

The Digital Villages Research Network

Interim Report : April 2010

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East Cleveland Community Development Group in partnership with the Unit for Social and Policy Research and the Institute for Digital Innovation at Teesside University.



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Contents

| | |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Acknowledgements | 2 |
| Summary | 3 |
| 1. Introduction | 4 |
| 1.1 Background | 4 |
| 1.2 Introducing the DVN project | 5 |
| 1.3 What is a Digital Villages Network? | 5 |
| 1.4 Project aims | 6 |
| 1.5 Project phases | 6 |
| 1.6 Action research approach | 8 |
| 2. Phase 1: Developing the Community Research Network | 8 |
| 2.1 What is a Community Research Network? | 8 |
| 2.2 Recruiting researchers | 9 |
| 2.3 Community researcher training | 9 |
| 2.4 Researching with local communities | 10 |
| 2.5 Developing the DVN website | 10 |
| 2.6 Enhancing ICT skills | 11 |
| 3. Phase 2a: Mapping ICT services and provision in local communities | 11 |
| 3.1 Community mapping methods | 11 |
| 3.2 Key findings | 13 |
| 3.3 Ongoing work | 14 |
| 4. Phase 2b: Household survey of ICT access and use | 14 |
| 4.1 Survey methods | 14 |
| 4.2 Key findings | 16 |
| 5. Project outcomes | 18 |
| 6. Forward plans for 2010-11 | 19 |
| 7. References | 20 |

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Paul Davies, April 2010

Summary

- The Digital Villages Network (DVN) is a Big Lottery Research Programme funded Action Research Project which explores Information and Communication Technology (ICT) use in Redcar and Cleveland, in the North East of England.
- The research investigates the ICT needs of people living in diverse rural and coastal towns and villages across the region. One of the main aims of the project is to explore how community-based ICT initiatives can support communities and individuals to learn about ICTs and use them in effective ways to support social inclusion and access to services.
- DVN is a mixed-method action research project, combining qualitative and quantitative research approaches. There are four phases of research, involving community mapping of ICT services and provision, a household survey of ICT access and use and interviews and focus groups with local community members.
- The project has a network of 15 community researchers who live in diverse communities within Redcar and Cleveland. The community researchers (CRs) take part in research training and design, fieldwork and analysis.
- The project is currently in phase 3 and is preparing to carry out 72 one-to-one interviews to understand processes of digital inclusion and ICT use in the home.
- Findings from the survey in phase 2 show that access to the internet and Broadband in the home is in line with national figures. However, there are still a significant number of people who do not have computers and the internet in the home.
- In remote villages, Broadband infrastructure continues to be problematic, with respondents reporting inadequate internet access.
- Social networking sites such as Facebook are increasingly popular, whilst less than half of our survey respondents use local or national government websites and online services.
- The project has met key outcomes to date and the Community Research Network is on schedule for phases 3 and 4.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

New information and communication technologies (ICTs) are having profound and far-reaching effects on the social world, shaping our work and home lives, our communities and our personal relationships (Cavanagh, 2007). The internet and mobile phones offer continuous access to information and services and 'perpetual contact' with family and friends (Katz & Aakhus, 2002). Online social networking is restructuring the meanings of community and friendship (Beer & Burrows, 2007). Such trends are important in reshaping sense of belonging to people, places and spaces.

Within the UK today, nearly three quarters of the population have the internet at home, and over 90% of UK households have one or more mobile phones (Ofcom, 2009; ONS, 2010). Most recently, we have seen a significant increase in the use of social networking sites, such as, Facebook and MySpace. However, for some individuals and communities, ICT access remains difficult or limited. Many rural communities, for example, have faced additional barriers to accessing the internet and Broadband services, due to a lack of adequate infrastructure and distance from ICT access points and learning centres (CRC, 2009). The recent closures of key services, including rural post offices and local schools, has also impacted significantly on rural service provision and opportunities for maintaining and enhancing community initiatives.

The UK government actively promotes the role of ICTs in facilitating social inclusion. This is particularly the case for deprived, rural and/or remote communities in terms of reducing 'distance' and enhancing local economies and civil society. In December 2009, the Government issued the 'Putting the Frontline First: Smarter Government' report which recognises the potential to reduce the cost of public services and improve the customer experience by moving the majority of provision online (HMG, 2009). This report also acknowledges the need to increase people's ICT skills so that they can use online services effectively. However, there is limited research evidence that scrutinises whether this vision is realisable or has been achieved.

Digital exclusion is an ongoing problem and it is estimated that there are 10 million adults in the UK that do not use or have access to computers and the internet (Race Online, 2010). Many within this group are also likely to face social exclusion and financial deprivation. According to UK Online (2010), nearly half of those without ICT access are in the lowest socio-economic groups, and 70% of people living in social housing are not online. 50% of those without ICT access are aged over 65.

The government has recognised both the social and economic benefits of digital inclusion and the Digital Inclusion Task Force (<http://www.marthalanefox.com/digital-inclusion-task-force>) has been set up to address these complex issues. Earlier digital inclusion provision has tended to be a patchwork quilt of provision from different organisations and funding bodies, resulting in diverse initiatives, projects and pilots. More recently, the Task Force has stressed the need for a more holistic response to digital exclusion by increasing partnership work and sharing expertise. Over the last few months, there has been increased activity around the development of a National Plan for Digital Participation (recommended in the 'Digital Britain' Report, 2009); and the accompanying Independent Review of ICT User Skills by Baroness Morris recommends a curriculum for digital life skills.

Against this policy backdrop, our project explores whether the development of a Digital Villages Network can facilitate new types of ICT-based service provision and learning. There is great potential for innovative and socially inclusive ICT-based services to support rural and coastal residents in accessing services, shops and learning spaces and the DVN aims to address some of these needs. We will explore the effectiveness of the DVN model for enhancing access to services and learning opportunities, adopting a community driven approach which draws upon local expertise and explores the diversity of ICT needs within and across communities in Redcar and Cleveland.

1.2 Introducing the DVN project

The Digital Villages Network (DVN) is a Big Lottery Research Programme funded Action Research Project which explores Information and Communication Technology (ICT) use in Redcar and Cleveland, in the North East of England. The project is directed by Paul Davies of the East Cleveland Community Development Group in partnership with Professor Eileen Green (Research Lead), Carrie Singleton (Research Coordinator) and Steve Thompson (ICT Facilitator) at the University of Teesside.

1.3 What is a Digital Villages Network?

We define a Digital Villages Network as a virtual and real-world network of community members, practitioners and researchers working together to identify community needs and develop appropriate community-based solutions. A DVN meshes internet connectivity and on the ground community networking to facilitate social inclusion and information sharing in rural and coastal communities.

1.4 Project aims

The overall aim of our project is to investigate the effectiveness of a Digital Villages Network as a model for providing access to services and virtual learning for rural and coastal communities in Redcar and Cleveland.

Within this, the project has four main aims:

- i. To build capacity within and across rural and coastal communities through the development of a Community Research Network
- ii. To investigate and map access to and use of ICTs, broadband and community media across Redcar & Cleveland, generating the first dataset of ICT-related activity within diverse communities across the region
- iii. To explore the effectiveness of the Digital Villages Network model as a means of facilitating access to services and virtual learning
- iv. To investigate the role of the DVN in facilitating community participation and social connectivity within and across communities

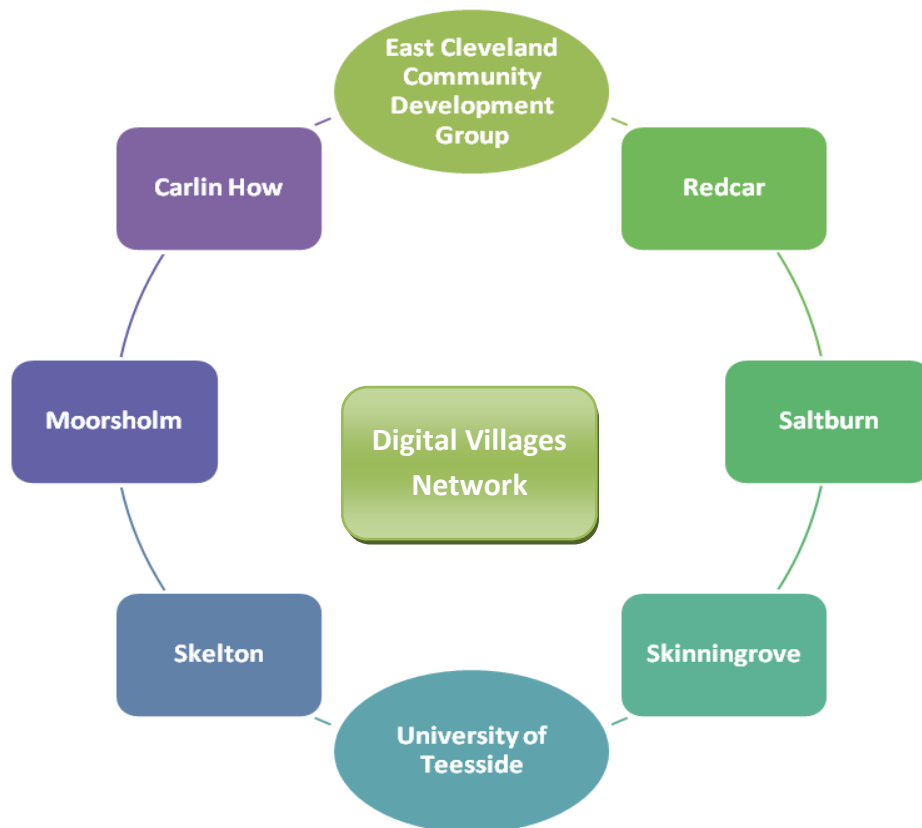
1.5 Project phases

The project is organised into four distinct but interlinked phases. Each phase utilises different research methods to build a rich picture of ICT use, combining both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Within each phase, the community researchers undertake research training and conduct fieldwork with the support of the team. The project has recently completed phases 1 and 2, the findings from which are discussed in this report.

Phase 1: Developing the community research network (November 2008 – September 2009)

The first phase of this project focuses on recruiting community researchers and developing the six research nodes. Researchers attend a series of research methods workshops and are supported to design and carry out the research project. Workshops are delivered alongside ICT support on the DVN website, where there is space to reflect upon and discuss the research as it progresses. Here, the Digital Villages Network becomes operationalised as a community learning environment.

The diagram below shows the current Community Research Network and the location of our research nodes.



Phase 2: Mapping ICT use in the community (May 2009 – ongoing)

In phase 2, the community research network will carry out a survey of ICT use at designated points across the region. They will identify community-based ICT initiatives and enter these into a Digital Map to provide a spatial and textual view of available services. They will then undertake a survey of home access and use of ICTs and community media, and levels of participation in community ICT initiatives. The survey will enable us to find out about what kinds of ICTs are used and people's ICTs interests.

Phase 3: Exploring ICT use in social and community context (March 2010 – August 2010)

In phase 3 we will carry out one-to-one interviews with 72 individuals (12 in each of the six research nodes) based in Redcar and Cleveland to explore the social context of ICT use including: rural/coastal context and community participation; personal use of ICTs; and views on community ICT initiatives.

Phase 4: Developing the Digital Villages Network Model (September 2010 – April 2011)

The final phase will identify key components of the Digital Villages Network for further research and development and test these out in community-based focus groups. Drawing upon these findings, the network will develop the pilot online DVN in each of the community nodes. We will ask local residents and service providers for their views on the DVN. In the final stages of the research, we will concentrate on writing up the findings for dissemination. To maximise opportunities for sustainability of the DVN, community researchers will also forge and maintain new and existing relationships with other VCS organisations for future collaboration in the DVN. There will also be opportunities to develop ways forward through new funding and community networking.

1.6 Action research approach

The DVN is a mixed-method action research project. It combines quantitative data collection on ICT access and use within households and community settings with in-depth qualitative data on perceptions and meanings of ICTs, community media and virtual service provision and learning for people living in rural and coastal communities. Our action approach emphasises user-oriented research practices combined with a commitment to promoting social change (Reason, 2008; Stoecker, 2005). The project espouses a 'bottom-up' approach which identifies community members as experts and agents in their own lives and communities (Letherby et al., 2007). Thus, the project aims to integrate scholarship with action, fulfilling the aims of the research alongside on-going capacity building for sustainability. Project partners work to learn from each other to carry out research which reflects and highlights the ICT needs of communities in Redcar and Cleveland.

2. Phase 1: Developing the Community Research Network

2.1 What is a Community Research Network?

One of the main aims of the project is to develop an active and sustainable Community Research Network within the region. The project currently has fifteen researchers attached to the network and based in six research nodes: Carlin How, Moorsholm, Redcar, Saltburn, Skelton and Skinningrove. The network offers peer support and connectivity for research activities, digital skills and community-based activity. Researchers work up to 18 hours per month and participate in all aspects of research design and fieldwork. To date, the network has been successful in completing phases 1 and 2 of the research. Currently, researchers are

involved in planning and training for phase 3 and will conduct 72 one-to-one interviews to generate a rich picture of ICT use in the area.

2.2 Recruiting researchers

The first group of CRs, Nick, Terry, Barry, Marian, Roger, Marion and Amanda were recruited in the spring of 2009 through existing links with partnership organisations. They came on board in phase 1 to undertake initial training and community mapping. Our second group of researchers, Lynne, Steve, Cheryl, Kathryn, John, Martin, Pauline and Colin, were recruited through adverts in local papers and started in October 2009 at the start of the survey distribution. Our most recent researcher, Katherine, joined the team in April 2010. All of our CRs are actively involved in local community organisations or have an interest in local community issues and bring a wide range of skills and interests to the network. More information about our CRs is available at www.digitalvillage.org.uk.

2.3 Community researcher training

Research training takes place in local community venues and is carried out in each phase. All CRs have been trained in the basics of research including an introduction to social research and ethics and safety. CRs are also CRB checked to meet the requirements of the University's Ethics Committee. Researchers then participate in training specific to each phase of the research. Training combines a mixture of presentations and activities. Above all, the CRs are supported to shape the research design in dedicated planning workshops. Additionally, CRs are encouraged to keep fieldnotes and to contribute to the DVN research blog at <http://digitalvillage.org.uk/research-blog/>.



2.4 Researching with local communities



One of the main tenets of the project is to value and draw upon local expertise and knowledge. Consequently, the researchers and the team have worked together to exchange ideas in order to facilitate research which meshes with the needs of local communities. Researchers have advised on the local areas, which has in turn shaped the ways in which the research is carried out. Different research

approaches have been utilised in different villages and towns to ensure good local relations and methods and sampling which are tailored to the diversity of the nodes involved in the project. For example, the survey has employed various strategies of delivery to maximise response rates and encourage participation.

It is well documented that it can take a long time to build relations of trust with communities, and the project recognises that there are ‘communities within communities’ who’s participation can take longer to develop. The project recognises the importance of maintaining political neutrality within local settings and adopting an inclusive approach to the research. The community research network training includes learning about the multi-faceted and dynamic shape of local relations, and the importance of ethical practice when engaging with research participants.

2.5 Developing the DVN website

The development of the DVN website (www.digitalvillage.org.uk) has been important for dissemination purposes, as a vehicle for data collection and as a resource for the research team. The document library is a resource for the project team and members of the CRN. It stores key research methods readings, workshop resources and fieldwork tools. Tagging is used to organise the documents and facilitate access to relevant resources. Writing blogs to document the research activities is strongly encouraged at all times. However, it has been a challenge to develop this activity, because of the public nature of blogging and linked concerns about generating interesting and relevant content. As the fieldwork has



developed, we have seen an increase in the numbers of blog postings and greater confidence about what to write.

2.6 Enhancing ICT skills



DVN researchers are supported to participate in ICT skills development through dedicated sessions and via University programmes. The CRs have a range of different ICT interests and skills which are invaluable for the research project and for sustainability beyond the lifetime of the project. The DVN project has delivered ICT learning for research including blogging (see left at Margrove Park), digital media and social networking, led by Steve

Thompson. Community Researchers identify ICT needs and workshops are tailored to these.

The tools that are used in ICT learning are open source and free. This approach builds upon earlier community media activity in centres and communities with little funding and existing creative software. Open source software was ideal for this type of activity and meant that participants could use it on their home computers. Open source and web 2.0 software also supports community connectivity, which is important for the development of the digital village concept. Examples include: Wikispaces for Wikis, WordPress for Blogging, Audacity for audio and a variety of Google applications. In the research project, the DVN blog is a rich resource of data and CRs have made excellent contributions to its development and continuation. Many CRs have also taken up Teesside University's Certificate in Professional Development to learn about web development, creating easy-to-use websites, digital imaging, picture construction and the use of web-based software such as Dreamweaver, demonstrating added value to the project through academic and VCS collaboration.

3. Phase 2: Mapping ICT services and provision in local communities

3.1 Community mapping methods

In this phase, the Community Research Network undertook a 'mapping exercise' to identify and log the number and location of ICT organisations and services in Redcar and Cleveland. The aim of this phase was to provide a wide-scale picture of access to ICTs for community

members. The information that we gathered is currently being entered into a digital map which will show the geographical location of ICT organisations and services and basic information about what is on offer.

Our research adopted a ‘community mapping’ approach which is defined as ‘local mapping, produced collaboratively, by local people and often incorporating alternative local knowledge’ (Perkins, 2007: 127). The researchers used their own knowledge of local services to identify participants and distributed short self-completion questionnaires to a wide range of service providers across Redcar and Cleveland. Service providers were contacted in person, or by telephone or email.

So far, we have analysed the data from over 60 organisations that have taken part in our mapping research. As the mapping is ongoing throughout the project, more will be added to our analysis.

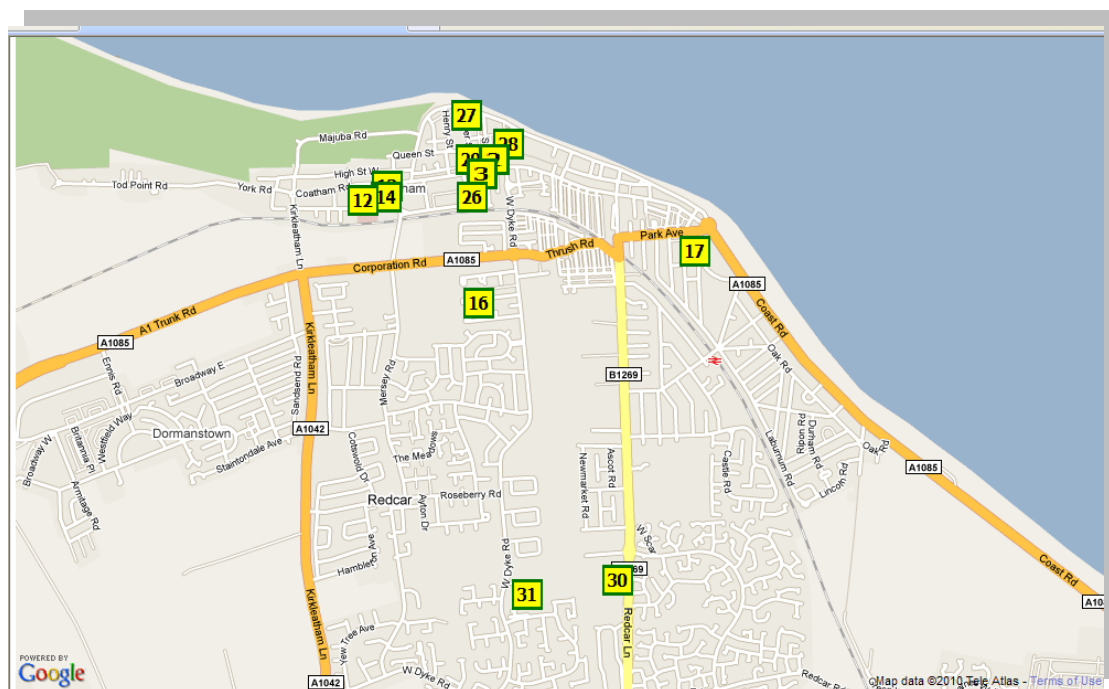
We have engaged with a diverse range of organisations including: ICT-related organisations and businesses such as UK Online centres and Internet cafes; local community centres, village halls and pubs; and organisations from a wide range of sectors including: social care, children’s services, advice and guidance, older people’s services, mental health, learning disabilities, employment, leisure and the youth



service. The fieldwork postcard to the right was developed by CR Steve Nicholls to show where they had been to conduct community mapping activities.

3.2 Key findings

Our digital map is currently being developed. This is an early prototype:



Our data demonstrates the following early findings:

- There are many types of facilities for learning about computers and the internet in the region but most are concentrated in urban areas, particularly around Redcar and East Middlesbrough.
- A number of innovative urban-based ICT centres exist, including cyber cafes and bespoke ICT learning environments.
- Rural areas are well supported with village halls offering a range of social activities, but many of the halls lack internet connectivity and do not offer ICT training. A map of rural village halls is provided by the Tees Valley Rural Community Council and is available at <http://www.tvvh.org.uk/>.
- Margrove Park Village Hall is a good example of a rural village hall that provides access to ICTs for local residents. The hall has wifi and laptops and runs a computer club where members learn ICT skills and update their village website (www.margrovepark.com).

- A diverse range of ICT training and learning courses is available in the region ranging from basic, unaccredited courses for beginners (n=12 centres) through to NVQs (n=4 centres) and the University Certificate of Personal Development (UCPD) in computing (n=3 centres).
- One of the main issues for many service providers is identifying and securing funding to start or continue with and enhance their ICT provision and activities.

3.3 Ongoing work

Community researchers are currently continuing with the mapping by approaching additional organisations to take part in key areas such as Guisborough, South Bank and outlying East Cleveland villages. We are also currently mapping community-based websites to document online activity for and by local communities in Redcar and Cleveland.

4. Phase 2: Household survey of ICT access and use

4.1 Survey methods

The main aim of the survey was to identify levels of home access and use of computers and the internet, participation in ICT training and use of online government services. A further aim was to explore sense of belonging to local place and identify the extent of individual involvement in community-based ICT activities.

The survey questionnaire was developed with the CRs in dedicated workshops. Ideas were exchanged and CRs reviewed and shaped the overall direction of the questionnaire development with support from the research team. It was made clear to potential participants that they did not have to use or have access to the internet in order to take part. Indeed the project welcomed the views of a diverse range of people. The questionnaire was piloted with individuals (n=20) known to the project via the East Cleveland Community Development Group and one of our Redcar researchers.

The survey was distributed to homes in our six research areas through CRs working in each area. A total of 150 questionnaires were delivered in each area, with the exception of Skinningrove where 100 questionnaires were distributed due to the availability of the one community researcher in this area. In the small villages of Moorsholm and Stanghow, each household received a questionnaire and in Carlin How, 1 in 3 houses were asked to take

part. In the larger areas of Skelton, Redcar and Saltburn, the research team sampled a series of residential streets for socio-economic diversity.

Distribution and collection strategies were selected to maximise return in each area. For example, in Moorsholm and Stanghow, a postal strategy was adopted, whereas in the other five areas, researchers returned to the houses to collect the questionnaires by hand. If a person was unavailable, a pre-paid envelope was left for the respondent.

We received 250/850 completed questionnaires with an overall response rate of 29%. Our response rates varied by place, with high response rates from Moorsholm (44%), Skelton (43%), Carlin How (31%) and Saltburn (23%). Both Redcar and Skinninggrove had lower response rates of 14%. There are a range of factors which could have shaped these response rates. People living in Moorsholm, a remote rural village, have experienced ongoing difficulties with securing good quality Broadband access and feedback from the village suggests that people were highly motivated to participate to support their campaign for enhanced Broadband services. As our Moorsholm community researcher observed:

People I'd spoken to in the village, they're very interested in [research] ... because we've got such a poor or nonexistent [Broadband] system anyway, so anything they can contribute to get ammunition to go forward to try to get people like BT... if at the end of [the survey] we could get the feedback ... I'm sure there's people in the village that want to take it further with BT.

Strong social ties to place and community have also been identified as a key factor in motivating participation. In Redcar, a large urban town, researchers reported that a reduced sense of belonging to local neighbourhood and community and a lack of awareness about the project and their local research team had contributed to low participation:

Redcar is such a big area, it's wrong to say that I'm a member of the community in [place name] or the [name] estate... it's totally different... in terms of community [so] I'm not sure in terms of getting [good] responses.
(Redcar researcher)

Redcar researchers also found that few people were in their homes during the day to answer the door, and they also encountered some wariness about completing a questionnaire and scepticism about the anonymity of the survey. Conversely, in smaller towns and villages such as Skelton and Carlin How, the CRs' extensive efforts to publicise the research and their roles on the project through face-to-face contact is highly likely to have increased participation rates:

But by doing it on a more personal one to one we actually found out a lot and we met some really interesting people that we can now go back to for other things... so that was why it was good to speak to people rather than just put them through letterboxes. (Skelton researcher)

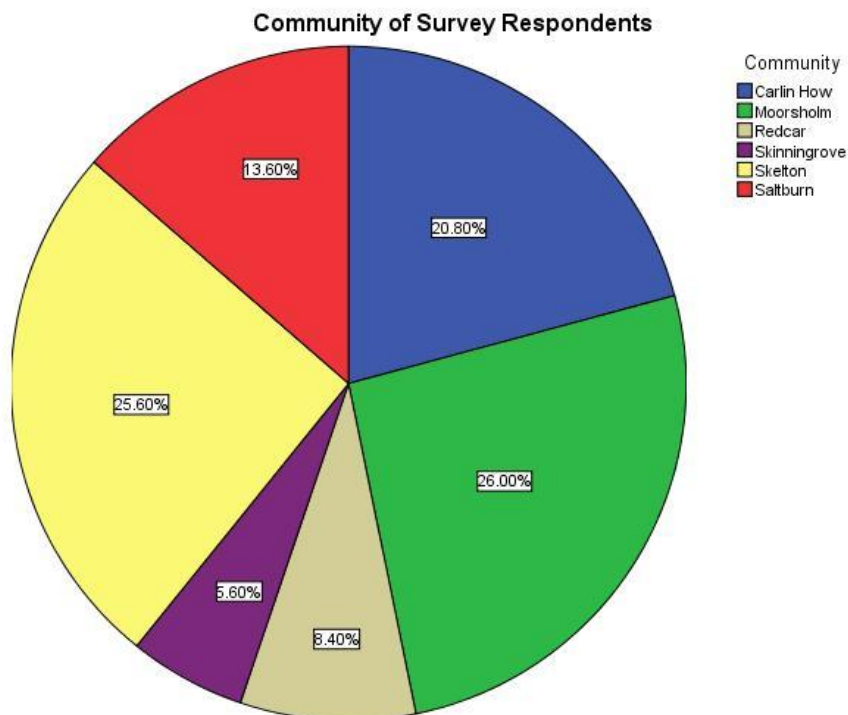
I did find it a lot easier when I actually knew the person, it made me feel really comfortable and I think it may have been encouraging them more to fill the survey in because they knew me... (Carlin How researcher)

4.2 Key findings

Below is a snapshot of our survey findings which we will be publishing later in the year.

Who took part in our survey?

- More women (61%) than men (39%) completed our survey
- The average age of the respondents was 54
- Just under one quarter of respondents has no qualifications
- Of the sample, the largest groups of respondents are from Moorsholm and Skelton (see chart below)



This chart shows the distribution of respondents from across different areas in Redcar and Cleveland

Internet access in the home

- Most of our survey respondents had internet access at present in the home (79%) and most of these have broadband access (70%) or Wi-Fi (18%). The national figure for internet access in the home is lower at 70%. It is also lower in the North East at 66%. Nationally, 90% of internet users in the home have Broadband (ONS, August 2009). This is similar to our survey findings in Redcar and Cleveland if we join the number of Broadband and Wi-Fi users.
- 17% of our sample stated that they do not currently have access to the internet at home. The main reasons for this included: (i) not having a computer in the house; (ii) it is too expensive; (iii) they do not know how to use a computer; and (iv) they are not interested in using the internet.
- A very small group of people - 3% - used to have access to the internet at home, but no longer do.
- Only 4 people said that they did not have Broadband because it was too expensive.
- 5 respondents living in Moorsholm do not have Broadband because they cannot get home access.

Owning a mobile phone

- Most of our respondents have one or more mobile phones in the home (91%) which is in line with the national picture.
- The average number of phones per household is 2.

What are people doing online?

- 39% of our respondents have a Facebook account (a social networking website), which corresponds to the observation by ONS (2009) that there has been a 'boom' in online social networking activities.
- Many of our survey respondents either look at other people's photographs online (33%) or upload their own to share with others (26%).
- Men are more likely to look at YouTube and women are more likely to use Facebook.
- Almost half of respondents used the internet in the last year to gain information on local council services (44%) and 36% of respondents looked at the internet to get information on national government services.
- 34% of respondents used the Directgov website and 32% used NHS Direct / Choices.
- Less than 10% use the internet to look for a politician or political party.

5. Project outcomes



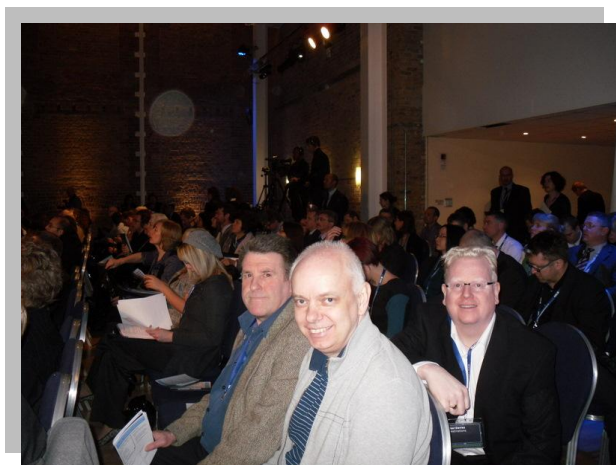
Community Researcher Marion Smith with Carlin How's oldest resident, Ivy Ferguson

The project has already highlighted some tangible successes through engaging with diverse communities, groups and partners in the key areas of digital inclusion and service provision. The wide and diverse range of project participants and beneficiaries demonstrates both interest in the Digital Village concept and the effectiveness of the research methodologies.

We have been proactively working on dissemination opportunities for the project, talking to key national stakeholders and those who can take our findings and look to incorporating them into national or local policy. Meetings have been scheduled with UK Online and the government's advisors on digital inclusion and learning, Flip Consulting and Becta. The Digital Inclusion Taskforce has also been made aware of the project.



Paul and UK Online Centre's Managing Director and DITF member, Helen Milner



Members of the project team and some Community Researchers also attended the 5th National Digital Inclusion Conference in March 2010 and were able to discuss the project with many delegates there.

Paul, Roger and Nick at the 5th Digital Inclusion Conference, London

Our research evidence to date suggests the following recommendations for a DVN:

- Participants need to develop digital activities and skills that are relevant to their own lives and interests. DV skills training and learning should not be prescriptive but work alongside people's digital choices.
- A digital village can facilitate social inclusion through active community participation, a greater sense of belonging to local places and an enhanced understanding of other people's / communities concerns and aspirations.
- A digital village is a dynamic and fluid space. A one size fits all approach is unlikely to be effective and digital skills development needs to enable communities to take the concept forward and make it relevant to their ever-evolving needs.

6. Forward plans

The DVN project is now entering its third phase with the following planned activity:

- 4 CR workshops on interview design and skills, sampling and fieldnotes
- Collaborative design of the interview schedule and related research materials
- 72 semi-structured interviews in 6 research nodes
- Qualitative data analysis which will feed into phase 4 starting in autumn 2010

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