sustainability of many of the current projects, those developing plans for a successor Programme will need to consider whether it will be appropriate to provide additional resources to existing projects, where they have performed well and whether transitional arrangements can be put in place before March 2008 to ensure that such projects do not lose key staff due to a hiatus between the two Programmes

Recommendation 15: More consideration needs to be given to the question of the extent to which it is desirable for a digital inclusion Programme to fund activity which is principally concerned with providing free or at reduced cost to certain individuals or groups, facilities which are available within the market, as opposed to activity which is focussed on raising awareness, increasing skills or building capacity.

Annex 1: Extract from the Baseline Report:
"Chapter 2: Background: The Communities@One Programme"

2.1 Digital Inclusion and the Origins of the Programme

In the last two decades, ICT has transformed life in developed societies: whether it is used for keeping in touch with friends and relatives in other parts of the world, for enabling people to work in more flexible ways (such as home-working and operating "virtual" enterprises), for shopping and for by-passing traditional service providers such as travel agents or insurance brokers, or for accessing information about, and doing business with government, ICT either already has or is in the course of radically reshaping the way in which we live our lives.

But the very fact that ICT has the potential to empower individuals and communities means that differential access to, familiarity with and use of ICT can potentially exacerbate the gap between wealthier and more powerful groups in society – whether defined in social or spatial terms – and those who are less privileged. While "entry costs" to the use of ICT in terms of hardware and internet access costs have become progressively less, they are still not negligible for those on fixed low incomes. Even more importantly, the gap between the "knowledge rich" and the "knowledge poor" can mean that even where there is access to the ICT infrastructure, it is used in a far more constrained way by excluded groups and communities. This has led to the development of the concept of "digital inclusion" – a process which seeks to ensure greater equality of access to the potential benefits of ICT to those groups which might otherwise be excluded for economic, social, spatial or cultural reasons and to go further by using ICT as a way of empowering people to transform their lives.

"Digital inclusion" is the fundamental aim of Communities@One. Launched in January 2006 and funded by the Social Justice and Regeneration (SJR) Department of the Welsh Assembly Government and the European Regional Development Fund (from the Objective 1 and 2 Programmes for West Wales and the Valleys and East Wales respectively), the Programme is targeted at the Communities First areas: 100 wards and 32 sub-wards, identified in 2000 as the focus of a long-term, flagship community development programme to provide holistic support to the most disadvantaged communities in Wales.

The development of the Programme began in the second half of 2004 and, in origin, it was essentially opportunity-led. Funding of some £4.5 million had been informally ring-fenced under Priority 2, Measure 2 ("To Stimulate and Support Demand for ICT") of the Objective 1 Programme for a project aimed at demonstrating the benefits of ICT for the community as a whole and supporting communities to increase their access to and use of ICT[16]. The then Welsh Development Agency had been developing a project (known as "e-communities") which was intended to take this forward, but in mid-2004 the Agency's Objective 1 funding applications were reprioritised and work on the project abandoned. At this point, the Communities Directorate of SJR was asked to take on responsibility for developing an alternative project (and to source match-funding for it) which could promote "digital inclusion" and community access to ICT.

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[16] Objective 1 West Wales and the Valleys Programme Complement November 2002, page 24 - 5

The Programme concept and idea – which early on focussed on targeting the initiative on Communities First areas - were developed by the Communities Directorate, but drawing on widespread informal consultation and the support of an informal (and pre-existing) network of organisations and individuals with an interest in the agenda (see Section 4) during the second half of 2004. Match-funding was secured from within the Welsh Assembly Government's budgets. A formal Objective 1 project application was developed in the first half of 2005 and funding secured, with the first staff appointed in the autumn of 2005.

2.2. Communities@One: Aims and Objectives

The overall aim of Communities@One is to *"help achieve social inclusion through the use of technology – digital inclusion"* and more particularly *"to enable communities and individuals to use ICT in ways relevant to them to enhance their quality of life, overcome difficulties and allow them to fulfil their social, economic and cultural potential"* [17]*.*

In this broad context, Communities@One at its outset had four interrelated objectives (as set out in Box 2.1)[18]:

Box 2.1: Communities@One Objectives

ICT enabled communities – to encourage and support community use of ICT to ensure ICT access, skills progression and outreach to the disengaged. It will help engage citizens with community organisations and activities. This objective will include ensuring that suitable ICT support provision is made available throughout the project area, using existing provision where possible but delivered to common quality thresholds.

National and local information and support structures– to ensure that the local projects delivering the programme are well guided and have the capacity to deliver results, that resources are channelled as effectively as possible and that a network of support and sharing is established. Good practice will be identified and exemplars will be established as points of references for other community organisations involved in this initiative.

A community sector enabled by ICT – will be developed which is well co-ordinated with local regeneration partnerships and is able to make the best strategic use of ICT for efficient operations both within its own organisations and the communities it serves. The project will resource local community brokers to provide support to community organisations to develop a range of projects. This, in turn, will enable local organisations to engage local ICT specialists to support their work, so creating new jobs in high technology in SMEs and social enterprises.

Better enabled service delivery - to encourage communities to better engage with key service deliverers, including local authorities, health service providers, the police, employment and careers services and learning centres. The project will encourage service providers to make innovative use of the medium in order to forge better links with communities and fine-tune their services to local need. It will also allow community organisations to build stronger links with the National Assembly in its priority areas.

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[17] Guidance p. 11
[18] Project Plan p. 3-4

In essence, the Programme is intended to:

- use community organisations as a way of providing individuals in those communities with access to ICT infrastructure and opportunities to better understand and exploit ICT in a range of ways including a better interface with public service providers, with a view to promoting economic and social regeneration; and

- strengthen the community sector itself, both by encouraging the most effective use of ICT and building closer collaboration both between diverse community organisations operating in the same areas and increasing co-operation between community organisations and statutory service providers.

The Programme is firmly based on encouraging bottom-up, community-based initiatives, but at the same time seeks to provide "central" expertise, ensure common quality standards and disseminate good practice. The Programme's underlying principles (see Box 2.2) [19] underline the importance of capitalising on existing provision, including building new linkages between existing ICT provision, rather than creating parallel structures.

Box 2.2: Communities@One Underlying Principles

New provision is brought to areas where it does not currently exist;

Existing provision is extended to provide an outreach capacity for the most marginalized groups;

Contact is made between ICT activities that are already in place in order that they no longer stand alone and can benefit from working and learning together and sharing experiences;

Priorities are identified locally by community groups in conjunction with a community broker

2.3 Communities@One Delivery Mechanisms

2.3.1 Budget

The overall budget for Communities@One is £9.565 million for the period until June 2008. Just over £5 million of this was originally earmarked for the Grant Fund, with just over £1.5 million allocated for the costs of the Central Team (staff, management costs and overheads of the managing body and marketing). The balance of the funding – some£3 million – was allocated for outreach support costs, with around £1.7 million of this allocated to meet the costs of the Community Brokers (staff and location costs) and the balance available for technical support.

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[19] Guidance, p. 12

2.3.2 The Grant Fund

The Grant Fund represents a key element of the Communities@One Programme – although it is important to stress, as should be clear from Section 2.2 above, that the Programme is more than a Grant Scheme.

According to the Communities@One Guidance[20], the Grant Fund is intended to provide grants of any size to groups which:

- *"are a not-for-profit community or voluntary sector group (including Communities First Partnerships)*
- *would normally be working in, and involving people from, a Communities First area, or if outside the area, the activity must be of direct benefit to the Communities First area;*
- *have a constitution or set of rules, dated and signed as "adopted" by the Chair, or other senior office holder on behalf of the group*
- *have a bank account, in the name of [the] group, which requires at least two signatures*
- *can provide a copy of [the] most recent accounts or statement of income and expenditure and a bank statement."*

Applications must be submitted with the support of a Community Broker[21] but there are no upper or lower limits on the size of the application.

Larger applications (over £15,000) are assessed by a Grants Panel, which consists of members of the Advisory Panel (see 2.3.4) and which meets at least quarterly. Applications below £5,000 are assessed by a "mini-Grants" panel consisting of senior members of the Central Team (which also screens larger applications before submission to the full Grants Panel). It was originally intended that all applications over £5,000 would be assessed at Grants Panel meetings, but it has subsequently been agreed that applications between £5,000 and £15,000 should be assessed by the mini-Grants panel and then considered by the Grants Panel by written procedure[22]. In all cases, the Assessment Criteria used are the same and are outlined in Box 2.3 (over).

Although the grant criteria originally excluded national voluntary organisations, this was revisited by the Advisory Panel in May 2006, when it was decided that projects promoted by national organisations could be considered where it was the case *"that the Community Broker Managers confirm that the service or project could not otherwise be provided by a local community/voluntary group"*[23]. The same meeting also decided that projects promoted by statutory organisations (but not by for-profit private companies) could also be considered, provided that the Community Broker Managers were convinced that a similar project could not be undertaken from within the voluntary or community sector.

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[20] p. 43
[21] Guidance, p. 45
[22] Minutes of Advisory Group Meeting of 10 May 2006
[23] Advisory Group Meeting, 10 May 2006, Document 3, p.1

Box 1: Grant Fund Assessment Criteria

Community Benefit
Is there a clear identified need for the project?
Does the application benefit the community, in general, as a whole and is it available to all of the community?
Are there any parts of the community which would directly benefit from the project?
Is there evidence that the project can achieve the results described in the application?

Marginalised Groups
Does the application help the digital inclusion of e.g.:
Minority Ethnic Groups
People with Disabilities
Older/Younger People
Other

Innovation
Is the application innovative in looking at new ways of engaging people with ICT?
Will it date quickly?

Sustainability
Is this sustainable in longer term?
What is needed to make it so?
Does the project have the potential to generate income and move towards self-sustainability?

Support
Has the group identified the skills it needs to make a project work?
Does the group have the existing skills to do the project?
What support does the group need, is this factored into the bid?

"Do" ability
Is the project do-able - given skills, costs and support?
What existing provision is already in the community concerned?
Does it or should it link to other projects?
Is there scope for partnership working with other local projects?
Does the project bring additional benefits if it is an existing project?

Links with Partnerships/Strategies

What evidence is there of links with other strategies at both a local and national level?

Jobs (for applications in excess of £5,000)
How many jobs, if any, are created through the application?
How many jobs, if any, are safeguarded through this application?
What informal training is provided for Group Members?

Performance
Has the applicant set measurable outcomes?

Management systems
Does the group have the capacity to manage the grant/project?

Eligibility
Does the project meet eligibility requirements of WEFO including measures to promote environmental awareness? (checking what the WEFO requirements are and then this will be a fuller question for the brokers to answer)

Cost effectiveness
Does the project demonstrate value for money?

Grants are available for a wide range of projects, both capital and revenue, which are seen to help promote digital inclusion. Examples given in the Guidance include not only supporting existing locally-based ICT projects and *"setting up new computer provision"* in communities where this is not readily available, but also projects to support mentoring of individuals in the use of ICT and applications from community projects without a specific ICT focus which *"display an innovative approach to utilising ICT and bridging the "digital divide" within their locality"*[24]. Support is not restricted to groups which provide general public access to equipment and ICT is deliberately defined in a broad fashion:

"ICT refers to any technology that is used to communicate, provide or find information. Obvious examples are computers, the Internet, e-mail, telephones, mobile phone and even digital television and radio"[25].

2.3.3 The Central Team

Although the Programme is "owned" by the Social Justice and Regeneration Department of the Welsh Assembly Government, who were the applicant for the ERDF funding, the management and delivery of the Programme were contracted out through a public procurement process to the Wales Co-operative Centre, a not-for-profit organisation whose main remit is the promotion of social enterprise. The Programme's Central Team is based in the Centre's headquarters in Cardiff and consists of:

- The Programme Manager, Alun Burge, who was recruited by open competition but who is a secondee from the Welsh Assembly Government and who was responsible in his previous role as Head of Communities First for developing the Programme;
- Two Community Broker Managers (it was originally intended to recruit only one Manager) who have line management responsibility for the Community Brokers but also undertake a number of other roles within the Programme;
- A Finance Officer (integrated with the Centre's Financial Team);
- A Marketing Officer (working alongside the Centre's own Marketing Manager);
- A Technical Support Officer who provides advice not just to Programme staff but direct to Grant Fund applicants and projects;
- An Administrative Officer.

The overall role of the Central Team[26] is to:

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[24] Guidance, p. 45- 46
[25] Guidance, p. 21
[26] Guidance, p. 17

- Provide management support to Community Brokers;
- Ensure that Community Brokers are aware of interesting initiatives so that community and interest groups are kept informed of latest developments;
- Manage [the] grant fund that will be used to fund projects and required technical support at a local level;
- Maintain contact with other initiatives and developments across Wales and beyond;
- Provide quarterly reports to WEFO and the Communities Directorate;
- Ensure that the initiative is appropriately marketed.

The Team is line-managed by Lesley Jones, who is the Deputy Chief-Executive of the Wales Co-operative Centre.

The Central Team is assisted by the Advisory Panel, which was, however, set up at the initiative of the SJR Department, with Members appointed by the Minister for Social Justice and Regeneration.

The Terms of Reference of the Group, as agreed at its first formal meeting in November 2005[27] are *"to support the successful delivery of the project by providing informed advice to the Wales Co-operative Centre and the Project Manager"* and more particularly to

- Discuss and advise on the overall strategic direction of the project;
- Receive and consider quarterly reports on project activity including statistics relating to project targets;
- Nominate a number of representatives to sit on the Grant Panel which will assess grant applications from community organisations and make recommendations for grant payments to the Wales Co-operative Centre;
- Advise on procurement and provision of technical support at a local level;
- Undertake any additional activities as may be identified and agreed with the Wales Co-operative Centre.

The Panel is chaired by David Jenkins, who is Chair of the Wales Co-operative Centre and also holds a number of other relevant appointments and meets quarterly.

2.3.4. Community Brokers and "Outreach"

According to the Communities@One guidance, the *"Community Brokers are pivotal to the success of the Communities @One initiative"*[28]. There are currently 11 Brokers in post[29]. Although they are on the payroll of the Wales Co-operative Centre and were recruited centrally, they are based in the field, located with bodies which were perceived to be playing a critical role with regard to digital inclusion and to Communities First (mostly local authorities or County Voluntary Councils [CVCs]). Their formal responsibilities (as envisaged at the outset of the Programme) are set

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[27] Draft Terms of Reference and Minutes of the Meeting of 1 November 2005
[28] p. 17
[29] A twelfth post was originally envisaged to cover RCT. However at the outset of the Programme it was agreed with the local authority that there was a degree of overlap with a separate, Local Authority-led Objective 1 project, Shape-IT.org, and that for the first six months Communities@One would not be actively promoted in RCT. After the six months this was reviewed, and while it was agreed that it would be appropriate for Communities@One to be promoted in RCT, by this point, the Grant Fund was already heavily committed, so it was decided not to appoint an additional Broker.

out in Box 2.4[30] (over), although they are also expected to play a key role in *"the identification and dissemination of best practice [which] will be at the heart of this project"[31].*

In reality, however, the role of the Brokers has evolved considerably since the "model" job description was developed and a new version more reflective of actual practice is being drawn up. Much of the initial effort of the Brokers has been concentrated on developing networks and partnerships and more particularly helping to develop, as well as co-ordinate, applications for the Grant Fund.

Box 2.4: Brokers roles and responsibilities

Establish links and partnerships with key local agencies (community/voluntary, statutory and private) and develop their role in digital inclusion.

Work alongside local people to help them to overcome barriers to access and facilities.

Review local ICT and Internet resources, facilities and barriers to access.

Assist in drawing together baseline information in order to identify gaps in current provision and access and developing creative and effective ways of meeting needs, e.g. through local content and networks.

Promote and enhance use of local resources and facilities among new and existing users.

Advise new and existing Internet users and groups of rights and responsibilities and any appropriate codes, protocols or standards.

Co-ordinate applications from local groups and present them to the Advisory Group for consideration.

Help local community groups access other prospective funding sources.

Motivate and work with a team of volunteer community champions and activists and community tutors who promote interest in learning locally.

Work in partnerships with local learning providers to create learning progression routes.

Work in partnership with local agencies, to create joined-up approaches to skills development and job seeking.

Promote government services online through appropriate local channels.

Brokers are expected to work closely with the Communities First Partnerships, but are not directly answerable to them. On the contrary, the Guidance makes clear that brokers

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[30] Guidance, p. 18-19 and "Model Brokers job description" at Annex B, p. 69 onwards
[31] Project Plan, p. 14

"may, if appropriate, convene and work with a local group to assist in the development of the Communities @One programme at the local level. The Community Broker may also work with any previously existing groups. However, it will be for the Community Broker to determine the most appropriate way forward"[32].

Besides the direct assistance of the Brokers, the Programme was conceived as having a key role to play in building up the local availability of technical support, both by increasing the capacity of community organisations themselves and by encouraging the development of local social entrepreneurs capable of providing such support. Ensuring the provision of adequate and long-term technical support was seen as a crucial way of underpinning the Programme's sustainability, since prior research had suggested that lack technical support was often a cause of ICT infrastructure within deprived communities being unused[33].

The Project Plan refers to "Circuit riders" as one of the key elements of the Programme (alongside the management agency and the central unit, the Advisory Group, the Community Brokers, and the Grant Fund) who would be:

"local ICT specialists, … funded for project support through the central fund. Local ICT specialists from the communities themselves will be encouraged to apply for consulting status as a means of creating tangible social enterprises. These Circuit Riders will be available as a resource for the Community Brokers to support bottom up project creation, assistance with any IT related queries/issues and to advise on such matters as required"[34].

A Technical Support Fund, with a budget of well over £1 million was created in order to underpin these efforts.

2.4 Digital Inclusion Elsewhere in the U.K.

2.4.1 Introduction

In this section we consider the broader UK policy context relevant to the area of tackling the "digital divide". In doing so, it is important to stress at the outset that some of the policy documents labelled "UK" appear in practice to apply only to England. In fact, several UK Government departments have published strategies that deal with digital inclusion to varying degrees, including the former Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM)[35], the Cabinet Office (E-Envoy's Office), the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit and the Department for Education and Skills (DfES). As such, there does not appear to be a *"natural home"* for digital inclusion policy, or indeed a Ministerial portfolio with direct and over-arching responsibility for it. We therefore consider a number of policy and strategy documents at a UK level which set out Government thinking on the digital inclusion agenda which are relevant in the context of the Communities @ One Programme. We also consider briefly the London Advice Services Aliance which influenced early thinking about Communities@One and digital inclusion policy in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

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[32] p. 18
[33] BT: Communities@One audit, p1.
[34] p. 7
[35] Now the Department for Communities and Local Government.

2.4.2 UK Government Policy

"Inclusion through Innovation *(Tackling Social Exclusion through New Technologies)"* is a report published by the Social Exclusion Unit[36] (SEU) of the former ODPM in November 2005.

The report explores the role of ICT in improving service delivery and outcomes for socially excluded groups and focuses on the key problems faced by them. Its focus is less on overcoming disparities in access to technology than in how technology can be used to address broader social exclusion, recognising that *"much remains to be done…[including]…tackling problems of worklessness, homeless children and health inequalities"*.

The report states that *"ICTs offer considerable potential to support solutions to exclusion problems"* and points to a small number of examples of this already happening (including inter-agency information sharing initiatives, community websites and mobile phone services). However, whilst some fairly limited good practice has already been identified and is referred to in the report, the SEU also recognises that there is *"very little evidence of serious evaluation* [or] *roll out of successful trials"* and goes on to say that there is a pronounced need *"to explore and understand the generic motivations, aspirations and experiences of socially excluded people in relation to ICT, so that e-services and support can be more appropriately tailored to their needs"*.

"Inclusion through Innovation" suggests that there are three main ways in which ICT can help deliver benefits to excluded groups of society:

- Firstly, through *"strategic planning and evaluating services"*. This rather vague and all embracing heading encompasses the need to target public services and develop *"efficient, tailored local plans to improve delivery"*;

- Secondly, by *"joining up services around the needs of the person"*. The report recognises that people can often be *"customers"* of multiple agencies simultaneously and that using ICT to join up government needs to *"go beyond the superficial sharing of personal details"*. The document suggests that an approach based on *"triggers of intervention"* needs to be developed (e.g. early warning systems for youth offenders). It goes on to state that such an approach would demand *"strong and clear partnership working arrangements"* regarding data sharing and co-coordinating actions;

- Thirdly (and perhaps of most interest in the context of C@O) through *"personal development and active inclusion in employment, social groups and community participation [which can] all be helped by technology"*. Examples here include ICTs being used to provide support, advice and information (mainly through websites) and in combating isolation and empowering people in deprived communities.

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[36] The strategy forms part of the Social Exclusion Unit's (SEU) wider work programme – *Improving Services, Improving Lives* – which aims to make public services more effective for disadvantaged people, in order to improve their life chances.

As will be seen, these are largely focused on service delivery rather than engaging socially excluded groups with ICT. While the report expands on these three themes in a section entitled *"What does ICT do to address Social Exclusion"?,* the issues explored are similarly largely focused on public service delivery (and their improvement) and do not explore pro-active measures to encourage engagement with ICT at grassroots community level.

Finally, the report proposes a series of actions to move forward with the digital inclusion agenda. In summary, these actions include:

- Using ICT as a tool for *"citizen engagement"*. Whilst this is outlined as a priority throughout the document, it is very much focused on citizen participation (particularly excluded groups) in service design and e-government;

- Bringing initiatives together through an *"independent unit"* to be known as the Digital Inclusion Unit for England which *"should be a third sector agency, with local and national representation on the governing body, with the key objectives of identifying and evaluating good practice, providing technical and practical guidance on roll out and implementation of good practice, providing and stimulating leadership on delivery of good practice, and stimulating communities of users and leaders to promote discussion and understanding"*[37];

- Developing more detailed guidance across Government as to how ICT can be used to support information sharing about excluded groups. The report acknowledges that this will by no means be a straightforward task and outlines that the *"problem is trust and agreeing roles and responsibilities"*.

"Connecting the UK: The Digital Strategy" was jointly published by the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit and the Department ofr Trade and Industry in March 2005. It refers back to the 1998 *Knowledge Economy White Paper* and the subsequent establishment of the office of e-Envoy and Minister for e-Commerce as evidence of the Government's commitment to the e-agenda in its broadest context.

The document depicts the UK as *"the most extensive and competitive broadband market in the G7"*[38] and refers to the 6,000 or so UK online centres across the UK (ranging from community centres to libraries, colleges and cyber cafes) as evidence of the *"Government having invested heavily in bringing the internet to every community"*.

However, the *Digital Strategy* recognises there is a digital divide and highlights the correlation between socio-economic status and owning a PC with internet access, citing evidence that individuals in the top two socio economic groups (A/B) are three times more likely to have access to the internet than those in the lowest groups (D/E). Moreover, the report points to the fact that (as of the third quarter of 2004),

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[37] It is understood that the Digital Inclusion Unit located in the City of London Corporation but staffed by Cabinet Office staff on secondment has been set up with this remit, but we were unable to find much in the way of published information about it at the time of writing.

[38] On the basis of the falling price of broadband and increase in access to it. According to the report 99% of the UK's population would have had broadband access available to them by the summer of 2005, with a new broadband connection being made in the UK (at the time) every 10 seconds, amounting to around 50,000 broadband connections per week.

48% of UK households had chosen not to access the internet from home. According to ONS research in 2004 the main reason for this is that people feel *"no need".* This is further underscored in the document by a quote from an independent evaluation of the UK online centre network which stated that *"By far the biggest barrier to accessing ICT is interest and motivation, followed by a lack of perceived need".* [39]

Other barriers which contribute to the digital divide outlined in the report include lack of knowledge and confidence to use the internet (cited by 35% of those interviewed by the ONS), the perceived cost of PCs and internet access, the perceived complexity of PCs (*"PCs are not for me"*) and a view amongst socially excluded groups that the content of the internet is not relevant to them

The report's section on the reasons behind the digital divide concludes that *"evaluation, information, support and easy access to ICT are crucial to ensuring that people from low income backgrounds reap the benefits of the digital world".*

The report provides some interesting evidence to suggest what the benefits of digital inclusion (particularly access to PCs and the internet) can be. Some examples include:

- Improved employment prospects (30% of internet users in the UK having searched for jobs online);
- Financial benefits (GLA research apparently showing an average saving of £368 p.a. after being on line for 4 years);
- Social benefits (the report quotes 66% of over 55 year olds using the internet as saying that ICT has a positive impact on their lives).

The report also states that access to a PC and the internet can also help service providers to *"reach hard to reach groups"* such as homeless people and those outside of the system, although it does not reference any examples or evidence of this.

In considering what can be done to bridge the digital divide, the report first of all affirms the Government's belief that any intervention should first and foremost be responsive to what it describes as *"market dynamics"* defined in the document as being competition, falling process, increasingly useful ICT based services etc. *"Our objective will be to maintain the momentum of competition in the market"* – which is a clear indication of the Government's support for regulation which facilitates the continued downward trend in prices. The document then goes on to claim that:

"There is a clear rationale for Government involvement in tackling the digital divide and minimising social exclusion; ensuring the correct national skills framework, regulating where there is market failure and delivering responsive public services".

It outlines a role for the Government in a number of areas such as:

- Ensuring competitive regulation;
- Helping to promote and increase public awareness of ICT;
- Pressing ahead with delivering public services online;
- Developing public infrastructure to ensure universal availability;

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[39] Report by Hall Aitken, 2003

- Ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to acquire key ICT and basic skills to make best use of ICT.

Finally, the document outlines a series of 8 actions to close the digital divide. Of most relevance to the Communities @ One programme is Action 7 *"Improve accessibility to technology for the digitally excluded and ease of use for the disabled".* Specific measures under this action include:

- Building on UK online centres[40] and ensuring that every adult enrolling on a basic skills course is given an e-mail account;
- Reforming the "Home Computing Initiative"[41];
- Improving access to people with disabilities.

Action 8 makes the commitment to review progress on combatting the digital divide in 2008.

"Enabling a Digitally United Kingdom: A Framework for Action" was published by the E-Envoy's Office[42] in 2004. The report is intended to *"provide an overview of the current state of digital engagement"* looking at demand side (i.e. how individuals are currently benefiting from being digitally engaged) and at the supply side (how industry, the voluntary sector and Government are benefiting from digital engagement).

The report is based on a very thorough analysis of digital inclusion in the UK (and rehearses many of the arguments and baselines subsequently described in *Connecting the UK).* Table 2.1 is an extract from the report and summarises the benefits of digital engagement:

Table 2.1: Benefits of digital engagement.

Individual Consumers	Industry, Gov't and the Voluntary Sector
Financial savings o Price reduction of charged-for service; o Reduced cost of transmitting information; o Reduced travel costs.	**Improved service delivery** o Greater take-up of entitlements o Improved user satisfaction o Improved communication o Improved reputation, increased user trust o Enhanced customer service
Time savings o Reduced user time o Reduced need for multime data submissions o Reduced travel time	**Time savings** o Reduced processing through common standards such as databases o Employee time savings o Reduced error rates o Reduced need for multiple collection of data from same customer o More flexible working hours

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[40] The network of open-access ICT facilities in libraries, community centres etc.

[41] HCI is a Government initiative designed to make it easy for employers to offer computers at a very good price to their staff. However, despite this recommendation tax breaks for employers which was at the heart of the Initiative were brought to an end in the 2006 Budget.

[42] Part of the UK Government's Cabinet Office.

Value-based benefits	Resource efficiency
o Improved information o Improved reliability o Improved choice and convenience o Improved access to premium services	o Reduced systems redundancy through integrated systems o More effective use of existing (electronic and non-electronic) infrastructure, reduced wastage of capacity

In terms of the role of ICT in promoting social inclusion, the report comments that:

"Ongoing lack of digital engagement on the part of large numbers in our society will risk exacerbating family, economic and social problems; a more inclusive society, by contrast offers the opportunity to build a stronger, wealthier and more equal United Kingdom. Specifically, lack of digital engagement on the part of individuals and communities as result of age, ethnicity, disability or income means their identities and cultures remain largely invisible. In this regard, the 'network' effect of communications technology is important".

The report concludes with a series of three headline recommendations which embrace a wide range of different suggestions including:

- Government should provide key stakeholders with ongoing market intelligence on the supply of and demand for ICT. The sharing of this research evidence should be supplemented with cross-sector meetings to encourage collaborative innovation and ongoing progress;

- Government should continue to join up services around the needs of citizens via DirectGov and the enhanced role of the new e-Government Unit, while evaluating services to ensure the realisation of benefits for all, including those who are currently not digitally engaged;

- Government should continue to support the national network of 6,000 UK online centres, because trusted intermediaries that have a deep understanding of their client group are often better equipped than government to deliver services for hard-to-reach groups. UK online centres are also an important community resource, providing the necessary lift to enable often hard-to-reach groups of people to become digitally engaged. Innovation in these areas should continue;

- The Government should look to encourage the establishment of an industry-led body that focuses on encouraging digital take-up through social enterprise, supported with corporate social responsibility initiatives. The organisation should build on the many different projects that exist regionally and locally, and should create new partnerships and joined-up initiatives within existing organisational frameworks[43];

- Government should encourage Intellect, the trade body, to convene a new cross-industry, fully representative group that focuses on the implications for digital engagement in the UK of the convergence of broadcasting, telecommunications, broadband and the internet, with a particular emphasis on digital content.

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[43] This would appear to the impetus behind the proposal to establish the Digital Inclusion for England

2.4.3 London Advice Services Alliance (LASA)

LASA is a charity that provides support to voluntary organisations including information and advice to practitioners as well as influencing policy and stimulating good practice. It has a particular interest in promoting and developing the use of ICT in the voluntary sector and has been involved in developing and delivering a *"Circuit Rider"* initiative since 2002. Circuit riders are *"people who support other organisations to make the best use of technology"* and the term is used to cover a range of professionals working in the voluntary and community sector. LASA's Circuit Rider project (now in its second phase)[44] provides the following services:

- An initial site visit consisting of an IT Health check, consultation on strategy and project plans;
- Assistance with IT problems;
- Technical support (through a contracted technical support company);
- Development of individual recommendations and action plans;
- Periodic follow up visits, usually around six per organisation;
- Training sessions and seminars;
- Subscription to LASA's newsletter service;
- Telephone and e-mail help-line, website and private mail discussion list.

The Circuit Riders work in various types of organisations including social enterprises, community groups and infrastructure organisations which operate ICT projects. They provide (depending on the individual's specialism) a wide range of ICT related support from repairing and fixing hardware through to training and general strategic advice and consultancy.

2.4.4 Digital Inclusion Policy in Scotland and Northern Ireland

In *"**Digital Inclusion: Connecting Scotland's people"*** (undated – but believed to be from around 2001/2), the Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning outlines the Scottish Executive's vision for a digitally inclusive Scotland as being one which:

"will ensure more equal, effective and beneficial access for all people to the digital technologies and Web facilities that benefit them in their day-to-day lives. In a digitally-inclusive Scotland, the public, private, and voluntary sectors will make positive use of digital technologies and the Web to improve quality of life and deliver new opportunities for disadvantaged individuals and communities."

In terms of a baseline, the report outlines that at the time it was published (which is undated) almost 25% of Scottish households were online (compared with an estimated 47% in Wales in 2007[45]).

The strategy recognises that *"a significant proportion of society does not have access to any of the new communication tools"* and that the *"the digital divide"* to a large extent affects those which are already most excluded within society. It identifies several reasons why a significant proportion of the population do not, or cannot, make full use of the internet and related ICT. These can be summarised as:

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[44] The project is a two year initiative (to April 2007) working with sixteen London based grantee organisations, the Bridge House Trust and Big Lottery Fund.
[45] Wales Consumer Council Research 2007

- Perceived or Actual Costs;
- Lack of Access;
- Lack of Skills;
- Cultural/Community Barriers;
- Personal Attitudes.

The strategy proposes to take action in the following ways:

- Awareness and Promotion: Ensuring that excluded individuals and groups are aware of the opportunities that ICTs can provide;
- Access: Disadvantaged individuals and communities must have access to ICTs at the time, place, method and price appropriate to their needs and lifestyles;
- Support: Providing reliable, accessible and cost-effective sources of advice and support is crucial;
- Skills: Providing the basic computer and technological skills that will instil individuals with the confidence to use ICTs;
- Content: Ensuring that disadvantaged individuals and communities are provided with, or develop themselves, online content and services that they value and wish to use;
- Community Involvement: Ensuring that the initiatives are sustainable at a local level, and that local communities have a sense of ownership.

It goes on to specify a number of key priorities in the following areas:

- Conducting a major campaign with the UK Government to raise the awareness of the general public of the benefits of getting online;
- Increasing awareness of existing opportunities for public access to the internet by mapping and publishing the locations of all such facilities in Scotland;
- Significantly increasing the number of venues across Scotland which offer public access to the internet;
- Developing two pilot digital communities in disadvantaged areas in Scotland.

The *"Digital Inclusion Strategy for Northern Ireland"* covers the period from May 2003 to December 2005. Whilst this strategy is now clearly out of date, there does not seem to be a more recent replacement for it. The strategy outlines a view that *"all citizens, who so wish, should have access to modern technology and should be able to take advantage of opportunities offered by the internet, email, word processing, database, spreadsheet and other related electronic tools"* and sets as it goal *"to ensure that every Northern Ireland citizen has the opportunity to maximise the use of computing and internet technologies to enhance their quality of life"*.

Research conducted in April 2002 by Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) highlighted a number of obstacles which prevent citizens from making greater use of computing and Internet technologies. These included:

- Lack of interest;
- Lack of access to the technology; and
- Lack of relevant computing and Internet skills.

The strategy also makes clear that information on digital inclusion initiatives and opportunities are not widely available. This in turn has led to an under-estimation and lack of knowledge of the range and abundance of computing and internet initiatives already in place. As a result, a key action is to build and maintain an up-to-date knowledge base of relevant activities and initiatives, which should include schemes and programmes aimed at helping citizens access and make use of computing and internet technologies.

The strategy acknowledges that the best way to ensure that all citizens enjoy the benefits of the "Information Age" is through co-operation amongst all those interested in the topic. The strategy argues that this would need to involve a partnership approach between (but should not be limited to) the 11 central government Departments, their Agencies and sponsored bodies, local government, the private sector and the community and voluntary sector.

In terms of monitoring progress, the strategy outlines as its goal that by 31 December 2005:

- The percentage of NI citizens who will recognise and be prepared to take advantage of the access opportunities available, will be on a par with 'information elite' countries; and;
- Difficulties experienced by certain groupings in society in accessing modern computing and Internet technology will have been overcome.

It is not clear to what extent these goals have been met by the strategy.