

Harrow Voluntary Sector ICT Development Project

In June to July 2003 Lasa worked with Harrow Council as part of its Local Government Online Project to provide ICT development support to twelve medium-sized voluntary sector organisations based in Harrow, including Mind, Mencap, the Citizens Advice Bureau, Middlesex Association for the Blind, Harrow Association of Voluntary Service and Harrow Anti Racist Alliance.

The project developed out of Harrow Council's desire to help voluntary organisations in their area use technology more effectively by developing IT strategies. Lasa and the Council initially discussed carrying out ICT Healthchecks for the organisations, but the budget for work on this scale was not available. It was therefore agreed to run a project based on training sessions, but with some element of consultancy.

Organisations applying to join the project were made aware that it wasn't about how to use a computer from day-to-day, or particular pieces of software, but rather about how to manage IT at an organisation level and develop a strategy for it. The areas the project would address were described as follows:

- How much should we be spending on computers?
- Where we can we get help when the computers go wrong?
- Who in our organisation should be responsible for ICT?
- Where should we buy our computers from?
- How can we tell the hype about ICT from the reality?

Six half-day workshops were held in June 2003, each of three workshops being run twice, each time for six organisations, on three successive weeks. It was stressed that organisations should attend all three workshops, making arrangements to handover information if different staff attended: in fact attendance was consistent all through the project.

Two accessibility issues arose for disabled trainees. One trainee was blind: Lasa were able to supply handouts in electronic format, which he could study in advance using a screen reader, which reads text out loud. Another trainee used a motorised wheelchair: Harrow Council experienced some problems finding an accessible room, due to repair work on the Civic Centre lifts.

Almost all trainees were managers of their organisations. This was very useful, since they were used to taking a strategic view of their organisations' practices and had authority to make changes to them. One trainee was an admin worker who had day-to-day control of IT, but felt that she had little influence in the organisation to effect change.

The training covered the following topics:

- Introductions
Trainees explained their own ICT experience, and their organisations' ICT setup
- Managing ICT
Why is it such a problem? Discussion of problems we need to address to manage IT effectively (for example, it's complicated, expensive, uses lots of jargon)
- Software Standardisation
How to make your systems easier to support if all staff use the same software and the same version of it.
- Software Licensing
Introduction to software licensing, quick assessment of different organisations. Charity pricing can reduce licensing costs.

- Security
This session included backups (different technology solutions and good working practices), dealing with spam and disaster recovery.
- Where to Get IT Training
Roundup of alternatives including Online Training, self-taught courses from books, “traditional” out-of-the-office training etc. Training Needs Analysis – how do you know what training your staff need? How do you get good value for money?
- Where to Get IT Support
Need for strategic relationship with IT support company – discussion of how to find a support company and manage the relationship with them.
- Procurement and Budgeting
Introduction of the concept of “Total Cost of Ownership”: need to budget realistically for ICT and include costs in each year’s budget. How to get value for money when buying ICT equipment and systems.
- Local Area Networks
Why networks are strategically important: use of networked email. A beginners’ guide to the technology, including a costing exercise.
- Internet Access and Websites
Different methods of accessing the Internet, again with costs. How big a priority should your organisation’s website be?

The training was carried out in an informal way, for example using quizzes to introduce key points. Plenty of time was made available for discussion: participants were able to share useful information about useful local services, particularly for training.

Trainees were given detailed handouts – including a full set of Lasa *ComputaNews Guides* – to take away for reference.

The final session in the training section of the project equipped trainees to apply general lessons to their own organisations. Each trainee received:

- Belarc software, which automatically surveys a computer’s hardware and software, detecting for example what kind of processor it has, how much memory is installed, and what version of Windows is running. Gathering this inventory information is a first step in building an ICT strategy.
- Lasa’s *Guide to Managing IT*: this publication includes checklists for Board Members and Senior Managers, Staff Managing ICT systems and Staff Using ICT Systems, each at a basic, intermediate and advanced level.
- A “Healthcheck template” – a 10-page document, based on that used in Lasa’s CR project, to help them gather information about their ICT working practices.

Trainees were asked to choose from these tools depending on the resources they had available, and the needs of their organisation. The trainer also stressed that developing an ICT strategy was a large piece of work, and that staff should be prepared to spend some time on this in the next few weeks.

Organisations were then given several weeks to allow them to examine their practices in light of what they had learned in the training, and use the tools supplied to begin to develop ICT strategies. Ten organisations booked for 45-minute surgery sessions held in July, so as to discuss the issues

which they most felt needed resolving in their organisations. Issues raised covered a wide range of topics including procurement, security, networks and budgeting.

Nine months after project was completed, LB Harrow assessed its effectiveness; they commented that:

“The workshops that Lasa facilitated in Harrow were very successful in raising awareness of groups that had previously never thought of ICT as a strategic issue. Attendee’s were from medium sized voluntary sector organisations with various levels of ICT capacity. Feedback from those who attended the workshops has been very positive. Many went away from the workshop with the impetus to make their draft ICT strategies (the material outcome of the workshops) a workable reality. All attendees were aware that trying to enthuse their colleagues would be a struggle but they felt less isolated and better equipped with knowledge gained from the sessions and support offered by Lasa.”