Final Report

Get Connected Investment Project

Research Brief A

Evaluation of Investment Process

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social care
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Specialists in Care, Quality and Innovation

The SCIE Get Connected Investment Project

ARP Final Report

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Executive Summary

The Get Connected programme was devised to stimulate ICT use in social care, and particularly to improve access for service users in the residential and day care sectors. Our research, complemented by work commissioned from MORI under the programme, shows that most providers use 1 or 2 PCs, for administrative purposes, and residents rarely have access to email. Now times are changing and access to the internet is increasingly expected everywhere and for everyone. And to be able to communicate with each social care provider electronically is seen as more than desirable by government regulatory agencies. The need was clear.

The Get Connected Investment Project was part of the wider SCIE programme, aimed at promoting the benefits of the digital revolution to social care staff, particularly for training, and in the personalisation agenda for service users - one of the few social groups still largely untouched by computers. It looked to stimulate change in the sector, with some £12m to distribute in grants of up to £20,000 per bid – some 1,000 organisations were expected to benefit.

It was also a high-risk project, with little credit for success, but a lot to lose for failure or bad publicity, and a lot of public money was involved. ARP were brought into the process soon after the start of operations, to scrutinise and evaluate the processes, and highlight lessons to be learned. So, this part of the 'post implementation review' will review the process outcomes, and document some points for reflection in hindsight. We also highlight some of the main factors, at a higher level of analysis, which we believe have contributed to the success of the project.

From our perspective, we believe the key objectives of the project were achieved. We found the processes fair, transparent, valid and defensible, with evidence-based processes used to inform operational decisions as they arose. The final allocations of the available money have now been finalised, with minimal objection and complaint, following contact with over 6,000 provider organisations and the allocation of grants to over 1,200 successful bidders. All successful bids were fully or almost fully met.

Early evidence has uncovered many 'good news' stories and excellent examples for others to follow. We have also found that there is still much to do before all care settings are truly included in the internet age – but this project has effectively begun to seed the sector with opportunity.

Objectives and the Role of ARP

As the research brief for the evaluation of the investment process noted, "the principal objective for the funding is that access to ICT is improved for users of service, family carers and staff so as to enhance the quality of life offered with the service and improve opportunities for learning." This was an area of current research and expertise for ARP and we felt we had a valuable contribution to make.

SCIE duly appointed ARP to "undertake a quantitative and qualitative evaluation of the effectiveness of the grants distribution process". It is important to note that in this report we are not looking to evaluate the impact of the grants in recipient organisations – this is currently being assessed separately by NIACE/IES. We focused on the 'investment' process itself – the various ways to distribute £12m fairly across the sector of some 25,000 social care providers.

We saw that evaluation implied two roles for us - to assess and validate the Get Connected processes, which had largely been established when we began, and to learn and improve, as individuals and organisations, from those experiences. In both roles it made little sense for ARP to observe from the side-lines, providing an external auditor role and delivering a final judgement at the end. Rather, we agreed at the outset to use our expertise to be an active participant in the process, as well as providing the necessary evaluation role as an outside critical friend. We believe this creative tension was successful for all.

In this participatory role, ARP have provided analysis and research, given advice, and participated in debates on all the main process issues throughout our time on the project. Much of this is documented in the minutes of meetings and in our written submissions and will not be repeated in this summary final report. Rather we seek to highlight some of the features which have made it a successful project, and note areas which give cause for reflection – the 'if I was going to do that again' questions. There is rarely a definite right or wrong in the judgement calls that had to be made as the project evolved. However the actual experiences provide a rich source of information which should be available to inform future projects of this type.

Finally here, we should say that we were engaged in the spring of 2010, after the January start of the application stage of Cycle 1. By this time many of the key decisions of process, including cycles and stages, and data structures and coding – all difficult to amend after implementation – had been decided, and the scope to make significant changes reduced. Arguably our value could have been greater if our involvement had started earlier. However, this should be seen in the overall context of a very successful project.

Results of the Get Connected Investment Process

Although the last few grants are still to be paid out, it is now true to say that the allocation of the total amount available has been completed, without significant objection, complaint or problem. The last grants should be finalised within 3 months – more or less as planned. Opportunity for involvement was widely publicised for over a year in various media. During the processing the overall allocation was monitored for fairness and equity across the main dimensions of region, provider type, ownership, and size. The process has been transparent, and the 'winners' have been publicised. Audit has completed scrutiny of the samples from the first two cycles. The primary objectives of the investment process have been achieved.

Around 5% of the sector, some 1,200 social care provider organisations, have been allocated an average of around £10,000 each for essential computer equipment and/or training, to become truly 'connected'. Almost all grant recipients were allocated their requested total in full, enabling them to implement their local projects which had already been screened for cost and quality. However, in the final cycle, Cycle 4, grants were reduced, pro-rata by a small percentage so that all successful applicants could share in the remaining grant available. With the falling cost of technology since the start of the project, this was felt to be a better outcome, and resulted in an unsought but welcome increase in the number of 'winners' and a greater leverage of investment.

Inevitably over the two years of the Get Connected project, the complex processes of application, evaluation and prioritisation, and implementation have been difficult for many – both applicants and assessors. Yet over this time, very few complaints or objections have been made from the potential 25,000 providers eligible to apply, or the 6,000+ who had some contact somewhere with the process, or from the 3,300+ who became known 'cases' to the project. With many potential pitfalls along the way, it could have been different.

The early research evidence shows that managers are finding the resulting benefits to be "better than expected" (always a good indicator of success), and site visits are finding many heartening stories from grateful and positive staff and service users. The NIACE/IES research will focus on this aspect.

The extent to which good practices and the greater adoption of ICT now spread 'virally' through the sector remains to be seen and with the passage of time will be more difficult to attribute purely to the project. Similarly, the general pressure such a project exerts towards seeing digital services as part of the social care regulatory

standards is difficult to assess. Nevertheless ARP are confident that the stimulation of opportunities afforded to service users to become digitally included, and care staff in gaining access to new forms of learning, have vindicated this use of public funds.

Highlights:

Stating that the investment process has successfully achieved its objectives is, fortunately, easy to do, as all the indicators show an efficient and effective assessment at each stage, from Expressions of Interest (EoI) to the equitable allocation of the final grant awards, and the efficient batch payments now made to over 1,200 'winners'. As the operations wind down, much value can be gained from a post-implementation review, and identifying why it has been successful is worth the reflection.

There are many valuable contributing factors: none are magic bullets on their own, but 7 aspects in particular have added significant value:

1. Excellent leadership of the project, with strong technical leads in each of the different operations.
    o Project Management by SCIE provided clear guidance and strong leadership from the start, coupled with energy, accessibility and responsiveness. The whole project group had confidence in the project management.
    o Application processing led by LASA, assisted by CTT. At the core of the process was the evaluation of the bid data received from the social care providers. With the volumes of forms received in the thousands, across a multi-stage application process, and running a built-in costing check, the work by LASA and CTT maintained a high and consistent standard of inspection, assessment, and guidance throughout.
    o Information management. In the technical database development, form design, and subsequent data monitoring, CTT provided a sophisticated information and reporting system, allowing monitoring of the processes to be easy and transparent throughout the project.
    o Financial scrutiny & payments by SCIE provided a confidence to the group that the financial checks and payment systems were robust, effective and sound.

2. Good team-working between the main partners - SCIE, CTT, LASA, with the external consultants, ARP and NIACE/IES fully engaged at each stage of the process. Projects may have good individual partners but they need to work together to be effective. This was highly successful in this case. With positive leadership, aided by a culture of open and transparent project operations between the various combinations of partners, each brought some 'added value'. With regular formal Partners Meetings to oversee the process and make operational decisions as needed, the different specialists worked together 'seamlessly' across the Get Connected operations.

3. A well-chosen External Advisory Board, performing the customer role in the project and consisting of a strong core of organisational leaders representing the service user in the social care sector. Board Members were active both in their detailed oversight of the project ('case studies' were selected at random and inspected in detail by the External Advisory Board) and in providing inspiration for the technicians and assessors behind the scenes, when describing the need on the ground.

4. A considered and flexible approach to business process development. With an unknown volume of demand at the outset, this flexibility was necessary. At the start it wasn't known whether there would be a need for further publicity to attract more applicants, or whether the response would be overwhelming, knowing how well the initiative had been publicised. As it happened, the volumes were manageable – it was the timing of the applications which caused the problems, with a dribble of applications for a number of weeks and a great rush at the end of each cycle! Many decisions taken during that early planning phase helped the project to remain flexible and manage efficiently:
    o 4 cycles, both to allow specialist bids, and provide 4 windows of opportunity to bid, effectively open for more than a year.
    o Each cycle had 2 stages, allowing a double filtering of applicants, ensuring applications met the project criteria and offered value for money.
    o Extending the project time when necessary to allow consistent assessment for applicants across the cycles.
    o Various pragmatic special rules were developed early in the process to deal with special cases e.g. branches of the same organisation, and proxy applications made by IT providers on behalf of a number of Care providers. Other debates were more difficult – if the grant was to fund more than just establishing a broadband connection, what exactly was eligible, and why

were certain items of hardware & software deemed ineligible? Defensible decisions were made without discrimination.

5. Information Management - the choice, development and consistent use though-out the project of excellent operational and management systems. CiviCRM in particular was successfully developed to allow easy recording, management, and reporting of huge amounts of data. It succeeded in allowing constant monitoring at all times of the various volumes at the process stages. Regular 'dipsticks' were easily acquired, providing reassuring evidence of an ordered progression, with planned adjustments as necessary. This data was not only useful for productivity and planning purposes, but also to assess equity in distribution among the various types of service provider and according to geography and size. In fact, almost always the applicants were a good representation of the wider sector and any bias could be easily adjusted or addressed in subsequent cycles. The data, and resulting information, were interpreted in detail and shared as a core part of every Partners Meeting, and with the External Advisory Board. With 'Huddle' for process control, and an effective email communications network, a range of busy people stayed connected.

6. Due diligence and fairness of opportunity were cornerstones of the assessment processes. Rigorous 'due diligence' was applied, with all applicants measured against essential criteria, both at the preliminary stage, the 'Expression of Interest', and the second, formal Application stage. It was important that there should be an equitable distribution of grant recipients, so that the profile of the organisations awarded grants aligned with the national sector profile, by provider type within the sector, as well as region and the size of the organisation. Almost all variables were close to their expected proportions, further validating the lack of bias of the assessment and filtering process.

7. A cost-effective payment and audit policy, with some 20% of grant recipients randomly selected for detailed audit, research, or site-visit, to ensure that the grant had been used for the agreed purpose. On-going reports from the audits have suggested very little irregularity – user error, rather than fraud.

All these factors have made the project productive, and effective. In our view the project has achieved its objectives with the minimum amount of fuss, responded appropriately to issues as they emerged, and helped forge links and uncovered new areas in social care development that SCIE could champion.

Points for Reflection:

Projects are complex. Problems and challenges are part of the territory. Something will always give pause for thought. These points have made us reflect:

- Initially we saw the assessment process, at both the EOI and Application stages, as too complex, difficult to administer, and time-consuming to record. With assessments having to be made and recorded in great detail by technical specialists to assess the cost, functionality and viability of a wide range of local projects, when the number of applicants reached the thousands, timescales began to creak.

- We also felt that the complexity could be seen as too much 'due diligence', possibly at the expense of other types of support, as we became aware of some of the difficulties for applicants. We do fully accept that the core objective of the investment project was the distribution of the seed-money. Nevertheless the opportunity to provide more 'hand-holding' of applicants may also provide a good investment. Some struggled to imagine the consequences of being 'connected', and other practical issues of 'start-up' for some grant recipients, many starting from a low base of knowledge and experience, highlighted the need for support. LASA's local approved-supplier list was provided to help foster local support relationships, and supplemented with specifically-written help, with links to relevant internet-based guidance, but the need for resource-intensive support still exists.

- Early planning. It is acknowledged that an early high level commitment was made to begin Cycle 1 before volumes, and the full complexity of the processes, were known and routines developed. This resulted in some early data design of the complex information processes being rushed, and not achieving the full potential to collect useful field data. The labour-intensive 'spreadsheet attachments' required for assessment perhaps could have been avoided. Certainly the powerful and extensive dataset could have been even more useful and accessible with somewhat less text and more categories coded. More useful coded information about the motivations and purposes from the bids could have been collected, rather than the large amount of textual information requested, then to be transcribed into the CiviCRM database. However, there will be an opportunity to explore some of the practical information missed on application through the

post-implementation research by NIACE/IES. Giving sufficient early planning time in this area usually repays the investment in quality data.

- A note on publicity. Despite considerable targeted attempts to publicise the Get Connected initiative, in various media and across a year in time, an internal survey found that the message failed to get through to some 2/3rds of the unit managers in the sector. Clearly the difficulties of contacting and engaging this elusive group should not be underestimated! As it turned out quite fortuitously, greater awareness of the project in the sector, if translated into many more EoIs, may have proved too much to process in reasonable timescales, and therefore awareness became a useful initial 'filter'. Staff turnover in key posts makes any such project, lasting some 2 years, vulnerable to communication problems.

- Sometimes flexibility is double edged. While extending the lengths of cycles to accommodate processing demands, it also affects planned research activity. Much of the research on the impact of these grant awards has been done, so far, at the very early stages of implementation, when a culture of ICT use has not had time to become embedded. It would be a shame if the range and extent of the good news stories were not picked up simply because the on-site research into 'outcomes' was undertaken too early after the grant award and project implementation.

These points are made in a spirit of learning, and should be seen in the context of a very successful project.

Conclusion:

That the whole sum of public money available (around £12m) was distributed fairly among the social care provider sector, with provider organisations given an equal opportunity to make a bid for and gain a grant.

Over 1,200 or 5% of the sector's providers secured a grant. The project's research suggests strongly that these 'winners' are likely to be in the vanguard of the digital revolution. Our work in the investment phase has uncovered considerable untapped need, both for knowledge and equipment. The valuable experience gained by the project could be used to inform the on-going ICT development in the sector.

Recommendations

We have few recommendations to make, given the successful achievement of the investment project objectives. Scrutiny should now pass to the impact of these grants. Encouragement, and support and guidance, for the sector and the 'winners' in particular, are the focus of our final recommendations.

- Seek further financial resources for 'more of the same'. The resources have been used effectively and are 'working with the grain' of change in the sector. Further stimulation could lead to a build of momentum leading to desirable outcomes for the service users and staff all in the interests of good public service outcomes. There is still considerable demand in the social care sector, and now much more knowledge about its profile and its needs.

- The GC programme should to continue to foster relations with and benefit from joint working with similar organisations. A number of useful links have been established with allied causes in the digital revolution in social care – from the partners in the project to the 'Get Digital' workshops attended by some of the Get Connected winners. The relationships forged in this GC partnership should not be lost.

- Consideration should be given to helping tackle issues of implementation, support and sustainability now being faced by grant recipients. Individually, project partners are tackling these issues as part of their wider remits. Though beyond the scope of this Get Connected investment project, the wider GC programme may also wish to address these needs.

- SCIE has a lead role to play in the promotion of good practice, having gained considerable knowledge and understanding of the problems of the sector. Site visits have found many good examples that have already emerged from this project of using ICT in the personalisation agenda for service users. SCIE is the natural lead player and can serve as a network coordinator and promoter of good practice. Hosting a website for 'winners' implementation issues, highlighting good examples, and helping communication between winners, may be useful, for example. Much is already being done by SCIE in the field of e-learning for social care staff. The use of ICT is as fast changing as the technology – for example, already within the time of the project there has been a shift from laptops to tablets (e.g. iPads). Links gained with LASA, CTT and others in this field can help to keep networks informed and up to date.

Thank you and Acknowledgements

ARP wish to record their appreciation of the support and assistance given to them by all participants in the Get Connected project. At no time from our engagement were we excluded from any deliberations or denied access to any information. Though our role was to assess the processes used in the project we adopted a fully engaged stance working closely with the Get Connected Project partners. All our suggestions were either made in writing at the early stages of the project or orally at Partners Meetings. Through open and honest dialogue process changes were incorporated into Cycles 2, 3 and 4 of the project. We were happy with the willingness of the partners to give due weight and consideration to our suggestions and were content that sensible compromises were made in areas where there was no single 'right answer'.

Finally, we acknowledge the contributions played by a number of individuals in the project. SCIE provided the backbone of the project. Stephen Goulder sponsored this potentially high-risk project effectively, being accessible and supportive when needed. In particular, Jennifer Bernard provided strong project management and clear focus throughout, with enthusiasm and skill. She was ably assisted with general support from Ross Oldfield, who was unfailingly helpful, and from Ferry Mokhtar's financial scrutiny. The leadership of William Hoyle of CTT and Terry Stokes of LASA, key partners, provided both guidance and on-the-ground experts – CTT's Richard Cooper and Sarah Newton provided technical systems expertise and analysis of a high order, and LASA's Aba Maison and Ian Goodman always sought to be transparent and fair in their application of the rules. Everyone played their part. Together it worked very well.

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