Internet
The flexibility of fast broadband

Outside my flat there is a large billboard encouraging customers to sign up for "the mother of all broadband". It offers speeds of up to 20 megabits per second and the possibility of 50mbps in the near future – much faster than current connections, which typically operate at about 8mbps. BT recently announced plans to give 10 million homes and businesses speeds of up to 40mbps – five times faster than the current average – and some owners of newly built homes could get up to 100mbps. For the third sector, this presents real opportunities, but also throws up some challenges.

At a time when people are feeling the credit crunch and trying to reduce their carbon footprints, next-generation access could facilitate more home working and improve video conferencing with colleagues. By reducing travel costs, NGA could make flexible working a reality for more people.

I can see the business and consumer benefits of faster broadband connections (for example, multiplayer online gaming and faster downloads for music or TV programmes), but the social applications of this technology remain relatively untried and untested.

A consultation by Ofcom in 2006 recognised this when it said "the majority of the applications and services generally proposed for next-generation access are entertainment services that may result in limited incremental social benefit". The Broadband Stakeholder Group, a UK industry and government forum that looks at broadband-related strategies, echoed this recently when it said that "so far, there is limited evidence of significant social welfare being derived from next-generation access networks or services".

I'd like to see charities give some serious thought to how they can use NGA to innovate. It could be used to facilitate remote health monitoring and consultations, mentoring and befriending schemes, home and community security initiatives, lifelong learning programmes and much more.

Because of the high investment costs required to build a UK-wide NGA network, roll-out is likely to happen in phases. Charities therefore need to think about how they could use this technology. They also need effectively to state the case for why they need these higher bandwidths, or whether services can be delivered by improving the reliability and consistency of today’s broadband.

If the sector doesn’t do this, there’s a risk that businesses and certain consumer types will be at the front of the queue, with charities lingering near the back. I’m sure the sector doesn’t want to see that happen.

Rosie Walker

Medium and message
Action for Children has created an animated online drama written by young people for its latest campaign

Trapped: the series follows four teenagers stuck in a school

As part of a campaign to develop the emotional resilience of young people, Action for Children has produced an animated online drama series about children trapped in a building.

Three young writers aged between 11 and 14 worked with drama writer Lucia Haynes to develop the scripts for the eight-part drama. Trapped, in which four teenage friends break into their old school before its scheduled demolition. When the roof collapses, trapping the teenagers, their friendship is tested.

Greg Vines, head of communications at Action for Children, says an online drama can be broadcast sooner than a TV script and is young people’s preferred way to access information. "It also gives the young people writing it more confidence, and develops their imagination and planning skills," he says.

The three children who helped write the drama are being supported by the charity’s Knowsly Family Intervention Project, based near Liverpool. "When they came to us they were quite nervous, insecure young people who had not been able to commit to projects like this and didn’t have adults to take them anywhere," says Vines. "But now they have enough confidence in their writing skills to feel that they can write a CV or approach their homework differently."

The series is being broadcast online and can be downloaded to mobile phones. Liverpool-based animators and actors worked on the films.

Rosie Walker

Site Visit www.housing-rights.info

The Housing Associations’ Charitable Trust aims to identify solutions to housing problems and the Chartered Institute of Housing is the trade body for housing professionals.

Development
The two organisations received a grant from the Communities and Local Government department to set up the site, which provides advice on housing to new arrivals to the country and people involved in providing advice to them. The site was launched in September after a development period of a year.

Design and content
The site is not pretty. The organisations have gone for a text-only design and the focus is on providing information rather than trying to impress potential supporters. The result is that it looks rather ugly, but it is clear and easy to use, and the various areas of the site are well flagged up and organised.

The home page includes two large buttons at the top of the screen indicating the areas of the site that are for advisers and for new arrivals themselves. It makes sense to provide this distinction.

Andy Ricketts

The content of the site is where it excels. The information that is provided here cannot be faulted. It also explains some complex things in simple English for the benefit of those who may not have a very good command of the language.

Special features
The site includes a search function powered by Google. It makes finding specific items on the site easier and will be a useful feature.

The CIH says:
"One of the most common problems that housing professionals meet in dealing with housing inquiries from migrants is not knowing whether they have any entitlement to housing or homelessness assistance. This web resource should fill the gap."

Andy Ricketts

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