THE CHARTER DATA PROJECT: BUILDING COMMUNITIES THROUGH INFORMATION + TECHNOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

The Charter Data Project was established to address the issues of information dissemination and access to social services in the local region of Charters Towers and Dalrymple Shire in North Queensland. By collecting, maintaining, distributing and publishing information about social services, Charter Data supports the community in the region by articulating who is doing what and where it is available. This facilitates community connections and creates an environment for ongoing networking. Community Information Strategies Australia (CISA) developed the software platform (CISA Infosearch) for the project database, and provided information management guidelines and community training. This case study will give an overview of the development of this phased project, its implementation, outcomes, and future issues.

BACKGROUND

Charters Towers is a rural community located within the Dalrymple Shire, North Queensland. Dalrymple Shire encompasses about 70,000km\(^2\), a geographic area larger than Tasmania. The population of 16,000 lives in vastly different circumstances dependant on their location within the Shire. About 10,000 residents live within Charters Towers, with the remaining 6,000 living in small isolated townships or on remote rural properties. Charters Towers owes a significant proportion of its historical development to the exploitation of its gold resources during the late 1800s and early 1900s. Gold mining is still an important contributor to the local economy as is beef production and its educational institutions. The City of Charters Towers is located at the epicentre of the Shire and is the service centre for the majority of people living within the Shire. Charters Towers is located 130km from the nearest regional centre, Townsville.

Community Information Strategies Australia (CISA) was established in 1981 and is the peak community information organisation in South Australia. CISA is a not-for-profit, non-government organization providing essential community, information, and information management services including software, consultancy and training.

Social service information is defined as anything anyone needs to know about everyday living. It covers a wide range of areas such as welfare and counselling services, employment assistance, health support groups, accommodation, legal services and recreational facilities.

THE NEED

Several different modes of social service delivery are evident in Charters Towers. A number of agencies are based in Charters Towers and deliver their services to
residents of the township and beyond. Some agencies are based in Townsville and provide visiting services to the area. There are also agencies based in Townsville which can only be accessed if a client travels to that regional centre. These differing modes of service delivery have on-the-ground implications for residents and are perceived to contribute to a feeling within the community of fractured or incomplete access to social services. It is hard to attract and keep professionals in rural communities, which has implications for service delivery. Also of concern to agencies is the apparent high turnover of staff in rural communities generally. Practitioners new to the region do not necessarily have the underpinning knowledge about local service delivery or even the ‘informal alternatives’ open to them in their work with clients. Over time practitioners gather this knowledge, but when they depart, there are no processes in place for knowledge transfer and the learning has to commence again.

There are large areas of the state without any formal community information provision at all. In these regions we must assume that people rely on informal information networks of friends, family, colleagues, and the media. These networks are valuable but insufficient. The information is not comprehensive, objective, confidential or updated regularly. It is not readily available to newcomers who have few established connections. So ultimately these communities are therefore disadvantaged.

As early as 1999, social services in Charters Towers were collaborating in workshops that examined the capacity of the community and the possibilities for enhanced services or cooperative programs that utilised community resources and addressed ‘perceived gaps’ in service provision. Agencies participated in government initiated regionalised and local level discussions about the capacity and need for social service delivery in Charters Towers and Dalrymple. ‘Coordination of services’ was an issue that was seen as important in terms of the ability of the community to act collaboratively or even cooperatively. The development of the Charter Data project can be traced back to those early meetings. The ensuing discussions identified the need to start a process of building an inventory of human services for the community and thereby creating a quantified representation, which could be mined to reveal barriers to and opportunities for more effective social service delivery.

**FINDING A SOLUTION**

The driving inspiration behind the Charter Data project was a desire to address social service ‘access’ issues. A utopian solution would be the availability of all critical social services on-the-ground in the region. However, by and large it is recognised within the community that such a solution was impossible. An underpinning premise of the project is that rural communities deserve (and need) access to social services just as much as those living in urban environments, but that they need to access these services in a different way. There is also the belief that to be successful, solutions to social service delivery must be initiated by the local community. Kingsley, McNeely and Gibson (1997) support the position that community driven projects not only enjoy stronger community support but also may have greater chance of success on ‘technical grounds’. Community members have a more accurate ‘social map’ than external professionals and tend to have a better sense of what will or will not work, and will see opportunities for solutions where others may not.

Over the period 1999-2001 several agencies pursued the issue of ‘enhanced social service delivery through coordination’. Funding submissions were
developed and submitted, none were successful. Rationales for the failure to secure funding seemed reasonable - ‘We have limited grant funds and as such are targeting direct client services’ - ‘Charters Towers is not a priority area for our funding body’, etc.

During 2001, a social services network group was approached by a representative of the Department of Primary Industries (DPI) regarding an opportunity for local social issues to be addressed by the development of a social pilot program under a local DPI set, the ‘Burdekin Rangelands Reef Initiative’. The group raised the issue of coordination and collaboration and further meetings were hosted by the DPI to elaborate on the concept of a local initiative that would strengthen the capacity of social services in Charters Towers.

Over several meetings, goals were agreed on and a methodology was ‘brainstormed’. The group, now called the Social Pilot Working Group agreed that a key contributor to effective and efficient service delivery (by agencies) and access (by consumers) is an accurate, shared information base. The goal of ‘improving access to information’ was to be the first initiative and outcome sought by the project.

Community Information Database software programs were investigated using several basic criteria - user-friendly interface, flexibility, application in a small rural environment, and of course, economic imperatives.

The Charters Towers Social Pilot Working Group approached Community Information Strategies Australia (CISA) to provide the software platform, information management guidelines, and community training for the Charter Data project. This would be the basis for a comprehensive database of health and community services.

CISA, which is based in South Australia, operates on the belief that people need continuous access to appropriate, accurate information in order to make informed decisions and to participate fully in society. CISA provides a framework for community service information management through a model of centralised data collection and distribution. It developed the CISA Infosearch software which allows local agencies to add their own information, using a standard thesaurus, thereby ensuring consistency across all users and allowing information sharing between them.

CISA Infosearch has been the preferred community information database throughout South Australia since 1990. In 2000 and 2001 the Infosearch framework was adopted by the Shire of Broome in Western Australia, and the Northern Territory Council of Social Services.

**HOW CISA INFOSEARCH WORKS**

The PC and network-based version of CISA Infosearch enables organisations to add, modify, publish and distribute information about community and social services. The software is a 32bit application, written in Delphi 4.0. It has a proprietary data structure and comprises several executable files to manage, view and manipulate data.

**Database Structure**

The user interface merges multiple datasets from users who choose to edit and maintain their own data. Although the database may consist of several datasets, users see it as a single, seamless structure. Each dataset has an owner and is held as a separate file. When users add records to the database, they add this information to their dataset within the database. It is
possible for users to share their Infosearch datasets to other organisations. Because each dataset has an owner, users cannot delete un-owned information, thus maintaining the integrity of each dataset.

In South Australia, CISA publishes the base dataset and provides quarterly updates. Users can add to CISA records or add their own records to the database. The records that users add and the enhancements they make to other datasets are held in their own dataset. CISA updates do not overwrite the information in the other datasets.

Organisations can publish directories of information from all of the datasets. The information published can be sourced from subject indexes, record title indexes and table of contents.

The structure of each dataset is freeform, as compared to fixed length tables of data. The freeform nature of the datasets allows each record to be a structured document with fields and layout individually tailored to convey the information appropriately for each record.

Each dataset consists of a number of records. Each record is a structured document, broken into fields and sub-fields. The only mandatory field is the record title field; to this can be added any number of fields, including free text field, with no fixed length. The number of occurrences of each field is configurable. The database is fully searchable.

Certain fields and sub-fields have been developed for specific purposes including:

- Web
- Email
- Also Known As
- Formerly
- Directory Entries
- Subject Index Fields
- Hypertext links

Fields are owned. The owner can prevent other users or other organisations from viewing a specific field.

Users also have some limited control over the information display. It is possible to change the properties of a particular field (e.g. whether the specific information/field is displayed by default or as part of ‘Extra Information’) and the ability to change the title of the field caption. The formatting of text within a free text field is also configurable, allowing the editor to choose fonts, sizes, colours and layout, such as indenting and bullets.

Software structure

The software consists of three main modules. Each of these modules is a separate executable:

Browser/Editor

The Browser/Editor provides access for searching, viewing and editing information. The Browser/Editor comes in two versions. The Browser only version comes with the Editor facilities disabled. The Browser is configured to provide multi-user concurrent access to a common database. The Editor only allows a single user to edit the database at any one time. The Editor works on a separate version of the database. Once editing is complete this dataset is made available to the Browsers through the Admin Tool. There are four ways the user can view information:

- By A-Z index of the record titles
- By A-Z subject listing. This also enables the user to step through to related subjects through the classified thesaurus
• By directories. Directories are user defined structure for organising the data
• By searching the database for specific records

**Publisher**

The Publisher is a utility to produce directories or publications from the database. The user can select the records to be published, the fields within those records and method of indexing. This information is exported to an XML file (which in turn is manipulated with XML templates) to produce outputs in a variety of formats e.g. HTML, RTF, DTP.

**Admin Tool**

The main functions performed by the Admin Tool are:

- Managing datasets
- Incorporating datasets from other organisations
- Setting ownership and passwords
- Backing up data
- Field definitions
- Transferring edited data to the Browser database

**The Database Distribution System**

The host Infosearch organisation provides the core regional community services data on a quarterly basis. Customers cannot edit this database. Users can add local data relating to their community, using the structure contained within the CISA software and thesaurus. The quarterly update it does not affect the local data when loaded.

**THE IMPLEMENTATION**

Once CISA was selected as the software provider the project became focused on the collection of local service information. Over a period of several months the database took shape - its first incarnation. An underpinning principle of the Charter Data project is that it will continue to be shaped and evolve through the input of the community. The content will grow, the focus will expand, and the utility to the community is to be the test of its success as a capacity building outcome. It has been suggested that ‘to be an effective community building tool, community information networks must act capably as an agent for access to information, establishing legitimacy of information and dialogue processes, and supporting discourse between community users of the network’ (Pigg, 1999). Charter Data has developed a tool whereby the local community have greater access to information vital to functioning in the community. Other criteria for success are addressed by the following project strategies.

Community up-skilling is critical to capacity building. Through the Charter Data project, community members in the City of Charters Towers and isolated communities throughout the Dalrymple Shire will be given opportunities to receive training in the use of the database in a package that will also provide basic computer training where necessary. Charters Towers has existing information and professional networks for the exchange of ideas and issues. Charter Data will act to ‘reinforce existing networks, including informal networks, not recreate them’ (Pigg, 1999). The project aims to work strongly and strategically with community institutions. The project communication strategy utilises both communication information technologies and traditional face-to-face consultations.

**FUTURE ISSUES**

Charter Data has evolved from a place of strength, with the project based choices
made by a community sensing that an opportunity was ‘ripe’. There was real potential in our local community to do things a little differently – as we in fact may be the experts in identifying, developing and extending our own capacity. It will be critical for Charter Data - a project that aims to facilitate collaboration between distinct groups - not to be exclusive of technical experts simply because they are not based in our community. Possibly the greatest challenge will be for the project to be meaningful to all individuals and agencies that contribute to the community assets, including those based outside the local community.

There are three levels of community assets to be considered in capacity building projects. Those locally based and controlled, those locally based but controlled by external agencies, and those originating outside the community and externally controlled. Charter Data will operate from a position of the community as social entrepreneur and must take care not to parochialise issues or exclude those critical assets that exist outside of the community. Rather they must engage those agencies in the project outcomes and successes.

Charter Data is a project in its infancy. Through the development of a community information database responsive to community need, the community has been enriched. The test for the project is now the development of sustainable processes that will enable the database to truly develop according to early promising indicators. To do this, individual community members and service providers will need to see both its current utility and future potential. In this project both groups are clients. There is a challenge for the participating community - some may find it unwieldy to pursue issues that concern them through this new forum; social service agencies may be reluctant to break down some ‘information boundaries’ that currently exist. Charter Data will evolve and adapt because the project design supports the achievement of outcomes somewhat independent of each other, but which in their realisation will have an accumulated effect of strengthening the capacity of social services in our local community.

The database is a ‘living tool’ in terms of the project and will evolve as indicated by community expectations. Future phases of the project will serve to:

- Advance discussions with surrounding localities to include their regions on the database, and to support the distribution and maintenance of the database in the expanded region;
- Utilise the database for the development of a report on the current social services assets in the local community;
- Engage agencies listed in the database in an exploration of barriers and opportunities for enhanced service delivery and collaboration.

It is hoped that the outcome will be a significant regional resource for rural and remote communities in north Queensland.

REFERENCES


Pigg, K. Dr. (1999). Community Networks and Community Development: A Paper presented at the Conference of the International Association for Community Development. Scotland