

ISØQUANT Consulting

# Wired Community @ Collingwood: Preliminary Evaluation Report

Executive Summary

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## **Introduction**

This executive summary presents findings from an evaluation of the Wired Community @ Collingwood Project (Wired) one year into implementation. Wired provides housing estate residents an opportunity to obtain a network-ready computer at no cost, along with the establishment of an ICT training hub, estate-wide intranet and communications network, email and affordable internet access for residents.

## **Evaluation Method**

An evaluation framework was developed to identify and validate key intended outcomes and to identify information and data requirements and metrics assess project implementation and outcomes for residents. The Evaluation Framework incorporates a number of elements thought to be impacted by ICT, including; information and communication, citizenship, community and culture, health and wellbeing, and economic status. Methods used to capture information and data on outcomes for residents included resident surveys and interviews. The research team have collected surveys from 102 of the 320 residents that had participated in the project up to July 2009. The team also interviewed 20 residents and met with a range of groups on the estate. The evaluation of project implementation involved a stakeholder analysis to distil key stakeholder expectations and perceived project success during this formative stage.

## **Project Implementation**

We have observed strong participation in the first year of the project with around 40% of resident undertaking training, receiving a second-life computer and/or obtaining internet access. The next stage of the project will likely be more challenging and new strategies are already being devised to encourage more residents to participate. Customised support may be required for the many residents that face social, emotional, mental health and economic challenges that may discourage engagement.

A stakeholder analysis revealed important differences in value perception between various residents. This created tension among key stakeholders as the expectations of some residents about the nature and quality of ICT services to be provided differed considerably from others, particularly first-time users. Both the case study and survey results reveal considerable resident value and satisfaction with the project.

For the residents, the Wired Office is the public face of the initiative and in their view responsible for all elements of the project. In reality, the project involves multiple service providers and the Wired project team have had to work through some delicate and challenging incidents. There is now a better appreciation for and understanding of these complex relationships that should assist the project team to better manage future incidents and negotiate timely solutions to ensure residents are provided with a quality service.

## **Building Trust in the Project**

Given the challenges of engaging residents, and the level of financial investment that is at stake it is essential that both Government and non-government services and those involved in project governance see their role as project facilitators and assist in the promotion of the project. In particular, it is important that place based services on the estate are even more active in their support of the project; using their connection with residents to encourage them to participate.

Engaging some of the most disadvantaged residents will take a coordinated approach and leveraging of existing relationships.

### **Service Reliability and Coordination**

The Office of Housing and Infoxchange continue to work towards better coordination so that the system is more reliable. In this first stage of the project residents reported problems with service reliability (drop-outs and speed). Considerable progress has been made on these key issues with system enhancements undertaken. In line with that work the most essential component is that residents understand that their concerns about service reliability have been heard and that steps have been put into place to ensure the consistency of service to all residents.

### **Wired Project Office**

Communities are about people and the Wired Project Office is where front line staff are engaging residents and building trusting relationships. Resident responses highlight that the team in the Wired Project Office are integral to the success of that aspect of the program.

### **Case Studies**

The case studies presented in this report demonstrate the power of ICT in making a difference to people's lives. Connecting with family around the world, reading daily news in one's own language, job search, access to services and education are short-term outcomes that are clearly evident. The impacts are particularly strong for the isolated, those suffering poor health, or do not speak English. Sophie, through her computer, has become connected to the world; a factor that she admits has enabled her to feel better about herself and her health. John says that he likes to Google about health and food because he wants to stay in good health and so he keeps informed about what is good for him, in particular which western foods (John is Chinese) could improve his overall diet.

For these residents the internet is an essential tool for communicating and feeling connected both locally and globally. The improvement to participant's quality of life was a reoccurring theme, as was participants identifying how pivotal access to technology is to their health and well-being.

A common theme for participants that discussed education and training was the recognition that their computer skills were not adequate to gain employment leaving them unable to compete in the current employment market. Ryan was an example of someone who presented very well with good social skills. His motivation to join the Wired project is that he has very poor computer skills and recognizes that he is being left behind in the current age of technology. More importantly he is concerned about his ability to re-enter the workforce without that knowledge.

The following personal reflections highlight the impact and benefit of access to ICT.

- I play the accordion in Fitzroy. In China my husband was a director of music. It has been our life and still important to me. I like doing it and it is good for the mind. It is easier now because I have email to know what is happening with practice. I also use the computer to tell me times of the bus that I must get.
- I email my friends from China and also my friends that live locally. I can talk to them whenever I want on the email and it doesn't cost very much.
- The computer keeps my mind active. I practice every day. It is very good for you to do something like this, it is the connection between your fingers and your mind.
- The computer has been fantastic, because I am so isolated. The computer and the internet keeps me in touch with what is happening around the world, and I feel included in the world.

- I use my computer for searching for a job and that is how I got the job that I have now at the City of Yarra.
- I also use the internet to understand English words – I can look them up if there is something I don't understand its meaning.
- I came to InfoXchange to learn new skills on the computer. Because I don't have a job, I want to look for a job , I want to use the computer to write my resume and to look for jobs.
- For example, before if I was looking for a job I have to send my resume through the post. Now I can send on the email. It is very easy! I feel very happy about it.

At Collingwood these participants are making stronger connections to the world around them on a daily basis and are excited about the new possibilities of being a part of the available technology.

**Resident Survey:** The key findings from the resident survey are as follows:

### **The service**

- 2 in 3 InfoXchange ISP resident customers are satisfied with overall customer service
- While 1 in 3 residents were dissatisfied with the reliability of the internet service connection (drop-outs and slow speeds), around 60% of residents report they are satisfied with the prompt and helpful assistance provided by the help-desk.
- 61.2% of residents believe the InfoXchange ISP service provides value for money

### **Usage patterns**

- 54% of survey respondents indicated that they had use the internet for the first time as part of the Wired Project
- Usage patterns reveal the most common and frequent uses are email (68%), accessing news (70%), entertainment (games, music and videos) (64%) and information services (including health and other services) (48%)
- Other uses include social networking (49%), employment search(34%), online education or training (35%), downloading (music or movies) (34%)
- Online shopping, banking and bill payment were the least common uses (20%, 19% and 15% respectively)

### **Behaviour and capability**

- Of the 32 respondents currently employed, around 1 in 3 indicated that there has been a moderate or significant change in their ability to do their job, while 34% (of 62) respondents believe they are better able to search for employment.
- Around 64% believe that access to a computer and internet has impacted their ability to learn new things
- ICT access has had a moderate or significant impact on respondents' ability to communicate with friends and family (55%) and on pursuing hobbies and interests (66%)
- 44% report an impact on ability to find out about courses and training opportunities
- 37% report ICT access has impacted their ability to share ideas and creations, while 31% report an improved access to services

### **Social connectedness and support**

- A relatively small proportion of residents (26.5%) belong to a social network on the Estate
- Only 23.5% indicate that they have a social network of friends outside on the Estate

- However, 60% indicate that they could get help from friends, family or neighbours when needed

### **Neighbourhood cohesion and trust**

- Around 51% of residents believe that the Collingwood Housing Estate is a close-knit community, while a relatively small proportion (15%) disagreed with this statement
- On collective action we have mixed results: 32% of respondents disagreed and 42% agreed that neighbours get together to deal with problems
- 39% of respondents disagreed and 29% agreed that the Estate was a good place for raising children, with 32% neither agreed nor disagreed
- 44% of respondents believe that residents get along with each other, 16% disagreed with a significant 40% neither agreeing nor disagreeing.
- Almost all of those surveyed believe that residents are generally helpful and fair minded, while a relatively small proportion (35%) believed that residents could be trusted
- Respondents reported feeling safe at home regardless of the time of day. However, 14% reported feeling unsafe walking through the estate during the day while 46% felt unsafe at night

### **Health and well-being**

- Around 65% of respondents feel part of their community, validating observations and responses to survey questions related to social cohesion on the Estate
- Likewise, 29% indicate that they are dissatisfied with how safe they feel
- Around 60% are satisfied with their standard of living, while 16% are not satisfied with their future security
- 60% are satisfied with their personal relationships, while 71% feel satisfied with their spiritually or religion
- Overall, 63% are satisfied with the life as a whole, with around 15% dissatisfied

### **Economic and Financial security**

- Around 21% percent of residents indicate that in the last 12 months there have been times when they had run out of food and not able to buy more
- Another measure of financial stress is ability to raise money in case of emergency. Almost 7 in 10 indicate that they would be unable to raise \$2,000 from friends or relatives

### **Summary and Conclusions**

These results suggest that this digital inclusion initiative has, within a very short period, had a considerable impact on residents, more than 50% of whom are using a computer for the first time. The socially isolated, such as recent migrants and refugees, are now able to connect to friends and family both locally and overseas. There are over 30 government and community/philanthropic organizations operating on or around the housing estate. The ICT infrastructure and estate intranet in particular, present service providers with an opportunity to connect with housing estate clients in ways previously only available to a small proportion of residents. That only 3 in 10 of residents surveyed indicating they are using the internet to access to online services and information, presents a great opportunity for improved service and information delivery. Self reported behaviour and impact suggests that outcomes are significant and include employment search, productivity and access to education and training. These proximal outcomes are indicative of potentially larger and more significant distal impacts and benefits.