

A case study on the community initiative of **www.brookmans.com.**

All communities have a need for Information Communication Technologies and “technology can play a significant role in Promoting community building by facilitating information, communication, and resource exchange” (Turner-Lee & Pinkett: 3). The village of Brookmans Park is the perfect example of a community working with initiatives, but lacking certain necessities. This case study will explore where community informatics help to promote a community but also to highlight where the existing initiatives need improving or developing.

Brookmans Park is a small village situated twenty miles north of London in the county of Hertfordshire. In 1998, the population of Brookmans Park and the close surrounding area was 6,400 which reflects the size of this small community. The majority of people in Brookmans Park are aged between 16 and 59 and the population could be said to be a growing one with ten births to seven deaths per thousand residents. It could be said to be a fairly well off commuter village with only 2% of the resident population claiming Jobseeker’s Allowance. The majority of people in Brookmans Park would be able to afford Information Communication Technologies of one kind or another. After carrying out research, it has been established that although the majority of the population is over 16, it is the youth of Brookmans Park that would need targetting and bringing into the community more. Many residents have begun to complain about the increasing number that are ‘hanging around’ the village green. Therefore, the existing initiatives are obviously do not appeal to everyone.

The community have a variety of different Information Communication Technology initiatives varying from a newspaper to an internet site. This case study will focus on the Internet based initiative, www.brookmans.com. This ICT is a communication technology who’s aim is “to serve the local geographic community” (Turner-Lee & Pinkett: 3).

“Information and communication technology offers enormous potential for civic society for education, health, arts and culture, social services, social activism, deliberation, agenda setting, discussion, and democratic governance” (Shuler: 2). The site www.brookmans.com offers links to other areas of public interest within Brookmans Park including the primary and secondary schools as well as the village’s dentist practice and nearest doctor. It fulfils the needs of an information and communication technology as well as going beyond this to provide a contact list of businesses, feature writing, history of the area, a photo gallery, recent news and events, interactivity and train times.

This initiative was set up in 1998 as an experiment to see whether “content created for the community by the community” (Brewer: 2003) could become a reality. David Brewer, a member of the community conducted this experiment single handily to bring about this successful, popular initiative. It meets it’s aims through three groups; the North Mymms Local History Society, the Gobians Woodland Trust and the local community forum members. These groups have provided the majority of the content

although David Brewer, maintains the site and offers news items on local issues that might be of interests.

It could be assumed, that by the existing communities contributions, Brookmans Park has sufficient social capital with “trust and cooperation between individuals and within groups” (Simpson: 121). It seems as though the internet site has provided an increase in the social capital. Social capital is a crucial factor within a community and the more that there is, the more likely it will be that communication technologies will be used. Ultimately, it is the members of a geographic location who are responsible for ensuring and contributing to the well being of their community and their social capital. The members of Brookmans Park seem to be doing this.

David Brewer obtains contributions from the community itself as well as other groups and it is him who updates the site daily and responds to questions and e-mails. Even though Brookmans Park is only a small village, this is an outstanding achievement. Maybe this could be reconsidered in the future if the site was to be extended as more staff would be needed. Also, future plans could bring in extra funding.

The web page provides various links to sites within Brookmans Park, advertisements and a contact list for businesses, education links, feature writing, a history of Brookmans Park and the surrounding area, a photo gallery, recent news and archives, train times, reviews and forums for interactivity on village life. The site currently gets between 1,000 and 1,500 page viewers a day, which is brilliant for such a small village. A lot of this popularity can be put down to the forum as people come together daily to chat to one another and form an online community. The forum has over 200 members and 133 different topics to talk about. The youth of Brookmans Park make up the majority of the forums members, using the initiative as a way to keep in touch with local friends. However, this could be extended in the future by offering other services to the different generations. This is an area of this initiative that could be successfully extended.

As a seemingly wealthy community, it is fair to assume that the majority of households do have access to the Internet but there will still be a part of the community who do not have access and who also will not have any experience of PC's or how to use the internet. Therefore, this would be some thing that would need to be addressed as www.brookmans.com can only really serve the online community. By definition, whoever is without access to a PC is excluded. However, within Brookmans Park, to combat this there are a variety of ICTs that are available for all of the community. The Chancellors Community Newsletter, which comes out twice a year and is delivered to every home within the community, and the Welwyn Hatfield Times, which comes out once a week and costs 45p, offer a local news service too. They contain listings of events where the community could come together as a whole but do not offer interactivity in the way that the web site does. When looking at a community like this, one must consider if all of these ICTs are enough and tackle all areas of exclusion. Although there are alternatives to the Internet based initiative, these would not be as up to date and have not been as successful. They can never be as fresh or immediate as the online Brookmans Park Newsletter. With an Internet based ICT, it can always be ensured that the news is constantly updated. Even with a weekly distributed newsletter, you would not get this. Therefore, in order to ensure that none of the community is excluded, either Internet access for all would have to be ensured or a daily paper based initiative could be introduced to run along side the Internet site. However, the latter is probably the most efficient suggestion as a paper based initiative would be extremely expensive and the majority of the residents would

not appreciate daily news of the community being pushed onto them. It would much more effective to just provide some thing where the community could access a local community if and when they wanted too. This is an area that would need to be revised in the future in order to maintain a sense of community.

Also, when looking at this internet based initiative, one must consider whether a village like Brookmans Park needs some thing that would promote face-to-face contact rather than online communities? "The internet may be diverting people from "true" communities because online interactions are inherently inferior to face-to-face and even phone interactions" (Wellman: 5). To an extent, www.brookmans.com proves that this argument is unjust and invalid. The members of Brookmans Park, gain their sense of community through the web pages. It has been extremely successful and nothing would be gained through replacing it. Therefore, instead of introducing another initiative that would merely promote face-to-face interactions, www.brookmans.com should be extended to include both. A geographic location could be established where the community could not only interact through the internet, but also together as a group.

Brookmans Park is a fairly well off commuter village so the site mainly deals with issues affecting this social group. As mentioned before, the majority of people within Brookmans Park will have access to a PC within their homes, but the older sector are unlikely to and also are unlikely to know how to use the new technologies. It is therefore vital, especially in a community where the most successful ICT is an Internet based one, that every one has access to the web and knows how to use it.

"Bill McIver, in his paper "Access to cyberspace as a human right" builds a case that access to cyberspace, far from being ancillary, is fast becoming a necessity to survive in today's world" (Day and Shuler: 2). Brookmans Park is no exception.

Therefore, there is a definite need for Internet access to be provided. The local library could be the site for this as the council currently provides computers but it is particularly small. Therefore, it could be beneficial to set up an Internet café within the village in the free space that there is underneath some vacant flats. This would target the issue of internet access and also provide a venue for bored youngsters to go to as well as providing a geographic location for face-to-face interaction to take place. Not only this but to prevent online communication taking over from valuable face-to-face communication, the café would provide a meeting place for the community to gather in and communicate with one another as frequently as they wanted. This internet café could also provide teaching for people who are unable to use PC's and would help support the existing ICT of www.brookmans.com. This ICT seems perfect for the village and has been a great success so far. It has a clear editorial proposition and aims to deliver content to people in the most effective, efficient and elegant manner. The editor and founder of the site is constantly trying to improve the site and try out new ideas on it. In that respect, it is a work in progress rather than a finished article. Future use of this ICT could work even more closely with the village businesses and the community in order to provide online shopping and delivery services. This would appeal to the older generations who are unable to get about as easily as others. It would also target the over crowding of cars around the village shops at peak times during the day.

"Members are more attracted to a community in which they feel that they are influential" (MacMillan and Chavis: 12). With www.brookmans.com working alongside the Internet café to promote a fully interactive community initiative, it would invite all members of the community to come and have their say and provide features

for the web pages. People must be able to identify with a community in order to feel like they are a part of it. "Membership is a feeling that one has invested part of oneself to become a member and therefore has a right to belong" (Macmillan and Chavis: 9). Connectivity within a community is essential to community building. The community of Brookmans Park must be able to allow everyone to belong to it that wants to by offering social ties, networks and active members. An extended initiative would be the perfect solution. At the moment, the web site's "membership has boundaries, this means that there are people who belong and people who do not" (MacMillan and Chavis: 9). Therefore, the establishing of a place where people could gather to learn and interact together as well as contributing to their community would be an ideal solution. Members of the community would be able to have some influence over the site and could gain some valuable skills. "It is through a sense of belonging to a local community that people engage in community activities" (Day: 2). By the extension of this initiative, the community would have an active project in which they could find a sense of belonging.

There is substantial space available within the village centre and enough capital available to support such a project. Each road in Brookmans Park has its own frontages association who could all contribute to the funding and be able to interact over the web pages with other businesses and companies. Workmen could be hired this way and all of the associations could work together and communicate so that there was the minimum of disruption in the village. There are a variety of businesses who would benefit from advertising on the site. They could branch out to other communities to offer their products and even a home delivery service for those who were unable to get into the village. Ultimately, the final initiative needs to "be embedded in and reflective of the needs of local citizens" (Day: 10). The local people should have full participation in decisions made about their community and the more this is achieved, the more people will feel like members. A successful initiative must promote solidarity, participation and coherence.

This existing initiative most definitely contributes in building a community and the site currently gets over a thousand page views per day. However, as I have mentioned before, there is some exclusion and the community would have to target this in the future to ensure all of the community were to be included. The ICT is a tool that is working towards fulfilling all of the needs and wants of the community. As mentioned above, it is far from being a finished project and could be progressed to a much more inclusive and beneficial initiative. At the moment, it promotes civic activism for certain members of Brookmans Park and from the established make up of the community one could assume that the majority of the 16-59 year old members would be included. Therefore, it is the minority that would have to be targeted, helped and provided with help, teaching and access. Brookmans Park has a strong business based community and this would be incorporated into the ICT and therefore given the opportunity to grow. Ultimately, access would be provided to computers and the Internet for the whole community of Brookmans Park. Initial training and encouragement would be offered to those who were not confident with the technologies. It would be hoped that within time the initiative would start to pay for itself and the people of Brookmans Park would provide regular community contributions to the web site to keep it up to date and interesting. Communication and information is a vital part of every human's life and with a few years development and funding from local businesses and interested parties, the ideas suggested in this case study of an Internet café could become a reality.

Bibliography:

- Chanan, G., et al. 2000. 'The new community strategies: How to involve local people'. London: CDF.
- Day, P., 'Community Informatics- Policy, Partnership and Practice'. ItiRA Conference: 2002.
- Day, P. et al., 2001. 'Cross-sectoral collaboration and participation: Information and communications development pilot project (ICDPP)- a case study'. In GCNP. 'Proceedings of global CN2001 Second World congress of citizens networks'. Buenos Aires, Argentina. 2001:GCNP.
- Day, P. & Schuler, D., 2000. 'Shaping the network society: Are citizens actors- or just part of the audience?' The CPSR Newsletter.
- McMillan, D.W. & Chavis, D.M., 1986. 'Sense of Community: A definition and theory'. Journal of community psychology; 14.
- Turner-Lee, N.E. & Pinkett, R.D., 'An asset-based approach to community building and community technology'. In Day, P. & Schuler, D. (eds.), 'Community Practice in the Network Society: Local action/ global interaction'. London: Routledge.
- Simpson, L. et al., 2002. 'The design and implementation of rural communication technology initiatives: Guidelines for project planners'. In Marshall, S., et al. (eds), 'Proceedings of the ItiRA conference 2002. Rockhampton, Queensland: CQU.
- Wellman, B. et al., 2002. 'Does the internet increase, decrease, or supplement social capital? Social networks, participation, and community commitment'. Hungarian Journal of social sciences.

References:

- www.brookmans.com
www.google.com

Word Count: 2,681