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The Evaluation of Communities Two Point Zero: Interim Evaluation

Research Summary

Social research

Number: 04/2012

The Department for Local Government and Communities (DLGC) of the Welsh Government appointed Old Bell 3 Ltd. in 2010 to undertake a long-term evaluation of Communities Two Point Zero, the Welsh Government's flagship digital inclusion initiative. The aim of the evaluation is 'to identify and measure the impact of Communities Two Point Zero and its progress in meeting its aims and objectives'.

The evaluation involves three distinct stages. This interim evaluation builds on an Initial Process and Scoping Report published in early 2011.

Introduction

Communities Two Point Zero is the flagship digital inclusion Programme of the Welsh Government which is expected to run for six years from April 2009 to March 2015. Developed by the Digital Inclusion Unit (DIU), it has received an allocation of £8.9 million of ERDF towards total project costs of just under £20 million. The Programme involves both a focus on community and voluntary organisations as a route to promote digital inclusion (with a headline target of engaging some 20,000 individuals with ICT over the lifetime of the programme) and an emphasis on working with social enterprises, and, in so doing, generating economic benefits for supported enterprises, communities and individuals.

In terms of spatial coverage, support for social enterprises may be provided in any part of the Convergence area, while work with community and voluntary organisations is restricted to the most deprived 30% of Lower Super Output Areas (LSOAs) as identified by the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (WIMD) 2008.

Dadansoddi ar gyfer Polisi



Analysis for Policy

Delivery of the Programme is contracted out by the DIU to a consortium led by the Wales Co-operative Centre and including four other delivery partners, Carmarthenshire County Council, Novas Scarman (now known as People Can), the Pembrokeshire Association of Voluntary Services (PAVS) and the University of Glamorgan's George Ewart Evans Centre for Storytelling (GEECS).

Methodology

The report is based on a programme of work undertaken between September and November 2011 which involved:

- Reviewing recent policy and strategy documents and data from the National Survey for Wales;
- Reviewing Programme performance data;
- Undertaking semi-structured face-to-face interviews with 16 key stakeholders;
- Undertaking small focus groups with front-line fieldworkers;
- Undertaking face-to-face interviews with a representative sample of 20 assisted organisations (six social

enterprises and 14 voluntary and community organisations);

- Undertaking telephone interviews with a broadly representative sample of 180 individuals supported by the Programme;
- Undertaking a web-based survey with local stakeholders identified as having a potential engagement with Communities Two Point Zero.

Findings

After a somewhat difficult start, Communities Two Point Zero now appears to be firmly on track both in terms of its financial profile (where it is clear the Programme is being tightly managed) and in terms of delivering against the headline targets agreed for it, though two of the more hard edged economic targets – for jobs created and for new social enterprises started – are proving challenging. This would appear to be in large part due to the economic climate, but also, perhaps reflects the rather ambitious approach in the Business Plan to 'growing' social enterprises from community and voluntary organisations' activities as well as

the fact that the WEFO targets in particular do not really capture the key ambition of the Programme to ‘address... social and other barriers to ICT uptake by firms, citizens and communities’.

Feedback from both the organisations assisted and the individuals who are being supported by the Programme suggests high levels of satisfaction. However, a common theme of consultees was that the Programme still does not have a particularly high profile: while it is probably true that *public* awareness is not a pre-requisite for success, without a good level of awareness of the Programme amongst organisations who can benefit from assistance or help deliver digital inclusion activities, opportunities will be missed. Efforts which have been made to engage County Voluntary Council (CVCs) and local authorities more fully are of importance here and need to be continued.

More generally, it seems clear that there remains a discontinuity between the Programme’s work with organisations and the broader

effort to support individuals to engage with ICT for the first time – though the digital initiatives (large scale projects) are clearly a move in the right direction in terms of engaging the third sector (and indeed other organisations) in delivering digital inclusion.

Much of the support being provided to organisations appears to be functional or operational, with a strong focus on information tools (particularly websites) and on resolving hardware and software problems. With the exception of the two digital initiatives in our sample, few organisations had been engaged with developing the broader skills or involvement with ICT, of those outside a few key individuals (staff or volunteers).

Crucially, however, the assistance to organisations is building capacity to manage ICT more efficiently and effectively: this is perceived by assisted organisations as a key strength of the Programme – and a differentiator from other support that might be available commercially.

Moreover, the limited amount of cross-over from organisational support to broader digital inclusion activities to a large extent reflects the limited opportunities which voluntary and community groups perceive for this, rather than a lack of effort on the part of Communities Two Point Zero staff.

It is still early days to give anything like a definitive view of the impact of the Programme but it does seem clear that, in terms of individuals, participation is playing a key role in enabling beneficiaries to start using ICT and more particularly the internet for the first time and in increasing the range and frequency of use across all beneficiaries. While it is impossible to be sure that this can be wholly attributed to Communities Two Point Zero, those participating in the Programme show far higher levels of digital inclusion after participation than the population in these areas as a whole.

The evidence of positive impact in terms of the organisational support is, perhaps, more limited, particularly as far as 'bottom line' economic impacts are concerned,

though the support is generally perceived as contributing significantly to operational efficiency.

Indeed, the view of most of the assisted organisations that, in the absence of the Programme, they would either have muddled through without upgrading their ICT or doing so in a more limited way, without the focus on building their own capacity to manage and trouble-shoot in future, rings true given what were their generally precarious economic and financial circumstances.

As well as the direct impacts on individuals and organisations, it does seem clear that the Programme is also playing an important part in raising awareness of, and inspiring others to engage with, the digital inclusion agenda.

Assessing value for money is extremely complex for an initiative of this kind, which is unique, which seeks to alter behaviours, which involves several different sorts of potential and actual impacts, and which has a strong focus on adding

value to initiatives and activity which are already underway.

Moreover, it is clear that much of what has happened to date (e.g. the effort invested in working with organisations to develop digital initiatives) is effectively up-front investment which is only starting to generate results.

Even so, it might be thought that the overall costs to date at just over £5 million are quite high when compared to the headline results of just under 250 organisations assisted and 5,000 individual beneficiaries supported, around 1,500 of whom have probably gained the confidence and skills to use the internet for the first time.

Nevertheless, it is clear that in terms of the relationship between costs and outputs, the Programme is performing reasonably well, and is in line with what was deemed acceptable at the time the Business Plan was approved. Deadweight appears to be relatively low, moreover, and the evidence in terms of the individual beneficiaries supported suggests the Programme is having at least as

positive an impact in terms of changing behaviours as could have been anticipated at the outset.

Moreover, the Programme has clearly made progress in terms of putting the building blocks in place for more extensive future delivery.

In terms of processes, there have been significant improvements in working relationships between delivery partners over the last year and the new structures agreed as part of a recent strategic generally seems to command strong support and are in line with the original conception of the Business Plan.

More generally, Communities Two Point Zero remains very relevant in terms of the broader policy agenda: indeed, the importance of digital inclusion has increasingly come into focus not only as a component of social justice but as a critical element of delivering effective public services in a time of sharp downward pressure on public expenditure. While the Programme has perhaps so far been wary of focusing too greatly on access to public services as a 'hook' to engage with the digitally excluded,

ensuring greater access to, confidence in, and use of ICT on the part of those most in need of accessing public services is of vital importance. In this context, it is interesting that more than 50% of the individuals having been supported by the Programme to date are now using the internet to access information about public services.

Recommendations

The evaluation makes a series of 14 recommendations which include:

- continuing to fund the Programme until 2015;
- making greater efforts to 'translate' support for organisations into digital inclusion initiatives;
- continuing to focus efforts in terms of proactive work on digital inclusion on the 30% most deprived LSOAs, but relaxing spatial targeting so as not to exclude work with voluntary and community organisations elsewhere, where these actively seek to engage;
- continuing to make efforts to increase awareness of the Programme throughout the third sector, working closely with key partners such as CVCs and local authorities;
- using access to public services as a way of stimulating digital engagement;
- paying close attention to the cross-cutting themes of environmental sustainability and equal opportunities;
- making greater efforts to address the low rates of activity relative to need in some parts of Wales (particularly North Wales and some parts of the Valleys);
- providing greater clarity over the role of volunteers in delivering digital inclusion.

Author: Old Bell 3 Ltd.

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