

Appendix G

The Norfolk E-Government Vision

The seven linked scenarios below illustrate how the comprehensive application of electronic government, and greater use of ICT in community settings, could affect the lives of a citizens, council officers, business people and communities. They provide a vision for how Norfolk might look in the future.

The Citizen's Tale

Joe Soap is an unemployed 28-year-old who has recently been made redundant from a Norwich shoe factory where he was a machine minder in the packing department. The machines now mind themselves.

He lives in a Council flat on Mile Cross, where he had to sell his car following his redundancy to pay off Hire Purchase agreements on household items. He has just received bills for gas, electricity and the telephone in the morning post. As he also needs to pay his rent, he telephones the Council.

Normally he would just arrange to get his rent taken directly from his benefits - all of which are paid via the Council on behalf of the Benefits Agency. When he first became unemployed he was interviewed at the local housing office on behalf of all the relevant agencies under the "One" scheme and given advice on training and finding work as well as benefits. The balance of his benefits is put in his personal Council bank account (operated in partnership with the Co-op bank) and can be withdrawn either as cash from any council office, bank, post office or taken in credit on his Citizen Card which has a chip which keeps details of his balance and credit limit.

However the bills add up to more than his monthly benefit so he talks to a Money Advice officer. Some of these are Council employees. Some work on a paid or voluntary basis for the Citizen's Advice Bureau and other voluntary bodies. The telephone system automatically switches him through from the freephone number to whoever is free.

Once there he sorts out how the payments can be spread over the year - details of some of his commitments and income are already on the system the advisor calls up and others can be added quickly to give proper household budget advice. The advisor then logs details of how much can be paid when with the Co-op, which arranges the necessary finance using a guarantee from the Council that

it will cover any loss. Proper financial planning and discussion with Joe give the Council the confidence that default is unlikely - after all they can always throw him out of his flat!

The advisor also spots that he is now entitled to further benefits as his circumstances have changed and automatically posts the electronic form to the Benefits Agency to process it. That being done, Joe goes down to the local store to do some shopping. The cost is automatically deducted from his Citizen's Card and credits from the store's customer loyalty scheme are added. There are also special offers for people who are on benefit, but because these are processed automatically Joe does not feel embarrassed by having to claim them in front of others.

The store uses details of what he and other customers shop for, when, to help decide how much to stock and to revise their marketing work. Joe remembers the bad old days when he joked about having a "fist full of plastic" with a dozen different cards to carry. Now agreements between the different banks and major store chains on common standards and interoperability mean he only needs one that is accepted by everyone. He can even use his Citizen Card to buy things or get cash when he is on holiday abroad - assuming he can afford a holiday abroad again.

The store also has an information kiosk which hosts local and national government information. The most popular information is stored on the machine's own memory and it records every access to update what people most want. It can also access the Internet to get information from remote locations if needed.

Joe logs in to the Employment Service to see what jobs are on offer. He is in luck as there is one he would like at a new pub opening in the area. His Citizen's Card contains details of the jobs he has had, courses attended and qualifications held, and accreditation of his experience in his previous work - an electronic CV. This is sent electronically to the firm together with an application form he has filled in on the machine and an interview date and time is sent back as an electronic agent has recognised that he fits the 'person specification' for the job.

This makes Joe feel a lot better so he looks at the local leisure information to see what he might do that evening. There is an aerobic session at his local community centre he quite fancies so he books a place - his Citizen Card automatically logging his discount and acting as identification.

Rather than going straight home he decides to brush up on certain skills before the job interview, so pops into his local library which hosts an outreach centre for the Millennium Learning Network. He does a couple of hours work on a distance learning package available at any outreach centre and learning credits for this are logged on his Citizen's Card. He also gets out a book using the card and a reader logs it and date stamps it without needing to bother the librarian who is busy helping a youngster with their homework assignment in the after school club.

In the afternoon a neighbour calls and asks if he can do some decorating for them with payment in the Local Economic Transfer System (LETS) currency the “Norvic”. This can be entered onto Joe’s Citizen card along with other “currency” and is accepted at many local businesses as well as by his neighbours and friends. He has some spare time, and although the payment is still taxable and taken into consideration when assessing benefit, the Benefit Agency are more lenient with LETS payments than they are with “real” money in order to foster community businesses and help people build up a customer base so they can move off benefit and into the mainstream economy.

After working, it is some distance to the community centre so he decides to take a bus. The bus stop lets him know when the next bus is arriving and as it is not long he waits and takes it, paying with his Citizen’s Card in the swipe reader which logs when he gets on and off the bus. What he does not know is that the information on how many people travel from where to where, and at what times of the day, week and year, is logged and analysed to plan the bus timetable. However he does know the service has improved over recent years.

When he arrives at the community centre that evening he quickly checks the local information on their kiosk before his course. There is a planning application in for the new pub that will be sited at the end of his street. Although he is keen on the job he is also worried about noise and nuisance so he looks at the planning application and comments already made by local people and the Norwich Society. Joe is keen on finding out what the councils are doing since he was picked to be on the Citizen’s Panel. Every so often he will be asked his views on key issues facing the City and County and knows that they are taken on board when making decisions - not like the old days when all you could do was vote for a party manifesto.

He is still not sure about the issue so he sends a message to his local councillor’s voice mail using the microphone on the kiosk. He would have liked to use the videophone on the machine to contact a planning official but it is outside of office hours and electronic communications have not changed things that much. However his councillor is in and sends back an automatic message offering a videophone link to his on-line ward surgery that is booked for that time slot.

After a videophone chat to the Councillor who is sitting at home at his PC, he is reassured that the proper controls will be in place to reduce noise and disturbance and that the improved bus service means there are not as many cars using entertainment facilities (or drunk drivers).

When he gets home it is bad news, however. His home has been broken into. He quickly calls the Police whose “agent” system assesses the degree of urgency (and the likely level of demand at that time of night in relation to the number of people on duty) and contacts the nearest officer to attend. Although Joe thinks he has talked to a person he has in fact been talking to a computer that has asked for the relevant information and taken the appropriate action - using a recording of his own voice to give the address to the officer. The same routing system used for his call to the money advice person picks up all emergency calls and sends them to the nearest available officer. Special diagnostic questions have been devised for all emergency situations to find out quickly the exact

nature of the problem and the appropriate response and these can be used either by a person in a call centre or a computerised programme as in Joe's case. If it is not a standard situation it defaults quickly to an expert to tackle.

The Police Officer notes down the details on her electronic organiser and borrows Joe's telephone to download the details to the police computer. This logs details of items stolen so that if they are recovered they can automatically be tagged and returned to Joe. It also looks at the modus operandi and checks if there are other similar crimes. As there have been some in that area it sends a message via the ring master system and email to Neighbourhood Watch co-ordinators asking them to warn people there is a burglar in their area. It also checks the criminal database for likely suspects and warns officers to check their homes in case they return with the loot. It also accesses the logs of the CCTV cameras in the areas and downloads copies of the relevant footage to the duty officer to check for evidence of the criminal.

As luck would have it the duty officer is able to spot a known criminal whose photograph the computer has brought up at the relevant time and uses image recognition software to search the current CCTV images and spot him about to break into another house. A quickly despatched officer is able to catch him red handed.

Although he gets his goods back quickly and the loan of an alarm connected to the station in case of repeat victimisation, Joe feels uncomfortable in his home and before he goes to bed sends a voice mail message to the housing department asking to be considered for a transfer on compassionate grounds. It will also move him away from that noisy pub!

The District Officer's Tale

Joan Pears has noticed an improvement in her lifestyle since she started teleworking a couple of years ago. As a business liaison officer she was often out seeing local firms on their premises so it was easy to make the switch to full time teleworking so she could arrange her hours around appointments but also dropping off and picking up her children from school.

Her work is judged by the number of clients she sees and how quickly and successfully she can process their cases rather than by the specific hours she keeps and if she works late some days or at weekends it is balanced by being able to take time off when she needs it for her family.

Of course she still comes into the office for team meetings, and to pick up some mail - although mostly she logs in to the office system, downloads letters that have been scanned in and voice mail and email messages and sends back the files she has completed and outgoing email.

She is part of a new team formed from people working in many of the old departments who dealt with businesses in the City. Each of them still retains their original professional discipline and can work on the relevant part of any current case in the system, but everyone also has a "patch" with a group of regular clients they get to know, and act as advocate for, with the others in the team.

They include County as well as District Council officers and those of the Health and Safety Executive and are closely linked to the Small Business Service for the advice part of their work - although they also have a separate enforcement role.

Her first call today follows a phone call yesterday to the freephone Business Link call centre number that, like Joe's Money Advice Line, routes to whoever is currently free. The call was from a person wanting to open a new pub in Mile Cross in a vacant building.

The call centre operator logged his details onto the system and sent it off not only to Joan but all the officers who would need to look at the plans and process the various approvals he would need. Joan was "tagged" as lead officer and after a check with her diary on the system a provisional appointment was booked.

This morning she logged into the system to download the details to her laptop, including a check at the expert systems view of whether the application was broadly consistent with planning guidelines and what permissions the person would need.

She noted that an initial notice had already been drafted to be sent to neighbours, civic amenity and community groups, the local Community Power forum members and, of course, local councillors. It would be sent out as soon as Joan had visited and made sure the person wanted to proceed once the system and any potential problems were explained to them.

Meeting the client on site she soon established that he knew what he was doing and that there seemed to be no obvious problems with the various rules he would have to meet.

Joan's role - like all of the team - is to give advice on what the client has to do to comply with the regulations and avoid problems occurring rather than enforcing the regulations when breaches take place. Some areas she had to refer to colleagues in other disciplines with email queries - some were answered straight away and others were "logged" for reply as soon as they could be checked. The team aims to process all but the 20% of really complex applications in three weeks - the slowest part is the statutory 14-day consultation period.

One issue is particularly complicated as new planning policy guidance has been issued by the government that morning and sent to Joan via her portal service. Her profile sits on a regional database so information about any of her professional (or personal) interests being sent out by central or local government or the private sector information services is automatically routed to her. Joan and her customer pop in to the area First Stop Shop that has a videoconference link back to City Hall. A talk to a planning expert who looks at the detailed drawings the client has scanned and emailed into the system and the planning files for that site on the Geographical Information System (GIS) system mean it can be quickly solved with an alteration to the plans to allow for improved access.

The City Council has been developing a three-dimensional computer model of the City using information from its GIS and a Virtual Reality Modelling process. This was based on the Virtual City project developed for the tourism market in the Millennium centre. The

professional version takes the architect's plans for each building and "sites" them on top of the area map. Also on the map are details of public utilities and links to "relational" databases of traffic flows, past planning applications and permissions, land ownership etc.

As each new planning application is made it can be "placed" in the model and looked at in the context of existing buildings in the same way the planners used to use the physical scale model of the City Centre (still in City Hall) to see what it might look like when it was built.

After various other bits of data have been passed on to relevant officers Joan passes on to her next appointment with a recently opened Chinese restaurant. Alterations had to be made to meet updated regulations and she is carrying out a follow up visit to check they have been done. She uses her digital Dictaphone as she walks round carrying out the inspection, checking against the print out of what had to be done. When she finishes she emails the record to City Hall where a speech recognition programme automatically turns it into a word-processed document and emails it back to her for checking later.

She has no appointments booked in for the afternoon as she wants to catch up with her paperwork and do some work on her NEBS Management Diploma course. The training officer has recorded a seminar on the CD-ROM, which also contains the latest workbook for her to go through. Her answers are logged on the CD and sent back to be evaluated and then the results added to her electronic CV on the council personnel records system.

Once she has enough credits she will be put forward for the personal interview to check it really has been her doing the work, and then the qualification will be added. Individual elements of the work can also count against other NVQs when appropriate further modules and work experience credits are entered.

As she finishes more quickly than she anticipated she logs in to the "grapevine" section of the Council intranet. As well as seeing details of the latest jobs on offer and current news about the Council and service centres, the electronic magazine contains a "gossip" section with news about other officers, and several electronic discussion groups where people can contribute views and ideas about current corporate work programmes and issues. The latest one is about the following year's economic strategy action plan, which can also be accessed from the Council's Internet site so the general public can have their say.

Because a deal with the local cable and telecoms company has meant developing a Centrex system where all councillors and teleworking employees are on a "virtual switchboard" and can dial internal extensions to other councillors and officers, external email is all but free, as is general Internet use. The system is part of a regional public service network, which means that telephone and data calls to any public body in the region are similarly 'free' – although there is an annual charge for those bits of the network they lease from Telecoms and the costs of maintenance.

Officers are encouraged to use this facility for other uses to broaden their interests and knowledge, which may be of benefit to the Council in the future. There is a "net nanny" system in place however in case the local papers run stories about "Internet pornography

on the rates”. Joan uses this to research the history of the other Norwich’s across the world for her local history group. This may then be used in future to develop further information on the public website on history and tourism. If it is she will get a one-off extra payment.

The Businessman’s Tale

Jim Leather had always wanted to own his own pub, ever since he started in the trade as a barman. Now the business plan he had developed at the local Business and Learning Centre has been approved by the offshore on line bank he had emailed it to.

The Business and Learning Centre was an outpost of the Millennium Centre with a local Business Link counsellor who had access to all of the information, services and advice that were on the whole network. Jim had been able to use a standard form on one of the hireable computer terminals to fill in his own details. He got advice from the local person as well as on line advice from sector experts within the organisation who could download his details.

Because the local estate agents all posted details of property on the network, as did the Training and Enterprise Council and Employment Service of skill and pay levels for various types of job, he was able to use up to date information on likely costs.

He could then go to an architect who downloaded details of the property from the estate agent and plans from the City Model into his office system. Using his own CAD and Virtual Reality modelling software the architect could quickly draw up conversion plans while Jim was there. He then gave them to Jim on CD-ROM so he could give them to the City Council when he was ready to apply for planning permission, and to the builders who would do the work.

Jim then sent out an electronic invitation to tender in the local “Tenders Electronic Daily” and received quotes from five local firms who were automatically sent details of tenders being posted in their specialist area for an annual fee.

He was also able to use current demand information based on sectoral models and local census information for his business and marketing plan. It even had access to details of spending patterns of Citizen Card holders down to a fairly local level so his plan could be very sophisticated. As well as demand side information it let him see what other pubs and clubs where in the area.

Information on the site also encouraged him to join the Shaping the Future “club” for firms in the Leisure and Tourism sector where he would be automatically sent information about relevant developments in the local area and national scene and could join in discussions with other employers in the field on issues such as skills, planning decisions, legal changes etc.

Now that his business plan had been approved he used his home PC to log onto the local network and register an interest in the property in Mile Cross he had picked with the Estate Agent - putting in details of his bank and solicitor. The Estate agent could then start the paperwork quickly and contact the others directly. He also sent an email to his solicitor so work could be started at that end.

Now that Council planning policies, planning applications and the land register were on line, the search procedure was cut down to a couple of days.

He had already logged a call to the local Business Liaison Officer to book an appointment about his plans and the day's good news meant he could start more definite discussions.

He got on well with Joan Pears who was not only able to start the process of getting the planning and other permissions he needed, but give him advice on how to take the development forward in business terms.

He was able to post an advert on the local web for bar and catering staff via the Job Centre - whose computer also mailed, faxed or sent an automatic telephone message to registered claimants with the right skills.

He was also able to start publicising the pub by placing a "virtual" entry in the local leisure guides to be activated when he opened. This would also be posted to the electronic yellow pages directory. By the end of the day he had actually had his first interest as the local newspaper scanned both planning permissions and the draft leisure guide entries to follow up for paid advertising in both their printed and electronic newspapers.

Joan was also able to advise him that there were courses available for first time businesses that he could take on line or in person at his local Business and Learning centre. He signed up for the employment law course as he already had training in health and safety and basic bookkeeping from his previous bar work.

She was even able to give him a business idea. More and more "public" places were providing a local access kiosk hired from the local authority that people could use for a small fee either in cash or on the Citizen Card. The Council gave most of the money back to the site owner and these generally more than paid their rental costs. Jim thought they might only be a short-term success, however, until Internet TV reached most homes so was glad he could rent it by the week.

The Council did not mind if the kiosks were only used for a short time as it had helped set up an IT recycling firm to make new kiosks and PCs from the components of old ones and new chips. This had meant not only did every school child have some sort of computer on their desk, but they had been put in most sheltered accommodation for older people and were on offer to all people who were registered as disabled but who were able to work from home if they had the equipment.

By the end of the day he had most things in place for an opening provisionally booked for a month's time. The only real worry was the builders and decorators - all of this instant communication meant they were even more likely to be called off for an "emergency" somewhere else, so he made sure there was a penalty clause in the contract he agreed with the builder by exchange of email.

The County Officer's Tale

Ron Cussons always used to bemoan the paperwork that stopped him spending more time with his clients as a social worker. Since the “blitz” last year that cut the number of forms to 10% of its previous total and made them all available electronically, he had been able to increase the amount of time he spent in the field by 30%.

The other big improvement had been the agreement to share information between the various caring agencies - social services, health, education, probation, Benefits Agency, and various voluntary bodies like Age Concern and CAB. This meant there was less opportunity for people to fall between the cracks of the different agencies and time was not wasted in duplication. There had been worries about “big brother”, but as the public saw an improvement in service these had faded except for extreme civil liberties groups.

Take his current case. Jane Soap had called in at her local One Stop Shop ostensibly to complain about noise from the neighbours. The information worker had spotted that there were deeper problems and in the course of a talk in the private interview room over coffee had confided that she was going through a marriage break-up with her husband. Things had started to go wrong when he lost his job and started drinking. He had not been physically violent - although she was afraid he might - but started shouting at her and the two children. She had no family nearby and did not know where to turn for advice.

The information worker had suggested a series of agencies who could help - the CAB for legal advice, social services for herself and the children, the police in case her husband did become violent, housing for accommodation, the health shop for the impact it was having on her well being. They then sent off information to the agencies - with Jane’s permission - and it was agreed Ron would be the liaison officer on behalf of all of them.

Like Joan Pears, Ron had access to the case notes of all of the agencies and would liaise with specialists as he needed. Who became liaison officer depended on the prime issue - probation tended to pick up ex-offenders, education those at school and the voluntary sector those who felt nervous or antagonistic to local authorities. Sometimes the liaison officer would change over time. Another of Ron’s clients had transferred to him from the health service. A health centre worker had looked after her while she was in hospital and undergoing treatment to help with addiction to heroin, but once they had been largely weaned off the drug Ron had taken over and worked closely with police and probation to get her into work and stay off drugs.

Ron visits Jane in the flat he helped arrange for her. She has what may be good news. Joe has found a job and she hopes this will persuade him to mend his ways. If he does she may go back to him, but Ron cautions her to make sure she does not go back too early.

Her eldest boy had been having some problems with a group of children but concerted action at school and the local youth club had prevented these being serious. Although caring commitments with her pre school daughter have prevented Jane working until now, Ron has used the “One” diagnostic process to identify areas where jobs may become available and suitable training courses at the local information and learning centre, which has a community crèche.

The “One” diagnostic process is linked to the Shaping the Future Labour market Information system, which maps trends in demand and supply of different skills and jobs based on projections by individual local firms as well as surveys. This helps advisors suggest career paths for individuals; employers look at workforce training programmes and colleges plan future course provision.

A series of linked databases also map other trends down to quite small communities, including benefit take up, council tax and rent arrears, crime levels etc to spot emerging problems. This then triggers action by the relevant agencies working with local community leaders and can form the basis for bids to the government or Europe for major schemes.

As well as being used by strategic planners, the information is used by people like Ron to get an idea of what may be happening on his patch. An increase in petty crime was traced to the same group of children causing problems for Jane’s son, when Ron and the local community police officer spotted the links between statistical trends and their knowledge of the area.

Ron adds some notes to the case file details on his laptop and downloads them to the records back at the office. Significant changes for the relevant agencies are then routed to them as emails or alerts.

The Community’s Tale

Despite being the guinea pig for most experiments in urban renewal since it was first built as a Garden Estate in the 1920s, Mile Cross still had major problems of structural unemployment and deprivation.

Its unemployment, youth unemployment and long term unemployment were the worst of any wards in Norwich. It had high levels of benefit take up and low levels of educational attainment. Proportions of lone parent families were high and there were also high-ish numbers of lone pensioners and comparatively high levels of ethnic minorities. It had a low level of car ownership.

Other individual estates faced equal, if not greater, challenges and the buildings themselves in Mile Cross were in good condition. There was also a strong sense of community – perhaps strengthened by the adversity individual families found themselves in.

The community started to feel this strength through the Single Regeneration Partnership when it moved from having ‘a place at the table’ according to the national rules, to using that place to develop its own self help schemes and influence the direction of the schemes of others.

The Norman Recreation Centre had always been more in Mile Cross than of it and saw its customers as being Citywide. During the renovation the community association took more involvement and changed it into a centre for their use. The relocated health shop, the Community Café, all contributed to moving it away from a straight leisure use. The thing that really changed it was the One Stop Shop development.

When they were first asked what information they wanted access to from the Council, most people gave the Marlon Brando answer: “What you got?” It wasn’t until they started to look at the Internet and explore what was available for themselves they started to

develop ideas. These ranged from hobbies – breeding canaries was popular – to health issues, “what’s on” information and increasing requests for information about Council activity in the area. This was fed by a growing awareness through the Community Power group and the community planning process of how much they could influence what went on in their area if they stated and argued their case based on real options. However they could only generate those options if they understood the background and the restrictions the Council was working within.

Community activists from elected Community Power representatives to volunteers on sports and social groups learned together how to gather, interpret and use this information to influence the system. Of course, the more they got, the more opportunity they saw, and the more they demanded. If the City Council can provide committee papers, shouldn’t the County? If the local authorities can give details of work they planned, why can’t the public utilities? If Housing can let you see your file, why can’t your doctor?

This fed back into the regeneration process in supporting projects. Access to socio-economic information and centre use statistics meant they could refine the business plans of the community café and Mile Cross Gardens projects with help from economic development officers. It also enabled them to fight plans to close the local post office and transfer business elsewhere. It eventually enabled them to put in a bid to take over and manage their own estate when the government’s policy moved from enabling councils to do this to persuading them. The City was never going to be first in line to take this option, but a tenants’ co-operative was far more attractive than a semi-commercial housing association led by the “great and good”.

The other key use was in personal learning. The obvious manifestation was in people doing courses in the IT training centre. There was a dip after the SRB subsidies disappeared, but this flattened and then rose as people’s interest was whetted using the free access kiosks in the café and the nearby library. The presence of the community nursery, crèche and the mother and toddler groups in the same premises meant parents – particularly lone parents – were able to access learning without a high cost of childcare.

The fact that the kiosks and Single Point of Access service gave access to careers guidance and information on the full range of courses that were available locally, removed further barriers. This was, of course, also helped by having job opportunity information available online. The introduction of Individual Learning Accounts, and encouragement to use these in conjunction with individual’s lifetime record of achievement posted on a password connected area of the local server, meant they could constantly review their CV and use it as a basis to identify what their next steps were in consultation with the Careers Service.

Because of the community links and the work on identifying needs via the Community Planning process, people were able to spot gaps in the market for courses they needed and use their Individual Learning Accounts to collectively purchase courses they needed, with further subsidy from the Learning City SRB project.

Initial interest in the self-help kiosks came from both ends of the age spectrum. Youngsters would use them as part of the after school clubs to do their homework (and surf the web and send emails to their friends). They would then bring in their parents and show them

how to get information and use the programmes themselves rather than asking the kids to do it. This led several parents to go on to do more formal courses or use the interactive tutorials to learn new skills. As the first computer literate children came out of school and found it easier to get jobs this spurred parents to try and do the same. Having City College's New Deal training centre nearby also led to increased use as the young people on those courses also used it as an after school club – to the annoyance sometimes of the other users.

One of the earliest community enthusiasts was a local pensioner who was on the Community Centre Association. He started using the computers to get information about his hobby but then invested some of his pension in a computer of his own. He persuaded fellow members of the petanque association to put details of their club on the Internet via the Council's server and used it to book matches and develop links with a boules club in their twin town in France.

Other clubs then started to put their own information up, making the web authoring course one of the most popular in the IT centre. The Community Power group also refined their own web pages, and the opening community pages developed by the Council for access to local information, several times as they gained an understanding of how they could use the technology.

Access to cheap computers under a government scheme was managed from the centre and those taking them up got a free taster course. Laptop loan schemes from the schools to help parents and children learn about IT together, also helped and those who did not have email at home or school could get a free account on the Council's server to be used from the café or library or public kiosks. The latter were most popular with teenagers who preferred to use the Internet – like the telephone – when they were out of sight of their parents. The concept of having a single individual "information" account, where all information held about them by all the local agencies could be accessed by those who needed it, was originally greeted with concern about "Big Brother". However, the fact they could access it themselves and see what people had written about them was useful. As children learned to use it to keep their lifelong record of achievement up to date as well as keeping their homework accessible, people saw further benefits – especially linked to their Learning Accounts. Flexibility on benefit entitlement over local currency and credit union accounts also helped.

When Information and Learning Centre and Single Point of Access franchises came along the community developed a partnership with the Adult Education Service, City College and the local authorities to run them jointly and plough back money into local developments rather than corporate coffers. They then managed to get a Community Legal Service and Small Business Service sub franchise added to the existing health shop, which evolved into a healthy living centre. This put a wide range of services under local control, which were offered across the various sites of the Norman Centre, library, New Deal Centre and area housing office.

As existing Council staff retired or moved on local people were recruited and trained into the work using the Barefoot Guidance courses. These were supported by trainees and volunteers to deliver a cost effective local service. The big breakthrough was getting the credit union recognised to deliver benefits to local people, which enabled the community to integrate money advice services, as well as setting up another community income stream. In a first for the country they managed to get the government to allow them to

“bank” their ILA credits with the credit union, and this was further boosted by the integration of management of this with the Local Economic Transfer System. The City Council Citizens’ Card held the information about all of this, which meant people had control over their own information and only authorised people to read it when they needed to, to avoid the idea that their neighbours knew their business.

The Village Tale

Harleston had suffered decline in the 80s and 90s as traditional industry shrunk and no new major employers stepped in to take its place. Few youngsters went on to education after 16 and levels of success at school were low. It was just too far from the main trunk roads and railway lines to be less attractive to commuters and had little to celebrate except their very successful women’s hockey team.

They dated the turnaround in fortune from the establishment of the Community Information Centre in part of the new youth club complex, and the association that built up with the learning centre run by City College.

Harleston was one of the six Market Town Initiative sites. Although the amount of money available was not enormous, it was enough to get key projects like the youth club and information centre off the ground. I also meant the people of the village working together to see what was needed and how to spend the money. This meant that when the Connecting Communities Competition came along they were able to put together a strong bid and win a share of the pot.

The Connecting Communities bid was based on a local radio broadband network based on the County broadband links to the secondary school. A switch was put in the school and the village regeneration group set themselves up as a not for profit company to offer broadband connections to local residents and businesses. Teenage boys were the first significant market – wanting access to online gaming and downloading music. However this meant they could also have access to Esinet – the schools network – and some of the new interactive content developed regionally for the National Grid for Learning. This wasn’t enough to get them all interested and active in learning by itself, but coupled with work in the schools to make learning more interesting and attractive it started to affect their academic success.

The network also enabled Harleston to set up the first virtual UK Online Learning Centre through Ufl. Rather than a permanent physical building, the centre was established by using the machines in the library; those in the schools outside school hours, those in the youth club, and the growing number of home connections. When joint, face-to-face sessions were needed, tutors either hired the local community centre or arranged with Community Transport to bring students to the larger learning centre at Diss. This meant a far wider range of courses could be offered as the number signing up each term was not as crucial to financial viability. Ironically, the

availability of the virtual learning centre developed enough interest in lifelong learning to justify a permanent centre – even though that model was now felt outdated.

The availability of broadband also made the town more attractive to telecommuters who could work from home when they did not have face-to-face meetings. Bandwidth was enough for decent videoconferences as well as fast access to company networks and the ability to send large files. Lecturers from the UEA were among the first to take up this lifestyle spurred by the University's green travel policy – and the lack of car parking spaces. However other companies like Norwich Union also started to encourage staff to telecommute, and a number of consultants and freelance workers in industries like the media and multimedia settled there too.

The nature of existing employers meant little take up from them at first, but the presence of multimedia firms started to develop their interest in e-commerce (partly due to heavy selling by those companies either formally or in the pub) and a number started to enter the field successfully, allowing access to new markets and a growth in employment.

All of this combined meant a renaissance for local shops and services as both more people, and more affluent people started to shop there – if you work from home because you want to reduce travelling, then shopping close to home is also attractive. Those who preferred to shop online could also do so from local shops as well as the big chains, and could make sure their local traders got in any special items they wanted rather than having to travel to Norwich or further afield to get them. Local traders were happy as they could buy in new lines with the guarantee they would be sold.

The higher achieving pupils joining the local schools also helped raise the aspirations of the “natives”.

However it wasn't just in jobs and learning that the network had an impact. Its comparative isolation meant it was hard for people there to access services. Their nearest council offices were in Long Stratton so they had little choice but to do business over the phone. For many people and for many services, this was fine. However older people and those suffering other disadvantage like disability or lack of income often wanted to talk to someone face to face to discuss difficult and complex problems around finance and benefits and general support.

The first step to help them was the Information centre. Volunteer and part time staff could help with many problems – especially after they were given the same training as staff in joint council one stop shops. The centre also proved a popular place for organisations to run surgeries – the Police, JobCentre Plus, Consumer protection and CAB. Most problems could wait for the fortnightly visit from specialist staff.

When the community network was put in place, it meant you could use the computers at the library, school and Information Centre to videoconference to staff at Swan House and County Hall to deal with problems – especially urgent ones. A surprisingly popular location was the local sheltered housing scheme where in addition to contacting council staff, it gave an extra element to the care alarm system and some human contact, not to mention an opportunity to use the Internet to keep in touch with the grandchildren.

The network also meant that visiting professionals such as Social Workers, health and other inspectors and nurses could access the information they needed via radio modems on their PDAs. Details of their clients' cases could be accessed in real time, and important new information sent back to their office immediately in order to support fellow staff that may be working on other aspects of the case.

The establishment of the Norfolk secure area, which allowed public bodies to send secure e-mails to each other greatly helped team working. An environmental health officer inspecting the kitchens at the local pub could also do checks for weights and measures using a predesigned form and script, and fill in some of the information licensing needed to process the application the landlord had made for an entertainment licence. These could be sent straight to colleagues. They could also answer a wide range of regulation questions from the landlord by accessing the SUPER database. They could even validate the licensee's application form by checking their signature and authorising the electronic version of the form.

The same was true of social workers who could witness and check documents for benefit applications. Crucially, they could also immediately inform other disciplines when helping people in crisis – warning Police, schools and doctors of potentially at risk children, telling doctors, housing and other parts of social services when people went into or out of hospital.

The network also meant that those who wanted to could do business with the councils and other bodies over the Internet. The same basic information council staff accessed to deal with questions was also available to all on their web sites, and the Norfolk Portal and other tools meant it was easy to find what you needed quickly. The Information Centre made a small charge for issuing and validating digital certificates, which allowed you to do all of the transaction online, and would also help you complete and application if you needed it.

Some of the staff even moved to the village as they were now able to do more work from home and liked to live in their "patch". There were occasional downsides when they were badgered by clients in the pub, but feeling part of the community they were serving and seeing the real difference they made in people's lives made up for that.

This access to information was also of great benefit to the village as a whole. As part of their work the steering group initiated a debate about the future of the village. The influx of jobs and people was good news in many ways, but also brought problems. How much extra growth could the village take? What sort of new businesses would be welcomed in the new industrial estate? What would happen about parking now the once ample spaces were becoming hard to find? They had already been looking at and commenting on planning applications and other consultation exercises, but this gave them the chance to be pro-active.

The GIS services the councils had developed for their own purposes were invaluable in this process. Models about the effect of extra numbers on demand for transport, school places etc were also available. As they drew up their five year plan, the village was able to use the information they had to lobby for changes in policy by planners – especially important if key strategic decisions about land allocation and transport were made in Cambridge rather than County Hall. They were also able to use the information to develop

further bids to local, national and European funding streams. The experience of the developing the village network had given them the confidence and experience to manage large projects and many of the newcomers had valuable skills to add.

This identification of skills also became part of a village audit they put on their own web site. A local multimedia company had developed a yellow pages for local businesses a while ago. As well as helping people access what they needed locally, it acted as a focus for visitors, and encouraged businesses to engage in e-procurement by some of the public sector locally.

This prompted the idea of local electronic white pages, but instead of just listing names and contact details, it included details of people's skills and interests, and had details of clubs and societies locally. People who had lived as neighbours for years suddenly discovered interests they had in common. Membership of social groups and attendance at events increased, as many people had not spotted the small posters in shop windows. New groups also blossomed as people talked on line to others with similar interests and wanted meet face to face.

People were encouraged to register for emails to be sent to them by groups offering services they may be interested in. It was cheaper, quicker and more environmentally friendly than bits of paper through the letterbox, and you knew you had more of a chance to be interested in what you were sent. Some businesses did try spamming early on, but found people were less likely to use them than rivals who only sent information if they were sure people were interested.

This service included the opportunity for councils to provide customised messages. Consultations about planning issues and even emergency information could be emailed or sent as a text message alert to those directly affected. A surprise bonus was catching some con men preying on the elderly. A large number of older people used text messages to contact their grandchildren and participate in competitions on Radio Norfolk. The police were able to send out a warning that con men were in the area and a hotline to contact. They were spotted by a lady who kept them talking until the police arrived.

Not everyone could afford to pay at a commercial rate for the internet, but a combination of subsidy via Social Fund money for learning, various other pots of cash they had successfully bid for, and a local fund the local network Company set up for connecting people who couldn't afford it otherwise out of the rentals of those who could, meant that few people who wanted to be online were not.

The fact that so many took up Internet access so enthusiastically also converted most of the doubters. Helping them learn in a non-threatening way, and the word of mouth buzz about how good it was helped enormously in boosting take up.

All of this meant it was little surprise when they won a national competition for best Information Age Community and were able to use the cash prize to start to take the network out to nearby smaller villages.

The Back to Front Tale

Roger Wright had worked for Norfolk County Council Education Department for twenty years as an admin officer in the Pupil Access section. Most recently he had been processing grant forms for school uniforms.

When the County Council started to develop its e-service transformation, he first thought he would not be affected. He already used computers and this was just a bit whizzier, wasn't it. Perhaps it would mean more people would spot the availability of the grants on the web site and it would mean more applications, but surely people who could afford internet access wouldn't be eligible anyway.

He then realised the extent of the changes which were planned. The new financial systems could reduce the amount of paperwork he would have to fill in to process the applications and payments, and the initial calls, despatch of forms etc would be handled by the Contact Centre. So where did that leave his job?

At first it seemed no-one else had the answers either. His line management were as unsure about the process and end result as he was, and the e-Service Directorate and even his departmental e-Service team were a bit remote. They seemed to concentrate on the big picture rather than what it would mean to him. It was very worrying. He knew the work he did was only a small part of the range of services the County Council provided, but it was his, and he tried to do a good job. Would the Contact Centre staff understand what was involved and the questions the public asked him the way he did? And, of course, what would happen to him – he felt too young to retire but too old to learn a new job.

He had some comfort when the Council announced their policy of no compulsory redundancies, but that still left him with the question of what he would actually do.

It was clear that the number of people who simply processed bits of paper would reduce – automation meant this could happen more quickly, and as part of the review of the way all processes were done it was also clear that decisions would be streamlined. The intention was to have scripts which made sure people provided the right information first time, reducing follow up calls and letters and making it easier for senior officers to sign off the 80% of applications which were straightforward. The new financial system also had an automatic feed to add commitments from grant approvals so they could monitor how much was available in the budget in real time, and compare it with previous years at the same time.

He could also understand the benefits from the public point of view of getting a more joined up service via the contact centre and one stop shops. He had often had to help people who started off asking about grants but then asked about other council services and could not understand why they had to be passed to other people to answer them.

Roger had developed his own filing system for the most frequent and simple of these so he could often answer them without having to transfer people. He had also once or twice managed to suggest to people that there were other grants they may be eligible for if they qualified for his, which gave him a good feeling. There had been one case last Christmas when the Cratchit family applied for an

allowance for their youngest son who was being given special needs help for his physical disability, and Roger had been able to suggest a contact for domestic aids and adaptations in Social Services.

He talked to Personnel who said they hoped some of the existing staff would transfer to the Contact Centre. Others would be slotted in to other jobs in the authority – although they were not planning redundancies, there would be a freeze on outside recruitment for all bar a small number of key jobs and they would retrain anyone who could shift internally. A special page had been set up on the intranet for those whose jobs were at risk, altering them to vacancies that were coming up with a help line where you could discuss whether your profile matched those for the position. People like Roger who could be affected could book an evaluation session where their skills were looked at, they were advised what sort of jobs may suit them, and they had a fast track to training in any key skills they may be missing paid for from the corporate e-service pot.

Roger found the evaluation very useful – all of these tests were not widely used when he had first joined the county and it was fascinating to get an insight into his strengths and weaknesses. He didn't get any real surprises, but it helped him realise that the part of his job he valued most, and was most suited to, was the customer contact and helping people. He felt a job in the contact centre, a one stop shop, or the service desks helping people with the more complex problems which the contact centre was not able to handle would suit him best.

This feeling that there were positive opportunities for him helped his attitude when the service transformation team came to talk to his unit about how things would change when the contact centre and back office systems were in place.

The team was the Contact Centre project manager with the department's e-Champion and Roger's line manager. It was clear immediately that their understanding of what his section did was very theoretical and even his line manager had little idea of what was actually involved. It also surprised him that he understood his own job more after having to describe the actual processes to other people – he had been doing it long enough to manage on autopilot rather than thinking in detail about why he did what he did.

The team drew a diagram of the processes they managed – what questions they needed answers to, what decisions had to be made and the basis on which they made them, where information was sent to other sections and what information they needed from others apart from the client. They could then agree which elements could be handled by the contact centre, and which had to remain with the department. They could also crucially see what information the contact centre had to have access to and hand over to be able to process the application smoothly.

Because he was able to stand back from the work and see it with fresh eyes, Roger was able to make suggestions about ways they could make the process easier and more effective. He was also able to raise various niggles he and his colleagues had harboured over the years with some confidence they would be listened to.

The team were impressed by his collection of information about other services within and outside the council which he had amassed to answer common questions from clients and copied it for inclusion in the corporate knowledge management system. In addition to scripts for the contact centre to help them ask the right questions and give the right answers about the grants Roger handled, they could script other questions about related benefits and have information to answer frequently asked questions about a range of subjects. Lots of people had similar information to Roger's and were all devoting some of their time to keep it up to date and accurate. Having it in a central database with clear "owners" for each bit to ensure it was updated would allow everyone to offer a better service.

As he was interested, he was shown some of the LEAP process maps which had been done for related services – there had not been one for his area, but the team said they would be forwarding it to the IDeA to potentially be added to the national set. He was able to spot links from the work he did to other processes where information gathered for education grants could be re-used by the council for other processes, and validations of entitlement and identity they did could be accepted by others and vice versa.

Doing that work saved him some effort when he went on the joint one stop shop course as part of his re-assignment process. Part of the course was to compile a directory of contacts and networks – who they referred people onto if they couldn't handle all of the issues themselves. It was fascinating to discover that a lot of the issues he dealt with were also raised with other county departments and with district councils, and just how little the public understood who did what. He also found his own knowledge of who did what was far from complete when talking to others on the course, so he could sympathise with how hard it was for the public to access the services they needed.

It also made him think twice about whether he wanted to operate in a one stop shop. Although he enjoyed helping people he was not sure how well he would cope with people who were in serious distress because of the problems they had, or with belligerent customers who were not happy with the answers they gave.

Eventually he plumed for a job in the new joint district/county benefits advice service that was established. People who applied for one benefit were assessed and advised on the full range of benefits they were entitled to – including some from central government, although they could not yet process applications for those. Although this meant more people claiming benefits, the savings in joint assessment and processing offset this to some extent. They were also able to offer a money advice service about managing household budgets, which meant the level of money people owed to the local authorities reduced. It also helped reduce fraud because they were able to cross check information more effectively.

One of his first clients were the Cratchits, whose grant was up for review. With the Infobase system he was able to suggest a private charity founded by a local entrepreneur and financier that gave bursaries to help with young Tim's condition.