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CLES bulletin is a topical summary of articles which have appeared in the professional press. Its aim is to provide a pithy précis of a subject area, drawing out the specific and common issues raised in the individual articles.

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ICT and Regeneration

In the midst of the digital age, it would be difficult for many of us to imagine life without the internet, email or a computer, yet many people in deprived areas are still without access to Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). Media interest in this topic has highlighted the relationship between ICT and regeneration, raising questions about how ICT can help to drive regeneration and whether or not the sector is aware of the potential of this medium. These are just some of the issues looked at in this Bulletin.

Regeneration and Renewal magazine[1] highlights the benefits of ICT to the regeneration sector suggesting that a clear, well-designed website can help boost an organisation's image, spread its message, collect feedback and provide access to enormous amounts of disparate information.

It reports that although many voluntary and community websites are flourishing, there can be difficulty in getting through to people in the community as websites produced tend to be more business and stakeholder orientated. However it also notes that the launch of the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit's website, *renewal.net,* has stepped up the pace for the regeneration sector.

Regeneration and Renewal draws attention to the limits of ICT, showing that many community groups find

that although their websites are a useful source of information it is difficult to develop them as interactive sites and many groups still get more response from direct contact such as community meetings or phone calls.

It concludes that although the potential of ICT is apparent, when it comes to community regeneration, it is clear that websites can only work in partnerships with other forms of information sharing, debate and discussion, and direct contact is still a useful and valued form of communication.

Inclusion magazine[2] provides a case study illustrating how ICT is helping to drive regeneration in Manchester. It describes Eastserve, an interactive website connecting neighbourhoods in Manchester as part of the New Deal for Communities (NDC) initiative. It helps to promote many of the NDC objectives by drawing long term unemployed people into training and jobs, encouraging those who are without a bank account or credit rating to save, and getting people who have been hard to reach involved in new initiatives.

Eastserve's first aim was to provide residents with computers and internet access. The equipment is supplied by ITEM, a local community enterprise that collects and recycles redundant computers and buys new ones in bulk to sell at a large discount. Many people can't afford the £200 to buy a new computer so East Manchester Credit Union (EMCU) arranges loans, and in the process takes on new customers and introduces them to the benefits of saving.

It has had a considerable impact on local people and the NDC programme and it is confident that by the time the funding runs out in 2004, it will be an integral, self-standing part of the community.

New Urban Futures[3] notes that digital technology appears to have been largely left out of the urban policy agenda. It argues that access to digital technology, its take-up and its effective use are part of the competitive advantage of any city, however it is not being made available in poorer areas. It identifies three main reasons why this is a problem:

❶ The digital infrastructure is being created almost entirely by and for the private sector, with only occasional nods to public policy goals.

❷ The infrastructure is being constructed to serve largely economic goals – any social or environmental benefits that could be derived

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[1] Schopen, Fay *Making the web work* Regeneration and Renewal 17 Jan 2003 pp.20-21

[2] Lovell, Sara *Wired up and ready to go* Inclusion Issue 5 Spring 2003 pp.6-7

[3] Oakley, Kate *Urban policy needs to be wired up to the digital age* New Urban Futures 1 May 2003 p.7

will be add-ons, trickling down, assuming economic growth allows it.

❸ The urban policy agenda on a range of issues from skills, crime and education to the actual look and feel of our cities could benefit from a closer understanding of what digital technologies can offer, however urban policy and e-policy are distinctly separate.

It concludes that we need to bring policymakers, urbanists, planners and technologists together to start talking about what impact digital technologies will have on cities and more importantly what impact we want them to have.

Regional Studies[4] asks if information and communication technologies can really support regeneration? It reports that recent initiatives by the New Labour administration have brought together the role of ICT and regeneration and that concerns about the digital divide and social exclusion have been considered in the context of neighbourhood renewal and access to mainstream services, such as education, training and employment.

Regional Studies raises three aspects which have been rarely considered:

❶ The relationship between ICT and regeneration is vague and that value-laden judgements lie behind the idea of technology addressing complex matters of regeneration.

❷ The evidence base for evaluating local ICT providing a net benefit for communities is unsubstantiated.

❸ The political-administrative arrangements of and within ICT projects require serious attention.

Regional Studies concludes that the matter of ICT and regeneration and the policy implications surrounding it need to be given more serious consideration and analysis.

CLES Consulting recently produced a report for the Department for Education and Skills (DfES)[5], highlighting the key factors in supporting access to ICT for BME groups. The report analysed the needs necessary to improving access which included funding, ICT provision, effective partnership, research and sharing good practice.

The benefits of developing ICT in the regeneration sector seem clear, yet a key theme that has emerged is that ICT access currently appears to be primarily targeted towards the private sector. In order for the full potential of ICT in driving regeneration to be realised, there needs to be a clearer relationship between the two sectors and a more concerted effort to apply ICT to deprived areas thereby allowing their residents to reap the benefits.

For more information on this topic, please contact:

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[4] Southern, Alan *Can information and communication technologies support regeneration?* Regional Studies 36 (6) 2002 pp.697-702
[5] *Supporting access to ICT for BME groups in deprived areas: Approaches to good practice* DfES 2003, 111pp