ICT Hub service

Evaluation report: Volunteer matching service (iT4C)

Summary

The iT4C programme has succeeded in delivering thousands of hours of work to many hundreds of projects in voluntary organisations. Those organisations whose project has been seen through to a successful conclusion are generally extremely pleased with the service from both iT4C and from their volunteer. The volunteers also get a lot out of the programme. In some cases the relationship persists after the project is finished, with the volunteer continuing to provide ICT support in some form — which can include becoming a trustee. There are therefore many intangible and uncounted benefits as well as the considerable monetary value of the work actually delivered.

The main area of concern is the disappointment felt by those organisations whose project does not find a volunteer, or whose project is terminated before completion, and the frustration of would-be volunteers who do not find a project. It appears that probably around one third of projects do not find a volunteer, and that a third of the projects that do start fail to finish. This would mean that under half of the projects put forward reach a successful conclusion. This report finds that the main reasons for this appear to be:

- the relatively small scale of the scheme;
- the level of motivation required from both the volunteers and the organisations;
- internal factors and lack of resources within voluntary organisations.

Some of these are well outside the control of iT4C. Recommendations are made in this report for changes which might help to mitigate these problems.

It has not been possible to benchmark the iT4C service against similar programmes, for a variety of reasons.

The survey and analysis of respondents

An electronic survey was carried out in October 2007. All volunteers (about 4,500) and voluntary organisations (about 2,000) on iT4C's contact list were e-mailed with an invitation to participate. A total of 74 volunteers and 110 voluntary organisations responded. This response rate of around 1½% for volunteers and 5½% for organisations is reasonable for a cold mailing to a fairly dormant list.

Since the questionnaires allowed respondents to remain anonymous, it is not possible to estimate how many of the responses — or tell which ones — came from both the organisation and the volunteer who had worked on their project. Nearly one in five respondents (18%) from organisations did not identify themselves, but over a third (38%) of volunteers chose to remain anonymous.

The volunteers were generally very experienced: nearly half had over 20 years' experience in IT, suggesting that they represent an enormously valuable resource.

How many years' experience in IT do you have?

Under three	*Three to ten*	*Ten to twenty*	*Twenty to thirty-five*	*Over thirty-five*
8	19	11	25	9

There was a very heavy bias to London and the south-east — in line with the distribution of jobs in IT. (iT4C operates across the UK, but effectively appears to serve mainly England):

Which English government region or other geographical area are you based in (volunteers)?

North West 6	*West Midlands* 3	*South West* 9
North East 1	*East Midlands* 0	*South East* 22
Yorkshire & Humber 3	*East of England* 3	*London* 20
Scotland 3	*Wales* 1	*Northern Ireland* 0

The organisations showed a similar pattern, although significantly less marked. For example, while one in five of the organisations who answered the questionnaire were in the midlands, only one in 20 of the responding volunteers were from that area:

Which English government region or other geographical area is your organisation based in?

North West 4	*West Midlands* 11	*South West* 12
North East 3	*East Midlands* 10	*South East* 15
Yorkshire & Humber 7	*East of England* 10	*London* 31
Scotland 4	*Wales* 2	*Northern Ireland* 0

These figures appear to be a very reasonable reflection of the spread of iT4C's work — with volunteers from the regions outside London and the South East being slightly better represented than one might have expected. According to iT4C figures from May 2006 onwards, 57% of volunteers and 57% of organisations come from London or the South East. Among respondents to the survey 59% of volunteers and 42% of organisations were from that area.

The organisations were generally small or medium-sized (in voluntary sector terms) and therefore likely to be much smaller than those the volunteers were working for in their paid positions. Nearly half of the organisations had an income of under £100,000 and only one in six an income of over £1 million. If our respondents are representative of the whole iT4C client group, this suggests that the iT4C programme is reaching a higher proportion of small organisations than many of the other ICT Hub activities, such as events.

What is your organisation's annual income?

Under £10,000 .... 21 (19%)	*£100,000 - £1,000,000* 41 (37%)
£10,000 - £100,000 ..... 29 (27%)	*Over £1,000,000* 18 (17%)

The suggestion that the responding organisations are mainly small is borne out by the information provided on their ICT set-up. Half have just the one office site, with as many as a sixth having no office site at all, and only a third having two or more office sites. The proportion of organisations with staff who work from home or who interact electronically with members or service users is appreciable, but not as high as one might expect — again suggesting that the organisations using iT4C's services are relatively undeveloped in their use of ICT.

How dispersed is your organisation's ICT?

We have no office site 18
We have just the one office site 54
We have two or more office sites near each other 17
We have two or more widely separated office sites 16
Some of our staff or volunteers regularly work from home 31
We encourage our members and supporters to interact with us electronically 31
We encourage our service users to interact with us electronically 21

The projects and how they went

The volunteers reported on 44 projects and the organisations on 100. This disparity in numbers is partly because only half of the volunteers had actually put themselves forward for a project. (See below for a discussion of the matching process.) Organisations, on the other hand, had almost all submitted a project, and most were therefore able to report on this. Many projects however, had fallen at the first hurdle and failed to find a volunteer.

How far the project got

These projects were at a variety of different stages. Eight were either never started, or terminated before getting very far and eight were still underway, while over half (19 of those answering this question) had been finished, either substantially or even to the extent that the volunteer had continued to support the organisation.

How far did you get with the project? (Volunteers)

You agreed to start work but then the organisation decided not to proceed
(for whatever reason) 3
You started work, but then had to drop out (for whatever reason) 2
You started work, but the project was then abandoned by the organisation 3
You couldn't finish the work, but passed the project on to someone else
(internal or external) 0
You substantially completed the project, leaving just a few loose ends 8
You completed the project fully 9
You completed the project fully and are now continuing to support the
organisation with its IT (as a contractor, a trustee or a member of staff) 2
You have started work and are currently working on the project 8

With the organisations, one third never got as far as starting a project because no suitable volunteer came forward. Although this appears a large proportion, it is considerably better than iT4C's internal estimate that only 30% of projects find a volunteer, and probably represents organisations neglecting to report back to iT4C when they do find a volunteer. The alternative is that the questionnaire was responded to differentially by organisations which had had a successful experience. While this is clearly a possibility, the disparity is large, and iT4C has good reasons for suspecting that a significant proportion of organisations do not report back when projects go ahead.

iT4C has recently started a structured programme of follow-up contact with organisations at three-monthly intervals. This is a positive move, and should produce better information about the progress and outcomes of projects.

Recommendation 1
Clearly, iT4C would be in a better position to demonstrate its value if it had more data on successful matches. It would therefore be worth iT4C maintaining contact with as many organisations as possible until the outcome of the request is clear.

Of the 65 projects that did start, a quarter were then terminated, and a quarter were still in progress at the time of the questionnaire. The remaining half were completed, and again in some cases the volunteer had remained involved with the organisation.

How far did you get with the project? (Organisations)

We signed up and requested a project, but then decided not to proceed 1
The project was written up and advertised by iT4C,
but no suitable volunteer came forward 33
Volunteer(s) came forward, but then we decided not to proceed
(for whatever reason) 2
A volunteer was appointed and started work, but dropped out
(for whatever reason) 12
A volunteer started work, but the project was then abandoned by us
(e.g. because of changed circumstances) 2
A volunteer started work, but then passed the project on to someone else
(internal or external) 0
Our volunteer substantially completed their part of the project,
leaving just a few loose ends 2
Our volunteer completed their part of the project fully 19
Our volunteer completed the project and is now continuing to support our
IT in some way (as a contractor, a trustee or an employee, for example) .. 11
Our volunteer has started work and is currently working on the project 17

The figures from the volunteers and from the organisations are consistent enough to suggest that this is probably about the typical pattern: at least two thirds of the projects that start reach a successful conclusion, but the remaining third are terminated, either by the volunteer or by the organisation. (It is interesting that the volunteers report the majority of projects being abandoned by the organisation, while the organisations report the opposite. This may be something to investigate further in future.)

Projects put up by organisations in some regions were much less likely to find a volunteer than others. Although the numbers are small, it is probably significant that two thirds of the projects in Yorkshire & Humber and in the East of England failed to find a volunteer, compared with just one fifth in the West

Midlands and South-east England. However, the data is probably insufficient to say that this is a problem which should (or indeed could) be profitably addressed.

Types of project

By far the most common type of project reported on was web site development, followed by database development. Between them, these two categories represent over half of the projects. The pattern was similar enough between the volunteers and the organisations to suggest that they are both samples from the same set of projects. It does appear that organisations are more likely to identify their project as an audit or strategy, while volunteers are more likely to report it as general advice or consultancy. This is the only obvious discrepancy in the figures.

What broad subject was your most recent project (if any) about?

	Volunteers		Organisations	
Web site development	14	32%	46	46%
Database development	10	23%	15	15%
Technical support, or fixing a problem	6	14%	10	10%
General advice or consultancy	6	14%	4	4%
Network development or problem-solving	4	9%	3	3%
Other	2	5%	5	5%
General ICT audit and/or helping to develop a strategy	2	5%	14	14%
Training in the use of ICT	0	0%	3	3%

There were interesting differences between the types of projects in terms of how far they progressed, although the numbers are small and should not be relied on overmuch. Whereas web site development, database development, training and technical support all succeeded in at least attracting a volunteer two thirds of the time, only half or even one third of other types of project did so. At the other end of the scale — for fairly understandable reasons — technical support, network development and general advice were much more likely to lead to a long term relationship. The proportion of projects being abandoned was pretty consistent, suggesting that the type of project has little influence on this outcome.

Stage project reached, by type of project

	No suitable volunteer	Project abandoned	Completed (or almost)	Completed and support continuing
	33 (41%)	16 (20%)	21 (26%)	11 (14%)
Web site development	13 (34%)	8 (21%)	14 (37%)	3 (8%)
Database development	4 (36%)	3 (27%)	2 (18%)	2 (18%)
Training in the use of ICT	2 (33%)		4 (67%)	
Technical support, or fixing a problem	3 (30%)	2 (20%)	1 (10%)	4 (40%)
General ICT audit and/or strategy	5 (63%)	2 (25%)	1 (13%)	
Network development or problem-solving	1 (50%)			1 (50%)
General advice or consultancy	2 (67%)			1 (33%)
Other	3 (50%)	2 (33%)	1 (17%)	

Elapsed time for projects

Most of the completed projects appear to have taken a matter of months, once the volunteer had started work. The whole process, however, took longer for the organisations, as they first had to register their project and wait for a volunteer to come forward. In some cases this has obviously taken a considerable time, and five of the organisations had been waiting for over a year with no volunteer in sight (whereas only four of those whose projects were completed had required more than a year from start to finish).

Recommendation 2

IT4C should consider advising organisations that if no volunteer has been found within, say, three months, their project should be taken off the list, or redefined to make it more likely that a volunteer could be found.

(Volunteers) How long did it take, from when you first made contact with the organisation?

		Less than a week	Less than a month	1 – 3 months	3 – 6 months	6 months to a year	More than a year
	34	4	10	10	5	4	1
You agreed to start work but then the organisation decided not to proceed	2	-	2	-	-	-	-
You started work, but then had to drop out	2	2	-	-	-	-	-
You started work, but the project was then abandoned by the organisation	3	-	-	2	-	1	-
You substantially completed the project, leaving just a few loose ends	8	-	1	4	2	1	-
You completed the project fully	9	-	2	4	2	-	1
You completed the project fully and are now continuing to support the organisation	2	-	1	-	-	1	-
You have started work and are currently working on the project	8	2	4	-	1	1	-

(Organisations) How long did it take, from when you first signed up with iT4C?

		Less than a week	Less than a month	1 – 3 months	3 – 6 months	6 months to a year	More than a year
	97	7	21	24	17	16	12
We signed up and requested a project, but then decided not to proceed	1	1	-	-	-	-	-
The project was written up and advertised by iT4C, but no suitable volunteer came forward	32	3	9	9	5	1	5
Volunteer(s) came forward, but then we decided not to proceed	2	-	-	1	1	-	-
A volunteer was appointed and started work, but dropped out	11	-	3	2	3	3	-
A volunteer started work, but the project was then abandoned by us	2	-	1	-	-	-	1
Our volunteer substantially completed their part of the project, leaving just a few loose ends	2	-	1	1	-	-	-
Our volunteer completed their part of the project fully	19	2	2	5	3	4	3
Our volunteer completed the project and is now continuing to support our organisation's IT in some way	11	-	-	3	2	5	1
Our volunteer has started work and is currently working on the project	17	1	5	3	3	3	2

Feelings about the outcome

When it comes to their feelings about the overall outcome of the process, organisations are both more enthusiastic and more disappointed. While over a third were very positive, a quarter were either negative or very negative. The volunteers were overwhelmingly positive — under a third were neutral or negative.

Overall, how do you feel about the outcome (regardless of whether the project was completed or not)?

	Volunteers		Organisations	
Very positive	9	24%	37	37%
Positive	17	45%	20	20%
Neutral	9	24%	17	17%
Negative	1	3%	16	16%
Very negative	2	5%	9	9%

As one might expect, the organisations' opinions are influenced by how far they got through the process. Where the project was completed, they were without exception positive. The least positive were those who did not succeed in finding a volunteer at all, although over half of those whose project was terminated, for whatever reason, were also either negative or very negative.

Overall satisfaction by stage reached (organisations)

	No volunteer found	Project terminated	Project underway	Project completed
Very positive	3%	6%	65%	75%
Positive	9%	25%	29%	25%
Neutral	42%	13%	6%	
Negative	24%	44%		
Very negative	21%	13%		

Recommendation 3
iT4C would clearly do much to increase satisfaction with its service if it could increase the proportion of projects that are carried through to a successful conclusion.

Value of the work

Organisations and volunteers were both asked to estimate the value of the work carried out. Interestingly, the organisations' estimates were significantly lower than the volunteers'. This almost certainly reflects the fact that the volunteers were mainly basing their estimates on commercial rates, whereas the organisations would have been thinking of voluntary sector rates. Volunteers who based their estimates on voluntary sector and public sector rates came in with significantly lower estimates than those using commercial rates, although the numbers are so small that more data would be useful here.

Can you estimate how much your input would have cost the organisation if they had had to pay for it?

	Volunteers		Organisations	
Under £500	5	17%	10	21%
£500 - £1,000	5	17%	16	34%
£1,000 - £2,500	7	24%	5	11%
£2,500 - £5,000	4	14%	8	17%
£5,000 - £10,000	6	21%	5	11%
Over £10,000	2	7%	3	6%
Don't know	6		13	

What is your estimate above based on?

	Mainly commercial / private sector	Mainly public sector or local government	Mainly voluntary sector
	20	6	3
Under £1,000	30%	50%	33%
£1,000 - £5,000	30%	50%	67%
Over £5,000	40%		

Taking the mid-point of each range[*] and weighting the responses accordingly, the average organisation estimate of the value was £2,888 and the average volunteer estimate was £3,698 — nearly £1,000 higher. Even if the volunteers' estimate is more realistic, it is significantly lower than iT4C's initial estimate based on projects lasting on average 10 days at £460 per day. (However, the number of projects included was a conservative estimate, based just on those where iT4C was positively informed that the work had been completed.) iT4C has since revised its methodology for calculating the value of work carried out by its volunteers and now varies the assumed fee rate and number of days taken, whenever sufficient information is available to do this.

Recommendation 4
iT4C should continue to refine its methodology for calculating the total value generated by its programme.

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[*]   With the top band set at £15,000. If the top band is set at £12,500 the averages drop to £3,526 and £2,729.

Only seven volunteers based their estimates on their own freelance rates, and only three on their company charge-out rates, while the remainder used their own estimates of industry rates. There is some indication that charge-out rates would give a lower estimate than freelance or consultancy rates, but there is insufficient data to state categorically that the outcome would have been substantially different if this basis had been used.

Perceived benefits of the projects

Both the volunteers and the organisations benefited greatly from the projects. In the case of the volunteers the average benefit was 'about what I expected, with a few on either side of that mark.

How much benefit did you get from working on the project?

Much more than I expected... 2
More than I expected 5
About what I expected 13
Slightly less than I expected (but still worth doing)...5
A lot less than I expected... 3
I didn't know what to expect... 1
Not applicable; I didn't get far enough (or haven't yet).. 9

When asked to elaborate, ten comments were received, many of which are quoted here. (Those excluded concern reasons for projects not going ahead, rather than a response on the benefit gained).

If you want to explain or expand on your answer above, please do so:

Did not really expect to gain anything from this. Just wanted to help.

It provided experience of how a good company arranged their Access form layouts, plus experience of their office environment. Also provided experience commuting and working in London, in a relatively safe area of the city.

I wanted to help out, I already run a successful software consultancy firm and wanted to give something back to my local community.

Refreshed my Excel skills nicely.

I gained a great deal of personal satisfaction from advising the voluntary body, in addition I was able to test and develop techniques that will help me with my own work.

Work content was minimal — simply liaison with an existing supplier to determine how to upgrade a web hosting service in order for client to gain additional benefits. Upgrade determined and under implementation.

We engage on projects to benefit the charity, not ourselves!

The organisations were more enthusiastic.

Did you get the benefits you had hoped for from the project?

We got much more than we had hoped for..17
We got more than we had hoped for...11
We got about what we had hoped for 9
We got slightly less than we had hoped for (but still worth having)..........................6
We got a lot less than we had hoped for..9
I didn't know what to expect.. 1
Not applicable; we didn't get far enough (or haven't yet) 47

The main benefits the organisations felt they had achieved were saving money, having better quality data, and being more productive — 'doing things better'. There was less evidence of 'doing better things' — extending their work to new areas or new client groups, but despite this the extent of positive feedback is certainly notable.

Overall what kind of benefit(s) did you get from the project (if applicable)?

We were able to save money (not just on the volunteer's expertise) 27
We are more confident about our information (more accurate, more secure, more detailed, etc)..... 25
Our staff are able to work more productively and are less frustrated.. 19
We are now able to offer services to people that we hadn't been able to reach before 9
We are now able to offer different kinds of services that we hadn't been able to offer before............. 9

While many organisational respondents took the opportunity to express their disappointment at not having found a volunteer, those whose projects went through to completion gave valuable insight into the specific benefits they had obtained:

If you want to explain or expand on your answer above, please do so:

Our website needed updating and we could not afford to pay to have this done. For us this was a much needed service. We need to have an accurate website.

The additional benefit which is not listed above is that I was supported and energised by the meetings I had with the volunteer. I was tackling a big project and the mentoring I received gave me confidence in my decisions and allowed me to test out ideas.

We learnt how to change our web home page and subsequently improved on the work done. It just looks better — not about economics.

We have a good database and our data entry is sound. We continue to encounter difficulties with data quality — our clients (young people aged 13-25) complete forms while with our youth workers and these forms are checked by managers before data entry, and it is not always perfect for data entry — so we have ongoing difficulties fitting our worker team to our system. We also have a continual need for flexibility in reporting on the data, more than we envisaged at the outset of this work.

We anticipate the following benefits when the project is complete: Saving money, staff work more productively, more confident about our information.

We have had very positive initial meetings and we are expecting a very positive outcome that will make us more efficient and save us money

We don't have an IT person here, and our iT4C person was brilliant (he is IT director of a city firm), always ready to help, to come in and help interview, to give advice, to do some of the work that none of us knew how to do. I cannot express enough how brilliant he has been. (He gets a mention in our Annual Review.)

Our volunteer has developed an extremely good website for us and so we have been able to contact our core users effectively for the first time.

General comments: It has been a bit of a roller coaster ride really. We aren't the easiest organisation to work with as we don't have the time to give and things tend to go on the back burner for far too long. The first volunteer we had really didn't fit with our way of working, which we felt responsible for, and that we didn't fit with iT4C, but the second volunteer we were put into contact with has been wonderful; very patient and interested and willing to explore ways and means with us.

We have a volunteer working with us and we hope to be able to submit a funding bid for setting up a Community Wireless Network in the next two weeks.

Not only has James helped us with advice about re-equipping, but has sorted out several problems we have encountered. When I phone, he nearly always gets back to me the same day and has usually been in and fixed it within a day or two. He has spent hours talking about equipment and makes sure that I understand the terminology. He's always very pleasant and friendly. We can't thank him enough.

Following on from the volunteer dropping out (due to work commitments abroad) we were able to get funding for the new database. His input had helped us to think the project through and clarify our needs.

Our volunteer signed up and then went away. What help he gave was useful but he did very little. We are hoping he may come back

We now have an internet enabled database to collect information from all our staff across the country.

We have now developed the project using an in-house volunteer.

This evolved as a support and advice role to both the Chief Exec and the Business Development Manager, both of whom had IT experience themselves, so we used the volunteer as a sounding board and to help us review the quotes provided. All in all the relationship did exactly what it said on the tin, if you know what I mean.

Although our volunteer is busy virtually all of the time taken on our project has been dictated by our own level of resources. He has saved us a lot of time. We have already outlined and agreed the next stage of our project (introduce an open source simple(?) client server into the network).

Perceptions of each other

Respondents were also asked what they felt about the other party to the arrangement.

The organisations were generally very satisfied with the volunteers they had working for them, both in terms of their technical suitability and their understanding of the voluntary sector culture. Over half felt that the volunteers matched up very well on both counts, with another quarter rating them as 'well' suited:

How well did your volunteer suit your organisation's technical needs?

Very well	36	(56%)
Well	15	(23%)
Adequately	6	(9%)
Only just adequately	1	(2%)
Not well at all	6	(9%)

Bearing in mind that iT4C volunteers mostly have a commercial background, how well did your volunteer fit in and understand your organisation's culture?

Very well	34	(53%)
Well	16	(25%)
Adequately	7	(11%)
Only just adequately	2	(3%)
Not well at all	5	(8%)

There was a very strong correlation between both measures, with no major anomalies. The widest gap was one volunteer who was adequately suited culturally, but not at all well suited technically.

The volunteers were less impressed with the organisations they worked for. While the organisations were reasonably clear, on average, about what they wanted the volunteer to do, the volunteers felt that working within the voluntary sector culture was typically only 'manageable'.

It is a tribute to the professionalism of the volunteers that they overcame these issues and gave a service which, in the main, pleased the recipient organisations.

How clear was the organisation you worked for about what it wanted you to do?

Very clear	10	(25%)
Clear	11	(28%)
Adequately clear	11	(28%)
Not very clear	4	(10%)
Not clear at all	4	(10%)

How easy did you find it to work within the culture of the voluntary sector?

Very easy	7	(18%)
Easy	10	(26%)
Manageable	17	(44%)
Quite hard	3	(8%)
Very hard	2	(5%)

The volunteers were also asked what their main lessons were from the experience. These are not just interesting and revealing in their own right; they may also be useful to iT4C in preparing future volunteers for what to expect. The main lessons include:
- The lack (or uncertainty) of funding.
- Lack of ICT expertise.
- Communication difficulties and slow responses.
- The need to clarify roles (including internal ones) and expectations.

What was your main lesson from the whole experience?
Communication takes a long time. Internal politics have to work themselves out.
The voluntary sector is hugely under-funded and relies very heavily on unpaid work.
Can require some pushing to get the necessary info to start.

Accuracy when implementing a release of the changes. On the day of the release their server went down, and I was to provide the release as soon as the server was up and running. After a bad morning, it was important for me to provide them a good afternoon's work, and they were happy with the results.

I always include "Good planning, clear initial requirements and constant review of requirements and progress with client", so no lessons — more reinforced my idea of what methodology works.

Socially good atmosphere and a chance to exchange ideas and skills.

If working at home on the project, give continual feedback to the organisation (even on what might seem minor details).

In future, make sure that the person who asks you to do the work is authorised to do so by the organisation.

The lesson was, that the people who have to be dealt with may not be or even know the people with the answers.

I'm left uncertain whether to try again given I took all the precautions I could think of at the outset to prevent what happened. (I completed the first phase of the work fully … but despite repeated promises to get on with implementing the system, it never happened.)

Be patient! I've been waiting for the organisation to test my latest offering for over six weeks, [without] hearing anything back from them.

Not being in a professional/corporate environment, you often have to come up with more input yourself (the organisation does not always have a clear plan beforehand). At the same time gratifying and difficult to manage!

I have discovered how many organisations are lacking basic measures such as regular backups and efficient networking. Both organisations that I support (after introductions from iT4C) believed that their data was being backed up every day although it hadn't been backed up for months. And both improved their network connectivity simply by substituting a £35 100Mbit/sec ethernet switch for a 10Mbit/sec hub.

At times I felt I was "bullying" the organisation to adopt my proposed solution as they had very little technical expertise and low expectations. From initial feedback they are delighted with the outcome.

That the continuance of charities is very dependent upon the whims of the funding bodies.

Never trust anyone at a voluntary organisation to complete a task on time or ever.

Don't expect people to be keen to contact you.

Try to help the client to define the requirements clearly. The client may be unsure about what they want.

That IT knowledge in some areas of the charitable sector is very limited. I was surprised they need to seek external help.

Expectations vary wildly from organisation to organisation, especially regarding the relationship once the project has been completed.

To realise how many organisations try to build their own Access databases and the problems that can arise!

It is difficult to find clear objectives.

Taking these responses together with the slightly more muted enthusiasm for the whole experience from the volunteers suggests that iT4C could do more to help prepare the volunteers for their experience.

Recommendation 5
IT4C may want to consider offering volunteers a telephone briefing — at least on their first piece of work — both on the specific project and on the generalities of working in the voluntary sector.

This cross-cultural contact must be counted as an intangible benefit of the programme. Increased understanding of the voluntary sector among commercially-oriented staff can only be beneficial. At the same time, it may also be worth the sector reflecting on this insight into how its working practices come across to people from a different work background!

The iT4C matching service

Either iT4C itself operates in fashion that is more sensitive to the voluntary sector than the commercial sector, or the voluntary sector has lower standards (or possibly our sample is significantly unrepresentative). Either way a familiar pattern emerges: the voluntary organisations are happier with the iT4C service than the volunteers are.

The organisational respondents generally found iT4C very helpful or helpful, while the volunteers were more likely to say that iT4C defined the project 'adequately' than 'very well'. (This also shows through in the volunteers' comments quoted above about lack of clarity on the part of the voluntary organisations.)

How helpful was iT4C in clarifying your needs before advertising for a volunteer? (Organisations)

Very helpful..44 (50%)
Helpful..31 (35%)
Acceptable 10 (11%)
Not very helpful 3 (3%)
Not helpful at all 0

How well did iT4C define the project before advertising for a volunteer? (Volunteers)

Very well 8 (20%)
Well 17 (43%)
Adequately..12 (30%)
Only just adequately 3 (8%)
Not well at all.. 0

On efficiency, too, the organisations were more positive (although a few were obviously very disappointed not to find a volunteer).

How efficient was the iT4C process?

	Volunteers		Organisations	
Very efficient	8	20%	37	44%
Efficient	18	44%	24	28%
Acceptable	13	32%	16	19%
Not very efficient	2	5%	5	6%
Very inefficient	0	0%	3	4%

Many of the respondents gave suggestions about possible improvements to the iT4C service, although inevitably this was often (but not always) coloured by whether or not they got a successful project out of it. The comments below are reproduced in full, divided into rough categories. It is interesting to see that the organisations — again — were more likely to be enthusiastic or disgruntled, while the comments from the volunteers were mainly neutral or constructive.

Based on the comments here, a number of recommendations are made below.

How could the process have been improved, or how could iT4C have been more helpful? (Organisations)
Generally positive

iT4C were great. We just found the lack of uptake frustrating, but that's not their fault.
Very pleased. Cannot think of any way it could have been improved. It was perfect.
iT4C have been as helpful as possible but the specialised nature of our project means it will/would be difficult to find suitable volunteers.
I found everyone I spoke to or emailed extremely helpful and professional. The website is excellent and easy to use and register on.
I find the web-site very helpful, in particular the stories on the projects already completed. It is also very useful that the volunteers are IT professionals with current expertise and credentials and a willingness to help charities.
I think it's been fine. Our volunteer called us very soon after the opportunity was posted. It took a while to get grounded about the details of what was needed, but it's been fine ever since. He is not, in fact, from a commercial background, he's a student - but he's very good.
I am quite happy with the help I have received so far.
It worked very well for us so far — could not have worked faster or more efficiently.
It couldn't be improved. It's brilliant!
iT4C was very helpful during this process at each stage, I would not fault them at all — it is just disappointing not to have attracted any interest in our project.
iT4C was extremely good all round.
iT4C have been very helpful, the only reason we are not working together yet is that I haven't had the time to dedicate to working out exactly HOW we might work together!

iT4C were very helpful and I have told other people about it — I personally would be reluctant to use the service again (once bitten, twice shy).

It worked very well and very efficiently for us.

Don't think they could have.

I think you are helpful offering this service. Since I have not had the opportunity to use the service I cannot answer your questions.

It worked fine for us. We have more than one manager from a commercial background in the charity so the approach was not in any way foreign to us. In the end we needed less support than we thought but what we had was useful.

Generally neutral/constructive

Would be interesting to know how many volunteers there are with which skills in our area.

They needed chasing.

More pro-activity on their part.

Suggesting particular volunteers.

Volunteers forthcoming!

Selecting some suitable volunteers.

We had two approaches before finding a suitable volunteer. Felt very concerned that one volunteer spent a long time understanding our needs via e-mail then decided we were too far away and he was only prepared to be involved if we paid him. As soon as I made clear that was not my understanding I did not hear from him again. Made me wonder whether prospective volunteers were properly vetted.

I think our request was early on in the out of London work so it was difficult to find someone within reach. As we don't have access to our office in the evenings or weekends, it made it particularly difficult to make a match.

I found it slightly awkward when we were sent volunteer details and told that they would contact us but we could, as a courtesy, contact them. I was never sure whether to 'make the first move', not wishing to hassle them if they had decided not to pursue it.

Perhaps we could have kept in touch with iT4C when volunteer became difficult to contact — didn't realise they could have helped. Just thought of it as a matching service.

Didn't find it very easy to register — we now need to register again and I know it is easy to do but can't find the correct link.

The problem we experienced was that the volunteers were not CRB checked

I was unable to view our or other opportunities on your system so couldn't see whether there was any reason why there was no response for several months.

Difficult to say as they can't influence volunteers but I think more regular checking & restructuring if no volunteers have been found within a given time frame would have been helpful.

Seems a slightly cumbersome process. Is it necessary to be phoned up to discuss? Not totally sure why this is necessary. Would be useful to be able to browse current advertised posts on the site before posting to get a feel for what type of work gets advertised.

It took time to find a volunteer (but we are in a very remote area) and the first one didn't follow up on our initial response. Don't know if iT4C were tracking that.

We had an initial enquiry of interest from a volunteer very quickly but they didn't follow through and I have tried to contact them but they haven't come back to me. The initial contact from iT4C was fantastic, prompt and professional.

Generally negative

I found it really strange that having found us no volunteer(s), we were taken off the database of potential placements.

I didn't feel iT4C understood our needs — so couldn't really have been more helpful. This may have been because our project wasn't defined by us well enough, or because the person at iT4C didn't have the necessary skills to learn about our project or the necessary understanding of our area of work. I think it was a bit of both.

We never got a volunteer.

All we get are newsletters. No volunteers. Complete waste of our time. We are all volunteers too, so signing up actually took away resources while adding nothing.

According to iT4C several volunteers contacted us. One I replied to immediately but they did not get back to me. One contacted me just before I went on leave and it was some time till I got back to him. The other I have no record of having been contacted by (they may have rung the switchboard). I would prefer a more predictable way of knowing I had been contacted: e.g. always an e-mail, with "Volunteer offer from IT4Communities" in it so that it can be picked up quickly and reliably.

We never fathomed out how to report back on your website in spite of your help. This has put us off asking for help again. It just leaves the feeling that we don't want to go through the hassle again.

Following up each case to check what happened. After the initial referral was made I heard no more. I'm disappointed this is the case and don't feel able to recommend, sorry.

The project was registered and advertised, but we never received any contact from a volunteer. Nor was there any follow up from the person who registered the project

Given more information about our organisation.

Could have found someone in the past year, could also have checked after three and six month intervals as to progress in request.

The website could be better designed. It took some searching to find the registration process.

How could the process have been improved, or how could iT4C have been more helpful? (Volunteers)
Generally positive

There was no fault with the iT4C

Now u people started seriously building long lasting bond by taking this initiative survey like this one.

Don't think it could be improved anyway, I think it's just the type of help was not what I specialise in or too far away for me

More Scottish projects would help. The process is fine, just that there are so few projects in my area, or the virtual ones don't suit my skills.

I've just had a search now and it looks ok — gives you the information we need. Unfortunately they were mainly technical website requests which is not my area.

Generally neutral/constructive

In the past the project has perhaps stayed available on the iT4C web site after the personnel who placed the details on line has moved on — not iT4C's fault but it can be hard to advance a project when the people now have no idea why help was asked for.

I would like more local projects please.

It needs an automated way of informing iT4C of contact problems e.g. via website rather than having to ring up or e-mail. Too busy for that.

It would be useful to get e-mail alerts of new projects rather than having to log in regularly and do a search.

Perhaps more technical depth to the specification advertised. However, I entirely appreciate the difficulties in supplying this.

Ability to search by postcode and give distance from base postcode would have encouraged me to follow through as I try and cycle to clients.

Much of the demand seems to be for e-development rather than advice or non-executive assistance.

A service matching skills to positions and an automatic offer of positions to applicants would be very useful

I don't think it's the process, just the work load I have and the fact that I live in a rural area so travel is time consuming, exacerbating the problem. I am likely being unrealistic in signing up.

It is a personal issue and I would like to keep looking for something small.

It might be helpful if some of the skills categories could be broken down into sub-categories

I wasn't sure whether I should contact the charity or the charity would be contacting me. I didn't receive the contact details so I waited for over a week then the charity contacted me.

As I've suggested to IT4C previously, regularly checking that projects are still wanted would be very useful. Much time has been wasted trying to contract people re: projects that have been long completed.

By ensuring that volunteers are dealing with the correct member of the organisation — especially on virtual projects.

Since significantly improved by addition of an RSS feed to the iT4C web site. A 'follow up' service might have been useful as a way to shame the organisation into action (or identify any issues that the organisation was unwilling to raise with me).

Project originally accepted by a colleague (and is still down to her on the system). Doesn't seem to be any way to transfer a project between volunteers.

Maybe if you asked the organisations to fill in a basic questionnaire. More to make them think a little bit about what they need rather than to necessarily help the contractor. Once you get their ideas flowing it's generally good fun.

Provide more than one contact in the organisation.

If recent opportunities would have been mailed that would have been better.

The process seemed to work well and I can't think of any improvements but it is about a year ago since I used the service so I've probably forgotten any bad bits!

The answer to Q18 (How well did iT4C define the project) is a little unfair on iT4C. They advertised what the organisation requested very clearly. It was just that the organisation did not know what their problem REALLY was. What they actually needed was consultancy — not the improved reporting they requested.

Generally negative

I found it difficult to use the system to identify projects that were both suitable for my skills and within my travel area.

By creating more opportunities during the weekend and after hours projects which are accessible to me/us.

Define the project's objects from charities prior to advertising.

I wish there were projects during the week times or after working hours, if there could be any.

Defining a standard procedure for getting in touch, especially re: the first meeting. As a volunteer it was not clear to me whether the first meeting was to make contact or to start working immediately.

Give chance to volunteer to undergo project

Recommendations

From the comments above, the main themes that come out are that iT4C should consider:

6 making it possible for volunteers and organisations to get a better sense on the web site of what types of project are being asked for.

7 clarifying the process for volunteers and organisations making the first contact.

8 getting more involved in the matching process, as well as monitoring the progress of the project (as iT4C has started to do, but perhaps not as intensively as would seem to be required).

9 spending more time identifying the appropriate contact within an organisation.

10 minor improvements to the web site (if these have not already been dealt with) — including better searching, for example by postcode and by more detailed breakdown of skills required.

Despite the number of suggestions for improvement, respondents were overwhelming likely to recommend the iT4C service, or had already done so. Over a third of both volunteers and organisations had passed on a recommendation more than once, while at least half of each group had done so at least once. Under 10% of the organisations (and none of the volunteers) said they would not recommend the service. Again, the organisations tended to be more extreme in their response.

Have you recommended the iT4C service to anyone else?

	Volunteers		Organisations	
Yes, I have told several people/organisations about it	21	33%	44	43%
Yes, I have told one other person/organisation about it	11	17%	11	11%
No, but I would if I was talking to someone who would find it useful	31	49%	38	37%
No, I don't think the iT4C service is worth recommending	0		8	8%
No, I don't think the projects iT4C supports are worth doing	0		1	1%

Obstacles to making a match

One of the most significant areas of dissatisfaction with the iT4C programme overall was the number of organisations which had not succeeded in finding a volunteer, and the number of volunteers ending up without a suitable project. It is worth exploring some of the factors affecting this.

Volunteers

Some of the volunteers had been signed up with iT4C for some considerable time, and some had been very active, putting themselves forward for four or more projects (although only five had actually started work on more than three).

While signed up with iT4C, how many projects have you:

	None	One	Two or three	Four or more
(a) asked for contact details	25	12	19	16
(b) made contact	28	13	13	12
(c) agreed to start work	36	14	10	5

Unsurprisingly, those who had been signed up with iT4C for less time were more likely not to have got involved in any projects yet[*]. However, there does seem to be a plateau. Although the volunteers who had been involved for three to five years had almost all asked for contact details at least once, and two thirds had made contact with a project, under half had actually started work — about the same proportion as those who had been involved for one to three years. In other words, it does appear as though a volunteer who has not found a project within a couple of years is unlikely to find one, no matter how hard they try.

Proportions taking none of the specified action, by length of involvement

	Length of involvement		
Those answering 'none' to:	Less than one year	One to three years	Three to five years
(a) asked for contact details	55%	36%	6%
(b) made contact	59%	46%	31%
(c) agreed to start work	73%	54%	56%

There is no obvious pattern — for example by skill area or geographical location — to those who remain unplaced after three or more years.

Recommendation 11

iT4C may want to think about following volunteers up after they have been on the register for two or three years with no result, to see whether they can be given any help in finding a project, or whether it may be more appropriate to take them off the list.

The reasons potential volunteers gave for having made no contact were most likely to concern the geographical area, followed closely by time pressure on the volunteer and then by the skill area being requested.

If you did not put yourself forward for any projects, please say why

None of the advertised projects were in the right geographical area for me	13
None of the advertised projects suited my skills	6
I found that I didn't have time to take on any of the projects advertised	6
I found that I didn't have time to check out the iT4C web site	6
My employer changed their policy on volunteering, so that I couldn't get released	0

Those who did make contact didn't necessarily take up the project. This is recognised as a possibility in the iT4C approach: volunteers and organisations have to be a good match in order for the project to work well, and it is only once they have made contact that they can establish the extent of the fit. Volunteers tended to attribute the lack of progress to problems at the organisation's end. Some of these reflect comments already made above.

If you were interested in a project but did not start work, why was this?

I could never get through to the right person at the organisation, so in the end I gave up	14
The organisation seemed unenthusiastic about the project, or about me	8
When I found out more about the project, the work didn't appeal, or didn't suit my skills	7
The organisation chose someone else to work with	7
My situation changed after I had started the process, so I was unable to continue	4
When I found out more about the organisation, it didn't appeal to me	3
I found that I didn't have the time	3

When invited to give more detail about their difficulty in finding (or completing) a project, several volunteers gave interesting comments:

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[*]   In the table below, those giving no response have been added to those who selected 'none'.

The last project was a busy CAB. They wanted a web site worked on, but did not know where to get access to the current site. No one who was around at the time I enquired had the time to look into the project, and were frustrated as they couldn't understand why I could not just update the web. I guess if I had been more persistent, things may have progressed further. I tried the IT support for CAB, but they did not hold details of how the website had been administered either.

Charity originally asked for help to develop reports. When I spoke to them it was clear they had a need for a proper database and means to access it from three different sites. I suggested (and have developed) a web interface for them to record, update, access and produce reports from an Access database. This application is now being tested by the voluntary body.

I started a volunteer project outside the iT4C, since it took ages for the listed charities to make contact. The response rate is very poor from these charities. It seems they are not really in need of help.

The project was gained through Chelmsford Volunteer Centre and I only subsequently found out that it was also advertised via iT4C.

One prospective volunteer took the trouble to give a detailed answer, and it is worth quoting it in full:

> *"When I first joined iT4C, I was given the impression from the NextSteps careers advisory service that the point of voluntary work should be to gain new skills in order to find a paid job. I have discovered the reality that to obtain the voluntary work I require existing skills already. Then we learn new skills once in the work. Having accepted this fact, my experience in iT4C work is that I am short of contacts to ask questions if I am stuck. There is only limited help from books and the online help facilities. When really stuck you need people to ask. The charity staff do not have the knowledge to help, or their knowledge is limited. Their iT4C volunteer is expected to be the expert. Therefore I wonder whether it is possible for iT4C to hold networking events to bring together volunteers of similar skills, so that we could learn from each other. I fully understand if people may be short of time for attending extra iT4C events, but I believe it may help the likes of me.*
>
> *In my situation at present I only know one contact who knows Microsoft Access, and one contact who knows web design. They are contacts outside iT4C, and both have been concerned as to why I am bothering them with questions. If I could get to know other iT4C volunteers I believe I could become more successful with the work. Also I am sure the volunteers can benefit knowing of online new groups that can also provide help if stuck on a problem. Thank you."*

Recommendation 12
iT4C should clarify whether it is prepared to recruit inexperienced people as volunteers, as well as those established in the industry. If it is, it should consider a support package — as a minimum, perhaps, pointing its volunteers in the direction of the ICT Hub Knowledgebase and other resources.

Geography

Taking the data quoted earlier we see that in many geographical areas the proportions are fairly well matched but, in a few — the midlands and East of England — the number of volunteers is very small by comparison with the number of organisations (assuming that the sample in both cases is broadly representative of the total populations). By contrast, in the south-east there is an over-supply of volunteers.

Which English government region or other geographical area are you based in?

	Volunteers		Organisations	
North West	6	8%	4	4%
North East	1	1%	3	3%
Yorkshire & Humber	3	4%	7	6%
West Midlands	3	4%	11	10%
East Midlands	0		10	9%
East of England	3	4%	10	9%
South West	9	13%	12	11%
South East	22	31%	15	14%
London	20	28%	31	28%
Scotland	3	4%	4	4%
Wales	1	1%	2	2%
Northern Ireland	0		0	

Although there are individual regions where there is an imbalance, on the whole it appears that it is more likely to be the low numbers in themselves that lead to volunteers and projects not matching up. If, for example, about 4% of the 4,500 volunteers on the books are based in Yorkshire and Humberside, that means that there are only 180 in the region. This must significantly reduce the chance of finding a good match.

The results of this can be explored by comparing the completion rates of projects in different regions. There are, inevitably, anomalies (and possibly misleading patterns) when the data is relatively sparse, but there does appear to be a trend whereby organisations in the 'smaller' regions are less likely to find a suitable volunteer: two thirds in Yorkshire and Humberside, and in East of England, against just one fifth in the south east. The pattern is not uniform, however: projects in the midlands likely to be filled. This could be because they are more urbanised, so that transport is not such a problem — but then what about the south west? More data is needed to resolve this.

Progress with project, by region (England only)

		North West	North East	Yorks & Humber	West Midlands	East Midlands	East of England	South West	South East	London
	99	3	3	6	10	8	9	12	15	30
No suitable volunteer	33%		33%	67%	20%	25%	67%	33%	20%	33%
Project stopped	14%	33%	33%		20%	25%		33%	20%	7%
Project completed	32%		33%	17%	30%	38%	22%	25%	35%	33%
Note: totals do not add to 100%, as projects in progress are omitted.										

Recommendation 13
iT4C should try to confirm the extent of the regional effect from data it holds and consider making special efforts to recruit volunteers in the regions where it is proving harder to make successful matches.

Skills

Volunteers were asked what skills they had offered. Out of 74 questionnaire responses, 72 completed this question, many of them offering more than one skill. When we compare this with the subject of the organisations' most recent project, a mismatch is immediately obvious. Nearly two thirds of the volunteers were offering technical support or general consultancy (usually among other things), while each of these featured in only 10% or fewer of the projects. Network development and training were equally over-represented.

What broad subject was your most recent project (if any) about?

	What skills were you prepared to offer? (Volunteers)		What broad subject was your most recent project about? (Organisations)	
Web site development	32	44%	46	46%
Database development	28	39%	15	15%
General ICT audit and/or helping to develop a strategy	27	38%	14	14%
Technical support, or fixing a problem	45	63%	10	10%
General advice or consultancy	46	64%	4	4%
Network development or problem-solving	25	35%	3	3%
Other	8	11%	5	5%
Training in the use of ICT	32	44%	3	3%
Programming	25	35%	*(Not asked)*	

Looking at the figures in more detail we discover that 30 — well over a third — of the 72 respondents offered neither web site development nor database development, which excludes them from nearly two thirds of the projects.

Combining this factor with the need for volunteers to be geographically close to the organisation (in most instances), does help to explain why some projects fail to find volunteers, and some potential volunteers fail to find projects.

Recommendation 14

iT4C may want to indicate in its publicity the distribution of skills requested by organisations, and make particular efforts to recruit volunteers with those skills.

Organisations

The organisations were also given the opportunity to explain why they had failed to make progress with their projects. These have been broadly categorised below. The internal reasons often boil down to time pressure; it is important to recognise that recruiting and managing a volunteer does absorb some time and effort, and must therefore not be seen as cost-free to the organisation. This is pointed out in several of the comments quoted at various places in this report. In many of the external cases, the problem was just the lack of suitable volunteers. (These responses have been omitted below unless they contain additional insights.)

Internal reasons

Several volunteers are working on current (both IT and non-IT) projects and we don't have the management resources to manage/support volunteers for new projects yet.

As a large organisation we have an established IT/Web team and as yet have not identified anything that would be suitable.

We initially enquired about website development and a volunteer to support our IT sessions for people with visual impairment but we then managed to recruit further volunteers through alternative means so no longer required the volunteer matching service.

We are not yet at a stage to request assistance. Our first project will be a web site. It is likely that we will be asking for help in the next 3-6 months.

We are very busy for the next few months so we decided to wait until after our AGM in February to discuss developing a web site and asking for a volunteer to help us.

We can see the potential in making use of voluntary help through iT4C, but as yet I have been unable to find enough time to really work out where we most could use help. I have a couple of quite time consuming things going on at the moment, but will definitely bear iT4C in mind and will send an e-mail round to colleagues asking them to consider whether they might benefit from help this way.

Internal organisational issues.

[The project is] ongoing pending a change of staff.

We had already let a contract when the volunteer came forward. Since then the project has stalled because of a number of factors.

The project is still in development. Our main charity has launched a new corporate image and until we get details of the new logo, etc, we cannot proceed. When these arrive we will forward to the volunteer. He knows about this.

General/mixed reasons

I needed a speaker for an event and ended up contacting someone else directly via the ICT Hub.

We have not identified specific project that would benefit from iT4C input. Coupled with this we deal mainly with confidential patient data and anyone working on our systems would have to be suitably vetted.

We have not requested another project since the last one was completed. Much of the support was around choosing an IT Support company and developing, through discussion, an approach to IT longer term.

We originally asked for support re-designing a client and contact database. We've been using the database for a year but we've continued to have contact with our volunteer as new considerations have arisen. We're now looking at a kind of phase 2, converting it from Access to a system using Java and SQL. It has turned out to be more complicated than we thought to begin with. We've also moved into a situation where we are looking at upgrading our server and re-networking, which our volunteer is supporting us with a bit.

We have had two previous volunteers for projects — one who was unsuccessful due to his personal problems, the other completed his project very satisfactorily. The current project/volunteer is very recent.

External/iT4C reasons

Three volunteers made initial enquiries, but on reading more about our project, didn't get back in touch with us.

The volunteers who contacted us did not perhaps have enough free time to make an impact on the project?

The volunteer attended and a good start was made. When he dropped out he would not communicate by phone/e-mail and we felt we had been left high and dry. There was no explanation from him.

A volunteer was found, I was informed and contacted the volunteer who didn't respond to any contact I made — haven't heard anything more from either the volunteer or from iT4C.

We were initially contacted by a volunteer who was difficult to deal with and has subsequently been taken off your list. We had managed to make some progress with him but he did not really give me what I wanted. I then contacted another volunteer who felt that what we had already was acceptable. And there we have left it.

We afforded the volunteer all the time, assistance and access to our IT system that he requested but the final report was never forthcoming.

The first volunteer promised but never delivered; the second volunteer was removed from the scheme by yourselves

We recruited two consecutive IT general support workers. Both were very keen, but both dropped out after 1 month to 6 weeks, having obtained paid work. The difficulty for us is that it takes quite a lot of time to get them started, so losing them so quickly means this is not really a practical solution. But I was pleased to help both of them into paid work.

Distance was a problem. The volunteer didn't have enough time to fit us in. He was 35 miles away

Conclusion

In sum, the information above suggests that the following are the key obstacles to achieving a better rate of volunteer placement:

- Although the scheme deals in thousands of potential volunteers and projects, it is nevertheless relatively small scale. Given the need to find a match on skill, geography and, to some extent, temperament, it is inevitable that some matches will fail to take place.
- Both the volunteers and the organisations have to be highly motivated to participate. They have to make the effort to get in touch, make the time to set the project up and deliver it, and be prepared to negotiate a sometimes tricky relationship.
- Internal factors, lack of resources and changing circumstances within voluntary organisations — especially small ones — sometimes prevent a project from progressing or cause it to be abandoned or redesigned.

Some of these there is little iT4C can do about. The recommendations above are intended to suggest ways in which iT4C may be able to address some of the obstacles, at least in part.

Benchmarking and value for money

It would be interesting to know how iT4C's performance compares with others working in the same field. Several attempts were made to obtain comparative figures from other volunteer placement programmes, in order to benchmark iT4C.

Suitable figures were not, however, forthcoming. Some programmes are so much bigger than iT4C that they do not provide a useful comparison, in others the way of working is so different that, again, comparisons are not helpful. In yet others attempts were made to contact a relevant person with no response.

Recommendation 15

Through its evaluation as part of the ICT Hub, iT4C is possibly a step ahead of other volunteer placement programmes in opening its activities to external, publicly available evaluation. It may be worth pursuing the matter of benchmarking — and in particular seeking mutual learning from each others' experiences. This might form a useful small project in its own right.

In terms of the value of work provided, iT4C received £248,383 from the ICT Hub during its first phase (July 2005 – March 2007) and raised an additional £101,000 from other sources, giving a total of almost £350,000. The budget for the second phase of Hub funding (to March 2008) is around £190,000. This compares with a value to the sector of work done by the volunteers which was estimated by iT4C to have reached £2.5 million since the launch of its service in November 2002.

It is worth noting a 1996 report[1] which found that the value of work carried out by volunteers in 12 organisations was often not much more than the management cost involved in recruiting and supporting the volunteers, and in no organisation did it exceed £7 for each £1 spent on management. When all the costs (including travel expenses, for example) were taken into account, nearly half the groups yielded a return of less than £1 for each £1 spent, and only two produced a return of over £4 in the pound. The yield of the iT4C programme is therefore towards the top of the range found in the study.

Paul Ticher & Andrea Eaves
January 2008

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[1] The Economic Equation of Volunteering, Dr. Katherine Gaskin, Centre for Research in Social Policy, Loughborough University, (pilot study), December 1996.