SOCIAL INCLUSION THROUGH ICT:
A LOCAL AUTHORITY STUDY

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Abstract

This year ODPM have awarded ‘Beacon Council’ status to Local Authorities which show expertise and leadership in ‘Social Inclusion through ICT’, a timely topic for councils, given the increasing emphasis on the use of new technologies for services, jobs, democracy and so on. One interpretation of the Beacon topic is to see it as overcoming social exclusion; another is to frame it in terms of overcoming the digital divide. Using a case study of one of the ‘Beacon’ Local Authorities, this paper demonstrates that this is not simply semantics - although the two agendas overlap they are not synonymous, and many opportunities to overcome social exclusion will be lost if the narrower ‘digital divide’ agenda is all that is addressed.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Since 1995, Derwentside District Council (DDC) has been pursuing a programme of ICT-related activities that aims to improve directly the well-being of Derwentside, its residents and businesses (as distinct from the improvements the IT department is making ‘internally’ for the Authority). DDC has gained recognition in the region for their expertise in this field, with many other Local Authorities now contracting them to develop and support their ICT services. In the spring of 2003, they were awarded ‘Beacon Council’ status as a lead Authority under the ‘Social Inclusion through ICT’ theme. This is an Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) scheme that gives recognition to leading Authorities under a number of themes – in 2003, one of these was ‘social inclusion through ICT’ (ODPM, 2003).

The UK government is clearly committed to addressing social exclusion, and sees ICT as a way of addressing some aspects of this (Social Exclusion Unit, 2001a, Social Exclusion Unit, 2001b). Particular emphasis was placed on the role of Local Authorities and their partners to deliver the government’s programme through the Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy (Social Exclusion Unit, 2001b). At around the same time, the role of Local Authorities with respect to ‘community governance’ was clarified and strengthened with “the introduction of statutory community strategies and the broad new enabling power to promote community well-being” (ODPM, 2001, p2). Local Authorities were also to enhance their services through the use of ICT (ODPM, 2002). By combining these various...
strands of policy, it seems unsurprising that ODPM decided upon ‘social inclusion through ICT’ as one of its Beacon Council awards for 2003.

However, it is possible to construct a different narrative to arrive at the same Beacon Council heading of ‘social inclusion through ICT’. This starts with the ‘UK online’ initiative launched in 2000 – “a programme of work to ensure the UK’s place as a leader in today’s global economy” (Office of the e-Envoy, 2002, p1). A central concern is with those people who are not yet online, and with devising means of increasing access and use of the internet. These themes are echoed in UK ‘digital divide’ policy, which perceives a gulf emerging between the ‘information-rich’ and the ‘information-poor’: “To prosper nationally and to compete globally, we need to empower people at the local level to become active participants in society” (DTI, 2000, p2). It addresses access to, and use of, ICT by people living in the poorest neighbourhoods. Local government and its partners have a central role to play in delivering this ‘community’ level policy (ODPM, 2001) and their commitment to making all services available electronically by the end of 2005 involves them in developing provision and in providing access to their clients (ODPM, 2002). These policies, then, lead Local Authorities to target people who would be excluded from ICT, and from the benefits its use could bring.

This paper is concerned with the outcomes of defining the role of Local Authorities in these two different ways: one where ICTs are used to overcome social exclusion; and the other where access to the technology and the benefits it can bring is the focus of attention. It starts with a practical example of the
activities of DDC – a leading Council in this field (Advisory Panel on Beacon Councils, 2003). It then addresses the concept of ‘social exclusion’ and examines how the activities can be situated within this framework. The ‘digital divide’ is then addressed, and again DDC’s programme is evaluated. Finally comparisons are drawn between the outcomes of the two approaches.

2 A STUDY OF SOCIAL INCLUSION THROUGH ICT

2.1 The Study Area

Derwentside is a rural District in NE England. The two main towns and many of the surrounding villages have a history of heavy industry: steelworks and coal mining, both of which have now completely disappeared. These areas rank highly on the national statistics for multiple deprivation. The less remote part of the District is within easy commuting distance of major centres. The more remote areas have agricultural landscapes, with some areas of high quality environment.

2.2 DDC’s programme of activities for Social Inclusion through ICT

DDC began to address how it could use ICT in the wider community in 1995. Until that time, the IT Department had simply serviced the needs of the Council. This, however, was a Council that already saw ‘community governance’ as central to its role (aiming to develop the ‘well-being’ of the community rather than acting only as a provider of statutory services). This was in part due to the needs of the area – a major industry collapse in the early 1980s meant that nearly 9000 people
were registered as unemployed (28% of the workforce). Much of the work undertaken has been in partnership with other organisations in the region, but with DDC playing a key role.

Some of DDC’s earliest ICT developments concentrated on the infrastructure: they created a broadband network, and set themselves up as the internet service provider for those businesses and organisations that they linked up. This was a marginal cost to DDC in that it needed a high speed network between Council Buildings, as well as an internet connection, both of which could be easily extended to incorporate the wider community need. The configuration of the network, and the nature of the contracts negotiated with the telecoms meant that it could provide internet services at comparatively low prices; it also developed its own pricing policy based on an ability to pay rather than on market forces. This infrastructure building activity has continued as a backbone to much of what else has been achieved through ICT. Even when describing infrastructure provision, though, the chief officer at DDC with responsibility for ICT stresses a broader agenda of social inclusion; an area interested in regeneration must have a broadband network in order to attract or keep vibrant businesses, and to attract new (professional) residents to the area.

The early period of its programme also saw the development of numerous Public Internet Access Points (PIAPs). Examples include community centres, libraries, schools and scout halls. Computers and internet services were offered to community and voluntary organisations; training was provided for the workers and volunteers with the intention that these people would then support their wider
membership and the public. At the same time broader social inclusion goals were being targeted, in particular: overcoming dependency and raising aspirations. The system was designed so that all the PIAPs were linked in such a way that they could post information on a central website, and/or communicate between themselves free of charge. The aim was to foster mutual learning and support between these groups and help to overcome the dependency culture that existed in the area. Some schools were linked into the PIAPs network, whilst others were included in the DDC system later through a contract to provide internet services to Derwentside schools as part of the National Grid for Learning. Part of the rationale for targeting schools at this early stage in the programme (DDC does not have a lead responsibility for education) was to address the poor levels of educational attainment in the District, but it was also about using the internet to raise aspirations. DDC often quotes the fact that some of their primary school pupils have never visited the main cities in the area (about 10/15 miles away), so that the internet serves to widen their horizons.

In the late 1990s (the second phase of the programme), DDC continued to develop the infrastructure network, extending it not only into more rural areas of the District but also crossing into other parts of the North East region. The development of the network into the more rural areas was linked to the development of more PIAPs.

In this period, central to much of the activity was the exploitation of the network to improve public services. DDC worked with the Employment Service to develop a means of linking electronically the employment needs of local
companies with the skills of the unemployed (at the time no electronic system existed in the Job Centres). Here, the aim was a buoyant local economy and jobs (not necessarily needing ICT skills) for unemployed people. In the same vein, DDC also supported the development of an e-commerce incubator centre, and provided advanced telecommunications and network services to attract or keep modern businesses. Another project networked local GPs in Derwentside with the aim of improving the services they provided through small, local surgeries. In most cases, the ‘projects’ were initiated by other organisations – the Primary Care Trust, individual businesses, Northern Informatics, for example – which approached DDC because of its track record in providing appropriate, sensitive and cost-effective network services.

Over the past three years, DDC has been involved in more projects to improve local public service provision for other public sector organisations. These have included providing the North Durham NHS Trust with high bandwidth connectivity between various hospitals and some of the health centres, which allows fast and secure transfer of data between sites (including sending X-rays on-line). DDC also worked on a project with the Health Promotion Service to provide technical linkages so that peripatetic health workers could order the information they needed on-line, and developed an interactive website of information for the general public.

In this most recent phase, DDC has also initiated innovative projects that aim to reverse aspects of social exclusion caused by institutions and systems, including making improvements to public services, and addressing the disengagement from
‘normal’ citizenship that often accompanies social exclusion. The SPICE project aims to involve children in democratic processes and in local citizenship issues, using technology where appropriate. This has included on-line voting, and the development of a smart card that will reward participation, good citizenship, and improvements in lifestyles such as healthy eating, with one means of redeeming the credits being at the public swimming pool. The SWIFT project was funded under EU Framework Programme IV to develop a ‘prototype’ system for the co-ordinated delivery of social, welfare and health services to elderly people in their own homes. The system included the networking of the service providers, and the development of user friendly technology which the elderly people could use.

Another project conceived and led by DDC in this phase is the Stanley Connect project which will provide 300 homes - which all include children just entering secondary education - with computers and network connections. It will also fund educational support personnel. The aim of the project is to improve educational attainment. The project provides people with access to technologies, but is novel in that the provision is not delivered through a PIAP, but by placing computers in people’s homes. The number of homes chosen in this project was not arbitrary – this was the minimum number of applicants needed by BT in order to upgrade the local exchange to ADSL. This project aims to kills two birds with one stone: to improve educational attainment, and to provide local businesses and residents with the opportunity of connecting to an upgraded communications infrastructure. This is a new strategy for DDC in providing broadband – rather than supplying the network, they have provided the telecoms company with the critical mass needed for an upgrade of the exchange.
Some of the PIAPs developed in earlier stages of the programme are now flourishing, with local community groups determining how the equipment and the facilities are used. The most active are running homework clubs, providing ICT training and have informal drop in sessions. Indeed, some are now having to ration access because of over-demand for the facilities. Some are using the attractions of ICT (including games machines) to persuade ‘disaffected’ youths into the community facilities, and in one PIAP a project is underway to train a group of young people in website design and digital photography manifesting in a sophisticated website for the centre.

3 ADDRESSING SOCIAL EXCLUSION

3.1 Towards a Definition

The concept social exclusion is of recent creation, with its first official usage being by the European Commission in 1988 under the second European poverty programme (Samers, 1998). Veit-Wilson relates it to a French concern with a Durkheimian conception of solidarity and integration in social space, in contrast to the traditional discourse in the UK of poverty which took a lack of resources perspective (Veit-Wilson, 2002). "The concept of exclusion is not a new way of defining the poor; rather, it draws attention to a combination of economic hardship and institutional discrimination, both of which help to create unfavourable life chances and chronic exclusion from normal citizenship. The idea of a combination of poverty and constraints on participation in citizenship is at the heart of the term 'social exclusion'" (Mingione, 1997, p10).
This overlay of contributory factors is a common theme in the literature, although different authors cite different factors, or give them different emphases. For Perri
6 (1997), it is about exclusion from participation in jobs, education, homes, leisure, civic organisations and voting. Sibley (1998) talks of how “unemployment and associated deprivations, particularly poor housing and inadequate education, can, in combination, amount to a denial of citizenship” (p119). Samers (1998) sees the focus as being on “inadequate social participation, lack of social integration and lack of power” (p125) whilst Tunstall and Lupton (2003) include material deprivation and poverty, but also a lack of social interaction and participation, the agency of the excluded and the excluders, and the role of subjective attitudes. Rahman et al. (2000) measure income levels and dynamics, economic circumstances, health and well-being, education, social stability, barriers to work, exclusion from (and disadvantage at) work, vulnerability, access to services, social cohesion, crime, and housing (although, as Tunstall and Lupton point out, critics would argue that it is not possible or desirable to develop a measure of social exclusion (Tunstall and Lupton, 2003)).

The concepts of poverty and deprivation emphasise the individual (or household), seeing them as ‘victims’ of a lack of resources (Chapman et al., 1998). By contrast, social exclusion also recognises that there are other contributory factors: some authors refer to institutional discrimination (eg, Mingione, 1997); some to exclusion from ‘normal’ citizenship or participation (eg, Samers, 1998, Sibley, 1998); and some to attitudes (Tunstall and Lupton, 2003). Chapman (1998) group these as ‘relational issues’, where the focus is on system failures rather than on individuals. Examples of these relational issues would be poor or non-existent
services, a lack of participation in civic organisations or democratic processes, and disempowerment.

Many of these relational issues impact on an area basis, with places and social groups becoming excluded by the rest of society. This is often seen in terms of the ‘ghettoisation’ of certain areas, such that service provision – both public and private – declines, and the area becomes stigmatised (see, for example, Sibley (1998), Mignione (1997)). In the UK, this has led to a concentration of effort in addressing social exclusion through area programmes (Social Exclusion Unit, 2001a, Social Exclusion Unit, 2001b). There is also recognition that certain social groups are at particular risk of social exclusion: old people, ethnic minorities, ex-prisoners, disabled people, those involved in family conflict or living in a deprived neighbourhood, for example (Social Exclusion Unit, 2001a). However, major statistical studies still focus on the main structural groupings of society – age, gender and so on (eg, Rahman et al., 2000).

It is not the intention here to claim to have seen the way through the complexity (or even chaos (Samers, 1998)) of the concept of social exclusion, but rather to create a framework of dominant themes that will serve as a base on which to situate the activities of DDC in using ICT to overcome social exclusion. For the purposes of this analysis, the main factors that contribute to social exclusion have been grouped under a number of headings:

1. *Income deprivation (individual’s lack of resources)* -this would equate to traditional notions of poverty;
2. **Social deprivation (individual’s lack of resources)** - this would include poor education and poor health;

3. **Disengagement and Marginalisation (relational/system failures)** – disengagement from ‘normal’ citizenship; marginalisation through stigma, discrimination, lack of power, dependency etc.;

4. **Lack of local services (relational/system failures)** – no, or impoverished, public and private provision; this would include a lack of local service facilities (GPs, libraries, schools, shops, pubs, banks etc), poor levels of services ‘coming in’ to the locality (policing, public transport, insurance, taxis etc), and poor infrastructure.

### 3.2 DDC’s Activities

The activities in DDC’s programme can be situated in the social exclusion framework developed above. This analysis only investigates the direct consequences of any project; in the long term the programme of regeneration activities will hopefully indirectly generate a wide range of social inclusion benefits.

#### 3.2.1 Income Deprivation

In DDC’s case, some projects aim to address aspects of individual poverty. The ICT network has been used to attract firms to (or keep them in) the area, making more jobs available to local people. Some projects, especially those supporting PIAPs and schools, have provided or encouraged ICT training thereby raising people’s skill levels and employability. The project linking the employment needs
of local companies with the skills of the unemployed aimed to get more local people out of poverty. PIAPs have been developed to allow people access to the benefits of the technology such as looking for job vacancies and making applications.

3.2.2 Social Deprivation
The poor level of educational attainment in Derwentside is a major concern of the Council. Although not the Local Education Authority, there has been a pro-active approach to installing and supporting computers in schools. The recent Stanley Connect project where computers are being provided to 300 homes is targeted specifically on improving educational attainment. Some of the PIAPs run formal homework clubs, and post-school education can also be enhanced by access to electronic educational courses and/or information available via the internet. Poor health - a major issue in the North East - is targeted by a health promotions website providing information and advice (again, accessible via PIAPs), by the information provided by health visitors, and the SPICE project’s smart card incentives to children for a healthier lifestyle. More subtle forms of social deprivation, such as the lack of ‘life skills’, are also addressed although only in an indirect way. An argument can be constructed that in this century, an essential ‘life skill’ is the mastery of ICT and projects that promote ICT skills through schools and in PIAPs would address this particular issue.

3.2.3 Disengagement and Marginalisation
Disengagement and marginalisation from, or by, the rest of society, can relate both to individuals and to places. A number of projects, especially those in schools or
PIAPs, aim to raise the aspirations and confidence of children and young people: in the school (where the children had never visited the nearest city), and in the PIAP (where young people were developing the community centre website), for example. Some PIAPs use their ICT to provide attractions such as games machines and film nights to encourage disengaged young people into the community centre. The SPICE project specifically targets the involvement of children in local citizenship, in part through ICT. SWIFT helps elderly people stay in their own homes (and within their own communities).

Variously, these activities use ICT to address issues of individual engagement. The early phase of PIAPs, however, had an explicit aim of addressing disengagement and marginalisation of the community as a whole. The network provided by DDC to these PIAPs was configured to provide a central website where information could be posted and shared between the centres, with free communication between them. A recent project has re-visited this idea, but also includes funding for a co-ordinator of the site who can research and post relevant information for the many small voluntary organisations involved. These communities, historically, were very dependent on a single local industry, and when the industry collapsed, the dependency culture remained. An ability to share information would ‘build the capacity’ of community leaders so that they are able to manage projects that will provide local benefits.

3.2.4 Lack of Local Services
The lack of local services, or the poor level of provision, is a form of social exclusion caused by institutional or system failures. DDC’s programme of
activities includes a number of projects that address these system failures by using ICT to improve the delivery of services. In some cases, the technology is used to improve single services: for example, school education through the introduction of the internet or health through enabling remote diagnoses from central hospitals. The SWIFT project uses the integrative power of the technology to provide a single service to elderly people by linking a number of service providers such as GPs, pharmacists, and social services. These projects address service improvements per se. The improvements need not involve the recipients of the services in accessing the technology as this is predominantly invisible to the client. A number of them help to sustain local outlets: improving the services provided by small GP surgeries, and making improvement to ‘community’ hospitals, for example. To an extent, the provision of funding for PIAPs, located in existing local centres, also helps to keep these facilities viable.

Whilst the formal line at national level would still generally be ‘wait for the market to provide’ an advanced ICT infrastructure, national and regional initiatives are now acknowledging that the market is failing to meet demand in rural and deprived areas. DDC, somewhat ahead of national policy, began to intervene in the development of an advanced ICT infrastructure in the mid 1990s, seeing this as a crucial backbone to much of the programme, but also as a means of addressing social exclusion through making the area an attractive location for vibrant businesses and incoming residents. Without the development of an advanced network, much of their programme of activities would not have been possible.
4 ADDRESSING THE ‘DIGITAL DIVIDE’

4.1 Towards a Definition

This is an elusive concept, with different meanings, or emphases, attributed to the term by different authors. Closely related is a body of work on ‘access’ to ICT. Some authors are critical of the concept – Selwyn, for example, refers to the “flawed and over-simplified notion of a dichotomous digital divide” (Selwyn, 2003a, p17)

The notion of digital exclusion first emerged with regard to the technological disparities between developed and developing countries (Selwyn, 2003a), where the emphasis is on exclusion from any communications technology. Chakravartty (2001), for example, highlights the fact that 75% of the world’s population does not have access to a basic telephone service. The western, developed world soon started to apply the concept within a specific nation state, or even region, and in the main switched the emphasis to those people who were excluded from using the technology and away from places that were excluded from the technology. EU and UK policy, although formally presenting the latter as a marginal issue, do allow for ‘exceptions’. Some of the literature echoes concerns with infrastructural provision in ‘deprived areas’ (Office of Economic Development, 2002, DTI, 2000) and in rural areas (Richardson, 2002, Malecki, 2003, Hollifield and Donnermeyer, 2003, Talbot, 1997). Rural policy in the UK recognises the ICT issue (DETR and MAFF, 2000), and many nation states, including the UK,
are now introducing schemes to support the roll out of broadband in disadvantaged regions and localities.

That being said, the main concern in developed countries is with the divide between the people who are the ‘haves’ and the ‘have nots’ of modern technologies (mainly networked computers, although digital TV and mobile phones are given occasional attention), and the recognition that take up by certain social groups – those in lower socio-economic groups, and older people are of particular concern, and those living in ‘deprived areas’ – is low (CEC, 2002, National Telecommunications and Information Administration, 2000, Office of the e-Envoy, 2002). Many factors, including poverty, education and skills, a lack of ‘technological capital’ (see Selwyn, 2003a), or a lack of perceived benefits could lead people to be ‘have nots’ (see, for example, Hellawell, 2001, Dutton, 1999, BECTa, 2001, Best eEurope Practices, 2003, Digital Europe, 2003). The emphasis, then, is on ‘disadvantaged’ people, often living in ‘deprived areas’. There is, however, a growing literature that highlights how people, in certain situations, make informed choices not to get connected. These people may not fall into ‘disadvantaged’ social groups as normally defined (Selwyn, 2003b, Wyatt et al., 2002).

Policy measures to alleviate these issues focus on the need to make access easier, but a key question is ‘access to what?’ According to Servon (2002), until the millennium, the focus was on providing the technology, and, perhaps, some skills training. In line with more recent thinking, however, the UK policy now emphasises providing the technology and the relevant skills base so that people
can make ‘meaningful use’ of the resources available via ICTs (DTI, 2000). Provision of ICTs in schools and through PIAPs is a central to this policy. The emphasis is on stimulating use, developing ICT skills, encouraging e-learning both in formal educational settings and in lifelong learning and, more recently, making the available information more user friendly and appropriate (CEC, 2002, DTI, 2000). Here, computers and the internet are seen as means of making people more included.

However, although a lack of access in the sense of resources at the individual level can in itself been seen as a form of deprivation, policy is frequently targeted at broader social inclusion (better access to services, more educational and training options, and additional means of civic engagement, for example).

As with defining social exclusion, the intention here is not to resolve the contested nature of the ‘digital divide’ and come up with a new definition. Rather the aim is to draw out the salient points from the literature and policy on the ‘digital divide’ to provide a framework within which to situate DDC’s activities. The following features seem important.

1. Providing access to ICT for individuals - ‘disadvantaged’ people often in ‘deprived’ areas who would not otherwise have the opportunity to use it. It would be usual for ‘projects’ to include providing skills training in the use of ICT; a popular form of provision would be via PIAPs. In some cases, network provision might be addressed.
2. *Using the ICT to access services* – in particular, government services, education, and civic engagement activities.

### 4.2 DDC’s Activities

#### 4.2.1 Providing access to ICT for individuals

There is a clear grouping of DDC projects where a central aim is providing access to the technologies for individuals who might not otherwise have the opportunity. PIAPs, in the early stages were established in and around the two main towns. Subsequently, Rural Challenge funding enabled the roll out to a few remoter areas. Providing supported access to ICT for people who would not otherwise use the technology was clearly an important objective in all these projects. Funding was provided to ‘train the trainers’ in ICT skills; the notion was that community leaders and volunteers would be provided with training, and that they would then support the members of the public as they learned to use the technology. DDC has also pushed forward the policy of getting computers into schools so that children can acquire ICT skills. A recent project, Stanley Connect, provides access to ICT for people in their homes, rather than making public provision.

DDC prioritised the need for an advanced infrastructure to accompany these developments, somewhat in contrast to much of the developed world’s digital divide policy, which tends to marginalise the need for such attention. However, where the literature gives credence to such activity is in deprived and/or rural areas where market mechanisms might be inadequate. Parts of Derwentside fall into both these area categories.
In the early phase of its programme, DDC created a broadband network and set itself up as an internet service provider. The original broadband cabling, leased from Telewest, provided a backbone to which DDC could attach spurs with ‘last mile technologies’ (cable, radio, or BT connections). Most of the original PIAPs were either nodes on the backbone, or networked into it. The Rural Challenge phase saw the backbone developed further into the rural areas of the District, with radio links commonly creating the final connections. Schools were connected into the system in a similar way. The infrastructure has been developed through time: the area coverage is now much greater than in the early years, and the reconfiguration of the network provides a more robust and advanced system. DDC was also concerned to ensure that advanced telecommunications were available to support the project of putting computers into homes. This time it was able to negotiate an upgrade of the local exchange to ADSL because the project provided the critical mass of demand needed by BT.

4.2.2 Using the ICT to access services
All of DDC’s projects that provided individual access to the technology had the aim of not only making sure that people acquired ICT skills but also of improving access to services. The early PIAP projects promoted ‘capacity building’ among community leaders by providing a shared website. They were less well-defined in terms of quite how the general public would benefit, although there was a strong belief that this would be the case. The lack of clearly defined outcomes reflects both the nature of PIAPs where, within reason, people might expect to use them as they want, and the fact that, in the mid-1990s, there was much less evidence of exactly what benefits might be generated. The later PIAPs, under the Rural
Challenge project, saw the introduction of support staff whose role was to help people use the technology to support their interests.

Those PIAPs that are now flourishing run a number of activities with clearly defined goals. A number run ‘homework clubs’ where the technology is being used to access educational material. Others are LearnDirect centres where access to electronic post-school educational courses are supported. Another project in a PIAP is supporting young people in developing content for their website. Providing access in schools had a clear educational goal; and so too did the access provided in homes. The project provides not only the technology but also educational support staff to the families involved.

The access provided through PIAPs, schools and in homes informally allows access to a wide range of services. Some will be linked to services that DDC has helped to enhance: job searches, information on health and on local government services. Others will be available via access to the worldwide web, with its wide range of information and e-commerce services.

5 COMPARING SOCIAL EXCLUSION WITH THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

DDC’s ‘social inclusion through ICT’ activities fit comfortably within an agenda of overcoming social exclusion, and within one of overcoming the digital divide. A close investigation of the Beacon Council brief and feedback provided by ODPM (2003) and the Advisory Panel on Beacon Councils (2003) highlights the ambiguity of the term ‘social inclusion through ICT’. The brief provided to Local
Authorities by ODPM (2003) suggests that it was the ‘digital divide’ definition that was meant at this stage – the term ‘digital divide’ is used four times on page 1, ‘digitally inclusive society’ twice, and there are regular references to ‘access’ and ‘take up’. However, the feedback from the Advisory Panel on Beacon Councils (2003) states that they were “very impressed by the way that the Council had shown leadership in spheres normally outside its control” (p90), and during the shortlist visit, the assessors referred to the ‘golden thread’ of ICT that was woven through all DDC’s activities. These statements imply that it was the way that ICT was being used to address regeneration and community well-being (the social exclusion agenda) that impressed the judges.

The point about the Beacon process is that the lead given by government to Local Authorities confuses an agenda of addressing social exclusion with ICT, with that of overcoming the digital divide. Is this simply semantics, or are there fundamental differences between addressing social exclusion or the digital divide?

It would be difficult to argue that the use of ICT should be expected to address or resolve all aspects of social exclusion. As a starting point, though, the DDC study indicates how certain problems can be addressed (see Table 1).

Before embarking on a comparison of columns 2 and 3 in Table 1, it is necessary to recapitulate in order to check that all aspects of the digital divide agenda have been captured by this analysis: it was constructed around social exclusion themes, and could, therefore, be missing some aspects of digital divide activity. In the earlier section ‘Addressing the Digital Divide’, the analysis was conducted under
two headings: ‘Providing access to ICT for individuals’ and ‘Using the internet to access services’.

Table 1: Comparing Social Exclusion and Digital Divide Agendas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Exclusion Heading</th>
<th>Activity Identifiable in DDC’s ‘Social Exclusion’ Programme</th>
<th>Activities Identifiable in DDC’s ‘Digital Divide’ Programme</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Income Deprivation</td>
<td>Supporting firms to secure jobs</td>
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<td>(individual’s lack of</td>
<td>Making vacancy information more accessible</td>
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<td>resources)</td>
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<td>Making vacancy information more accessible</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Providing ICT skills for jobs</td>
<td>Providing ICT skills for jobs</td>
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<td>Social Deprivation</td>
<td>Addressing educational attainment</td>
<td>Addressing educational attainment</td>
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<td>(individual’s lack of</td>
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<td>resources)</td>
<td>Making health information more accessible</td>
<td>Making health information more accessible</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Providing ICT skills and access</td>
<td>Providing ICT skills and access</td>
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<tr>
<td>Disengagement and</td>
<td>‘Capacity building’ for community leaders</td>
<td>‘Capacity building’ for community leaders</td>
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<tr>
<td>Marginalisation</td>
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<tr>
<td>(relational/system</td>
<td>Information for self-help</td>
<td>Information for self-help</td>
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<td>failures)</td>
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<td>Electronic voting for children</td>
<td>Electronic voting for children</td>
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<td>Smart cards for citizenship</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of Local Services</td>
<td>Improving local public services – hospitals, GPs,</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>(relational/system</td>
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<td>failures)</td>
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Under the first heading, DDC’s activities were the provision of computer technology, training in the use of ICT, and improvements to the telecommunications infrastructure. In Table 1, these aspects are captured under
the headings income deprivation (ICT skills for jobs), social deprivation (access to, and training in, ICT), and lack of local services (improving telecommunications infrastructure). DDC’s activities described under the ‘Using the ICT to access services’ heading are represented in Table 1 under the headings income deprivation (making vacancy information more accessible), under social deprivation (addressing educational attainment, and making health information more accessible) and under disengagement and marginalisation (capacity building for community leaders, information for self-help, electronic voting for children).

Having established that Table 1 has not served to exclude aspects of digital divide activity from the analysis, comparisons can be drawn between column 2 (social exclusion activity), and column 3 (digital divide activity). The digital divide agenda has a narrower focus than the agenda for social exclusion. The latter encourages the use of ICT to attract firms to, or keep firms in, the region, and so potentially providing more job opportunities. Focusing solely on the ‘digital divide’ would not address this. While ‘digital divide’ policies and literature do not exclude technologies other than computers, the alternatives are still internet-related: digital TVs and mobile phones. The use of ICT to service other technologies such as smartcards would not, then, be covered by a digital divide approach. A major aspect of social exclusion activity – improving services – is also not covered by the digital divide approach which only provides potential help to individuals through access to information, and does not focus on the system failure per se. DDC’s ‘social exclusion’ activities make improvements to hospitals, to GP services, to schools, to services for the elderly in their homes.
Yet, while the use of ICT is central to these improvements, the clients need not engage with the technology to benefit.

6 IMPLICATIONS FOR LOCAL AUTHORITIES

The DDC study suggests that overcoming the digital divide is a subset of the wider agenda of addressing social exclusion through ICT. If the message for Local Authorities is simply to address the digital divide, then a number of opportunities to address other aspects of social exclusion through ICT will be missed. The main issues that will not be addressed pertain to area exclusion: areas where excluded individuals are significant in number but which, at the same time, might become unattractive, ‘difficult’ and/or stigmatised (Mingione, 1997, Sibley, 1998, Social Exclusion Unit, 2001b). As can be seen by the DDC example, ICT can be used to help these areas by attracting or keeping firms, and by improving public service provision. It would seem important, then, for Local Authorities with ‘deprived areas’ to address the wider social exclusion agenda through ICT, and, like DDC, give priority to ensuring that a good quality infrastructure is in place.

Rurality brings some different twists to area exclusion. In some cases, an area may be classified as deprived within mainstream definitions, and have the additional overlay of the distance people need to travel to jobs, to services and so on. In other cases, an area may not be stigmatised, or be aesthetically unattractive, but may still have problems with a lack of employment opportunities, and with a poor level of services, overlaid with issues of remoteness. In his overview report
of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation’s ‘Action in Rural Areas’ research programme, Shucksmith (2000) emphasises the particular economic structures of rural areas that cause exclusion: how some areas lack jobs, and how those jobs that exist locally are typically low grade, low paid, and often part time, casual or seasonal (See also Countryside Agency, 2003). Using ICT to address this ‘area exclusion’ issue by attracting new businesses or by improving existing firms is an important avenue for exploration.

The loss of services in rural areas, and the problems of travelling to access more distant outlets, is a dominant theme in the literature. Among the issues raised by the Centre for Rural Economy in their report for the then newly formed Regional Development Agencies of England were the loss of village (and more increasingly, market town) services, and the car dependency of rural dwellers which has “heightened access and mobility problems for some groups (especially among the elderly, rural youth and non-car-owning households)” (Centre for Rural Economy, 2001 p14). What is more, many rural households need, but cannot afford, more than one car (Cloke et al., 1994). A commitment to a review of public service provision was made in the Rural White Paper (DETR and MAFF, 2000), whose follow up action included the publication of the Rural Services Standard setting out the levels of access to rural services which rural communities can expect to achieve (DEFRA, 2002). Clearly, the improvements that DDC made to public services such as hospitals, GPs, schools and services for the elderly address some of the public service problems found in rural areas, as do network infrastructure developments.
The Rural White Paper also points up the lack of shops, banks, garages and pubs in rural villages. Banking facilities in the form of distance to Post Offices, Banks, and cash points is also flagged by the Countryside Agency (Countryside Agency, 2003). In these cases, remoteness is normally held responsible for the problems of maintaining private sector services; some metropolitan areas can also be excluded from private service provision, but in these cases the problem is often about the stigmatisation of areas, and the use of geodemographic profiling. In the DDC study, there were no examples of the use of ICT to address the lack of private sector services. However, it would seem feasible that the delivery systems to improve public services locally – supporting high quality local outlets, and/or integrating service delivery - could be reconfigured to improve certain private sector services in similar ways. This might have more success in rural areas where the problem is mainly one of viability than in stigmatised deprived areas where it might be difficult to attract private service providers.

Local Authorities with areas with problems of area exclusion would benefit from defining their target as social exclusion rather than just the digital divide when planning how to apply ICT, and certain aspects of central government policy encourage this. Using ICT for ‘promoting economic vitality’ and ‘promoting social inclusion’ is part of the National Strategy for Local e-Government (ODPM, 2002). Local Authorities’ powers to address the ‘well-being’ of their communities have now been clarified and strengthened (ODPM, 2001). Formerly, national government gave little guidance to Local Authorities on how they should be utilising the powers of ICT but this has been made much more explicit in its recent
policy on local e-government (ODPM, 2002). Using ICT to improve services, including joined up local services, is central.

While some aspects of central government policy stress the problem of the digital divide, others focus on the use of ICT to address a wide range of social exclusion factors. The Beacon Council scheme, with its apparent shift from a digital divide to a social exclusion agenda, is just one more confusing message to Local Authorities about how to achieve ‘social inclusion through ICT’. This paper has made the case that Councils with problems of area exclusion can benefit from using ICT to address these wider social exclusion issues, rather than simply focusing on the narrow ‘digital divide’ agenda. According to Selwyn (2003a), the ‘digital divide’s appeal “lies in its neat packaging of complex social issues in a form of social exclusion that governments can be seen to do something about, unlike more longstanding and fundamental ‘non-digital’ divides” (p17). Hopefully, local government will take up the challenge and help to address these longstanding and fundamental ‘non-digital’ divides through ICT.
References


