Summary

Southern Housing Group is committed to tackling social and economic exclusion faced by many of our residents. We recognise that addressing digital exclusion – and in particular exclusion from access to the Internet - is a key way of tackling a range of linked socio-economic issues. In 2010 we established three intrinsically linked projects, together creating our Computers in Communities programme, as follows:

- Community Centre Programme - established in five SHG community centres, providing free IT training and support to Group residents and the wider community.
- Sheltered schemes programme - piloting IT hubs in four sheltered schemes in London and the South East. This year's target will see the project rolled out to a further 10 schemes.
- ‘Digital Exclusion in Rural Areas research’ - understanding issues for residents in rural areas and exploring how to get them online.

Underpinning this project is the desire to support “hard to reach” residents who have not historically accessed mainstream provision – such as libraries,
What did you set out to achieve?

Social Housing residents are statistically the single most likely group to have not accessed the internet. Increasingly our day-to-day lives are supported through internet access. Being unable to access the internet – either because of limited IT skills or experience, or difficulties in getting access to computer facilities - creates significant social and economic exclusion for large numbers of people. These include reduced access to the “best deals”, paying bills at reduced rates, communicating with friends and finding a job.

Our research highlighted both the existing lack of skills and confidence amongst residents and a high demand for computers to be readily available in communities. For a number of our residents there are significant barriers in accessing mainstream facilities. Our project overcomes those barriers by bringing the internet to residents through community facilities, engaging through a range of “triggers” - from knitting on the Internet, using Skype to contact friends and family, to pragmatic job search skills. Our specific objectives were:

- To support hard-to-reach people who, historically, are unlikely to access high street digital facilities, and empower them by offering access to computers and the Internet
- To bring individuals and communities together, creating a welcoming “social club” environment, supporting those who may be isolated and/or lonely, including elderly, disabled and vulnerable residents as well as youth, unemployed and those on low incomes
- To engage people whose first language is not English and therefore face additional barriers including Turkish, Bengali and Somali speaking families, using targeted outreach, translation and marketing methods
- To build a strong volunteer programme to support the fantastic vibrant facilities that have been established, thereby giving ownership to residents - not the HA; and providing long term futures for these resources. This has been a particularly successful element of the programme.

How were these aims and objectives met?

To achieve our objectives the Group undertook a range of measures including:

- Equipping the community centres with the computer system and ‘adaptability aid kits’. This allowed residents to have a focal point within their housing estate, especially targeting those who would not be able to fund their own computer or Internet
Providing a flexible, yet tailored, approach through ‘blended learning’. This included combining a range of technical and pragmatic beginners courses and offering one-to-one as well as group sessions. Attendees could choose from a range of sessions - from a basic computer introduction through to advanced aspects of Open Office and website design.

Establishing partnerships with key national digital inclusion drivers including Race Online 2012, UK Online Centres, BBC First Click, Digital Unite and Job Centre Plus.

Working with over 40 community partners across a wide geographical scope.

 Recruiting and training a network of residents volunteers to create sustainability for the programme. Giving Residents the capacity to own both the programme and linger term interest in their local community facilities.

Conducting training sessions for residents in CV writing and interviewing skills, as well as offering them financial and money management tips through IT workshops.

Creating a menu of marketing and outreach tools including newsletters, website links, posters, door knocking and SMS messaging to help target specific groups.

Reaching out to the community using a ‘mobile approach’ such as laptops, dongles and existing partner facilities. The Group ran successful information days at several venues including local post offices, schools, community centres, libraries, and social clubs.

Throughout all of these stages, residents were consulted and involved all the way to ensure it met their direct need in the shortest possible route for what could be a very complicated process.

What challenges did the project face, and what lessons were learned?

For many residents going ‘online’ was a scary proposition, so the Group aimed to create a welcoming space where residents could feel relaxed and make friends. It also allowed them to use virtual applications, like social networking and Skype, to reconnect and chat to friends and families in other centres and abroad. We learnt that it was crucial to include the ‘fun’ element - which included games, online searching and media. They key to unlocking this was finding the right “tailored” hook for the residents.

Trying to engage with traditionally “hard to reach” was more difficult.
than anticipated and required much greater in depth work over a significant period of time to build trust and confidence. This needed to be carefully balanced with creating a dependency/over-reliance on tutors to facilitate independent skills development and a feeling of confidence in using computers and the Internet without support.

- We learnt that local volunteers, who knew their communities well, were best placed to connect with local people. Furthermore, peers who had experienced the same issues of isolation, limited confidence and exclusion were a far more effective way of engaging similarly excluded residents than a top down staff led approach.

- The Group needed to meet the specific needs of learners; for example, some residents required mobility assistance, so the Group offered transport to those in sheltered schemes. On occasions staff members also visited people in their homes. Volunteers helped provide translation services and a centre for evening sessions is being opened to cater for those who work during the day.

- The programme has led to a direct improvement in community cohesion across cultural, racial, age and ability divides and has increased the number of people willing to become agents for change in their communities.

How was the success of the project measured?

To support residents and local communities to access the Internet

Our most tangible and measurable objective was to maximise access to the Internet and train residents to do this independently. Since October 2010:

- Five IT Community Centres and four sheltered IT hubs were established in London and the South
- 900 people have been trained to use the Internet
- 400 people completed our basic beginners course, the majority being over 65
- 150 people have benefitted from employment advice and support by using the Internet
- 70 people can now use online government services
- 20 people completed online numeracy and literacy courses
- Three of our centres have 'Work Clubs' with Job Centre Plus referrals.

To bring together communities, engage with hard to reach residents and build stronger community cohesion

Our particular aim here was to encourage older residents and non English speaking residents to access the Internet. We have been successful in supporting older residents as set out above and this has led to a future programme next year. Our work with the Bengali community in Tower Hamlets has been positive, with women-only sessions supporting the project. There has been significantly increased usage at all community centres which
are now vibrant activity hubs, with three running activities every day. We have also developed the Pathways project, an innovative volunteer led project in Hackney working with disengaged young people supporting them into training and employment opportunities via IT.

To establish a volunteer programme to support sustainability of community spaces and the overarching programme
This has been very successful. All of our community centres now have designated volunteers with “ownership” over both the local IT programme but more fundamentally over the centres themselves. We have also established a Volunteers Supervisor role, filled by a volunteer, to coordinate and oversee activities. The volunteers we are working with have been supported by training programmes and have expressed significant satisfaction with the opportunities the programme has led to.

In Sheltered schemes we have worked with volunteer “super users” who lead programmes in their own centres. We are keen to build on the model and will work with these “super users” as peer mentors in other sheltered schemes, learning from our experience that residents themselves are far more persuasive of the benefits of the internet than we ever can be.

What were the key positive outcomes?
Volunteering
The Group’s Volunteer Programme was in its infancy and required targeted promotion and recruitment to attract people. The Group has organised a celebration event for volunteers as well as an information day for training and networking purposes. Comments from volunteers include: “it’s so wonderful to see the smile of the community people” and “seeing people’s faces when they realise it’s so easy and they have nothing to fear”. This is a key part of the project and could definitely be replicated by others. It is also key to the governments Big Society agenda and we anticipate that there will be resources available to enable others to utilise this.

Flexibility through partnerships
The positive working relationships the Group formed with a variety of organisations was beneficial in attracting a wider audience to the centres. The Group worked with local post offices, Job Centre Plus outlets, libraries, learning centres, schools, youth clubs and voluntary organisations such as the Society of Genealogists, Help on your Doorstep and the London Metropolitan University Volunteering Fair. This approach has enabled us to engage a more diverse group of residents than may otherwise have been the case. Our experience is that community partners are very keen to support this approach.

Maximising use of community facilities
We believe this has been a major positive outcome of the project. A number of housing organisations – HAs and LAs – have a range of community facilities. Through the volunteer programme and engagement with our community partners we have been able to create vibrant activity hubs which
are supporting a range of community activities, initiated by establishing IT hubs but now evolving in vibrant centres with a range of different activities.

How has your initiative improved the skills or knowledge of residents? How has it helped them to access services or opportunities?

Whilst residents have developed specific IT related skills, they have also become much more confident on associated activities such as money management and budgeting as well as growing in personal confidence. Specific outcomes are:

- Setting up an email account, sharing photos, searching the internet, designing online greeting cards and booking trips/events, leading to greater independence and autonomy.

- Searching for information and conducting online shopping. One resident commented: “It made me more independent, I would not have to rely on other people to do my shopping.”

- Using Social networking websites like Facebook have been popular, helping to combat social isolation. One resident said: “I have a lot of family and friends but they all live in different places. This was a great way to get trained on the Internet and keep in touch that way.”

- Learning to use money saving tips through cost comparison and auction websites. A resident said: “Instead of worrying about yourself, you’re saving time and money.”

- Searching and applying for jobs online, finding courses CV writing and interviewing technique tips.

- Learning new programmes like Word/Writer and Excel/Calc. A resident commented: “I run two social clubs and as such there is a lot of book-keeping to do. If I could do this on the computer it would save me a lot of time”

- Website design and blogs

- Reconnecting with friends and family overseas has improved the quality of lives of older residents who considered themselves ‘socially isolated’

- Residents are now fully running community IT / Social Centres on behalf of the Group, playing positive roles in the social and economic improvement of other resident’s lives.

Resident volunteers have also developed skills in communication, planning and teamwork.
How have you worked with relevant partner organisations to deliver your initiative?

We developed a network of partners which allowed an exchange of strategies, resources and the sharing of good practice. Partnership working was central to the programme’s success.

- UK Online Centres, BBC First Click and Race Online 2012 offered support through a range of methods, including funding, marketing material, learning packages, staff training resources, conference invitations, and promotion of the project.

- Resources from Get Digital allowed us to target the over 60’s living in sheltered schemes and enabled us to set up an IT lounge in Seaford and The Hub in Amhurst Road was used by Hackney residents across three sheltered schemes.

- RISE Computers has been the main supplier of fixed computers in the centres. Their interest in communities, maintenance support and use of the free Open Office has been beneficial throughout the programme.

- Citizens Online helped promote the Volunteer Programme by providing outreach support and motivating volunteers.

- Partnering with local Job Centre Plus outlets allowed us to provide one-to-one support for job seekers.

- We worked with over 40 community partners including tenants associations, residents groups, other housing associations, Age UK, libraries, post offices, learning centres, youth clubs and schools.

- Hyde and Affinity Sutton housing associations have been the Group’s partners for the ‘Digital Exclusion in Rural Areas Research’. Key findings will help the Group reach out to residents in the Isle of Wight and West Sussex.

- The single most important partnership conceived during the programme has been with the resident volunteers who formed themselves into a network during the delivery of the programme - service users became resident volunteers. It has enabled us to continue the projects for the benefit of local residents and look at ways in which we can develop the CiC Volunteers Network for the longer term.

How does your project help address either a current challenge, faced by many providers, or meet a current priority in your part of the UK?

Statistics from UK Online indicate that 28% of people who are not accessing
the internet live in social housing and 77% are retired or unemployed. Only 15% of people living in deprived areas had used a government online service or website in the last year, compared to the nationwide statistic of 55% (Ofcom, 2009). This is a key target as the government as local authorities increasingly deploy their services online including the Universal Credit, which will affect some residents. Our own research indicated a lack of access to computers by our residents and a level of need by young people and parents alike.

The CiC programme was aimed at diverse groups across a wide geographical area, but tailored to meet specific needs of the local community. The programme also sought to address the social and economic barriers preventing people accessing computers by providing free facilities and training support. The CiC project was targeted at key groups of residents on low income and unemployed, the elderly and the disabled.

Ironically, when many commentators are blaming the Internet for breaking down societal bonds, we have found quite the opposite is working when communities are encouraged and supported to come together under their own terms. One of the added benefits of the programme was the very fact that new social clubs, friendships and networks have been set up as a direct response to putting access to computers in communities. The benefit of bridging social divides cannot be underestimated especially in this day and age. The resident volunteers are committed to keeping the social dynamics created using the IT as the central focus for future developments. Plans are underway by the resident volunteers to take ownership of the IT spaces and to develop the community centres into thriving hubs, thereby bringing back a sense of community and neighbourhoods.

Is your project influencing the way other providers work, will it help deliver improvements beyond those immediately involved?

We believe that the digital agenda is part of a wider approach in building a strong community and breaking isolation barriers for residents. A vibrant and dynamic resident volunteer programme has grown from this project - resident service users are encouraged to sign up to the volunteers programme and to use their learnt skills for the benefit of the wider community. As a direct result the project has supported tenant associations to initiate more activities at centres such as youth meetings, homework clubs and evening IT sessions facilitated by volunteers.

We are now receiving referrals for IT training from Job Centre Plus outlets in Tower Hamlets, Hackney and Hammersmith and Fulham boroughs. Additionally JCPs have begun to deliver regular job-club session at these centres thereby attracting a typically hard-to-reach group of lesser confident individuals and move them closer to the labour market.

In Amhurst Road, the Group collaborated with a Tenant Participation Officer from a neighbouring housing estate to run a joint information day. The
association was interested to learn about our marketing approach to residents and the wider community as they are currently working on similar projects but not getting positive results. The collaboration reaped benefits for all involved.

We are the lead partner on the ‘Digital exclusion in rural areas’ research project along with Hyde and Affinity Sutton housing associations who are interested in learning from good practice. The partnership is happy to share the experiences from this pilot with other organisations. Discussions are in place to pool the resources of the sheltered schemes to make the accessible to each others’ tenants.

The project is valuable as it is provides both an educational and outreach approach. It is able to be adapted to fulfil the needs of a wide range of groups from people over 60, through to parents/carers in schools, youth groups and job seekers. The model to ‘Pass IT on’ to the wider community and share ideas with other providers is the essence of this successful Group project.