



EVALUATION OF THE CONNECTING RURAL SOMERSET PROJECT

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1. Introduction

This evaluation report was requested by the Connecting Somerset project manager as part of the end of project documentation. It will form part of the final submission to Rural Renaissance.

The Connecting Rural Somerset (CRS) project was a part of the Connecting Somerset programme. The project was a partnership between Somerset County Council, the Rural Renaissance scheme and other local partners, such as Business Link and the Somerset Skills Alliance. The project provided match funding to small rural businesses that wished to adopt new Information and Communication Technology (ICT). The project ran from March 2006 to July 2007.

By adopting new technologies it was hoped that these businesses would be able to boost their e-commerce activity and aid in creating greater dynamism in the rural economy of Somerset and thus increase the rate of small business growth and survival within rural Somerset. Through investment in new technologies many businesses were able to reach customers without the need for relocation. As a result the project has added a lot to the competitiveness, attractiveness, and sustainability of Somerset's rural communities.

The CRS Project had two sides: it provided advice and delivered grants. The funding for the CRS project came from the European Social Fund, the South West Regional Development Agency and Somerset County Council. The businesses helped contribute to the programme by investing their time and resources and taking an active role in their development.

2. The Background & Research

The CRS project was launched after research was carried out by the Somerset Broadband Team but it was not specific to rural areas. One of the main problems with the CRS project was that the specific research about the rural areas was done in February 2007, almost 1 year after the beginning of the CRS project, however during this time, the research completed for Connecting Somerset was analysed and used to aid in the delivery of the CRS project. If the specific research for the CRS project was done before, the results could possibly have been even better than they were.

The CRS project really did not do anything particularly different from the Connecting Somerset Programme; it was simply the transfer of the programme to rural areas except for a requirement to increase digital inclusion in rural areas. However, the results have proven that there was a need for the Connecting Somerset project to adopt a more rural flavour so as to reach businesses in rural areas.

The purpose of the research was to understand the best way in which to help businesses to improve their ICT. The main problem was the lack of understanding that businesses in rural areas had about the benefits of new technologies. The businesses could also be put off by the financial aspects of

the new technologies. Businesses were concerned about the staff time required to set up and administer e-commerce, security, and the complexity of these new technologies.

It was also evident that businesses didn't want one off financial assistance but also advice and long term support.

3. The marketing of the project

Video case studies, highlighting businesses which had successfully employed new technologies, were used to encourage other businesses to move forward and improve their ICT. This approach was successful in engaging with rural businesses: businesses knew all about the project, and could be convinced of the advantages of utilising new technologies.

To identify the rural businesses, and to separate them from the others, the team divided Somerset into 3 zones:

- Urban zone (not covered by the Connecting Rural Somerset project)
- Rural Zone (CRS1)
- Very rural zone (CRS2)

The Rural Renaissance definition of rural areas and postcodes were used to identify which businesses could be helped.

There was no specific marketing for the CRS project; it relied upon direct marketing from the Connecting Somerset Project.

Marketing took the form of e-mails, newsletters, PR activity, workshops, and exhibitions etc. The main difficulty was having a constant presence in the local newspapers. Overall, the marketing of the project was without a doubt a success.

4. The help provided

The CRS team provided help delivering grant and advice.

There were 5 steps which could be taken:

- Step 1: Broadband internet connection, e-mail and web browsing
- Step 2: A basic website (not easily updated by businesses)
- Step 3: A flexible website (easily updated by businesses)
- Step 4: On-line selling (website with a payment mechanism for example)
- Step 5: E-Business Integration (involving businesses to manage their operation electronically)

The grants given by the Connecting Rural Somerset project were available to any businesses based in rural Somerset. To receive grant funding, the only condition was that a business be within an identified rural area. The grants were offered against the 5 steps, businesses were able to apply for one or more of those steps.

If a business has not received more than 100,000 Euros of funding within the past 3 years, they can apply for a grant. The grant funding is 'match funding': It means that the businesses pay 50% and the CRS project pay 50%, the grant for each step was capped at £500 (*please see annexe 1 about funding*).

A team of business advisers was able to offer free assistance and advice to businesses that wished to utilise new technologies and solutions.

The Connecting Rural Somerset project also produced a publication, called "The Internet and Me", which highlighted the benefits and advantages to getting online for non business users. It was aimed at helping alleviate people's fears of technology and signpost them to local help and support. Through a combination of real life examples and quotes, and easily understandable advice this publication had a positive impact upon people who may feel excluded, the feedback that was gathered shows this (*please see annexe 2*).

The dominant demographic of the areas targeted by this magazine was people between 55-70 years of age, therefore the style and language is somewhat tailored to suit older people, this is not to say that the information and advice on offer will not appeal to people above and below this age group who wish to take steps to get themselves online.

5. The results

There are about 3,377 businesses located in the very rural areas and 11,573 in the rural areas of Somerset. These were divided into the 5 Somerset districts.

The results were very encouraging with the project successfully hitting all of the targets that were initially planned and providing a real impetus for the rural economy.

In fact, all the targets have even been surpassed; (*please see annexe 3*)

The initial target was 96 businesses to be helped and to date; more than 170 businesses have received help and advice from the CRS project.

All the targets were achieved by October 2006, except for 'The Internet and Me' publication which started later than the others targets but which hit its targets in December 2006. In fact, instead of the 300 copies that were planned, it had actually delivered 1437 copies by January 2007.

In total, £85,000 in grant funding has been fully paid to businesses, the all 5 districts being helped (*please see annexe 4 for details*).

District	Number of businesses	Total amount of grant	Average grant by business
West Somerset	59	£22,971	£389
Taunton Dean	32	£18,015	£563
South Somerset	4	£1,627	£406

Sedgemoor District	38	£20,817	£548
Mendip District	41	£21,832	£532

6. The perceptions of the businesses

According to a survey sent on the 23rd August 2007 to businesses that received grant funding, advice and support 74% stated that they were *very satisfied* with the service they received through the CRS project. (*please see annexe 5*). It was discovered that 84% of the businesses that responded to the questionnaire felt that new technologies were *very important* to rural areas.

The CRS project has convinced 26% of business to improve their e-business capabilities. Almost half have noticed some moderate or major increases in their efficiency and would like to make further changes in their e-business capabilities.

Consequently, businesses wished to further develop their ICT, 52% still would like to make further changes to their e-business capabilities; proof that there is perhaps a future role for a similar project to Connecting Rural Somerset in any other future developments. No respondents stated that it is not important or not important at all: so it would seem that rural businesses would be willing to adopt future developments in new technologies.

Nevertheless, where we can be sure of the increases in ICT level and e-commerce activity, we are as yet unable to measure any changes in the creation of a greater and sustainable dynamism in the economy. This will perhaps become measurable in a years time after the end of the project.

Another difficulty perceived by the businesses was with regard to the consultations, it was actually difficult to adapt the content of the courses to the need of the businesses. During the courses, the balance was difficult to find between general knowledge in ICT and specific requirements. The solution could be to spend more time directly with the businesses after the initial support.

The main concerns of the businesses seem to be about security. They want to know themselves how to solve a problem, to be sure that their data is secure. The courses that were available were thought to be well presented, but did not cover issues to enough depth.

Conclusion:

We can state that the strategic objectives defined by under the Rural Renaissance scheme were reached. Many of the businesses helped were part of the Tourism and Food & Drink sectors.

It can also be stated that the vast majority of businesses that have engaged with the Connecting Rural Somerset Project have improved their technical level of ICT. Broadband and website assistance was the most

popular type of assistance that was requested. Businesses having this form of assistance were then able to reach customers not only in their locality, but also elsewhere in the Country and even the world.

The research, showed that the main difficulties were practical points which the CRS project could help with, rather than a point of principles.

Two options could be taken: the first is to develop direct contact with businesses to help them to understand progressively how to manage their ICT technologies; the second is to encourage businesses to entrust the running of their e-technologies to ICT hosting companies.

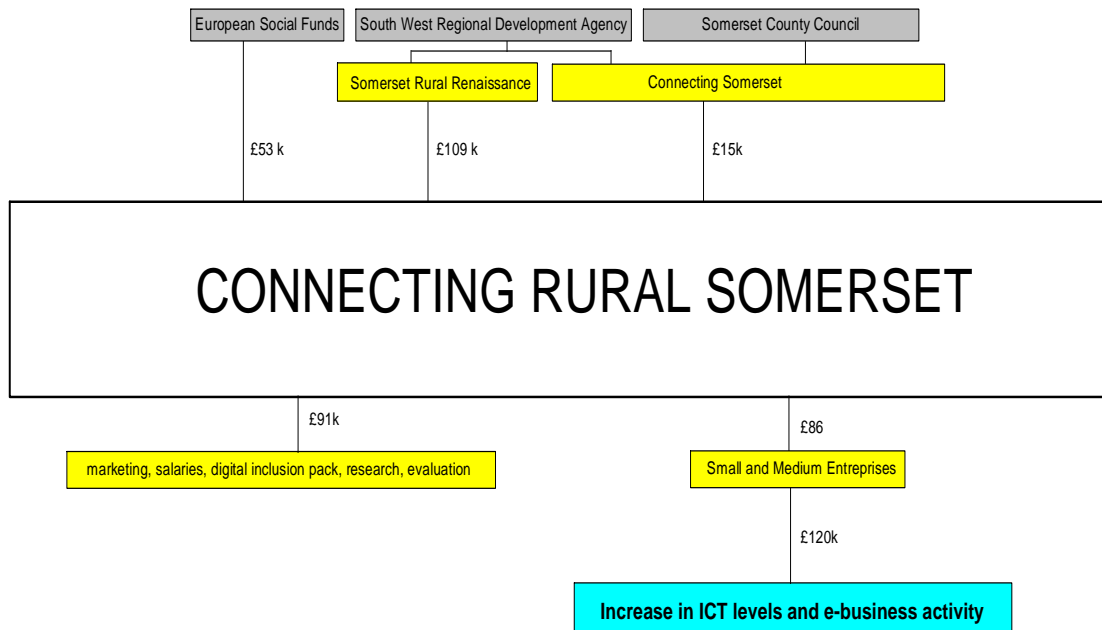
But it can be stated that a second project such as the Connecting Rural Somerset project could work well in these rural areas, still with a direct contact with companies and not only financial assistance.

To conclude, it can be said that CRS has given a real impetus for rural businesses to take the initiative with respect to ICT development and adoption.

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I. FUNDING



II. Feedback DIP (as of 14/03/07)

How useful have you found this publication?			Are you more likely to use the internet than you were before?			Are you more likely to take part in some kind of computer training than you were before?		
Very	49	89%	Yes	50	91%	Yes	47	85%
Slightly	6	11%	No	4	7%	No	5	9%
Not at all			No response	1	2%	No response	3	6%

III. TARGETS REACHED

	Target	Achieved
Businesses supported	96	164
E-adoption steps taken	150	263
Employed people assisted in skills development	48	76
Jobs created	0.6	0.6
People receiving the Digital Inclusion Pack	300	1437

IV. ACTIONS BY DISTRICT

West Somerset District Council (Connecting Rural Somerset)

Broadband Steps that have been claimed: 36
 Static Website Steps that have been claimed: 22
 Dynamic Website Steps that have been claimed: 22
 Ecommerce Website Steps that have been claimed: 08
 Ebusiness Steps that have been claimed: 02

59 businesses in total

Claims - Total Paid: £22,971.81
 Grant as a percentage of businesses investment: 27.53%

Taunton Deane Borough Council (Connecting Rural Somerset)

Broadband Steps that have been claimed: 14
 Static Website Steps that have been claimed: 17
 Dynamic Website Steps that have been claimed: 17
 Ecommerce Website Steps that have been claimed: 06
 Ebusiness Steps that have been claimed: 03

32 businesses in total

Claims - Total Paid: £18,015.27
 Grant as a percentage of businesses investment: 44.17%

South Somerset District Council (Connecting Rural Somerset)

Broadband Steps that have been claimed: 02
Static Website Steps that have been claimed: 02
Dynamic Website Steps that have been claimed: 02
Ecommerce Website Steps that have been claimed: 01
Ebusiness Steps that have been claimed: 00

4 businesses in total

Claims - Total Paid: £1,627.55
Grant as a percentage of businesses investment: 27.62%

Sedgemoor District Council (Connecting Rural Somerset)

Broadband Steps that have been claimed: 14
Static Website Steps that have been claimed: 19
Dynamic Website Steps that have been claimed: 23
Ecommerce Website Steps that have been claimed: 09
Ebusiness Steps that have been claimed: 05

38 businesses in total

Claims - Total Paid: £20,817.60
Grant as a percentage of businesses investment: 41.90%

Mendip District Council (Connecting Rural Somerset)

Broadband Steps that have been claimed: 19
Static Website Steps that have been claimed: 21
Dynamic Website Steps that have been claimed: 23
Ecommerce Website Steps that have been claimed: 09
Ebusiness Steps that have been claimed: 04

41 businesses in total

Claims - Total Paid: £21,832.28
Grant as a percentage of businesses investment: 40.14%

V. Connecting Rural Somerset Questionnaire results

Sent to 122 businesses on 23rd August 2007, 31 businesses answered.

1. Had you planned to develop your e-business capabilities before you found out about the Connecting Somerset project?

YES	71 %
NO	26 %
No opinion	3 %

2. Do you think that new technologies are important in rural areas?

Very important	84 %
Important	13 %
Quite important	0 %
Not important at all	0 %
No opinion	3 %

3. Which E-Adoption step were you assisted with?

Broadband, E-mail and web browsing	39 %
Basic Website	35 %
Flexible Website	32 %
Online selling	19 %
E-Business	19 %

4. How satisfied were you with the product and the company you chose deliver it?

a) Functionalities

Very satisfied	55 %
Satisfied	39 %
Dissatisfied	0 %
Very dissatisfied	6 %
No opinion	0 %

b) Ease of use

Very satisfied	48 %
Satisfied	45 %
Dissatisfied	0 %
Very dissatisfied	7 %
No opinion	0 %

c) Support (service and staff availability, responsiveness, time taken)

Very satisfied	39 %
Satisfied	35 %
Dissatisfied	6 %
Very dissatisfied	10 %
No opinion	10 %

5. How satisfied were you in your contact with the Connecting Somerset team, with respect to the issues listed below?

a) Communication regarding the project

Very satisfied	68 %
Satisfied	29 %
Dissatisfied	0 %
Very dissatisfied	3 %
No opinion	0 %

b) Responsiveness to your requirements

Very satisfied	65 %
Satisfied	26 %
Dissatisfied	0 %
Very dissatisfied	3 %
No opinion	6 %

c) Consultations

Very satisfied	42 %
Satisfied	36 %
Dissatisfied	3 %
Very dissatisfied	3 %
No opinion	16 %

d) Overall

Very satisfied	74 %
Satisfied	16 %
Dissatisfied	0 %
Very dissatisfied	3 %
No opinion	7 %

6. Have you seen any increases in your turnover or efficiency since receiving your Connecting Somerset (CRS) funding?

Major increase	10 %
Moderate increases	39 %
Small increases	19 %
No increases	26 %
No idea/answer	6 %

7. Would you look to make further changes to your e-business capabilities?

Yes	52 %
No	29 %
No answer	19 %

8. Are you satisfied with your companies' current information and communication technologies (ICT)?

Very satisfied	3 %
Satisfied	77 %
Dissatisfied	7 %
Very dissatisfied	3 %
No opinion	10 %