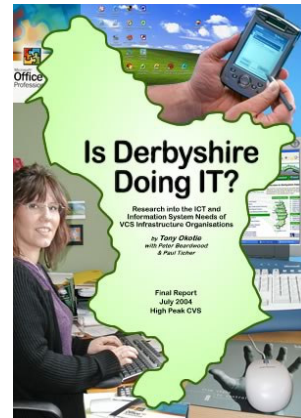


Is Derbyshire Doing IT?

*Research into the Information system
and ICT needs of
VCS Infrastructure Organisations*

Executive Summary



Introduction

It has been recognised in various studies in the last three or four years that ICT usage within the voluntary sector is low. This piece of work focuses on Derbyshire: where the IT and information provision is, what the gaps are and how those gaps and deficiencies could be addressed. In particular, once establishing what the needs within the VCS infrastructure bodies are, it looks at how investment through the government's Infrastructure Investment Programme can be best used within the county to improve capacity and effectiveness, and how national capacity-building programmes can fit with this work at a sub-regional level. Similar work is going on in other counties within the East Midlands and, while some common themes are emerging, there are significant differences in locality,

geography and the maturity of the sector.

The study was conducted by interviewing 22 VCS infrastructure organisations across Derbyshire (there are approximately 33 in total), plus discussions with a number of other organisations. Finally, a small number of consultants were engaged to provide input into specific areas of the project. This was mainly regarding good practice in the use and deployment of IT and IT support, within the voluntary and other sectors, to help formulate a plan to address some of the specific areas of need found from the interviews.

The 22 organisations interviewed employed a total of 400 people, and had a combined annual revenue of over £12million.

Survey findings

The benefits of ICT, resources available and IT strategy

All of the organisations could identify at least one benefit in using IT, however limited their IT resources were. Despite clearly being aware of the benefits that ICT can bring to the organisations, all of the organisations made it clear that there were gaps within their

organisation in the provision and deployment of IT and information systems.

Over half of the organisations rated their IT provision as "good" or "excellent"

Only six of the organisations interviewed described their ICT strategy as proactive – one said they had no strategy, while the majority (15, over two thirds) said that their strategy was reactive.

One interviewee described the need for someone to show them “how IT can help us work smarter, not harder”. VCS organisations need more assistance in planning IT

Email and the web

All organisations surveyed used email regularly as a means of communication externally, and anecdotal evidence would suggest that the level of email usage has increased rapidly over the last two years. Broadband

Hardware and software issues

There was a high level of disparity in PC provision across the organisations interviewed. While in the majority of organisations, staff and volunteers that needed a computer as an important tool to carry out their work had one “to call their own”, there were still areas where sharing of computers was commonplace. Whilst not always identified as a **problem** because of part time workers, job share etc, in all of the organisations where sharing of computers occurred, interviewees identified better and increased provision of hardware as a way of increasing effectiveness and efficiency.

Applying this to the VCS infrastructure organisations interviewed, over a third of PCs (over 100 in total) should be replaced. Bearing in mind that interviews only took place in two thirds of the county's infrastructure

strategy. Overall, only a quarter of organisations said that they had enough funding to address their IT requirements. This is particularly worrying, in light of section 5, where the majority of those interviewed identified ways in which better IT provision could help the organisation grasp new opportunities and solve existing problems.

services have been taken up by VCS infrastructure organisations wherever available, and the internet was cited as increasingly being used as a tool for the organisation.

organisations, this figure for replacement hardware could be closer to 150 PCs.

“When it breaks” was the standard answer to the question “How often do you upgrade computers” and was quoted in 80% of the interviews. Very few (only three or four) had formal or semi-formal replacement policies.

On questioning interviewees further “when it breaks” had to do because a planned approach would prove impossible due to problems in funding replacement equipment.

Over half of the organisations surveyed would welcome assistance in the purchasing process.

Over half of the interviewed organisations did not have a standardised operating system across their PCs. This was often

because PCs had been added as the organisation grew, or older PCs were replaced, and new machines were supplied with current operating systems. This non-standardisation was a frustration, and was cited as an issue, particularly because of the issues and problems it created with local area networking. It was very surprising to learn that 20% of the organisations surveyed were not aware of charity discounts available on software, or how to access them.

Networks and support

Of the organisations surveyed, only four (18%) didn't have a local area network. All of the organisations that had a network could identify benefits from doing so. However, the issues of support and maintenance of a networked office environment were apparent. Over half of the networked organisations had no IT specialist or service contract to support the computer network.

Information provision

Only seven organisations interviewed said they had a dedicated Information Worker, and only two of these were full-time positions. Information Officers were most prevalent in the CVS interviewed – six of the CVS in the county currently have an Information Officer. However, funding for three of these posts comes to an end in 2005, with uncertainty about continuation funding.

The vast majority of organisations interviewed reported a growing

It could be argued that all of the problems outlined regarding software are due to a lack of knowledge about these issues within the organisation. While many organisations cannot justify a "specialist" due to their size, it is clear in these cases that they also do not have an easily accessed source of guidance and advice. In summary, over half of the organisations surveyed stated that their software was not adequate for their needs.

Issues about the provision of IT support and maintenance within VCS infrastructure organisations were the largest concerns raised during the interview process. Only three organisations employed a person where (internal) IT support was the major or sole part of their role, and these were in the larger organisations. Support and maintenance (internally or externally) of IT systems is under resourced in 70% of organisations surveyed.

demand for information – both internally and by client groups. Interestingly, a number of other organisations interviewed referred to CVS being a prime source of that information. The report found scope to improve the sharing of best practice of information – there is already an informal network, with the information officers from the CVSs meeting quarterly to share ideas and good practice. This forum has had positive outcomes and benefits in the sharing of

information and resources, but is currently not resourced.

Centralisation of information is seen to improve efficiency, but there are major challenges for organisations to embrace this. The report looks in depth at three areas:

- Databases
- Shared calendars and diaries

Website provision

18 of the 22 organisations interviewed had a dedicated website, designed internally or externally. The organisations that used an external designer (either a freelance, consultant or company) paid in the range of £250 -£2,500 for the service. The average was around £500.

One of the major issues, cited by 6 organisations, was the difficulties encountered in keeping the

Training and skills

Three-quarters of the senior managers interviewed said that staff did not have adequate IT skills to meet the needs of the organisation.

This "skills gap" was variously described including:

- Staff not aware of shortcuts or efficient ways of using office software applications
- A lack of knowledge around MS Access
- The need for someone being trained and able to handle day to day system "glitches" (printer problems, back ups on the server etc) without having to call in external support – a trouble shooter

- Full integration of client/member information

and suggest that a national study is needed to investigate the use of centralised fully-integrated information management systems and their promotion.

website current and regularly updated. This was a particular problem for the organisations doing this work internally, either by a paid staff member or a volunteer.

Two thirds of organisations with a dedicated website had not addressed accessibility issues. VCS infrastructure organisations have done little to promote their websites

While most organisations could access existing provision (such as ECDL and IBT) through Training Clubs, LearnDirect etc, and some organisations had done so in the past, over half the senior managers felt these courses often did not address the real needs of staff. In addition, the length of time to complete these courses often made it impractical to release staff to do them.

Only one of the organisations interviewed had used online training. One of the overwhelming messages around training to come out of these interviews was the need for workplace based, low-key provision - something that is not available currently.

Provision of services and support to client groups

The study only identified two projects operating in the county that offered IT help, support and advice to frontline organisations, although a number of organisations suggested that they

are asked for IT services on a regular basis, and that there is a need for infrastructure organisations to provide support for frontline organisations that is currently not being met.

Using new technologies

One of the interesting points to come up in the interviews was a general lack of awareness (in senior managers) of new technologies (such as workgroup systems, and home working which are discussed in detail in the full

report and how they could be employed to improve efficiency and effectiveness. It is clear that the VCS in the county needs a "champion" to promote the use of new technology.

Good Practice

Having established the IT and Information needs of the VCS sector within Derbyshire, the full report looks at solutions and examples adopted elsewhere. This includes a critique of the Circuit Riders concept - mobile IT support workers, each of whom supports a caseload of organisations. The concept came from the USA, where it allows grassroots IT workers to support and network with one another, and to collectively lobby suppliers, funders and policy makers. The report suggests that use of circuit Riders would be beneficial to the sector in Derbyshire in meeting many of the needs outlined.

In the final part of the report, attention is turned back to the county and how these ideas about "good practice" could be incorporated.

Recommended solutions for Derbyshire

The full report contains a number of recommendations:

Funding for Replacement hardware and software

The survey has identified a need to replace a third of the infrastructure bodies IT hardware because it is ineffective through it's age and growing incompatibility with more modern equipment that

organisations have purchased. This represents approximately 150 PCs, plus other peripheral equipment. Estimated at £1000 per PC including software, this equates to £150,000.

The formation of a Derbyshire IT working group of the consortium

A “circuit riders” approach within the county

To meet the needs outlined in this report, it is suggested that this takes four forms:

- The employment of an “IT champion”
- A project offering technical support
- The employment of a peripatetic IT tutor
- Website designer, to advise and /or design

Although four separate parts, potentially provided in different ways, all are important for the

success of the VCS in making best use of IT. Although different funding models could be adopted for each, the report identifies a figure in the order of £322,000 to action Circuit Riders in Derbyshire. However, a comprehensive business plan needs to be completed before instigation. The full report suggest that this may be a task for the working group, or a piece of work completed separately with £4,000 set aside to complete it.

Building on the work of Information Officers meetings

Although still in its infancy, the county CVS Information Officers meeting has already seen some benefits in peer-to-peer support, sharing of good practice and joint activity. Support through the IIP is therefore suggested, to enable a

member organisation to take a lead on developing the forum to include other VCS organisations. For two years, the cost is expected to be quite small – in the order of £5,500.

Database feasibility study

It is not clear at this stage what work will be carried forward at a national or regional level around database issues. However, this report recommends that at a local (Derbyshire) level further work is funded to establish the feasibility of a joint database system in

conjunction with statutory authorities. This study is an in depth piece of work, with significant input needed by consultants. As such, we recommend that a period of three to six months is allocated to carry it out, with a cost in the region of £20,000 - £25,000.

Infrastructure consortium website

There is a clear need for a website covering the common interests of VCS and related organisations in the Derbyshire area. This would bring the efficiencies of removing current duplication, drawing together disparate information and adding new functionalities. This suggestion is that this website

should be launched as soon as possible, to highlight the work already carried out and to enable organisations to understand the developments and ongoing actions from the IIP. Cost in the order of £2,000 - £3,000 for set up and first year.

Conclusions

Is Derbyshire doing IT? The answer from this study is both yes and no. Is Derbyshire different from other counties? Again, the question has two answers. The survey identified pockets of excellence within the county, but also a large number of organisations that were not making best use of IT. If the aim of the infrastructure funding is to create a "level playing field" there is clearly much work to be done. We hope this survey is the start of that work, and that the IIP can help realise the potential of the sector in using IT and information in a proactive, effective way.

Is Derbyshire Doing IT?

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With Peter Beardwood and Paul Ticher

July 2004

Additional copies of this executive summary and the full report can be downloaded from www.highpeakcvs.org.uk/derbyshireIT