



WILTSHIRE & SWINDON SMARTPLACE PROGRAMME END PROJECT REPORT

Project name Business Theme

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Author:	Andrew Poulton
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Introduction

1. The Wiltshire & Swindon SmartPlace Programme developed from the decision in June 2002 by a range of public and voluntary sector partners in Wiltshire and Swindon to work together with BT to secure the benefits of broadband and related technology for the people and organisations of Wiltshire and Swindon. The programme aimed to maximise the benefits from ICT and broadband technology for businesses, learners and communities across Wiltshire and Swindon bringing benefits for all sectors, both public and private, and voluntary and community, in a holistic way, with particular focus on delivering long term employability.

The programme comprised of five themes: Business Development, Learning & Skills, Community Capacity Building, Broadband Infrastructure, and Marketing. Each of these themes was implemented by means of a series of individual projects which, when taken as a whole realised the aims and objectives of the programme. This project formed the Business Development theme.

Project Objectives

2. The objectives of this project were increase use of broadband by SMEs across Wiltshire and Swindon through the provision of business support. This support was delivered in several ways. Businesses were able to attend events across the county with the intention of raising the awareness of broadband and demonstrating the real benefits that it would bring to businesses who made use of the technology. A number of “drop in” demonstration centres were planned (Salisbury, Swindon and Trowbridge) allowing businesses to gain hands-on first-hand experience of broadband with advice, information and support available from experienced Business Link ICT advisers. This advice was available by telephone, attendance at short (45 minute clinics) and through more intensive sessions, possibly culminating in the business applying for a grant made available by the project. The grants were 50% match funded, to a maximum grant of £1000 and were for businesses seeking to carry out a broadband related activity which would enhance their business, applicable where a business looked to improve their IT infrastructure to deliver broadband technologies to staff or looked to develop interactive websites (ecommerce for example). However, the grants could not be used to cover broadband installation and running costs, new computer workstations (whether desk-top or laptop) nor could they be used for the development of simple websites.

Project Deliverables

3.
 - 3 Broadband Experience Centres
 - 3 broadband / ICT events per experience centre per year to cover the business benefits of broadband and the deployment of smarter working practices through the use of e-technologies.
 - 9 clinic days per experience centre per year to deliver one 2 one advice on broadband and e-technology issues.
 - 300 half day intensive advice sessions.
 - disbursement of £100,000 grant funding through 50% match funded grant opportunity

Achievement Against Objectives & Deliverables

4. Two experience Centres located in LearnDirect Centres in Salisbury and Swindon were opened as scheduled. However, there were issues associated with finding suitable premises within budget in Trowbridge and consequently this centre was delayed. This was beneficial to the program because it became apparent from early on that although the centres were excellent for the delivery of on-line learning, businesses were unlikely just to “drop in” for a demonstration of broadband and related technologies. As a consequence of this, the focus for Trowbridge was changed and 2 portable centres were procured, allowing demonstrations and training to take place in more

remote locations, enabling the SmartPlace program to be taken to the clients rather than the other way around,

By June 30 2005, 14 Broadband and ICT related events had taken place, engaging with 261 businesses. These events promoted broadband from a business perspective, raising awareness of the “real world” business benefits of broadband, in that it was much more than just “faster internet”

By this time, the awareness of broadband through all marketing routes was significantly higher than at the commencement of the project, the subscription rate to broadband had exceeded the project target and consequently the decision was taken not to carry out any further events based on the fact that targets had been achieved and the volume of information available to businesses meant that the events were no longer required.

Because the Experience Centres were being increasingly used for learning, they became an unsuitable venue for the delivery of the 45 minute clinic sessions. Consequently the decision was made to conduct these clinics at the Business Link offices in the relevant locations (Salisbury, Swindon and Trowbridge). To date 185 businesses have benefited from attending one of these sessions, being provided with concise information and advice on broadband and e-technology related issues by an experienced Business Link ICT adviser.

171 Intensive business advice sessions have been delivered directly and 125 grants have been disbursed. The grant budget of £100,000 has been successfully allocated and with each grant recipient also being entitled to a half day advice session, the target for intensive advice will have been met by the time the final grants have been claimed.

Conclusions

5. The Business Theme of the Wiltshire and Swindon SmartPlace Partnership Swindon has achieved all of the targets as laid out at the initiation of the project – taking in to account slight adjustments to targets and aims reflected in the learning gathered as the project progressed. The grant has leveraged an additional £350,000 spending by Wiltshire based businesses, leading to a total investment of over £450,000 in broadband and e-technology improvements by Wiltshire businesses. The majority of this spend has been with Wiltshire based suppliers, closing the loop and achieving the aim of improving the Wiltshire economy.

Events, marketing and advice sessions have greatly increased the business awareness of the advantages of broadband related technologies and this is demonstrated by a broadband subscription rate which is not only above the regional average but also above the national average.

However, experience has proven that businesses are unlikely to visit “drop in” centres unless an event has been laid on with a particular theme. Consequently the move of the Experience Centres from a business to learning focus was wise and investment in a portable service is proving to be beneficial by taking broadband demonstration and access to learning opportunities out in to the broader community.

Recommendations

6. The overall success of the business theme and the ongoing demand for information, advice and funding demonstrates that there is an ongoing demand for ICT and e-technology / e-business advice and support across the businesses of Wiltshire. Also, information gathered through meetings with non SmartPlace related clients and at ICT related events highlights the fact that there are still a great many businesses that are lacking in both awareness and implementation of ICT and e-business best practice and consequently are at risk from more ICT literate competitors both inside and outside of the county. Consequently all efforts should be made to secure follow on funding so that initiatives developed as a result of SmartPlace can continue to benefit Wiltshire businesses and enhance the Wiltshire economy.