Date: Wednesday 23 January 2002
Time: 2.00pm to 4.50pm
Venue: Committee Room 1, National Assembly Building

Cyhoeddir y papur hwn yn yr iaith y'i derbyniwyd gan Gynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru

A submission to Agriculture and Rural Committee of the Welsh Assembly
For their Review of
Rural Information and Communications Technology

On Behalf of
Telecentres Powys
20 September 2001

Telecentres Powys is countywide association of organisations each of which aims to provide its own community with access to ICT. It has a membership of over thirty organisations each of which is focussed on local and community need and run largely on voluntary effort.

Through the generosity of over 130 community workers and volunteers, the management structure of Telecentres Powys and the post of "Project Manager – Community Initiatives" (funded by Powys County Council) it has been possible to develop this unique organisation and co-ordinate its efforts in meeting its objectives of:

- the provision of public access to ICT
- the raising of awareness of the people and communities in Powys to the issues relating to information and communications technologies
- the delivery of information and communications technology training, and awareness raising through the provision of community focussed centres
- co-ordinated action in the development of information and communications technology based solutions to rural, social, local democracy and economic development issues in Powys
- innovative action through the use of information and communications technologies for the enhancement of social inclusion, local democracy and economic development of the communities in Powys
- the development of "teleworking" opportunities
- co-ordination and collaboration with other agencies in the provision of information and communications technology services in Powys
- capacity building, marketing and promotion of the use of information and communications technologies (ICTs) for the above objects

Telecentres Powys are therefore constituted and are already working on the ground to develop skills and provide practical support to all sectors of communities in which they are situated. However, Telecentres Powys and many of the community facilities that form the network at present have no funding from any source whatsoever.

Case Study - Sennybridge Resource Centre

Sennybridge Resource Centre (SRC) exists to provide a community 'owned' centre to provide access for local people and businesses to modern office and information technology, and learning opportunities. It acts as a centre for community activity and is seen locally as a major centre for action in this very rural area. Since it opened in November 1999 the centre has worked with a wide range of mainstream agencies to develop the local delivery of a curriculum for benefit of the local community.

Start-Up/beginners IT courses have taken place for:

- Development of skills of local people working at the Army Camp (50 trained)
- Local farming community through CWYSI - 40 trained
- Local residents (40+ trained)
- Local businesses 15 employers and 30 self employed

Where possible, trainees have been trained up to RSA CLAIT standard and there is now a waiting list for people to join new 'beginners' classes. The success of the centre derives from its local ownership. People don't want to and in most respects cant travel to other centres to get this sort of friendly training. Furthermore local people trust the local centre run by local people.

The SRC is also a focus for other groups wishing to meet to discuss and take part in areas of special interest. This includes such groups as "The Knitters" numbering 10 enthusiasts, the Epynt Action Group who look upon the facility as their head office and six other local groups who use the facility to produce their newsletters.

Over twenty farmers regularly use the facility to access photocopying facilities, licence movement documentation, information provision on the Internet, to send emails and use the Fax. The facility has been acknowledged as a lifeline for farmers during the current foot and mouth crisis and ever so slowly more are starting to use the facilities that are available.

Case Study - Talgarth TIC

Talgarth Tourist Information Centre Association is an independent Tourist Information

Centre. By linking in with the Telecentre network they are able to provide access to the Internet and ICT. They see one of their key roles as the engagement of local people in training activities. In the case of Web design this has been so successful that they have recently commissioned a complete course on Web design to be delivered by Powys Training for local people.

These are just two examples of how voluntary effort is feeding in to mainstream activity of education and economic activity and the contribution these centres are making to achievement of goals of other organisations, yet this effort is largely unrecognised and remains unfunded.

In the same way as European funding schemes embed ICT as a cross-cutting measure, no strategy paper emanates from the Welsh Assembly , Powys County Council, the Welsh Development Agency, Mid Wales Partnership or ELWa without reference to the importance of ICTs for learning, training, education, economic development, social inclusion, e-democracy, e- commerce, the digital divide, tourism, community development, communities of interest, etc yet Telecentres remain unfunded.

The ELWa Draft Corporate Strategy July 2001 says that it wants "to provide the basis for an inclusive, stable society and effective cultural development by transforming the lives of disadvantaged people and developing all our communities by: supporting community capacity building, mainstreaming community learning for all groups in society and recognising informal learning …" yet it is believed that there is no funding to do this.

Links with a wide range of organisations have already been established to attempt joined up delivery of services. This will continue as the Rural Recovery Plan and Farming Connect are implemented. Experience shows however that duplication is often seen because the agencies developing new projects or schemes are often unwilling to work with existing legitimate locally owned schemes on the ground even though they could and would help to achieve the objectives set.

Income streams have been developed by a number of local facilities where skills permit. These value added services include the provision of IT related business advice on behalf of Business Connect with whom a contract has been negotiated. A similar role is developing with the Careers service with support from ESF funding but these schemes are not universal.

A failure to fund what is currently voluntary action will eventually lead those organisations that are currently doing work for nothing and at the same time helping to meet the targets of mainstream funded organisations to feel that they are being exploited by those statutory organisations. If the new models that are talked about in strategy documents are to be adopted, we have to look at resourcing those schemes that have potential to work and break the mould and not maintain the 'old order'.

Telecentres Powys would like The Agriculture and Rural Development Committee to:

- recommend that access to ICT for all people is a public service

- recommend that 'locally owned' ICT facilities be funded from the public purse
- recommend a continuation of this support for the foreseeable future in order that the general public can gain access to the skills and develop understanding of the implications ICT in relation to E democracy, the local economy, employment and social inclusion.

Tim Fletcher - On behalf of Telecentres Powys 20th September 2001

WEB References

For further information on the ICT Related activities in the County of Powys Please refer to the following web sites:

Telecentres Powys http://www.telecentres.com
Powysweb – Gateway to Powys http://www.powysweb.co.uk
Powys Communities Online http://www.pco.powys.org.uk
Community Development Officers forum – in association with PAVO http://www.pavo.org.uk/cdos/