

Closing The Digital Divide:

information and communication
technologies in deprived areas



An Executive Summary of the
report by Policy Action Team 15
and CD-ROM of full report

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Department of Trade and Industry

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Introduction

The Social Exclusion Unit's report on the problems faced by people living in our poorest neighbourhoods, *Bringing Britain together: a national strategy for neighbourhood renewal* (1), set up 18 Policy Action Teams (PATs) to take forward further work in key policy areas. PAT 15 was asked to produce a report on Information Technology. Its recommendations will contribute to the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal to be outlined by the Government during 2000.

Remit and Goals

The remit for PAT 15, Information Technology, was to report on:

- best practice in providing access to IT, and IT skills, for people living in poor neighbourhoods;
- lessons learnt about the effectiveness of shared access points, such as kiosks in community centres, libraries and Post Offices, and greater access to the Internet, etc;
- the best models for improving access to communications networks as a means of strengthening community ties.

The goal was:

- to develop a strategy to increase the availability and take-up of communications and information technology for people living in poor neighbourhoods.

Key findings

Over time, it is expected that information and communication technologies (ICTs) will change the whole pattern of peoples' lives, as completely as broadcasting,

telephony, and high-speed transport did in the past. If the precedent of these past revolutions in communications is followed, the social and economic benefits will be disproportionately enjoyed by those who adopt them early on.

Individuals can expect easy access to a wealth of information, entertainment, and to cheaper, more individually tailored goods and services, with new opportunities for choice, participation, lifelong learning and leisure. Businesses will increasingly turn to electronic commerce, to be more competitive and to serve customers better.

For people living in low-income neighbourhoods, gaining and exploiting ICT skills can lead to opportunities to participate fully in the local and national economy. The arguments for social inclusion and for economic development in the Information Age are mutually re-enforcing.

Lack of access to ICTs leads to or reinforces disadvantage at a number of levels: for children, not having access to computers and the Internet at home or in the community, may make it hard to keep up at school; for adults, computer literacy can be important for re-entering the labour market; and for the community as a whole, better access to communications networks can improve the quality of life. I think this means government services not life services, make it easier to access opportunities in other areas, and enhance local social cohesion.

In some housing estates, well under 50 per cent of households have a telephone, compared to a national average of over 90 per cent. Ownership of, and access to, personal computers is also much lower. However,

television is ubiquitous, and digital television may offer a more likely future route to home access in these neighbourhoods.

People who live in deprived neighbourhoods are less likely to be able to use the most common methods of training or points of access to ICTs. This presents particular problems. Many people in deprived neighbourhoods are unemployed, and as a result do not get the hands-on supported ICT experience that others do through their work. They may also have had off-putting educational experiences in the past, and tend to find formal training unattractive. This is particularly a problem for young people who have been excluded or truant from school.

Some deprived neighbourhoods have high proportions of black and ethnic minorities. For some of these, English is not their first language. They therefore require special language facilities.

Women are generally less likely to be interested in ICTs than men, a position exacerbated in some communities where women's activities are constrained by their cultural background. Special arrangements such as home outreach, childcare provision, and women-only groups may be needed.

At national level there are a number of key programmes and initiatives already operating and a significant number of others already well into their planning stages. However, although a lot of work is being done, this is not well co-ordinated. There is no single Government department overseeing where resources are focused and no co-ordinated approach to evaluating outcomes.

The PAT found a range of barriers which prohibit the establishment of successful ICT access points and constrain the involvement of the target audience:

- *Lack of a joined-up approach*: there is no clear policy or strategy locally and nationally. Sharing of good practice is as poor as sharing of facilities.
- *Promotion*: marketing is generally poor. the target audience lacks awareness of the potential of ICTs. The role of community IT centres is not well understood, and many community groups lack ICT awareness.
- *Content*: content is often unattractive or unsuitable, not having a local focus or being over-dependent on literacy.
- *Access*: there are physical barriers like location, access and opening times, as well as security issues. There is a lack of suitable venues, and some are off-putting for some groups. There is a lack of child care support and facilities for people with particular needs such as people with disabilities, older people, etc.
- *Competencies*: staff and volunteer availability is a problem, as is developing their ICT skills.
- *Funding*: funding is often unsuitable, inconsistent, partial or unsustainable, and scarce resources are often devoted to chasing it. Too little support is given to running costs and perhaps too much to capital.
- *Costs and perceived costs*: costs of telephone calls are said to be a barrier for Internet access for community projects. The cost of equipment is also seen as a barrier. Many people think they cannot afford access, and charges, real and perceived, dissuade use.

The PAT found no comprehensive survey of attitudes towards, and use of ICTs, by black and ethnic minorities. This lack of data indicates that comprehensive research is necessary.

For ICT programmes to be successful they need local ICT champions and mentors who are drawn from the same background as the community they serve. They should also ensure that local provision reflects the cultural background of the neighbourhood.

Key recommendations

- 1 The Government must ensure that all of its actions to promote the use of ICTs and e-commerce are coherent and reduce rather than increase social exclusion. To this end, the new e-ministerial network should co-ordinate work on ICT and social exclusion as part of its overall remit. Also, the DfEE should be responsible for acting on the recommendations of the report, and report annually on progress, the first to be produced by April 2001.
- 2 Individual departmental programmes to provide various ICT-based facilities should be presented to the public as a single, cohesive proposition which demonstrates the Government's strong commitment to maximising the national benefit from the Information Age.
- 3 Within individual neighbourhoods local marketing and outreach activities, using local mentors, where possible, should be implemented to encourage people to take the first steps towards using ICTs.
- 4 By April 2002, each deprived neighbourhood should have at least one publicly accessible community-based facility to complement any home access which is

available, in line with the Government's targets for e-commerce as set out in the recent PIU report.

- 5 As part of the provision of IT Learning Centres the DfEE, in partnership with local organisations, should offer an ICT familiarisation programme, starting with an ICT taster session which could lead onto other education, enterprise and employment programmes.
- 6 The Government has set a target in the Modernising Government White Paper that by 2008, 100% of dealings with Government should be capable of being done by the public electronically. In support of this our aspiration is that by 2004, 75% of people living in deprived neighbourhoods will have the capabilities to access electronically delivered public services and the skills to do so, if they wish and 100% by 2008. The DfEE should establish annual targets towards the achievement of this aspiration.
- 7 ICT projects are usually funded from numerous funding sources. The rationalisation of these funds, including their source and management should be determined in the context of the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal. This should also look at how to co-ordinate and assist bids for EU, lottery, charitable and private funding.
- 8 The report strongly supports the Performance and Innovation Unit (PIU) recommendations that telecommunication operators be encouraged to offer a wider range of tariff structure options, and explore new commercial arrangements, allowing more flexible retail tariffs, provided this does not increase the cost of basic telephone provision. It is essential that any change in tariffs do not price people in deprived

neighbourhoods out of using the full range of telephone services. The report recommends that OFTEL take these factors into account in setting policy for this area.

- 9 The Government needs to develop mechanisms for the continuous identification and promotion of good practice in this area, and should ensure that, by 2001, the following facilities are available and publicised:
 - ICT familiarisation and awareness training for those involved in development of neighbourhood plans;
 - good practice information, both existing and ongoing; and
 - a framework and tools for establishing service level agreements.
- 10 In addressing the needs of poor neighbourhoods particular consideration needs to be given to black and minority ethnic groups. Local ICT champions and mentors should be drawn from the community they serve, and local provision should reflect the cultural background of the neighbourhood, for example by providing supported home loan of laptops in communities where women find using public facilities difficult.

References and Further Information

Bringing Britain together: a national strategy for neighbourhood renewal, July 1998 Cm 4045.

Copies of the PAT 15 report, Closing the Digital Divide: Information and Communication Technologies in Deprived Areas, can be obtained by from the PAT 15 website: www.pat15.org.uk or from Christians on tel: 0870 1502 500.

The report can also be accessed on the SEU website at <http://www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/seu/index.htm>.

