



# **Sandwell Infrastructure Web Tool: COMMUNITY CHAINS Project Evaluation (Executive Summary)**

Submitted to

**Sandwell Community Information &  
Participation Service Ltd  
(SCIPS)**

by

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## Executive Summary

The Sandwell Community Information & Participation Service Ltd (SCIPS) commissioned CSK Strategies Ltd to undertake a final evaluation of their Sandwell Infrastructure Web Tool: COMMUNITY CHAINS project (principally referred to as *the project* or *the Web Tool* throughout this report). The evaluation brief asked for an evaluation which addressed 2 specific objectives, namely:

- (a) To assess the value and impact of the project overall, and in line with the outcomes set out with the Big Lottery Fund.
- (b) To assess and make recommendations for future options/succession strategies for the project in its entirety (including potential partner organisations and relevant funding streams), and/or specific project elements.

The brief provided further details of specific aspects of each of these features, including whether the project had addressed issues of diversity and inclusivity and comparing the Community Chains project with similar projects elsewhere. An emphasis was placed upon identifying clear recommendation/proposals for the future of the Sandwell Infrastructure Web Tool Project.

This Executive Summary outlines the key findings, conclusions and recommendations of the evaluation. It includes a brief description of the project and the evaluation methodology used, a summary of the evidence of achievements including the effective partnership and management processes before summarising the key lessons and recommendations.

### The Project and its development

The proposed project built on the earlier IT work delivered by SCIPS, but in a number of ways was a quantum leap forward, in terms of the concept, scale and nature of the project, for the SCIPS organisation and for the partnership. The project is a free web-based community resource designed to promote Sandwell's community sector and to provide help for community groups. It has principally been supported by a fieldworker from SCIPS and now also has additional help provided through volunteers.

However, the way that the project is now operating is different from how it was originally envisaged. In November 2009, SCIPS's original partners to the development of the project determined that they were not able to sign the partnership agreement. Following the granting of a 3 month extension of time to SCIPS by the BIG Lottery, a new partner, Wednesbury 2000, and a new partnership agreement were put in place. The original business plan was amended to incorporate details of the new partnership arrangement and this was subsequently approved by the BIG Lottery.

In February 2010, SCIPS and its partner, Wednesbury 2000, secured £183,094.27 for a three year project from the BIG Lottery's BASIS programme.

As the bid had already been approved by the Big Lottery, there was no option to change the project objectives and milestones. The only option was to secure approval for a new partner to help deliver the project and retain much needed resources for the borough. However, it is evident that the overall concept, nature and delivery changed markedly from that which was originally proposed. The Lottery has approved five project progress reports (including two annual reports) on this basis.

In essence, therefore, the approval from the BIG Lottery envisaged a project for the development of collaborative working amongst the four Local Infrastructure Organisations and a joined-up service to the Community and Voluntary Sector in Sandwell. However, the project, as now being delivered by the partnership, is a developmental and networking web-based tool for the Sector; with a very much bottom-up approach in its design.

Our evidence suggests that this reshaped project is having a significant positive impact, but it is not that which was originally envisaged. However, in the evolving context of where community development is going in Sandwell; coupled with the decision to bring back Sandwell Homes into the Council, it will be extremely useful for the future.

### **Evaluation Methodology**

The methodology employed by CSK Strategies included:

- A review of a large number of documents including the BASIS project application form, partnership agreements, Board and Steering Group papers, monitoring reports and promotional material.
- An analysis of project outputs achieved.
- Interviews with Board members, Partners, Stakeholders and staff working on the project.
- A telephone survey and collection of views from 15 beneficiaries of the Web Tool.

### **Outputs, Outcomes and Impact**

The evidence demonstrates that whilst Community Chains project has been unable to achieve some of its strategic outcomes as outlined in the original bid, it has excelled at delivering a hugely beneficial and much needed service to grassroots community organisations that is very much valued by its users.

The project has succeeded in delivering many of its outputs or is well on its way to achieving them and in some cases it has already exceeded the agreed outputs.

The project has succeeded in consulting with 100 groups and has undertaken a further 8 Focus Groups as part of the development of the Web Tool. A pool of volunteers has been trained up to ensure the web tool is relevant and up to date. On average, 204 events are published on

the calendar each month, 45 downloadable resources have already been published (exceeding the target of 24), a monthly e bulletin is published and circulated to over 271 community groups and individuals and a programme of promotional visits have been delivered to 64 community groups to date.

### **Conclusions/Lessons Learnt**

Our overall conclusion is that SCIPS has developed a Web Tool that has proved itself to be a very valuable networking, information sharing and capacity building tool for the third sector in Sandwell, in particular for the many smaller, grassroots organisations in the Borough. The evidence we have collected shows that it is widely appreciated by its users. As the community development context in the Borough continues to move towards a collaborative approach with a central aim of increasing the capacity of the third sector to win contracts to deliver publically funded services more cost effectively, reaching people in need who have been less well reached in the past, the Web Tool and the linked capacity building work by SCIPS will have a major positive contribution to make.

However, this will require resources to maintain the Web Tool, to continuously update and develop it so that it continues to be relevant to the needs of its users and target beneficiaries, and also to maintain the 'human touch' element which is an essential component of its effectiveness. Clearly the role of the Web Tool and related SCIPS activity needs to be clearly defined within the context of collaborative community development work across the Borough, but the COMMUNITY CHAINS project has demonstrated in practice that these have a distinctive and positive role to play.

Though the project did not follow the path laid in the original proposal, this was for legitimate and rational reasons.

*At the heart of this achievement has been the partnership between SCIPS and Wednesbury 2000. Both partners have worked together effectively, combining their different skills and experiences to deliver a project that is relevant, easy to use, and accessible and fills a gap in the support services for small, grassroots groups. The project is clearly valued and appreciated by its users.*

*The experience of the Community Chains project has highlighted that a key lesson to be learnt relates to future, effective partnership working. There is a need for mainstream bodies and the infrastructure partners to invest time in building trust between the 4 infrastructure partners and generally strengthen partnership working for the benefit of the wider borough.*

## Succession Recommendations

The recommendations, which are described in more detail in section five, focus on ensuring that this much needed service continues to be developed and fully integrated in to the new policy context of the integrated community development strategy and the merger of Sandwell Homes back into Sandwell MBC.

## Some Operational Recommendations:

Below are set out some more operational recommendations relating to the Web Tool:

- Following receipt of and information obtained from the independent evaluation, SCIPS should complete its work on the Good Practice Guide; with a view to its publication in time for the End of Programme Event in November 2012. (SCIPS is on target to complete this work).
- Early work is desirable to investigate further and follow-up on the results obtained from the in-house Impact Study and, in particular, those results relating to the usefulness of the search facility and the low proportion of users registering for the funding search tool, despite the latter being identified as a priority through the initial consultation process.
- Early consideration should be given to consequential presentational issues in relation to the events calendar and the search and filter facility as the Web Tool continues to grow and attract more registered users and visitors.
- The opportunities of Facebook and Twitter and other social media tools should be investigated, in order to maximise interest and coverage
- The initial volunteering work being delivered under the Supporting Change initiative is proving extremely successful and beneficial to all parties and should be rapidly taken forward, perhaps with the assistance of another infrastructure partner, such as Volunteer Centre Sandwell.