



Llywodraeth Cymru  
Welsh Government

# Evaluation of Communities 2.0

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Research Summary

Social research

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This is the final evaluation of Communities 2.0, the Welsh Government's strategic digital inclusion Programme. An earlier version of the report was published in March 2015.

The report is the culmination of a long-term evaluation commissioned in 2010 to identify and measure the impact of Communities 2.0 and its success in meeting its aims and objectives. The evaluation focused principally on the Programme within West Wales and the Valleys.

## Background

1. Communities 2.0 was the flagship Digital Inclusion Programme of the Welsh Government. Developed by the Digital Inclusion Unit (DIU), and funded in part by the European Regional Development Fund through the Welsh European Funding Office (WEFO), it was expected to run for six years from April 2009 to March 2015, with a budget of a little under £20 million. The Programme was delivered by a consortium led by the Wales Co-operative Centre.
2. The Programme involved both a focus on community and voluntary organisations as a route to promote digital inclusion (with an original headline target of engaging some 20,000 individuals with ICT) and an emphasis on working with social enterprises, and, in so doing, generating economic benefits for supported enterprises, communities and individuals.

Dadansoddi ar gyfer Polisi



Analysis for Policy

- 3 The second phase (from April 2012) saw a stronger emphasis on work with individual beneficiaries, in particular through the development of 'digital initiatives', large scale projects delivered by partner organisations on an area-based or thematic basis, which sought to deliver digital inclusion activities directly or indirectly to relevant individuals, particularly from the four broad target groups for the Programme – older people, disabled people, those living in social housing and the unemployed.

## **Method**

- 4 The methodology and work programme underpinning this report has involved:
- A review of policy and strategy documents as well as data from the National Survey for Wales (NSW), literature related to the socio-economic benefits of digital inclusion and performance data;
  - A survey of 571 individual beneficiaries who received support from the Programme:

The survey also involved a longitudinal element, with second wave interviews held with some 304 beneficiaries around 12 - 18 months after their first interviews;

- Qualitative case-study interviews with 49 social enterprises and voluntary and community organisations supported by the Programme, again using a longitudinal element;
- Semi-structured interviews with 20 key national stakeholders and small focus groups with 31 members of staff;
- A web-survey with 50 local stakeholders;
- Five case-studies of digital initiatives involving face-to-face interviews with 41 stakeholders.

## **Key Findings**

- 5 Overall, significant progress has been made over recent years in reducing the gap between Wales and the UK as a whole in terms of the proportion of the population using the internet, with some notable successes in terms of

some specific target groups identified by the Welsh Government.

6 Stakeholders generally believed that Communities 2.0 continued to have considerable relevance to the wider policy agenda, with the strong emphasis of the UK Government on delivering welfare benefits online contributing to driving up demand for support from individuals and spurring greater engagement with the digital inclusion agenda on the part of other public and third sector organisations.

7 In general, feedback from stakeholders and staff suggested relationships between WEFO, the DIU and the delivery partners had been very good, with the Programme management team being seen as very responsive to changing Welsh Government priorities, while trying to juggle the distinct elements of the Programme (support to social enterprises, to voluntary and

community organisations and to individuals).

8 In terms of performance, the Programme exceeded most of the targets set, with a particularly strong achievement in terms of individual beneficiaries supported. Progress in terms of enterprises created and new jobs was less impressive, though still representing a reasonable achievement, given the economic climate, while support to enterprises on the cross-cutting themes of equal opportunities and environmental sustainability showed reasonably good results after a slow start. There was a modest underspend of around 4% on the Programme.

9 The Programme seems to have been highly effective at raising awareness of digital inclusion amongst key stakeholders and at working with partners, particularly through the digital initiatives.

- 10 Assisted voluntary and community organisations expressed high levels of satisfaction, qualified in some instances by a view that the systems around applying for 'packages of support' were unduly onerous and a frustration on the part of some staff that what they regarded as an arbitrary distinction between social enterprises (who qualified for financial support) and voluntary and community organisations (who did not) hampered the effectiveness of support to the latter.
- 11 Many of the interventions with organisations focused on fairly functional support, although in phase 2 there was a much stronger emphasis on taking a more holistic view rather than simply dealing with the expressed needs of the organisation. The attempt to use organisational assistance as a way of securing the digital inclusion of individuals was generally less successful than had been hoped at the start of the Programme.
- 12 In terms of support for individuals, the evidence was significantly more positive. Many of the digital initiatives developed a real sense of momentum and the sort of informal learning offered was seen to have succeeded in reaching a wide range of excluded individuals. At the same time, it was recognised that some of the target groups – notably the disabled - had been more difficult to reach than others.
- 13 Our survey evidence strongly suggested that the Programme had generally been appropriately targeted in terms of individual beneficiaries, especially in phase 2, with beneficiaries overwhelmingly reporting that the support had been in the form of basic ICT courses, but with a significant element of support relating directly to access to welfare benefits.
- 14 Turning to evidence on outcomes and impact, the

limited evidence available suggests that Communities 2.0 played an important role in raising awareness of digital inclusion across the third and public sectors and made a contribution to the development of on line delivery of services by the public sector.

15 The longer-term impact of support to voluntary and community organisations and to social enterprises was more limited. The longitudinal work in particular suggested that it may be unrealistic to believe that a one-off intervention can make an enduring difference to small organisations, while significant economic impacts were generally not found in assisted organisations.

16 In terms of individual beneficiaries, however, our survey work suggested that participation in the Programme had a significant and sustained impact on the extent to which beneficiaries made use of the internet for a wide range of purposes. The positive effect

was particularly visible for older beneficiaries.

17 Between a quarter and a third of beneficiaries interviewed for a second time had gone on to do further learning connected to ICT, while more than a quarter of the small number of second-wave interviewees who were in employment thought that participation in Communities 2.0 had assisted them in securing their current employment.

18 This positive view of the impact of the Programme on individual beneficiaries was strongly echoed by evidence from stakeholders and the digital initiative case-studies.

19 There were mixed views from stakeholders about the need for, and shape of, any future Programme, though many interviewees believed that support for social enterprises should be integrated with more generic business support and that any new Programme should focus more on

supporting digital inclusion of individuals rather than organisations.

- 20 Some elements of some of the digital initiatives were likely to be sustained even in the absence of a future central Programme, but most contributors believed that at a minimum a central resource was needed to stimulate local initiatives, bring partners together and exchange good practice between digital inclusion practitioners.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

- 21 The report concludes that the Programme has generally been well managed and has proved particularly successful in its work with individuals, where it has had a significant and sustained impact in terms of the propensity to use the internet. Interventions with voluntary and community organisations and social enterprises appear to have been less transformative in

terms of impact, although levels of satisfaction were high.

- 22 Communities 2.0 has also contributed to increasing the visibility and building a greater understanding of the digital inclusion agenda, generating a real sense of momentum about the agenda, with the prospect of some of the digital initiatives being sustained after the end of the Programme.
- 23 Making judgments about the value for money of such a Programme is challenging: however, we conclude that, even ignoring the Programme's wider outcomes - in terms of raising the awareness of the digital inclusion agenda and developing partnerships and tools to address it, as well as the undoubted benefits to the 750 + social enterprises and voluntary organisations assisted - the likely net cost for each individual who became digitally included as a result of the Programme was around £1,150. Given the scale of the savings available to individuals

buying goods and services online this appears to represent good value for money from the individual perspective, while also contributing to savings from the online delivery of public services and wider societal benefits. These include the benefits of a small but potentially significant proportion of beneficiaries being able to improve their labour market position: if the results of our telephone survey were representative, the Programme would have played a major role in assisting around 1,250 former beneficiaries to access new jobs

- 24 The report makes a series of eight recommendations (formulated in late 2014 before decisions by Welsh Ministers on successor arrangements) namely:

### **Recommendation 1**

The Welsh Government needs to continue to encourage the mainstreaming of digital inclusion as part of its anti-poverty strategy.

In particular, Communities First clusters should be encouraged to resource digital inclusion work within their areas

### **Recommendation 2**

The Welsh Government should seek to allocate resources for a more limited successor Programme to Communities 2.0, focused exclusively on the drive to increase still further the digital inclusion of currently excluded individuals. This should not in itself undertake – nor probably fund – front line activity but should:

- Continue to act as an advocate for digital inclusion to public, private and third sector organisations, focusing on ways in which digital inclusion activities can play into other agendas, such as improving the efficiency of service delivery;
- Support and encourage partners already involved in the digital initiatives to sustain their involvement, including providing support to access external funding;

- Where necessary, broker new local and thematic partnerships;
- Provide opportunities for networking between individuals and organisations involved in digital inclusion, in order to disseminate good practice and prevent duplication, while working closely with current or emerging networks within ‘sectors (e.g. housing associations, local government);
- Maintain and promote the legacy of Communities 2.0 in terms of tools and techniques, including maintaining the ‘Computer Courses near You’ facility on the website;
- Continue as necessary to provide ‘train the trainer’ training, focused particularly on supporting front-line organisations to develop and support a cadre of volunteers capable of delivering basic ICT training.

### **Recommendation 3**

In addition, and building on the

national campaign undertaken in the last few months of the Programme, the Welsh Government should work with training providers to consider how informal learning related to ICT can be sustained (and funded) after the end of Communities 2.0.

### **Recommendation 4**

Given the continued high level of digital exclusion amongst social housing tenants, and the difficulty which individuals with a poor credit history have in securing contracts with ISPs, the Welsh Government should, as a matter of urgency, work with social housing providers to consider how ubiquitous internet access might be offered on a no or low-cost basis, and should examine whether and how future ERDF funding might be accessed to support this.

### **Recommendation 5**

The Welsh Government should consult with relevant representative groups to consider how digital inclusion activity for disabled people can best be taken forward, in the light of the difficulties experienced in reaching large



numbers of disabled people in their homes.

### **Recommendation 6**

The Welsh Government should consult with DWP/JobCentre Plus over the future support needs of jobseekers and others in receipt of welfare benefits, who lack the skills, confidence or access to the internet to be able to operate in an online environment. Ideally, given the suggestion from some interviewees that budgets might have been available to support this work had Communities 2.0 not been available, it should seek to secure a financial contribution towards continued support from the Welsh public sector, e.g. libraries, for such individuals.

### **Recommendation 7**

In terms of social enterprises, the Welsh Government should seek to integrate support on ICT issues with the broader business support offer, whether through Business Wales generically or through a dedicated social enterprise support service. Support with upgrading ICT infrastructure and capability should be eligible for any business finance schemes which are

specifically targeted on micro-enterprises.

### **Recommendation 8**

In terms of the wider population of voluntary and community organisations, consideration is needed (within the Welsh Government and possibly also within the Third Sector Partnership Council) as to whether providing ICT support (alongside support on such issues as governance and fundraising) should be a part of the role which the third sector infrastructure (the WCVA and CVCs) is expected to play and if so, how this might be recognised through funding. In our view, this is a lower priority for Welsh Government funding than support for the digital inclusion of individuals, but if this is not deemed a priority by the Welsh Government and the sector, then it will need to be recognised that some organisations will struggle to maintain adequate (or in some cases, any) ICT infrastructure.

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