

Collaborative working  
to make  
more effective  
use of  
ICT

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## Introduction

The benefits of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) are significant for voluntary and community sector organisations (VCOs). However, it can equally pose major problems, particularly for small to medium sized VCOs, because of the high costs of accessing expertise. Without this, organisations cannot realise the potential of ICT, develop effective systems, or maintain them efficiently.

This publication aims to inspire organisations to see collaboration as a potential solution to the ICT issues they face. Research has been conducted to identify examples of collaboration in the sector. It outlines what organisations can learn from these to enable effective ICT use and support, with case studies as illustrations. Full versions of these case studies are available at [www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/collaborate](http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/collaborate). Some examples may be suitable to replicate or adapt, and some of them are open to new members joining.

## Context

ICT is part of everyday life for voluntary and community sector organisations (VCOs) of all sizes. It touches every aspect of running an organisation from accounting, communications and marketing, to office procedures and networking dispersed teams in the field. However, with greater reliance on ICT comes a greater need for effective support. It is important to consider not just technical support (for when things go wrong) but all aspects of ICT support including:

- Procurement and purchasing decisions
- Staff and volunteer training
- Security
- Strategic planning

Without support in all these areas, ICT can quickly become much more of a hindrance than a help, costing an organisation time and money. Individual support organisations from the public, private and voluntary sectors can and do provide ICT support to VCOs – whether this is grant-funded or sponsored and therefore free to the user, consultancy-based, or membership-based. However, there is significant potential for a more collaborative approach within the sector itself, which may offer:

- increased efficiency
- lower costs
- reduced duplication
- effective exchange of relevant information and best practice
- better understanding of the issues faced by VCOs through the experience of those collaborating

## Is collaboration right for you?

Before embarking on a collaboration, partners will need to clarify and agree a range of issues. The NCVO Collaborative Working Unit publication *Should you collaborate?* will help with further information on what issues to consider before you decide if collaboration is the right solution for your organisation.

Useful questions to answer will include:

- What are our aims for this collaboration?
- What can we achieve together that we could do less well separately?
- Do we have the support of our Trustees and Chief Executive?
- Does it fit with our strategic vision and current priorities?
- What is the role of each collaborating partner?
- What are the benefits to each party?
- What are the costs and resources required?
- What timescales are realistic?
- What would happen if things went wrong?

Potential collaborators will want to consider whether to begin a new collaborative initiative – perhaps starting their own version of what has happened elsewhere, or whether there would be more benefit in joining an existing collaborative initiative, if there is one available. This will depend on issues such as:

- Development or start-up costs
- Size – is there benefit in starting small, or is critical mass important for success?
- Locality – do we need our own local version of this model?
- Culture – do we need a version that meets specific needs, customs and ways of working?

## ICT Collaborations

The case studies and examples in this publication begin to map collaborative initiatives from which organisations can learn, or which they might join. These are not exhaustive, and new collaborations are beginning all the time. Whilst there are many models and variations of collaboration possible, we identified nine main areas (A to I), and these are shown in Table I, against ten case studies that illustrate one or more of the areas. These nine areas are explained in more detail below with the relevant case studies cited. A fuller discussion of possible models, with pros and cons, and some links to wider examples, then follows. There are links to more detailed versions of some of the case studies, which are available online.

**Table I: Possible areas of collaboration and example case studies that illustrate these.**

- A** Joint purchasing
- B** Participation in an online help group
- C** Sharing support staff locally
- D** Sharing development or passing on an ICT based application
- E** Joining an existing network
- F** Signposting and adapting existing resources
- G** Passing on expertise for free or low cost
- H** A buddying scheme for mutual help or advice
- I** Shared back office

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
1. ICT Hub	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	
2. Community First	✓			✓		✓		✓	✓
3. 5 Counties				✓	✓	✓	✓		
4. Experts Online		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		
5. FOSS	✓		✓	✓					
6. BME Complementary Learning Network	✓		✓	✓					
7. Superhighways			✓			✓			
8. Ethical Property					✓				✓
9. Common Database York & North Yorkshire				✓					✓

## A. Joint purchasing

See case studies (2) *Community First*; (5) *FOSS* and (6) *BME Complementary learning network*.

### Summary

Jointly agreeing a specification of hardware or software can help to bring purchasing power through bulk ordering. This can mean financial savings. Sharing experience of equipment suppliers between partners may help with decision-making. When specifying equipment, one partner may have experience of accessibility issues or have experience of other technical issues that may help the partnership in a purchasing decision. Joint purchasing may extend to support services.

### Discussion

In theory, clubbing together to buy makes financial sense, and can also help with tricky and expensive areas, such as buying in expert advice on technical requirements, technical developments, support for ongoing maintenance, or sharing staff training. Good examples of the practice are, however, harder to uncover than might be expected. Differences in the specifications of machines and software needed, and different priorities and timescales among purchasing partners has led to some collaborations being slow, abandoned, or of doubtful value.

### Pros of joint purchasing

- Leverage and financial savings
- Sharing the development of technical specifications
- Sharing product research tasks and findings
- Sharing experience in use and maintenance

### Cons of joint purchasing

- Compromises in specification on one side or on all sides
- Timescales for procurement may not match

### Wider examples:

You can find details about a range of organisations that broker deals on behalf of voluntary and community organisations at [www.ictHub.org.uk](http://www.ictHub.org.uk).

## B. Participating in an online help group

See case studies (1) *ICT Hub* (4) *Experts online*

### Summary

Online help run by the sector for the sector can be a valuable tool, as a shared understanding of the issues and context exists. Support can be accessed from anywhere with a connection to the internet. Unlike a helpline or one-to-one email messages, forums allow information and experience to be shared between all the users of a forum for mutual learning and support.

## **Discussion**

For many years now, people have been able to search the internet for solutions to ICT problems. A typical model is an interactive 'online forum', also known as message or bulletin boards. These generally take two forms: a self-help group where those with specific ICT issues can ask questions and explore and share solutions; or an 'expert' forum, typically run by a software or hardware company or a group interested in a particular program or computer language, where individuals respond to user queries.

More recently, these types of online forum have been started by VCOs to help others in the sector. When an initiative is sector-run, it ensures some shared understanding of the issues and context, and efforts are made to explain technical jargon or keep it to a minimum.

Some forums are free – and some of those which are free are supported by funding, so the service may be better maintained than those which rely entirely on goodwill. Other services offer more personalised answers to a specific message and may ask for a membership fee to help cover the cost of greater time needed to provide answers. Fees may be presented as a contribution to administration costs – the guidance you get once registered is more like a self-help club than a pay-per-query service.

### **Pros of online support:**

- Often more up-to-date than books, magazines or other websites
- They can be accessed from anywhere, with a connection to the internet
- They can be accessed at any time
- A good site will speak to you as one VCO to another
- Services can serve many users
- Using the medium builds skills and confidence in further using the medium
- Unlike one-to-one help, information and experience can be shared between all the users of the forum

### **Cons of online support:**

- Some confidence with ICT is needed to feel comfortable and confident using such a service
- To frame a question in a way that will convey the issue requires a reasonable understanding of ICT
- Finding what you want can be difficult and take time
- Attitudes of the unseen users and moderators of the forums can feel intimidating
- Can be frustrating, time-consuming and difficult for beginners to navigate
- Jargon can be an obstacle

### **Wider examples:**

UK, voluntary and community sector (VCS), free to user

- ICT Hub discussion forums [forums.icthub.org.uk/index.php?5](https://forums.icthub.org.uk/index.php?5)

An online discussion forum where anyone from voluntary organisations in the UK can ask ICT questions and ICT Hub staff will try to ensure that all questions get an answer.

US non-profit

- Techsoup – non-profit technology forums aimed at organisations in the US, including relevant information for VCOs worldwide.  
[www.techsoup.org/community/index.cfm?cg=header&sg=community](http://www.techsoup.org/community/index.cfm?cg=header&sg=community)

### **C. Sharing support staff locally**

See case studies; (5) FOSS (6) BME Comp. Learning Network and (7) Superhighways.

#### **Summary**

Smaller organisations that cannot afford an individual or team to support their ICT might consider using shared support staff. Often known as circuit riders, these support workers are not based in one organisation but travel between the organisations that make up their caseload, helping on a long term basis with ICT planning, support and training.

#### **Discussion**

The concept of mobile ICT support workers, who support a caseload of organisations, emerged from the non-profit sector in the USA in the 1990s. Known as Circuit Riding or eRiding this model enables smaller or less well resourced organisations to draw on shared ICT expertise. Whilst large organisations may have an individual or team to support their ICT, smaller organisations often struggle to resource this need, and it may fall to a staff member or volunteer to support an ICT system. Most small organisations don't need full-time support, but outsourcing their ICT to a commercial company may not be cost effective or desirable. Here the idea of sharing ICT support between several organisations is particularly appealing. One of the longest running and most successful ICT support projects based on the principles of circuit riding is the Superhighways Partnership based in south west London (see case study 7).

Circuit riders may be individual workers or work as part of a team. They travel between the organisations that make up their caseload, helping on a long-term basis with ICT planning, support and training. They have an ongoing relationship with the organisations that they support, not just visiting when a problem arises. Crucially, they are not alone and are supported by a network of other circuit riders.

Because the circuit riders are often based in infrastructure organisations, which are providing support to VCOs in other ways, they have a good understanding of the needs of the VCS. Support can be tailored to individual organisations, and links to other related opportunities – like funding or strategy – can be highlighted. Knowledge, best practice and specific resources such as project fact sheets, past newsletter articles; templates such as health checks, website briefs and network tenders are shared between organisations, either by the circuit riders themselves, or by VCOs directly at joint training events. This fosters continuous learning within the network of circuit riders, for the benefit of the organisations they serve.

At present, most examples in this country are grant-funded in a specific area, and the service is free. Replicable and sustainable examples in the future may include models such as:

- A managing organisation levying an annual membership fee
- A shared employee services a group of organisations

### ***Pros of sharing support staff locally***

- Cheaper than having your own ICT expert or technician
- Promotes shared understanding across organisations
- A centrally managed team of support workers can share expertise and work together on larger projects.
- Circuit Riders based in infrastructure organisations will have the advantage of knowledge about local opportunities, events and priorities
- A team can work together on bigger projects – complicated jobs can be finished more quickly
- Shared resources are built up
- Organisations who join can benefit from learning and resources already developed
- Aims to build capacity within the organisations

### ***Cons of sharing support staff locally***

- Not everywhere is covered by a circuit rider
- May require grant-funding to keep circuit riders in post
- Without a central managing partner, employment issues can become complicated
- More difficult/costly to operate a scheme in remote or rural areas than urban areas
- Circuit riders may be rigid about what they will and will not do
- Some organisations may prefer a ‘quick fix’ rather than the enabling approach often adopted by Circuit Riders

### **Wider examples of local circuit rider projects**

- Circuit Riders North East [www.vonne.co.uk/issues/ict/index.htm](http://www.vonne.co.uk/issues/ict/index.htm)
- LASA's Circuit Rider project  
[www.lasa.org.uk/circuitriderproject/](http://www.lasa.org.uk/circuitriderproject/)
- Derbyshire Circuit Riders  
[www.highpeakcvs.org/IT/index.asp#circuitriders](http://www.highpeakcvs.org/IT/index.asp#circuitriders)
- Devon Voluntary Information and Communication Expertise [www.device.org.uk/](http://www.device.org.uk/)
- Online map of UK Circuit Riders  
[www.frappr.com/ukriders](http://www.frappr.com/ukriders)

### **D. Shared development or passing on an ICT-based application**

See case studies (2) *Community First*; (3) *GMCVO – 5 Counties*; (4) *Experts Online*, (5) *FOSS* and (6) *BME Complementary Learning Network* and (9) *Common Database York & North Yorkshire*.

#### **Summary**

Several VCS partners identify similar organisational needs for ICT tools. Common areas where there might be benefits in sharing the development of ICT tools and ways of using them might include: databases, websites, and reporting and monitoring tools. Further, VCOs may co-operate with each other by sharing examples of existing developments or applications that they have already built or adapted themselves. These may be transferable to other organisations, or merely act as an illustration of the possibilities technology offers. Both new developments and adaptations may be based on off-the-shelf, commercially produced software. The advent of Open Source applications (software where the source code is not protected by commercial interests) makes passing on solutions more viable.

#### **Discussion**

The voluntary sector has a long history of sharing tools and expertise for free or at low cost. Because ICT skills in the sector are scarce, exchange in this field has been limited but it is increasing. VCS organisations with ICT expertise may choose to pass on their adaptations of commercial software applications to other VCS organisations for free (subject to commercial licensing laws) or for an agreed contribution. Examples include *Experts Online*, which offers members a free downloadable Full Cost Recovery spreadsheet (built in Microsoft Excel) suitable for centres that run multiple projects. This is a sophisticated tool, with an instruction guide, and the option to ask for support online within the forums (as discussed above). Some branch organisations share useful tools across their network of offices, together with access to help and support in using these, but these have proved hard to uncover and document.

Support partnerships are now emerging to promote Open Source software: software that is available free of charge for anyone to change, improve and distribute. This is technically possible as the source code, which drives the programs, is made openly available – hence ‘open source’. The switch to this type of software is now being actively considered and promoted by many organisations and networks including the ICT Hub. However, there is currently a lack of training and support, as well as issues of accessibility to non-specialists. If these barriers are overcome, there is potential for Open Source to provide tailored, cost effective solutions.

***Pros of joint development or passing on applications:***

- Avoids reinventing the wheel
- Sharing technical specifications and expertise can reduce costs
- Shared solutions can be low/no cost to recipients
- Shared solutions may lead to further partnership work
- Can inform further developments and mutual learning

***Cons of joint development or passing on applications:***

- Joint developments may find it hard to address divergent needs
- The provider of solutions may be seen as responsible for training and support
- The provider of solutions may be seen as liable if things go wrong

Specific pros of Open Source are:

- The original applications are free
- There are strong, collaborative user and developer communities, and extensive online support is available
- Can be run on older, cheaper computers
- Programs and applications are as good or better than commercial alternatives
- Can be adapted and rewritten to suit the user
- Often more secure than proprietary software

Cons of Open Source are:

- It is unfamiliar, especially in the VCS
- Support is not widely available. Online support can be confusing and hard to use
- Some existing software and hardware may not be available or compatible with open source systems
- Technical expertise is needed to adapt software to suit user
- Less formal accountability

### **Wider examples of open source applications include:**

- Firefox Browser  
[www.mozilla.com/firefox/](http://www.mozilla.com/firefox/)
- Apache web server  
[www.apache.org/](http://www.apache.org/)
- MySQL database  
[www.mysql.com/](http://www.mysql.com/)

### **E. Joining an existing network**

See case studies (1) *ICT Hub*; (3) *GMCVO – 5 Counties*; (4) *Experts Online* and (8) *Ethical Property*.

#### **Summary**

The benefits of some collaborations only become apparent when a critical mass of participants is reached. Joining in with an existing network is an opportunity to tap into experience and resources that grow as the number of participants increase. While this is true of many collaborations, ICT-based networks are a special case because the medium itself expands and changes the nature and potential of collaboration. ICT enables wider collaborations with far fewer limitations of time, location and size.

#### **Discussion**

Membership models have played an important part in VCO support and collaboration for many years, and many of today's VCS infrastructure organisations have grown out of this concept. There are two main options for addressing ICT support needs through collaboration in the sector: to create an ICT-specific membership group; or to add ICT collaborative support to existing support networks. Models range from formal 'umbrella organisations' to communities of interest, to informal self-help groups that are more like clubs. Networks might be geographically, thematically or culturally based, and contact may be face-to-face, 'virtual', or a mix.

Collaborative alliances are emerging, where like-minded organisations can use their combined size to influence policy: combining many VCO members they can exercise more clout than individual efforts could achieve. Individual VCOs can benefit from the alliances directly by using the resources made available, or indirectly by belonging to the umbrella bodies that drive the alliances. Although size and breadth of nationwide collaborations can bring great benefits, organisations involved with alliances must be careful not to become (or be seen to become) too large or too distant from their core beneficiaries.

Whilst membership may be seen as a way of leveraging in financial contributions to support collaboration (whether from membership fees, from sponsorship or grants generated by demonstrating the value of the group), the model offers more than just financial gain. Equally important is a sense of belonging; shared understanding; access to a network of known peers; the potential to develop trust-based relationships; and the opportunity to share resources, materials and knowledge.

### **Pros of joining an existing network**

- Critical mass – value resides in the members and what they contribute
- Access to existing resources and knowledge– built up over time
- More likely to be sustainable than a new start-up
- Less duplication of effort

### **Cons of joining an existing network**

- May not meet the needs and expectations of everyone
- May be harder to influence than one begun from scratch
- May become too large
- May have become entrenched in using certain techniques, processes and so on
- If the network did not originate to accommodate ICT support, it may be harder to ‘bolt on’ expertise or build a specialist ethos in ICT

## **F. Signposting and adapting existing resources**

See case studies (1) ICT Hub ; (2) Community First; (3) GMCVO: 5 Counties; (4) Experts Online and (7) Superhighways.

### **Summary**

There are many existing resources available that may apply to the sector, but these are not always easy to find. Signposting to relevant existing guidance, policies, tools and other resources is a far better use of time and money than creating them from scratch. Technology offers new opportunities to aggregate, signpost and make links in new ways.

### **Discussion**

Sometimes it is not necessary to formalise a membership network to promote collaboration and sharing. Technology has, of itself, created more opportunities for joining material from disparate sources together, and has begun to break down the barriers between where one organisation or network ends and another begins. Information resources are now harder to ‘own’ and control, and gate keeping is giving way to cross-referral, amalgamation, instant signposting, and constant refinements, updating and adaptation. This is having a knock on effect on areas such as Intellectual Property and Data Protection.

Using tools like collaborative websites, electronic information feeds, forums and shared databases, rapid exchange of information can be an effective way of providing support to a wide reach of organisations. Potential for these collaborative tools is explored in the sister publication to this: *ICT tools to support collaborative working*.

### **Pros of Signposting and adapting**

- Avoids reinventing the wheel
- Managed carefully, can reduce information overload
- Potential to share information more widely and more efficiently
- Potential to adapt resources for specific audiences
- Challenges some more traditional models of paying for information and expertise

### **Cons of Signposting and adapting**

- Managed poorly, can create information overload and too many links
- Harder to hold onto Intellectual Property
- Requires care in information management as new legal understanding emerges

### **Wider examples**

- ICT Hub knowledgebase  
[www.ictHub.org.uk/knowledgebase](http://www.ictHub.org.uk/knowledgebase)
- VCS Wiki  
[www.freecharity.org.uk/wiki/](http://www.freecharity.org.uk/wiki/)

## **G. Passing on expertise for free or at low cost**

See case studies (1) *ICT Hub*); (3) *GMCVO – 5 Counties*, (4) *Experts Online* (7) *Super highways*

### **Summary**

Organisations may be willing to pass on expertise for free or for minimal cost. Collaborative schemes managed and run by and for the sector are currently rare (but see H below). Private sector expertise, made available through volunteering schemes, can be a model for passing on strategic expertise without the usual consulting costs. VCOs are usually encouraged to identify a specific, time-limited project that requires expertise that they do not possess or cannot afford. They are then matched with an ICT volunteer.

### **Discussion**

These programmes offer a co-ordination and matching service, drawing on a pool of ICT professionals, willing to volunteer their time and expertise to VCOs. To do this effectively, models of volunteer matching or brokering have developed. As ICT expertise – as well as time and resources – are scarce within the sector, VCO to VCO support using this model is limited, though some pay-for services are emerging. The programmes are usually supported directly or indirectly by industries where ICT expertise resides.

Charities first need to identify a project and make sure it is suitable for professional volunteer help. This is usually done with help from matching/broker organisations and the details of the project are made available to the volunteer pool. Once matched with a suitable volunteer, the volunteer works directly with the beneficiary organisation to deliver the project. Projects can range from help with a website design or database choice to strategic planning. This approach is ideally suited to providing support for one-off projects or longer-term strategic help, but not 'fire-fighting', maintenance, or ongoing 'helpline' type support.

### **Pros**

- Can provide valuable, clearly defined help
- Low or no cost to recipient
- Can encourage organisations to focus on the longer term

### **Cons**

- VCO must spend time and have expertise to specify the project
- Limitations on projects that can be undertaken
- Limitations on timescales
- Not suitable for maintenance or technical support
- Using volunteers can be unreliable

### **Wider examples**

- ProHelp – A programme of Business in the Community delivered through local 40 local ProHelp groups offering free professional help to VCOs in a number of legal, marketing and business areas including ICT.  
[www.bitc.org.uk/programmes/programme\\_directory/prohelp/index.html](http://www.bitc.org.uk/programmes/programme_directory/prohelp/index.html)
- ProHelp in High Peak & Derbyshire – [www.highpeakcvs.org/prohelp/index.asp](http://www.highpeakcvs.org/prohelp/index.asp)
- City Action – A project that helps transfer of time, skills and resources (including ICT) between City firms and community-based organisations in Camden, Hackney, Islington, Lambeth, Southwark, Tower Hamlets and Westminster – [www.city-action.org/](http://www.city-action.org/)

## **H.A buddying scheme for mutual help and advice**

See case studies (1) ICT Hub and (2) Community First

### **Summary**

A system of buddying or exchange visits may benefit an organisation willing to share its experience of working with ICT with another organisation, or may help organisations looking to develop an area of ICT by seeing what others have achieved.

## Discussion

Similar to model G, this version of exchanging expertise is perhaps more replicable within the sector. Typically two organisations with similar problems, challenges, or areas of interest agree to help each other, sharing insights and experience. Ideally, a co-ordinating body is still a requirement, though arrangements could be more ad-hoc and self-managed. Organisations would typically give staff time to each other for free. However, as real direct costs are incurred (e.g. travel), bursary schemes are being developed to help.

Ideally, some form of reporting on learning and benefits will capture the buddying experience, so others can learn both how best to benefit and what learning has emerged.

## Pros

- Can promote genuine collaboration at little or no cash cost
- Can take place informally and be self-managed by two partners
- May lead to other models of ICT collaboration (eg joint purchasing)

## Cons

- May require organisations with similar levels of demand, or clear 'ground rules' so that exchanges are equitable
- A weaker or very needy organisation may make unreasonable demands on a stronger buddy
- Not suitable for fire-fighting, or fixing breakdowns
- No access to outside guidance, may lead to replication of mistakes or narrow vision of what is possible

## I. Shared back office

See case studies (2) *Community First*; (8) *Ethical Property* and (9) *Common Database York and North Yorkshire*.

## Summary

Shared back office means sharing support functions between organisations in order to increase efficiency and effectiveness. Back office services include HR, finance and administration – and everything else which supports an organisation to deliver its mission. See NCVO's Collaborative Working Unit's *Sharing back office services*.

ICT is essential to back office services, and collaboration can enable organisations to develop more sophisticated systems and bring huge benefits to organisations and their beneficiaries. Back office ICT collaboration is most common where organisations share office space and organisations can be offered a package of ICT services and support, but it is not dependent on a shared physical space. Specific elements of back office collaboration are covered elsewhere in this publication.

## Discussion

Shared back office ICT has the potential to provide suitable software and ICT support at a reasonable price through collective buying power and shared resources. The types of shared back office arrangements vary greatly in the voluntary and community sector and currently include: training, purchasing, technical infrastructure and national and local technical support (see [www.charityshare.org.uk](http://www.charityshare.org.uk)).

## Pros

- Generates economies of scale
- Allows for access to better quality services at more affordable prices
- Access to affordable and reliable maintenance services
- Opportunities for other shared services such as electronic room booking facilities, intranet, shared calendars and cheaper phone calls
- Increased buying power with suppliers
- Can provide more streamlined and efficient access to data

## Cons

- Distribution of initial product or services across all participants can be proportionally more difficult according to number of organisations involved
- Disruption to services during initial install
- Can raise issues around data ownership and sharing
- May not be able to meet very specialised requirements

## Case studies

### C A S E S T U D Y

I

#### ICT Hub

The ICT Hub is a partnership of national Voluntary and Community Organisations (VCOs) providing a range of services to assist organisations in the voluntary and community sector to access the benefits of ICT. The Hub came out of the ChangeUp initiative from the Home Office designed to strengthen the capacity of the voluntary and community sector. The core members of the ICT Hub are:

- iT4Communities
- National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO)
- National Association for Voluntary and Community Action (NAVCA)
- AbilityNet
- London Advice Services Alliance (LASA)

For further information see [www.ichub.org.uk](http://www.ichub.org.uk)

The ICT Hub is one of the largest collaborations in the sector trying to effect change in the way the VCS uses and benefits from technology. The partners collaborate to provide a range of services to help voluntary and community organisations benefit from ICT. They also collaborate using ICT to provide these services and to enable others to collaborate and share learning. The partners bring together their different skills and expertise to collaborate on some projects as a whole partnership and some just with one or two other partners.

The ICT Hub collaborates to provide a range of services in the following areas:

- To raise awareness of the strategic understanding of the importance of ICT
- To improve the funding and procurement environment with which voluntary and community organisations operate
- To support and co-ordinate the provision of hands-on ICT Support.

**Joint Purchasing** The ICT collates information on who brokers discounts available at [www.ichub.org.uk](http://www.ichub.org.uk).

**Participating in online help groups and joining an existing network** There are a number of online help groups for infrastructure, circuit riders, IT Volunteers and frontline groups to benefit from funding to procurement of ICT.

Please see [www.forums.ichub.org.uk/index.php?6](http://www.forums.ichub.org.uk/index.php?6).

**Signposting and adapting existing resources** Within the ICT Hub's website [www.ict hub.org.uk](http://www.ict hub.org.uk) are two other websites: a knowledge base of good practice materials and a directory of local support including trainers and circuit riders searchable by postcode. The ICT Hub website publishes its own research and publications about the take up and use of ICT in the sector as well as signposting to others resources.

**Passing on expertise for free or at low cost** The ICT Hub is developing two models of ICT support – pro bono volunteers and circuit riders. IT volunteers are an effective way of supporting organisations and the Hub can offer a wide range of volunteers all over the country as well as virtually! [www.ict hub.org.uk/how\\_we\\_can\\_help/Volunteering.html](http://www.ict hub.org.uk/how_we_can_help/Volunteering.html)

The ICT Hub is also working to increase the number of circuit riders and for further information about circuit riding see [www.ict hub.org.uk/how\\_we\\_can\\_help/Circuit\\_Riders.html](http://www.ict hub.org.uk/how_we_can_help/Circuit_Riders.html).

**A buddying scheme for mutual help or advice scheme** The ICT Hub offers two buddying scheme. The ICT Connect scheme enables voluntary and community organisations to explore their ICT needs by visiting another organisation. Please see [www.ict hub.org.uk/ICT\\_Connect](http://www.ict hub.org.uk/ICT_Connect). The exchange visit schemes is similar to the ICT Connect scheme but for infrastructure agencies. Please see [www.ict hub.org.uk/exchange\\_visits](http://www.ict hub.org.uk/exchange_visits).

## Community First: Herefordshire and Worcestershire Local Infrastructure Consortia Portals

The Herefordshire and Worcestershire Infrastructure Consortia are working to make sure that voluntary organisations and community groups can access the support and services they need to achieve their aims. They also work to increase the influence that the sector has in how public services are run.

Their Website/Extranet Project created a web portal jointly to deliver the information and services of the consortia members to their users. The project developed new websites for the core consortia members, ensured compliance with the Disability Discrimination Act and enabled staff to manage their information easily on the website using content management systems.

The project has developed an extranet (private secure website) to support the internal work by consortia members.

Community First's Local Infrastructure Consortium Portals have 15 new websites and extracts built for partners and jointly searched by the portals.

For further information go to [www.hinc.org.uk](http://www.hinc.org.uk) and [www.winc.org.uk](http://www.winc.org.uk)

## Five Counties ICT Project

The Five Counties ICT Project built on the success of the Three Counties Project. This was made up of Cumbria, Lancashire and Greater Manchester, and these were joined by Merseyside and Cheshire in the expanded Project. The five main threads of the project were:

- The delivery of an accredited ICT management training module;
- Dissemination of work done on data protection audit and procedures;
- Dissemination of work done on creating corporate IT filing systems;
- Co-ordination of e-communities networks; and
- Development of mechanisms for sharing electronic data.

The 5 Counties Project was successfully concluded after two years in 2006. One of the most significant outcomes was the establishment of relationships and contacts across the entire region. The mix of larger urban consortia and rural consortia was invaluable. The urban consortia were able to offer support and resources to the rural counties, and the rural partners able to assist in the 'rural proofing' and prepare for DeFRA investment. The joint working arrangements have also meant the interests of the sub regions have been represented at the regional level. Best practice was shared throughout each of the regions.

Greater Manchester (GM) undertook an analysis of the ChangeUp ICT investment plans to look for opportunities for collaboration, and funding was secured for the 5 Counties Officer to co-ordinate and support the involvement of the ChangeUp lead bodies and the deployment of the funds.

All resources developed through the 'Five Counties Project' are jointly owned by the partners. They are therefore able to use them freely to assist voluntary organisations in their areas.

Full case study available online.

## Experts Online, shared forum via trusted networks

Experts Online is a free service provided to members of the Networks Online group. Networks Online is a grouping of voluntary sector networks and projects which have added their own 'extranet' (shared and private online spaces) to an existing extranet run by the charity ruralnet|uk. Members maintain their own private online areas for their membership. Uses include: holding a shared archive of key documents or templates; a list of members and descriptions of their work; interactive discussion areas. Members of Networks Online also share free services and expertise within online forums that every member network can see and use, and to which everyone can contribute.

Experts Online is one of these shared areas. It consists of a set of forums covering different themes of interest to the voluntary sector, such as business planning and community engagement. One such area is the Computers & Communications Forum.

Any member of a participating network may ask as many questions as they wish, browse the questions and answers generated by others, and answer questions posed by others. However, as speedy answers from peers cannot always be guaranteed, the forums are monitored by 'experts' – practitioners who can draw on their own experience and knowledge. They also keep the forums tidy and raise points of interest. 'Experts' may receive fees or quid-pro-quo benefits for their contribution.

Participating networks include ruralnet|online (the Rural Development Community); CAN Online (Community Action Network of Social Entrepreneurs); Direct Support (UK Online Centres) and many others. A charge is levied by ruralnet|uk's trading arm to establish and maintain access to the extranet, but once within the shared areas services are free. Regardless of who staffs which forum, and who asks a question, all members benefit. Templates, tools and sample applications can be offered and shared, and are held in Knowledge Banks.

Full case study available online.

## FOSS – Free Open Source Software in the VCS

A pilot study in the East of England has been testing the viability of Open Source software. This has been supported by a concurrent Circuit Rider project. Both projects are funded by the ChangeUp programme and run by Cambridge Independent Advice Centre. A range of organisations were selected to receive a free computer and other hardware, software training and support.

The collaboration enabled the organisations selected to:

- Run joint training events
- Joint purchasing which would not be available to individual frontline organisations
- Exchange experience and ideas, mainly via the circuit riders
- Identify common areas where open source could be applied, for example:
  - Content management run websites
  - Remote access
  - Automated back-ups

Collaboration directly between the selected organisations has been slow to materialise but some potential projects are beginning to emerge. For example, two organisations were having difficulty getting information to traveller populations, many of whom find reading difficult. A third organisation, CamSight, trains blind people to get information from the Internet by using special text to speech software. This software may offer the solution to the traveller communities.

Full case study available online.

## BME Complementary Learning Network

Four organisations providing a network of out-of-hours education support have successfully collaborated in a project involving equipment purchase, co-ordinated delivery of courses and shared monitoring.

The African Caribbean Citizens Forum (ACCF), Muslim Khatri Association (MKA) and Pakistan Youth and Community Association (PYCA), led by the Bangladesh Youth and Cultural Shomiti (BYCS) set up the BME Complementary Education Network in 2004 to deliver courses from a range of community centres across Leicester.

A joint bid to the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund led by BYCS enabled computers and other equipment to be purchased at a discount on behalf of the network. BYCS had previous experience of purchasing so could advise partners. The Somali Afro European Media Project were able to offer skills in streaming video and audio of presentations, meetings and interviews for channels tailored to the community.

The partners also shared existing support contacts and suppliers. The smaller, younger organisations benefited from the track record of BYCS. Rather than duplicating equipment at all the centres, some specialist equipment was placed in appropriate centres. For example, the MKA had an accessible training room with a lift so certain courses and equipment were located there.

One partner had monitoring forms that could be adapted for use by all partners, and experience of data protection issues. The forms were redesigned and now a common system is used with consistent information being passed to the local authority.

Full case study available online.

## Superhighways Partnership

The Superhighways Partnership provides ICT support to VCOs across the London boroughs of Bromley, Croydon, Kingston, Merton, Richmond, Sutton and Wandsworth.

Individual ICT Support workers (circuit riders) are based in the member CVSs but come under the umbrella of the Superhighways partnership to provide the following services:

- Troubleshooting software & hardware problems
- ICT healthchecks and strategic planning
- Signposting
- Training
- Newsletter
- Resources website

The Superhighways Partnership has the advantage of supporting a team of support workers who combine their knowledge and resources to create a more effective service than individual isolated workers could.

The close links between the Superhighways Partnership and the South London CVSs also mean that the circuit riders can benefit from referrals from the CVS, and make links with other local projects.

Full case study available online.

## Ethical Property IT Department

Ethical Property buys buildings for use by Voluntary and Community Organisations (VCOs). They realised that many VCOs do not prioritise IT and so began to offer a range of services to tenants in one of their properties.

Tenants in one property were offered access to a comprehensive email system, including centralised anti-virus and anti-spam control; shared calendars and contacts; email access via the web, and back up for their email data.

Ethical Property are expanding the communal IT services offered through the introduction of central servers for use by tenants. The expanded services will include:

- Higher specification servers at a lower purchase and maintenance cost;
- Reliable and affordable IT;
- Improved communal services such as intranet, electronic room booking and competitively priced phone calls;

Services offered to tenants initially are user account administration and support; Fileshare and email account administration.

They are able to take advantage of the high degree of technical knowledge Ethical Property have gained, ensuring they can take full advantage of the benefits a server can bring, and feel secure in the knowledge it is properly managed and maintained. The Ethical Property team recommends anyone exploring shared back office arrangements: 1) researches numbers of users and charges to ensure projects break even; 2) ensures that the hardware is of a high enough specification to cope with future expansion. They found themselves having to provide some additional memory/back-up hardware to ensure the servers could cope with the extra services added.

Full case study available online.

## Common Database for Infrastructure Organisations in York & North Yorkshire

The York and North Yorkshire infrastructure consortium identified the need for a central system for storing data within the sub region. The current systems utilised by the infrastructure were unsuitable for the task, and led to duplication.

The consortium realised there was an opportunity to develop an application that would provide much more than a simple database. They wanted to address the need for customer relationship management; to keep data alive; and enable sharing of information.

The suppliers adapted an existing application to provide a voluntary sector data management application that would provide all of the above functions. This application was chosen as it allowed for modification to meet organisations' specific needs. In addition to the original specification, it also provided integration of customer relationship management; events and resource planning; and flexibility of reporting.

The greatest challenges were installing the application across the 17 organisations without disrupting their existing systems, and the implementation and management of the extra hardware and infrastructure to host the application.

The most significant issue in developing the application was data ownership. Each infrastructure organisation thought that sharing data on individuals and organisations would weaken their ability to deliver services and attract funding. It took time and effort to convince them that the new system would benefit their organisations.

The system is providing a centrally managed and maintained data store that will allow the infrastructure to streamline the way in which they manage data. Information from research projects and surveys will be made available to all the infrastructure organisations. The system has encouraged collaboration between infrastructure organisations and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future.

Full case study available online.

## Research resources for further information

### *National research and background*

- ICT Hub baseline research 2004 report – [www.ict hub.org.uk/cms/opencms/ict hub/research/](http://www.ict hub.org.uk/cms/opencms/ict hub/research/)
- IT infrastructure in the Voluntary and Community Sector survey report 2006 – [www.do-it.org.uk/magazine/news/it-infrastructure](http://www.do-it.org.uk/magazine/news/it-infrastructure)
- Finance Voluntary Sector IT Survey 2006 – [www.charityfinance.co.uk/it/](http://www.charityfinance.co.uk/it/)

### *NCVO's Collaborative Working Unit*

NCVO's Collaborative Working Unit (CWU) offers information and advice to help voluntary and community organisations make decisions about whether and how to work collaboratively. It serves their managers and trustees as well as engaging with infrastructure bodies, funders and policy makers.

Email: [collaborate@ncvo-vol.org.uk](mailto:collaborate@ncvo-vol.org.uk)

Telephone 020 7520 2440

[www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/collaborate](http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/collaborate)

CWU guidance on developing joint working agreements between voluntary and community organisations [www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/jointworkingagreements](http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/jointworkingagreements)

CWU models & case studies outlining good practice in the different ways that voluntary and community organisations can work together [www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/jointprojects](http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/jointprojects)

### *ICT Hub*

The ICT Hub is a partnership of national voluntary and community organisations. This partnership provides a range of services to help voluntary and community sector organisations benefit from ICT. [www.ict hub.org.uk](http://www.ict hub.org.uk).

### *ruralnet|uk*

ruralnet|uk is a rural regeneration charity that works through promoting and enabling collaboration, research, consultancy and information transfer. ruralnet|uk's I-See-T project is exploring ICT for collaboration in the VCS. This year long project aims to share the experience, tools, advantages and pitfalls of using ICT for collaboration with organisations in the VCS that could benefit most.

Email: [collaboration@ruralnet.org.uk](mailto:collaboration@ruralnet.org.uk)

Telephone: 0845 1300 411

[www.ruralnet.org.uk](http://www.ruralnet.org.uk)

[www.i-see-t.org.uk](http://www.i-see-t.org.uk)

### **Local research**

- Herefordshire & Worcestershire Voluntary and Community Sector ICT Research Survey Report  
[www.itshere.org.uk/resources/researchpublications/ICT%20Survey%20Full%20Report%20VCS%202004.pdf](http://www.itshere.org.uk/resources/researchpublications/ICT%20Survey%20Full%20Report%20VCS%202004.pdf)
- Is Derbyshire Doing IT? – Research into the ICT and Information System Needs of VCS Infrastructure Organisations –  
[www.eastmidlandsinfrastructure.org.uk/documents/derbyshire/IsDerbyshireDoingIT.pdf](http://www.eastmidlandsinfrastructure.org.uk/documents/derbyshire/IsDerbyshireDoingIT.pdf)

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