An Evaluation of Communities Two Point Zero – Initial Process and Scoping Report

Old Bell 3 Ltd. has been appointed to undertake the long term evaluation of Communities Two Point Zero by the Department for Social Justice and Local Government (DSJLG) of the Welsh Government. Communities Two Point Zero is a Programme[1] which aims to provide a strategic approach to digital inclusion, working with community and voluntary sector groups and social enterprises and which is part-funded by European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) from the Convergence Programme for West Wales and the Valleys.

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 first stage of the research has involved scoping the subsequent stages of the evaluation and an initial evaluation of Programme processes. The work programme was undertaken between November 2010 and February 2011 and involved reviewing a wide range of relevant documentation, undertaking fieldwork with the Welsh Government, management and staff from the delivery partners[2] and other stakeholders and a telephone survey of organisations and enterprises supported by the Programme to date.

The research highlights the rapidly changing policy environment over recent years at EU, UK and Welsh Government, drawing particular attention to the way in which digital inclusion has become an increasing focus of Government, not least in the context of service delivery.   Digital inclusion is one of the five key themes

of 'Delivering a Digital Wales' and the 'Digital Inclusion Framework' published in December 2010 both reiterates the central importance of Communities Two Point Zero to increasing digital inclusion in Wales and represents an increasing level of ambition to ensure a Wales where 'everyone who wants to be on line can get on line, do more on line and benefit from the advantages of being on line'[3].

In terms of key findings, the initial process evaluation suggests that:

> The Programme is based on sound evidence in respect of the scale and nature of digital exclusion and the experience of the predecessor Programme, Communities@One, though the Business Plan gives rather less attention to the evidence of need in respect of enterprises in general and social enterprises in particular;
> The process of contracting out the delivery of the Programme has involved some development of the model envisaged in the Business Plan, including a stronger focus on support to individuals, more specific spatial targeting in respect of the support to voluntary and community organisations, a proliferation of different 'front-line' roles (and a decreased emphasis on Community Brokers) and a focus on six key initiatives[4]. The rationale for the composition of the delivery consortium did not appear particularly clear to some of those delivering the Programme;
> Many stakeholders felt, at the time of the fieldwork, that the strategic environment in which the Programme was operating had changed, partly as a result of cuts in public expenditure and the quest to use ICT as a way of delivering public services more efficiently, with a stronger emphasis on supporting individuals to get on-line, and with the risk that the social enterprise strand of the Programme would become increasingly isolated. This was seen as requiring major changes to the delivery model;
> Despite some initial difficulties, key relationships between the Digital Inclusion Unit (DIU)

within the Welsh Government and WEFO, between the DIU and the Wales Co-operative Centre and between the Wales Co-operative Centre and the other delivery partners are working well: this has been facilitated by the appointment of a Programme Director within the Wales Co-operative Centre, although the variety of organisational cultures and terms, conditions and working arrangements for staff employed by the five delivery partners is a cause of some difficulties;

There are some concerns that the drive to meet targets may lead to the Programme providing insufficiently intensive support to voluntary and community organisations and there is little evidence of cross-referral between different delivery partners. The social enterprise strand is in practice operating in a largely autonomous way;

Most organisations supported by the Programme (whether through the social enterprise or the voluntary and community strand) have sought and received support to set up or improve websites or to increase staff or volunteers' ICT skills, with the fact this support is provided free of charge being a key motivation for using the Programme: there has been relatively little focus on the commercial exploitation of ICT. Levels of satisfaction with the support provided and the processes surrounding the application for financial 'packages of support' are generally high;

The Digital Inclusion Wales conference was a major success in terms of communicating with a wider audience, although some of the original assumptions about how the delivery partners would be able to ensure structured relationships with external stakeholders (e.g. Local Authorities and County Voluntary Councils) have not really been realised;

Management Information Systems are comprehensive and appropriate to meet WEFO requirements but are regarded

by some front-line staff as onerous: the Client Management System was undergoing re-development at the time of our fieldwork;

The Programme is lagging in respect of a number of its targets though in general at this stage in a six year programme not in such a way as to give grounds for serious concern: the target of supporting 20,000 individuals looks challenging, as does the job-creation target, given the deterioration in the economic climate since the Business Plan was developed;

There is some underspend to date, with a time-lag between the financial commitment to 'support packages' and the incurring of actual expenditure.

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County Council, the George Ewart Centre for Storytelling (GEECS) at the University of Glamorgan, Novas Scarman and the Pembrokeshire Association of Voluntary Services (PAVS).

[3] Welsh Assembly Government (December 2010) *Delivering Digital Inclusion: A Strategic Framework for Wales,* Cardiff: Welsh Assembly Government, p.2

[4] Participatory Media; Circuit Riders; E Government; Social Enterprise Virtual Market Place (though this has subsequently not been taken forward, because of a similar project developed by the WCVA); Widening Access; Hard to Reach Individuals.

[1] We refer to Communities Two Point Zero throughout this report as a Programme, although from the perspective of the West and Wales and the Valleys Convergence Programme it is regarded as a project.

[2] The Programme is delivered by a consortium led by the Wales Co-operative Centre and involving Carmarthenshire