INFORMATION NEEDS OF RURAL COMMUNITIES

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Research Report

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Research Report

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THE STUDY CONTEXT

In the Autumn of 1996, the author was commissioned to study the information needs of rural communities, as part of the SUN Teleregions project in the North of England. Regional teams in six European countries are working on the SUN Teleregion project:

Baden Wurttemberg, Germany (project leader)

Catalunya, Spain

Lombardia, Italy

North of England, Great Britain

Rhone-Alpes, France

Upper Austria, Austria

The SUN project (Sites User Networks using Tele-applications for Community Development) is funded from the EU's Framework IV Telematics Applications Programme, under the heading 'Telematics for Urban and Rural Areas'.

In the North of England, the SUN Teleregions project is led by Northern Informatics, a partnership of organisations keen to attract telematics investment in the region, and to promote the use of telematics applications. In 1995, the Northern Informatics partnership set up a number of 'sector groups' to help take forward its mission. One of these was the rural sector group, led by the author of this report, which focused its attention during 1996 on developing a 'strategy' for the development of telematics in the rural North, published in 1997 as 'Avoiding Exclusion: The Challenge of Shaping the Information Society in the Rural North'.

The SUN Teleregion project in the North of England focused on three areas of activity: a Regional Information Service (RIS); telematics applications for health; and training and awareness raising activity under the Cyberskills programme. This report contributes to the RIS project, which is developing a web-based application for citizens and SMEs throughout the region. Its 'user needs' focus is also very much in the spirit of the SUN Teleregions project, which emphasises this aspect.

The main fieldwork for this project on the information needs of rural communities was carried out in January and February 1997, and the final report was submitted to the sponsors at the end of July 1997.

AIMS AND METHODS

The aim was to undertake a preliminary study of the information needs of rural communities to better inform those developing initiatives to improve the flow of information. The focus of the empirical work was on information *per se*, rather than on telematics.

Preliminary work identified that asking people directly about their unmet information needs would not be fruitful: it would be tantamount to asking someone to say what they don't know. Asking more generally about information needs was also difficult: the initial response was usually, what do you mean by information? An important part of this study was to understand more fully what sort of public information rural people used and sought. As such it was important that they should define the parameters. This implied that qualitative methods would be the most appropriate.

Three contrasting case study communities were chosen in Northumberland (Falstone, West Sleekburn and Wooler) in order to tease out issues of geographic remoteness, of the level of existing services, and of 'cultural capital' and social exclusion. A focus group discussion was conducted in each location with between four and six representatives of the local community. In each case, these people had been involved in designing and executing their Village Appraisal.

Falstone is a village of about 100 households, at the east end of Kielder water on the north Tyne. For a village of its size it has a surprising number of facilities: a sub-Post Office in the village shop, a cafe, a pub, and a village hall. Visitors to the area are important in maintaining the viability of many of these services. The main obvious difficulty of living in Falstone arises from its remote location high up in the North Tyne Valley: around 8 miles from the nearest small market town at Bellingham; about 30 miles to Hexham or Haydon Bridge for a major shopping trip, and the high school.

West Sleekburn is a village of 120 households situated about 2 miles outside Ashington on the south Northumberland coalfield, and about 8 miles from Morpeth, Bedlington and Blyth - the local towns. Earlier this century, the village was a thriving mining community, with a number of local services. Since the closure of the pit in 1964, public and social facilities have declined dramatically, in line with the demolition of many of the dwellings. The only services in the village are a pub, a wooden 'village hall' with no fixed heating or toilets, and a saddlery shop. It is an ageing community.

Wooler is a traditional market town in north Northumberland, regarded as the 'Gateway to the Cheviots' which services the surrounding rural hinterland of Glendale. Wooler itself has about 900 households, with a far greater concentration of elderly residents than the national average, and problems of population decline - 9% in the period 1981 to 1991. Wooler has the typical services that you would expect to find on a market town's high street: a range of shops, banking services, pubs and so on. It has its own branch library, first and middle schools, and a number of public buildings.

INFORMATION IS .....

By looking at the village appraisal reports of the three case study areas, and analysing the focus group discussions, it was possible to find many common ways in which the groups defined the parameters of the subject 'public' information, how they conceptualised the subject, and the importance they attached to it. This section forms an important background to the later discussion of the issues raised by the groups, and the comparisons between them.

The three case study communities had each recently completed a village appraisal report: a study of the needs of their community by local people, and proposals and recommendations for action. 'Information' was not afforded chapter heading status by any of these village appraisals. The word appeared in a subheading in the Wooler report but as part of the title Information Technology which focused on computers and a telecentre facility rather than on information *per se*. Information, then, was not seen in the village appraisals as a separate topic.

Superficially at least, it was not given prominence in their first priority actions either: each wanted to develop a 'new' village hall/community centre. For Falstone and West Sleekburn, the main objective was about creating physical space in which activities could be carried out (by both local people and tourists in the case of Falstone). Wooler's main objective was more subtle. The town already had a number of physical spaces where activities took place; the main objective was to create a focal point for the community and the tourists with their new centre. By providing many services under one roof, it was hoped that costs could be reduced while enhancing the level of service.

However, while information was not thought of as a topic in its own right, it was important to the communities. Their construction was not of information as an end in itself, but as a means to an end, needed for a purpose, often as one of a number of resources drawn in to solve a problem, achieve a certain end, or move something forward. Information was pervasive to their needs, but elusive as a concept: it was multi-faceted; it could be tangible or intangible; it was entwined in what they were trying to do.

A member of the Falstone group explicitly made this connection of information and purpose when describing an attempt to get information through the library service: "It took 10 weeks to get a book that I wanted, and the thing I wanted it for was over". And similarly, someone from Wooler said of their library, "If it was for homework, it would have to be handed in before the book was ever produced". Another explained how information was part of education, "it's all part of that process to learning - access to information".
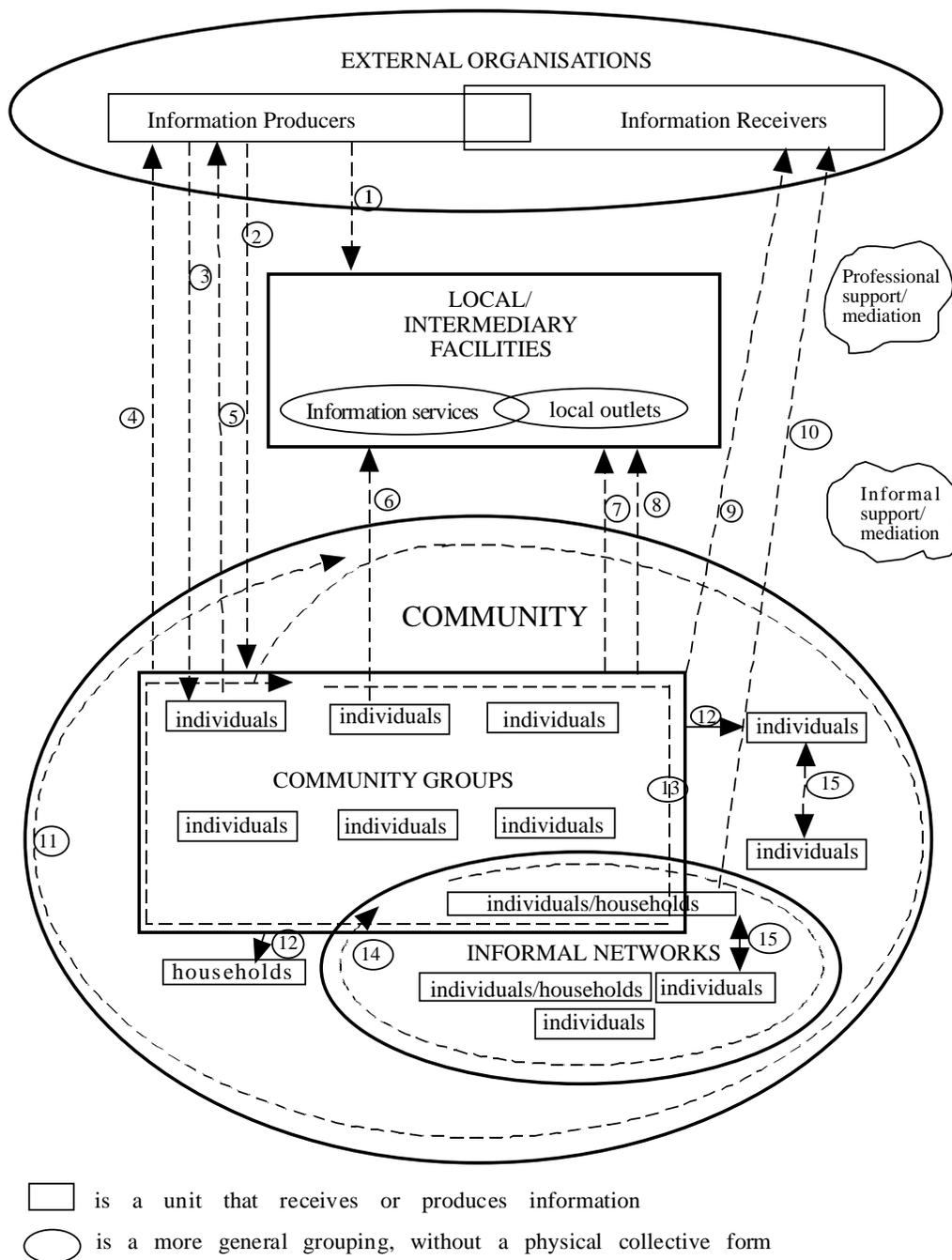
For Wooler, the community and the Borough Council had a common purpose in developing Padgepool Place as their new community and tourist centre. Because of this common purpose, the group frequently did not need to find things out for themselves: "We use the Berwick Borough Council for everything we can use them for". For the Falstone group, at least in terms of pursuing their new community centre, information was one of many tools that were amassed to ensure the smooth passage of their proposal: you also needed experience, good contacts, negotiating and presentation skills, and a good and iterative relationship with those who had the power to determine success or failure.

The West Sleekburn group also emphasised that information was linked to a purpose, and that it was often only one of a number of means needed to address an issue. For example, phone calls to the Council from residents about the flooding in the village would ask the question 'when will it be fixed' but would be demanding action rather than just information.

This group went further than the others in talking about situations where information could be useless. The other two groups discussed how it was pointless if information arrived too late, but the West Sleekburn group also talked about situations where information could be on time and correct, but useless in the context of other constraints on their lives. A good example was information for the young people on what's on in the area at weekends. For many of them this information might just increase their frustration: "To hit on a bus up and down here, to be in a place you want to be, is nearly impossible".

Information, then, is not normally a stand-alone, end project. However, information as the focus of attention for the discussion groups, and all three of them implicitly developed the same basic model of what they thought the topic included. They discussed the many and various sources and outlets of information; the main flows of information; and the people who supported these flows. Figure 1 diagrammatically examines this view of information, and provides an analytical basis for the following sections.

EXTERNAL ORGANISATIONS

Information Producers

Information Receivers

① ②

③

④ ⑤

Professional
support/
mediation

LOCAL/
INTERMEDIARY
FACILITIES

Information services   local outlets

⑩

⑥

⑦ ⑧

⑨

Informal
support/
mediation

COMMUNITY

individuals   individuals   individuals

⑫   individuals

COMMUNITY GROUPS

⑮

individuals   individuals   individuals

⑬

individuals

⑪

individuals/households

⑫
households

⑭

INFORMAL NETWORKS

⑮

individuals/households   individuals

individuals

☐   is a unit that receives or produces information

⬭   is a more general grouping, without a physical collective form

In Figure 1, 'external organisations' are those outwith the settlement and community that either produce information or receive it from the locality. Examples are publishers, local authorities, benefits agencies, and colleges. 'Local/intermediary facilities' includes information services such as libraries, CAB, Tourist Information Centres, and local outlets for basic information such as hotels, cafes and local shops.

'Community' is made up of individuals and households, most of whom are involved in local informal networks (neighbourly, kinship and friendship networks); and some of whom are involved in formal community groups such as Parish Councils, Residents Associations, Scouts and Guides and Village Appraisal Groups.

Some of the external organisations send out or advertise their information to the local/intermediary facilities (eg, the benefits leaflets held in sub-Post Offices); others send it to community groups (eg, information on community funding opportunities advertised to parish councils); and other organisations distribute information directly to individuals (flows 1, 2 and 3 on Figure 1). Sometimes the external organisations or the local/intermediary facilities passively hold information which individuals or community groups then seek out as the need arises (flows 4, 5, 6 and 7). Typically, this would be the 'reference' type of information available from libraries, or public sector information on benefits, planning, funding and so on.

Some information is produced by community groups but is for wider consumption, either via the local/intermediary facilities or by external organisations (flows 8 and 9). Examples would be the parish council minutes lodged in the local library, or the village appraisal report,

submitted to the local authorities and the regional Objective 5(b) partnership. Some external organisations, particularly those that distribute benefit payments, require individuals to supply information (flow 10).

Community groups such as the parish council or the village appraisal group sometimes circulate information to the whole community (flow 11). The village appraisal groups are also involved in the process of collecting information or data from individuals and households in the community (flow 12). A community group circulates some information to its own membership, but no wider - meeting agendas, details of the next meeting and so on (flow 13). Similarly informal networks circulate information round their own group (flow 14). Individuals within the community pass on information to other people or households (flow 15).

These information flows are not always simple or automatic. Difficulties may arise, when those at the community level need to seek information from the 'higher' levels. Two groups of facilitators are apparent: professional advice/support/mediation workers, and informal supporters/helpers. On the whole, the informal support networks help people bridge the gap between the community level and the local/intermediary facilities: neighbours know where to pick up a local bus timetable, or when the library will be open. The professionals are mainly active in bridging the gap between the intermediary facilities and the external organisations - for example, the librarian will direct you to various external sources of information.

Information (and its flows) takes many forms: it can be written or verbal; it might be sent via the post or given in person; searches might involve a

trip to a local outlet or a phone call; it can be more or less formal and structured. In the discussion groups, books, booklets, leaflets and posters, were commonly mentioned examples of the written form. Information was given in verbal form, either on a one to one basis, or in a group setting. Individual households often receive unsolicited information via the letterbox: the postal service, paper deliveries, leaflet drops and so on, or from other people. Searching out information sometimes involves asking local people first, a trip to one of the intermediary facilities or the information provider, or perhaps a phone call. On the whole, information provided externally is more formal and structured. That provided locally is often less formal, and may include unsubstantiated, but useful, tips that professional organisations would be reticent about giving.

AN AUDIT OF INFORMATION SOURCES AND FLOWS

This section takes Figure 1 as its starting point and, drawing on the individual case study reports (appended as an Annex), describes the sources and flows of information important to each community. It starts by investigating the external information sources, the intermediary information services, and local level provision in the three case study areas, and then looks at the flows of information between the different levels, and the circulation of information within the community.

Information sources and outlets

The Falstone group talked about a range of information sources and outlets. The Community Council and the local authorities were seen as important in terms of taking forward actions on behalf of the community -

developing the proposals for the new village hall, for example. Colleges and community schools had information on courses; the bus companies produced timetables; local event information was provided by the local authority, the National Park, the Forestry Commission and the Water Company. Some mention was made of organisations controlling benefits.

The intermediary facilities for Falstone were provided in a number of locations: Falstone itself had a tearoom, a shop/Post Office and a noticeboard where posters and leaflets could be found, and the travelling library visited occasionally; Bellingham, the nearest market town provided a small branch library, and an outreach CAB; Hexham provided more specialist library facilities and a permanent CAB and Job Centre.

At the community level in Falstone, there were a number of formal organisations mentioned in respect of information: the Parish Council, the village hall committee, the village appraisal group. Less formally, the shop was seen as a focal point for information sharing, not necessarily a matter of asking the shopkeeper, more about meeting people there who might be able to help. Previous experience was a valuable source of information for certain situations. For example, "It was something I found out by putting many planning applications in for my own house" said one of the group.

In terms of taking forward their community projects, Wooler mentioned very similar information sources: Northumberland Association of Local Councils, Berwick Borough Council and the Community Council. They also had reports from 'outside' consultants on the feasibility of developing tourism. Again in line with Falstone's responses, colleges and

community schools were mentioned in Wooler as sources of information on courses; bus companies in terms of timetable information.

As a market town, Wooler boasted many intermediate facilities for information. The local shops and hotels provided outlets for leaflets and posters on tourist information and local events; the Post Office had information on its services and on benefits. More formal information facilities included a permanent Branch Library, and outreach, temporary or mobile information and advice services: the CAB, a tourist information centre, Benefits Advice, a Youth Project van.

In discussing information needs, the Wooler group mentioned numerous formal organisations at the community level: the Glendale Gateway Trust, the Parish Council, the Wooler Retailers Association, the village appraisal group and so on. Their village appraisal recognised the rather dispersed nature of all these organisations working broadly towards the same ends, and the Gateway Trust was an attempt to bring the organisations together to take forward some common projects, such as the development of the community centre. Less formally, word of mouth was seen as an important source of regional information: the neighbours for where to find an ice rink, for example; informal networks between the young people in arranging a night out.

West Sleekburn residents gave more emphasis than the other groups to the need for information from the Council, in particular the District Council, and from benefits organisations such as the DSS. The Community Council was important in offering information and advice in developing community initiatives such as the village appraisal report, and in taking forward the proposals from it. Residents also wanted

information from and about local industries in terms of the impact of their emissions on health and safety.

West Sleekburn had next to nothing in terms of information facilities in the village. The pub, which some residents refused to set foot in, had a noticeboard. The Post Office at Stakeford, over a mile away, had a noticeboard and carried leaflets; the nearest branch library was at Guide Post, involving a bus ride for those without a car; most of their 'formal ' information needs were met in Blyth, Ashington or Morpeth, all involving two bus journeys for those reliant on public transport.

In West Sleekburn, the only group mentioned in respect of information at the community level was the village appraisal team which had originated as a resident's association. An important source of information was the local people. The key activist, Jean, in particular, was seen as a source of information and support.

Information flows into the community

For Falstone, the postal service was an important means of receiving information: college brochures, bus timetables, local events leaflets were received by many of the group in this way; one person received a book on benefits available for elderly people. The discussion group was concerned over delays with the first class post delivery. The local paper, the Hexham Courant, brought information in particular on 'what's on', local jobs and training opportunities.

Representatives from Falstone had attended an event organised by the Community Council which gave information on funding opportunities for

communities. Other information in relation to their community development proposal was often offered verbally: by a visit or phone call from the local community worker, or a meeting or phone call with staff and Councillors from the local authority. In this last respect, the Falstone group also stressed the two way and iterative nature of the information flows: regular updates on the new village hall proposals were given to the District Council, but in return, feedback on the likely success of the venture was expected. "It's no good going ahead if we are not going to get permission" said one of the group.

Falstone had no permanent formal information services in the village, just various outlets for leaflets and posters. The nearest permanent library was in Bellingham (about 8 miles from Falstone), but this was only open 12 hours a week, on three days. The hours of opening made it difficult for working people and for school children to use the library. Bellingham library was said to have only two or three bookcases of reference, but the ordering system was good: you could order books from other libraries and collect them from Bellingham or the travelling library as long as you were prepared to wait. For more specialist reference material, villagers would travel to Hexham, Morpeth, or occasionally Newcastle libraries. The CAB ran a regular outreach session in Bellingham, but the permanent CAB was in Hexham, as was the Job Centre (a 60 mile round trip).

When information was sought by the Falstone villagers from external sources, a trip was frequently involved, either to the source or to an information service. Those without their own transport were helped through informal support networks - lifts and car sharing arrangements, and the fact that "people collect for their neighbours - that's village life". The phone was occasionally mentioned as a means of accessing

information, but it was not generally thought to be effective. It was something you used only if your need was urgent. Otherwise it was preferable to wait and travel in person. The group estimated that about 10% of households did not have a phone; mobile phones do not work well in Falstone.

Wooler had plenty of outlets for 'what's on' in the region: the local shops, the hotels, the library and the Tourist Information Centre carried information on cultural events, sporting activities, and trips and visits. Some information, such as adult education programmes, was delivered to each house. The Berwick Advertiser, was a good source of local information such as 'what's on' and jobs.

By contrast with Falstone, the Wooler group said little about the information needed to take forward their community proposals, perhaps because their main venture, the new centre, was undertaken jointly with the Borough Council, who could provide most of the necessary information.

Wooler had a number of information services provided locally, albeit often on an outreach, mobile, or temporary basis. However, some of this provision came in for criticism. Concerns over the library service were similar to those from Falstone. The opening hours (15 hours a week on three days) were problematic for those who work and for the high school pupils. The reference section was felt to be lacking in quantity and currency, "Well ... there is an information section, which I don't think is very good". You could order things from other libraries, but you had to wait. People who were mobile would use Berwick library for more specialist and newer reference material.

The Youth Project caravan which visited Wooler at one time providing information and advice to young people in a very informal way had been very good; but it seemed that it no longer came. The outreach CAB and Benefits advice service were thought to be intermittent services that had difficulties in providing the type of privacy that people wanted. The permanent offices were in Alnwick or Berwick, but appointments could be difficult for those dependent on public transport.

Although Wooler had more information services provided locally than Falstone, people still frequently needed information from further afield. A public transport system was available to the main centres in the region, but the lack of regularity did not make it easy for those without a car. However, many people would travel for information, in particular for 'study information' for courses. The phone was a means of accessing information - but only straightforward information: "if you are wanting just basic information - bus times or anything like that". However, when asked in the discussion, the group gave estimates of phone ownership of between 50% and 75% of households.

The West Sleekburn group praised their local free paper, the Leader, for information on 'what's on' locally, and also found this sort of information on the noticeboard at the Post Office in Stakeford (about a mile from West Sleekburn). Council information was available by a visit to the offices, a phone call, or by attending a local 'surgery' session with the Councillor. These sessions were held in the pub in West Sleekburn, which excluded those residents who "won't go where there is drink". Getting Council and other public sector information frequently involved someone acting as a mediator, an issue discussed in more detail later.

The West Sleekburn group relied quite heavily on information and advice from the local community worker, in terms of the knowledge and information needed to take forward community initiatives. They also got information from the Council to help them take forward local projects.

The residents of West Sleekburn had almost no information services locally, and hence needed to seek information outside the village. The library at Guide Post was referred to in terms of fiction, and was given little prominence by most of the group in the discussion.   After prompting, Jean named the library as a possible port of call if you really didn't know where to find information; one of the others admitted that she had only recently realised that libraries could offer this sort of a service.

The West Sleekburn group emphasised the distance between them and the sources of information, often in terms of walking, or of the number of bus trips that would be needed, and the irregularity of the local bus service. Even so, there was not a consensus over the advantages of the telephone. One school of thought in the group was that it enabled you to be more confident about requesting information; the other that it was much easier to find things out face to face. Not all the households in West Sleekburn had phones, but there was a phone box in the village. Some residents wouldn't use the phone for information: "she lives besides the phone box, but I think sometimes she's not sure ... not confident, doesn't know who to ring".

Information flows out of the community

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All three case study areas had conducted village appraisals and produced reports, the contents of which were for external consumption as well as community use. The main interested external organisations and fora would be the local authorities, the Rural Development Programme partnerships, and potential funders such as the Northern Uplands, Objective 5(b) partnership. In some instances the information would be used directly to assess funding applications from each community; they also provided detailed information about local needs.

Apart from the village appraisal report, Wooler made no mention of designing information specifically for external consumption, although some of the information generated for Wooler and Glendale may also be of interest to people and organisations outwith the area, such as the local history records and maps held in the Wooler library. Likewise, the West Sleekburn group did not talk of themselves as information providers to the world outside their community other than through their village appraisal.

In its village appraisal, Falstone had identified the need to provide information about the village and its attractions: the viability of their local services was reliant on passing trade from tourists on their way to Kielder. Hence they were developing information about Falstone, and about things to do from the village, in order to attract more visitors. This would be advertised and made available outside the village.

Some individuals in the communities were asked to provide personal information to official bodies. Accessing information about benefits and entitlements in Falstone was not seen as an issue. However, "Filling the forms in, though, is a different matter ... a lot of them [forms] are asking

for information, and a lot of people are frightened to put information down that isn't relevant to what they are claiming for" said one member of the group. The West Sleekburn group explained how some people did not want to give personal information and some would feel ashamed to tell anyone that they needed money; others wouldn't like to expose the sort of financial information requested by benefits organisations and the like.

Information flows within the community

All three case study groups had been involved in conducting a village appraisal. In all cases, this had meant deciding on the topics to consider, designing the questions, collecting the data from individuals and households, and producing a report and recommendations. At the time of the case studies, all were at the stage of having key proposals that they wished to take forward on behalf of the community.

The Wooler group discussed their efforts at collecting information for the village appraisal quite candidly. If they were to do it again there would be additional questions in some sections, but they would also redesign their questionnaire to make certain 'sections' of relevance to specific societal groups: they felt that they had many incomplete forms because of the irrelevance of some questions to that household type.

The Falstone group also talked about collecting information from their community. In pursuing their proposed new community centre they needed to know how local people assessed the options. Models of the different designs had been produced by Newcastle College, and had been displayed in the village hall for a week so that those interested could view

them and comment on the options. A 16 page follow up leaflet setting out the options had been produced and would be circulated to each parishioner to elicit opinion. As well as mail drops, Falstone stressed the role of their noticeboards in circulating information.

Door to door information drops were not used in Wooler to circulate local information. Various local shops would carry posters about events and meetings; however this means of circulating information had been identified as problematic. Sometimes the existing formal groups in Glendale were used to pass local information on. West Sleekburn used door to door information drops to circulate local community information, and for a while had had a community newsletter. The pub noticeboard, and the one at the Stakeford Post Office, would be used; notices would sometimes be posted (illicitly) on the bus shelter in the village.

Informal channels were seen as important for the circulation of local information in Falstone, "there is a good grapevine". The village shop was a recognised focus for information exchange. West Sleekburn also informally passed much information quickly round the village: "If you sneeze at the top somebody knows at the bottom. There is not a lot happens in the village that people don't know about".

USER-FRIENDLY INFORMATION

Getting information was not always straightforward or as simple as it might be. Sometimes this meant that intermediaries had to help people retrieve information; on other occasions that the information was not packaged in a way to suit them. There were also problems in accessing information for certain societal groups.

Supporting information retrieval

Not all information is easily accessible; for some types of information, the state and society readily acknowledge this, and provide 'professionals' to help: staff in libraries, CABs and so on. The groups in this study also stressed, to differing degrees, the role played by the local community and by key individuals in supporting the acquisition of information.

Both the Wooler and Falstone groups were critical of the access to their local library, but Falstone was clear about the support a library could provide in an information search. The West Sleekburn group needed some prompting to talk about the role of libraries in the context of information. The CAB and Benefits Offices were discussed by all three groups.

In the Falstone discussion, formal help with accessing information did not feature very strongly. If you didn't know how to find something out, you would ask around locally first, and if that didn't help, you would approach the library, the CAB, the Benefits Office ... it wasn't considered difficult.

Local sources, such as the neighbours or the yellow pages, were also the first port of call for Wooler residents, and tourists benefited from advice from hotel staff. Professionally mediated access to information was also seen as important. The group was concerned that the problems with present personal information and advice services might lead to further unwelcome cuts in the services. A priority was to find a means of

providing the young people in the area with advice and information - a sort of junior CAB.

The Wooler group were also concerned to improve the level of support - both formal and informal - with their proposed Community Centre. One of the problems identified in the Wooler village appraisal was that there was no 'drop in' culture to any of the existing local facilities that would make them obvious places to seek out information or informal advice.

West Sleekburn residents relied heavily on supported access to information. "I think the majority of people don't know where to start when they want information" said one of the discussion group. The West Sleekburn discussion of mediation was dominated by the need for very local, informal, and 'friendly' help with accessing information, with very little mention of the role of information professionals, although it was hoped to run CAB in their proposed village hall.

Many people in West Sleekburn needed support because they were confused if they approached official sources for information. In some instances, when "they baffle you with words", what was wanted from the 'office' was a leaflet that you could take home and study in your own time, and check out with close friends and family. Another strategy was to get somebody else to go, or phone on your behalf: Jean said that one of the residents "sometimes comes up here and says 'will you ring such and such'. Or 'can you sort that?'. Ring somebody so that she knows what she has to do". In terms of the sorts of activities needed to take forward their community development plans, there was confusion over whom to contact: which organisation, which department and so on.

Some people in West Sleekburn lacked the confidence to request information. The group thought that people might not ask about courses, for fear of asking in the wrong place - the village appraisal had found out that a number of people did not know where to get this sort of information. Sometimes people were worried that they might not understand the information they were given. And this lack of confidence was not helped when officialdom treated them roughly. Even Jean, well-known for her resourcefulness and used by others as an adviser over information searches, had experienced this: "I spoke to somebody at the Council and he put me down. He said, 'surely you understand that, it's so simple'".

Officials in organisations such as the Council were more likely to be seen as obstacles to an information search than as supporters by this group. Jean talked proudly of her determination in dealing with officials: "they think, 'this women isn't going to go away, we'll have to give the information because she keeps phoning'". But her battling spirit was atypical of most of the residents, who would avoid contact with officials outside the community as far as possible. Two 'professionals' from outwith the community, however, were used extensively for support in searching out information: the community worker, and two local Councillors. "I know that sometimes I would have been completely stuck if it hadn't been for Alec [the Councillor] because I just ring up and say 'where do I find such and such', or 'can you tell me what to do about such and such'" said Jean.

The notion that there are one or two key people whose actions in relation to the circulation and use of information in a community are all-important was stressed by the Wooler group: "if you have someone working in a

community role who is fairly proactive and will go round knocking on doors and is prepared to say, 'look, do you know this course is on, I thought you might interested', a lot of the success of things hinges on that".

The discussion in West Sleekburn made it clear that Jean was similarly a key member of the community. Apart from her passive support roles described above, she would sometimes act more proactively, on behalf of the whole community. For example, during our discussion, she decided that she would look into getting a glass-fronted lockable noticeboard in the middle of the village. She was also important in triggering activity in others: "Having Jean say, 'I've been there and it worked for me' is a prompt for that person to go and use that service".

The West Sleekburn group felt that certain people, such as Jean, could access information because of their determined personalities. Experience was thought to be very important by one of the Falstone group: "If you haven't got the experience of putting in planning applications or anything else, then you don't bother with a village appraisal and you don't get anywhere".

Privacy

Aspects of privacy were raised by all three case study groups. The Falstone group alluded to this when they talked about people not liking to give information on forms. They were more explicit about it when discussing the possible siting of an electronic kiosk for information retrieval: the shop and the pub were both criticised as too public for certain types of information. The West Sleekburn group talked about

people feeling ashamed, or at least averse, to telling someone that they needed money, and about people not wanting to expose their financial situation.

The Wooler group emphasised the need for personal information and advice to be given privately. It was also important that someone's need for that type of advice was not obvious to the rest of the community. Hence the criticisms of the outreach CAB and benefits office interviews that were conducted at a table in the library where no privacy could be assured, but also of these same services being provided from a caravan in the car park: "There will be several people sitting in the cars who will notice, and think, 'oh, now why do they want to go ...?' It doesn't sort of encourage people to use that sort of thing".

Presentation of information

The quality of certain information leaflets was a focus of discussion in both Wooler and Falstone. Both groups had difficulty with the bus timetable. "It has 't' which means it doesn't run on school holidays, but who knows when school holidays are unless you have children?" said one Falstone resident, and "there's so many codes on it that you need a degree in computerisation to work it out" said another. Similarly, a Wooler resident said, "there's that many little stars and wiggles ... to work out what this little star meant, and this little wiggle...". The Falstone group suggested an improved format: the timetable should be a much longer and more detailed document, which separately gave the timetable for each week.

The Falstone group also raised issues about the plethora of local events leaflets: from the Water company, the Forestry Commission, the National Park, and the local authority. In their view this information should be presented in an integrated form: the priority for the individual is what is on, not who is running it. They also felt that local people's needs were not being targeted: perhaps tourists found the leaflet showing all the events for a season useful, but local people would find it much better if they were alerted to the event a short while beforehand: it should be advertised with a leaflet or a poster, or a message via the school if it was targeted at children.

Some West Sleekburn residents had difficulty understanding the information given to them in a leaflet, or verbally. However, this was not discussed as a criticism of the presentation of information, but as personal deficiencies in the skills needed to deal with the information.

Excluded groups

Young people and their information needs were discussed at some length by all three case study groups. For Falstone, this was particularly the case in the discussions about the library service, and about the use of computers for information and learning. The library service for young people was particularly poor. The travelling library which visited Falstone infrequently, always arrived during school hours making it impossible for school children to use it. The Bellingham library was not easily accessible to many of the school children: afternoon openings were not convenient for middle school pupils who had to catch the school bus back to Falstone; the high school children arrived back in Bellingham after the library had closed.

Young people's information needs were also stressed by the Wooler group. Echoing Falstone, the lack of access in terms of both opening times and the stock carried of 'study information' by the branch library was a cause of concern. Young people's needs in terms of more general information and advice was a focus of the action following the village appraisal. They not only needed access to information and advice services, they needed the service to be dedicated to their needs: it should be physically separated from other community facilities, with an ambience attractive to the youngsters, and information and advice ranging from drugs to jobs to training opportunities. It should be well-staffed with 'youth workers' able to give support and advice: "Obviously they couldn't give them an answer to every question, but they could point them in the right direction to find out".

The West Sleekburn group talked more generally about the needs (rather than information needs) of the young people. They felt there were next to no facilities for them in the village, and that a lack of transport left them without the option of going elsewhere. The winter was particularly bad - meeting outdoors was almost impossible, and the state of the village hall made it impossible to lay on activities. Information *per se* could do little to solve these problems. In talking about a possible public 'telecentre' in the village, the group thought that the young people would be the primary users, and that they should have been asked about this in the youth appraisal, carried out as part of the West Sleekburn village appraisal - it might have got a very positive response.

The Falstone village appraisal survey had found a lot of demand for some sort of a 'telecentre' facility, particularly from younger households. This was thought to be because not everyone could afford to have a computer

at home, but it was seen as an essential part of a child's education. "You feel that you should really have one for them to continue with it [at home] otherwise those with computers at home learn such a lot more" said one of the group. The schools were giving children an interest and enthusiasm in computers: "they do such a lot of work on the computer in gaining information, not games, but gaining information from it". However, the school's input was not thought to be enough: the equipment was dated, the more up-to-date equipment such as internet connections was not being used by the schoolchildren, and computers were used for computer science and maths courses, rather than as information and communication tools for all subjects.

Wooler also found a lot of demand from households with children for 'telecentre' facilities - 70% of these households said they would use such a centre, with study/education (including a strong information component) as an important reason: "If they haven't got a computer in the home ... they do tend to do their homework on computers, or a lot of their coursework. And therefore they [those without computers] are restricted at school".

The other group with specific needs that was singled out for comment was older people. In Falstone, they were thought to have more of a reticence about using the phone for obtaining information than the rest of the population, and when they did, the complexity of getting passed around between departments and personnel left them "very, very foxed". Similarly, the West Sleekburn group discussed getting information by phone: "I think a lot of older people probably wouldn't know how to go about it .... we've been brought up with phones, where a lot of older people aren't like that". And it was the older residents in West Sleekburn

who were thought most likely not to find out about benefit entitlements. Some of them were said to think that the only money you were entitled to was what you had earned, and that hence they would not pursue benefit claims. The Wooler group did not single out old people as a group for specific comments on information needs, even though (or perhaps because) they make up such a large proportion of local residents.

LOCAL INITIATIVES

Each group was actively pursuing some of the recommendations from their village appraisals, which had implications for information provision.

Village halls/community centres

The main proposal in Falstone's report was for a new, or substantially refurbished village hall that would accommodate local people's needs and those of tourists.   Access to information did not feature in the questionnaire as one of the proposed facilities in the Village Hall; the 'additional suggestions' from residents in the report made mention of a small library. Since the village appraisal, the village hall idea has been developed further, including a consultation process about the main objectives and design of the proposed village hall. Some of the proposed designs had taken forward a number of the responses from resident in the village appraisal, and hence included a computer training room, a study room/library, tourist information, and an exhibition/job vacancies area.

Wooler had a well-developed proposal to redevelop Padgepool Place as a new integrated centre for both the local community and for tourists. This in part provided a focus to the current rather dispersed community

activity in Wooler, but also generated economies of scale that would enable service improvements. A number of these related to information services. "The idea was that it might be possible to have it [the library] open for more hours if it was somewhere like that, where one person might be in to stamp books, and hand out maps ..." As a centre for community and tourist activity, a 'drop in' culture could be developed, such that it would be an obvious place to find out what was going on, or pick up general information leaflets. It would also provide private consultation rooms for advisory services needing privacy, and people would be able to visit Padgepool Place for this purpose without attracting attention to themselves.

West Sleekburn wanted a new-build village hall which would enable them to run various community activities. In the discussion about information needs, the group explained their thinking about the role of this facility in terms of improving information services. Some of the problem for people was that no information was held in the village: there wasn't even a village noticeboard that everyone could see. The village hall could provide basic information: noticeboards, and racks for information leaflets on council services, on benefits, on health, on courses and training opportunities, and so on. But it would be best if someone were available to help with the information: "sometimes you can look at a leaflet and still be puzzled by some of the things that's on it, can't you. But if someone was there and you could say, 'here, what is that supposed to mean' ... and they could explain things to you .. that's better, isn't it".

The village hall could also provide a venue for talks giving information - the Victim Support Group, or the Police, for example. The speaker could follow up their presentation with information leaflets. For those issues

that demanded privacy, the village hall could provide the venue for outreach sessions: the CAB or the Welfare Rights officer, for example. It would also solve the problem for those people who won't visit the pub by providing accommodation for the Councillor's 'surgery' sessions.

'Telecentres' and telecommunications

All the village appraisals included a section on computers and communication. There was a degree of consistency in the types of questions asked of each area here: although there is a 'bottom up' ethos to village appraisals, the groups had been asked by the Community Council of Northumberland to include a set of questions on computers, telecentres and electronic communication systems. However, this section of the questionnaires had focused on the high-tech rather than on the basics: consequently no statistics were collected on telephone ownership, a basic prerequisite to a discussion of more advanced communications systems. All the discussion groups recognised that there were a number of households in their localities without phones.

Falstone reported that mobile phone reception needed to be improved; 41% of residents complained of poor TV reception. Some 16% of households used a computer at home, but only one household had an internet connection. The large number of positive responses to the question about potential use of local public computers led to a proposal for the provision of a computer in the village hall. Computer training was identified as the main need, but there was also demand for information on job vacancies, on careers, and on training and education. The group discussion generated more detail on what was needed. The main concern was thought to be that the youngsters would fall behind their peers if they

did not have substantial exposure to computers, and to the information unlocked in this way. However, few households had computers, which generated a lot of demand for a public computer facility. As the children would be the main users, in the first instance, of a 'telecentre' in Falstone, it was suggested that an after school club would be needed. Use of the centre would then filter to other members of the community: people would be curious, and the youngsters could involve older family members.

The discussion in Falstone then turned to the best location for a computer or telecentre, and the sort of support that would be needed. Some straightforward information would be accessible without support once the person was familiar with the computer terminal. Information could be provided from a kiosk-type information point in the village shop, or the pub, so long as it was a straightforward search, not private information, and that the opening hours were suitable. The village hall was proposed as offering more flexibility over opening times, allowing you to spend some time finding the information you wanted, and providing "somebody who could actually talk to you" and help you if necessary.

Wooler village appraisal had also found some problems for residents with reception for mobile phones (12% of respondents), TV (18%) and Radio (16%). Some 17% of households had a computer or a fax at home - mainly in the younger households. More than half the respondents thought that a public telecentre would be beneficial, with 35% registering a 'don't know' response. This would be used mainly for 'study/education', 'computer training' and 'general interest', and mainly by young households. This was part of the Padgepool Place proposal which saw the telecentre not only as a public resource but also servicing the needs of

other organisations, such as the Tourist Information Centre, in the new centre.

Funding was already available for a publicly accessible computer with internet connection in Wooler in order to produce the community newsletter. As this would have to find a temporary public location while Padgepool Place was developed, the group discussed the options. Question: the Library? "Not very accessible". Question: the middle school? "closed during all school holidays .. So it's even worse than the library really. ..... Possibly the Mechanics Institute" (an under-used facility in Wooler).

Another computer-related proposal in Wooler was to link all the youth clubs in the region via EMail. This would partly broaden the social interactions of the young people some of whom have very few local friends of a similar age, and partly develop the young people's confidence in the use of computers and the internet.

West Sleekburn reported that of the respondents to the question about home ownership of computers (thought to be only a small proportion of the total households), 24% used computers at home. The discussion group commented that there was very little ownership of computers by the villagers: they wouldn't be able to afford one. Some interest in a public telecentre was reported in the village appraisal. The group suggested that this would have been from people with children who would appreciate the importance of computers. The children were getting regular exposure to computers at school, and were keen to have a machine of their own. As many parents wouldn't be able to afford this, a public telecentre would be popular and used by the young people for

study/education purposes in the first instance. However, this could develop: "I think it would be a good thing for the adults as well because I think I would like to go with the kids and they could actually tell us a thing or two".

Other information developments

For West Sleekburn, Jean decided during the discussion to look into the possibility of a village noticeboard, but otherwise all their information-related proposals hinged upon their new village hall initiative.

The Falstone village appraisal report also recommended that the village consider a local newsletter, in which all local job opportunities could be advertised. Improved publicity leaflets for tourists, showing local Falstone walks, and a handbook on the village were thought possible ways of attracting more tourists. The report recommended that signposting for tourists, including footpath signs, should be improved.

As already mentioned, Wooler had received funding to develop a community newsletter. This would cover the whole of the Glendale District, with the aims of promoting the activities of the Glendale Gateway Trust, of helping to build a sense of this community, and of providing local information on organisations and activities. The Glendale Gateway Trust also hoped to develop a 'drop-in' centre for young people in one of the buildings rendered redundant because of the Padgepool Place proposal. This would give them a community facility, but also provide the informal information and advice service described earlier.

CONTRASTING THE THREE COMMUNITIES

The case study areas were chosen to reflect contrasts between the size of the community, the distance to major service centres, and the sorts of networking skills and status resources ('cultural capital') the residents possess. In terms of size, West Sleekburn and Falstone are similar with around 100 households, and contrast with Wooler's 900 households.

Regarding the remoteness of the settlements, we were interested in the distance to a sizeable centre, or centres, of multiple services - the large market towns that would offer a high school and/or a college of FE; a 'full time' library, a CAB, probably council offices and so on. For West Sleekburn, this would be Ashington (about 2 miles away) and Morpeth and Blyth (both about 8 miles away). Wooler looks to Berwick or Alnwick (both about 15 miles away) for these services; Falstone to Hexham or Haydon Bridge (30 miles distant).

We were also interested in assessing whether the 'cultural capital' of the residents of the case study areas was an important factor. This concept assumes that people have various networking skills and status resources they can draw upon, derived from their education, socio-economic background, experiences and contacts. Data from the census provides information relating to cultural capital:

Ward	Upper North Tyne (Falstone)	Wooler (Wooler)	Sleekburn[1] (West Sleekburn)

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[1] The population census data for Falstone and West Sleekburn are contained within their ward data, but form only a small proportion of the ward. Our case study of Falstone focuses on about 100 households; the ward of Upper North Tyne covers 640 households. Our West Sleekburn case study again focuses on around 100 households; Sleekburn ward covers 1480 households. Our Wooler case study of the market town and its hinterland focused on about 900 households - about the same

Population unemployed	3%	4%	14%
Population in occupational groups, Management and Admin; Professional; Associated Professional and Technical	33%	26%	15%
Population above retirement age	18%	30%	23%
Households without a car	20%	32%	45%

Source: 1991 Census of Population, via NOMIS, Crown Copyright

The data suggests that Falstone residents have much more cultural capital than West Sleekburn, with Wooler lying in between, but closer to Falstone than West Sleekburn.

Size of community

Where size of community is important we would expect to see similarities between Falstone and West Sleekburn, and contrasts with Wooler. There were two clear areas of the analysis where this pattern occurred.

coverage as the Wooler ward. In terms of this analysis, our data comparisons are strictly of the three wards, not the three case studies. For Falstone and West Sleekburn the data pertains to the villages and their surrounding areas. However, this can still give some good indications of comparisons between the three case studies.

Wooler had formal information services such as the library and the seasonal Tourist Information Centre, and a good range of facilities that carried, or could carry, information leaflets and posters. In contrast, Falstone and West Sleekburn villages had no formal permanent information services, and limited facilities that could carry information. However, it has to be said that Falstone's local outlets were much more numerous and accessible than West Sleekburn's, in part due to the need to provide information and facilities for tourists.

The community size factor was also important in terms of information flows around the community. Both West Sleekburn and Falstone described an effective grapevine in their villages, and sometimes supplemented this with leaflet drops to all households and/or putting up a local notice. Wooler, as a much larger settlement, found these internal information flows far more problematic, and recognised that their present system was not particularly effective. They did not use leaflet drops; there was no obvious location for a poster, although plenty of facilities were available; they did not refer to an efficient grape vine. If they wanted to target the whole community, they would sometimes use existing interest groups to help spread the message. Using local 'agents' was their proposed means of collecting and circulating their newsletter. They hoped that their new community centre development would provide a focus for the community so that information could be circulated both formally and informally from there.

Remoteness of community

The hypothesis here was that accessing information would be more difficult the further the community was from a large centre. West Sleekburn should have been showing far fewer difficulties than Wooler, than Falstone. There were no signs of this being the case, with plenty of examples suggesting the opposite. The discussions, though, made some sense of this apparent paradox.

Distance, on its own, is not important. It becomes an important factor when there is difficulty in overcoming it: when transport is limited and/or costly, when the trip does not fit well with other regular travel such as going to work, and so on. West Sleekburn, in particular, regularly referred to the distance to a larger centre in terms of the number of bus trips, hence stressing the difficulty in travelling, not the distance per se. This indication that lack of car ownership was an important consideration was borne out by the census data for Sleekburn ward which showed 45% of households having no car.

Perceptions of distance and geographies were also more important than the actual distance between two places. Each of the case study groups mentioned 'distant' places that they would think of for information, hence situating their settlement in a wider geographic context. For Falstone, this 'map' regularly included Hexham and Haydon Bridge (30 miles to the South), Morpeth (35 miles to the east), and sometimes Newcastle (50 miles southeast). For Wooler, their main outward focus was on Berwick (15 miles north east) and Alnwick (15 miles southeast). West Sleekburn had a more local focus - on Ashington (2 miles north), Morpeth (8 miles west) and Blyth (8 miles east) - and did not mention Newcastle for information, although this would only be about 15 miles away. While Falstone spoke of Newcastle (50 miles away) as a provider of 'specialist'

courses, libraries and information - a possible trip if you wanted that sort of information, West Sleekburn's only reference to a trip to the Newcastle/Gateshead metropolis (15 miles away) was in terms of its unlikeliness: "If you want to go to the Metro Centre pictures or anything, it is a real event".

Cultural capital

If cultural capital is an important factor in accessing information, we would expect to see similarities between the Wooler and Falstone case studies that contrasted with West Sleekburn, or a situation that suggested a ranking: Falstone, then Wooler, then West Sleekburn.

In terms of external information needed by the community, all three case study areas spoke of leaflets on activities - what's on, colleges and so on - and information needed to take forward their community development plans. But beyond that, they emphasised very different needs. West Sleekburn residents' information needs revolved primarily around their day to day living: benefits, council services, and resolving problems that were affecting them: flooding, industrial emissions etc. There was very little discussion of information as something needed for education or knowledge in its own right. In contrast, Wooler and Falstone said very little about information needed to support day to day problems, but concentrated far more on information for education. Hence these two case studies both spent time explaining the limitations of the local library service for reference purposes, and focused on the needs of school age children and of those taking evening classes. The Wooler group referred quite often to "study information", which was bound up with formal education where the information was a means to becoming educated,

gaining a qualification and so on - a passport to the wider world in effect. The Falstone group also concentrated on this means to an end, 'study information', but sometimes took it a stage further, seeing the gaining of knowledge as the end in itself, a type of leisure activity. In this context they spoke of "specialist information" for which one was prepared to travel to specialist sources such as a Newcastle library.

Looking at the formal information services, libraries were given much more prominence by the Wooler and Falstone groups than West Sleekburn's. Much of the discussion of libraries for Wooler and Falstone was about reference information, and both talked about their local branch library, but also about the larger libraries that were used. In contrast, West Sleekburn only talked about their local branch library, and did not discuss reference information.

The CAB service was discussed by Falstone in a 'taken as read' manner: they knew where it was, and would use it if they needed it. The Wooler group paid far more attention to this service in their discussion: they were concerned about potential cuts in service, wanted their new community centre to incorporate this service discreetly, and hoped to set up a new equivalent service for young people. The West Sleekburn group did not give much prominence to the CAB in their discussion of present information needs; however, they did talk about running CAB sessions in their proposed village hall, suggesting that travel and transport problems may explain this apparent lack of interest, rather than a lack of interest in the services on offer.

While all three case study groups readily admitted that neighbours and local people were very important in directing you to information, some

West Sleekburn residents could or would not independently access information: they needed local and informal support throughout the process. The group described how some people were confused and unconfident about finding information, which in itself caused embarrassment. Because of this, they often turned to a friend, a neighbour, or a member of the family to help them with accessing information. Sometimes this meant that a friend would accompany them, sometimes they would get someone to act on their behalf, making a phone call, or visiting the 'office' for information. Because support was needed, seeking information often became a many-staged process. You might need someone local to encourage you to go, say, to the Benefits Office in the first place; you might then just pick up a leaflet on your first visit, so that you could read it in a supportive environment, and discuss its finer points with friends; you might subsequently arrange to visit (perhaps with someone else) to discuss your entitlement with the official.

Relationships with public officials for the Wooler and Falstone groups were in stark contrast to those described in West Sleekburn. In various ways, Wooler and Falstone residents described an easy, confident, or based-on-equality approach to much of what they wanted to do. The Wooler group was essentially working in partnership with the Council over the development of Padgepool Place, and had few problems over information for this. The Falstone group described the iterative approach to building a relationship with the planning department, giving them regular information updates, in return for reassurances that the granting of permission would be straightforward, and using their open meeting over the new development to canvas the views and support of the local Councillors.

West Sleekburn residents had very different experiences of relating to officials for information. The picture painted was one of officers defending their information from assault by local people. If a local person wanted information, they would have to get past the officials and their defences first. If you approached an official, you would have to be persistent: they might try not to give it to you, or to confuse you. You would need a thick skin: they might try to make you feel small. The community did not get the help they wanted from the Council over their concerns about the safety of a proposed new chemical plant.

There were also contrasts between the extended networks used by the three areas - links that they had that helped them effect their proposals. Member of the Falstone group referred to a number of these: the planning officers and the councillors whom they hoped would ensure the smooth passage of their planning application; and the links to Newcastle College which meant that a student project provided them with models and designs for their new community centre. The Wooler and West Sleekburn groups did not paint a strong picture of 'who you know' connections outside their communities.

The same pattern emerged when looking at 'know how' in the context of the community proposals: understanding the processes involved in bringing the projects to fruition. Once again, the Falstone group stood out in talking about the experience within the group of planning processes, and suggesting that if you don't have experience of these processes you won't get anywhere with your proposals. Wooler and West Sleekburn did not talk about this 'know how'.

The West Sleekburn group were critical of the gatekeepers to information, and recognised gaps in the provision, but did not criticise the information that they were given. The Wooler and Falstone groups confidently criticised official information that was provided. For example, inadequacies in a bus timetable reflected badly on those who had designed it, not on those who could not understand it. They were the clients, and their needs were not being met. The Falstone group took a similar stance over the local walks and events information provided by the National Park, the Forestry Commission, and so on. If these providers wanted people to attend, they should target their information better. Members of the Falstone group not only criticised these pieces of information, but were happy to put forward their ideas on the form the improvements should take.

The final way in which the cultural capital of the three case study areas led to differences was that residents in both Wooler and Falstone were not portrayed as ground down in their searches for information: sometimes they had to get around an obstacle, but it was in the nature of a game. For West Sleekburn residents, getting vital information was a serious, difficult and often tortuous business. Some people just gave up.

Hence there were a number of ways in which Falstone and Wooler's cultural capital made access to information easy: they had plenty of 'professional' contacts and felt at ease dealing with these people; they understood the services that were on offer and were experienced in dealing with 'official' procedures. By contrast, West Sleekburn's disadvantages in this respect were twofold: firstly, they did not have as much cultural capital, but this also caused their second disadvantage. When dealing with 'officials' who had more cultural capital, they lacked

confidence, were made to feel 'put down', embarrassed or confused, which sometimes meant that they gave up on their information search.

CONCLUSIONS

This study was undertaken in the light of a number of initiatives by information providers seeking to improve their services, especially via telematic means. The report throws up numerous issues for information providers. The next section summarises the main lessons for information provision in general; the report then focuses on the implications for the design of electronic services.

Improving information services

*   Information comes in various forms

Some of the providers hold information that is sought, when necessary, by the client; others send out unsolicited information. Some information flows are based on text, some are verbal communications; information can be produced for public consumption; some is for limited circulation; some is private. Improving information services means addressing all of these.

*   Information is for a purpose

In almost all cases information is sought for a purpose. The delivery of information hence needs to be timely, and packaged effectively to help the client use it to good effect.

*   Formal information providers are only one part of the jigsaw

Local communities are also important actors in delivering information services - supporting their efforts could be an effective means of improving information services.

*   Access to reference material is limited in rural areas

The limited hours of rural branch libraries and of mobile services are a problem, in particular for many school aged children who are unable to use them as an educational resource. These libraries are also limited in terms of their reference stock.   The discussion groups made few references to the broader information role of libraries.

*   Easy access to public information and advice is limited

The CAB, the benefits office, the Job Centre, the Council etc, are all at a distance, causing problems for rural residents who lack mobility. Some of these services are also failing people who lack the cultural capital to understand the system and to relate confidently to officials**.**

*   Access is mainly constrained by a lack of cultural capital

The size of a settlement, and its 'remoteness' from a service centre are only problematic for those without transport. In rural areas, with poor or non-existent public transport, this means for those who do not own a car. A far greater constraint to accessing information, though, is a lack of cultural capital. These people are also likely to be the ones without cars.

*   Local support and mediation services are important

This is particularly the case for those people who lack cultural capital. What is hence needed is a local, informal support mechanism rather than a formal service outwith the community that might be seen as unsupportive or unresponsive.

*   Phones help in only a limited number of cases

Although a phone call might save a journey for a rural dweller, the discussions suggested that for many people they were only used for very limited information searches for rather routinised information (eg bus times). Particularly for more personalised information, many preferred to go in person rather than phone. Not every home has a phone.

Designing electronic information services

The breadth of information types and needs outlined earlier in the report suggests that there needs to be many and various improvements. Telematics certainly has the potential to make a contribution in many different ways. A web site can provide an efficient means of holding mainly textual information for people to seek out as the need arises. Electronic e-mailing lists could be developed by those providers who currently send out 'unsolicited' leaflets of information. Private networks could allow the easy circulation of information around a community or an interest group. Videolinks would allow face to face communication at a distance. The developers of electronic information services should think about the specific needs they are addressing, and use the most appropriate telematics application.

The community provides and circulates a lot of information. Telematics could support many of these activities. Community groups could use web sites to deposit information - the village appraisal, and the minutes of the Parish Council, for instance - that can then be accessed at any time by those within and outwith the community. These groups would also benefit from electronic networking, allowing them private communications with their members, sharing of experiences with similar

organisations in other communities, and the opportunity to broadcast and advertise to the whole community. The last point would offer great benefit to larger villages and market towns that struggle to reach all households, but would only be effective once each home and business had an internet connection.

As well as supporting the local, informal information services, telematics can also help bring the formal and public information services efficiently into rural communities. For those communities with a library, immediate access to a wider electronic 'stock' of information would improve the service. For many people, it is important to have face to face meetings with the information services: they like to visit the CAB, the Benefits Office, the Job Centre, and the local council offices, which can be difficult for rural residents, particularly if they do not have cars. A local videolink, in a private booth, could be an effective compromise, allowing a private face to face interview via electronic means.

Telematics certainly is appropriate in helping to make information timely. It makes possible the idea of people searching out information at any time of the day or night, and that information can be transmitted and received almost simultaneously. However, if access to the internet is to be from a public place, access to that place will be a crucial factor. If this is from the branch library with its current opening hours, for example, then the existing problems of access will remain.

The traditional production of text based information is costly and inflexible, hence limiting the number of forms that a piece of information takes. Textual information in electronic form is comparatively cheap, and linkages between 'pages' are simple, making the possibility of holding it

in different forms much more feasible. Likewise, it will be possible to send out information in a number of different formats: for example, a full programme of events for a year at the beginning of the season, but also regular 'coming soon' reminders.

Many people find accessing 'formal' information difficult because they lack cultural capital. A real challenge in developing electronic information systems will be in ensuring that the new services improve the situation for these people. In some circumstances, this may mean developing people based services rather than electronic ones; in others telematics will have to be used appropriately to resolve the issues. How can it be harnessed to make searching for information easy for those who find the current system impossible? Could a local videolink to a support service help? Will the technology enable those without cultural capital to use the anonymity to be more confident, or will they be further marginalised by their lack of fluency and confidence with the technology?

There are no definitive answers to these questions at present, but answers are needed. Two main means of finding out would be firstly experimentation, but secondly, and more importantly, for information services to gain a much better understanding of what the problems are. Working through local organisations that can help them to access appropriately the people who have difficulties, they must address why the current services fail some sections of society.

It is likely that simply installing computers for local use would be inappropriate in solving access problems for this group: those lacking cultural capital are also likely to be those with little or no experience of

computers. Telematics may not be the main solution here, but may be usefully engaged to support improved ways of working.

For example, the report stresses the importance of local and informal 'facilitators' who help people who have difficulty in accessing information for themselves. In some instances, what is provided is a comprehensive support service which involves the local volunteer in taking on the role of animateur, counsellor, and advocate, as well as simply directing the person to the relevant information source. This facilitator is vital in the process, and it would be inconceivable to imagine that their role could be performed effectively through electronic means. However, telematics could be used to provide various back up services to these facilitators - direct access to useful web pages, links to other local facilitators, to the professional advisory services, and so on.

The discussion groups all raised issues about public access points to information via the internet. It certainly was not the case that computers were widespread in homes, hence they all recognised a need for a *public* access point. A significant number of homes do not have a phone yet, and it is very unlikely that they would all have a computer in the foreseeable future. An important general point was that the access point needed to be provided locally, which linked to the groups' second point, that much of the desire for this access point was driven by the needs of the school children for educational purposes - a group with very limited mobility. It should also be accessible at times suitable to local people's needs, with support personnel available.

All three discussion groups had the same model: of an internet access point within the village hall/community centre, meeting their 'local' criterion, and also allowing the possibility of more flexibility over access

times than institutions such as schools and libraries, if they existed locally, would provide in a traditional manner. All groups also thought that young people would be the initial target group, with suggestions about 'homework clubs', but also about the possibility of the youngsters encouraging and supporting adults in their initial visits to the access point.

This raises some interesting points for those looking to improve information systems with telematics: where can access effectively be provided locally, what hours of opening would be appropriate for a public point, and what support services will be needed?

The 'local' criterion provides problems for the public services: only 1% of parishes with populations of less than 1000 have a library, over half the parishes in England have no school, and it would be rare for other public information services such as Job Centres or Business Link offices to be located in remoter rural areas. What these smaller settlements may have is a village hall, a village shop/Post Office, or a pub - not part of the traditional public structures that deliver information services. Information services need to look into the feasibility of using these facilities to effect delivery of information to rural areas via telematics if they are to meet the demand for *local* access to the internet.

Hours of opening of the facility will be all important. Where the access points are primarily intended for study purposes, there is a clear need for regular evening and weekend opening, as well as weekday standard hours. This means that traditional information providers to rural areas will have to change their working practices dramatically, and/or supplement them by use of facilities that can give the required hours.

The emphasis on the usage of these access points by the young people raises further points: about the involvement of youth organisations in this provision, about appropriate supervision, and about creating an environment conducive to young people. It also suggests that the young people could be a useful local resource in terms of involving the rest of the community. Is it possible for the information services to harness this?

These young people could also provide some of the skills that will be necessary in running a local access point: amongst them will be some with very advanced computer and technical skills. Are there ways of integrating these youngsters into the delivery of local support services? Earlier parts of this report emphasised how often people need some degree of formal and informal support in accessing information in a traditional manner. In the foreseeable future, the likelihood is that electronic provision of information will add to the need for support - people will need support in using computers - although ultimately it is to be hoped that it will improve and simplify access.

The findings in this report lead to a conclusion that these local access points will at times need to provide support to many people in searching out information, and in terms of the technology. Some of this should be informal support, provided locally, perhaps involving young people in some aspects; the traditional information services will also be needed, but could perhaps be provided remotely via a videolink. However, a subset of information that is 'straightforward': bus times or what's on, for example, could be provided for some people from a simple public kiosk - they would need initial familiarisation with the technology, but little further help.

Concluding comments

This report was undertaken in the context of improving information services to rural areas using electronic means, and it concludes that there are certainly ways in which telematics could help. However, it also exposes how much of an information service to a rural area is provided locally, voluntarily, and informally, rather than by the formal, 'public sector' information services. To effect improvements in information, telematics must be used to support the community as well as more formal services. In order for the capabilities of the technology to be fully exploited at the local level, the traditional public services will have to undergo a radical rethink of their roles and methods of delivery.

The report also highlights the problems that some groups in society have in using the present formal services. Simply adding telematics to the existing services without making other alterations could mean that these groups are excluded further because the use of the technology will become another barrier. Telematics may not be the most appropriate or important resource to use in resolving this problem.

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ANNEX: THE THREE CASE STUDIES

FALSTONE INFORMATION NEEDS

Falstone

Falstone is a village of about 100 households, at the east end of Kielder water in the Upper Tyne valley. For a village of its size it has a surprising number of facilities: a sub-Post Office in the village shop, a cafe, a pub, and a village hall. Visitors to the area are important in maintaining the viability of many of these services. The main difficulties of living in Falstone ostensibly arise from its remote location: around 8 miles from the nearest small market town at Bellingham; perhaps 30 miles to Hexham or Haydon Bridge for a major shopping trip, and the high school.

1991 census data of particular interest to this study for the Upper North Tyne ward is as follows:

Population unemployed	3%
Population in occupational groups, Management and Admin; Professional; Associated Professional and Technical	33%
Population above retirement age	21%*
Households without a car	20%

* This figure is for the enumeration district of Falstone - the ward of Upper North Tyne is divided into 4 such districts and some statistics are published at this level.

Falstone data is included in this ward level data, but the ward covers 640 households, of which only about 100 are in Falstone. The ward data shows the unemployment rate at well below the national average and a far smaller proportion of households being without a car than the Northumberland average. The proportion of Falstone population above retirement age is the same as for the county. A third of the working population are in occupational categories that might imply some form of higher education qualification or equivalent.

A recurrent theme running through the interview was the reductions in services over time: less hours for the Post Office; the post going out later in the day; the bus service being cut etc.

Information's position in the village appraisal

The Village Appraisal Group have completed their report. There are sections on General Household Details; Children, Adult Education and Young People; Employment and Training; Tourism; Sport and Leisure; Environment; Health; Services; Computers and Communications; Transport; and Village Hall. There was also a young persons' questionnaire.

Information is not a section in its own right; however, there is mention in the text of a proposed newsletter, tourist signposting and tourist information and publicity for Falstone, the mobile library, the postal service, job vacancy information, training and education information, careers advice, bus timetables, and the possibility of a small static library. There is also an obvious information need for the proposals, especially

for a new build village hall, to be taken forward. The discussion focused around these information needs.

Main sources of information

The discussion generated a wide range of information sources available (and used) by the villagers. The village has a number of noticeboards: the 'official' village noticeboard maintained by the Parish Council, the shop's noticeboard, and the board in the pub. The shop, incorporating a sub-Post Office, carries leaflets of information, for example, on benefits, and courses. The cafe carries a range of leaflets, mainly on tourist attractions.

Informal channels were seen to be very important for information: "There is a good grapevine". The shop is seen as a focal point for information sharing: not necessarily a matter of asking the shopkeeper; more about meeting people there who might be able to help.

In terms of taking actions on behalf of the community, such as developing the ideas for a new village hall, the Community Council is an important provider of information. The group also felt that their personal experiences contributed a lot of knowledge to this process, for example "It was something I found out by putting many planning applications in for my own house" said one.

An important means of receiving written information from outside the village is via the postal service. Leaflets on courses from all the main local providers are sent to individuals; bus timetables are distributed via the post; some people receive information on local events in this way; one

person got a full book of information on available benefits through the post.

The Hexham Courant is the paper that covers the area, and was quoted regularly as a source of information on events, and for local job and training opportunities. Specific local information leaflets/newsheets are provided by the local authority (Tynedale District Council), the community schools, the National Park, the Forestry Commission, and the Water Company.

Libraries are an important source of information - thought of mainly in terms of reference books, but a place that might be used for more general queries after other avenues have been explored: "I would look around and ask people locally, first, who I thought might know, then I might try the Hexham library", said one villager. There is a travelling library which comes infrequently to the village; the library in Bellingham, open 12 hours a week over three days, and the large libraries with more specialist reference sections of Hexham, Morpeth and Newcastle. The CAB and the Job Centre also were mentioned as sources of information and advice, but Hexham was the permanent location for these (the CAB did a regular outreach session in Bellingham), which would involve a 60 mile round trip.

Main types of information discussed

In much the same way, a wide variety of types of information received and sought were raised. Leaflets on 'evening class' courses are widely available, arriving by post and in the village shop. Most people attending courses go to Bellingham where a good range of leisure pursuit (rather

than educational) courses are provided. But information on more specialist or educational courses at venues further afield is also available, and there seemed no difficulty in getting hold of this.

Bellingham does not provide specialist courses, but this would be inappropriate: "if you want to do anything special, you need a library, and if your class is local, you are depending on Hexham library". Reference books were seen as important, not only for adult education, but also for the children in the village. The travelling library was described as a fiction library; Bellingham was said to have two or three bookcases of reference. However, the delivery service was good: you could order books from other libraries and collect them from Bellingham or the travelling library as long as you were prepared to wait - usually a week to Bellingham, and variable with the travelling library dependent on when the next trip was. Bellingham library was also thought to be good at recognising what was going on locally (a school project, for example), and ensuring that there was a good range of reference books for the subject.

A lot of information is available on the Kielder area, and what is going on. This information is aimed at the tourists, to get them to visit the area, and once there, to give them information on local activities and services. The local people felt that information on the events of the National Park, the Forestry Commission, and the water company were also of interest to them, and that they would take advantage of some of the activities. They also had information on more cultural events in the area: the theatre, concerts and so on.

The first project of the group following the village appraisal is to pursue ways of improving the village hall facilities. The more ambitious of the plans is to build a new village hall on a new site in Falstone. This involves finding out about land values, the processes of the planning system, and the likelihood of planning permission being granted, and about the grant regimes that might provide funding for the new village hall.

Recognised gaps or problems in provision

The discussion generated a number of gaps or problems in information provision. The libraries' opening hours are making the service inaccessible to certain groups of people. Bellingham, as the nearest branch library, is not providing a good service for people who worked standard office hours: few hours open outside 9 to 5, and only one lunchtime. The travelling library visits are infrequent (either once a fortnight or once a month, the group weren't sure), but these visits are during the school day. Children are hence unable to use the travelling library, and even those at middle school in Bellingham could not use that library because they are not allowed out at lunch time and have to catch the school bus as soon as school ends.

While the efforts of the local postman were applauded, the group were certain that their mail was not coming into the village promptly. They were sure that it was taking an extra day for the first class service to arrive. One villager explained that "at one time we could prove regularly, we had things my mum [in another part of England] and I, that were posted at the same time from London ... and she would get it one day, and I would get it at least the next day, or the day after that".

The problem associated with benefit entitlement was not seen as the information itself, but the accompanying form-filling. "Filling the forms in, though, is a different matter .... a lot of them are asking for information, and a lot of people are frightened to put information down that isn't relevant to what they are claiming for", said one member of the group. Information on job opportunities was seen as an issue, but within the wider problem that there aren't many jobs available. The service bus timetable was obviously not serving its purpose of informing people of the times of buses - "it has little marks that are difficult to read ... it has 't' which means it doesn't run on school holiday days, but who knows when school holidays are unless you have children?".

Physical access to the Tourist Information Centre in Bellingham, which also housed the outreach Citizens Advice Bureau, and the CAB in Hexham was identified as problematic because of the stairs.

Interestingly, one of the problems cited was more about over supply of information than undersupply. The group obviously felt that the tourist information on local events that was available was less useful than it might be because so much information was provided at once. And not only was it for a number of months, but separate listings were produced by all the different organisations: the Forestry Commission, the National Park and so on.

Strategies adopted to get around these problems

In situations where you don't immediately know how to find a piece of information, you ask around locally. After that you approach

organisations such as the library, the Citizen's Advice Bureau, or the Benefits Office.

Problems of choice and lack of specialisation at local libraries (Bellingham and the travelling one) are solved by using more distant libraries (Hexham, Newcastle), or by ordering books for collection at Bellingham or from the travelling library.

The phone was occasionally mentioned as a means of solving an information problem. Instead of trying to decipher the complicated bus timetable, one member of the group just rang the bus company: "I found the best thing to do was to actually ring Snaiths at Otterburn and ask them what time on this particular day would the bus be".

However, the phone was not generally seen as an effective means of getting information. Large organisations' capabilities in dealing with enquiries in this way were called into question. You could waste inordinate amounts of time while you were passed from one person to another; too many organisations use answerphones which effectively blocked your information search; and computerised information systems were always down when you rang. The group also felt that many older people had a reticence about using the phone in this way, and that a lot of them got "very, very foxed". The phone was seen as something that you used only if your need was urgent, even though you might have to travel some distance, and wait, to get the information. There are also a number of villagers (the group came up with about 10 names out of 100 households) who do not have a phone. Mobile phones do not work in the valley.

There is an informal support network for those people lacking mobility, either in getting to the village services, or travelling out of the village. Hence "people collect for their neighbours - that's village life". Informal car sharing and the offering of lifts is a means of helping those without their own transport to access information (and other services) from further afield.

Ideas on how to improve information provision

The village appraisal has come up with a proposal to improve the information about job vacancies by introducing a village newsletter. The idea is that local employers (the Water Company, the Forestry Commission, the Calvert Trust, for example) would then advertise local jobs via the newsletter. This idea has not, as yet, been developed further.

The discussion generated a few ideas on how to improve the utility of some of the information already provided. The main message was that information providers needed to think more carefully about the groups they were targeting and then devise their information for individual groups. The local events leaflets were thought to be created with only the tourist in mind, although local people would be interested if they got the information at the right time. The main problem seemed to be the format of the leaflets: a period of, perhaps, six months of events all presented together. This might help visitors to plan their visit, but local people could do with being made aware of what was on via local notices about a week beforehand. Information about events for youngsters should be advertised where children would find things out: at school, for example. The group also felt that it would be easier to understand the information if

it were co-ordinated by the providers: Tynedale Council, the National Park, the Forestry Commission, and the Water Company.

The information on the complicated bus timetable needed to be made accessible to those wishing to use the bus: people can't read the plethora of notes, and stating 'school term time only' does not help people who do not know the dates of school terms.   A suggestion for improvement in presentation was to set it out as a much more detailed document, giving a timetable for each week at a time.

Falstone as an information provider

Already mentioned is the way that the village acts as a first port of call in an information search, and the local 'grapevine'.   The discussion concluded that the best ways of getting information round the village is either through letter boxes, or by informing the shop.   The village appraisal also suggests a village newsletter, not only to circulate 'internal' information, but also to provide information from outside the community on job opportunities and so on.

Developing proposals from the village appraisal has led to the committee providing information to parishioners.   Following the production of alternative models of the proposed community centre by Newcastle College, the group organised for these to be available for inspection and discussion by locals for a week.   Following that, a 16 page consultation leaflet has been produced which is going to each parishioner asking for views on the various proposed designs.

The villagers also want to provide information about Falstone and its attractions: the viability of their local services is reliant on passing trade from tourists on their way to Kielder. Hence they are developing information about Falstone, and about things to do from the village, in order to attract more visitors.

Computers/telecentre

The group explained that their questions in the village appraisal about the need for a 'telecentre' had generated a lot of interest. This was thought to be mainly from the younger section of the community: people with families. Not everyone could afford to have a computer at home, but it was thought to be an essential part of a child's education. "You feel that you should really have one for them to continue with it [at home] otherwise those with computers at home learn such a lot more" said one of the group.

The schools are doing enough in terms of computers to give the children an interest and an enthusiasm: "they do such a lot of work on the computer in gaining information, not games, but gaining information from it". However, the schools were not thought to be offering enough to the pupils. This is partly because of funding: for example, most of the computers at the first school are about 12 years old, and the PTA (not school's funds) has just bought the new one with CD-ROM. There was also a feeling that the equipment was not being fully exploited: the internet connection in Bellingham Middle School/Telecentre is not being used by the pupils; computers are used for computer science and maths courses rather than as information and communications tools for all subjects.

The villagers thought that the children would be the main users of a telecentre in the first instance, and that perhaps an after school club would be needed. However, it was felt that this would spread to other members of the community: there would be a curiosity. One member of the group suggested how villagers would react: "We don't know much about these things ... we've got something of it in the village, we'll go and see what it is". A non-threatening situation was thought to be important, with the children taking their parents and grandparents.

There was discussion about a local computer access point for information. Some information was seen as straightforward, and 'tangible', and it was thought that once people had been shown how to find information via a computer terminal, they would then be able to help themselves. This led to a discussion about an unstaffed kiosk-type information point in the village. The village shop was suggested as a location, but this was thought to be too public, that you would have to be quick because a queue would form behind you, and that it would not provide access in the evenings. The pub was again too public, and a number of people would not go into a pub, anyway. This suggested that 'kiosk' provision would only meet fairly simple, quick, and non-private types of information needs: probably the sorts of information that would be available on a leaflet anyway. The village hall was proposed as being able to offer more flexibility over opening times, allowing you to spend some time finding the information you wanted, and providing "somebody who could actually talk to you".

In the context of information points being available locally, the group was asked if they would take advantage of teleshopping, say from Safeway's in Hexham. This was not seen as an opportunity to reduce

travel to the shops. Large quality grocery shopping was something that was done infrequently, and in association with other activities: a trip to the dentist, a visit to relatives; or part of a day out from the village: "its a way of escapism".

Information is ....?

This section analyses what people in Falstone meant when they talked about information: its parameters, its association with purpose, and its important attributes, and so on.

The discussion at Falstone emphasised information as something that you give as well as receive, and as a two way flow. Information is provided by people in Falstone not only for each other, but for people from outside the community: the visitors. Information about the new village hall is given to the District Council, but in return, feedback on the likely success of the venture is expected "It's no good going ahead if we are not going to get permission" said one of the discussion group. The open meeting about the proposed design for the community centre also provided an opportunity to establish that the Councillors would vote for the scheme. Information also is often received in an unsolicited way, particularly through the letterbox.

Libraries, in principle, are closely related to some types of information - mainly for education and study. However, in practice, the service afforded to Falstone does not meet this need. People are another important factor in acquiring information. Sometimes local people know the answer; in other cases they would be able to direct you to the right person or place. It was suggested that the telecentre would need to be

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staffed to support information retrieval. Local people also have personal experience which can be brought to bear on a situation: "If you haven't got the experience of putting in planning applications or anything else, then you don't bother with a village appraisal and you don't get anywhere". This also suggests how information is entwined with other means of achieving the goal, such as negotiation or presentation skills.

Information is something that needs to be presented clearly. The bus timetable was the case in point in the discussion, and suggestions were put forward for an improved layout. However, it also made it clear that information is made complex by the situation it is linked to: in this case the bus service is complex, with the postbus providing one service, and the other doubling as a school bus. The timetable does not need to confound everyone: "there's so many codes on it that you need a degree in computerisation to work it out", but the information will always be complex.

Information can be more useful if it is targeted. This might mean, in the case of the 'what's on' leaflets, producing separate information for the different target groups: the tourists, the locals. It might mean targeting the circulation carefully: children's event information to the schools, for instance.

Information is acquired for a purpose, and hence is needed at specific points in time. This can been seen from the comment about the library service: "It took 10 weeks to get a book that I wanted and the thing I wanted it for was over".

Information raises issues of privacy. The discussion on the siting of an information kiosk in the shop or in the pub raised responses about the need for privacy. The reticence of people about giving information to claim benefit was also noted.

WEST SLEEKBURN INFORMATION NEEDS

West Sleekburn

West Sleekburn is a village of 120 households situated about 2 miles outside Ashington and about 8 miles from Morpeth, Bedlington and Blyth in the south Northumberland coalfield.

Earlier this century, the village was a thriving mining community, with a number of local services. Since the closure of the pit in 1964, public and social facilities have declined dramatically, in line with the demolition of many of the dwellings.   While the physical distance to larger centres of population are not large, West Sleekburn can now claim a type of remoteness: it is remote from services. The only services in the village are a pub, a wooden 'village hall' with no fixed heating or toilets, and a saddlery shop. The public transport service provided in the village does not make services further afield easy to reach for those without a car.

1991 census figure of particular interest to this study for Sleekburn ward are as follows:

Population unemployed	14%
Population in occupational groups, Management and Admin; Professional; Associated Professional and Technical	15%
Population above retirement age	23%*
Households without a car	45%

*   The West Sleekburn village appraisal analysis found that 32% of the population was aged 60 years or over: well above the average for Northumberland.

West Sleekburn data is included in this ward level data, but the ward covers 1480 households, of which, only about 100 are in West Sleekburn. The ward data shows the unemployment rate as well above the national average, the proportion of people over retirement age as slightly more than the Northumberland average, and well above the county average for the proportion of households without a car. Only a small proportion of the working population are in occupational categories that might imply some form of higher education qualification or equivalent.

Information's position in the village appraisal

West Sleekburn has completed its village appraisal report. It has sections on Household Structure; Leisure; Environment; Transport and Shopping; Home Communications; Training; Youth. Within the text, there is a proposal for a West Sleekburn weekly newspaper; analysis of questions about a possible telecentre; and mention of the need for information on computer courses, and that some of the householders do not know where to finding information on education and training.

The main project connected with this appraisal is the development of a new village hall which will provide a facility, and a focus for the community. The discussion focused on the information needs identified in the village appraisal report, and on the information that would be needed to bring the village hall project to fruition.

Main sources of information

The local Councillor(s) is used as a first port of call for much of the public sector information needed by the villagers. Jean, a key activist, would ring the Councillor(s) and ask for information, or for directions to the information. If they didn't know, then they would find out and let her know. It was acknowledged by the group that West Sleekburn was fortunate in having a couple of good Councillors.

The Council is frequently the source of information for the residents. The District Council is particularly important, with the works department being approached regularly. The DSS is another place from which people regularly needed information. In order to take forward community initiatives such as proposals in the village appraisal, the villagers rely heavily on the Community Council for information and advice.

Libraries were mentioned, but not very often. The nearest library (at Guide Post) was portrayed as source of novels. However, Jean did name libraries when thinking of a first port of call for information if you really didn't know where to go. The others, though, wouldn't, until recently, have thought of libraries for this, but had recent experiences which had broadened their understanding of what some libraries could provide - tapes and videos, maps of the area, and so on.

The local free paper, the Leader, was a praised as a good source of information on what is on locally, although it was noted that not all the local villages receive this paper. The 'local' Post Office in Stakeford, has a good noticeboard for local events. Village events or issues are advertised by a house to house maildrop (there used to be a newsheet).

Less formally, although importantly, much information is sought from, or given by, other people. Of the group, Jean, in particular, is recognised as someone who will either know answers or who will be able to give some leads in terms of finding out. More generally, though, information passes quickly around the village, "If you sneeze at the top somebody knows at the bottom. There is not a lot happens in the village that people don't know about".

Main types of information sought

The Council is obviously an important source of information. Some of the information needed is about the services provided: about the schools, about the swimming pool and so on. Other information is about understanding the Council's requirements: why was a resident told to take his fence down - what was the problem? Another important type of information from the Council is to do with getting some action taken. For example, what was the problem causing the flooding at the corner, when would it be seen to; and as time went on, why did it take four years of battling to get some action? Facts on entitlements, in particular to benefits, are another type of information sought from both the Council and other public sector organisations such as DSS.

People want to know about courses - for skills training, for broader education and leisure pursuits. What is going on locally is also of interest.

They also want information about the local industries, and how these might affect their health and safety. The group were well aware that there were potential hazards from being close to chemical plants, and wanted

regular monitoring information, as well as information on the hazards from incidents. One of these plants "went on fire, you know, and we wanted to know what effect it was going to have on the area, because it is a chemical plant, and we asked if we could have a meeting down there." When a new plant was proposed for the area, they collected information from the local community where it was currently sited, about leakages and evacuations - information that was not known to the Council.

Recognised gaps or problems in provision

The main issue didn't seem to be that certain types of information were not available. One problem was that it wasn't provided locally. To collect information, you need to travel: sometimes to Guide Post, more often to Ashington, Blyth or Morpeth. Most of these journeys involve two bus journeys if you haven't got a car.

Another problem was that for a lot of information, you also need to be persistent. If you ring, you are often told someone will ring you back, and then they don't. Jean is justifiably proud of her persistence with the local Works Department of the Council: "they think 'this women isn't going to go away, we'll have to give the information because she keeps phoning'".

However, she has also experienced another common problem that people are made to feel 'put down' and stupid when requesting information: "I spoke to somebody at the Council and he put me down. He said, 'surely you understand that, it's so simple'."

Some information that is provided is not clear to the recipient: "You go somewhere and they baffle you with words". Some is not sensible - the siting of information about dog control, or advertising that scoop bags are available some distance away.

Villagers' reasons for not finding information

Even when information is available, and known to exist, some villagers will not seek it. Distance is a factor here. Some people will not bother because it is too far. This was thought to be particularly an issue with some of the older people who find they are blinded with information if they go to the 'office'. They then want to take a leaflet home, look at it, discuss its meaning, and subsequently return to the office for the next stage in the process. Some just give up.

Money issues are another big problem. Some of the older people think that the only money you should be entitled to is what you have earned, and hence will not pursue benefit claims. Some feel ashamed, or at least averse, to tell someone that they need money. Others do not want to expose their financial situation.

Some of the villagers will not go to get information due to a lack of confidence, and embarrassment. They might not ask about courses, for fear of asking in the wrong place. They might feel embarrassed that they don't know about the subject, or that they might not understand the information they are given, especially if they anticipate that officialdom might treat them roughly.

Strategies adopted to get around these problems

There was discussion about whether phoning was a better way of getting information than going in person. This was inconclusive: some felt they were empowered through the telephone and could say things that they wouldn't face to face; others felt that it was very important to be able to see the response you were getting, and hence preferred to go in person. It transpired that not everyone in the village had a phone at home; the village was supplied with a phone box. Some people won't use the phone for information: "She lives besides the phone box, but I think sometimes she's not sure .... not confident, doesn't know who to ring - that is the point I'm trying to make"; and "I think a lot of older people probably wouldn't know how to go about it ...... generation .... we've been brought up with phones, where a lot of older people aren't like that, are they".

Getting someone else to ring or come with you is another way that some villagers deal with their information needs. Jean has a number of requests to phone on other people's behalf: "[a villager] sometimes comes up here and says 'will you ring such and such'. Or 'can you sort that'. Ring somebody so that she knows what she has to do. She's done that a few times."

Confidence is enhanced and embarrassment minimised by the step by step approach to getting information: discuss the issue with friends and neighbours; collect a leaflet; read it at home - get it explained informally if necessary; go back later to discuss the matter further with the 'office'.

Ideas on how to improve information provision

The discussion of needs generated some ideas on how information could be improved locally. Much relied on there being a new or rebuilt village hall - at present there is not an appropriate meeting place. If there was a better facility, then a part of it could be used as a local resource centre. It could have racks with information leaflets. Initial thoughts on the subject matter needed were information on courses, on rights and entitlements, and on health matters. It was felt that it would be best if someone was there who could help with the information: "But I think sometimes you can look at a leaflet and still be puzzled by some of the things that's on it, can't you. But if someone was there and you could say, 'here, what is that supposed to mean, this part here', and they could explain things to you ... that's better, isn't it?"

Another good way of promoting information would be to get people to come and give talks in the village hall: the Victim Support Group, perhaps, and the Police. Group members could do an initial trawl to see if people would be interested; they could then go to the talk, and be given leaflets to take away about security, about house locks and so on.

Some issues would be better dealt with on a one to one basis. This was particularly the case for money, benefits and rights issues. It would be useful if 'surgery' sessions could be run in the village hall. It was recognised that this advice could not be too specialist: there would not be enough demand to warrant regular sessions by, say, the DSS. But the CAB or Welfare Rights officers would be useful, and might generate broader demand. There was also an issue with the present 'surgery' sessions with the local councillors: these were held in the pub in the village, and some people would not go: "Sometimes I go down there with

quite a few messages that people want done. I'll say, 'well, go down with me', but they won't go where there is drink".

It is currently difficult to pin up notices for the village: the pub and the bus stop are the only possibilities. The pub is not frequented by everyone; you are not really permitted to put up notices in bus stops, and they get taken down. Jean felt it would be worth giving some thought to getting a glass fronted lockable noticeboard in the middle of the village.

Computers/telecentre

The village appraisal report includes a section on 'Home Communications' which focuses primarily on information technology. Unfortunately the simple question of phone ownership was not asked, although the villagers reported that not all households had a phone. The group could give only limited background to the report's findings on computers and telecentres - this was a question that they were asked to include by the Community Council for comparative purposes.

The report states that of the households that responded to the question (thought to be low), 24% use a computer at home. The group's comments were that there is very little ownership of PCs among villagers: they can't to afford them. For those with children, it isn't that they don't know that computers are important: the children are getting regular exposure at school, and are keen to have computers of their own. "From the age of four they use them. My daughter's just been doing .... they had little teddybears and they had to do gloves and give them a bag and they had to do it all themselves. So from a very young age, and she thought it was great. She keeps asking to go on the computer again."

The discussion group thought that publicly available computers in the village would be very popular with the children. They felt that the young people should probably have been asked about computers in the Youth Appraisal - they might have got a very positive response to the idea of a 'telecentre'.

They were aware, but with little direct experience, of computers having a number of functions: "Some of the information packages are quite outstanding. It's quite amazing what you can find out about." and "[a villager] has just been getting a keyboard for his: he loves music and he can do his own music and everything". They could envisage the children as the initial users of a telecentre but that this could develop: "I think it would be a good thing for the adults as well because I think I would like to go with the kids and they could actually tell us a thing or two".

Information is ....?

This section analyses what people in West Sleekburn meant when they talked about information: its parameters, its association with purpose, and its important attributes, and so on.

Information is a means of achieving an objective; it might not be the only contribution that is needed. This means that the broader context of the community's needs is often important; that the information is only one part of a sequence; that it is often inextricably linked with advice, with consultation, with negotiation; and that information is useless if it can't solve the problem being addressed.

A good example of the first of these points is that of the village hall. The village appraisal's main finding is that there is a need for a new, or substantially rebuilt, village hall, which at first glance does not seem to have strong links to information needs. But to develop this idea involves a massive amount of finding out: who might fund it; how to build it; all the regulations for providing public access and activities; the needs of local people and so on. There is an enormous information task here, which will need a process of finding where the information is; of understanding it; of matching some of it - what people want with what is allowed, and so on.

The second point is that often the gathering of facts is preceded by activity and succeeded by it. Something, or somebody needs to start the ball rolling. "Word of mouth is probably the most effective way for the majority. Having Jean say, 'I've been there and it worked for me', is a prompt for that person to go and use that service, much more so than a leaflet. It encourages them to go and find out." They might then collect a leaflet and take it home to read. This might be followed up with a visit to the 'office' to discuss their entitlement, and to fill out a form, which would trigger the payment. This example goes some way to demonstrating the third point, that information is linked to advice, consultation and negotiation. The phone calls from villagers about getting something done about, say, their flooding, are firstly about negotiation and secondly about receiving information.

Information is only useful in these contexts if it resolves the issue. If it doesn't ultimately let you know what has to be done, doesn't enable you to do what you wanted, or to get something, then it isn't useful. For example, the young people in the village have little to do in the evening -

in the winter, there is nowhere locally for the villagers other than the pub. A youth club would be a nice idea, but the present hall, such as it is, doesn't have toilets or adequate heating. Transport is a major problem in travelling further afield. "To hit on a bus up and down here, to be in a place you want to be, is nearly impossible". Young people are dependent on lifts to get them outside the village. Their mobility is the primary constraint to their activity; not information.

Information is difficult to get: it is arranged in ways that aren't familiar: "I think the majority of people don't know where to start when they want information". And even for Jean, "I know that sometimes I would have been completely stuck if it hadn't been for Alec [the Councillor] because I just ring up and say 'where do I find such and such', or 'can you tell me what to do about such and such'".

People are very important in the process of accessing information, for a number of reasons. In the example here, the Councillor is used to direct Jean to the relevant information. Jean herself is sometimes asked to act on behalf of others: going to the Council surgery sessions, for example. Informal networks in the village are used for general support, but also to alert people to information they might need or want, or to explain information.

Information often isn't easy to get hold of: you have to be a persistent character to get it. You also need to be confident, or not worried about being exposed to ridicule because you don't know something. One member of the group said, "I spoke to somebody at the Council and he put me down. He said, ' surely you understand that, it's so simple'".

Some information is very private and/or embarrassing. Money was the key example of this in the discussion, where a number of people would not want to expose their financial situation, even if it meant foregoing benefit. Here information is seen as something that you are asked to provide.

WOOLER INFORMATION NEEDS

Wooler

Wooler is a traditional market town in North Northumberland, regarded as the 'Gateway to the Cheviots' which services the surrounding rural hinterland of Glendale. Wooler itself has about 900 households and problems of population decline - 9% in the period 1981 to 1991 according to the village appraisal.

1991 census figures of particular interest to this study for Wooler ward are as follows:

Population unemployed	4%
Population in occupational groups, Management and Admin; Professional; Associated Professional and Technical	26%
Population above retirement age	30%
Households without a car	32%

The geographic and population coverage of this case study, Wooler, equates well with the coverage of the Wooler ward data. It shows lower unemployment than the national average; a substantially larger than average grouping of people above retirement age; and 32% of households having no car - close to the Northumberland county average. Just over a quarter of the working population are in occupational categories that might imply some form of higher education qualification or equivalent.

Wooler has the typical services that you would expect to find on a market town's high street: a range of shops, banking services, pubs and so on. It has its own branch library, first and middle schools, and a number of public buildings. A recurrent theme in the discussion was the cuts in services over time, and especially the downward spiral that ensues when the reduced service leads to reduced usage.

Information's position in the village appraisal

The Village Appraisal for Wooler has been published and runs to about 100 pages. Because of the age profile of the town, the analysis presents many of the findings in terms of age group. There are sections on: Household Structure; Use of Existing Leisure and Community Facilities; Facilities for the whole Community; Community Buildings; Work, Training and the Business Community; Shopping; School and Childcare; Adult Education and Training; Communications and Travel; Environmental Measures; Social and Community Services; Tourism.

Information is not a section in its own right, but various subsections are related to this topic: The Library Service; Village Newsletter; and Information Technology. Apart from these subsections, there is mention in the text of drop-in facilities and study facilities for young people, of the bus timetable, of signposting paths and bridleways; of the CAB; and of the Tourist Information Centre.

The many disparate groups in and around Wooler all working broadly towards the same ends have now come together as the Glendale Gateway Trust. This group is taking forward the major proposal from the village appraisal: to develop a new community centre which would include a

tourist information and interpretation centre, the library, a 'telecentre', community offices and rooms, consultation rooms and refreshments. Much information will be needed in order to bring this project to completion.

The group discussion in Wooler for this case study was focused upon the information issues raised in the village appraisal, and on processes, such as the development of a new community centre, which in themselves would have information needs.

Main sources of information

Wooler residents can find out information in a number of ways. Some is delivered to their houses: leaflets on adult education courses, or from the local theatre, for instance. They also take a local paper, the Berwick Advertiser being the most popular, for local information. The local shops and hotels carry tourist information, including leaflets of interest to local residents, for example, what's on. Very local events such as coffee mornings are advertised through posters in the local shops, or in the local press. The various 'community' buildings in Wooler do not have noticeboards for this sort of information. The Post Office has leaflets on its services, and benefit-type information.

Staffed information points, with mediated access to information (and advice), are available in mobile/outreach/ad hoc form. A tourist information van, soon to be replaced by a temporary shop, is parked in Wooler during the tourist season. A Youth Project caravan used to call in Wooler, perhaps once a month, offering information and advice to young people among other things. The 'benefits van' was mentioned, and an

outreach CAB service, sometimes in a van, and sometimes using the library as a venue. The library was discussed, usually in terms of the limited nature of its service, rather than as a key information resource. However, its local records were thought to be good.

Word of mouth was seen as an important source of regional information: the neighbours for where to find an ice rink, for example; informal networks between the young people to arrange a night out.

The village appraisal report was perceived as an information resource on Wooler, as were the various tourism studies that had been commissioned from consultants. Northumberland Association of Local Councils, Berwick Borough Council, and the Community Council of Northumberland were all seen as sources of information and advice for the conduct and furtherance of the village appraisal and its proposals. "We use the Berwick Borough council for everything that we can use them for. We get them free ... They paid for consultants to come in and do a feasibility study on the building ..." said one of the group in relation to the development of Padgepool Place.

Main types of information discussed

'What's on' information for larger centres in the region is readily available either directly, or from local shops, hotels, library, or the Tourist Information Centre. This includes both cultural events such as theatres, concerts and cinemas, and sporting activities, such as swimming pools and ice rinks. Information for visitors on the region and its attractions also seems easy to find in the hotels, the caravan site, or from the TIC.

Information about Wooler and its activities is mainly advertised via posters in shops. This was not thought to be adequate, hence the need for a newsletter, and part of the argument in the village appraisal for an integrated community facility. Local history records and maps are kept in the library, and were thought to be well-used by the local history group.

Information on the adult education courses available in Wooler, and in the other major centres in the north part of the County is delivered to each house. A recurrent theme about doing courses was the need for 'study' information - background reading and research activities - which was not well catered for in Wooler. The need for this type of information was also important for the young people.

CAB and benefits information was discussed, both in terms of the adult population, and for the young people, who were thought to need a type of junior CAB drop-in centre. "I'm sure it wouldn't just limit itself to controversial issues that were appropriate to young people .... it does have that information yes, I mean employment and further education prospects and ...." explained one of the group.

Bus timetables (and information on train times) were raised a few times, mainly in terms of problems with the information.

Recognised gaps or problems in provision

The village appraisal identified a problem with local/community information: there is no central point in the village where coffee mornings, whist drives, and the like could be advertised. Wooler does not have an 'official' noticeboard, nor do the many public halls in the

town have noticeboards, or a 'drop-in' culture that would make them obvious places to seek out information.

The limited nature of the library in Wooler was a major concern. It is now open 15 hours a week, on three days, which is a reduction on the service a few years ago. As opening hour decisions are understood to be based on the number of issues, the situation is "self-defeating, because the less hours it's open the less potential there is to get books out, so there's cuts again". The hours were thought to be difficult for those who work (they would like lunchtime and after work opening) and for the High School pupils whose school bus only arrives back in Wooler while the library is still open on one evening a week.

Studying in the Wooler library (using reference books, searching out information etc) is a particular problem for the school age children, and for those pursuing adult education courses and training. "Well .... there is an information section, which I don't think is very good" said a member of the group. This was both in terms of the number of reference books and the age of the stock. It is possible to order books from other libraries, but then you have to wait: "they will try and get books for you if you ask them, but again you've got to wait. If it was homework it would have to be handed in before the book was ever produced".

There are difficulties with the personal information/advice services available to people in Wooler. The group perceived a need for information and advice for young people, a sort of junior CAB, a service which had been provided at one time by the visiting Youth Project caravan, but which was no longer thought to visit Wooler. The nearest permanent CAB offices are in Berwick or Alnwick; difficulties in the

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public transport service led one of the group to outline an anecdote about one person who had to leave his interview with the CAB half way through so as to catch the bus back, leaving him with his query unanswered. An intermittent outreach service from both the CAB and the Benefits Office visits Wooler, parking their caravans in the town, or using a table in the library. Neither of these were thought to provide the privacy that most people would demand: "There will be several people sitting in the cars [where the caravan parks] who will notice, and think, 'oh, now why do they want to go ...?' It doesn't sort of encourage people to use these sort of things". And the perceived lack of demand for these outreach services might lead to further cuts.

Information on the bus times came in for criticism. A number of bus companies serve Wooler, and an integrated bus timetable has been produced. Getting hold of this in the winter (out of the tourist season) was thought by some to be a problem, although it seemed that a local shop had recently started to stock them. The main problem with the timetable is the design, and the number of difficult-to-read small notes that accompany it: "Mind you, if you can read the timetable, there's that many little stars and wiggles ... to work out what this little star meant, and this little wiggle, what that meant". In order to get information over the phone, you would have to ring each of the bus companies to get information on all the services.

Problems also occur because intermediary contacts are used, instead of interested people receiving information directly. Hence the training provider who had written to hundreds of organisations to advertise their Management Course, but had not necessarily reached those interested in attending. This had happened to a member of the discussion group, who

heard of the course, not through work at all, but from a friend who had done the course the year before.

Individual strategies adopted to get around problems

Asking the neighbours, or looking in the yellow pages is a strategy adopted for information on the existence of a service: where is the nearest ice rink, and so on. The neighbours might also be asked for information on opening times, or you would telephone. Telephones are used for specific information needs: "if you are wanting just basic information - bus times or anything like that" said one of the group; "Railway stations as well, you just automatically ring them to find out times" said another. However, the group gave estimates for phone ownership in Wooler that ranged from 50% to 75% of households, suggesting that there are a substantial number of residents who don't have this option.

In the absence of an efficient means of advertising local information, posters are displayed in local shops, and existing groups and societies are used to pass information on.

Because Wooler library is seen as offering very limited study facilities, those who can would use Berwick library for more specialist and newer reference material. One member of the group said that she would rather travel to Berwick than order it and have to wait.

Ideas on how to improve provision

Although information did not feature in its own right in the village appraisal report, it was reported as very important to the concept of the new community centre. Many of the problems and issues outlined above would be resolved if and when Padgepool Place was developed.

What is proposed is a new community centre in an existing, somewhat derelict building that originally housed the Glendale Rural District Council, and now belongs to Berwick District Council. The idea is to create an integrated centre for both tourists and the local community, that will incorporate all the rather disparate community facilities presently available in Wooler, and services such as the library and the CAB. One of the aims of this integrated venture is to create economies of scale so that present services might be improved. For example, "the idea was that it might be possible to have it [the library] open for more hours if it was somewhere like that, where one person might be in to stamp books, and hand out maps .." Bringing all these services together also makes the introduction of a 'telecentre' facility more viable.

This large, multi-purpose facility will also warrant some catering - a coffee shop, for example. Padgepool Place hence will become a focus for the town for many services, and people will tend to drop in. This will then be the ideal place for advertising local events, and carrying a wide range of information - some of it provided electronically. It also aims to get around the present problems for the personal advice services: private consultation rooms can be provided, and people can visit the centre for this purpose without it being obvious to other residents where they are going.

A further proposal is for a drop in centre for young people, in one of the buildings that will be made redundant by the development of Padgepool

Place. This would be well-staffed, but have an informal atmosphere. It would carry information on a wide range of subjects for young people, from drugs to jobs to training, and offer advice. Some information would be in the form of leaflets and posters, but much would come from the staff: "Obviously they couldn't give them an answer to every question, but they could point them in the right direction to find out".

Funding has been secured to proceed with a newsletter for Glendale: this includes the acquisition of a computer and a commitment to provide public access to this facility. It is hoped that this will ultimately be part of the Padgepool Place development. The newsletter is to serve two main purposes: to promote the activities of the Glendale Gateway Trust, and in particular the development of Padgepool Place; and to provide local information on organisations and activities. The newsletter will cover Wooler and its rural hinterland which makes up Glendale. Local representatives are being sought who will act as agents to collect information from the local clubs and societies and feed this to the newsletter co-ordinator. These people will also be used to sell the newsletter in their locality.

Wooler as an information collector

The village appraisal team had obviously collected much information from the residents about community needs. In the discussion there was a fair amount of self-criticism - they could now see how they could have collected far better information. One of the areas was the design of the questionnaire - they had a lot of incomplete forms which they felt was to do with a number of questions not being relevant to some groups, and a

lack of consistency over the requested responses. They also felt that a lot more information about telecentre usage would have been helpful.

Computers/telecentres

Computers were a frequently mentioned topic in the discussion. The village appraisal found that 17% of households have a computer or fax machine at home; these are predominantly in the young households, where 40% have equipment at home. 70% of the young households said that they would use a telecentre in Wooler, with study/education (including a strong information component) as an important reason: "If they haven't got a computer in the home ... they do tend to do their homework on computers, or a lot of their coursework. And therefore they [those without computers] are restricted at school".

The vision is of a telecentre incorporated into the Padgepool Place development. It would be used for a range of purposes: for tourist information; for access to information services to complement the library service; for training and study; to produce the newsletter; to provide business information and support; and for practical computing experience and qualifications.

Funding is already available for a publicly accessible computer with internet connection in order to produce the newsletter. Padgepool Place offers basic accommodation at present, but obviously still needs to be developed to provide the proposed focus for the community. The computer certainly cannot be housed there during the conversion work, and will need to be relocated to another public building. First thoughts

by the discussion group on possible sites generated the following responses:

Q   The library?

A   Not very accessible.

Q   The middle school?

A   Closed during all school holidays. .... So it's even worse than the library, really. ..... Possibly the Mechanics Institute. .... Possibly, that is a possibility.

Another computer-related proposal in the village appraisal is for the youth clubs in the region. The young people are known to want more contact with other groups of young people, and among suggestions for joint activities is the creation of a computer network between the clubs, connecting the youngsters via EMail. This has met with enthusiasm from the young people. The motives for pursuing this are partly to help the social interactions of the young people, and partly to develop their confidence in the use of computers and the internet.

The discussion also exposed a little known fact: that the Middle School in Wooler has a computer (with internet connection) which is available for use by members of the public. This was thought to be available on a drop in basis, rather than as part of a course. It seems that locals are not aware of this 'telecentre' facility.

Information is ....?

This section analyses what people in Wooler meant when they talked about information: its parameters, its association with purpose, its important attributes, and so on.

The discussion group was keen to stress the importance of key activists in the community in spreading information, and their personal attributes. For instance, "if you have someone working in a community role who is fairly proactive and will go round knocking on doors and is prepared to say, 'look, do you know this course is on, I thought you might be interested' a lot of the success of the thing hinges on that". The Berwick youth drop in centre had impressed the group and influenced their ideas for a drop in centre of their own. But it was recognised that they were not only impressed with the project, but with the manager: "He's very good. It depends who you have as well".

Residents in general are important in terms of knowing certain things, and of knowing who would know. Some people have specific roles in the community, and act in this capacity to pass information on - for example, existing groups in Wooler were used to alert people to the public meeting at the start of the village appraisal. The newsletter committee is identifying local agents who have an information collection role in their locality and a newsletter delivery role. The need for professional help with information and advice was particularly prominent in discussions about young people.

Information is closely related to education and study. One of the group said of information, "that's part and parcel of education .... Isn't it being

able to retain information? It's all part of that process of learning - access to information". A fair proportion of the discussion was about studying: in relation to adult education courses, in relation to school children, in relation to the proposed telecentre, and in relation to the library. In terms of the library service it was clear that this should be important to studying and information, although the group was highly critical of the present facilities.

Information is perceived in a wide range of ways. It is something that should be available when you needed it, such as for studying; it is something the community has, such as consultant's reports and the village appraisal; it is something you want to collect, but that could prove elusive if you do not design your questions well enough; it is something that could be used to help bond a community - this was part of the rationale for the Glendale newsletter. Some information is confidential, and the fact of seeking that information needs to be kept private as well. There is something you could call 'basic information' such as the times of buses.

The village appraisal and Berwick District Council have a common purpose in developing Padgepool Place. This means that the community's information needs (and other needs) to develop this facility are readily met, or even dealt with 'for them'. They are finding it more difficult to generate the 'information' and associated commitment from organisations over the hours and space that each would use in the proposed centre, information that is needed for the business plan for the funding application.

A criticism of the library made it clear that information is needed not only for a purpose, but at a specific time: "if you have got homework for one

evening to hand in the next day and you want some information you can't get it. Not from that library anyway".

Information is something that could be enhanced in some circumstances by integrating provision, and in others by focusing and targeting provision. The new Padgepool Place centre is envisaged, among other things, as an integrated information centre for tourist information, community information, the library, the CAB and so on, with indications that some boundaries will be crossed: the telecentre providing information for a number of these outlets, for instance, and centre staff hopefully keeping the library open longer. Within this, though, it is recognised that some of this must be kept separate and private - CAB activities for example. The information service for young people is perceived very differently: this needs to be targeted specifically at young people, and focused on their needs, and their ways of getting information.

The presentation of information is important. The customer's needs should be given prominence here: the published timetable goes some way in integrating all the bus service information - something wanted by a Wooler resident, and missing if you ring a bus company for information. But in so doing it makes the information very difficult to read. Presentation is also important when eliciting information, and the village appraisal questionnaire was known to have put a number of people off because of the lack of consistency for requested responses, and because of the irrelevance of some of the questions to certain sections of the community.

• to ascertain the nature and needs of rural microbusinesses; and. • to understand their existing relationships with business support agencies and where these relationships could be usefully developed. 1.3 Research design. Thirdly, an investigation into the role of rural microbusinesses in the local economy. This element of the work was conducted through a series of case studies of microbusiness communities and was funded by the University of Newcastle. The findings have been presented within the CRE Working Paper, State Sponsored Formalisation and Transformation of Small Business Networks: Evidence from the North East of England (Laschewski et al., 2001). Part I: Current situation and needs of rural youth. Regional trends Main issues affecting rural youth. For most developing countries the last decade has been one of increasing difficulty -declining living standards, unemployment, deteriorating services, social unrest and political instability. But despite longer life expectancy and reduced infant mortality, attitudes which have developed over centuries do not change so quickly. Social reliance on large families is still strong in most parts of the world as it was in the West until this present generation. Population growth is often singled out as one of the main negative factors in any approach to developing sustainable agricultural and rural development programmes.